

FAILED MARRIAGES : GETTING HELP

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Dollar dreams turn sour for many brides

By *Swati Desai*

Hyderabad: Laxmi, Sunita, and Chitra may not know each other, but share a few things in common. They are educated, young, Indian women from well-to-do middle class families who married young professionals working in the US. With similar family backgrounds, they had dreams of a better life. So did their parents. Unfortunately, they also share shattered dreams and broken marriages.

It is unlikely that the severity of their experiences are shared by the majority of women who go abroad after marriage. But the difficulties in adjustments are common and are usually not discussed openly. In most cases, parents of such brides are in the dark as to what to watch out for.

The first serious issue faced by such brides is that of domestic violence. Although the high prevalence of violence against women within the South Asian community in the US has been well established by studies, it has not been publicised in India.

Cultural disconformity is another serious issue. Women are surrounded by husbands' extended family who demand traditional behaviour. Such in-laws' mindset belongs to the India of the time they left home. The husband too nurtures these expectations. It doesn't matter that the woman may be product of a modern, independent and feisty India.

In some cases women encounter mental illness and eccentricity in their husbands. They may find skeletons tumbling out of the closet post-marriage. Men also demand outrageous sexual behaviour. In the absence of the usual family support systems, all these come as a shocker to women.

Wives of the professionals with a temporary work permit in the US too face hurdles. Such permits do not allow wives to work. In such cases, the woman is passing time in idleness. With husbands busy with work, women get little access to familiar or comforting activities. In the next few weeks, stories based on the lives of Laxmi, Sunita, Chitra, and others will be told in a series of articles, with names changed on request. For parents, the list of precautions will be presented. Help for women in these situations will be discussed.

(The author is a psychotherapist in private practice in Los Angeles, and a mental health consultant to South Asian agencies. She is currently on sabbatical and visiting the Indian School of Business, Hyderabad)



Thorough probe before marriages is vital

By Swati Desai

Hyderabad: Laxmi was married to a professional in the US with good recommendations and a good family. Gradually, her parents realised that her husband was isolating her from them, and she was a victim of domestic violence. This set them through a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. They blamed Laxmi for being too headstrong and themselves for sending her to a foreign country. They were caught between a strong belief in the sanctity of a marriage and an urge to get Laxmi out. Besides the anger they felt against the husband and his family, they were worried about the future and the shame the matter could bring to them. They were also helpless due to the distance.

Parents of daughters with similar failed marriages, especially in foreign places go through these emotions. They are faced with two questions — what they could have done to prevent such situations and how does one deal with it?

Parents are typically wellwishing and trusting, but it pays to take stringent precautions. Firstly, a thorough investigation among grooms' close friends and NOT just his family pays off. One should not get into the dollar dream trap. Encourage the daughter to have a frank conversation with the prospective groom so that there are no skeletons in the cupboard. If he is willing to discuss past relationships, it is a good sign. However, if he justifies past relationships saying, "I found out that she was crazy or she falsely accused me of hitting her," it is a bad omen. Such confessors pin blame on others and emote self-pity. Further investigation through friends is vital in such cases.

Parents must check if the conditions are right for financial independence — through work or education. The ability to stand on one's own feet is paramount to survive in a foreign country. Parents must also ensure a safety net of sound finances (in case, she needs to travel back) and friends outside the husband's family, before the daughter departs. Do not insist on a grandchild until she has settled. Remember that it is OK to call social service agencies for help because the legal and immigration issues can be costly and overwhelming when on your own. Also, she can call directory assistance and ask for an infoline that can give her toll-free phone numbers to get help.

If an unwarranted situation arises despite these precautions, stop blaming yourself and try to look at the situation as an outsider. Your pain, worry, and shame being conveyed to your daughter will worsen her experience. Second, convey your support without interfering in her decision-making process. This requires tremendous patience — difficult but vital.

(To be continued)

(The author, a psychotherapist in private practice in Los Angeles and a mental health consultant to South Asian agencies, is on a visit to the Indian School of Business, Hyderabad)

Help at hand for abuse victims

Agencies help the distressed to start over again

By Swati Desai

Hyderabad: Laxmi was shocked the first time her husband threw a plate full of food at her. He was angry because "she was disrespectful to his mother." He also vented his anger on the food she cooked. "It was spicy despite she knowing that it upset his stomach." Laxmi was shocked to see this ugly side in her charming husband.

However, Laxmi saw that such outbursts were always followed by attempts of apologies and coaxing her into physical intimacy. What she experienced many times over is described by domestic violence counsellors as 'cycle of violence'. In such cases, simmering tension is followed by violent outbursts and reconciliation attempts.

What triggers these incidents is usually jealousy or possessiveness. The husband also demands 'respect'.

Such people have devised many ways of controlling the victim. They allow little financial freedom, cut communication access for minimising contact with the victim's family and friends and monitor her every move. If she were to resist such torture, there is always the threat of her immigration status being in jeopardy.

For those who suffer in silence, it has more to do with their low self-esteem and strong beliefs in marriages. Also for Indians, the idea of reporting the matter to police is still intimidating. Victims, in most cases, return to the husband. Lack of awareness that the victim's immigration status is protected by law too is prevalent.

In some cases, what adds to the victim's trouble is her inability to drive, unfamiliarity with the language, lack of money to survive and a poor social network. Each victim needs to understand the importance of:

Preserving evidence: Those calling the police must keep a copy of the police report, photographs of body abuses, diaries. They must also record the versions of neighbours as well as counsellors.

Precaution: Keeping copies of documents (legal, immigration, medical, bills) and some money with a trusted party. In the US, there are social service agencies in all major cities specialising in helping Indian victims of domestic violence. It is important to remember the safety tips provided by these agencies. Their help is crucial as the process re-establishing oneself could be tiresome.

(To be continued)

(The author, a psychotherapist in private practice in Los Angeles and a mental health consultant to South Asian agencies, is on a visit to ISB, Hyderabad)

How to beat waiting room blues

By Swati Desai

The case of a girl who leaves her job in India to get married to a hardworking engineer husband returning from the US for two weeks for matrimonial purpose has become fairly mundane. She may be modern enough to expect a career after the change of visa status or traditional enough to expect to set up her house and start a family, the initial experiences can be common.

The new independent apartment in the US overlooking a swimming pool sounds glamorous. Initial phone calls to parents to India are full of descriptions of fun-filled trips to amusement parks, casinos, may be even skiing and boating.

After first few months, the glamour wears off, busy husband's long hours become extremely boring, the surrounding quietude and aloof attitude becomes overbearing, the differences with the husband start becoming arguments and occasionally irritating, setting up the house does not take up so much time. Sometimes the husband's parents come to visit for several months. Eventually, this can become gruelling and overpowering for various reasons.

The low level depression is a common experience but nobody describes the real nature of it. Several tips for the couple are offered here to prepare them for a more meaningful experience in the waiting room to have a job or a child.

Beware of the signs of depression: feeling unusually low, feeling easily irritable, shopping urges, harshly judgmental attitude, marked change in sleep patterns or appetite, sudden weight change, and finding obstacles in beginning any activity.

Life in the US is activity oriented. Before leaving for the US, think hard about what you enjoy doing outside of work, and discuss it with your husband.

In India things happen to you, in the US you need to make them happen. Any activity you want to pursue, plethora of information is available, if you take the initiative.

Taking initiative may include learning to drive, exploring the public transportation system, finding the location of the closest public library, closest university or college, and community parks. These resources in the US are amazingly rich in classes, information, and lectures.

Husbands, be prepared to spend some money on things like joining an evening class (could be pottery, child psychology, or computers), pursuing a hobby, or teaching your wife to drive. It is money worth spent.

If you want to volunteer your time for a cause you believe in, each city will have an Infoline (call 411 to get the number) which will give you relevant phone numbers. Volunteering opportunities range from caring for animals to teaching under privileged school children.

It helps to find out about neighbours and having some contact with them. No need to shy away because of their foreignness. Most will enjoy your friendly attitude. If you prefer only Indian community, you may want to arrange for day time contact with other wives. Start a book club.

Before leaving for the US, make sure to find relatives and friends who would help in case of trouble, keep in touch with them, and ensure putting money aside for troubled times if they arise.

Familiarise yourself with the rules for physical safety in the US. Safe areas, daytime safety in the apartment, safety in public transportation and so on. Do not

plan to be in the waiting room, instead use your time to prepare for more meaningful life ahead.

(The author, a psychotherapist in private practice in Los Angeles and a mental health consultant to South Asian agencies, is on a visit to ISB, Hyderabad)

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Scars may remain, but a turning point is close by

By *Swati Desai*

Hyderabad: Sunita met her husband on the Internet while she was working in India and he lived in the US. This led to a two-year intense romance through emails with the husband professing the 'ultimate love'. Her parents' fears of her husband belonging to another community did not deter her from the marrying him.

In the US, Sunita felt awkward about certain expectations from the joint family. Giving a massage to her inlaws, bar on conversing with the visitors, and permission to go out only with her sister-in-law all put her in an uncomfortable position.

When she mentioned these difficulties to her husband, he became enraged and accused Sunita of not understanding the customs of his community. The last straw came when Sunita discovered legal papers of her husband's divorce from his previous wife. When she confronted her husband, he claimed that his ex-wife was crazy and had to be hospitalised. His family supported his claims, but things were never the same for Sunita from then. Her mistrust of her husband and his family only added fuel to his rage.

Frequent outbursts of violence finally led her to contact a social service agency.

It took Sunita two years of struggle for finding shelter in a South Asian transitional housing, going through the legal wrangles in divorce and alimony proceeding, applying for immigration status under special immigration laws, pursuing a nursing education with the help of an agency, fighting allegations from her husband's family of being a bad daughter-in-law, battling depression and most importantly garnering a sense of pride in being financially independent.

Today Sunita shares her apartment with a friend, has a work permit and a job, and drives to her nursing job. She did this with the help of a social service agency and community support. More importantly, it took courage and patience for her to stand on her feet.

Is life better for Sunita today? It is a trade-off between preserving self-dignity and letting go of false notions of security.

Any person who goes through the shock of discovering secrets such as a previous relationship, mental illness, violent behaviour, or alcoholism suffers from some form of post-traumatic stress disorder. There could be recurring nightmares, paranoia, total lack of trust in the surroundings and loss of self-confidence. Once these emotions are overcome with a counsellor's help, there is still the feeling of

vengeance or self-destruction. The tedious legal and immigration processing too can be exhausting for most Indian women. The option of returning home is shelved when faced with thoughts of bringing shame to the community back home and worrying the parents. Social service agencies could help (see box), however the help may not seem as forthcoming as the victim may want.

The most significant factor that helps the victim is the sense of self-dignity, and the feeling that she has the right to a productive and happy life. She needs to think that what happened to her was an accident, out of her control, and although the scars would remain, she can still rehabilitate herself.

(The author, a psychotherapist in private practice in Los Angeles and a mental health consultant to South Asian agencies, is on a visit to ISB, Hyderabad)

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Children a test for abused women

Transition To Single Parenthood Gets Even More Difficult

By Swati Desai

Hyderabad: Chitra hoped having children would make her marriage stronger. Since her arrival in the US, Chitra was subject to her husband's violent behaviour and peculiar sexual demands. But she never thought of leaving him. Her parents had always advised her to adjust with her husband and not to be so 'headstrong'. So she even tolerated his sexual wanderings and accusations of prudishness.

However, she was unaware of the established observation by counsellors of domestic abused victims that violence increases during pregnancy. The child in her life gave Chitra a sense of importance, but her marriage only grew worse. She tolerated her husband's occasional overnight absenteeism because he was a good provider. They lived in a comfortable middle class neighbourhood. Their fights were loud and involved pushing and shoving. The children, now 8 and 5, lived in this world. Finally, after one such violent argument, a neighbour called the police leading to the involvement of a local child protective agency.

In California and some other states in the US, when children witness violence between parents, it is viewed as child abuse. Allegations of child abuse generates an investigation by the local child protective agency. This can lead to a simple warning, mandatory attendance to parenting classes or mandatory counselling.

Only in extreme cases are children placed in foster homes until the situation between parents improve. In Chitra's case, her husband was asked to vacate the house. Chitra was allowed to have custody of the children only if she agreed to severe contact with him until the completion of the mandated counselling.

Mothers who are victims of such marriages are faced usually with additional challenges: 1) financial security of the children in case she leaves the husband, 2) the social stigma of a broken marriage in the Indian community and the impact on the children 3) children attached to the father makes the transition to single

parenthood trickier, 4) the difficulties itself in single parenthood such as lack of family support in a foreign country, expensive professional child care, and the possibility of children straying in the absence of male supervision.

Also, research shows that children who witness parental arguments and violence regularly are more prone to mental trauma and violence.

The choices in such cases are never easy.

Some important points: 1) Seeking the advice of psychologists and counsellors to deal with the situation. Get as much information on possible outcomes of child abuse investigation in your case and what your options are. (Remember that the counsellor may be required to report suspected child abuse to the child protective agency. 2) There is no need to panic as this does not mean the child will be taken away. 3) Garner support from family and friends for child care and court appearances. 4) Build a rapport with social workers.

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Troubled marriages: Do solutions exist?

By Swati Desai

Ashley was a successful television executive in Los Angeles area and Alex was a retired businessman after some failures in his once successful business. They were both in their early fifties, lively, attractive, fit, and lived with their sixteen year old daughter. They seemed like an ideal couple until Ashley complained bitterly, "Alex does not pay his share for running the family. I am always the reliable bread earner. I am tired of his stingy, irresponsible behavior. I know he has enough money stacked up". Alex on the other hand thought of Ashley as a material girl with over expectations of high life style. He claimed to want a simpler and less expensive life and had no wish to spend on holidays to Europe.

Jill was so confused about staying in her relationship. She claimed that Kent was too involved in his own job and his own routine. The only intimacy he could express was through sex, not through listening and talking. She was not sure if the financial security was enough to keep her in this dry marriage.

These marriage stories are common in the US. The divorce rate is 50%. Couples are unwilling to sacrifice their personal desires. Such conflicts are becoming our problems as well, in the middle class and increasingly prosperous India. It may be worth examining stories of problematic marriages to explore some solutions.

The list of some common issues and complaints, not all inclusive, is as follows.

1) Both partners with independent careers generating conflicts around financial contributions, sharing household chores.

2) One partner, typically the woman, complaining about others inability to express feelings, softness, and gentleness.

3) If there is a problem child or a mental health issue (for example, depression in one partner), marriage may not sustain it.

4)Controlling and abusive emotionally and verbally -- behavior from one partner pushing the other out of the marriage. Just like the popular psychology articles in the US would tell you, most arguments couples have are around money, sex, and child-rearing! On a more serious level, these issues can be looked at from the sociological, economic, and psychological perspectives. From the sociological perspective, a women's financial and emotional independence is sometimes held responsible for breaking of the traditional husband/wife role expectations. The sixties was also a time to rebel against the shoulds of the society, to pay attention to inner desires, for belief in equality of rights, and to grow tolerance for alternative life styles. Social taboos against divorces quickly disappeared.

Economically speaking, the move towards creating social safety nets and insurances also meant less inter-dependency in old age and for child-rearing. Psychologically speaking, using Freudian terminology, the acceptance id - meaning the untainted, raw, pleasure-giving desires, and questioning of the superego - meaning the belief in fixed rights and wrongs of the societal moral code, has allowed the individual to become more important than the societal rules.

It is not surprising that couples are also caught in the manifestation of this inability to surrender to traditional rules or to another person. The biggest challenge faced by couples today is resolving the question raised by one or both partners, but, What about me?

In the next series of articles, we will present stories of marriages from the US and attempt to look for practical solutions to the psychological problems.

(The author, a psychotherapist in private practice in Los Angeles and a mental health consultant to South Asian agencies, is on a visit to ISB, Hyderabad)

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Marriages and pressures of finance

By *Swati Desai*

Ashley's anger was explosive. Her husband Alex was supposed to pay the loan installment on his car every month by the 6th, but he was always late. He had repeated this pattern again. Ashley was furious because his car loan was on her name. She had obtained this loan for him because his bad credit would not have allowed him to get it for himself. Ashley was worried that his behaviour would spoil her credit rating. Besides, this was not the first time she claimed, "He is late on all payments, including his monthly contribution to our family expenses. He always shirks from his responsibilities, even household chores".

Problem #1:

Ashley had no trust and respect for Alex. She had explosive anger.

Alex tried to charm her out of her anger. He defended himself, "I am not late every time. Besides, I want to wait for the stocks to go up before I cash in and pay up all

my bills". Ashley asked him, "What about your monthly contribution? Did you even look at the list I left for you on the table?" Alex shrugged, smiled, and said, "I do not think I should be paying for your expensive habits. I want just a simple life style. I will pay what I think is appropriate from your list". He was never going to agree with Ashley's terms any way.

Problem # 2:

Ashley's anger created resistance in him and pushed him away. Alex was defensive, elusive, and passive aggressive.

The specific situation may sound American, although it is fast approaching the shores of urban India like a greedy wave: a successful, independent, aggressive wife and a charming, less successful, stingy, unreliable husband. Add to this Ashley's blatant materialistic high life expectations and Alex's inclination to lead simpler spiritual life.

Problem #3:

In spite of the modern exterior, they had traditional underlying expectations. For example, Ashley expected Alex to provide her with her expected life style and Alex did not like to be held responsible for daily household chores.

The details of the situation and the gender roles in the above patterns may vary, but the problems in this situation are universally experienced. Do the solutions apply to our local situations or not? We may be able to answer that after looking at how Alex and Ashley set to resolve their issues. They both ended up in couples' very unpleasant process, but decided to stick it out any way, until they both felt better about their marriage.

Solution # 1:

Patience for the solution to arrive, while you keep working on issues in spite of temptation to just give up.

The first step for Ashley was to recognise that her anger came from her feeling of being trapped and being taken advantage of. She had to realise what she received from Alex that made her stay in the relationship was not all about him taking advantage of her. She had grown dependent on his supportive listening skills. Besides, they always cooperated with each other in raising their teenage daughter. Once she struggled and came out of the dependency, she felt calmer and less angry. The choice of staying or leaving was hers.

Solution #2:

Sense of empowerment, not being trapped.

For Alex, when Ashley said she could leave, he was forced to recognise his passive resistance -- in the form of non-cooperation -- to Ashley's explosive demands. He also had to deal with his selfish tendencies and unwillingness to compromise for the whole family. Once Ashley's anger subsided, he was able to listen to her more, which shows that her anger had indeed been damaging to their relationship in the past. They also needed practical solutions such as total separation of finances and mutually discussed agreement on contributions.

Solution# 3:

There is no substitute for honest selfsearch and admittance.

They have decided to stay together and to give the best to their daughter.

(The author, a psychotherapist in private practice in Los Angeles and a mental health consultant to South Asian agencies, is on a visit to ISB, Hyderabad)

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Troubled Marriages: Do solutions exist?

By Swati Desai

Seema was furious with her mother-in-law while her husband Sainath sat quiet, across from her in the therapists office. "We were doing fine with each other for the first 10 years of our life in the US, until his mother arrived from India to live with us. It has been only downhill for last seven years. Everyone is on the edge. Even my kids prefer to just stay in their rooms after school," she said. Her face was twisted with anger. She was leaning forward and pointing her finger at her husband to make her point.

Problem #1: Problems with in-laws follow several Indian couples to abroad and can become only worse.

The therapist looked at Sainath with a question mark on her face. He squirmed in his chair. Finally he spoke in a tentative tone, "I mean, I know my mother is manipulative. I know she demands attention from me and sometimes gets it by playing games. But look, she is my mother and I cannot just get rid of her. I keep telling Seema to just adjust a bit for keeping the household happy. My mother is an old woman, she is not going to change. It is us who need to compromise". This seemed to have irked Seema more. She raised her voice. "What is wrong in telling her that she should not badmouth me in front of our relatives? What is wrong in telling her that we are going on a holiday without her while she stays with your brother in Kentucky?"

Problem #2: The husbands divided loyalty is causing the wife to feel secondary. Seema had become independent earning member of the family a few years after coming to the US. Her children were brought up in a society where the agebased hierarchy was not as important and Sainath constantly struggled to teach them not to question grandma on everything, also to show visible respect to her. He

blamed Seema for not joining him in his effort. Grandmas quiet contempt for Seemas upbringing of kids was sometimes visible. Seemas reaction was always defiant stemming from her feelings of subordinate status in her marriage with Sainath which she

had started resenting after recognizing her own value in her job as an accountant. In reality, she had started resenting all traditional expectations of compromising because she had seen her own mother losing herself. Her rage would just push her and Sainath into a silent mode for days at a time.

Problem #3: Wifes anger came from her own issues as well but she was unwilling to self-search.

Problem #4: Being in the US had changed wifes expectations from herself in addition to greatly reduced social expectation from the milieu around her.

Seemas story of emerging defiance against traditions is not so uncommon in modern urban India as well. After Seema threatened Sainath to leave, he was willing to go to the therapist and be a meek partner willing to compromise, but he resented Seemas rigidity to no end. Finally, they ended up making arrangements with his brother to have his mother for six months of the year in spite of his wifes debilitating medical condition.

This solution of compromises from husband helped the wife to feel some power and to ease the tension at home. The therapist noted, it made their marriage functional but not meaningful. For a meaningful marriage, Seema and Sai Nath need to make a commitment to honest self-search, she said. Seema cannot keep using her mother-in-law as a target . She must separate her own issues from the marital ones. Sai Nath be assertive, with both his mother and his wife. **(The author, a psychotherapist in private practice in Los Angeles and a mental health consultant to South Asian agencies, is on a visit to ISB, Hyderabad)**