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**chitra banerjee
divakaruni****My Work With MAITRI**

I would like to say that I have always been interested in women's issues and conditions, and desirous of making changes--but that isn't true. When I lived in India, I was totally immersed in the culture, and thus totally accepting of it. I never thought of women's rights, or their problems. If things were hard for us, I reasoned that that was just the way of the world. Wasn't it the same everywhere?

This is not to say that there aren't feminists in India. There is a strong movement, with dedicated women working to improve laws and conditions for their sisters. But I had grown up in a very traditional household, and had been kept carefully insulated from such events.

Coming to the US gave me the distance I needed to look back on my culture with objectivity, to pick out what I valued and realize what I didn't agree with. One of the latter was the double standards in effect in many areas for women, and I strove to remove these from my life.

This was also the time I started observing carefully the lives of other Indian women around me. I noticed that many of them were still caught in the old value system that gives a man precedence and power over them and excuses all their wrongs, and that, away from the traditional joint family that kept a watchful eye on things, such women were even more vulnerable. In 1989 and 1990 I came across several women who were victims of abuse, doubly victimized by the fact that they were unfamiliar with the workings of American society and had no one to turn

to. They were also uncomfortable with the idea of taking family problems to strangers--to white people, especially. That was considered a great shame and a betrayal of the Indian community. Several didn't speak much English. They had no idea of American laws and rights. They believed their husbands when they threatened them that they would be deported if they contacted any authorities. It was when one of these women, desperate and believing that there was no help available anywhere for her, attempted suicide, that I decided I had to do something.

MAITRI, which I founded with the help of a small group of friends in 1991, is a helpline--the first South Asian service of its kind on the West coast. Women in situations of distress call in and talk to trained South Asian volunteers, all women, and discuss their problems. Our volunteers speak many South Asian languages, and this, together with our understanding of the cultural context, helps to put the caller at ease.

Depending on how acute the situation is, we refer the woman to sources that can help her, or advise her to contact shelters or the police, or provide other necessary information. All our services are free and confidential. We have legal and medical help and family counseling available as well. Most of all, we provide a sympathetic ear, a sense that the woman is not alone, and a strong belief that no woman should have to put up with the abuse, ever.

The word "MAITRI" means friendship--and that is the attitude, ultimately, we hope to convey. Our aim is preventative: we try, through ads, to get women to call us before it is too late. We also provide educational workshops in the community to teach women legal and financial independence and survival skills, and also we offer awareness workshops open to all to alert the community to the problem of abuse.

Since 1991, we have been receiving an

average of 15-20 calls per month and helping women with a variety of problems. We work closely with the local shelters, often providing free translation services. We are completely volunteer-run and funded mainly by private donations, a true grassroots organization. Although at first sectors of the Indian society were hostile to us, accusing us of stirring up trouble and even issuing anonymous death threats, now we are receiving more support. Many of our women have gone on to lead successful and happy lives, either independently or, through counseling, together with their spouses.

My work with MAITRI has been at once valuable and harrowing. I have seen things I would never have believed could happen. I have heard of acts of cruelty beyond imagining. The lives of many of the women I have met through this organization have touched me deeply. It is their hidden story that I try to tell in many of the tales in my short story collection, *Arranged Marriage*. It is their courage and humanity that I celebrate and honor.

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