

*Seeking a Voice: South Asian Women's Groups  
in North America*

JYOTSNA VAID

Although numerous regional associations of immigrants from South Asia exist all across North America, these organizations are largely cultural or religious in their concerns, and tend not to address issues of sociopolitical significance. Even where such issues are beginning to be addressed, there has been a noticeable lack of attention to the particular concerns of women immigrants from the Indian subcontinent. This neglect is especially interesting given the important role that women have played in overseeing the functions of the regional associations, from running language classes to cooking for festivals. Ethnographic studies of South Asian immigrants also do not generally acknowledge the contributions and experiences of South Asian women.<sup>1</sup>

However, over the past decade a number of women, recognizing the need for a separate forum for articulating their unique concerns, have formed autonomous grassroots organizations in different parts of the United States and Canada. More than a dozen of these groups have sprung up. Founded by and composed entirely of women, these groups highlight the experiences, concerns, and contributions of women from the Indian subcontinent. In many cases the concerns of these North American groups have been directly shaped by issues that have mobilized South Asian women thousands of miles away.

Who are these groups? How did they form? What areas have their members determined to most need services? And what internal prob-

lems have they encountered at various stages of development? Before turning to these questions, a brief description of Indian immigrant women and their contemporary situation will help provide a context within which to view the concerns of the women's groups.

### *A Minority within a Minority*

Ratna Ghosh points out that some of the problems faced by South Asian women are shared with South Asian men because both groups are part of a visible minority. Some are shared with women in general due to sexist attitudes prevalent in North American society. Others are common to all Asian immigrant women, and several are unique to South Asian women. She notes:

[These women have] moved from a society which is itself undergoing transition in the economic roles and personal status of women to an industrially advanced society which is also having to cope with somewhat different problems of changing roles and status of women. The conflict and uncertainty of the changing roles subject women to ambiguities both in their personal lives and in their working world. In Canada, additional factors of race, difference in culture, dependent status, absence of close kinship ties, and extreme weather conditions—all interrelate to make their situation rather complex.<sup>2</sup>

The situation described for South Asian women in Canada is not significantly different from that facing those residing in the United States.

One factor that has given rise to several of the problems experienced by South Asian women immigrants derives from the fact that most of them entered North America as "sponsored" relatives. As Tania Dasgupta observes:

Being sponsored, our dependent status continues while we try to integrate into Canadian society. Given our socioeconomic background and often the inability to speak English, we feel a sense of isolation and alienation. Though more and more of us are entering the paid work force today, we are concentrated in low-paying and traditionally "female" jobs. This is often compounded by the lack of recognition of our previous skills and education and lack of access to English lan-

guage courses. Due to our social dependence, we are vulnerable to oppression at work, outside, and at home. Being visible minority women, we are also subjected to racism in every sphere of life. We are stereotyped as dirty, passive, slow. Thus, we face a triple oppression as women, workers, and as visible minorities.<sup>3</sup>

These sentiments are echoed by Reeta Bhatia, who points out that working-class women, employed largely in service and production occupations, are the target of more overt forms of prejudice and discrimination.<sup>4</sup> These women typically work in labor-intensive industries or in small businesses where they have a very marginal status in the economic structure. They are required to work long hours and are paid the minimal wage without any fringe benefits. Unaware of struggles launched by other women's organizations for improvements in labor laws, maternity benefits, and other reforms, they remain unable to articulate their oppression and demand their rights.

A 1984 survey of foreign-born women in the United States indicated that half as many South Asian women as men (48 percent versus 86 percent) are in the paid labor force. The women tend to be concentrated in service occupations and technical or sales positions, with less than a third (as compared to 72 percent of men) being employed in managerial and professional occupations.<sup>5</sup> This difference may reflect the fact that many middle-class women work part time or interrupt their careers because their own upgrading of skills, recertification, and preparation for qualifying exams must take second place to the similar needs of their husbands.

For South Asian women who work outside the home, there is the additional problem of a double workload, as they are still expected to take full responsibility for household and parenting demands—tasks that their middle-class counterparts in the subcontinent relegate to servants and members of the extended family. In North America, the woman alone oversees domestic and child-rearing duties simply because these do not fit the South Asian man's concept of appropriate work. Problems resulting from this situation have politicized some women.

In the social domain in particular different standards seem to apply for women and men. As Ghosh has noted, the relationship between men

and women is fraught with difficulty, affected as it is by perceptions of male honor and female chastity. However liberal a stance South Asian men may take publicly about women's rights, a rather different attitude is revealed when the women from their own family (whether daughters, sisters, or wives) seek these rights. It is thus not uncommon to find young Indian women who came to the United States as children being sent to India for their undergraduate education to safeguard them from the social permissiveness of Western society.<sup>6</sup>

A similar reasoning underlies the preference of first-generation immigrant parents to have their daughters married in traditional arranged marriages. This practice is reflected in the increased number of matrimonial advertisements in the past decade in immigrant newspapers such as *India Abroad*, most of which are placed by family members on behalf of the prospective brides.<sup>7</sup> Since many of these second-generation women are permanent residents or U.S. citizens, their secure legal status makes them particularly attractive to men who regard marriage as an easy means of gaining their own permanent resident status. In many instances, this mercenary intent is revealed only after the wedding has taken place. Cases of this type are increasingly becoming a concern for women's groups.

South Asian women who enter North America through arranged marriages are particularly vulnerable targets of exploitation. Lacking other support systems, they become overly dependent on their spouses—sometimes to the point of tolerating neglect, physical abuse, or infidelity. Because the sanctity of marriage is considered very important, such marriages continue until the stress experienced by the woman leads her to take some action. Many such cases have also come to the attention of South Asian women's groups.

### *The Rise of South Asian Women's Organizations*

The factors just mentioned have prompted the formation of new South Asian women's organizations and have determined many of the groups' services. The eleven groups surveyed for this essay are located across the continent, three in Canada and eight in the United States.<sup>8</sup> The oldest

group was founded in 1980, the newest in 1985. The groups are relatively small, ranging in size from just two or three to fifteen core members. All of the members are middle-class women in their mid-twenties to early-fifties. Marital status runs the gamut: unmarried, divorced, widowed, married. Some members are single parents. Some are very recent arrivals, here only a year; others have been here for as long as twenty years. The women tend to be highly educated, most either possessing or pursuing graduate degrees. They work as social scientists, doctors, businesswomen, computer scientists, journalists, filmmakers, lawyers, counselors, librarians, and community social workers. The group's core members include few women who work at home or in working-class occupations.

Most of the group members emigrated from India, although a few of them are from Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. There is little representation of Indian women who have immigrated to North America from countries outside of South Asia, such as Uganda or Trinidad. Some minority groups, such as Ismailis, do not participate in the groups, even though they form sizeable immigrant communities in certain regions of North America. Some women active in these groups are also involved in their ethnic communities. There are also several South Asian women, many of whom are students or professionals, who are members of feminist or progressive organizations but who tend not to join the South Asian groups.

#### *Factors Leading to Group Formation*

Although all the groups surveyed are concerned with promoting the status of women, their orientation and priorities—which reflect the factors leading to their formation—differ. For one set of groups, events in the Indian subcontinent, such as dowry-related deaths or the impact of Islamization on women's legal rights, served as the impetus.<sup>9</sup> These groups formed to work with women's groups located in South Asia. A second category includes groups which were mobilized by a desire to address specific problems experienced by South Asian women immigrants, such as domestic violence, unequal social and economic oppor-

tunities, or discrimination.<sup>10</sup> The last set of organizations formed because the members wished to establish a visible identity, whether along lines of ethnicity or sexual preference.<sup>11</sup>

A member of New Jersey's group, Manavi, which wanted to establish an ethnic identity, described the conditions leading to the formation of that group:

A few of us had got together to discuss Kavery Dutta's film project on Asian Indian women. Brainstorming for ideas, we found we had so many ideas to share, so many common concerns, anxieties. The meeting and the conversation sparked off a strong sense of commonality. As immigrant women, we felt there were many issues that were unique to our situation. We felt we should meet more often and for more than just a tête-à-tête. So we met again and created Manavi. We felt there were many Indian groups that organized cultural events and family-oriented activities. We knew that there was a tremendous need for a group to be dedicated to women's issues. Our goal is to work towards social change and create a visible ethnic identity for Asian Indian women.

In response to the question about formation, the members of the lesbian group Anamika, which publishes a newsletter of the same name, said, "The isolation in our lives and the reality of our lives, which was never acknowledged either by groups 'back home' or by South Asian groups here, have propelled us to start the newsletter."

The survey also asked whether the groups perceived themselves as "feminist" groups. Responses to the question were evenly divided.<sup>12</sup> Anamika members stated that although they consider themselves feminists, the women they hope to reach may or may not be so. The woman in Los Angeles who responded on behalf of the Asian Indian Women's Network explained that she would not refer to her group as feminist because the "women are still not ready." It is unclear, however, whether the "women" in this case refers to the group's members or those whom the group hopes to serve. On the other hand, the respondent from the Madison Committee on South Asian Women noted that the term "feminist" is appropriate for her group "because of our concern with the unique situation of women in South Asia and our long-term goal to help

improve this situation." In a profile of Manavi, Shamita Das Dasgupta sums up her group's stance:

Although we deal with problems and concerns of women, as a group we have refrained from declaring ourselves a feminist organization. This decision is a conscious one and taken for pragmatic reasons. We feel that, at present, identifying ourselves as a feminist organization will create hostile societal pressures which may ultimately render our work ineffective.<sup>13</sup>

The services and activities offered reflect what these women feel are the priorities for their community. While the degree of the groups' involvement in these services varies depending on available resources, the activities fall into four general categories: (1) information, referral, and networking; (2) counseling and crisis intervention; (3) direct social services; and (4) advocacy on issues affecting women's rights.

Activities may focus on issues in South Asia or North America. For instance the Committee on South Asian Women has donated books and given small grants to autonomous women's groups in South Asia and sponsored visits by feminists from these groups. Montreal's South Asia Community Center circulated an anti-dowry petition in 1984, which was delivered to the Indian prime minister. On a more local level, the center's members also started a drop-in center and women's cooperative. Along with the South Asian Women's Group of Toronto, they participated in the Canadian government-sponsored workshops on visible minorities and race relations in the workplace. Similarly, the New York-based Association of Asian Indian Women in America took part in a White House briefing on Asian American women.

Many of the groups have used newsletters and other publications to disseminate information about South Asian women from their own perspective. The Committee on South Asian Women has published a monograph containing a bibliography on women's status, a statistical overview, and a directory of organizations and individuals committed to improving the status of women in South Asia. In addition, the group produces an internationally circulated quarterly publication, the *COSAW Bulletin*, which features theme-oriented articles, essays, interviews,

book reviews, research index, and reports on the activities of other South Asian women's groups. In 1987 Manavi published a tri-state regional resource directory providing social and legal referrals for Indian women immigrants. As mentioned earlier, Anamika put out the first newsletter on South Asian lesbians. The South Asia Community Center of Montreal produces a community-oriented newsletter in several different South Asian languages. The South Asian Women's Group and the Association of Indian Women in America also circulate newsletters.

### *Internal Problems*

Despite the groups' achievements, members acknowledge that they have met with some problems, ranging from the pragmatic to the ideological. One of the most obvious and most prevalent problems is financial insecurity. Inadequate and unstable sources of income place severe restrictions on what the groups can accomplish. For example only two groups, the South Asia Community Center and the South Asian Women's Group, both in Canada, have their own office space and telephone. The former is perhaps the most established of the groups surveyed; it offers a full range of free services and, in fiscal year 1985-86, responded to 7,200 various requests.

Another obstacle is limited time. The Manavi respondent notes, "Our members are all very committed, but we need to make Manavi a top priority to do what we are targeting for. All our members are fully occupied in their careers . . . so coordinating everybody's busy schedule gets to be quite a task." The time spent on a group activity, such as production of a newsletter, is time that might otherwise be spent on professional pursuits or with family members. Several groups' members experience considerable stress from having to balance these competing demands. The situation is made worse in cases where spouses or other family members do not particularly encourage participation in the women's group.

The respondent from the Asian Indian Women's Network in Los Angeles cited "lack of support from spouses" as one of the most controversial internal problems of her group. In some instances, this lack of sup-



port betrays a defensive stance on the part of the South Asian men; in other cases, although disapproval is not overt, it nevertheless appears in the form of skepticism about the value of these groups or indifference toward the problems encountered by the group.

Support, however, also needs to come from the community at large. Here, too, problems have been encountered. These are aptly summed up by the respondent from the Association of Asian Indian Women in America who noted that although the group has become quite visible in New York, "community awareness is 60 percent, community participation is 10 percent."

A related danger is failure of sister groups to recognize the efforts of the women's groups. In one instance, a women's group spent several months preparing a detailed survey to be administered to their clients, only to find that another organization in that city had appropriated the survey without giving them due credit.

Many yet unanswered questions confront the South Asian women's groups. Organizations that have gained some stability must decide whether to develop a more formal structure. While most of the organizations have a written statement of their aims and objectives, decision making follows informal lines and is based on consensus. Many of the policy-related questions are often left to the discretion of the groups' coordinator. There is also the question of whether to expand and, if so, in what direction. Should regional branches be established, or should the groups join existing national women's organizations? Anamika chose to affiliate with an umbrella group, Asian Lesbians of the East Coast, "for reasons of safety," says its respondent. Should special links be forged with autonomous South Asian groups in North America or, perhaps, in South Asia as well? Smaller groups may be able to retain the dedication and solidarity characteristic of many grassroots organizations, but larger groups may be able to accomplish more.

Another problem concerns the position that the group should take on issues that are ostensibly not "women's issues" per se, but on which women are increasingly taking an active stand, such as nuclear disarmament, apartheid, or communal conflicts within South Asia. The question is twofold: where to draw the line between women's issues and other

issues and whether such a line even can be drawn. The minutes of three successive meetings of the South Asia Community Center chronicle an internal debate about whether the group should participate in a rally against nuclear weapons. The debate sparked a number of fundamental questions having to do with the group's goals and the most effective ways of achieving them.

Because of the sociopolitical context of most women's issues, one danger that some groups face is that of misconstrued political intent. Allegations have been made, for example, that a particular group is actually a front for a political organization. When key group members also belong to other organizations, the situation becomes even more complicated. To what extent can the group afford to have members with strong political ideologies and still claim to function autonomously? Though some criteria may be used to insure independence, such as refusing donations from other groups, it is difficult to refuse time and other resources.

Last but not least is the difference of opinion about the philosophy of the women's group, a difference that can be characterized as a "struggle versus service" debate. While implicit or explicit feminist principles may have guided the group's formation and initial activities, the subsequent actions of the group may eventually become indistinguishable from those of social services agencies. There is nothing wrong with providing such services if that is the sole and explicit aim of the group. For those who embrace a feminist perspective, however, it becomes a serious problem if their efforts are directed toward providing short-term relief, which only helps their clients adapt to the status quo that keeps them subjugated.<sup>14</sup>

Here, more questions must be faced: what model of social change should be advocated for South Asian women settled abroad, and which solutions offered by which brands of feminism are appropriate or desirable for which South Asian women? In wrestling with these questions, tensions have surfaced between the women's groups that are interested in offering feminist perspectives and solutions and umbrella immigrant organizations that want to steer away from these solutions. These latter organizations are usually dominated by men with considerable clout in the immigrant community. Their endorsement of the women's groups thus becomes important for the groups' effectiveness.

Most groups have not yet resolved all these issues, but increasingly recognize the necessity of periodic self-appraisal. They also agree that to achieve their goals sister organizations need to improve mutual coordination and cooperation.

### *Conclusion*

While the groups discussed in this essay are fairly diverse in their orientations, one shared feature is the women's enthusiastic dedication, as expressed in a report written at the end of the first year of the South Asia Community Center (SACC) in Montreal.

One of the most striking aspects of SACC as an organization is how organized it in fact is, despite radical changes in its internal structure. . . . One thing that emerges quite clearly is that we are a rather stubborn group of people; we have stubbornly resisted attempts by others to take us into their fold; as well, we have stubbornly kept the idea behind SACC in mind during our periods of inactivity (when other pressures occupied our energies). What accounts for this steadfastness of spirit? No doubt it comes from the strong conviction that something must be done about the situation of women in general, and of our South Asian compatriots in particular. This conviction, coupled with the realization that no one else here has gotten around to doing anything about it has prompted the movement leading to the establishment and development of SACC.<sup>13</sup>

Where this movement will ultimately lead will depend largely on the continued commitment of the women who founded these first few groups and the receptiveness of the society at large to the changes they promote.