

Silent Killings

- Naureen Singh

In 1896, American writer, Mark Twain, described the Indian society in his book *Following the Equator*.

“They are much the most interesting people in the world—and the nearest to being incomprehensible. At any rate, the hardest to account for. Their character and their history, their customs and their religion, confront you with riddles at almost every turn—riddles which are a trifle more perplexing after they are explained, than they were before.”

India is an astonishing country indeed. Over half of its people can't read or write, and yet, more scientists and technologists come from India than any other country. Millions of Indians survive with no food or water, roads and technological advances. The president of India is currently a female. According to the Indian newspaper, *Hindustan Times*, India is 1/3 the size of the United States, its population of 1.2 billion is nearly four times that of the U.S.A. There are sixteen official languages and nearly 1000 dialects spoken. Like any other nation in the world, it has its issues. The ones that stand out are not the issues like violence, increased gas prices, poverty, and terrorists. But the issues I am referring to are hidden from the world; Women's rights. I am not talking about the woman's rights like voting, driving, being able to leave the house, being able to be educated. The ones I am talking about are much more drastic. Violations of rights start even before birth and continue till death: Female infanticide, female child marriage, dowry, the widow life and much much more.

The circle of life starts with a baby's conception. But what if you are a girl, will you get to live to see your younger brothers and sister, or even your marriage? In India right now, probably not; because you are killed when parents find out you are a girl. This is known as female infanticide. Female infanticide is a growing problem all over India. The girls in Indian society are considered a burden and property to the family and can be easily tossed around, and nobody will care. Girls in India are being killed as soon as born based on the fact they are girls and if found earlier, they are aborted.

Many western groups have gone to India to educate the women on what is going on in their lives that they are not sensitized of. These women are taught on how to speak up and as mothers to fight in order to raise their daughters as princesses, and not as burden. Even though this process may seem to bring happiness into every woman's lives, the reality is that it doesn't. Only a small percentage of women benefit while the majority remains unaffected. It is not always the mothers that decide to kill the girls, 51.5% of the times it is the fathers. In India, the females are weak and uneducated to the point they do not possess even the rudimentary knowledge of right or wrong. To their detriment, even when adolescent girls get educated; this education is stopped short in favor of the boys who are encouraged to pursue higher education.

Child marriage is another issue. Child marriage barely exists in the world. But in India, it is alive. Its practice in India is arranged especially in the southern parts. They start anywhere from the age of 5 to the age of 15! Imagine, you are not even a kindergartner and you are getting engaged! Mind boggling isn't it? Child marriage in the ancient India was considered a blessing, but now it

is a curse. Child marriage has been illegal in India due to the *Child marriage restraint act in 1929*. This act applies to all of India and there is a punishment for all ages of men that are marrying the minor. The act can do a lot for the nation, preventing disease and misery for both the boys and girls. However, most Indian people, fail to realize that this law exists. There is a child marriage at least once a day in India and no one gets punished for it. In the U.S.A, there have been many books published to warn Americans on child marriage, but what about India? According to the UNICEF organization, 82% of girls in the state of Rajasthan are married by the age of 18.

Now the root of all problems is an evil ritual called dowry. Dowry, also known as *dahej* is a payment in cash or goods by the bride's family to the groom's family along with the giving away of the bride, which is *kanyadaan* in Indian marriage. *Kanya* means daughter and *daan* means gift. Dowry originated in the upper caste families as a wedding gift from the bride's family. Dowry can be anything from large sums of money, farm animals, furniture, and electronics. Later on, dowry was given to help with the marriage expenses and became insurance in case the in-laws mistreat the bride. Dowry may have been a beneficial idea in the beginning, but now it turned out to into a fate that brings misery to the bride and her family. It has become such an issue, that India legally prohibited dowry in 1961. However, its practice is very common and its abuse in India is rising.

The most severe "bride burning" is when those women whose dowry was not considered sufficient by their husband or in-laws. Most of these incidents are reported as accidental burns in the kitchen or disguised as suicide. Why are the women burned in fire? The reason is that it leaves no fingerprints or any trail of evidence behind it. Women rights? Where are they? In India, a woman is burned to death every 12 hours and such incidents are increasing. In 1988, 2209 women were killed and in 1990, just two years later, it doubled. It doubled to 4835! On record, 90% of burns are reported as accidents, 5% as suicides, and shamefully, only 5% are listed as murders. In poverty-stricken India, it takes an entire lifetime for the bride's parents to save up for the dowry. Even after marriage, the in-laws will keep on asking for more dowries. If the bride's family can't pay more dowries, divorce is threatened. In a country where shame is brought down as a result of the divorce, the bride's parents are forced to give more money. Sometimes, the threat of violence comes into play and makes the bride's life in absolute misery. There is no way to make this type of story end happily.

Yet another issue in India is widowhood. The Indian belief is that a couple is meant to stay together for 7 lifetimes. What can go wrong with this sort of idea? But here is the kicker: if the wife died, a month or two later the male is free to remarry. But what if it is the other way around? It used to be when a male died, the woman is burnt alive on the funeral pyre, even if it is against her wishes. This was known as Sati. Thankfully, the British government abolished this ritual. But does that mean the widow has a peaceful life now?

Widows in the 21st century in India are expected to eat only once a day, sleep on the floor with just 1 mat and no pillow, have no jewelry or expensive colorful clothes, to shave their head and be confined to a single room. Why do widows have to suffer like this? It is believed if they suffer in this life, they would be happy bride in the next. There are 40 million widows in India right now. Widows are the invisible community of India living in ashrams. An ashram is a place for widows to live. Ashrams are all over India and when I went this year to India, I visited three of them. I interviewed a few of these widows and got the impression they were there because they had no other choices. The women are not educated to know about this issue. The widows are condemned to a living death. To me, the widows should have the right to live the way they want to! There is a saying that once a man cut his nose and with the fear that everyone will

make fun of him, he started spreading rumors. He said that whoever cuts their nose today will have a good after life. I don't know how many people believed him, or how many people didn't. But all I know is people that spread rumors like that still exist.

To correct all these issues in India, will be long, hard, and it will take generations to get rid of. The laws are there, but to implement them is lacking. These issues exist only in India, so this hidden truth is not known to people in America and Europe. Child infanticide, child marriage, dowry, and the widow life bring the role of women in India to an unprivileged level. Many Indians will acknowledge these sad truths, but instead of finding the remedies and courage to help shape the future, they will sadly shake their heads. After all, can we possibly unravel thousands of years of deep seated Indian mentality? Do we possess the power of revolution within our grasps? There is an answer for this. Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikh humanistic ideals, wrote the following hymn in the early 16th century:

“From women we are conceived
From women we are born
To a woman we are betrothed and married to
Why should we consider women cursed and condemned?
When from woman are born great kings and leaders.
From Woman alone is born another woman
Without women, there is no human birth”

“With our own hands, we females have to carve out our destiny!”