

cause of tension and ostracism. Religious traditions determine what can be eaten, how it is to be prepared; astrology determines the time and date for major life events as weddings; and politics is everywhere and nowhere at the same time, democratic yet hopelessly dysfunctional. Such is the poverty, richness, diversity, as well as hope that is India.

One of the decidedly more arcane and less modern practices, inherited by India from its past, is the sometimes extreme treatment to which some Indian women are subjected. While male dominance is a characteristic inherited from many warrior and agricultural societies—though not all, as evidenced by the matriarchal society found among the Dravidians, as close as South India—it has not always evolved to take on the extreme forms of female infanticide and immolation found on the sub-continent.

Male heirs have been thought advantageous in many rural societies, for their ability to work and insure their parents' well being in old age. For similar reasons in less secure societies, male descendants were thought to provide some measure of protection from external violence. The dimorphism of the human species also leads more readily to physical domination by the larger male.

In many societies, these quasi-rational predilections were also enshrined into laws and social practices reinforcing them. As these constraints began to lessen in modern societies, sexual roles evolved. Though this represents a general pattern, there have also been numerous variants and exceptions. Preference for male heirs has not always evolved to the point of female infanticide, nor male dominance to social pressures for female immolation. Reasons for these evolving in India are probably unknowable, but could include the possibility that the impoverished conditions of India magnified tensions prevalent in many societies; the layering of peoples from invasion and partial assimilation exaggerated social responses; or, something simply went awry in a particular sub-sector of Indian society. Whatever the reasons, these practices are perceived as wrong by most Indians and in fact are illegal, but, nevertheless, persist.

One social practice in India perpetuating ancient roles is that of female dowry due the groom at marriage. In traditional households since the groom became responsible for the bride's well-being after marriage, a dowry was thought appropriate to assist in this process. Though roles have changed as society modernizes, the practice persists. It has led to perverse and unintended consequences. Poor families, giving birth to daughters fear the burden of the costs of the eventual marriages. Spouses seeking to divorce are reluctant or sometimes do not have the means to repay a dowry which would normally be returned with the divorced women.

Another ancient practice that of female immolation in order to accompany a deceased spouse into the afterlife, or "sutee", is now forbidden by law. Sutee has also contributed to aberrant behavior, leading some to devalue female life as it is weighed against other social obligations. Female infanticide, spousal immolation and accidental death are all outlawed social practices. Yet, they persist on the margin of Indian society with regrettable frequency and can enjoy a resurgence in periods of increased economic and social tensions. How can change be brought to the Indian masses?

Population Communications International (PCI), a U.S. based non-profit organization, with offices around the world, was created in 1970 as a division of the Population Institute under the leadership of David O. Poindexter, its first President. PCI's work has been one of the major influences in media based diffusion of information on family health and fertility over the decades. David Poindexter, personally, brought the rich Mexican experiences with telenovelas to the attention of India's Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, and as a result began a now lengthy history of Indian use of education-entertainment for health and population messages.

"Taru" was a social content serial drama sponsored by PCI and its Indian partners. It premiered in the Indian States of Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh in February 2002 on All India Radio (AIR). In May, it expanded to Uttar Pradesh, Uttaranchal, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana and Delhi. At its height "Taru" reached over 60 million listeners in the very densely populated North of India in the national language of Hindi. Fifty-two episodes of "Taru" were aired on topics ranging from HIV-AIDS, immolation, infanticide, female education family planning, reproductive health and other health and social issues related to the family. PCI worked with a local NGO, Janani, and AIR in preparing the dramas. Researchers from Ohio University have helped design monitoring and evaluation studies of the program's impact. Here is an episode dealing with female infanticide. Judge its impact for yourself:

"TARU"—EPISODE 11

Compere: In the last episode of Taru, you listened to how Phirki Chachi provokes Raj Rani against Neha, blaming her because of her social work. Even this does not satisfy her and so she goes to Kapikeswar also telling him lies to make him turn against Neha. But, with Neha's good luck, Aloni Baba and Rask Guruji come there and try to pacify the situation. Raj Rani is not convinced, but she doesn't dare say it openly to Aloni Baba and Guruji. And the matter ends there. Now, let us move to Suhagpur village,

where Taru and Shashikant are trying hard to solve the problems of the village people.

Theme Song

Music:

Earth, water and sky Sun, moon and stars . . . Their all encompassing glow, spreads over the universe . . . My humble feet see a light, for a life better and brighter . . . Turning dreams into reality, that marks my personality . . . Meeting companions on the way to empowerment, together, we march to enlightenment . . . Now, the targets are no longer difficult.

Scene-1

(Taru is sitting in the village Primary Health Center named "Sheetal Center" performing her day-to-day work. Shashikant enters.)

Shashikant: Taru, did you go to Nareesh's house—?

Taru: Yes, I have just come back.

Shashikant: How is the old lady now—?

Taru: You will be surprised to know, Shashi, that her fracture has proved a blessing for her. She is now a completely changed person. . . . (Smiles) She is now all love and affection to her daughter-in-law and her grand-daughters. (smiles again) You could never have expected this from her earlier.

Shashikant: Yes, Taru . . . the old lady is completely changed now. And this has brought a happy change in the life of her son Nareesh and his wife also . . .

Taru: Yes, of course . . .

Shashikant: Earlier, the poor husband and wife were feeling terribly guilty that they had to cajole Aloni Baba, the holyman, to tell a lie to pacify their mother. They felt so bad that they had to tell lies to her to change her mind.

Taru: Yes, Shashi. Sometimes a difficulty in life becomes a blessing for and changes the course of our life. By the way, how is Neha now? Did I go to her place?

Shashikant (in a disappointed tone): Yes, Taru. Myself, Nareesh, Aloni Baba—the holyman and his disciple, Guruj— all of us went there. Neha going through a bad time (pause) The old aunt, Phirki, never misses chance to provoke her mother-in-law against her. And then, the mother-in-law takes it out on Neha—She does not miss a chance to heap first humiliation upon hapless Neha.

Taru (in a shocked tone): Didn't you people try to put some sense in that old lady's mind?

Shashikant (faking a deep breath): We tried to reason with Neha's hand, Kapilleshwar. It was no use trying with older members . . . Only the village holyman—Aloni Baba could do it. He spoke to Neha's mother-in-law.

Taru: What did Kapil have to say?

Shashikant (furiously): He is a clever guy. Knows how to evade straight talk. He doesn't like Neha's knack for social work.

Taru (surprisingly): But, what is wrong in that, Shashi?

Shashikant (sarcastically): This is what you feel . . . But, you know, they are a family of landlords. They can't even think of their daughter-in-law going to the low caste, poor people's colony to make their girls literate. (Sound of somebody coming running towards them)

(started) Look there, Taru. That boy, rushing towards the centre, seem to be Mange Ram's son, Deenu.

Taru: Yes, it is Deenu. What is wrong with him?

(A boy aged 8-10 years painting, with deep breaths, enters the health centre)

Boy (painting): Come quickly, Sir. There, in our colony, Kalua is creating scene in front of his house. He says he will kill his new-born daughter. Come, do something or he will surely kill her.

Taru and Shashikant (together): What . . .

Shashikant (shocked): What! Kailua is killing his baby girl?

Boy: Yes, his wife gave birth to a baby girl this morning. He was away, at work in the fields, then. He returned just now and says he will kill this girl.

Taru (in a worried tone): Who sent you here?

Boy (in a sad tone): Kailua's wife asked me to rush and request that you to come soon. Please hurry up before it's too late.

Taru (gets up): Let's go, Shashi

Shashikant (hurriedly): Come, let's rush. We will inform the village holy-man - Aboni Baba and his disciple, Guruji, on the way.

(Sad Music) (Change of Scene)

Scene-2

(Kailua's house. Noise of crowd gathered outside his house. Kailua is shouting. Sound of his wife crying.)

Kailua (Shouting): I will kill all of them. I will kill them. I will kill all the daughters you give birth to.

(Shashi, Taru and the Boy enter the Scene)

A Man (hurriedly): Shashikant, sir, you came at the right time. Please do something. We have tried every trick with him. But, he has gone mad. Please stop him.

Shashikant (furiously): Kailua, what is this? Have you gone mad? I say, stop this nonsense.

Kailua (agitated): Please sir, keep away from this. Now, no one can save her from my hands.

Taru (shaking with anger): Kailua, don't be mad. Why do you want to your own child? Even the wild animals don't behave like this.

Kailua (sarcastically): Madam, I say, you keep away from this. I know, upper class rich people very well.

Taru (angrily): You know nothing. . . .

Shashikant (in a furious tone): Do you know, Kailua, what you are doing. You can be thrown into prison if you do this. It is a crime, do you know

Kailua (sarcastically): This talk of prison and a crime is all bullshit. Damn. I care about all this. You big, rich people, you are all hypocrites. If you for a test and abortion, it is alright. If we do it, it is crime. Why? (pau) Don't you know, girls are a big burden, a curse for us poor people. In their education, downy, and what not, it is better not to have them. This is my family. . . . I will do what I like. . . . Now please, leave me alone

Taru (shouting with anger): Kailua, don't you dare go into the house warn you . . .

Kailua (shouts): I will kill her. . . . I will kill them all.

Taru (to Shashikant): Shashi, you take him away. I will go inside to wife.

(She goes into the house. Kailua's wife is crying inconsolably. Seeing Taru she comes running to her.)

Kailua's wife (crying): Please, madam, for God's sake, save us. Save, a child from this butcher. I will not live to see my child dead.

Taru (in a consoling tone): Don't worry. Shashikant will not let him enter the house.

Kailua (shouting outside and cursing his wife): You bloody woman. He over that girl to me or, I will throw both of you out of my house. You go hell. I don't care. . . .

Kailua's wife (crying inside the house): I will not stay here now. I will away. I will beg work anywhere, but will not let you touch my baby.

(The village holyman Baba and his disciple Gurruji enter)

Aloni Baba: God is great, God is great. . . .

Gurruji: May God bless all. Shasthikant, what is all this? What is the matter?

Aloni Baba (to Kalua in raging tone): You cursed soul! You will perish.

(Sound effect of loud music)

Here . . . I invoke my invisible power *(Sound effect)*

Kalua *(nervously)*: My holy lord, why are you angry with me?

Aloni Baba (to Gurruji): Rasik, warn him to behave. Tell him not to incur God's wrath or God will destroy his entire family. . . warn him, ask him to behave . . . ave.

(Loud background music)

Gurruji *(Trying to reason with Kalua)*: Kalua, don't torture your wife and children or you will also suffer. . . .

Kalua *(stammers and murmurs)*: Me, me . . .

Gurruji: You will be thrown in prison for this sin in this life. After this life, you will go to hell. So, behave yourself.

Kalua *(to Baba hesitatingly)*: But, my holy lord, you know, girls are a big curse in our society. . . .

Gurruji: It is only because of men like you. . . .

Aloni Baba *(furiously)*: You fool, sinners and foul-headed men like you are responsible for the miseries of women. If men change their ways, women would be automatically free from all troubles.

Kalua *(hesitates)*: But, Baba, how would it help? Even if I change myself, how will you change others?

Aloni Baba: First, you change yourself. Then we will change others also. Come, let's go inside. *(Chanting God is great. . . .)*

(They all go into the house. Sound of an infant crying and Kalua's wife weeping.)

Gurruji: Aha . . . What a beautiful child . . . like an angle . . . like Laxmi—the goddess of wealth.

Kalua's wife *(hysterical)*: No, no, I will not let anyone touch my child . . . No, never . . .

Shasthikant *(consoling her)*: Don't worry, sister, your baby is quite safe. . . .

Taru *(reassuringly)*: And as for her future, I promise that Sheetal Center will give her full care till she is able to support herself.

Aloni Baba: What else do you want Kalua? Come now, take your daughter in your arms and kiss her. But, I warn you . . . no mischief . . . or else this crowd will punish you or throw you out of the village.

Kalua *(to his wife)*: Give me my child . . . give her to me. . . .

Kalua's wife: No, never.

Kalua *(to his wife)*: I am sorry, dear. I am very sorry. . . . I will not harm her. Please, give her to me. *(Takes the child in his arms affectionately)*

Gurruji *(with a sigh of relief)*: Kalua, a day will come, when this girl will be the dearest to you and you will stand against all odds to shield her. . . .

Aloni Baba: You are the mother of this baby . . . take care of her, be brave and face the world . . . and you will see that this girl will become your most potent strength.

(to Taru) Taru dear, I am very happy today. Let's go to your, what do you call it?

Taru *(laughs)*: Sheetal Center.

Aloni Baba: Yes, yes, the Center. Let's go there. We will sit and relax there for a while.

(Guruji and Aloni Baba leave from there singing joyously. The crowd follows them)

[SONG]

O Lord, you are residing on that high snow clad mountain. Please look after the world and its creatures.

[Change of Scene]

Scene-3

(Taru, Shastikant, Aloni Baba, Guruji are present at the health center talking to each other)

Taru (affectionately): We are grateful to you Baba. You have come here after a long time.

Guruji: My holy lord was busy with other things. But, did you notice? Naresh's mother now does not harp on having a grandson. Everyone is so pleased to see this change in her.

Taru (hesitating): That's right, sir. But, I am still not sure about Kalua. I am afraid he might still cause harm to his infant daughter. I don't trust that man at all.

Guruji (with full confidence): Don't worry. He dare not do anything now. . . . Now, that the child is care of Sheetal Center, why should he be feeling any burden. She will be brought up with other children at the Center.

Aloni Baba (with a smile): Our great culture, you know, is meant to serve the society. If someone refuses to see reason, he has to be tackled by other means then . . . you know that, Raski (laughs)

(Nisha enters the Center)

Nisha (calling from outside): Taru, Taru, where are you?

Taru: I am here . . .

Guruji: Is it Nisha?

Taru: yes, Sir . . .

Nisha (entering the room): Good afternoon, my holy lord.

Aloni Baba (lovingly): God bless you, my dear . . .

Compre: Listeners, you have just listened to this episode on how Taru and her colleague Shastikant, with their sheer perseverance and undaunted courage, saved a baby girl from the heinous crime of infant killing. Terrified, due to the supernatural threat of harm by the holyman Aloni Baba, Kalua was transformed into a chastened man. This change of heart and mind on his part brings relief to all. Just around that point of time Nisha comes with an urgent message from Neha that they should rush to her village to help stop a child- marriage. To know what happens there please listen to our next episode of "TARU".

And now our address -

Serial "TARU"
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Parliament Street,
New Delhi - 110 001

Please do send us your response. Your letters are awaited eagerly

(Music)

(Title Song)

[EPISODE]

Nisha (to Guruji): Good afternoon to you, Sir.

Guruji: Lord bless you with happiness

Shastikant (to Nisha): Come Nisha, Why you are here today?

Nisha: Shastikant, I have brought a message from Neha. She has requested you all to come to her village immediately . . .

Taru (nervously): Why, what is the problem? I hope she is alright?

Nisha (assuring): Oh yes, she is fine, but her family is bent upon a child marriage.

Guruji (with a sigh of relief): Don't worry, dear. Now that we have received the message, you don't have to worry.

Taru (to Guruji happily): O.K. Sir, now, how about a good song to us?

Shashikant (laughs): Yes Sir, before going on another assignment, let us re-energize ourselves with more strength and vigor.

Aboln Baba (to Guruji): Yes, Rasik, I am also eager to hear a good song from you.

Guruji: Now, that you say so, I have to sing.

(Guruji sings a folk song and everybody joins him by singing and playing instruments merrily)

My heart swings like a leaf in the wind, The easterly wind has a message in it, My homeland beckons me to return . . .

Theme Song

Music

Earth, water and sky. Sun, moon and stars . . . Their all encompassing glow, spreads over the universe . . . My nimble feet see a light, for a life better and brighter . . . Turning dreams into reality, that marks my personality . . . Meeting companions on the way to empowerment, Together we march to enlightenment . . . Now our goals are no longer out of reach.

Music

Closing Announcement:

You were listening to the eleventh episode of Radio Soap Opera TARU. This episode was written by Dr. Anita M. Kumar, directed by Ms. Karuna

Srivastava, assisted in production by Mr. Mukesh Shukla and produced by Mr. Kamal Dutt.

The participating actors were Banwarit Taneja, Ash Narayan Mishra, Br. Bhushan Shukla, Sanjay Verma, Palkaji Bharti, Deepa Nairiwala, Surendr. Sagar, Alta Ameen and Ashesh.

Headquartered in New York, Population Communications International (PCI), producer of "Taru", develops educational-entertainment programming for radio and TV in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean and the United States. PCI has recently strengthened its HIV-AIDS programming in China, the Caribbean, Kenya, Mexico, Pakistan, South India and Tanzania. In the U.S., PCI hosts an annual "soap summit", a gathering of "soap opera" professionals to sensitize them to social issues like HIV, AIDS, which they can then incorporate into their dramas.