Hope Amid Despair

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A Kanpur-based NGO, with financial assistance from the U.S. Embassy, is bringing a message of hope to women who have faced the darker side of life.

Zahida, whose father made money by forcing her to marry three times, is one of the women trying to pick up the pieces of their lives at Sakhi Kendra.

Amid the noise and bustle of Parampura suburb in the commercial city of Kanpur nestles a plot of land fenced by mud walls surrounding 10 dingy, little houses. There are some beasts of burden, donkeys and horses, tied to stakes outside. Off to the right is a dilapidated structure with a thatched roof and no doors. This is where 18-year-old Tarana lives with her family of five sisters, a younger brother, her rickshaw puller father and her mother, who does household chores for other people.

A crowd gathered as we reached the house. At that moment Tarana, a figure draped in white, appeared before us. She was tall, slim and her round face radiated beauty. But what drew my attention was her eyes. They

showed no emotion at all, no bewilderment at the crowd gathered outside or any curiosity about the strangers who had come to meet her. Her face looked much older than her years—as if it had seen too much and was tired of telling its tale over and over again.

And then Tarana's sister, Tabassum, slowly pulled away the dirty, white *dupatta* wound around her. What unfolded before us was a grotesque, unseemly sight. Stunned, we stared at what seemed like the nude portrait of a frail young girl. Both her arms had been severed up to her shoulders. Instead of rising round breasts—the sign of young womanhood—there were two large round black marks. The flesh down to her waist hung loose. Her toes stuck together in an unshapely manner. However, the face had been deliberately left untouched and absolutely clear of any mark. On our insistence, Tabassum retied the *dupatta* around her sister's limp figure. "It would have been better if the acid had percolated to her heart and wiped out her life. This is no way to live," mutters Tabassum, tears streaming down her face. Shaken to the core I had to pull myself together to ask Tarana my first question: "How did it all happen?"

"I was fortunate to survive being burnt by the pitiless acid," says Tarana in a tone of hopelessness, frustration and anger. As her eyes started to fill with tears Subhashini Chaturvedi, a social worker with Sakhi Kendra, a welfare organization working with victimized women and girls, stepped in to give us the details.

Her story, later corroborated by the girl's neighbors, begins when a group of neighbors forcibly occupied the house of Tarana's mother, Shakira. When Shakira complained to her landlord, he sent a notice to those people, also his tenants, to vacate the premises. Barely a week passed before Tarana was suddenly abducted. She was taken away in a jeep by her neighbor, Najo, and three of her male relatives. Najo gave her something to eat and she became unconscious. When she came to, her salwar was soaked in blood and she was being electrically shocked. Tarana lost consciousness again as all limits of barbarism were crossed in that grimy room.

Four days later, as Shakira stood on her veranda, a car stopped in front of her house. Tarana was tossed out, barely alive, before the car sped away. Doctors had to amputate both her arms and then her shoulders in a desperate effort to save her life. Tarana survived, but only to exist as a shell of her former self, condemned to live with a mutilated body and soul.

As I walked away on leaden feet, the priest of the temple nearby, Devi Prasad Tiwari, approached me. "Have you seen how cruel and oppressive the man of modern times is?" he harangued. The summer sun was beating down mercilessly as I got into my car and instructed the driver, "Shelter home, Sakhi Kendra."

The shelter was set up 30 years ago by Neelam Chaturvedi to help the widows of workers who were killed by police gunfire during a strike at the Swadeshi Cotton Mills in Kanpur. The home now houses two dozen women who have faced the darker side of life. They are given medical care, education, skills training, food, shelter, sympathy and safety. With the help of Rs. 1 million from the U.S. Embassy Alumni Grants Program, Sakhi Kendra has established centers in Lucknow and Jhansi as well. Chaturvedi, an alumna of the U.S. State Department's International Visitor Leadership Program, had asked for the aid to further the work of Sakhi Kendra. "If something is done with sincerity and commitment, funds are not a problem. You have to let your work do the talking and people would of course come forward on their own with whatever they can offer."

Chaturvedi says Tarana spent about three months in the hospital. The expenses amounted to hundreds of thousands of rupees. However, there was no problem getting money to pay for her treatment. Her attackers also were arrested and jailed. At

Tarana survived four days of being burned with acid, electrically shocked and hacked with knives by male relatives and neighbors. Only her face was spared. Sakhi Kendra helped pay for the medical care that saved her life, but she still lives in the same neighborhood.

Right: Gudiya, betrayed and abused repeatedly by people she trusted, became a mother at 16. Now in her early twenties she has resumed her studies with help from Sakhi Kendra.

Sakhi Kendra women and girls who have been through tough times are counseling others. “Who better than they to help other victimized women? The girls staying here are devoting each minute of their lives to enriching their own life as well as that of others,” says Chaturvedi.

As I sat engrossed in discussions with her I caught a glimpse of Archana, a counselor, sitting nearby. There were tears in her eyes, anger and grief on her face. A few minutes later she burst out: “Women give birth to men but men don’t lose a single chance to abuse them and treat them like commodities. Incidents of rape, molestation and acid attacks are increasing. You are shocked by Tarana’s case but there have been more than a dozen acid attacks on girls in the past year in Kanpur alone.” Everyone from Gudiya, Zahida and Megha to Mridula and Sapna, all residents of Sakhi Kendra’s shelter home, has her own story of barbarism to narrate. Each one’s tale is more heart-rending than the other’s.

On the second floor of the shelter home is a large hall where the girls learn to read and write or rehearse for street plays during the day. At night this hall is used as a dormitory. On one bed is a girl in her early twenties, engrossed in a book. Her long, flowing hair is a little disorderly but what arrested me was her face. It was absolutely blank, though her eyes seemed to relate another gruesome tale like Tarana’s. “This is Gudiya,” said Chaturvedi as she lovingly ran her fingers through the girl’s hair. “She is a very good girl. This year she passed her intermediate examination.” Gudiya, however, seemed to be lost in her own world, oblivious to all around her.

After passing the eighth standard, Gudiya had quit her studies on the insistence of her mother and began assisting in household chores. Around that time her aunt and a male cousin moved to Gudiya’s neighborhood. One day, her aunt asked Gudiya to accompany her to the marketplace. Gudiya remembers that they all ate something at one of the shops. The next thing she remembers is being in an unfamiliar city miles from Kanpur. “How or when I was taken there is still a mystery. When I started weeping, I was told that I would have to marry my aunt’s son and spend the rest of my life with him. I don’t know whether I was married to him or not, but I do remember that I was prepared each night to sleep with a stranger,” says Gudiya.

Barely 16, Gudiya gave birth to a baby who died within a few days. “I don’t remember whether it was killed or it died on its own,” she says. After the death of her child, Gudiya mustered enough courage to escape. But instead of going to her parents, she sought shelter at the house of her father’s friend. Gudiya’s father came to know that his friend was sheltering his daughter; but he did not bring her back home as he believed he would be embarrassed in the community because of her long absence. Meanwhile, the man harboring Gudiya tried to take advantage of her. She lost all faith in human relations and tried to commit suicide. Gudiya does not remember how she arrived at Sakhi Kendra, though Chaturvedi says she was brought by her mother.

Another girl, Zahida, told us how her father got her married three times for money. It was as if I was watching a series of images flashing past on a giant screen, each one more painful than the previous. If one was a victim of domestic violence the other had been raped and left to die on the streets. There were even women who were sold and bought in open markets like cattle.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau, more than 15,000 cases of heinous crimes against women are registered

every year in India. However, this is only a small part of the picture as 60 to 70 percent of cases of sexual exploitation are not reported.

Zahida brought me a cup of tea and spread a local newspaper in front of me, opened on page three. There were two pictures of women holding their children. It was a report on a police raid at a hotel in Allahabad where they had arrested more than two dozen women involved in prostitution. A number of them were from Madhya Pradesh and had been lured to Uttar Pradesh with the promise of jobs, only to end up in red light areas. The look on Zahida's face was telling.

Subhashini Chaturvedi (right, in blue), a social worker with Sakhi Kendra, counsels women in the Gadaria Purva locality of Kanpur. The home is a refuge for girls and women and has established centers in Lucknow and Jhansi.

Below: Soni, who received help from Sakhi Kendra, has her own story of barbarism to tell.

The problem is not confined to India. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, close to 50,000 women and children are trafficked into America every year. "Some are trafficked for sweatshop labor, some for domestic servitude, some for agricultural work, but the greatest number are trafficked into the sex industry," said U.S. Ambassador David C. Mulford at a Conference on Corporate/NGO Partnerships to Combat Trafficking held in Calcutta in 2004. Once in this business, not only do they face rape, beatings and humiliation but also many end up with HIV/AIDS. Over the past few years the United States has committed more than $400 million to anti-trafficking efforts around the world. Last year, the United States spent $95 million for projects in 101 countries, in addition to the $25 million spent on programs to fight human trafficking in America.

The United States has also given a grant of Rs. 9 million for 24 projects in India during the past few years. The Indian government started a program in 1998 called "Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking and Commercial and Sexual Exploitation of Women and Children" under the aegis of the Department of Women and Child Development. It works with NGOs.

However, Chaturvedi of Sakhi Kendra feels such efforts cannot be completely successful unless the common man raises his voice and takes action. During her visit to the United States in 1999 Chaturvedi interacted with organizations and shelter homes working for women's welfare.

She noticed that many regular people took time from their busy schedules to involve themselves in welfare work. The temporary and semi-permanent workers of any welfare organization worked as sincerely as the permanent employees. "I strongly feel that no government or non-government effort can produce the desired results without the involvement of each one of us," she says.

As I prepared to return to Delhi, the image of Sapna, a frail 14-year-old girl, kept flashing in my mind. When I met her she was holding a baby in her arms. "Is this your brother?" I asked. "You can call him my brother or my son. If he manages to survive, I would have to be his mother," she replied. What she meant could be grasped easily. The horror of such a betrayal of a child's basic trust could not be hidden by her casual tone. Tears rolled down her bony cheeks. And as I carried my belongings out to the waiting car, her sobs sliced through the abominable ordinariness of the day. □