

Family & CHANGE

Families are changing rapidly in India. In a bid to prop up the institution of family, many Christians are advocating “getting back to traditional family values”.

However, some traditional values have, in fact, contributed to the problems that have always plagued the Indian family - problems

such as wives being deserted, domestic violence, child abuse, female infanticide, dowry, and abuse of daughters-in-law – so returning to “traditional family values” cannot serve us well in all respects.

Christians and Criticism of Culture

God’s plan for family differs in many ways from that prevalent in South Asian culture.

The Bible judges all cultures, because it is God’s word for all people. No culture is perfect, and people must change a cultural custom if it does not meet God’s standards.

Cultural behaviours are fine when they have no moral implications; however, if cultural customs lead to morally unacceptable outcomes, like casteism, that will not allow a fellow human being to be treated as an equal, then Christians must speak against it, and work against it. Judging women as less valuable and their wishes invalid, treating daughters as unwanted, or

discriminating against them in food, health, education, value and love in the family, is morally unacceptable. Unjust family customs call for change.

Jesus as the Example for Cultural Change

Our example, Jesus, rejected much of the culture of His time. Jews did not eat with non-Jews or associate with people they called sinners, but Jesus disobeyed, eating with people said to be unclean (Mark 2:15-17, 14:3, 18-23). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught, “It was said... but I say to you...” (Matt 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). He was explaining to His followers that they could go against their own culture. It is the task of Christians in each nation to understand the culture and follow Christ in saying graciously, “But I say to you...” All of us can work to

SUICIDE

South India has a higher rate of suicides per 100,000 people than anywhere else in the world. The four states are estimated to have 50,000 suicides a year, approximately 137 a day. In most of the world, three men commit suicide for every one woman, but research on young people in Tamil Nadu found that two young women commit suicide for every one young man. Suicide was the reason for the death of 50 to 70 per cent of young women who died. An Indian women’s group in London said, “The high instance of suicides among Asian women is linked to abusive practices within Asian families.” ☹



change family structures and patterns that damage both families and individuals. ☞

Beulah Wood, a Partner with IS NZ, is an author, editor and lecturer. This article has been excerpted from her latest book, Families in the Plan of God: a Theology for South Asia, which addresses the needs and problems of the South Asian family and culture. For more information please visit the Resources section on our website www.interserve.org.nz.

GENDER ISSUES

Newspapers in India carry reports of rape, murder, and abuse of women almost daily. They include honour killings, bride burnings and other abuses. Many of the worst atrocities against women take place within the four walls of their home.

There has always been a marked preference for sons over daughters. In South Asia, in contrast to most of the world, there are more men than women. Abortions of female fetuses, female infanticide and the custom in poorer families of neglecting girls, have drastically slanted population figures. Modern technology has joined with ancient Indian beliefs that women are inferior. People abort girls to avoid paying dowry when they grow up. Alarmingly, the 2001 Indian census revealed that the imbalance was more marked in the under-6-year-old age bracket, and especially in wealthy areas like Punjab and South Delhi. ☞

Savitri's Story

My well-respected father had a government job and tried to arrange good marriages for his daughters. He arranged for my sister, Savitri, to marry at 19 with no dowry, as she was beautiful and educated. However, at the wedding the groom's family (big road-building contractors) threatened to call off the marriage unless they received Rs. 51,000 in cash, 100 grams of gold, furniture, and a gas stove that very night. Father gave money instead, thinking it was for Savitri and her husband. They never saw it.

After the marriage, her husband's mother and sister said to Savitri, "How mean your father is! No dowry even with a government job!" If Savitri visited our home, her mother-in-law told her to demand money. If our family gave any gift to Savitri, that family took it, saying, "Your father is a beggar and your mother is a prostitute."

Savitri's life became a tragedy. Every night her husband would get drunk, beat her and force sex on her. Her father-in-law, mother-in-law and brother-in-law also beat her. Then they shut her in a room, tied a cable to the fan and told her to commit suicide. She refused. When she shouted, neighbours came, but her mother-in-law told them to go, as it was a personal matter. The family was rich and the neighbours were afraid, so they left.

Father spoke to the father-in-law many times, requesting that Savitri and her husband live separately, but nothing changed. The mother-in-law said, "We have a right to torment Savitri. She is our

daughter-in-law." They treated her as a slave. Father gave up and said Savitri must adjust. "It's your fate," he said.

Her husband's people tore up our letters to her and prevented phone conversations and visits. The cultural attitude is, "Leave your daughter. Let her adjust." We kept hoping for 10 years. In the tenth year, we didn't even know if she was alive, but I felt God told me to visit. I arrived at 6 am and found her sitting among the kitchen vessels, mere skin and bones, without a blouse, weak, ill, hardly able to stand, yet still working. She was hysterical with fear and told me to go. I promised to pray and fast for her. I went home and, crying, told Father of Savitri's terrible state.

We contacted a cousin who is a lawyer in Delhi. He said, "Let her adjust. Let her die."

Then my honourable father did something amazing. He paid 10 goondas (hired thugs) to go with my brothers to raid the house, rescue Savitri and bring her home. They saved her life. Now Savitri lives with my parents, and works for a bank.

There are so many women living terrible lives like Savitri. Why does society allow this? Society does not think it is a crime. It's like a network of evil. All my girl cousins were tormented like Savitri.

Inside nearly all the 200 houses in our middle-class housing colony, there is a story – a burnt hand, a murder, a suicide... But our family started something. Before Savitri came home, people let daughters die in their in-laws' homes. Now in this colony, there are several cases of parents going and bringing a daughter back, or beating their son-in-law to make him change. ☞