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Texte récompensé par le premier accessit, Prix Daniel Pearl
décerné le vendredi 10 juin 2005

“ Promises and Lies”

Thirty year old Preeti Sandhu, spends her lonely days in a one-room outhouse on her brother's compound in Ludhiana, Punjab in India, looking at the photos of her sons that are kept with their toys and pictures of her Gods.

It was 1995, when the man who married her and had two children with her during his holidays in India, returned to make amends and take the family back with him to Canada.

At the New Delhi airport he asked her to wait while he showed the children around. After three hours of waiting, she made inquiries about the flight. It had taken off !!

Preeti opened the envelope her husband had given her. It was supposed to contain travel documents. All she found was blank sheets of paper.

“Where will I go?” she asked herself. “Can I be a burden on my brother? Who will marry me at this age? In brief, she had lost everything!

Runaway grooms from Canada are among thousands of Non-Resident Indians who have deserted their wives in Punjab.

Her husband has now remarried and lives in Canada with her sons.

Jasprit Kaur of Chandigarh, Punjab, she is another woman trying to figure out what happened to her promised life in Australia.

She loved the times when her husband would come from Australia and put her up in hotels at New Delhi and Mumbai . She is what they call a “holiday wife“

Last year during one the trips, he told her he was not coming back.

It is a tragic world of holiday wives, abandoned brides and runaway bridegrooms where one comes across heart wrenching testimony which sheds light on a social evil orchestrated by Indian men who have settled in Canada and elsewhere overseas.

Kiran, an architecture student from New Delhi has a similar story -Her Canadian husband spent 15 days with her after their marriage and left India. She has not seen him since.

In nearly every village in Punjab in India, there are examples of the abandoned and tattered lives of deserted wives. Some have had their husbands come down for a visit or two. But many have not seen a second time the men they marry.

These deserted wives become unwanted dependents on their in-laws and parents and their misery is further compounded if they are pregnant or have children.

The numbers are shocking. At least 15,000 cases of abandoned wives in the state of Punjab alone have been victims of a phenomenon which one could easily be recognised as an organized crime. A 40 per cent increase in the number of cases involving marriage frauds perpetrated by Indians from overseas in the past In fact, two or three girls in every village or town have such a tale to narrate.

It is devastating for a young woman to arrive in her new home in a completely foreign land, only to realize that the person she had married is already married and has children or that the life they she been promised is not there.

Twenty two year old Geeta, a business management student, was married into an affluent family settled in Canada. While flying back to Toronto, her husband Jai, declared that he was Gay. Jai married Geeta under parental pressure; his parents had threatened to disown him which simply meant that he would lose all his wealth and riches.

From Canada, the United States, Australia and Britain, the young men locals call NRI or Non-Resident Indians, come by the thousands every year to look for women in their homeland.

One of the most fertile hunting grounds is Punjab's Doaba region in northwest India from which an estimated seven million Indian immigrants have dispersed globally.

Here, the manic desire to go overseas is manifested during the wedding season where daughters are dangled as bait to hook the dream life abroad.

A quick engagement is followed by a massive wedding after which the husband flies home while the wife waits for her visa.

Soon the letters stop. The phone rings through to an answering machine and even that stops after a while.

In some cases the men had married the women while holidaying in their native villages and had no intention of living with them. There are stories of women who have been married for over 20 years but have only been with their husbands for no more than a week or two.

In other cases, the NRI's were after dowry money.

The most tragic of stories perhaps are of the women who keep on waiting year after year for their husbands to return.

A large proportion of the abandoned wives end up as a statistic in India where a woman is molested every 26 minutes, raped every 34 minutes, sexually harassed every 42 minutes and kidnapped every 43 minutes.

Those who do not accept their fate and fight back take on the risk of becoming part of another deadly number in India — every six hours a young married women is burnt alive, beaten to death, or driven to commit suicide.

No one knows who is to be blamed. The unstable ruthless NRI men, the parents who force their daughters to marry these men or maybe the daughters who agree to tie the knot because they are lured by the splendid life abroad.

Who ever may be blamed but at the end of the day all these women are asking the same question “Where has my husband gone?”