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THIS WEEK

7.6 Quake Hits Kashmir

Houston Cop Gets TOP COPS Award

Muzaffer Siddiqi, the police officer who serves as a liaison between the Houston Police Department and the city's South Asian population, received a TOP COPS Award during the annual award ceremony held Oct. 2 in Washington, D.C.



A27

U.P. Leaders Hype Real Estate Growth

A delegation from Uttar Pradesh led by Member of Parliament and Samajwadi Party leader Amar Singh extolled real estate investment opportunities in areas adjoining the national capital Delhi, at a panel discussion Oct. 7 in Santa Clara, Calif.



Investment opportunities in areas adjoining the national capital Delhi, at a panel discussion Oct. 7 in Santa Clara, Calif.

B1

Hindu Mandir Opens in Irvine

A new Hindu Mandir was inaugurated Oct. 9 by Irvine Mayor Beth Krom before a large, jubilant congregation. The 7,500 sq. ft. facility was purchased by the temple founders recently.



B22

Film to Document Post-9/11 Violence

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks rocked America, Valarie Kaur, then a junior at Stanford University, decided to travel to San Diego, Arizona, Washington, D.C., New York and other locations to document post-9/11 hate crimes and violence with a video camera.



After the 9/11 terrorist attacks rocked America, Valarie Kaur, then a junior at Stanford University, decided to travel to San Diego, Arizona, Washington, D.C., New York and other locations to document post-9/11 hate crimes and violence with a video camera.

C1



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (2nd from l) talks with Indian Army doctors as he pays a visit to earthquake injured people sheltered in tents, in Uri, about 70 miles north of Srinagar, Oct. 11. Singh pledged Rs. five billion (\$116 million) to help rebuild Kashmir as he toured the earthquake-devastated zone. (AFP/Getty Images)

Community Grieves, Rallies

By ASHFAQUE SWAPAN
Special to India-West

Even tens and thousands of miles away, the effect of the devastating earthquake that hit Pakistan and India Oct. 8 could pack a terrible, direct, emotional wallop, as Oakland, Calif.-based activist and poet Ali Hasan Cemantdaur found out.

He began calling his relatives in Karachi frequently after learning that his brother's sister-in-law Ruby and her two children, aged 1 and 2, were trapped in the collapsed 12-story Margala Tower in Islamabad.

Her father-in-law's body was recovered Oct. 10 night under a structure in the building.

The weekend tremor, registering 7.6 on the Richter scale, is South Asia's worst in a century, and has killed at least 1,244 people in Indian Kashmir and may have killed up to 41,000 in Pakistani Kashmir and Pakistan, according to Reuters.

As South Asian organizations appealed for aid, savvy Internet users have decided to put the global information network at work. Sabahat Ashraf, a Silicon Valley-based technical writer who lives in San Jose, Calif., de-

ecided to use the Internet.

"I've always felt that even if one is far one is not powerless," the expatriate Pakistani told **India-West**. "There's quite a bit of stuff

one can do."

He decided to go into action as soon as he heard about the earthquake. "When I heard about the earthquake Friday night, I im-

[Cont. on page A28]

Death toll in Pak could rise to 80,000: official

The Associated Press

Pakistani villagers desperate to find earthquake survivors dug with bare hands into collapsed homes and schools where children had been heard crying under the rubble. In the debris of a school in Balakot, 60 miles north of Islamabad, several children were rescued but many more died.

Officials said nearly 20,000 bodies have been counted but estimates of the toll already exceed 30,000. A spokesman for the Islamic Relief agency, Waseem Yaqhoob, told CNN the death toll could reach "80,000, maybe more."

"This could get very close to tsunami levels," he said, referring to the Dec. 26 tsunami in Southeast Asia that claimed about 100,000 lives. "It's horrific. It really is terrible."

The epicenter of the magnitude 7.6 quake that hit the In-

[Cont. on page A14]

Sex, AIDS and Namakkal



AIDS widow P. Jagadeeswari, 18, a field worker for a Positive Living Center in the Namakkal district, gazes lovingly at a photo of her late husband, Senthil Rajah. (Viji Sundaram photo)



By VIJI SUNDARAM
India-West Staff Reporter

NAMAKKAL, Tamil Nadu – Day after day, Saraswathi, who gave her age as 27 but looks more like 40, toils as a coolie in the relentless hot sun at one construction site or another in the small town of Rasipuram in the Namakkal district, carrying bricks and cement on her head.

Her workday is long, stretching sometimes to eight hours, and the pay is meager – Rs. 50 a day, the price Americans pay for a donut.

[Cont. on page A30]

AIF Gala Nets \$1M

By SARMISHTA RAMESH
Special to India-West

SAN JOSE, Calif. – It was Oct. 8. The evening had barely begun; the American India Foundation's third annual gala

fundraiser was yet to start. The guests – a veritable list of Silicon Valley's who's who, mostly from the Indian American community – were just trickling into the San Jose Convention Center for a night of fun filled pageantry. But even before the show could begin, the Foundation already had reason to celebrate: It had already raised a whopping million dollars from just sponsorships and ticket sales.

[Cont. on page A34]



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Sex, AIDS and Namakkal:

The Double Whammy of Preying Truckers and Family Moors

[Cont. from page A1]

That's the level of income that keeps almost one-third of India's 1.2 billion people living below the poverty line.

In addition to her penury, illiteracy and lack of vocational skills, Saraswathi is HIV-positive, which is the virus that causes AIDS.

She was diagnosed with the disease shortly before her husband died of an AIDS-related illness five years ago. Their only son was three at the time.

Saraswathi's sunburnt bony face and sunken eyes accentuate her overbite. She wears her sari like most laborers do — well above her ankles to allow for a greater degree of mobility as she walks on rocky soil at her work sites. Her heels are cracked and raw. Her blouse keeps falling off her shoulders because there's not much flesh to hold it up.

Saraswathi is one among about 100,000 people living with the human immunodeficiency virus in the district of Namakkal, which is about 220 miles southwest of Chennai and has a population of 14 million.

She has been on anti-retroviral drugs for several months, under the federal government's ARV rollout program, which began about a year ago and is administered by non-governmental organizations.

No cure has been found for the disease so far, but anti-retrovirals can turn HIV from a fatal disease to a manageable chronic illness by slowing the progression of the disease. But once patients are started on the drugs, they must continue

taking them all their lives.

Namakkal has always been well known for its thriving lorry and poultry industries, which allow its residents a reasonably comfortable lifestyle.

In recent years, however, the district has become better known for having the highest concentration of HIV-positive people in India, said P. Kausalya, who co-founded the Positive Women's Network for women living with HIV/AIDS.

Kausalya, a native of Namakkal but now a resident of Chennai, has been HIV-positive herself for seven years, after contracting the virus from her late truck driver husband, who hails from the same district. He knew he was infected even prior to his arranged marriage, but hid it from her. She,



Positive Living Center counselors P. Amaravathi (left) and P. Kiruthika. Kiruthika said she felt liberated after going public with her HIV status.

too, is on ARV therapy.

"One in two households in Namakkal has someone who is HIV-positive," said S. Swaminathan, project associate for the Namakkal-based Positive Living Project HUNS, an NGO funded by the Family Health International. PLP operates three Positive Living clinics in the district. "Here, it's the truckers who are mainly responsible for the spread of the disease."

Away from home and family for days — sometimes even weeks — at a time, driving endless stretches of highway with only an assistant by their sides, these truckers ease their loneliness by engaging in sex often when they stop for food, AIDS activists say. Many wayside dhabas supply women in addition to meals.

"Most truckers do it not so much because they derive pleasure from it, but more because it's a habit, or because of peer pressure," Dr.

For Kiruthika, serving as a counselor and coaxing infected women like herself into self-confidence has empowered her, she said. And going public with her HIV status has been liberating.

P. Krishnamurthy, project director of the Chennai-based AIDS Prevention and Control Project-Voluntary Health Services, told India-West.

Activist Dr. Monorama Pinagapani of Chennai, who runs several programs for commercial sex workers and an AIDS orphanage in that city, offered a different explanation.

"Truckers say that driving for hours in the hot sun builds up heat in their bodies," she said. "They say the heat can only be released through sex."

Whatever propels them to do it, condoms seldom figure in their roadside encounters.

"The truckers take the virus to other women they have sex with on the highway, or return home and pass the virus on to their wives," Swaminathan said.

P. Kiruthika was one such victim. Married off at age 15 to trucker Periaswami, who was twice her age at the time, the 19-year-old slender, pretty woman with a megawatt smile currently volunteers as a counselor at a Positive Living Center in Para-

mathivelur, a town 25 km. from Namakkal, when she's not nursing her HIV-positive husband.

Periaswami has been housebound since he had a stroke 10 months ago, about the time he was diagnosed with the disease. He is on the anti-retroviral therapy, and so is Kiruthika. She said it's now clear to her why she lost two of her children before they reached their first birthdays.

For Kiruthika, serving as a counselor and coaxing infected women like herself into self-confidence has empowered her, she said. And going public with her HIV status has been liberating. "I've told every one in my village that I'm HIV-positive," she told India-West with her trademark

smile. "I tell them that having HIV is not a death sentence."

Another contributing factor to the AIDS epidemic in Namakkal is the unusual household practices among the Gownder community there, Swaminathan said.

Joint families are the norm, and the daughter-in-law of the home automatically becomes the mistress of her husband's brothers, cousins and even his father, he said. In other words, she is the sexual property of all the male members. Likewise, it is not uncommon for the son-in-law to have sex with his sisters-in-law and mother-in-law, but more likely, on his terms.

"The culture in Namakkal is different from the rest of Tamil

[Cont. on next page]



AIDS widow Saraswathi, who is HIV-positive, toils in the hot sun every day as a coolie to put bread on the table for herself and her six-year-old child. (Viji Sundaram photos)

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C Y M K



Amit Gandhi 8-16-02-q

Sex, AIDS and Namakkal:

The Double Whammy of Preying Truckers and Family Mores



Julie Augustine, project officer for women and children in the Positive Living Project, runs clubs for vulnerable children in Namakkal.

[Cont. from previous page] Nadu," Swaminathan told **India-West**. "The prevalence of multi-sex partners is so common. That's one of the causes of the rapid spread of HIV."

And why, too, doctors find it hard to trace the source of infection in their HIV patients.

"One of the difficulties we face is 'partner tracing,'" said Dr. M. Anand Muthu, who works at a

steel boxes with clothes piled on them are placed against a wall. Dim light emerges from the solitary bulb that hangs from the ceiling. A musty smell fills the room. There is no running water. The street outside is dotted with litter. In other words, it is not exactly a place conducive for a person who is trying to slow the march of a deadly disease.

"If you're talking care, anti-



"The drugs are very toxic, so patients need good nutrition, clean surroundings and such basic necessities as clean water to benefit from those drugs," Gopalan told **India-West**.

Diagnosed HIV-positive after her husband succumbed to an AIDS-related infection four years ago, Mallika said recurring illnesses, as well as having to babysit her nephew and her HIV-positive younger daughter, forced her to quit her job as a day laborer four months ago.

Luckily for her, social workers from one of the Positive Living Centers helped to get her older daughter into the nearby "Reach the Unreached" boarding school run by Christian missionaries.

Mallika, whose parents died years ago, is dependent on the income her sister earns from cutting straw to make mats. It was the very same job Mallika's husband did until he fell ill.

Mallika said her sister, who was abandoned by her husband a few months ago, is paying off a Rs. 30,000 loan Mallika's husband contracted from his employer for his treatment.

"It is bonded labor," Mallika acknowledged. "But what to do?"

On days she feels very ill, the AIDS widow spends Rs.6 for the bus ride to the health care center



AIDS widow K. Mallika, who is HIV-positive, with her daughters Kirthika, 11, and Kavya, 5, who is also HIV-positive.

where Muthu works. Her neighbors wonder why she rarely leaves her hut, said P. Amaravathi, the PLC counselor assigned to Mallika. Amaravathi is careful not to let on. She visits just as a friend.

Even though talk about AIDS is commonplace all over the district, "still, many HIV-positive people are scared to disclose their status for fear of getting stigmatized," Swaminathan told **India-West**.

PLP's limited funding allows it only a five-kilometer outreach in the Namakkal district, but even so, about 1,250 infected women are benefiting from its programs,

nearly all of them widows, said Julie Augustine, project officer for women and children in the Positive Living Project. And most of the widows are in their late teens or early 20s.

Saraswathi, like many other uneducated widows in India, was spurned and shunned by her in-laws after her husband died. And like many other widows, she was deemed to have no claim to her husband's property.

She was also blamed by her in-laws, whom she and her husband had been staying with, for his death, a situation many HIV-posi

[Cont. on next page]

Namakkal has always been well known for its thriving lorry and poultry industries, which allow its residents a reasonably comfortable lifestyle. In recent years, however, the district has become better known for having the highest concentration of HIV-positive people in India, said P. Kausalya.

Positive Living Center health care clinic in Paramathivelur. "Patients refuse to divulge this to us."

Because AIDS has claimed scores of men, women and children in Namakkal in recent years, it is a topic very few there tiptoe around any more. At water pumps and bazaars, people discuss who lost whom and when to the disease.

But ignorance about how the disease can be contracted still breeds fear in many.

"Sometimes, after an HIV-positive woman pumps water from a community pump, the pump handle is immediately washed before someone else uses the pump," said Punitha Evangelin, a social worker at the Positive Living Center in Rasipuram.

"The culture in Namakkal is different from the rest of Tamil Nadu," Swaminathan told India-West. "The prevalence of multi-sex partners is so common. That's one of the causes of the rapid spread of HIV."

In a tiny one-room thatched hut in a rundown part of that town live 35-year-old AIDS widow K. Mallika, her two daughters, Kirthika, 11, and Kavya, 5, her sister and her sister's one-year-old son. A single cot occupies the center of the room. A kerosene stove and a few pots and pans sit in the kitchen nook, while a couple of

retrovirals are not the only thing," noted Anjali Gopalan, India's first AIDS activist and founder and executive director of the Delhi-based AIDS NGO, Naz Foundation (India) Trust. Naz does prevention work, as well as runs a care home for women and children who are HIV-positive. The Gere Foundation and the Godrej Foundation have been two of their main donors.

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Sex, AIDS and Namakkal:**The Double Whammy of Preying Truckers and Family Moors**

AIDS widow Dhanam Dinesh said she is one of the luckier ones because her parents took her back into their home after she tested positive. (Viji Sundaram photos)

[Cont. from previous page]
itive widows in India face.

"Within days after my husband died, my mother-in-law drove me and my child (then three) out of the house without giving me any money, or a share of his property," she said in Tamil. "She said he died because I had infected him," even though he had contracted the virus long before she did.

"The blame is always put on the widow, no matter what," said Muthulakshmi, a counselor at the Positive Living Center in Rasipuram, where widows are forced to wear white, and do everyone's bidding, even when it comes to sex. "The mother-in-law says 'my son is dead, why should I give you any property.'"

Most of the young widows are

not wanted by their parents, either, for fear that marriage prospects of their younger children might be jeopardized.

Dhanam Dinesh, 30 and HIV-positive, said she was relatively lucky. Widowed seven years after she was married off at age 16 to her uncle, Ravi, a truck driver in Namakkal, Dinesh said her parents took her back into their home after her husband poisoned himself, unable to cope with his failing health brought on by AIDS. The couple's son was only two-and-a-half-years-old at the time.

Her mother-in-law gave her Rs. 30,000 in exchange for her relinquishing her claim to the family property that would have gone to her husband.

"She made me sign a paper that



I would not ask for anything more," Dinesh told **India-West**.

The young woman currently earns around Rs. 8,000 a month working as the general secretary of HUNS. Dinesh said that even though her neighbors know that she is HIV-positive — "in Namakkal, everyone assumes that if a husband has the virus, the wife, must have it, too," — she is not discriminated against. "I am very lucky in that respect, too," she said.

Under Augustine's guidance, the Positive Women's Network runs clubs for children in Namakkal so they become aware of HIV before it is too late. Welcome Friends Club children go from house to house advocating condom use and urging parents to keep their daughters in school, and not

marry them off too early.

Even though child marriages are illegal in India, they are widespread for a variety of reasons, including the fear of parents that their daughters might "go astray" after reaching puberty.

Francisco Bay Area. "Why is a businessman less of a carrier? You have to have interventions in the general community. If these interventions are not widened, it's pointless."

There are days, Saraswathi said,

Alarmed over the high prevalence of HIV in the district, officials there have proposed that parents of daughters on the marriage market insist on having would-be grooms produce HIV-free certificates in order to be even considered by the girls' families.

But in Namakkal, one of the main reasons why a girl as young as 13 or 14 is taken out of school and married off is that the father is HIV-positive and is eager to get his daughter wedded before his positive status is discovered, or before he dies, Augustine told **India-West**.

Alarmed over the high prevalence of HIV in the district, officials there have proposed that parents of daughters on the mar-

when she can't go to work, either because there aren't any jobs, or because she's too sick. But as far as possible, she said she tries not to let her perpetual cough, breathlessness or frequent bouts of fever — typical "opportunistic infections" HIV-positive people are prone to — or the migraines that keep her tossing at night, prevent her from going in to work because she has a child to take care of.

That aside, she's still paying off



Members of the Welcome Friends Club in Namakkal said they go from house to house advocating condom usage and the importance of keeping girls in school.



AIDS activist P. Kausalya, empowered after she contracted the virus from her husband, these days often shares the dais with the likes of U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan (far right) and India's health minister A. Ramadoss.

riage market insist on having would-be grooms produce HIV-free certificates in order to be even considered by the girls' families.

But AIDS activists are skeptical about the proposal. They say it will only spawn a fake certificate market.

Because truckers nationwide

the Rs.14,000 loan her late husband took from his employer for his AIDS treatment, just like Mallika's husband did.

"He has threatened me, even beaten me, when I sometimes fall behind on my payments," Saraswathi told **India-West**. "I just can't afford to fall sick."

"Looking at certain groups of people as being carriers is detrimental and violates their rights," Gopalan asserted to India-West during a recent visit to the San Francisco Bay Area. "Why is a businessman less of a carrier? You have to have interventions in the general community. If these interventions are not widened, it's pointless."

are considered a high-risk group, nearly 80 percent of the Indian government's AIDS budget is targeted at intervention programs for them, Gopalan said.

"Looking at certain groups of people as being carriers is detrimental and violates their rights," Gopalan asserted to **India-West** during a recent visit to the San

(This is the second in the series on "Women and AIDS" by **India-West** staff reporter Viji Sundaram, who visited India for two months earlier this year under a fellowship from the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation in Menlo Park, Calif.)

Next week: The sex workers of Prem Nagar and Chennai.)

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