

# Losing Lives to Stigma

What the cases of Pallavi Dhawan and Saiqa Akhter can teach Communities about immigration, integration and the Social Stigmas of the Developmentally Disabled

By Furqan Sunny Azhar

Pallavi Dhawan, her husband, and their child left India and came to the US in 2012 partly (or primarily) because they wanted better treatment options for their son, Arnav. He suffered from a brain cyst and microcephaly, a condition characterized by a small head circumference.

Their time in the US was short and tragic, as the three of them are now dead, and the motives regarding the deaths are still under investigation. What we do know, though, is that the death of her child and her husband have been ruled a homicide, and her death has been ruled a suicide.

More is known about the tragic case of Saiqa Akhter who, in 2010, strangled her 2 children because they were autistic. She wanted “normal kids,” as she stated in her 9-11 call. Various media outlets revealed that she was suffering from depression in the days leading up to the children’s murders.

In my own practice as an immigration attorney, I have handled asylum cases for South Asian clients who have a developmentally disabled child. Their stories, which are fully corroborated by country condition reports, reveal that not only are the disabled children discriminated against in their home country, but there exists a hostility towards parents of developmentally disabled children as well.

Parents of disabled children are also discriminated against, vilified and demonized. The often prevailing thought is that God has punished them, so they must deserve the burden (or blessing depending on how you

think about the way in which developmentally disabled children are treated in our communities



view it) of caring for a developmentally disabled child. The other common perception is that the parent’s genetic makeup was in some way responsible for the child’s condition, and usually the mother unfairly bears the brunt of this blame, since she bore the child.

Both Pallavi Dhawan and Saiqa Akhter were immigrants to the US. They had opportunities to leave their home countries, and they took advantage of those opportunities. It is certainly true that with respect to the issue of treatment for developmentally disabled children, the US is far and away more progressive, inclusive and tolerant as a society, particularly in relation to South Asian countries. However, immigration to the US is not always a seamless transition.

Families in South Asia are structured differently than in the US. In the US, the child may leave the house at 18 in order to ‘find their own way,’ whereas South Asian communities often times live in “joint family systems” in which there exists an extended family arrangement where several families live in the same home. The benefit of a joint family system is that children and their parents have support of their immediate family, both emotionally and in terms of rearing children. This can be particularly important since caring for a developmentally disabled child is extremely challenging. It takes a tremendous amount of time and patience. I know this because I have a family member with Down Syndrome.

Life in the US is different from life in South Asian countries though. The drive towards upward mobility, professional advancement and

monetary wealth, coupled with the challenges of parenting for a developmentally disabled child can be overwhelming. The absence of immediate family can lead to social isolation and depression. Parents of developmentally disabled children can begin to believe that they are victims, or that they are deserving of their "fate," and they may repeatedly ask themselves the question, "Why us?"

The cases of Pallavi Dhawan and Saiqa Akhter are tragic, but they create a teaching moment. A moment for the South Asian community to do some introspection and think about the way in which developmentally disabled children are treated in our communities, and also how we view the parents. It's the big elephant in the room that no one wants to talk about, but the South Asian community can be a leader if they recognize the reality that although there are many beautiful things about our culture, there are ways for us to improve as well.



Parents of disabled children are also discriminated against, vilified and demonized



*If you know a parent who has a developmentally disabled child, don't treat them as social pariahs. Give them a call. Talk to them. Offer your help. Encourage your children to play with their children. Teach tolerance. It may save a life.*

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