



# Young Affluent **and** Depressed

■ by Shefalee VASUDEV

**F**OR SOME TRAGIC REASON, THIS has been a year of suicides among young, successful, urban women. On December 10 when the 2002 Gladrags Megamodel winner Rakhee Choudhari was found dead in her Mumbai apartment, she added yet another number to a growing list of depressed young women who had everything to live for and yet chose death. Barely two months ago, 18-year-old Delhi-based singer Saumya Sharma had jumped to death from the 22nd floor of a building. Earlier this year, Delhi socialite Natasha Singh, her sister-in-law, model Ritu Singh, former Lok Sabha speaker Shivraj Patil's daughter Sapna Patil and 21-year-old Tamil actress Monal all committed suicide within a span of two months. The common elements in these cases are too obvious to ignore. All were young, affluent and had a lot going for them in life. Yet, all suffered from bouts of depression, eventually leading to their premature deaths. Depression is the biggest underlying cause behind the extreme step of suicide; according to mental health professionals, there are five depressed women for every one such man in affluent sections of the society.

Young, ambitious, well-to-do women are becoming prime candidates for depression, suggest clinics of urban psychotherapists. As many cases indicate, lack of consistent emotional support is the primary cause. Patil feels that his daughter's suicide could have been averted if his wife had been alive. "I am not close to my children," he confesses. "In our family, we never spoke to our father. Everything was conveyed through my mother." Similarly, one of the causes behind Choudhari's suicide was debatedly her inability to cope with her parents' divorce.

Traditionally, depression has been linked with women. But as the role of women changed, depression began to affect the younger 15-44 age group. "The gap between aspiration and reality is very prominent in women as compared with men. This leads to constant turmoil," says Dr Nimesh

Desai, medical superintendent at Delhi's Institute of Human Behaviour and Allied Sciences. Across the world, the male-female depression ratio is 1:2 and in some societies, 1:3. Recent studies suggest that now depression strikes early in life and that young women are at maximum risk.

Not surprisingly, what was once loosely termed as melancholia in mental health and is now labelled clinical depression, has become a hot topic of research. In fact, warns the World Health Organisation (WHO), depression will become the biggest killer disease of women in the coming decade. For every suicide, there are 20 others who attempt it and 40 more who contemplate it. A World Mental Health report published last year found that unipolar depressive disorder (consistent, long-term sadness) was the largest malady afflicting women between 15 and 44, disabling 18.6 per cent globally. This toll is higher than that for heart disease and of breast/cervical cancers.

These are not exaggerated claims. Social and behavioural barometers support them. Young, affluent Indian women are paying the price for "being there, doing that". They haven't had to brave hardship, hunger, domestic violence or dowry threats. On the contrary, they fit a profile: they are bold, smart, fun-loving, even prodigal. Also, dominating, calculating and ruthlessly ambitious. What they want, they often get. But these things—designer lingerie, expensive perfumes, sleek cars and top jobs—don't offer the solace that a close-knit family bonding did in the past. Experts feel that busy parents who nurture by remote control contribute to this state. In some families, fathers are absent over long periods chasing their money-oriented dreams, while mothers are straddling, often unsuccessfully, the gigantic gap between the modern and the conservative.

The traditional symbols of ultimate accomplishment—name and fame or husbands, diamonds and servants—are obviously not the antidotes for the pressures of an affluent life. "There is a lot of pressure on the youth, more so on women, to prove that despite odds they are high achievers," says Dr Jitendra Nagpal of Delhi's Vidyasagar Institute of

LACK OF STRONG EMOTIONAL SUPPORT MAKES YOUNG, SUCCESSFUL WOMEN PRIME CANDIDATES FOR SUICIDE.

Mental Health and Neurosciences. Instant kicks, instant highs, instant fame and an almost blind race to get rich and famous tempt girls more than boys. But they are not able to shed the traditional roles of "nurturers" on the one hand and wanting to be "looked after" on the other. Naturally, there is a conflict.

Take Choudhari. This 23-year-old had already made her place in the modelling world. She had also stood fourth in the Miss International contest in Germany and was looking forward to going to Malaysia on December 20 for another beauty pageant. "She had a great future going for her," commented Maureen Wadia, managing editor of *Gladrags*.

That women in glamorous professions are prone to depression is catching attention.

Fashion photographer Rony Kaula, who works in Delhi and Mumbai, says the claustrophobic and insensitive attitude of the glamour world is like a noose around the necks of the aspirants. "Girls base their emotional and social security on their shortlived careers, unlike men who invest in a number of back-up plans," says Kaula.

Delhi-based model Amrita Nurie, 24, who has featured in the Hercules jeans and Neva innerwear ads, would agree. "One-and-a-half inch more on my waist gives me sleepless nights," says the 5 ft 6 in tall Nurie who weighs only 48 kg. Similarly, Deepti Gujral, 29, who left her home in Delhi to

work as a hospitality executive in Mumbai, became seriously depressed and was given to frequent bouts of crying because she suffered from anorexia. Anorexia nervosa, the eating disorder that makes people go off food, is a manifestation of an anxious mind and primarily a woman's problem.

Women don't feel comfortable when they abuse power or manipulate relationships for advancing their careers because they have been taught it is not "good". But they still do it. "Upon introspection, they begin doubting their own capabilities and often end up feeling ashamed," explains Nagpal.

Girls are also more vulnerable to vagaries of mood. So those who are in love with love and confuse it with the

loyalty of one man, often feel let down. The buxom Malayalam film sex symbol Shakeela attempted suicide in her early 20s because the man she was in love with did not marry her. "Among women depression is often due to relationships issues, unlike men for whom financial conditions or loss of social status is the reason," says psychiatrist Sudhir Khandelwal of AIIMS, Delhi.

Girls are mostly brought up in a protected and pampered environment and then suddenly thrust into a world of fierce competition that emphasises materialism. The office or the ramp and the real harsh world are very different, each with

“Women face pressure to prove they are high achievers.”

JITENDRA NAGPAL, psychiatrist, VIMHANS

## MOTHERS ARE STILL STRADDLING THE GAP BETWEEN THE MODERN AND THE CONSERVATIVE.



**SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION**

- ▶ Helplessness and emptiness
- ▶ Fatigue
- ▶ Low appetite
- ▶ Changes in weight
- ▶ Altered sleep pattern; insomnia or excess drowsiness
- ▶ Agitation at slightest provocation
- ▶ Inability to concentrate, apathy or social withdrawal
- ▶ Diminished sex drive
- ▶ Feeling of worthlessness or guilt
- ▶ Suicidal thoughts

*Two or more of the above symptoms could indicate a tendency towards depression.*

## SUICIDE STREET

# Driven to Death

**F**EW REALITIES are as chillingly compelling and as morbidly intriguing as suicide. This ultimate desperation undermines, overwhelms, outwits and devastates not just the people who commit it but also the people who are left behind. "The cause is essentially social," said French sociologist Emile Durkheim in his 1897 seminal analysis of suicide. Worldwide, most psychiatrists accept Durkheim's hypothesis that pressures of modern living, and not just a person's genetic predisposition, are behind the dramatic rise in suicides.

In India, for every person who commits suicide, there are 20 others who attempt it and 35 who contemplated killing themselves. The National Crime Records Bureau logs the country's suicide rate at 10 in every one lakh, of which at least five are women.

In the past decade, a number of young and talented women, who were also dominating, aspiring and excellent communicators, have taken their own lives.

They were all believed to have been gregarious women who "loved life". The most recent case of Rakhee Choudhari follows this script. "I believe in living life to the fullest and am not afraid of treading on the wild side," she had said in the final round of the 2002 Megamodel contest which won her the crown. But truth and perception are widely at odds as this list indicates.

▶ **1993:** Nineteen-year-old Telugu and Hindi film actress **Divya Bharati**, who won the 1992 Filmfare Award for best newcomer, fell from the window of her fifth floor apartment in Mumbai. Investigations indicated suicide.

▶ **1996:** **Silk Smitha**, 33, the Tamil film dancer, was found dead in a Mumbai apartment. Her suicide note indicated disillusionment in love.

▶ **1999:** The body of Kolkata dancer **Ranjabati Sircar**, 36, was found hanging in a room in a friend's house in Mumbai. Sircar, who had had an unsuccessful marriage and had lost her mother, renowned Kathak dancer Manjushree Chaki-Sircar, to cancer, suffered from depression.

▶ **2000:** **Anju Ilyasi**, 30, wife of TV producer Suhaib Ilyasi, died due to stab wounds. Despite speculation, the



KEVIN D'SOUZA/INDIAN EXPRESS



**SHUNNING LIFE:** Vagaries of mood and circumstance forced (anticlockwise from top) young women like Rakhee, Saumya, Natasha, Ritu and Divya to take their own lives

post-mortem reports confirmed suicide. Anju's personal diary, discovered by the police after her death, revealed she had gone through several phases of acute depression.

▶ **2000:** **Viji**, 27, Kannada actress, hanged herself. Her suicide note blamed a failed love affair with A.R. Ramesh, director of Tamil film *Independence Day*, for her death.

▶ **March 2002:** Thirty-one-year-old model and socialite **Natasha Singh**, mother of two, jumped to death from Delhi's Hyatt Regency Hotel. Singh had earlier talked of a difficult marriage, an abusive husband, a messy divorce and a painful custody case. Speculation about a terminal illness could also have been a cause of depression.

▶ **April 2002:** Tamil cinema actress **Monal**, 21, ended her life by hanging herself. She allegedly had a relationship with choreographer Prasanna that met with strong disapproval from her family.

▶ **May 2002:** Thirty-five-year-old

**Sapna Patil**, daughter of former Lok Sabha Speaker Shivraj Patil and mother of two, killed herself by hanging. She was depressed over post-natal complications of her newborn son. She had also suffered from depression in the past.

▶ **May 2002:** **Ritu Singh**, 31, model, socialite and daughter of MP Natwar Singh, hanged herself from a cupboard. Singh was reportedly a victim of depression and was addicted to certain anti-depressant drugs.

▶ **October 2002:** **Saumya Sharma**, Eighteen-year-old Delhi student, singer and aspiring actor jumped to death from the 22nd floor of the building she lived in. Sharma who had become quiet and preoccupied some months before her death had consumed alcohol before killing herself.

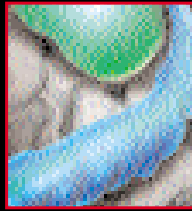
▶ **December 2002:** The 23-year-old **Rakhee Choudhari**, *Gladrags* Megamodel 2002, hanged herself from a ceiling fan in her Mumbai apartment. Choudhari was reportedly depressed over her parents' recent divorce. Speculations that she was upset due to a medical problem and had been gaining weight as a result are also doing the rounds as one of the reasons behind her suicide.

IT IS **PEER PRESSURE** NOT PARENTAL CENSURE THAT COMMANDS BEHAVIOUR AT A YOUNG AGE.

# The Chemistry of Depression

Depression, which affects the hippocampus and amygdala sections of the brain, is linked to depleted levels of serotonin, a brain chemical that governs mood.

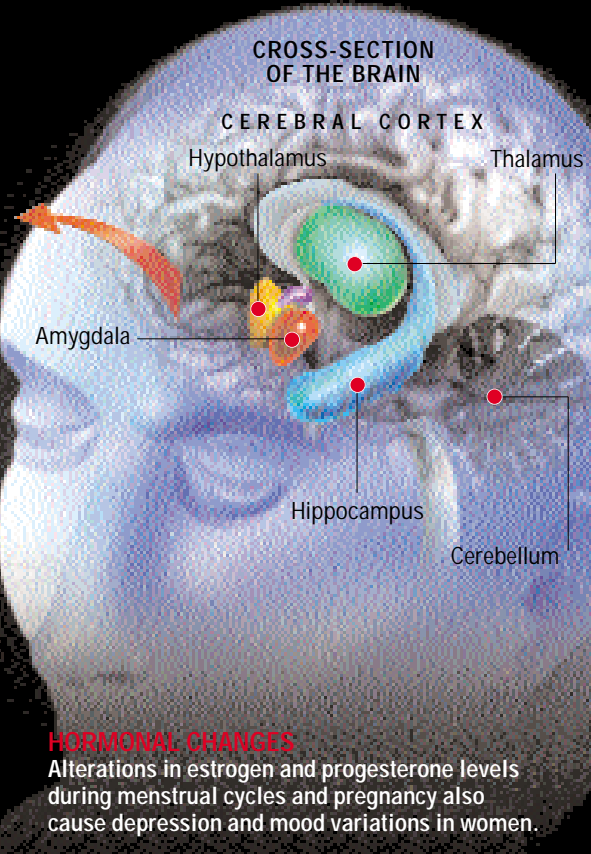
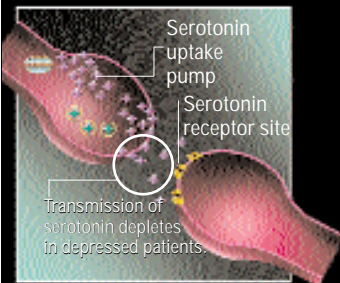
**1** Hippocampus is the memory centre. It is vital for storing raw information, including emotional baggage, coming from the senses via the amygdala.



**2** Chemicals like serotonin and norepinephrine transmit signals from one neuron to the next across a junction called the synaptic gap.



**3** In some cases, a portion of serotonin is reabsorbed by the uptake pump instead of being transmitted, while some bind to receptors on the next nerve cell. Depleted serotonin in the synaptic gap makes patients feel depressed.



**HORMONAL CHANGES**

Alterations in estrogen and progesterone levels during menstrual cycles and pregnancy also cause depression and mood variations in women.

Graphics by NILANJAN DAS

Sources: Essential Pharmacology by Stephen M. Stahl and Institute of Human Behaviour and Allied Sciences, Delhi.

varying expectations. Girls feel pressurised to outperform themselves as well as the boys all the time which leads to an early cracking up. Many also feel that the urge of young people to be noticed as bold and beautiful is fed by the growing Page Three culture. Mumbai psychiatrist Dr Harish Shetty believes that the voyeuristic media that follows glamorous women to their bedrooms is also to be blamed.

Moreover, peer pressure controls behaviour at this

age—if you don't drink or sniff coke you are not with it, say friends. But girls who do so are usually shunned by their parents. Often, urban, independent girls choose the "liberated lifestyle", living away from home, triggering off another set of pressures.

The ambition to be rich, affluent and hence powerful also creates in girls a "need to belong", some of whom find an upper class kitty party circle fascinating. But this too is a mirage. "I belonged to the elite club of lunching divas, where decimating people during power lunches was a favourite sport," says Bindu Dalmia, wife of a successful industrialist. "But this power is that of a social parasite. Young people need lessons in inverse snobbery,

otherwise they will keep choosing between instant wealth and instant death."

Neurologists find that while psycho-social stressors are the biggest factors of depression, it could also be a result of neurological changes in the brain (see box). Genetic and biological factors also play a role.

Anxious moods initiate a cascade of adverse changes in endocrine and immune functioning, creating a

susceptibility to physical illnesses. Studies report that women, despite being bigger victims of minor aches and pains, show only 50 per cent adherence to medical advice. "The stigma attached to psychological conditions makes them shy away from taking timely clinical help," says Desai.

Nagpal feels women should be realistic when they interpret relationships and their roles in today's society while Dalmia believes that the young need idealistic and socialist role models and not MTV icons to hitch their dreams to. Natasha, Rakhee and the others are only a reminder for the Indian woman that her leap into a life of emotional, financial and sexual freedom could come at a harsh price.

—with bureau reports