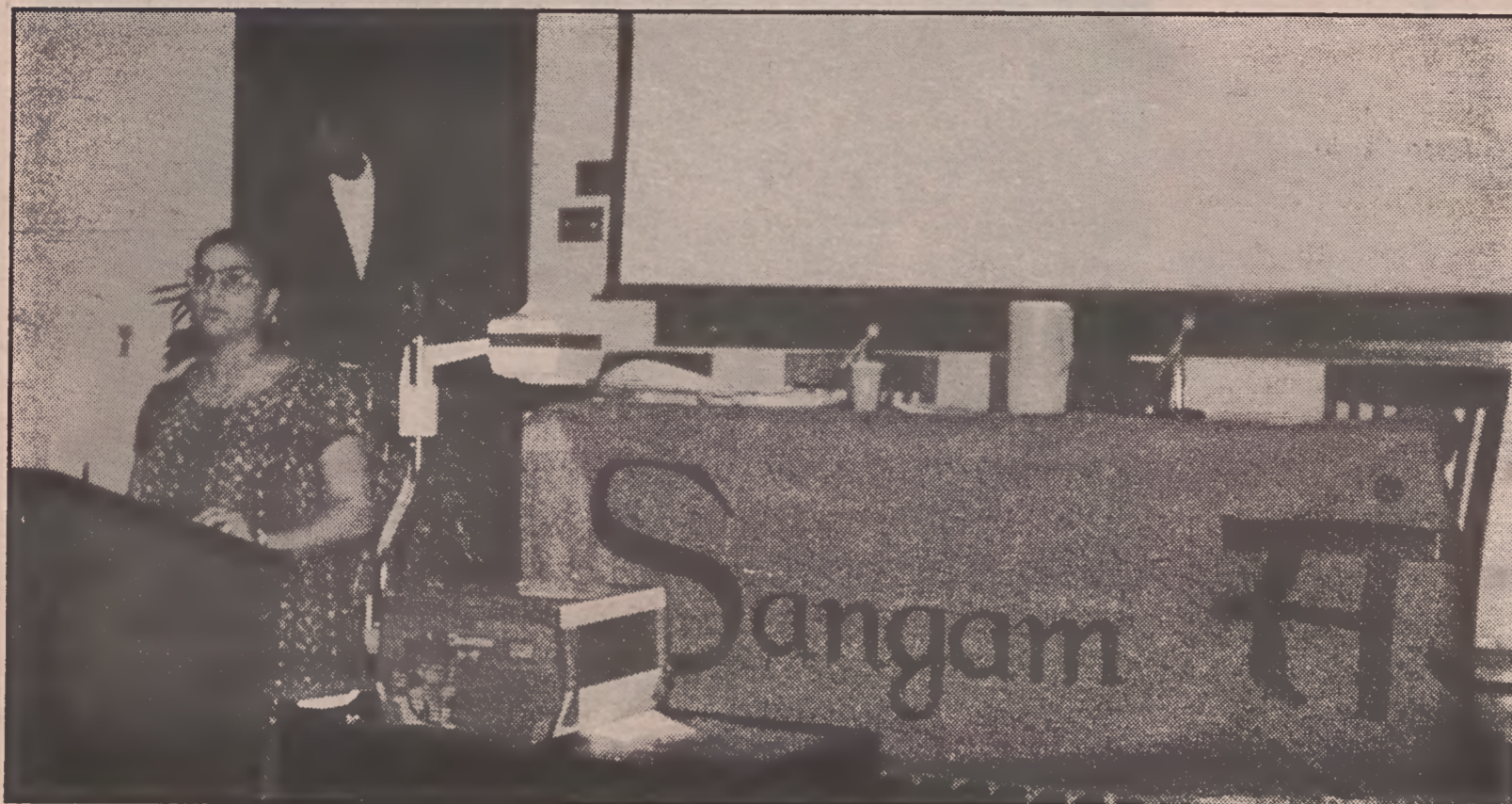


Asia Not Immune to AIDS

Sangam guests say disease is shoved under the rug in Asian countries like India and Thailand.

By Jesse Tung



AIDS is one of the biggest problems that the world faces today, but few people in the United States know that the highest rate of HIV contraction in the world is in Asian countries. On October 7, Sangam, the South Asian student organization, hosted a symposium about AIDS in South Asia to a crowd of over 100 people in Hamilton Hall. The guest speakers included Indu Ahluwalia, a doctorate candidate in the School of Public Health at the University; Lakshman Ramamurthy, a graduate student in the University's biology department; and Kari Hartwig from Family Health International, a non-profit organization located in Washington, D.C.

"AIDS is a serious problem," said Amish Sura, a junior biology major and vice-president of Sangam. "We thought that everyone should be aware that it's not isolated in the West. And what is seen as a modern problem of the West is present in an alarming degree in the very traditional cultures of Asia."

Ramamurthy discussed the medical aspects of the HIV virus and the history of AIDS both in the United States and in India, where AIDS became an explosive epidemic around 1985. He said that no one really knows the exact rate of HIV contraction in Asian countries because of the lack of testing resources and the secrecy that certain countries like China have about revealing the number of HIV cases. However, Ramamurthy added that tests run in India and Thailand have shown that AIDS has clearly become an epidemic in South Asia and Southeast Asia. He partly blames this high rate on the conservative cultures in India.

"It is very difficult for Asian countries, which are very conservative and so righteous, to accept AIDS, because AIDS was first publicized with homosexuals and was considered a taboo disease," Ramamurthy said. He also referred to a New York Times article about the recent earthquake in India. Doctors feared that a lack of sterile needles might

cause victims there to contract the HIV virus.

Ramamurthy said that AIDS is no longer just a Western problem confined mainly to the United States. He said, "By the year 2000, the U.S. will only have about 10 percent of all AIDS cases in the world."

Hartwig discussed the current problems that AIDS Control And Prevention (AIDSCAP), an organization for the prevention of AIDS transmission, faces in South

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--Indu Ahluwalia, UNC School of Public Health.

Asia and Southeast Asia and the strategies that it has implemented to combat these problems. She said that because of the massive population density in that part of the world, the spread of AIDS has increased rapidly, while funding for prevention there has decreased. By the year 2000, Asia will overtake Africa in most cases of AIDS.

Hartwig described the AIDS epidemic in particular Asian countries. This epidemic is especially prevalent in Thailand.

"A lot of people, when they talk about AIDS in Southeast Asia, talk about Thailand because of its large sex industry and IV drug use," she said.

Hartwig also discussed the programs that AIDSCAP has tried to implement in Tamil Nadu, India. They distributed condoms, encouraged change in sexual behavior and began dialogue with the local government about AIDS prevention. These programs seemed to be working, she said, but it

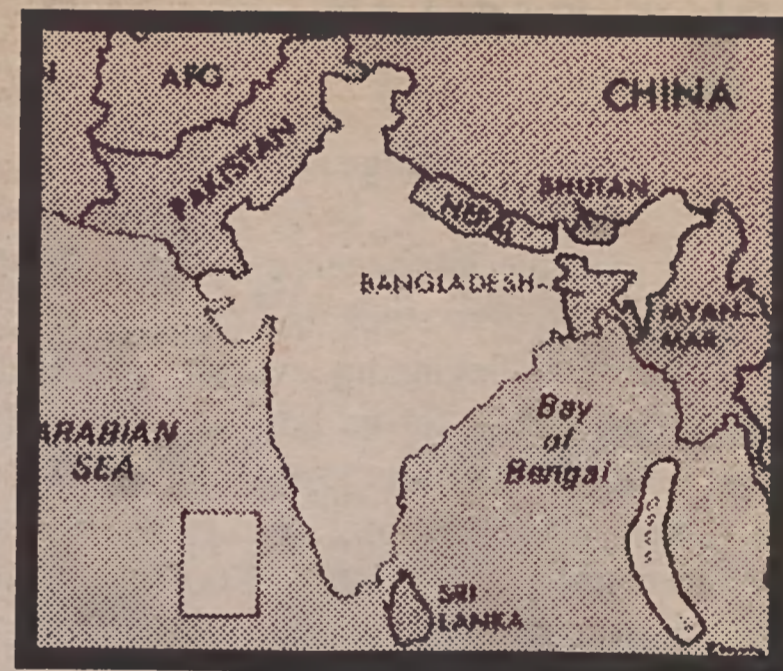
"It is very difficult for Asian countries, which are very conservative and so righteous, to accept AIDS, because AIDS was first publicized with homosexuals and was considered a taboo disease."

- Lakshman Ramamurthy

was still too early to make any serious conclusions on these initiatives.

Ahluwalia discussed the forces affecting the AIDS epidemic in India. For many years, the Indian government failed to admit that AIDS existed, she said.

"AIDS in India was in a climate where the Indian government vehemently denied it existed until two years ago," Ahluwalia said. "In 1988, during the World AIDS



conference, the Indian Administrator of Health said, "We have moral behavior and we have no HIV problem, but we're here to see what the Western world was doing."

Ahluwalia also said only 2 percent of the entire Indian Health care budget was allocated for the funding for AIDS research and prevention. Because third world countries have to control infant mortality as well as AIDS, prevention was usually on the bottom of the list for funds. Because sexuality is shoved "under the rug" in Indian culture, the issue of AIDS has also not been openly discussed.

"The symposium made me more aware of the AIDS epidemic outside the U.S.," said Ken Wu, a junior anthropology major from Greenville. "The media has had such an impact on exposing AIDS, mainly in the U.S., that many people are not aware of the AIDS situation on a world-wide scale."