Subhadra Mitra Channa

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Social Imagination and Constructed Realities

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
4381/4, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, Delhi 110002, India

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107043619

First published 2013

Printed in India

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Channa, Subhadra, 1951-
Gender in South Asia: social imagination and constructed realities/Subhadra Mitra Channa.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Summary: "Discusses gender in terms of models generalizing upon received wisdom from historical and cultural sources and lived realities"--Provided by publisher.
ISBN 978-1-107-04361-9 (hardback)
1. Women--India--Social conditions. 2. Women--India--History. 3. Feminism--India. I. Title.
HQ1742.C485 2013
305.40954--dc23
2013010246

ISBN 978-1-107-04361-9 Hardback

To the Memory of
the two most important women in my life
My Mother, Basanti Mitra
My Mother-in-law, Jeevan Devi Channa

Contents

Preface

The idea for this book was initiated at a colloquium in the University of South Carolina where I presented a paper on dalit women in India. After a long-drawn question and answer session, several scholars asked me if I had written a book about Indian women, and that I should put most of my knowledge together and make it available inside one cover. The ideas expressed in this book have taken shape over many years. When, as a young PhD student, I went to work among the low-caste washermen community, in the narrow lanes and by lanes of Old Delhi, I realized that the lives of their women were very different from my own; yet, I could communicate with them as a person, as a human being and also, as a woman, and the many conversations I had over several years of my fieldwork have remained with me. At that time, my curriculum had not included anything on gender and my work had focused on economic aspects of their lives.

As my own life experience and my field experiences increased over time, I began to think more and more on gendered lines. Several questions have come up again and again in the discourse on gender: is there a common feminine experience? Does the feminine transcend intersections of other social and political criteria like class, ethnicity and race? Does it include or exclude the notion of sexuality? In other words, irrespective of their sexual preference, are all women, women at some deep and essential level? Does being a woman mean that one is grounded in biological sex, or is it a free-floating category that assumes various meanings in multiple contexts?

To a large extent, the Western feminists have centralized sexuality within the definition of gender. My experience with women across the globe, however, has informed me that the essence of the feminine is irrespective of sexuality. As a woman, one can communicate with other women at a level that excludes the male; and this is an experiential interface, a part of the lived existence of women, not to do with thinking about the category called 'woman'. There is also the ethos of common humanity that cuts across all other differentiation. But where are the roots of difference? What makes one life way different from the other and more importantly, where are the lines of difference or the boundaries drawn?

In my encounter with Western feminists, it became clear that I was encountering different philosophies of life and that some very internalized South Asian values were not found in the West and vice versa. This inspired me to examine more closely what it meant to be a woman in South Asia. But even within South Asia, women are certainly not the same; but here the differences are not so much in the metaphysical roots but in the everyday realities of existence. Just like Western feminism is divided along the axes of race, class and ethnicity, South Asia has its own division along caste, class and ethnicity, which situates men and women within a variegated life experience. In this book, I have explored but left unanswered most of the questions that I began with. I do not even think that all questions can be answered, but what I may have achieved is to get across some ideas about being a woman in South Asia. I have also attempted to put forth a sketch of the historical constructions of womanhood and the dynamics of differentiations and their intersections with cosmology and ground-level social realities

Although my work focuses on South Asia, the theoretical paradigms and inspirations have been drawn from the immense work done by Western feminists and theoreticians of gender. But I was equally inspired by the stories and narratives of my mother and other family members, including my mother-in-law. The literature and popular culture of India has provided me with many insights. I have also drawn significant inspiration from the works of South Asian women scholars and indigenous literature. It can be that I may not be able to mention all of them in my work, but a work such as this is built up on the groundwork prepared by scholars, living women in many parts of India and the world, who have at some time or the other touched my life, and the received wisdom of many generations of women and men. Known or unknown, I am indebted to all of them.

My mother was a great storyteller and had a great quality of narrating stories with vivid descriptions which made people and events come alive before me. In my childhood we did not have television, but long afternoons and leisurely time was spent in talking and listening to a variety of stories. We also did not have air conditioning so the hot summer nights were spent by the entire family sleeping out it the open, and we would talk deep into the night under the bright starry skies. While doing fieldwork in many parts of India, I met so many women, each with their own stories and views, which remain imprinted on my mind; their faces and voices are forever etched into my memories. My mother-in-law came from an entirely different region of South Asia, from the North-West, and her stories opened up an unknown

world to me. She supported me throughout my graduate studies and made it possible for a young mother with two children to continue to study.

The colleagues and fellow scholars who have inspired me and given me courage to get along with my work, supported me and given me confidence to write and speak out my thoughts are scattered across the world. I owe a lot to my friend and inspiration, Professor Faye Harrison who is now in Florida, a scholar of immense depth and commitment from whom I learnt how to work and evolve myself as a scholar. Her book, *Outsider Within*, was especially helpful to me in this project. My friend, Professor Kelly Alley, gave me the opportunity to spend a semester at Auburn University and learn about American culture among other things. I owe much to my friend, Professor Ann Kingsolver, who not only provided me with love, care and understanding but also academic inspiration, support and avenues to get recognition for my work. It was while spending a year at the University of South Carolina, as a scholar-in-residence, that I was encouraged to write this book.

For the present, I want to thank Dr Antu Saha, who was my student but now is a scholar in his own right and who has worked hard on editing the manuscript. My daughter, Navya, read several chapters and provided very useful comments. Both my daughters have been the reason why life and work has remained pleasurable. They have given me the strength to go on even when the going has been tough. Their understanding and willingness to support me in my academic pursuits has finally enabled me to achieve a modest success in the form of this book.

1 Introduction

To create monolithic constructions of women, of any time period or spatial location, is not academically a sound procedure; yet, in every day conversations and in the collective mind, the archetypes of womanhood not only exist but they inform actions and practices, albeit most often erroneously. Therefore, to begin to write a book about Indian women, one begins with a great deal of misgivings and caution. Yet, I felt the need to address this stereotyping to write about something that already exists in the popular imagination as a 'construct' with the explicit purpose of demystifying some of the popular conceptions and also add in a modest way to the knowledge about the women of South Asia, in particular focusing on India. To do so, I felt that the gendered methodology introduced and used by an array of scholars, largely to deconstruct received wisdom of a particularly patriarchal kind (not to say racist and elitist), would be contributive to provide a degree of insight and critical assessment of how women are constructed in the popular mind and media and how to look underneath the projected images to search for what gave rise to them in the first place. The attempt has been made to put together bits and pieces to create a collage of shreds and patches and then, to stitch it all together into a tapestry that looks uneven and multi-shaded, somewhat like the patchwork quilts created by the hands of indigenous women in Southern America. Thus, this work may not have the smooth brilliance of a male creation but has the rough realism created by working feminine hands. But let me first begin with posing the question, why talk about women?

Societies, at least in the modern times, are identified through their women. Feminine faces, most often than not, advertise locations, cultures and people. Although the world remains patriarchal, yet women create boundaries across cultures; they are exoticized, projected and always provide a reference point to bring up discussions about the 'Other'. This is understandable in view of the fact that even today, the voices heard most across the world are male; it is but obvious that these voices should be talking about 'those women' or 'their women'. From the 1970s, academic discourse has relied heavily

on 'gendering' as a methodology, as a way to decentralize the views of and about the world from a male-centric focus. It is also true that most of what is available to us today as knowledge is via the mediation of the West. From the post-colonial times, knowledge has been monopolized and routed through the West in a way that even knowledge about non-Western people has been legitimized and made available by the Western scholars both to the world and to the people who are the subjects of this knowledge.

A gendered methodology has been directed at decentralizing the white and the male protagonist from the centre stage of worldly discourse.[1] The feminist researchers have critically evaluated positivism, empiricism and the methods of science (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991; Sarkar, 1997: 70) and raised specific questions about the power hierarchies colouring perspectives and findings (Bhavnani, 1994; Haraway, 1991); they have shown that neutrality and equity is not an integral aspect of Western science or scholarship.[2] Women have privileged themselves as speakers from the margins, holding vantage ringside positions in the arena of social drama. Since they are not the central actors, they are the critics. They can look up from the bottom, they can speak not as stakeholders but as victims and they can see what the powerful cannot for they do not wear the dark glasses of the profit makers and the exploiters, the conquerors and the killers. For, no doubt, women have transformed and they have been changing their roles, yet, in no epoch of the world have they made history, like a Chenghez Khan, or a Hitler, or even a Napoleon or a George Bush. The most powerful person in the world, the President of the United States, is yet to be a woman, although women have held power in many other countries of the world. The world is still constructed through the eyes of white men or at least, men who dominate the West. Women have been recognized as the silent half of humanity (Beauvoir, 1949). This is the reason why when we talk of a gendered approach, it means the focus is on women; because it is women who need to be heard and felt and known. Gender refers to both men and women but since a non-qualified approach to the world is so obviously male, the qualified approach has to be female. Thus, when I say nothing, it means man, but when I say gender, it means woman.

[1] Of course, this is within the post-modernist discourses of Foucault, Gadamer, Derrida and Nietzsche (Hekman, 1990: 13–26).

[2] 'In recent decades philosophers of science have launched a frontal attack on the enlightenment concept of "science" – Following the path breaking work of Thomas Kuhn, the philosophers of science have reexamined the rationalist basis of science and found it to be wanting' (Hekman, 1990: 110).

Thus, language does reflect social reality. 'Thus, hierarchies in other realms of life were often expressed in terms of gender, with dominant individuals or groups described in masculine terms and dependent ones in feminine' (Wiesner-Hanks, 2008: 3).

But again, all this is within a Western point of view that has monopolized the gender discourse so that even when the non-Western scholars speak, they have to situate themselves within this frame of reference. So, essentially the hierarchy that we are talking about here, the constructions of male and female, are all drawn from a Western root or philosophy, a point by now raised and debated to an extent that the earlier generalizations such as 'universal subordination of women' (Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974: 7) or the public–private and nature–culture dichotomy have all been culturally contextualized and multiple point of differences have been presented. Although the dominant voices refuse to die down, alternative voices are making an impact and continuing to do so, especially in the new century. What we are now striving for is not to construct differences keeping a Western scale as standard but to completely deconstruct the world and recast it. The feminist methodology with its emphasis on 'situated knowledge' (Haraway, 1988: 581) has found support in ecological movements and environmentalism, another platform on which the Western, white and male-centric forms of knowledge have been challenged (Grim, 2001). Thus, women finding a means to express themselves by putting forward their own voice has led to an interrogation of the validity of current knowledge. Feminism, although it challenges modernism, has itself modernist roots emerging from either liberal humanism or Marxism. Thus, a non-Western feminist thinking needs to find an alternative base to situate itself, to look for its roots in its own regional history and philosophy. Speaking of non-Western philosophies, Daya Krishna says,

> Philosophy is, however, nothing but the conceptual structure itself and hence any attempt at comparative philosophizing is bound to lead to an awareness of an alternative conceptual structure, a different way of looking at the world, a different way of mapping the cognitive terrain than that to which one is accustomed. (Krishna, 1989: 72)

Thus, if we approach gender from a non-Western philosophical point of view, then one has to look for different premises of world construction, a different cognitive approach, and these are best examined through those inscriptions that most forcefully shape the cognitive world, namely, religion, mythology and cosmology. Since working from the margins

from a gendered point of view is to engage in critical introspection, therefore, parts of this book may appear autobiographical, but that is only in the sense that gender constructions or even understanding of them cannot be situated away from self. A criticism of an objective centre, as already discussed, is replaced by the subjective self-driven view of the world, that is nevertheless contextualized and formalized through comparisons and drawing upon received wisdom.

How Gender is Understood in South Asia?

To understand gender from a non-Western point of view is indeed to tread on unfamiliar cognitive terrain. Gender is not a stand-alone concept, as indeed no concept is. First of all, we have to decide which worldview we are locating ourselves in. South Asia is a vast and differentiated continent with at least five major religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and Islam. The first four are born on Indian soil and often taken to subscribe to some essential worldviews that are more of the subcontinent than of any particular group or cult. Islam, coming from the Middle East, has separate roots, yet on the subcontinent, has modified itself considerably. But in this book, we concentrate largely on the Hindu philosophy or conceptual structure that has informed the other four religions, and although Islam has been an integral part of the history and social life of the continent and left deep imprints on culture, we shall, for the sake of clarity, leave out Islam from our discourse. This is only a methodological simplification for we are, as we shall discuss presently, attempting to construct a model. It would probably be a monumental exercise (possibly unattainable) to go into the actual empirical situations and we shall not leave out Islam or Muslims from our data and description but just construct our model out of the philosophical and social roots of Hindu values and social norms. Another reason for leaving out Islam is that it is closer to the Judeo-Christian traditions of the West. The model that we are building up is away from this tradition and certainly based upon quite contrary premises.

The first major difference between the Western or Judeo-Christian and the Hindu/South Asian worldview is that the former is both essentialist and dichotomous. The West believes irrevocably that there are two sexes and one cannot naturally and normally change into another. Anything that is not either here or there is anomalous. Thus, trans-sexed, transvestites, homosexuals, etc., are all considered by conservative whites to be anomalous. There is, in other words, no legitimate place for them in society.

However, the Indian thought is not essentially dichotomous. Transitions and continuities are both normal and privileged. Transgendered persons have a place in society and have ritual as well as cultural value. Myths and folklore abound with stories of sex change, of highly placed transgendered persons and most importantly, the ritual value of the hermaphrodite, half-man, half-woman, symbolized by *Ardhanarishwara*, a form of Shiva worshipped all over India. The Hindu worldview recognizes the male and female principles of the universe as *Purusa* and *Shakti*, where *Shakti* is the active principle, the regenerative force of the universe (Upadhyaya, 1941 reprint: 21),[3] and *Purusa* is passive and functions to control the power of *Shakti* that if left uncontrolled, can become destructive.

Creation is not finite and neither is the universe. Time is cyclical and in Hindu philosophy, the destructive and the creative forces are synonymous. Thus, Shiva, the creator, is also the destroyer; and the loving and nurturing mother, in the form of Parvati, can also become blood thirsty and destructive in the form of Kali. One form can change into another and there is no essential difference between creation and destruction or between *Purusa* and *Shakti*, for both are unified in the form of the oneness that is the ultimate deity, sometimes depicted in embodied form as Shiva–*Shakti* or *Ardhanarishwara* or sometimes, only as the symbol of 'Om'.

Thus, gender is not an essential dichotomy, embodied once and for all. The categories are not opposed but complementary if existing separately, but such separation is not natural or inevitable and the two may merge and become one; and ultimately, one may realize, as one often does, that they were not separate in the first place. The philosophy of existence of the *atmān* is at root of this vision of a unified universe: the *atmān* has no character,

[3] This passage from Upadhyaya (1941 reprint: 21) clearly illustrates the concept of *Shakti* in the *Rig Veda*: 'One of the most dramatic and powerful hymns of the Ṛgveda is uttered by Vāc, the daughter of Ambhṛṇa. She is herself the Ṛşi of the hymns and is conceived as the goddess presiding over speech. In her utterances she emphatically expresses the idea of the unity of the universe. She is the force that bends the bow for Rudra that his arrow may strike and slay the hater of devotion. She rouses and orders battle for the people and pervades heaven and earth. She is who brings forth the father, i.e. the sun, on the summit of the world; her dwelling is in ocean from where she extends over all existing creatures and touches even the far off heaven with her forehead. She breathes a strong breath which generates a tempest, while she holds together all existence. Mighty in her grandeur she appears "from beyond the heaven and from beyond the earth". She is the *Sabdabrahma* of the later times pervading the entire universe and accompanying all gods. She is the primeval energy of the universe, the feminine counterpart of the creating and annihilating God. Her hymn is made the basis of Śāktaism.'

neither male nor female, no varna no *jāti*, nor anything else, it takes on bodies like we change clothes and leaves them to pass on to another existence. This belief in reincarnation is present in all South Asian philosophical doctrines. It also leads to locating differences in a particular situation only, without giving them an immutable nature. Nothing is fixed, everything moves on and changes form; yet, the change is only superficial for, ultimately, all become one with the *paramatmān* (the ultimate reality). The *atmān* is thus both emanating from and merging with the *paramatmān*, 'divine being pervades the whole world, and is found eternally within the individual. Divine being is thus the supreme "Self"' (Smart, 1996: 89). While Hinduism has the concept of Self, Buddhism denies it and reincarnation is seen as the passing on of an animating force. This reality is again unqualified, it has no describable characters. Thus, unlike Christianity that believes God created Adam in his own image, thereby legitimizing once and for the existence of God as male (Father), Vedic Hinduism has no such qualifications for the Ultimate Being. 'The Absolute and the state of liberation were perceived to exist beyond the cosmos, beyond the gods who, in symbolizing and manipulating natural forces in a supernatural way, are implicated in the visible world' (ibid.: 58). The consciousness or Self having no gendered character has implications in the way the real world is imagined. At every point, there is always the possibility of a transition, although popular Brahmanical folklore may say that if a person does good deeds in a past life, he is born as a male and a Brahmin, such is not supported by any text. In fact, there is no essential denigration of the feminine in any South Asian philosophy or even social beliefs.

Gender and Personhood in Myth and Antiquity

'Hindu gender ideology admits gender overlap, gender transformations and alternative genders in myth, ritual and human experience' (Nanda, 1999: 145). *Shiva/Purusa* and *Shakti/Prakriti* are the male and female principles; they are not necessarily embodied as men and women. These are principles by which the universe operates. They may manifest themselves in actual men and women, at various times and in different ways. Let us take the story of Brihannalā, the eunuch, the form which the most famous warrior, Arjuna, had to take for some time. This is one of the stories in the Mahabharata, an epic poem that depicts the social life and culture of ancient India with a range and scope almost unmatched by any other epic. The story is of five brothers, born of a human mother but having gods as fathers, as their

sociological father, Pandu, the King, is impotent. Queen Kunti has a boon that she can call upon one god at a time and is urged by her own husband to do so, in order to ensure that the kingly lineage is continued. Thus, she bears four sons. The eldest having been born before she was married is discarded, but the other three are as follows: born of the god of death/dharma, Yamā, is Yudhistira; of Indra, the god of the heavens, is Arjuna; and of the god of wind, Vayu, is Bhima. Arjuna is the bravest and the best warrior in the universe. Yet, under a curse, he is to spend twelve years *incognito*; he has to spend one year as a eunuch teaching dance and music to a princess who later becomes his daughter-in-law. There is no contradiction in the bravest and skilful warrior teaching dance to a girl, living in the women's quarters and wearing women's clothes. He is still the best dance teacher, remains strong and brave and is able to defend his wife's honour (who is also living incognito as a maid servant).

Complimentary to the story of Brihannalā is that of Chitrangada (immortalized by the Nobel laureate poet, Rabindranath Tagore, in his poetry). She is born a princess of the remote region of Manipur and is brought up like a man by her father who has no son. She learns all the craft of warfare, is brave and strong like a man and is a true defender of her people, like a ruler is supposed to be. She lacks the charm and seductive qualities of a woman and is unmarried. She falls in love with Arjuna who happens to come to this remote area on one of his incognito wanderings. She uses magic to transform herself into a beautiful woman who is able to seduce Arjuna by her feminine charms. Yet, while residing in the kingdom, Arjuna is soon informed about the brave princess, Chitrangada, who is worshipped by her citizens as a mother and as a protector of her people. Hearing of her chivalry and bravery, Arjuna asks his beloved (Chitrangada in disguise) about her. The beautiful version of Chitrangada tells Arjuna that the woman he is admiring is ugly, she has not the charm or the wiles of a woman, she is straightforward as a man, has no aptitude to adorn her, goes about with her weapons and is strong and fearless, that is, not feminine. Arjuna, however, exclaims that he is fascinated by this brave woman, that he has no need for womanly charm but is full of admiration for her bravery and her qualities that, he declares, make her the most beautiful woman on earth. Hearing this, Chitrangada reveals her true self and Arjuna reaffirms his love for her, marries her and they have a son.

What is of interest here is that even in antiquity, for the Mahabharata was written at least a couple of thousand years back, Indian aesthetics was putting

character above beauty and women were considered attractive because of their mental and physical qualities. In other words, women were not considered as driven by instinct or as mere toys for sexual pleasure. We have many other such instances where women were attractive to men not because of beauty but because of strength, valour and intelligence. We have the story of Savitri, the only pampered daughter of a mighty king, who sets out on a tour of the world on horseback to find herself a husband; of Subhadra, who drives the chariot on which she elopes with her lover (Krishna); and in more recent times, there is the famous legend of the King of Mandu who falls in love with a tribal woman who he sees restraining a wild buffalo with her bare hands. Fatima Mernissi (2001) has made a similar analysis of how the Arab women have been seen as exotic sex toys, symbolized by the harem; yet, the harem was no more than a place of residence for women and children, and more importantly, a woman could fascinate a man and hold him captive, not by her physical attributes but her mental capacities, her talent and her courage. The famous Scheherazade of the *One Thousand and One Nights* was not a seductress but a woman of great learning and skill, who held the emperor spellbound by her intellect, her storytelling skills and the vast knowledge that she was able to mobilize into storytelling. Mernissi accuses the Western male-centric gaze to have exoticized the harem into the white man's sexual fantasy, whereas the real woman in the Arab world was more brains than beauty.

Thus, in South Asia, and even as we shall presently see in the near East, masculine and feminine qualities are not separated or dichotomized. It is for this reason that there is no apparent contradiction of a brave warrior donning women's clothes for he remains strong and a skilled warrior even as a eunuch dancer. The South Asian imagination has no place for the 'macho' man or the delicate woman. In fact, in South Asian culture, there is no recognition that women are weaker, either physically or mentally, and men are not required to get up and offer seats to women or be overly protective about them physically as in the West. All over India, one sees women working at construction sites and carrying heavy loads or breaking stones by the roadside. It is not essentially femininity that requires physical pampering but some other considerations. At the same time, a woman is seen as perfectly capable of being intellectual, wise and rational; thus, neither strength nor intellect is seen as male prerogative and, on the other hand, sentiments, emotions and softness are not exclusively female.

The Relationship between Fear and Domination

Mernissi (2001: 94–95) brings out the essential difference between how Western men have viewed women and how they are looked upon in the Orient. In a highly perceptive sentence, she says, referring to Immanuel Kant's vision of silent women as attractive, 'In Kant's enlightened West, the world is not populated by a single race of humans who share the capacity to feel and think, but by two distinct kinds of creatures; those who feel (women) and those who think (men)' (p. 94). Howsoever, Mernissi sets the mind thinking when she says, 'Could it be that the violence against women in the Muslim world is due to the fact that they are acknowledged to have a brain, while in the West, they are often considered to be incapable of deep or analytic thought?' (ibid.: 95).

In commonly understood Hinduism (Hinduism is a compound of many schools of thought and too complex to be discussed here), the female principle or *Shakti* is active, creative, powerful and if not curtailed, can turn destructive. *Purusa* is pure consciousness and passive and inert, yet, *Prakriti* needs to be controlled by *Purusa* so that she does not go out of control. The symbolic representation of this relationship is best seen in the iconography of Kali, the most destructive manifestation of the feminine principle. As Kali, the mother goddess (*Shakti*) runs amok, killing anyone that comes in her way, drinking their blood, her tongue lolls out, dripping blood, she has a garland of human heads around her waist and is dark and naked; the only way her demonic fury could be controlled was by her husband, Shiva, who lays down on the ground in front of her. As soon as Kali's feet touch Shiva, she stops in horror, for a woman is not supposed to stand over her husband. Her fury vanishes and she calms down.

Translated into social perceptions, it is believed that a woman's unbridled power can be dangerous unless controlled by a man. Thus, it is said in India that an unmarried woman needs to be controlled by her father/brother and a married woman by her husband; but as a widow, not being under any kind of direct male authority she is potentially powerful and hence dangerous. This is why upper-caste widows who could not remarry were subjected to all kinds of physical subjugation, so that they became weak and lost their power. Widows were tonsured, made to eat very frugal meals, fast often and generally lead an ascetic life. Yet, royal widows and their modern equivalents have often held immense power. As we shall be discussing in detail, gender in India is not about sexual differences but it is interwoven with considerations of class, caste and situational conditions. Thus Rao (2003: 3) problematizes

the representation of women, 'as somehow unmarked or disembodied from their caste or religious identity'; raising doubt if it is at all realistic to do so.

The need for curbing their power is illustrated by the myths of goddesses whose power is unlimited. The 2000-year-old temple of Goddess Meenakshi in Madurai, South India, has a myth corroborating this process of *Purusa* controlling *Prakriti*. Long ago, the region was a dense forest where Indra practised meditation invoking Shiva. With Shiva's presence marked there, a king built his capital in that area and named it Madhurapura (sweet as nectar). Many years later, a descendant of this king had a beautiful daughter named Meenakshi, who was an only child. After her father's death, Meenakshi sat on the throne, and many suitors sought her hand, but she rejected one and all. The discarded suitors, who were themselves princes, wanted revenge for their insult and joined together to overthrow her from her throne and usurp the kingdom. But Meenakshi confronted them, whirling her sword and killed them before they could even resist her. With blood dripping from her sword, the princess rode furiously on her horse thirsting for more blood but after a distance, she came across a benign and smiling male figure. As soon as she faced him, the sword dropped from her hand; she realized that she was confronting Shiva and then her own identity was also revealed to her and she realized she was Shiva's consort, Parvati. The two united on earth and in Meenakshi's temple, there is a shrine of Shiva where he is known as *Sunderaswara* (beautiful god).

In this myth, the intrinsic nature of *Prakriti* and *Purusa* is revealed. *Prakriti* is active and when aroused, she becomes aggressive, almost beyond control, her destructive power can only be curbed by the benign presence of *Purusa*, who remains passive; the figure of Shiva is just a smiling presence, has no action attached to it. Yet, *Prakriti* cools down, she submits and then she becomes the domesticated wife, the controlled *Shakti*. Thus, beauty and calmness is attached to *Purusa* and not to *Prakriti*, whose beauty can be of the terrifying kind.

'The earth, *Prithvi*, was the ready, heated female body, seeking the soothing and fertilizing seminal rains of the sky god *Indra*' (Caldwell, 1999: 104). The earth goddess, Prithvi, must be nourished on the dead bodies of decomposing organic matter and then cooled by the rains (symbolizing semen of the sky god) to become fertile and benign. This theme is specifically found in Dravidian poetry of the *Sangam* period, where there is an imputed relationship between 'agricultural fertility, human sexuality, and the necessity of death for the continuance of life' (ibid.: 112). Thus, as a human being in female form, she must be cooled by marriage and only then she becomes the

benign though powerful mother. But as an unmarried girl and as a widow, her powers are yet unchecked and she needs to be controlled. At a more metaphoric level, the association of blood with fertility could have led to the practice of human sacrifice, or any other kind of blood sacrifice, to the mother goddess. At some of the Kali temples across the country, like Kalighat in Kolkata, blood sacrifice is still practised. At the Chittorgarh Fort in Udaipur, at the temple of Kali, one can still find the scaffold where human sacrifices were carried out and the tank to collect the blood next to it.

In the Indian system of medicine, Ayurveda, a menstruating woman is considered both physically and sexually hot. A practitioner of *tantric* form of mother goddess worship once told me in a personal interview that *satvic* form of Hinduism forbids a menstruating woman to practise any ritual because of the belief that her powers are too strong in that state. In common parlance however, it is said that she is in a state of pollution, thereby evoking the connection made by Mary Douglas (1991) between pollution and danger. One may thus extrapolate to say that women's exclusion from some forms of rituals may be because of fear that her powers would multiply.

Thus, describing menstrual taboos among Hindu families in Orissa, Seymour tells us, 'Menstrual restrictions set a woman apart and remind the family of her reproductive powers, which must be controlled until she is properly married' (Seymour, 1999: 87). She also refers to the cosmological associations made between the fertility of women and the fertility of the earth. While describing the Harcandi festival in coastal Orissa, Apffel-Marglin and Parajuli (2000) also quote the words of their informants, that the mother (goddess), the earth and women are the same thing in different form. 'This phrase could not be clearer. The Mother (*mā*, the goddess here) does not symbolize the earth in the form of a woman. All three are one in different aspects, different forms' (ibid.: 303).

Caldwell (1999: 123) has analyzed the life cycle of a women in Kerala to be divided into five stages, where at the beginning and the end, we have the infertile non-menstruating stages (pre-menarche and post-menopause) where the woman is socially not regarded much as a woman, that is, norms and taboos applied to fertile and married/widows do not apply to her. The category of a married and fertile woman is most auspicious and the categories of unmarried and fertile virgin and fertile widow, the most dangerous, their heat or sexuality being uncurbed.

All over India, these categories are similarly represented. In east of India (and also, in Nepal) the pre-puberty girl (*kanya*) is often regarded as the epitome of purity and worshipped as a goddess (*koumari puja*). Even in North

India, there is widespread practice of worshipping little girls on the eighth day of the Navaratri (nine days devoted to the worship of the goddess, in her various forms). Even now, in some parts of India (like Rajasthan), the earlier widespread practice of marrying girls at a pre-puberty age is practised, especially among upper castes. A menstruating girl is said to bring misfortune on to her father's house. A post-menopausal woman may take on the character of men, that is, she may appear in public, deal with public affairs and is often accepted as head of a family or household.

In other words, gender is not an 'in' or 'out' condition; it is more of a cycle that peaks with sexuality and declines with the lack of it. Butler (1990) initiates a discourse challenging the very basis of gender as a substantive reality that has an existence outside of its construction. 'There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (ibid.: 34). Thus, the natural existence of a biological body does not presuppose sex, or desire, and a dichotomous masculine/feminine experience. Desire and its expression in sex are through an imposed necessity of heterosexuality. Butler, like Irigaray, and specifically Beauvoir are steeped in Western philosophical constructs and when they set up a critique, they are still speaking from within that framework. But among non-Western people, such dialectical worldview is not a necessary condition of perception of the world. In other words, the conditions of compulsory sexual dichotomy that these authors are critiquing may not be present. Among the Bhotiyas of Uttarakhand (Channa, 2013), for example, gender is a condition of life cycle of sexuality and reproduction. This is not to say that they do not recognize the female and the male body, but such a body does not bear the 'mark' (Wittig, 1981: 48) of a gendered identity. Thus, one can be more or less of a man or a woman depending upon other conditions of life and body. The physiological properties of the body have a lot to do with gendering, in terms of ritual status, division of labour and social recognition. Thus, as the body goes through its cycles of development, the gendered markings of the body also transform. Thus, like the entire worldview of Hinduism, gender too is a more of a cycle and less of a dichotomy.

That brings us to another aspect, namely, the existence and social acceptance of more than one gender. There is also a Western and a non-Western worldview with respect to the third gender. The Western feminist discourse is represented by the lesbian, who according to Wittig, is not a woman: she exists outside of the political necessity of being defined as a

woman as opposed to a man in a necessary bind of heterosexuality, which only defines 'female sex'. As the male is the universal person, the one who sets up the definition, it is only the female who is 'defined'. The lesbian being not defined or placed within this definitive heterosexuality is neither man nor woman but the third sex or no sex (Butler, 1990: 153–54). Within the social conditions of the West, then, this third sex defined in the context of a world created by men has no sanctity. The lesbian, in fact, has emerged as the symbol of radical feminism. In comparison, the third gendered persons in India or in other non-Western cultures have had a social acceptance since antiquity and there are legends and myths about them. Even within a phallogo-centric description of the world, the possibility of non-heterosexual existence is made possible. They are seemingly a product of the physical body but in real terms, they represent the performative aspect of gender, that is, a female consciousness trapped in a male body. The freeing of this consciousness is the creation of a new body, the process of castration described by Nanda. But unlike the non-heterosexual of the West, they exist as a socially recognized community, the *hijra*s, about whom Serena Nanda (1999) has given an excellent account. The social acceptance of the *hijra* and other such categories is possible because of the possibility of a non-dialectical world and the language to name in-between categories that are not linguistically identified as 'in-between'. Linguistically and socially, the term *hijra* is a category by itself. It is only in the English language that they become a third gender. As Nanda has shown, such possibilities exist in other cultures also.

More than Two Genders

The possibility of a third gender is recognized in Indian languages that have three genders: masculine, feminine and a neutral gender. Nanda (1999: xiv) mentions that while writing in English, she had to use a feminine pronoun when the speaker was using a gender-neutral pronoun (a limitation of the English language).

In the Mahabharata, an epic that has been cited earlier, a key position is played by Shikhandi, the son of a king, a powerful warrior but a eunuch, a third-gendered person.[4] The story of Shikhandi in the epic tells us that

[4] The birth of Shikhandi is itself a miracle. It is the rebirth of the princess, Ambā, who voluntarily takes this birth to avenge a wrong done to her in an earlier life. The story of Ambā is linked to the main story of the Mahabharata, where, in order to continue the lineage of his father, King Shantanu, Bhisma, his son by the celestial goddess Ganga (river),

Shikhandi had his rightful place in society, although publicly recognized as neither man, nor woman. In her book on the *hijra*s, Nanda (1999) has mentioned that they play an important ritual role in society. At auspicious

captures three beautiful princesses, three sisters, to marry them to his two brothers by his stepmother Satyavati. In an earlier phase of the story, Shantanu, the King, father of Bhisma, falls in love with a fisherman's daughter, Satyavati, whose father refuses to give his offspring to the aged king citing the fact that the kingdom already had a crown prince in the form of Satyavrata (later renamed Bhisma). The dutiful son agrees to abdicate his throne to fulfil his father's desire for the beautiful maiden, but she raises further objection saying that even if Satyavrata does not himself ascend the throne, his sons will have greater rights as they will be the sons of the elder brother of her own sons (when born). Then, Satyavrata takes a mighty oath that he will remain a celibate all his life (*ājanmabrahamachari*). The fierceness of this oath taken by a handsome young prince in the prime of his youth leads him to be called Bhisma (the mighty one). His father then blesses him saying that he will never die unless he himself wishes to do so.

Bhisma, after the death of his father, devotes himself to the welfare of his stepmother and his two rather weak stepbrothers. The three princesses captured by him (a common Kshatriya practice) were thus for marrying them off to his younger brothers. Out of them, the eldest, Ambā, expresses that she was in love with another prince and Bhisma releases her to go to her lover. But the prince in question refuses to have her back saying that she was now the property of the man who had captured her. Ambā returns to Bhisma and requests him to marry her, but he too spurns her saying that he was bound by oath to remain unmarried. A desperate Ambā, who has nowhere to go and who is in love with Bhisma and does not want to marry his brother, enters the fire to immolate herself. But before she gives up her body, she tells Bhisma that she will be the cause of his death in her next birth.

It is this birth as Shikhandi where she does become the cause of his death. She becomes the charioteer for Arjuna, where the latter has to face Bhisma in a fratricidal war. Although Bhisma is a great warrior, he is unable to strike at Arjuna as he cannot take aim in the direction of a person who is not a man. Thus, hiding behind Shikhandi, Arjuna is able to riddle Bhisma with his arrows and he falls down, only to choose his death at a much later period.

What we learn from this story (presented here in a highly abbreviated form) is that women held power over men because of their desirability, as exemplified in the story of Satyavati, who, in spite of being the daughter of a fisherman, was able to bargain with the king to the extent of extracting an extraordinary vow from the prince. It shows, like in the other major epic Ramayana, that a father's will (even that of a mother) has great potency and a son will go to any extent to fulfil his father's wishes/desires. But what it shows up most is the power of a virgin, an unmarried girl who is fertile but whose sexuality goes to waste as Bhisma spurns her. It is the negative power of her curse that brings down a person as mighty as a lion, the most honoured personage in the entire Mahabharata that has hundreds of characters. Bhisma's denial of Ambā is not a denial of her femininity but a result of his own bondage vis-à-vis his oath, yet, he had to pay for it by a painful death. It is described that Arjuna shot so many arrows into his body that when Bhisma fell, his body remained on a bed of arrows instead of touching the ground.

occasions that have a specific relation to fertility like marriage and the birth of a child, the presence of *hijra*s and their blessings are considered auspicious by the very fact that the *hijra*s are believed to be ascetics and thus having the power of sexual abstinence. They are also believed to be endowed with the power of the mother goddess whom they worship and when they undergo emasculation, 'the former, impotent male person dies, and a new person, endowed with the sacred power (*Shakti*) is reborn' (ibid.: 26). Also, as Nanda reaffirms, *hijra* is a personally identified gender identity in Indian society and it is not a negative identity, neither this nor that, but a positive one. It is not an anomaly but an existing position in society that is filled by virtue of specific characters.

The phallic symbolism is essentialized in Western thinking, where the absence of the phallus is serious business but its absence or existence only defines or redefines the masculine; however, it plays a different kind of role in India and is given a sacred interpretative dimension. Female homosexuality, on the other hand, even if recognized, has not been given any particular social, ritual or symbolic importance. Maybe for the Hindus, it is the feminine principle that is the defining subjectivity, the core of existence as *Shakti*, and manifested in many forms that may easily encapsulate the sexual variability that is independent of the phallus. The devi is a complete entity and is worshipped by herself, but the masculine principles are viewed as complete only in combination with the feminine. Thus, in Hindu worldview, the feminine exists and exists independently of the male. In fact, both can exist away from each other, not as bodily males and females but as essence or character. But the feminine stands defined and she is defined and named as *Shakti* (power). Sexuality as free floating, as freed from desire, is most potent.

Feminine Power

Thus, feminine power in the form of ascetic sexuality is highly charged in the unmarried virgin and the ascetic widow, who is still fertile. The two institutions with respect to women, that were found when Brahmanical patriarchy was at its peak, were probably put in place to control this power: the marriage of pre-puberty girls; and the repression of widows finding extreme expression in her burning on her husband's funeral pyre. Of course, there were more complex issues involved in the latter and we shall have occasion to discuss all that, but what is interesting to note is that in mythology and ancient texts such as the Upanishads, neither of these

institutions seem to have been existing. There are only isolated cases of sati (burning of a widow on her husband's pyre). In Mahabharata, the only sati is King Pandu's wife, Madri, who dies with him more out of guilt and shame for having caused her husband's death, than out of any customary requirement; and in the Ramayana, it is Sulochana, the daughter-in-law of Ravana, wife of his brave son Indrajit who is killed in the battle with Rama and his brother, Laksmana. There is no evidence of any requirement to become sati, as it is not even considered by any of the widows, not even after the Mahabharata war, when entire dynasties were wiped out.

The death of Madri is itself interesting as Pandu had been cursed to become impotent and also to die if he ever had sexual relationship with any woman. He is married to Kunti and the extremely beautiful Madri. The former has a boon so she can conceive a child from any god that she chooses to evoke, and she can do it five times. The first time she tries it out of curiosity while she is still unmarried and conceives a son by the Sun God; this child is discarded for fear of shame. After her marriage, she reveals her secret to her husband and he encourages her to make use of her boon as he himself is unable to father a child. In order to escape from the public eye, Pandu retreats with his two wives into the forest. Keen to become a mother, the younger wife, Madri, also asks Kunti to give her the magical chant to call upon a god. Kunti obliges her and Madri, too, becomes the mother of twins from the twin gods, Aswini Kumar. But in the forest one day, Pandu comes across Madri bathing in a fountain; and unable to control himself at the sight of her beauty, he makes love to her and according to the curse on him, dies. Out of shame and guilt, Madri climbs the funeral pyre and kills herself and Kunti returns to the kingdom with her five sons, three of her own and two of Madri; they are known as the Pandavas or the sons of King Pandu. The widowed Kunti wields immense power over her sons and in the rest of the Mahabharata, plays a key role.

The power of the feminine *Shakti*, in the form of the devoted wife, is also told in the story of Kannagi, worshipped as a goddess in the South of India. This legend is immortalized in the Tamil classic, *Shilappadikaram*, dated perhaps to second century BC and is attributed to Illango Adigal, a prince who gave up his throne to become a Jain ascetic. Kannagi and Kovalam are a happily married couple who live in the kingdom of the Chola kings. Kovalam is a rich merchant. One day he goes to watch the courtesan, Madhavi, dance at court of the king, where the king, pleased by her performance, presents her with a garland. As per custom, Madhavi has the option to offer it to any

man she wishes to take with her as her partner. Madhavi catches sight of Kovalam and falls in love with him and offers her garland. Kovalam goes with her to her house and is so enamoured with her beauty and grace that he forgets all about his family and stays on with Madhavi. Since he is not attending to his business, he eventually runs out of his money and under the misconception that Madhavi no longer loves him, he returns to his wife Kannagi, who welcomes him back. Since they have no money, Kannagi offers him her anklets filled with diamonds to sell and start afresh in life. Together they leave their old home and come to Madurai. Here, misfortune overcomes them. A cunning goldsmith steals the queen's anklets filled with gems. Unfortunately, Kovalam goes to the same goldsmith to sell one of Kannagi's anklets and the goldsmith, seizing the opportunity, catches him and presents him in front of the king as the thief. The enraged king orders him to be executed and Kovalam is killed. When Kannagi hears of this, she appears in the king's court burning with righteous rage; she asks the queen, what was inside her anklet and the queen replies, gems. In anger, Kannagi throws her other anklet and it bursts open and the diamonds roll out before a shocked king and queen. The king realizes his mistake and dies of guilt and grief of having had an innocent man killed; the queen follows her husband and also dies of shock. Yet, Kannagi is not satisfied. She curses the entire city and in rage, tears out her left breast and throws it, and the entire city goes up in flame and Kannagi herself perishes. She is then deified and worshipped and her icon has only one breast. There is a common saying in India that a 'sati' can burn anything with her anger. A 'sati' is a woman who is loyal to her husband and has thoughts for no other man. Sunder Rajan explains,

> The queen's death is a manifestation of *Sati*, while *Kannaki*'s curse is an expression of *Shakti*, the powerful, ferocious, feminine cosmic principle. But it is the excess of *Sati*, the ascetic virtue of good wifehood, that is converted into *Shakti*. These two generally opposed aspects of femininity in Hindu representations of the goddess are linked in *Kannaki*, indicating that the source of feminine power lies in virtue accumulated as good wife. (Sunder Rajan, 1993: 58)

In this myth, it is clear that men are not the ones to exhibit moral courage or steadfastness. Yet, a wife is also supposed to overlook her husband's folly and exhibit exemplary loyalty to him, like Kannagi, who accepts her wayward husband and remains faithful even in his absence. A woman is the one who is to display loyalty and courage and is to have moral strength.

Men are rarely seen as endowed with such active agency; they are the ones to drift with the current. It is believed that a woman can protect herself and her husband by the power of her righteousness. It is for this reason that a raped woman was rarely considered as innocent or wronged in India and even today, many people still believe that a really righteous woman can come to no harm. The myths support the cognition of a righteous woman as a goddess and that a miracle would protect a really virtuous woman. A sati is too powerful to be raped!

The fact that a 'sati' was visualized as a goddess, made the practice of sati, the burning of a woman on her husband's funeral pyre, a prerogative of the high-caste/class woman. The lower caste and untouchables of those times were not even given the choice of burning their corpses. Even otherwise, it was the wife of the powerful men, usually kings and royals and also Brahmins, who performed sati. It was unthinkable that a low-caste woman could be worshipped; more importantly, her husband was not a person worth dying for. Neither in mythology nor in history do we have any woman from a low caste eulogized as a 'sati', they were forever dasi*s*. Only a man of high prestige could claim the body of his woman even in death; the body of a low-caste man's wife was not deemed to be his even when he was alive. Thus, at one level, namely, that of society, the marking of women as dasi and devi is nothing but the play of power between men.

Two major discourses on sati are worth mentioning here: by Sunder Rajan (1993: 15–63) and by Lata Mani (1989). The former situates the debate within the mind/body dichotomy imposed by the West to appropriate the subject of the body in pain in the interests of a female subject as agent. Mani, however, looks upon the debate on sati as a political project of the colonial government to, first, denigrate Indian patriarchy for its oppressive practices of subjugating women and second, to project itself as the saviour, typically symbolized in the helpless Indian woman being made sati and rescued by the brave Englishman in fictional accounts, such as *Around the World in Eighty Days* by Jules Verne and later, by M.M. Kaye in her popular novel, *The Far Pavillions*.[5]

But the questions of caste and class have not been raised even by feminist scholars who have brought in relevant points in the discussion. It is worth noting that sati has not been reported in the Vedic texts or supported by

[5] The European rendering of the sati also puts it right into the class context as both the rescuer and the rescued are of the highest class of society, especially the Indian woman, royal in both cases.

any religious texts of the Hindus at any period when the caste system had not been consolidated. The word sati itself refers to a woman of virtue and is not related to what has been the 'practice' (burning on the funeral pyre), the meaning by which it is now commonly understood, especially by a Western audience. In Bengal, where it was widely practised in seventeenth–nineteenth centuries till it was banned in 1829 by William Bentinck, it was often used to get rid of widows of rich families who would otherwise lay claim to family property.[6] Even poorer widows of upper castes like Brahmins were often put on the pyre to prevent them from going astray and damaging the family honour, especially the danger of being sexually attracted to a lower-caste man, since widow remarriage was customary among the lower castes.

Sati has been widely recognized as an occasional custom that became glorified under Brahmanical patriarchy that concretized itself after the medieval period and not textual or part of Hindu traditions of antiquity. Although a lengthy discussion on when the caste system really became the way – we find it in the eighteenth–nineteenth century or at the time of colonization – is beyond the scope of this chapter, we can consult an excellent work on the history of the caste system by Jaiswal (1998). She is of the considered opinion that the Rig Vedic society, being a simple pastoral society, did not have the kind of hierarchy we find in later caste society dominated by the Brahmin priestly class,[7] 'The priestly outlook invested every human action with religious significance and gradually evolved an ideology which made the preservation of the purity of the *Brāhmāna* varna from external contact its primary concern'...'the roots of this ideology lay in the growth and intensification of class relations with the emergence of a ruling class exercising control over land and the labour of the exploited classes' (ibid.: 85).[8] Even in the historical study of caste, Jaiswal decries the fact that very

[6] One of the active social workers opposing sati was Raja Ram Mohan Roy, scion of a rich landowning family, whose sister-in-law was burnt at the death of his elder brother at the age of 17 years, when the Raja was away from home. Shocked by the cruelty of the act and the death of a much loved sister-in-law, he campaigned strongly for its abolition.

[7] Upadhyaya (1941:55) writes, 'Although the Ṛgveda Saṁhitā warrants the commencement of the caste system, its evidence clearly points out that the habits and customs which later on grew as peculiar traits to the distinct classes had not yet acquired their rigidity. There was no ban put, for example on interdining and intermarrying.'

[8] R.S. Sharma (2001) has done extensive work on class formation in ancient India and is of the opinion that Rig Vedic society was ranked but, as a pastoral society, it could not have developed a full-fledged class system. In fact, he does not believe that even late Vedic period was a class society; this kind of society might have emerged before AD fifth century and reached its climax in the eleventh–twelfth century.

little attention has been paid to the women and 'most studies including that of Altekar approach the women's question almost entirely from the point of view of the upper castes' (ibid.: 93), but she adds,

> Our sources provide ample evidence of the fact that in framing the rules of hypergamy and punishment for sexual offences *Brāhmānical* theory was heavily weighted in favour of upper caste men and ensured double exploitation of the female both on account of her gender as well as station in life: yet no serious study has been undertaken of these issues. (ibid.)

Thus remains the argument that sati may have been part of a series of practices, including child marriage, that were put in place by a strongly patriarchal hierarchical system based on caste/class to seclude access to the bodies of higher-caste women by men of the lower castes, and also proclaiming the power of elite men. In the film, *Antarjali Yatra*,[9] for example, the rich and aged Brahmin patriarch is advised by his priest that if he takes a wife with him on his funeral pyre, it is *he* who would go straight to heaven. There is no relevance here of the woman (child bride) to be made sati. It is neither her physical nor spiritual welfare that are an issue, what matters is the redemption of the rich and upper-caste *man*.

Thus, we have a clear example of the perspective that we get when we look at something merely as a women's issue or when we take a gendered perspective. As a woman's issue, sati debates have largely concentrated on the body/mind of the woman, her subjectivity, agency, etc. But as soon as we look upon in a gendered perspective, we need to contextualize it against the social hierarchies and power relationships in society (like Lata Mani). It then becomes a question of men as well as women, of power and closure of boundaries between classes.

[9] *Antarjali Yatra* is a Bengali film made by Gautam Ghosh in 1987. It is the story of a rich Brahmin widower advised by the family priest to marry on his deathbed, ostensibly to persuade the new wife to ascend the funeral pyre of her husband so that he can go to heaven. *Antarjali Yatra* refers to a custom in Bengal when a dying man is left on the banks of the river Ganga so that he can die there and go to heaven, as death on the Ganga riverbank is considered a straight path to heaven. Thus, a poor, young Brahmin girl is married to the old man while he is waiting to die on the riverbank. The young wife has to set up house on the river side just passing days when she will have to ascend the funeral pyre. The *chandal* (untouchable) who is charge of the cremation ground takes pity on her and befriends her urging her to run away. They develop a sexual relationship but the floods come and break the bank of the river and the wife dies while hanging on to the husband's body in an attempt to save him. Thus, she ultimately does fulfil her destiny of dying with her husband.

The Public Woman

In the story of Kannagi related earlier, we are introduced to another kind of woman who had her own place in ancient Indian society, the courtesan or the public woman. Ancient literature abounds with the stories of women who were neither wives nor widows, but who led an independent existence. Many of them were talented singers and artists and, in fact, in quite recent times, many such women or their daughters were among the first women to appear on the screen in the Indian movie industry when it was founded. There were two kinds of such women. One were those who were occupants of houses called *kotha*s in North India or known by other names that housed the dancing girls, many of them being highly accomplished and talented. All the royal houses had their coterie of dancing girls who were part of the palace and often played interesting role in the palace politics. These women passed on their knowledge to their daughters and the system was maintained through a kind of matrilineal inheritance. The boys born to such mothers would be musicians and accompanists for the dancers. Some of them would also become dance and music teachers.

The other kind were the ones dedicated to a deity, and were known as the wives of that deity, or *devadasi*s, and were a part of the ritual life of the temple. They, too, were highly accomplished and several classical dance forms of India were nurtured and developed by them, including Bharatanatyam and Odissi. In the temples of the South and in Orissa, in the temple of Jagannath at Puri, such women, like the *hijra*s, had important ritual roles to play and were called in to bless newly married women, newborn children, etc., for their status was of a *nitya sumangali* (forever married) since they were married to a deity and could never become widows. 'She was a female ritualist whose personal (sakti) could be ritually merged with that of the great goddess (sakti)' (Kersenboom, 1992: 137). They always dressed up like married women, and remained bedecked all their lives.

Some public women have been historical-cum-mythic figures, like Amrapali who becomes a follower of Buddha. The history of Amrapali (Ambapali) is interesting. She has been located sometimes during the reign of King Bimbisara, king of a kingdom near modern Gaya (Bihar state of modern India). Amrapali was a foundling, found by a gardener in the kingdom of Vaisali, under a mango tree (hence her name from *amba*, meaning mango). Following strict norms of democracy, in Vaisali existed a custom that the most perfectly beautiful women were not be married to any one man but must be dedicated to the pleasure of many. Amrapali grew up into a most dazzlingly

beautiful woman and was also highly intelligent and accomplished in all art forms. According to the custom, she became a courtesan and is credited with authoring some of the most beautiful pieces of poetry in the *Therigatha* collection.[10] Her talent and beauty attracted so many men that the glory of Vaisali of that period is attributed to Amrapali's fame. Her price was fifty *kahapana*s for one night (as cited in *Vinaya Texts*, Part II: 171). Her treasury grew bigger than that of any king. The King Bimbisara, who was married to the princess of Vaisali, is also reported to have spent seven nights with her.

Amrapali bore Bimbisara a son named as Abhaya who embraced Buddhism and became a holy monk, and under his influence, Amrapali too embraced Buddhism and became a Buddhist nun. She had met the Buddha in person.[11] Buddha reportedly accepted her invitation to be a guest at her house and partook of her hospitality. Amrapali is indeed one courtesan whose name is still popular in India and films have been made about her. Her life indicates that even a person of the stature of Gautama, the Buddha, was not averse to accepting repast at her home, and the patronage she received from kings and the fact that she bore a ruling king a son shows that, at times, the courtesan was a respected career woman – a woman truly liberated and independent and who held the secular powers of wealth and political influence.

In literature and poetry, the courtesan often played a key role and sometimes, as in the Sanskrti play, *Mrichcha Katika* (The Clay Cart), the courtesan also converted to a wife. Thus, her role in ancient India was an accepted one and not denigrated and, at times, an intelligent and ambitious woman could take this life up as an informed choice, as in the case of a famed courtesan of the city of Benaras or Kashi (recorded in the *Vinaya Texts*, Part III: 360–61). She was born to a rich and influential banker of the city who was also very learned. The father gave an exemplary education to his daughter who grew up highly learned and wise. Not wishing to confine herself to the domestic life, she chose the life of a courtesan. Her fees for one night was equal to the entire revenue of the King of Kashi and this prohibitive price could be afforded by only a very few. In order to accommodate more men, she reduced her fees to half and became famous as Ardhakashi (half of Kashi). She too, ultimately, became a disciple of Buddha and gave away her fabulous

[10] Her verses tell the poignant, almost autobiographical, story of a princess who was so beautiful that many princes fought over her hand. In order to maintain peace, she was requested to become a courtesan and bestow her favours on all rather than becoming the wife of only one.

[11] Description of this meeting is found in *A Life of Buddha* by Asvaghosa Bodhisattava, translated from Sanskrit into Chinese by Dharmaraksha (AD 420) and from Chinese into English by Samuel Beal (*The Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. XIX).

wealth to charity and to Lord Buddha. It is said that when she was about to go and meet Buddha to give him a large part of her wealth and also be ordained into the monastic order, she was informed that some robbers were waiting to waylay her. She sent a message to Buddha, who sent a learned and competent bhikku (monk) to ordain her. Subsequently, by her own efforts, she attained *arhatship* and wrote many poems that are still read.

The *devadasi*s were honoured and taken care of by the kings and rich men until fairly recent times. Zaman (2007, 2013) has recorded the life history of the only surviving *devdasi* of the Jagannath temple of Orissa who recalled how the King of Puri would have his guards escort the *devadasi*s to the temple and how they were treated with honour and respect. The courtesans during the time of the Buddha, as described earlier, were often those women who opted for a life of learning and cultivating the arts. They were often highly creative as writers and business women. But we must understand that this option was exerted because such a life of independence was not available to a married woman. There is often a glaring contrast between the docile wife and the wily courtesan, the latter having more influence over her man and also in a position to be demanding, whereas the wife is always portrayed as obedient and docile. For example, in *Mrichcha Katika*, the young Brahmin is chasing the beautiful prostitute all over the town while his docile wife sits at home and when required, even entertains her husband's lover. Thus, the contrast between being a wife, that is, being a part of someone's life, and a courtesan, that is, in charge of one's own life, sometimes persuaded a woman like Ardhakashi to opt for the latter. During Buddha's time, however, we find that most of them preferred to enter the monastery and become followers of Buddha rather than continue with the life of a prostitute that although not socially shunned, was still not a life of virtue. The courtesan could not aspire to attain virtue or accrue merit as a sati and also, she had no access to spiritual power or merit.

Even the *devadasi*s, the 'wives' of the deity, are not viewed as having any particular merit except that they bestow merit on others. Their value is more ritual rather than spiritual, an aspect to which we shall return later. It is ironical that the auspiciousness of the *devadasi* was of more use to the housewives than to their own selves. Thus, married women looked upon them as auspicious and sought their blessings. But although the courtesans became relegated to the status of women only partially acceptable to society by the medieval times, the *devadasis* retained their ritual status till recently.

It was only in post-colonial times that their status was marginalized by the very term 'temple prostitution', coined by the British. It was an unfortunate

labelling as it denigrated the *devadasi* in the eyes of the public, especially the Western educated one. In post-colonial India, the institution was finally stigmatized and even banned. The huge cultural contribution of the *devadasi*s was forgotten in public memory as educated and middle-class women took up dance as an art form and profession. Rukmini Devi Arundale set up the school, Kalakshetra, to teach Bharatanatyam to girls from respectable families. Thus, while the institutionalized public woman culture was dying out, it still left behind some great names like Siddheswari Devi and Bala Saraswati who, in the long line of traditional dancers and singers, were able to find fame and recognition in respectable society by their talent. Therefore, by converting dance from ritual to art, its credentials were established as fit for domestic women.

As a result, we find that the domestic and public dichotomy in pre-colonial times set apart those women who were the material to become wives from those who were predestined to become mistresses. In his classic novel, *The Guide*, the famous Indian English writer, R.K. Narayan, has described the struggle that a daughter of a dancing woman has to go through to establish herself as a respectable woman. Even though she is a Masters in Economics, Rosie, the daughter of a dancing girl, is forced into marriage to an older archaeologist, where both she and her mother are greatly beholden to her husband for having converted her to a respectable woman through marriage. Her husband has no love for her and is engrossed in his work as an archaeologist and dislikes Rosie dancing. At the period of time when this novel is located, dance was yet to come into its own as an art form. But Rosie leaves behind a painful love affair and estrangement from her husband to find her identity and respectability in society on her own terms as a famous dancer.

More interestingly, Vasudha Dalmia writes about Bharatendu Harischandra (a nineteenth century scholar of Hindi) that he like all other men of his time went regularly to a courtesan to get 'education'. 'It was here that the young men of the day learnt the department of a *rāis* and of a *sahṛdaya*, or connoisseur of the arts' (Dalmia 1999:128). The word *rais* denotes a rich man and a cultured man too. It is well known that most rich and accomplished men favoured and supported courtesans more for their art than for their sexual favours.

In history, we have the example of Umrao Jaan, a famous courtesan of Lucknow, who is recognized as the first writer of a novel in Urdu, her biography *Umrao Jan Ada*, which has been successfully filmed twice in Mumbai. In more recent times, there is the example of *Noti Binodini*, a girl again from a dancing girl family (*noti*), who moved Sri Ramakrishna

Paramahamsa to tears by her theatre performance and later, became his disciple. Ramakrishna was the teacher of Swami Vivekananda and a great spiritual leader of nineteenth century Bengal who left a great influence on the Western philosophers of his time, including French philosopher, Romain Rolland, who has written his biography.

Thus, we see that although there was a dichotomy of the public and the private, the lines were never too rigidly drawn. In fact, widows of upper-class/caste families, or even kidnapped or lost girls, could find themselves in one of these 'houses', where they were then given training according to their talents. In fact, Umrao Jaan was kidnapped as a child and sold to a *kotha*. At times, like Binodini, they found respectability through marriage. Thus, the public woman also had a place in society, but unlike in the West, it was not only a position of prostitution; in fact, many were only performers and not prostitutes, although the line was rather finely drawn. The *kotha*s were not brothels. Their primary goal was the nurturing of art and music, and they had rituals inherent to their institution and also played a ritual role in the society. Most importantly, the public woman, too, was an aspect of the power of *Shakti* and one her many manifestations.

A need to have prostitutes was also ostensibly to protect the purity of the devis. Since wives and women of respectable family were neither expected nor encouraged to be overtly sexual, the libidinal needs of men were fulfilled largely through visits to prostitutes or the keeping of concubines. Bannerjee writes,

> In 1853, Calcutta with a population of about 40,000 people, supported 12,419 prostitutes...More than a decade later, in 1867, although the city's total population had come down to some extent, the number of prostitutes rose to more than 30,000. We are told that it was mostly the women of the weaver, barber, washerman, milkman, fisherman and other lower castes who resorted to this profession. (Bannerjee, 1989: 143)

In other words, some impure/sexed bodies were needed to protect the sanctified bodies of the inner world of upper-caste/class women.

Religion and the Asexual Woman

However, one aspect needs a little more elaboration and that is the life of an ascetic or a nun that provides a third option from being either a wife or a mistress. This option became open to women only from the time of Buddha for while Jainism and Buddhism had options for women to become nuns, Hinduism gave different kinds of options. Among the Hindus in the Vedic

period, married women could accompany their husbands on *Vanaprastha* into the forest but it was as an accompanying spouse or if they were widows. In later periods, we do not hear too much about women taking to asceticism once Brahmanical Hinduism took roots as a highly patriarchal religion. Only with Buddhism, this option became open to women and from all that we can gather from historical texts, they did take to it in large numbers, especially women from high families, including Buddha's own wife, Yashodhara. Thus, merit was not associated only with the virtuous wife and one could take the path of spirituality as an individual. Even in medieval Europe, Wiesner-Hanks writes, 'For women of all classes, however, religion provided the most powerful justification for independent action' (Wiesner-Hanks, 2008: 8). In Europe, under the Orthodox Church, women held positions of power as abbesses and controlled vast amounts of wealth and secular power. It was only when the church became more patriarchal that the nuns were pushed into seclusion and had to lead a life of piety and not take to abbeys as a way to keep control over property and to retain individual power and agency. With spread of Protestant ethic also, women lost their power and prestige and became more like adjuncts to men and missionaries.

Thus, we find that as religions become more institutionalized, women are gradually pushed out. In India, when women did not find a place in orthodox Brahmanical Hinduism, they took the path of more heterodox sects like the Bhakti movement and the Vaishnavite cults of eastern India. Culturally, these women were associated with lower classes and relegated more to the category of dasis than powerful devis. The Baul sects of Bengal and eastern India attracted many women who had no other place in society, but were social outcastes and even had the suffix dasi added to their names. To a large extent, they were treated as public women (almost like prostitutes) in spite of their ritual and spiritual activities. Some of them were women of good families, sometimes even highly accomplished, yet not acceptable as women of good virtue or respectable women.

However, spirituality was a liminal space that could be occupied by women who may have chosen to be neither dasi*s* nor devis, that is, chosen neither domesticity nor the independence of a courtesan. The Bhakti movement provided one such path that began as a protest against Brahmanical Hinduism and its stranglehold in the medieval ages. It began with the eighth century Tamil poet Karraikal Ammaiyar and spread to the North by the fifteenth and the sixteenth century. As described by Tharu and Lalita (1993: 54–55), this was a protest movement against Brahmin domination and ritualistic religion, where pure devotion was seen as the path to union with the divinity,

often metaphorized as a lover. People of the working castes, low in rank, like washermen, potter, barbers and artisans, joined the movement and many saints arose from their ranks, like Ravidas, Kabir, Tukaram, Akka Mahadevi, Meera Bai and Bahina Bai, to name a few. They used the simple language of the people to write their verses, breaking the domination of Sanskrit, and the highlight of the movement was the emergence of many women poet and saints.

> The women poets of the *Bhakti* movements did not have to seek the institutionalized spaces religion provided to express themselves, and women's poetry moved from the court and the temple to the open spaces of the field, the workplace and the common woman's hearth. (ibid.)

These women often used the dasi motif to describe their selves, but they used this term with reference to divinity, to liberate themselves from the masculine world in which they were situated. The example of Meera Bai, a royal princess married into the princely dynasty of Mewar in Rajasthan, is exemplary. Meera was a devotee of Krishnā and could not accept the domestic life of the palace. She chose not to be a devi but the *dasi* of her lord, Krishnā. She is seen as a dishonour to her royal husband's family who even try to kill her. Ultimately, she leaves the palace to wander among the mendicants and ordinary people, singing her songs of devotion and is recognized as a saint. In her verses, she expresses her desire to be the '*chākar*' (servant) of her lord, thus choosing to be a dasi, to renounce her royal lifestyle for the simple life of a devotee.

Thus, these dasis were liminal to the polarities of being either devis or dasis as they transcended all worldly categories and social hierarchies, like the low-caste men within the same Bhakti movement.

The Devi and the Dasi

My attempt here to build up a generalized model is fraught with misgivings and the realization that it is not going to be an easy task. Most models are dichotomous, especially those with a Western root, like nature and culture, public and private, rational and irrational, yet, as we have been discussing, when we are situating ourselves within the worldview of the Indian subcontinent, the thought processes are not really dichotomous. What we have already noted is an absence of closed categories, that is, there is far greater fluidity and possibilities of transition than may be in Western thinking. In-between categories are neither anomalous nor unimportant,

oppositional categories also are rare; like the opposition of good and evil or man and woman. We learn from the myths and stories narrated that men can turn into women and vice versa, that there is nothing called good or evil and actions are interpreted according to situations (the doctrine of karma and dharma). Yet, we also know that there is a definite undercurrent of a way of thinking that can be generalized.

Here again, several issues arise: whose ways of thinking are these?; what is their origin?; in what situations of power hierarchy?; if we accept this point of view, who is it that we are ignoring?; and how have these categories and ways of thinking reproduced or transformed themselves? As I see it, the only way in which one can generalize is at the very core, at the very basic level. The more data we feed into our model, the more differentiation we encounter, yet the fundamental premises, if isolated, can guide us to putting a lot of order onto what may appear to be only a mass of unconnected data; like the stories I have been telling so far may have been appearing to be disconnected with each other. A model is essentially an abstraction and the more skeletal or reified it is, the more likelihood of its applicability; for example, the nature versus culture or male versus female in the Western culture. A model can, at the least, provide us with a yardstick for comparison, for locating differences and explaining behaviour that may seem unconnected but is connected at some deep level of conceptual structure.

The model that I propose here is a deductive one, an analyst's model, yet it is derived from folk models and spoken language. The terms devi and dasi are understood and have the same meaning almost all over India, no matter what language is spoken in that region. The conceptual categories are derived from their use in most of India in pre-modern times, that is, almost till the beginning of the twentieth century, to designate women belonging to higher and lower-caste groups. In Bengal, a Brahmin woman had the suffix devi put in after her name and a non-Brahmin woman had the suffix dasi. But later, the terms became more class than caste specific. In western Indian, the term *bai* is often used instead of dasi, with the same connotation of a working or lower-class/caste woman.

My maternal grandmother, for example, being born into a non-Brahmin family, was named as Bhabatarini Dasi. But after her marriage to my grandfather, who was a well-to-do barrister belonging to the upper-class gentry of colonial India, her name was changed to what was considered more appropriately upper class, Kamala Devi. Similarly, my mother-in-law, born in the North-West of India, into a different language, had the suffix *bai* to her name which was changed to devi when her husband became prosperous. Even

today, it is customary for upper-caste girls to have the suffix devi attached to their name, for example, among the high-caste Meitei's of Manipur.

But the suffix is only a reflection of much more deep-seated social reality, namely, a hierarchy that has multi-level and multi-dimensional complexity: at the ritual level; at the social–structural level, that is, with respect to location, public or domestic; at the cognitive level, inner or outer; and at the economic level, working or non-working. Thus, as Moore and Sanders (2006: 18) point out, generalizations are productive for anthropological understanding for two reasons:

> The first is that longer run structures of power and domination form patterns in human life, as Marx among others recognized, and those patterns require elucidation and explanation. Gender is a case in point. Abandoning generalizations and comparisons will occlude rather than reveal the workings of power. Second, by assuming that binary classifications, like nature/culture, mind/body are products of western philosophical traditions and have been imposed on other cultures, we lose sight of the fact that other cultures may deploy similar binaries albeit in dissimilar ways. (Moore and Sanders, 2006: 18)

A usefulness of making a model is, as Handelman (1998 reprint: xxvi) points out is that it enables us to create a society that may be viewed as bounded and offering the possibility of generalization. 'Making models is one systemic way of practicing holism, because the event-that-models emerges from human creativity as a world unto itself, within social worlds that are indeterminate and open ended. Social systems do not exist. Systematically organized models do.' (Handelman 1998: xxvi). The models do not represent social order, they create it. This is especially true for the myths and stories that I have narrated. Thus, by creating a model, we are able to create a microcosm that enables us to look at society as if it exists as a society. What then is the utility of a model? It enables us to reflect upon and compare social practices that are in some ways drawing upon the models that are publicly available. The way people react in the lived-in world, the manner in which the actors in society attempt to rationalize their actions and regulate their behaviour is often provided to them by these public models of myths, stories and, in contemporary times, the media.

As I can see it, the models do not reflect reality but they do mirror the essential characters of the society, in a way that Levi-Strauss (1969) has talked of the deep structures. Since Levi-Strauss has connected these structures to the logical structures of the human mind, in term of binary opposites, the criticism has been that his model does not express transformation. However,

if one is not talking of structures of mind that are biological but those that are shaped by centuries of internalization of beliefs and action pattern, similar to what Bordieu calls *habitus*, then there are underlying principles that govern society that do not change, while other dimensions like culture, language and economy may change. It is with reference to these that I have built my model of devi and dasi.

We have discussed certain essential characters of the South Asian way of thinking that may still persist; the conceptualization of life, time and space are three such fundamental thought processes that may not change even if most other things do. In the age of nuclear weapons and global economy, they may still guide logical thinking in this particular milieu and affect behaviour. As we have already discussed, life in South Asia, with its deep-rooted belief in an eternal soul, transmigrating through various lives, gives a completely different style to living than is found among Western people who believe that there is but one life. People in this region display a greater degree of equanimity than their Western counterparts. Time is thus regarded as cyclical; the rigidity of a linear time schedule is missing in South Asia and Indians often turn the joke on themselves by referring to International Standard Time (IST) as 'Indian Standard Time'. It is so much expected that no one ever arrives on time that if someone does, they may encounter a surprised reaction. I remember that at a wedding, the bridegroom arrived in time, only to send the bride's party helter-skelter, as they were not even ready to receive them and the bride was still getting her hair done! The attitude is shaped by the realization that time is not going away, it is all there and will remain so, like the analogy of the river in Herman Hess's novel, *Siddhartha*.[12]

[12] Herman Hess's Siddhartha is a story about the Buddha and his teachings as told through the life of Siddhartha, a young Brahmin boy, who experiences life in many ways through his travels, as a bachelor looking for knowledge, as a man of the world earning money and enjoying the pleasures of the flesh in the company of Kamala, the courtesan, and finally as a boat man sharing the boat with another boat man Vasudeva. He learns the wisdom of life from both the river and the boat man. The specific reference that is made here is to the sentence, "he saw, this water ran and ran, and was nevertheless always there, was always at all times the same and yet new in every moment!" (p.65)

Also Vasudeva tells him, "the river is everywhere at once, at the source and at the mouth, at the waterfall, at the ferry, at the rapids, in the sea, in the mountains, every where at once, and that there is only the present time for it, not the shadow of the past, not the shadow of the future" p.68

The entire philosophy of the Buddha, about the "indestructibility of every life, the eternity of every moment" (p.75) is narrated through the analogy of the river. See Herman Hesse, *Siddhartha, A Tale of India* (e book)

Because of the inherent notion of rebirth, most Indians take an attitude that life is transient and yet not gone forever, and part of it is reflected in the Indian attitude to old age and death. Most people agreed with me on this point when I made it explicit that for a person who believes in rebirth, death is not a final ending. One British student doing his fieldwork on firefighters in India remarked that Indian firefighters were very brave as they had very little regard for personal safety, and most would enter into an area with no protective gear and with no care for their own life. If asked, they would say that doing their duty was more important than saving their own life. Part of this attitude is informed by notions of karma and dharma that we shall discuss presently, and part by the attitude of infinite time that most people carry with them, albeit as a habitus (unconsciously).

While discussing a reading by Sarah Lamb (2002) with my class in the United States (US), I found that the young American students had no concept of detachment or voluntary withdrawal from life, as was a part of getting old in Bengali culture. They could not understand as to why people would be giving up or trying to give up worldly attachments (*maya*), as discussed in that paper. On the contrary, they felt that as people grow old, they resist it and try to remain as young as possible, a phenomenon that is looked at with ridicule by persons from South Asia. Most Indians exposed to Western culture find it paradoxical as to why a person would not like to grow old? In Hindu philosophy, all relationships and attachments are transient and after death, the soul takes rebirth and forms other attachments and relationships. So, near death, one should consciously try to get detached and withdraw, for the time for these relationships to end is near. Even very rich and influential people try to withdraw by shifting responsibility to their children. At the same time, the children must try to pay off their debt to their parents by taking care of them in old age. This is because it is considered their dharma (duty) to do so and it must be done within this particular situation of bondage. Thus, while relationships are transient, the family as a unit is not, and this family continuity is maintained by the worship of ancestors (even though they may have taken rebirth).

As Lamb (2002: 58)points out,

> Such a system of long-term intergenerational reciprocity contrasts with practices in the United States, where among the white middle-class in particular, the dominant expectation is that parent–child gifts will flow 'down' from parent to child in a lifelong unidirectional manner. It would make the child and parent equally uncomfortable if the child were called upon to provide material support or intimate bodily care for his or her parent.

As this example makes clear, one has to deal with these underlying continuities of the thought process that makes generalization possible, to create models and to compare.

The one most important criteria that is exhibited in our constructed model is that we are not comparing men and women as is often done (like in the nature/culture debate) but comparing different categories of women and that too not just as a difference, but as a hierarchy. The goddess and the slave are not opposed to each other, they are situated at two different levels. It is my hypothesis that in South Asia, it is not sex but class and caste that decide gender patterns and expectations. In South Asia, we have a long tradition of inequality that has informed many aspects of society. It is evident from the myths, stories and instances that we have already discussed that society, from antiquity, has been hierarchical, and this hierarchy subsumes within itself the fact of gender, thus men and women are not in opposition to each other but it is the classes, the nobility, the slaves, the wives and the concubines, the women from one's own society and those from another, that form the lines along which gender is distributed and understood. Therefore, the categories male, female or even eunuch are to be understood against the given conceptual hierarchies, inequalities and privileges and marginalization's that accrue to markers of status, be it class, caste or talent, achievements or ascriptions.

The term 'devi' refers to a goddess and is also an honorific manner of addressing any woman of rank and respectability. The word 'dasi', on the other hand, is used for a slave or a woman whose body is public property, like a '*devadasi*', a courtesan, concubine or a woman of low caste. Thus, the devi was the wife of the elite Indian man, the Brahmin Pandit, the Kshatriya ruler or the Vaishya householder. Left out were the women who toiled in the fields, carried out various services like the barber's wife, the potter's wife and the scavenger's wife, each having her roles in society, performing various essential tasks and yet, always open to exploitation by upper-caste men. In feudal India, female servants accompanied the royal bride to sexually serve her husband. The upper-class/caste women were supposed to be chaste and asexual, at least after the establishment of Brahmanical patriarchy, and the upper-caste men satisfied their lust with the bodies of lower-caste working women. In folklore and literature, these categories have been brought out beautifully by the literary masters.

The texts that went into the construction of the devi were the *Dharmashastra*s and the laws of Manu, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and not the tribal myths and folklore. Born of antiquity, however, these terms have assumed different meanings in different epochs and historical

circumstances. They assumed greater significance when oral traditions with their variability and adaptability were replaced by the rigidity of the written words. Since most of the writing and translations took place during the colonial period, they were part of the colonial production of knowledge (Chakravorti, 1989; Cohn, 1996; Dirks, 2001) about which we shall discuss in the next chapter. And when we set out to analyze society in its complexity, these are only reference points, models that are not rigid but which can be manipulated by feeding new data into them so that when situations change, the content of the cultural practices and social relationships may change but their ultimate structural relationship of inequality remains. Thus, the deepest structure, the almost unchanging one is of power differential and hierarchy, and how and in what way this is expressed will change and transform historically.

Again, the argument may be raised that hierarchy is a feature of all complex societies and gender relationships are enmeshed with social relationships everywhere. For example, Wiesner-Hanks (2008), in discussing gender relations in early modern Europe, has included class in most of her analysis. But what is different is the expression of this hierarchy, the cultural idioms, the tropes and metaphors, the social organizational differences and the values and practices that legitimize and reproduce hierarchy. On the basis of our data based on the myths, stories and phenomenon discussed in the beginning of the chapter, we find that our model emerges as shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1

Devi	*Dasi*
High	Low
Upper caste/class	Lower caste/class
Domestic	Public
Wife	Concubine
Mother	Sexual partner
Inner	Outer
Asexual	Sexual
Confined	Accessible

The Applicability of the Model

Who is the Indian woman to whom this model applies? We have seen that the model is, to a large extent, based on the given content in the myths and stories we have discussed. But most of those stories are of antiquity, yet, they are a

part of the social imagination of most Indians. They are told and retold and also projected on the mass media. The televised serials (in Hindi) based on the stories of the Ramayana and Mahabharata had caught the public imagination so much that when they were being telecast, a curfew-like situation would arise in most Indian cities, especially in the northern belt, and even markets and business establishments would wear a deserted look. People would offer worship to the actors playing the roles of Rama and Krishnā (incarnations of Vishnu) and even today, these serials are seen in reruns by large audiences. Similarly, *Silappadikam* is one of the most popular stories in the South and the characters are household names. Women and men evoke the names of Sita and Savitri whenever there is talk of an ideal woman and the media projects such images, albeit in modernized versions, almost constantly.

The ideal Indian woman, however, remains a construct of a collective imagination, just like the American woman. One may refer here to a recently held exhibition (May 2010) at the Metropolitan Museum in New York on the 'The American Woman', where at the end of the exhibition, there is a legend explaining that the exhibition and the construct, 'The American Woman', is a phenomenon mainly of the media and popular culture. There is a collage of multiple faces of women, black, brown and Asian, to show how the exhibition, displaying only white, upper-class women, is only an archetype of the real American woman; but the concept is nevertheless alive in the popular imagination, not only in America but also globally. However, it is not correct to say that the image Americans have of their women is the same as what others have of them. Social imagination is mediated by power relationships, cultural divides and clash of norms. It is the same across caste lines and class too. The dalits of India have a different image of their own selves than what the elite have of them. It is here that Foucault's concept of power becomes manifest. What is projected as ideal is fed by upper-class values, by the norms and perceptions of the dominant groups of society.

Here, the argument reverts to what we understand, as Indians, when we talk of the 'ideal Indian woman'? There has always been a tension between the richness of diversity of the Indian subcontinent with its many languages, religions and ethnic groups and the monolithic construction of the 'Indian' in which context the term Indian woman or *Bharatiya nari*, rhetorically used in multiple contexts, is a popular construct of the collective imagination of the public and the print and the mass media. The term Indian becomes meaningful and can be understood only in the construction of the Indian nation, a product of collective response to the colonial experience. However, doubt has often

been expressed about the constitution of this collectivity, as to who it really represents and in whose voice it really speaks (Chakravorti, 1989).

Social imagination becomes symbolic when translated into commonly understood and accepted icons. It is as symbols that they initiate social action and guide public behaviour. There is a shared understanding that makes the use of these symbols imbued with meaning. Thus, we can see that the multiple manifestations of the understanding of the masculine and feminine are integrated into the common psyche and public culture so that apparent contradictions become meaningful. For example, sometime back, a popular newspaper in India had published a photograph on its front page of a computer engineer worshipping a photograph of the South Indian politician, Jayalalitha, as if she were a deity. No doubt, the very same man would be treating his female colleague in office or his own wife at home in a very different fashion and yet find no contradiction in his actions as, quite correctly, he knows that all women are not the same and also, why some are like goddesses (devi) and others are not. He, like all others, is informed by both his inherited cultural value systems and the social reality as it is comprehended.

Thus, the model that we have described and the content that feeds it and the symbols that sustain it are better understood if contextualized into various time and space coordinates, and in the following chapters, we shall see the workings of this model and its development from the colonial phase onwards.

2 Colonial India and the Construction of Upper-caste/class Women

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the 'devi' (divine woman) image as it was constructed during the colonial period. By borrowing elements from traditional Hindu Brahmanical, patriarchal values and those of Victorian England; the Indian men made an effort to project themselves as 'civilized' in response to colonial imagery of India. The ideas of etiquette, chivalry, modesty, hygiene and even romantic love were implanted on to existing patriarchal joint family norms. For this chapter, I rely partly on my own family narratives as they were handed down to me by my mother and through her, about two generations of women in colonial India. This is supplemented with references to sociological and anthropological literature about colonial India and some eminent literary works.

This chapter shows how a class-based hierarchy was superimposed on the earlier, largely caste-based divisions of Indian society and also, how certain earlier non-existing categories, such as those of the '*firangi*' (foreigner), the '*bhadramahila*' (lady) and the 'sahib' and 'memsahib', entered not only the vocabulary but also the cognitive categories of the people to create and comprehend new forms of distinctions introduced by colonialism.

This is the time when women from hitherto sheltered existence, namely, the upper-caste and class women, began to step out into the public domain, often to participate in the nationalist movement. This chapter discusses how new space was created for these new 'devi' categories, and the norms and etiquettes that bound them to their continued respectable existence.

The Colonial Factor

My great-grandmother, born somewhere towards the end of the nineteenth century, was named Lily – an outcome of the British entering Bengal as the East India Company and the final British political annexation of Bengal after the famous Battle of Plassey. My great-grandmother had no other Western

traits, did not know a word of English and her name was the only legacy of a foreign rule. Yet, the entry of Europeans into the soil of India as sovereigns, and not merely as invaders (like in the time of Alexander), is imprinted into the culture and minds of the people; an influence to which later historians and social scientists have attributed much of what is found in modern India, including, paradoxically, the caste system (in its present form) and the hardening of orthodoxies like the emergence of a concept known as Hindu (Bayly, 1988; Cohn, 1996; Dirks, 2001; Seneviratne, 1997).

Chatterjee (1993) has referred to the colonization of mind when he says that 'even our imaginations must remain forever colonized' (1993: 5).The British had introduced formal learning into Indian society but it was a highly 'constructed' knowledge, one that was directly a tool of European hegemony, more of a system of control than freedom. Through this knowledge, the elite sections learnt to look down upon their own ways of life, and to equate European culture with class superiority and elitism.[1]

The British came with feudal values. They found their so-called equals among the upper castes and what they considered as the elite of local society. Trautmann (1997, reprint 2004a) explores the reaction of the British to their freshly conquered territory, namely, Bengal, giving rise to a new Orientalism focused on India. The most provoking question was that of the Indian languages, most of them with their roots in Sanskrit, giving rise to the concept of a definitely Indo-European[2] family of languages, and also speculations about common racial ancestry (the Aryan). Thus, the Europeans initially looked upon Indians as long-lost kin with deep roots going back to antiquity of a common Aryan race. Unlike the experiences of conquest of some other parts of the world, the British found themselves in a flourishing civilization, and the first step taken by Warren Hastings, the first representative administrator of a British Bengal, was to promote the knowledge of this country and to respect its civilization. To this end, the Asiatic Society was formed in 1784, followed in 1800 by the College of Fort Williams, established to teach Indian languages to the British incumbents of the East India Company.

Even the British Indian legal system was ostensibly devised to respect local legal customs and norms as Warren Hastings, in 1772, assured the Indians

[1] This process became so ingrained into the Indian psyche that even today, westernization and ability to speak English is seen as the sole criteria of sophistication without which no one can gain entry into high society. This education hardened class differences, cutting across caste; this changed the face of Indian society to some extent, but at a later time period.

[2] It was articulated by Sri William Jones in 1786 and consists of Sanskrit, Latin, Greek, Gothic, Celtic and old Persian (Trautmann, 2004: 13).

that they would be governed by their own 'personal laws'.[3] Thus, a brand of Orientalists such as Sir William Jones and others of the Asiatic Society learnt Sanskrit and other Indian languages viewing Indian culture at par with their own selves. Their Orientalism was of mutual admiration and desire for sharing knowledge, rather than what Said (1985) has meant in his book, *Orientalism*, of a Western gaze on the Orient from a hierarchy of power relations, an act of appropriation such that knowledge is used for domination and its justification.[4] Thus, Trautmann calls this involvement with India as Indomania (ibid.: 63), which according to him, began with the conquest of Bengal and ended at around the early nineteenth century. A major aspect of this Indomania was a rediscovery of Hinduism as essentially monotheistic and a benevolent and just religion that had made India prosperous and a great civilization. It also involved treating Indians as social and cultural equals, if not slightly superior, and also to treat Indian women as fit partners for British men.

The Sanskrit scholars employed at Fort William College were referred to as professors and given due respect (O'Hanlon, 1997: 159). In fact, it is this reconstruction or rather 'construction' of Hinduism that later reinvented itself into Hindu nationalism with very different consequences, some of it with lasting effects.[5]

> Most of the evils of India are attributed to Muslim conquest and despotic rule, and the virtues of Hindu laws and customs are contrasted favorably, as if to say that Indian civilization will spring up once the overburden of Muslim rule is pulled back. (Trautman 2004a reprint: 67)

[3] However, Erin Moore is of the opinion that 'the overriding belief in the superiority of British law coloured the entire process: there were mistranslations; translations accompanied by the distrust of Indian scholar's own interpretations, and misplaced emphasis on certain textual authority over others...What became enshrined as "native" law was in fact collections of the opinions of English judges' (Moore, 1998: 39).

[4] Trautmann (2004: 23) has raised objections to Said's use of the term 'Orientalist': 'Orientalists are those whose knowledge of Asian history, religion, and so forth are grounded in mastery of Asian languages, and in the ordinary way, Orientalism is the knowledge that Orientalists produce. But, for Said, Orientalism is the whole, more or less, of Western authoritative pronouncements on Asian Societies.' Here, I am sure, Trautmann would like his own self to be excused from the definition of Said. One may also recall the beautiful rendition of Basham (2004), *The Wonder that Was India*, and also recall the excellent studies of Indian religion done by committed scholars to whom we owe much of the translations and interpretations of the ancient classic Sanskrit texts.

[5] Hamilton writes, referring to the Oriental scholars like Jones and Wilkins, 'We uniformly discover in the Hindus a nation, whose polished manners are the result of a mild disposition and an extensive benevolence' (Hamilton, 1808: 31).

These kinds of interpretations later served to fuel Indian nationalism, especially its distinct Hindu, upper-class character. The most important dimension of Indomania was its class and gender restrictions. The fact that most people in India were confined to the rural or tribal areas, and the interiors of the aristocratic homes had no access to the literate traditions or to direct presence of the British, made the intellectual give and take a limited affair.

> The circumscription as to class and gender on the subject side had an answering circumscription on the side of the Indian object: It was the learning of male Brahmins in Sanskrit, the sister dialect of the Latin and Greek that educated English gentlemen studied as the object of their enthusiasm, not the culture of Indians generally...It was concerned more with Indian civilization in most ancient times, prior to the coming of the Muslims. (Trautmann 2004a reprint: 63)

Thus, what the Indians learnt was definitely coloured by British interpretations, including their views about Islam and ancient India as well as the Aryans. All this went a long way towards shaping later nationalist discourse and set the trend for an emergent Indian identity.

However, by the nineteenth century, the British rule was well entrenched in India after the 1857 rebellion, when Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal was deposed from the throne of Delhi and entire India became a colony of Great Britain under Queen Victoria.[6] From this time began the period of Indophobia when Indian, especially Hindu, customs and practices came under attack as barbaric and uncivilized. During this period, the British were able to 'objectify' India and then, attempted to control it (Cohn, 1996: xiv). The British justified their rule by both a symbolization of the Indian nation as feminine, something to be conquered and subjugated, and also by the parallel process of emasculation of the Indian men and portraying the picture of a savage society where women were subjugated, shown no respect and even burnt as 'sati'. The colonial rulers self-projected themselves as the rescuers, something reflected in the English literature illustrating colonial times and the mythico-historical reality of a person like Job Charnok.[7] It was from here that major efforts to proselytize and reform Indians began in concerted

[6] Although as Cohn (1996: 80) points out, it was the capture of Srirangapatna and the defeat of Tipu Sultan in 1799 that really began the consolidation of British hold on India.

[7] Job Charnok is believed to have rescued a 14-year-old Bengali girl from becoming sati and married her. He is regarded as having founded the city of Calcutta.

effort. It was to people like Charles Grant (Trautmann, 1997: 101–07[8]) that India owes such terms as temple prostitution and who decried many aspects of Hindu customs as barbaric and primitive. During the Indomania period, many prominent Englishmen took Indian wives, but such was no longer encouraged.

> East India company servants who often took Indian wives or concubines in the eighteenth century, were now to observe racial endogamy and promote the cultural assimilation of Indians to England without themselves succumbing to the disease of 'Indianization'. (Farrington, 1976: 6; cf Trautmann, 2004a reprint: 110)

This dual approach to India left its mark on the people. The initial benevolent interaction with the elite groups of Indian society, the Sanskrit scholars and local rulers, led to an image of the fair and just Englishman and the superiority of a fair and open civilization with liberal and humanistic ideas. Even during the later period of rule when the British were labelling Indian customs as barbaric, many so-called enlightened Indians (those already familiar with European culture and languages) sided with them. In fact, under British criticism, it was the Indian men who carried out reforms with respect to their own societies, women being a major target. Even when the nationalist spirit was ignited and a nationalist movement began, it was inspired by Western values of freedom and dignity. Most freedom fighters were highly educated and well versed in the English language and chose their own philosophy of freedom; like the Marx-inspired revolutionary, Bhagat Singh. The ambivalent attitude of Indians towards their own culture and society and towards European culture and society can be understood only against the backdrop of the ambivalent attitude of the British, swinging between Indomania and Indophobia.

The phase of direct British rule coupled with the desire for cultural subjugation led to the formulation of a hegemonic language and education policy put forward by Grant, and given maturity by Macaulay. On 7 March 1835, Macaulay introduced his minute that sought to impose not only the English language but the entire 'wealth' of English civilization on the people of India. Although Macaulay is credited with drafting of

[8] 'Charles Grant made out a long policy paper that was a direct attack on Hinduism and Indian civilization and Indomania of Grant's contemporaries and fellow servants of the Company. Its influence was immense. It invented the reform agenda for Birtish India and in so doing created a justification for British rule' (Trautmann, 1997: 101).

the minute, it was people like Grant and Bentinck who anticipated such so-called 'reforms' (Ghosh, 1995).

The aim was of civilizing a section of Indian elite in the language, philosophy and arts of a superior culture and then, let them pass it on to the masses. At the same time, the study of Sanskrit and Indian languages declined for the British, who were no longer interested to know about what they now considered an inferior and barbaric culture; racism had set in with the political control of territory. The initial idea was concerned with the goal of administrative simplification; one would then have to deal with law-abiding citizens (following British laws and norms) and also intellectual subversion. The British Indophobics had no doubts that the lazy Indians will, at best, acquire a mediocre level of knowledge and aspirations, not posing any threat to British domination. Rather, their English-medium education would lead them to abhor native customs and become English in all respects except in colour (Macaulay, 1835: 249). But what really happened was far more complex (Cohn, 1996: 56), because the British had only superficial knowledge of India that was mostly derived from the textual traditions and the Brahmins. They were not able to assess the exact impact their policies would have on the people of India, resulting in a deeply fractured society along caste/class and ethnic lines.

For the Indian elite, a new vision of India was opened with this formal and secular education, one that was 'constructed' by British collaboration. Many Indians were able to access difficult-to-get and original Sanskrit texts in the English language. In the pre-colonial times, education in Sanskrit was limited even among Brahmins to a select class of scholars of which Mritunjaya Vidyalankar of Fort William College was a prime example (Bayly, 1988: 162). But there were few of that kind. Most Brahmins were either tillers of the soil or domestic ritual-performing 'pandits' with very limited knowledge. Many men, even of royal families, were illiterate or barely literate.[9] The British brought with them a value for education and formal learning along with fervor for inscription of knowledge.

While most Indians had access only to oral traditions, the British went about translating, writing and formalizing into manuscripts anything that they could lay their hands on. It was access to the body of knowledge so created that gave rise to an Indian intelligentsia that was different from the

[9] Even the great Mughals, like Emperors Akbar and Aurangzeb, were reportedly illiterate. However, Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar, deposed by the British, was a great poet whose verses remain popular even today.

classic Brahmin scholar. This intelligentsia also cut across caste lines and spread itself to those classes that earlier had no access to education. Thus, there emerged a select section of highly literate and knowledgeable Indian men, who not only were well versed in English language, but through English, learnt more about their own traditions.

Though, initially, the British may have encouraged the Brahmin pandit only of the Vidyalankar variety, knowledge soon passed into the hands of male elite, and trickled down to the hitherto two most deprived sections of Indian society, the women and the lower castes. A degree of destabilization of existing class and gender relations happened but that came much later, like the Western education of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar that turned him into one of the first 'untouchables' to become a national leader. When the British opened schools, there was no bar on children studying based on caste or class. Although the initial advantages were taken by only those who did belong to the upper classes and castes as the others were not even aware that they could go to school or did not see any use of doing so. The tillers of the soil, the daily wagers, potters, scavengers and fishermen saw no point in going to school, and women were not sent anyway, and this caste division continues unabated even today in India.

The impact of these values and sentiments, however, was felt later, but the first repercussion was in the changing relationships within the households, the change in relationships of men and women. A class of gentry was emerging modelled on the premises of the British gentleman and its counterpart, the lady.[10] The British imagination of a Hindu India also informed the construction of the ideal Indian woman as the ideal 'Hindu' woman.

The Inner and Outer Realms

Gender relationships in pre-modern India[11] could be broadly generalized along caste and class lines into: the women of the upper class/caste who did not work outside of the house and were confined to the women's quarters;

[10] In India, the term lady is still used for women and one has 'Ladies Seats' marked in buses.

[11] The term pre-modern India is a highly simplified term as different sections of Indian society were exposed to modernizing influences in a highly differential manner to the extent that, even today, there are many who do not qualify to be called modern in the sense of westernization and industrialization, while others may be fully integrated into a global culture. Here, it simply may be taken as the period when European influence was not overtly visible in the culture. We know that trade and even limited social contacts existed from medieval times at least.

and those who worked in the fields and homes, alongside their husbands or on their own. According to the model described earlier (Chapter 1), the former came in the category of devis and the latter into those of dasis.

From the Rig Vedic period, we have evidence of women being literate, and even scholars and women *rishis* like Lopamudra (wife of Agastya) and Ghosa, the wife of the great seer, Kaksivan. As Upadhaya has shown based on quotations from the *Rig Veda* (R.V. III, 55, 16; cf Upadhyaya, 1941 reprint: 174), in the ancient period, girls of high-born families (daughters of kings, nobles and seers) were educated along with their brothers and a bride was required to be learned if she was being married to a learned man. Girls were enjoined in the Vedas, not be married too young and to marry only after finishing the period of *Brahmacharya*, like their brothers. All accounts of marriages in the Vedas and Puranas indicate that women married at relatively mature age and were active agents of their own marriages. Thus, husband and wife often did not vary in accomplishments and many daughters of kings were scholars who married *rishi*s, like Apala and Romasa (ibid.: 176). In his classic rendering of the story of Yayati, in Marathi, Khandekar (2009) has given a beautiful narrative description of two women, Devyani and Sharmishta, both with education, accomplishments and agency; one is the daughter of a learned Brahmin, the teacher of the gods and demons, and the other is a princess.

However, later scholars of Sanskrit, like Pandita Ramabai – who wrote a book called *High Caste Hindu Women*, in 1886 – from America, was of the opinion that there was never a golden age for Hindu women; and to prove it, she had converted to Christianity after having acquired a medical degree from England in 1883. Whatever may be the truth behind such divergent opinions, women's education seems to have declined progressively over the centuries of patriarchal rule. Even Karve, in her critical analysis of the mythologies of India, is convinced of the torture and suffering of women, rather than about their agency (Channa, 1997; also, see Chapter 3).

Sinha and Basu (2002: 237) remark that women of high-caste and class families were married rather early by the time of Vatsayana and did not get time to become as accomplished as the *ganika*s (courtesans), indicating a separation of women based on class and caste where the upper-caste/class women were gradually absorbed into patriarchal submission, while the courtesans were credited with learning and accomplishments but at the cost of losing their virtuous status.

Most women from upper castes and classes were largely illiterate or barely literate by the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The chasm had deepened so much that women were not even supposed to speak a chaste language or appear to be intelligent. My mother told me how her grandmother always instructed her not to speak clearly and pronounce faultlessly. Girls were encouraged to speak a pidgin tongue and present themselves as humble before the men. Too much of command over language was considered 'unfeminine' and also 'unbecoming'. It was believed, as per the grandmother, that too much of studies would make a woman acquire masculine and undesirable characters. Thus, ideally, the women were confined to feminine tasks that, for high-born women, consisted of supervising servants and taking care of children. Therefore, women, children and female servants were confined to one section of the house, the 'reproductive area', while the men presided over the public and outer realms and were attended to by male servants. The women often developed close relationship with the women of lower caste and class who were the servants, as it was through these women that they had a glimpse of the outside world. Also, being deprived of education and accomplishments, there was little difference between them except that of wealth, which anyway belonged to the men.

In most well-to-do homes, the physical construction of the house made physical separation between the genders an imperative, to the extent that even husband and wife had minimal interaction with each other. The *antahpur* or *zenana* (in Urdu) was the women's sphere, and in the large structures of palatial buildings or *havelis*, there were often open spaces, secluded gardens, etc., for the women to get fresh air or exercise. In my childhood, I grew up in a house, in Delhi, where a central courtyard was surrounded by rooms and verandahs in a way that each room first opened into a verandah on either side of it and then one could go to the courtyard, where a guava tree was a major attraction for us as children. The front of the house was usually reserved for outsiders and the kitchen was towards the back. The women could spend all their time in the house, get fresh air and enough space to go around without necessarily having to go out. This was a relatively small middle-class house. A bigger house could have several '*mahal*s' as they were called one after the other, or even have a much larger courtyard and two entirely separated areas for men and women. Karlekar (1991: 61) writes that the life in the *antahpur* centred around this inner courtyard and it was the centre for many activities. Because of its very seclusion, it could, at times, be the site of clandestine sexual activity, like in the short story, *Lihaf* (the quilt), by the famed Urdu writer Ismat Chugtai, about a begum and her maid in a lesbian relationship.

This pattern of house building has survived in India for centuries. Basham describes house plans in the Harrappan[12] city of Mohenjo Daro as,

> The houses, often two or more stories, though they varied in size, were all based on much the same plan – a square courtyard, round which were a number of rooms. The entrances were usually in side alleys, and no windows faced on the streets, which must have presented a monotonous vista of dull brick walls. (Basham, 2004: 16)

Such houses with the inner and outer domains were also reported in the texts of Vatsayana for the first and second century AD. Although the practice of having separate quarters existed at the time of Vatsayana, no such evidence is available for or against from the Indus valley cities.

In the richer households, the space that separated the men from women, both physically and conceptually, was quite large. The aristocrats often lived independent lives with their concubines and attendants, sometimes maintaining mistresses in separate establishments. The practice of having town houses, or *bāgan bādi* (garden houses)[13] as they were called, was the accepted norm for the Bengali men of elite families. The wives, mostly married at pre-puberty ages, were selected more for their family background and often though not always for beauty, to produce progeny and continue the lineage. As women of high birth, they were not expected to be overtly sexual and physically demanding. Their real status was as mothers when they assumed great command over sons and daughters-in-law. Since the boys spent their infancy and childhood in the women's quarters with their mothers, the bond between mother and son was the strongest cross-sex relationship that developed in an Indian family, especially of high status, a norm still followed in post-modern India.

Feminism in India must account for the fact that instead of women being under direct domination of men, here they are under the domination of older women, and the spheres of power of men and women are almost equally distributed. 'A joint family is fraternal, with the father and the older brother as the *de jure* heads and the mother and older daughters-in-law as the *de jure* heads in the realms of food consumption, distribution, childbearing' (Roy, 1992[1972]: 13). While Roy is talking about well-to-do Bengali households,

[12] The dating of the Indus valley civilization, of which Harrappa and Mohenjo Daro are parts, is around 'the first half, perhaps the middle of the 3rd millennium B.C; it is almost certain that they continued well into the 2nd millennium' (Basham, 2004: 15).

[13] Interestingly enough, a separation of male and female spheres in the nature of public and private also began in Victorian England in the nineteenth century (Barringer, 2000: 154).

similar situations are found all across India. During the course of a field visit to rural Haryana in the year 1992, I was talking to recently married young man who told me,

> I have nothing to do with how my wife is treated in my house. I cannot supervise her food or her well being. It is entirely up to my mother who has the keys to the *bhandar* (store). It is she who gives whatever she wants to who so ever she wants. We men cannot interfere in anything that she does. It is her domain.

Urban and highly educated men in India often jokingly refer to their wives or mothers as 'home ministers' indicating that all power in the domestic realm lies with the women. This includes the transfer of funds to the domestic domain or sometimes, the situation also prevails where the mother has control of most of the resources of the joint household. I was told by a grown man in a Haryana village, 'To buy even a packet of *bidis*, I have to ask my mother for five rupees'. Even in the case of 'Dowry Death',[14] the main accused in most cases is the mother-in-law, even if others are involved. The position of the young daughter-in-law (almost a child in the past) was and is the lowest, even today. The Indian man can never speak up in front of his mother even if he can do so in front of his father. The young wife is relegated to the care of the mother, who may do as she pleases. There are stories of benevolent mothers-in-law who bring up child brides like their own children or cruel ones who may torture or starve them. The same story is repeated even today.

Seymour writes with reference to Orissa,

> Within India's gender segregated hierarchical family context, women had clear spheres of responsibility and influence. They believed that their roles as household managers and caretakers complemented the roles and responsibilities of men. To view Indian women simply as subservient and 'oppressed' – as much Western literature has tended to do – is a serious misrepresentation of these women's lives, feelings and personal attitudes. (Seymour, 1999: 101)

However, Seymour too supports the observation that the young married woman is at the bottom of the hierarchy. She is married into an unknown family (mostly) and has been reared to be 'obedient, self-sacrificing, modest,

[14] For more details on this, refer Willigen and Channa(1991).

nurturant, hardworking, and home loving. They should always have to show self-restraint and contribute to family harmony' (ibid.: 55). These qualities are all ideals that every upper-class/caste girl who is viewed as a 'devi' must possess. A young daughter-in-law is referred to as the *grihlakshmi* (Lakshmi[15] of the household) but only if she exhibits all these exemplary characters. In reality, however, especially under changing circumstances, a young woman of such ideals may not always exist and also, she might feel highly stressed to conform to them on a daily basis.

While on a visit to the United States (US), I witnessed a debate going on in the household of an expatriate Indian family where it was being discussed whether it was better for well-educated Indians to stay in India[16] or take up permanent residence in a foreign country. One man remarked that there was a gender angle to this preference; while most men wanted to go back, their wives put up strong protest. Here, they were enjoying a degree of freedom that they could never enjoy in their own town or cities or in their husband's paternal houses. Of course, many young couples may move out of their parental house but the mother-in-law's presence is always marked, even if she is not physically present. However, all this is much more relevant when the status of the family is higher because the devi model of womanhood applies only to them. In another chapter, we shall discuss the lives of women of marginal and dominated sections of society.

The husband–wife bond was the weakest in a household of high birth, a fact that has been depicted in many pieces of excellent literature and films. The Bengali novelist Bimal Mitra's *Saheb, Bibi, Golam*, or its Hindi version, *Sahib, Bibi aur Gulam* (filmed by the renowned Hindi film maker, Guru Dutt), is a kind of classic in northern India, depicting the plight of the aristocratic woman married to an indifferent husband who is busy womanizing in the outer *mahal* of the palatial house, while the young wife pines for sexual fulfilment. The crux of the story from a gendered perspective is the physical and emotional desire the young wife, as a high-born woman of that particular

[15] Lakshmi is the consort of the creator, God Vishnu, and exhibits all the characters of an ideal wife. She is of a beautiful golden colour and virtuous. She is the harbinger of good luck and prosperity. Often, people believe a daughter-in-law with good qualities will bring good fortune and wealth into the household and hence she is equated with the Goddess Lakshmi.

[16] This was more relevant when the US was suffering a recession and India was doing much better economically.

time period, is not supposed to have. When she approaches her husband to demand fulfilment of her conjugal rights, he scoffs at her saying, 'How are you different from the other women in this house who are satisfied with their jewels? The only occupation of a woman of your station is to make and break ornaments?' But the young wife does not give up and is able to get her husband at a great price and the story ultimately hurtles towards a tragic end. In another illustration of a similar situation, in the opening scene of the film, *Ghare Baire*[17] (The Home and the World), by the renowned filmmaker Saytajit Ray, a rich zamindar (landowner) is shown on his deathbed and he asks a woman sitting next to the bed and shedding copious tears, 'Who are you? Why are you crying?' He is told that woman was his wife, whom he had never known in his lifetime, although she must have spent a lifetime in his *antahpur* (inner quarters). Thus, men and women occupied absolutely different worlds that sometimes coincided but mostly did not. Upper-class marriages were not based on sexual preference or even companionship. The men were supposed to spend time with their friends, associates and concubines and women had to live their lives in the inner quarters in company of children and servants.

They were also occupying different cultural spaces as the *antahpur* was the place for enactments of the folk and rustic versions of culture, where women enjoyed performing simple rituals, listening to mythology and witnessing the art of folk performers like Bauls and Boshtomis.[18] The men, on the other hand, listened to classical music from the accomplished *baijis*,[19]who could read and write, often at the level of high intellect. During the days of the British, they would visit clubs and theaters and had access to a much wider cultural world that included the West.

While the men were stratified according to occupation and rank, the women, being practically all illiterate and secluded from male knowledge, shared a life that cut across caste and class. They organized, planned and executed specifically women's rituals which involved listening to religious stories and collective performances.

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[17] This is the film version of the novel of the same name by Rabindranath Tagore that depicts the infiltration of Western values into the home of a zamindar and the tragic consequences of imperfect socialization into new ways of life.

[18] The Bauls and Boshtomis were the male and female Vaishnavite mendicants who roamed the countryside and were often talented performers of devotional music accompanied by dance.

[19] These were the courtesan well versed in classical music and dance, who were imported from the centres of such traditions such as Benaras and Lucknow.

> In this upper class *Bhadramahila*s shared a common culture with working class women, and often *bratas*[20] involved the participation of women from the service castes. The popular culture consisting of theatrical performances, poems and skits written in a more accessible every day Bengali was enjoyed by a sizeable female audience; a number of these lived in *antahpur*. (Karlekar, 1991: 69–71)

In northern India, the women stay back when a boy from the village is getting married and the men from the entire village accompany the *barat* (the groom's party). The women then assemble in the largest courtyard in the village and spend the night singing and dancing. One very common form of entertainment is for one woman to dress up as a man and then dance and make lewd gestures with another woman.

The female bonding cutting across caste was also because of the immobility of the upper-class women, whose only window to the outside world was, often, only the gossip that was brought to their doorstep by the lower-caste women, especially the wife of the barber and the dhobi (launderer). The task of the barber's wife was to visit, door to door, to pare nails and perform pedicures and attend to minor illnesses like boils. She was also the traditional midwife. The *dhoban* (the dhobi's wife) had the task of carrying laundry to and fro from households; she would take away the dirty laundry and bring back the clean ones. Thus, these women had mobility and were regular visitors to all houses in a village or urban neighbourhood. There is a common saying in India that if you want to know anything about your neighbour, ask the *dhoban*. Thus, the upper-class housewives welcomed these lower-caste women to their doorsteps, as for reasons of purity and pollution, they could not be invited inside. This was another utility of the courtyard that it was a liminal space that would accommodate anyone irrespective of caste. So, here the upper-caste housewives listened to gossip and all kinds of juicy stories from the service caste women.

I had similar experience during the 1970s when I did fieldwork in an urban neighbourhood in Delhi. Even then, most women were not too mobile and welcomed the *dhoban* with a glass full of tea and some snacks while they avidly listened to her gossip about all their neighbours. The houses in Old Delhi where the fieldwork was done were all built in the same pattern where

[20] *Brata*s are primarily women's rituals that do not involve any sanskritic format but are performed by the telling of simple folk tales and small rituals that women perform together, that may include keeping a fast and cooking special items or anything that women can do easily. Women cooperate with each other in doing these *brata*, and often the women of different castes may come together to do them. In North India, for example *Karva Chauth* is one such ritual and in Bengal one may take to example of *Itur Pujo*.

the courtyard was highly functional. The separation of women's quarters provided a degree of privacy to women that afforded space for indulging in activities that may have digressed from the strict patriarchal norms they were expected to follow.

In her work on the Meos of Rajasthan, Moore (1998) records how a particular middle-age woman would entertain her 'brother' from her native village in the women's quarters till late at night while the other women would exchange amused glances. Most of the time, women ganged up with each other and supported activities that were fairly innocent digressions. In all of North India, the practice of village exogamy is based on the premise that all children born in the same village are brothers and sisters. This allows considerable latitude to women in interacting with men of their own village as they are all 'brothers' anyway. Thus, a visit to one's own village is like 'going on a vacation' (Narayan, 1986: 67) and a visit from someone from one's own village is an occasion to pour out one's heart. Such a person, who essentially has to be a man since women do not travel, was allowed into the *zenana* or *antahpur*.

Thus, what may have appeared from outside to be a suffocating system had its own ways of dealing with questions of freedom, and women's spaces were carved out within the patriarchal system, in many ways than one. Thus, as Scott (1985: 337–38) has argued, every system (no matter how oppressive) must contain some areas of latitude for it to be accepted; and all laws give the oppressed some breathing space, some areas where they too can exert their power, although it should not challenge the overall power structure. Thus, women had more space within the traditional structures of power than they had later. In the name of civilizing their women, the men actually sometimes subjected them to more controls than they had faced before.

The lives of women were less differentiated by class than that of the men. In their own world, women enjoyed such pleasures as were their own like sharing shared stories with their sisters, cutting across caste and class chasms.

The Creation of the Elite Woman: 'Bhadramahila'

However, things changed as a result of European influence. The English language education (also, French and Portuguese),[21] but primarily the British influence, led to transformations in the outlook of the elite men who not

[21] Not all parts of India were colonized by the British. Chandannagor near Calcutta and Pondicherry near Chennai were French colonies, while Goa was a Portuguese colony.

only acquired knowledge about liberal and universal humanism and Western science and rationalism, but also were affected by the gender relations and concepts of husband–wife as companions and about women's refinement and education. The Western-educated man developed sensitiveness to such ideas as husband and wife being a unit apart from the joint household, an idea that probably did not exist, and also notions of romantic love took root.

The society at that time was strictly following marriage norms of pre-puberty marriage and negotiations of marriages by elders in the family based on proper criteria of caste and status; yet, the idea of romantic love and companionship seemed attractive to many young men who wanted to build up similar relationships with their wives, or some abstract companion who was probably imaginary or someone with whom one could not have such a relationship.

The idea of romantic love was new to society of this time, especially to equate love and marriage, like horse and carriage, was almost unthinkable to Indians of that time. Even in mythology, the relationship of husband and wife was that of duty and devotion and torrid romance was left to the lovers like Rādha and Krishnā that transcended social bonds. Yet, slowly, Frank Sinatra probably had an effect on the Indian mind. The first writer of Bengali literature to take up romantic love was Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (Roy, 1992: 46). As Roy points out, he tried to merge the European romantic love with the spiritual love of bhakti.

One may refer to Rabindranath Tagore's story, *Nashta Neer* (The Broken Nest), where the young wife, Charulata,[22] is romantically attracted to her husband's younger cousin with whom she has an accepted joking relationship, yet, the emotions run high and go beyond the acceptable till the husband, apparently indifferent to his wife, is also made aware of the attraction that his wife has for his reckless younger brother. Here, the contrast is made between the staid and responsible husband and the gay, young man, who inadvertently sets off emotions that cannot be controlled, and Charulata is faced with a bleak future. The fact that a young woman whose desires are not fulfilled by her husband has no outlet except to bear her fate in silence, or may like Charulata be attracted to the wrong person, however puts in perspective a change in the male writer's attitude towards women.

Western-educated men like Rabindranath Tagore could possibly imagine and accept that a young woman, even though married, could have emotions and desires as a woman and not simply live according to the blueprint

[22] This story was filmed by Satyajit Ray under the name *Charulata*.

provided by society. The upper-class wife was regarded as a devi, a woman who should be completely devoted to her husband and have no physical desires, yet a sensitive writer could and did perhaps accept, under Western influence, that human emotions were universal and a person could be driven by uncontrolled emotions, although their manifestations were culturally controlled. Thus, the passion of the high-born woman for her forbidden object of desire does not always cross into physical expression. When it does, as in *Ghare Baire*, the woman is suitably punished by widowhood and voluntarily goes into seclusion. She is shown admitting her guilt and accepting to live her life as an ascetic widow. In this novel, Bimala, the young wife of an aristocrat, is introduced by her husband to his flamboyant friend, Sandeep, to whom Bimala is attracted as he is a complete contrast to her husband. While her husband is cool, rational and mild natured, Sandeep is hot headed, highly volatile, is overtly engaged in nationalist activities and idolizes Bimala as the mother goddess, the *Shakti*. Not obeying any social norms, he seduces Bimala and leaves her husband to release her by seeking his own death. The husband does not blame his wife but himself for having tried to change her too quickly. He understands that a woman confined to the *antahpur*, who had never set eyes on any unrelated man except her husband, could be fatally attracted to the first man she comes in contact with. His remorse is about spoiling her life, forcing her into a situation where she loses her devi-like sanctity. In his remorse, he is driven to ride into a situation of certain death, while the self-centred friend escapes and Bimala is left to lament her fate in the white clothes of a widow. Here, the writer does not override the morals and values of his time. Transgression of norms cannot be acceptable and while there is an understanding of Bimala's temptation, like that of Charulata, the writer cannot let these women live normal lives after they have crossed over the thresholds of the devi-like existence. They, too, have to cut the bonds of society and withdraw into ascetic life or loneliness like Charulata. The poet/writer, however, does not give to his heroines the fate of his own sister-in-law, Kadambari Devi, who committed suicide.[23]

Similarly, in *Chokher Bali* (Sand in My Eyes), the young, beautiful and educated widow renounces the lovers and a mundane existence, even after

[23] There is a speculation that the young Kadambari who was married at the age of 14 years into the Tagore household as the wife of his elder brother and was a close companion of the poet may have found herself in love with him (shadowed in the story of *Nasta Neer*). This is, however, only unconfirmed speculation and one cannot say anything definite about people long dead.

being seduced by the husband of her best friend and being offered marriage by a person of respectable descent. Here, too, the writer is reluctant to allow a woman of a elite family to regress into a life of disgrace by marrying again or living a sexual life in spite of being a Brahmin widow, and he liberates her, letting her keep her sanctity as a devi by plunging into social work and an ascetic life.

The third pillar of literature of this time was Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, whose depictions were not confined to historical periods like Bankim but who, to some extent, obliterated the distinction between the devi and the dasi by depicting women from good families and high caste who had fallen on bad times and may have had to lead lives that were appropriately assigned to the dasi label, but retained the inner spirit of the devi under all circumstances. For example, we can take his four-part autobiographical novel, *Srikanta*, whose central female character is a Brahmin child widow forced to live the life of a *baiji*, but who renounces her lifestyle for the pure and platonic love for the protagonist, Srikanta. Through the four volumes, the reader is made to realize that although Raj Lokkhi is forced into an apparent life of sin, yet, she has maintained every virtue fit for a Brahmin widow, including practising extreme austerity. There are many such characters that suffer, are sacrificing and unselfish, yet none of these women are weak or passive. In the true tradition of the Indian devi, they are powerful in their own ways.

Sarat Chandra's patriarchy reflects the true nature of Hindu patriarchy where women are not inferior; a radical departure from Western patriarchy where women are trivialized and considered inferior. Thus, towards the end of *Srikanta*, Part 3, (Chattopadhayaya 1996 ed) we have the protagonist suddenly realize that Raj Lokkhi is a goddess in the true sense.

> Her power is unlimited and with this infinite power she is engaged in play only with herself in the centre. Till now she needed me as a plaything in this play and I did not have the strength to resist the attraction of her intense desire; I had stooped in front of her, she had not glorified me. I had thought that she had made many sacrifices for me but now I understood that this was not so, for I did not realize the focus of her selfishness. She had discarded many things like wealth, status and money but was it for me? Did these things not form obstacles for her inner self? The difference between *me* and *possessing me* became clear as an immense truth in front of my eyes. Today her inner being wants to proceed on its onward journey and I have no power to obstruct that journey. Therefore like other inessentials in her life I too stand discarded on the road side. (translated from the Bengali by this author)

Here, we find the true spirit of nationalism mentioned by Chatterjee (1993), where the women were seen as symbolic of the spiritual strength of India and the Hindu culture. This was the platform on which the Indian men wanted to take on the superiority of the Western culture that, to them, was only material. Coming to the real world from the realm of fiction, these men also realized that on the ground, things were not as they were idealized both in fiction and in their imagined and glorious Hindu past. They, like the India haters, began to recognize the ills of their own society and this made many Western-educated men come to the forefront of reform and bring about changes in their family lives.

What is shown in *Ghare Baire* – the British governess being employed to teach the young wife, English, piano and singing – was common enough in aristocratic homes where the norm of high-born women not stepping out of the *antahpur* was complemented with educating her and making her accomplished in the arts of the English ladies. Thus, my own grandmother was taught the rudimentary English language – she could read newspaper headlines – how to knit and sew and also, basic hygiene by an English governess. Women learnt to embroider tea cosies, knit socks and bathe babies, as well as give first aid and darn clothes. Every effort was made to make them accomplished in a way that the 'ladies', that is, the white women, were accomplished. More aristocratic women were taught to play piano, Western music and literature; some were taught additional languages like French. In other words, the upper-class men, with their education and status, were determined to have as their life partners, women who were no less accomplished than their British counterparts.

But there was one major difference: the high-born Indian women did not transgress the bondage of Hindu patriarchy. The honour of the upper-class men was enshrined in the body of their women and these bodies were kept in safe seclusion. My mother recalled how if one of the women of their huge joint family in Calcutta wanted to make a visit across the lane (a distance of not more than 10 feet), she would get into the car at their end, in front of their own house, and then the car would be turned around and she would get out in front of the house across, in such a way that her feet would not touch the public street. For a woman of a respectable household to step onto the street and to be seen even momentarily in public was unthinkable in early twentieth century Calcutta, as it was in all other parts of the country. If at all someone had to go out, they would have to cover their body in a shawl or *chādor* and sit in a car or carriage, where all windows would be covered.

The inner realm was well protected by the men; the reform of the women was carried out according to the patriarchal norms of those times. The idea was certainly not to make the women independent of the men but to make them into proper partners. If anything, the women were even more restricted and they were treated more like school girls under strict discipline that was in contrast to the free womanhood that they were enjoying in the *antahpur*.

As Chatterjee has pointed out, in Bengal, the creation of a bilingual elite in the beginning of the nineteenth century led to imposition of Western values on Indian ones; 'thus language was the first zone of sovereignty' (Chatterjee 1993: 7). Thus, while most Indians would attribute the devi image to have been constructed from the traditions of India, it was actually greatly influenced by the norms and values of Victorian England. The westernization of the men was only to the extent that suited their patriarchal and nationalist interests. A pertinent issue raised by Chatterjee (ibid.) was the centralization of the gender discourse in nationalism as it formed a line of contention between the metropole and the colony. While the British had used the inferior status of native women, highlighting practices such as sati (Mani, 2006[1989]), female infanticide and child marriage as clear indications that Indians were uncivilized, the Indian men likewise projected the purity and spiritual superiority of their women (the devi image) to assert the superiority of the native culture. The separation was between the conceptual 'inner' and 'outer' domains, where the inner world was that of the spirituality, taken as an essential marker of 'cultural identity' (Chatterjee, 1993: 6), where the non-Western cultures (in India, taken as Hindu and Aryan) dominate as against the 'outer' (science and technology), where the West dominates. The spirituality of the East was to be taken as enough justification for its claims to freedom and the right to be an independent nation. It was towards this project of moral superiority and nationalist interest that the new woman was sought to be constructed. 'The "new woman" was to be modern, but she would also have to display the signs of the national tradition and therefore would be essentially different from the western women' (ibid.: 9).

Thus, the home or the 'inner' world became the site for construction of this nationalist ideal. Towards this end, the elite families carefully tutored their womenfolk, the first step being to separate them from the rustic and 'uncultured' women such as those with whom they had shared long-term relationships of doing '*brata*' together, or listening to the Baul *geet* or watching village '*jatra*'.

> The women who are sought to be excluded from the private space of the *bhadralok* home and from what is now seen to qualify as cultural activity are either relatively independent and literate such as the *Vaishnavite* women, or women from the lower strata, courtesans and prostitutes, i.e. women who have hitherto had greater access to a 'public' sphere of street, marketplace, fair and festival. (Sangari and Vaid, 2006: 11)

As I have already described, the upper-class women were strictly forbidden to physically set foot on the street. Apart from the street's metaphoric association, that we find even in the English language in which a 'woman of the streets' is used for a prostitute, the street was a place of pollution, quite literally, for anyone of any caste could walk on it. During the colonial period, there was also the real danger of exposure to the *mlechcha*, the non-Hindu in the form of British officers and administrators.

The women who out of choice or necessity roamed the public places, whose bodies were exposed to the pollution of the outside world, could no longer be admitted to the *andarmahal* or *antahpur*. As described by Bannerjee (1989/2006: 127–32), during the first half of the nineteenth century, there was a large exodus of rural folk from the countryside into the city of Calcutta as their resource bases were drying up under the British rule. In fact, the colonial administration was against all forms of wandering minstrels, singers and performers who dotted the Indian countryside, and many of them were branded as criminal tribes or plain criminals. The British wanted to rule over an orderly society of settled cultivators and clerks; they did not want to have anything to do with what they considered as lewd and primitive cultural traits of people making a living by singing and dancing. These lower classes propagated a popular culture that had much popularity among the womenfolk, even of the upper-class families. Roy describes the influence such performers had on impressionable young girls:

> A young *Vaishnavi* dressed in saffron with sandal wood decoration on her face and body, bead necklaces made of wood from the basil plant, playing a one string violin or a pair of cymbals and singing verses depicting the agony and pleasure of Radhas's love, has a very strong influence on a girl of tender age. The impact is greater than that of a classroom lecture or a professor who discusses the beauty of a *Vaishnava* literature. (Roy, 1992: 40)

It was perhaps this kind of strong influence that was sought to be avoided when the *bhadralok* class of educated men sought to wean away their

daughters and wives from the '*itarjan*' (lower classes) who were attributed with 'licentious and voluptuous tastes' (Bannerjee, 2006: 131).[24]

The contempt of the *bhadralok* was no doubt instigated more by the horror of the British Victorian morality to such performances. They expressed their revulsion of the open allusions to sexuality in the descriptions of the love of Rādha and Krishnā in the Vaishnavite poetry and other folk literature. By the beginning of the twentieth century, these performers had vanished from the upper-class households where women now played piano and sang songs of Tagore, mostly set to Western chamber music, where the words were sedate and Sanskritic. Abstract spirituality of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, the latter written down in chaste English and admired by the Western world, had come to dominate the minds and hearts of the middle and upper classes of Bengal. The new symbols of an emerging middle class of India were people like Gandhi, Tagore, Jagdish Chandra Bose, S.N. Bose and an entire line of British-educated, upper-class Indians who also came to the forefront of the Indian nationalist movement or otherwise formed an aristocracy of educated Indian elite.

The transformation of worldview with respect to women's bodies, now gazed upon by Victorian conservatism, led to many articles of clothing being transferred from the European wardrobe into that of the Indian woman. The women in India had worn clothing that suited the local climate. In hot and humid Bengal, for example, the women wore a single piece of cloth, called '*kāpod*' for poorer people and a more ornate version of the same called a '*saree*' for the richer housewives. However, while the material and the cost of the garments may have varied, their nature did not. Thus, even the wealthiest women would be wearing the same single-piece garment wrapped around them but no other piece of clothing. But with Victorian influence, there was addition of a blouse, petticoat and chemise, all of which entered the elite woman's wardrobe with no change of name and function.

Thus, as my mother tells me, the upper-class women would wear the chemise, blouse and petticoat and then wrap the *saree* on top. Such modesty was not adopted easily by the rural women and by those women who were not going out. It was only women going out of the house, like the Brahmo women, who adopted all these articles of clothing. The design of the blouses

[24] Bannerjee (2006: 132) reports that according to the 1891 census, there were 17,023 actresses, singers, dancers and their accompanists in the city of Calcutta, but by 1901, their numbers had gone down to 3,527. All of this was because of loss of patronage. In other words, they were banished from the *andarmahal*.

and petticoats were exactly like the Victorian dresses, with flounces, lace and embroidery. In very liberal families, including the Brahmo and Arya Samaj followers, etc., women also wore shoes and stockings. I have a picture of my grandmother taken at her residence in Delhi in the early part of the twentieth century, wearing a Bengali *saree*, fashionable high-heeled shoes in Western style and stockings.

A major change in dress was effected during the freedom movement when, led by Kasturba Gandhi and Kamala Nehru, the wives of leaders, and elitist educated women like Sarojini Naidu and Aruna Asaf Ali, a large number of women joined the freedom movement to come out on the streets. This 'coming out' process began the emancipation of the Indian women to which the Indian men became willing partners as people like Sivaswami Aiyar opined that it allowed them to show 'that they were more socially advanced than the British and to counter claims that they were too backward for self-rule' (Riddle and Joshi, 1986: 35).

Prior to this, the dress of women was suitable only for home wear, and in the confinements of the *antahpur*, modesty was sacrificed for comfort. My mother recalls that when, as a child, she had visited the interior of the home of a Muslim friend, she found the grandmother reclining on a cot, wearing gossamer transparent clothes and smoking a *hookah*, with fragrant jasmine flowers wound around her wrists. However, such comfort wear was not meant for the streets from which the respectable women were debarred, and to go on the street required a great deal of sacrifice that could be justified only for a cause as profound and noble as the freedom struggle. The modern *saree* which was far more practical, and when worn with a blouse, chemise and petticoat, more modest than any form of the traditional *saree*,[25] was evolved by the elite like Kamala Nehru and Sarojini Naidu. It was in the nationalist spirit, often woven out of khadi, and these women wore shoes and stockings like Englishwomen. Thus, if today, most of the world thinks that a traditional Indian woman is one who appears dressed modestly in a *saree* that covers her from waist to toe, they are seeing only a fairly modern woman who was a construct of the colonial period. Most of the dresses worn then, and even now, by really traditional women bear little resemblance to this 'modern' dress. There is also a huge variation across India in terms of dresses worn by both men and women.

[25] It must be mentioned here that in India, the *saree* or similar clothing was worn in various different ways in different regions and there was no one way of draping the *saree*. Also, it was also worn in only few regions. In other places, completely different kinds of clothes were worn.

Indian Outside, British Inside

By the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, there emerged a class of Indians who were nurtured by the British to form an elite ruling class. Since the British soon found that they could not import enough manpower to rule over such a vast country, they gradually began to absorb high-class, well-educated Indians into the top positions of administration, such as judges, magistrates, police and army. But every effort was made to see that the people who were so employed must remain loyal to the British throne, and they were insulated from the Indian culture as much as possible. Thus came up a generation of what were then called 'brown sahibs' and their counterparts, the 'memsahibs'. Even today, the common terms used for a person of high status, especially by people of servile classes, are sahib or memsahib, even though the original meaning has been lost. My mother often related to me the story of one of her friends whose father was a highly placed official in the British intelligence. Being in a sensitive post, his bosses in office made sure that his family was given a pure British education and the children were moved to boarding schools and given English names. They grew up exactly like contemporary British children but as soon as the daughter had left school, the father, under pressure from his family and also suffering pangs of guilt at having forsaken his *jāti* dharma as a high Brahmin, got her married into a very orthodox but affluent Brahmin family. My mother recalls how she would be amused to hear this woman let out a torrent of impeccable English from behind her '*ghomta*' (veil), scolding or talking to her children while engaged in household work, like a traditional Bengali housewife. Her husband, no doubt, was well versed in the English language but how she communicated with the others is anybody's guess. One day, her brother, completely foreign to the Indian culture, came to meet his sister and entered her kitchen with his shoes on, a sacrilege in a Brahmin household; the poor woman was heard whispering furiously from under her veil to her brother, 'take off your shoes, take off your shoes'.

The Bengali writer of renown and an aunt to the filmmaker Satyajit Ray, Leela Majumdar, who was also born towards the beginning of the twentieth century, has written in her autobiography how being children of a forest officer during British times, they went to a school run by missionary nuns in Shillong. She writes how she and her siblings found it much easier to converse with each other in English than in Bengali, although they were expected to converse in their mother tongue at home.

A very interesting piece of writing appeared in *The Statesman* (dated 8 August 2010) by Ayan Ghosh regarding the fusion cuisine or dining style

adopted by the elite in colonial Calcutta. Remnants of this cuisine are still found in not so exclusive eateries of the city in the form of Indianized versions of cutlets, devilled eggs and betki muniya, the corrupted version of betki muniere (served in the exclusive Calcutta Club). However, for us, the most interesting part of the article is a quotation from Nirad Chaudhuri's *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!*. This refers to the eating habits and kitchen establishments of the wealthy elite of Calcutta who, like Mr Sarat Bose mentioned in the quote, were both rich and entrenched in an English culture by their education. Sarat Bose was the elder brother of Subhas Chandra Bose, the militant nationalist leader of India who had formed the Indian National Army. Following his brother, Sarat Bose had also, later in life, given up most of the lifestyle that is depicted here. But in his heyday as a practising barrister and bar-at-law in the Calcutta High Court with a roaring practice, it is rumoured that even his suits were laundered in London. As described by Chaudhuri, the Bose household had two types of cooking, one traditional Bengali and the other European.

> Therefore, two separate kitchens and cooking establishments were maintained...The European kitchen, run on gas, was in the main house under a *Bawarchi*, i.e., Muslim cook, who knew European cuisine, a *Khansama* or waiter who was also called, boy, irrespective of his age, and a kitchen boy. Food cooked in the kitchen was then taken in the dining room in the European manner. The Bengali kitchen run on coal, occupied a separate building under the *Thakur*, or Brahmin cook and a number of maids. Sarat Babu divided himself equally between the two styles. In the morning he would have a fairly large English breakfast with a very swollen omlette. He would take it at his desk, while attending to his soliciters or whoever was with him in the South verandah, and it was brought to him at about eight. Before going to High Court he would have the usual Bengali midday meal of about five courses. His lunch was pure English, and it was taken to the bar library by the 'boy'. On returning home, at about half past five, he would take the usual Bengali refreshments for the afternoon, which were mostly sweets. At night he took the full English dinner of at least four courses, with a very liberal pudding...Sarat babu's children were given a choice between the two styles. In the afternoon they would be asked, 'Dinner or Thakur?' Most often they chose the latter. Sarat babu *never dined with his wife*, who dined in the Bengali manner by herself, or with the children. As a rule, he dined in solitary splendor in the dining room. The table could seat 12, and the dining service was made for him especially in Japan, with his monogram. (Ibid, emphasis added)

Apart from the awe created by the stupendous appetite of the person in question, this bit of writing reveals a lot about society at that time. The highly westernized lifestyle of the English-educated barrister could not convert his wife to eating forbidden food and enter into a lifestyle that would have spoiled her 'dharma' as a Hindu upper-caste woman. It was also not required of her as the husband was quite familiar with the *antahpur* system and would perhaps have not dreamt of inviting his wife to share his table, to food cooked by a *mlechcha* (Muslim cook); for, as pointed out by Chatterjee (1993), the women were the standard bearers of morality and all transgressions by men were not equivalent to even the slightest transgression by a woman. It is interesting to note that children had a choice and the writer has not separated them by sex, so that one presumes that male and female children were treated as equivalent in this household. Also, it was probably expected that the next generation was going to grow up less orthodox than their mother, or had a choice to do so.

Cooking and eating of food is a central dimension of caste society. In all upper-caste Hindu households, the cook was always a Brahmin male. Except for older women and widows, women were not entrusted with cooking as the fear of menstrual pollution was always present. This male Brahmin could only cook traditional Indian food that even in the meat-eating, Hindu upper-caste households like in Bengal and Kashmir, did not include pork or chicken, and throughout my own childhood, I never saw these items enter our home kitchen. Only fish and goat's meat is considered pure food among the upper caste Hindus. While in Bengal, upper-class women almost never cooked with their own hands and had help in the kitchen, in other parts of India like in Punjab or in the South of India, women of the household always cooked with their own hands. In Punjab, the society was not deeply hierarchized like in the eastern part and women of landowning households would help out in the fields also. Whereas in the South of India, caste values were deeply ingrained and only home-cooked or self-cooked food was and is still considered the only pure form of food for a Brahmin household. Even highly westernized Brahmins from the South of India tend to remain highly conservative about food.

This partial westernization where the men could eat forbidden food and interact with the *mlechcha* (here, the British) gave rise to some interesting social conduct. My mother recalls how at her wedding that took place in Delhi in the early part of the twentieth century, three different feasts were held: one for the family and relatives where traditional Bengali food was

cooked by the Bengali Brahmin cooks; another where traditional North Indian vegetarian food was cooked for neighbours and friends from Delhi, like the Jains and the Aggarwals, with their own food norms; and lastly, in a venue away from the home, an English feast was cooked for the British (and Muslim) guests, where food was served in the English style. The traditional Indian meals were served by the family members to the guests seated on the ground in neat rows. Here again, there was a caste distinction as the lower-caste incumbents of the household (like the washermen and scavengers) were always seated separately and given food mostly in the form of takeaway. Even today, when food is served to seated guests, a caste distinction is maintained, but in the more popular buffet style adopted in the large metropolitan cities like Delhi, caste distinctions need not be maintained and everyone helps themselves from the same tables.

During the colonial period, there was, however, a critical divergence between those who accepted English education only superficially but adhered to the religious and caste norms quite strictly, like the Brahmin family described earlier, and those that changed over to reformed forms of religions like Brahmo Samaj or Arya Samaj. Even those who did not change their core religious values did, however, consciously or unconsciously, take on very British norms of conduct. For example, my mother, educated in a missionary-run institution with English as a medium of instruction, had certain innate British values, like restrained display of emotions, preference for pastel shades of colour, a high degree of modesty in speech and behaviour and extreme conservatism towards all matters sexual.[26] She considered open display of emotions a vulgar trait, not to be indulged in by people of 'high class' – only rustic persons would show their emotions too much and wear loud clothes – and certainly, 'ladies' did not ever overtly refer to anything sexual. This separation of the 'rustic' lower-class and upper-class cultures was something that, as Bannerjee (1989/2006) describes, was an outcome of the Indian men aspiring to gain respectability in British or Western eyes. Such Western impact was much more in the nerve centres of British trade and empire, mainly in Calcutta and Bombay and cities like Lahore and Karachi, while many places were and may still be significantly sheltered from Western influence and English language.

Bengal showed greater influence of British culture than other parts of India because, first, it was here that the East India Company first entered for trade and set up their base. Second, as Roy (1992: 3) points out, it was never a

[26] These, of course, were Victorian values shed off by contemporary British.

stronghold of *Brāhmānic* orthodoxy, being more influenced by Vaishnavite, Tantric and Sahajiya traditions, known for their more open and democratic spirits. The Muslim rule that began in AD 1200, and lasted till the coming of the British in the eighteenth century, also left its influence in a synthetic tradition of Hindu and Muslim cultures. This was best possible under the rubric of bhakti or devotion that did not require any rituals or religious functionaries like priests. Thus, religion was more of folk traditions and integration of folk beliefs into the higher traditions of the upper classes, than strictly Brahmanical.

The building of Calcutta as a city, and the economic and political transformation this entailed, also led to the 'the swing of the modern Hindu towards European civilization' (ibid.: 6) in Bengal. A major reason for this swing could also be in the degradation of social life as exhibited in social ills like *kulinism*, sati, child marriage and denigration of widows, as has been beautifully described by Bengali writers like Sarat Chandra Chatterjee and social anthropologists like Nirmal Kumar Bose.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy founded the Brahmo Samaj, in 1828, that attempted to liberate women and also shake off the customs of child marriage, sati and orthodoxy. The women from Brahmo families were given education, wore shoes and often Western dress, were not confined to the *antahpur* and went out and interacted with unrelated men at public functions and at home. They were not subjected to pre-puberty marriages and were encouraged to become accomplished. However, this brand of reform did not last long as not too many people were ready to give up caste (*jāti*) and adopt the polluting ways of the *mlechcha*. Within the value system of Bengal of that time, such traits were considered unfeminine and decidedly unattractive, although a class of brown sahibs with distinctly Western values and ideas did emerge. Thus, in Bengal in particular, a high degree of westernization of the mind was seen, and many Bengalis rejected caste and purity and pollution norms to take to a liberal style of life. This trend was, much later, further cemented by a Left ideology for a large number of people.

Patriarchy and the British

The diversity of India and the localization of its '*jāti*' system had given a lot of flexibility to various categories of people who had their space and managed to manoeuvre their interests within the overall framework of a patriarchal feudal structure. The women, as already discussed, had their own space in the women's quarters and controlled power in the domestic realm. There

were other aspects of women's lives such as property and access to resources that gave them a degree of security and independence, including the dowry in the form of *streedhan* that they received from their parents and also, their security of maintenance in the joint property of their husband or the husband's lineage. To look at how these institutions were affected by the British policies of introducing the concept of private property as well as their jaundiced view of women's position in Indian society, I refer to the excellent analysis done by Oldenburg (2002) in Punjab, where unlike the port cities of Bombay and Calcutta, the economy remained largely based on agriculture during the colonial period, although Lahore and Karachi emerged as major cities. Oldenburg has however focused on the rural economy to analyze the effects of British policy on economy and society in the Punjab as well as the changes in gender relationships, especially the devaluation of the girl child.

According to Oldenburg, 'dowry could be called one of the few indigenous woman centered institutions in an overwhelming patriarchal and agrarian society' (ibid.: 9). Indeed, even today, a woman has full moral right over the jewellery and property that she receives from her parents at the time of her marriage. From traditional times, this *streedhan* was seen as the exclusive property of women. If we recall the story of Kannagi in Chapter 1, it was the wife who gives the husband her anklet to sell in the market. He did not have any rights over it. There is also an unwritten ethic that a woman's *streedhan* is to be touched by her husband or family only in dire necessity and even then, by her consent.

It is for this reason that extraordinarily large amount of gold is still locked up in the family vaults of most Indian families that has been passed down from women to women over generations. In an attempt to bring this gold out of the family vaults, the Government of India has recently launched a scheme of providing loans against gold deposits; the advertisement for which is very telling of the values attached to women's ornaments. The opening scene of this advertisement depicts a husband and wife at dinner where the husband is discussing the problem of raising funds for starting a business. The wife gets up and brings out her jewellery box full of gold ornaments and tells her husband, 'why don't we use these?' The husband leaves the dining table in a huff saying, 'The *times are not so bad* that I will have to sell my wife's ornaments' (emphasis added). The wife then explains that they do not have to sell but only get a loan against their deposit and the viewer is assured that the ornaments are as safe as they were in the family vault. This advertisement has been made with great sensitiveness to the feelings of

a man towards his wife's *streedhan*, for to touch it is to admit his failure to take care of the family that, in the Indian worldview, is the prime duty of the man. It is only at the wife's insistence and the assurance given by the bank that the ornaments are safe that persuades him to take a loan against them.

Thus, Oldenburg is right in saying that the woman's ornaments given to her by either her parent or her in-laws were her great assets, yet, to the British, spending money on ornaments was a waste as was the giving of dowries. Again, the marriage feast and expenditures were a kind of redistributive system where a lot of poor and dependents were fed and given gifts. But under pressure to reduce marriage expenditures by the British authorities, the traditional dues paid to the priest were considerably reduced during the colonial period, as were also the payments made to the folk performers and mendicants; many of the latter, such as wandering mendicants and performers, were also categorized as 'criminals' under British law.

The British administration wanted to divert as much of the farmer's earnings towards the state coffer as possible, in true spirit of a colonial power. To this end, they engaged in a dialogue with the men assuming that like in Europe, it was the men who had ubiquitous decision-making powers. But the men, who had no idea or agency over the matters considered as women's realm, would ask to come back after a day or two to talk to the British officers. In Punjab, as everywhere else in India, the domestic sphere was controlled totally by women, so the men needed to get back home to consult the women before they gave any opinion on these matters. The British, in turn, dubbed the Punjabi men as stupid, unmanly and unable to take decisions on their own. At the same time, they '...studiously ignored the authority of women, their central role and presence in matters such as wedding expenses, gifts and dowries, not to mention their undeniable agency in committing female infanticide' (ibid.: 80).

The dowry was often the collective effort of women who embroidered and sewed and also cooperated with each other to build up assets for their daughters. Even today, in middle-class homes, mothers begin to set aside ornaments, vessels and clothes for their daughters almost from the time of their birth. In most homes, traditionally, there would be a large dowry trunk where such goods would be accumulated. On a visit to a village in Haryana, a family of several sisters proudly showed me the beautiful garments they had embroidered for their weddings out of a trunk. The dowry in terms of home-made goods was also a testimony of the skill of the girl getting married. This was also an area where women could negotiate with the men to their

advantage. A young mother would persuade her husband to buy jewellery for the daughter, but would wear it on behalf of the infant daughter till such time as she grew up and was given her share.

Although, like the urban elite in Calcutta, the Khatris of Punjab took to English education, yet instead of the kind of cultural renaissance witnessed in Bengal, here the trend turned more to consumerism and the consumption of non-vegetarian food and European alcohol. The culture of display became prominent in Punjab cities that included the public display of dowries (as recorded in the 1916 updated and revised version of the Customary Laws of Lahore). More resources were diverted towards display than in providing for the daughter and also for poor service castes and more went into food, drinks, hiring an English band as against the traditional untouchable drummers.

The British stigmatized dowry by linking it to female infanticide. However, Oldenburg is more inclined to link devaluation of the girl child to the policies of the British that included draining the countryside of resources, starving the people[27] and eroding the agricultural economy so that sending boys to the army, or training them in construction work or sending them as labour became the only option for survival for many families. As pointed out by Moore (1998: 39), the British codification of laws worked against women, by denying them the rights that they had enjoyed under the traditional systems. For one, all women, that is, widows, unmarried daughters and other dependants, were unrecognized as coparceners in the individual ownership of property that the British granted to the men exclusively based on their own patriarchal laws.

> ...in the pre-colonial period the rights and entitlements of men were not qualitatively different from the rights of women in the land. These consisted of a share in the produce rather than the right to own the land and to dispose it at will or mortgage in for a loan. (Oldenburg, 2002: 133)

The land was held collectively in a system known as '*bhaichara*' (literally brotherhood) and the idea of 'individual property in land was non-existent. The British through the Ryotwari system transferred landed property into male hands for the specific purpose of pinning them down for the payment of revenue, effectively "creating the Indian male as the dominant legal subject"' (ibid.: 15). Thus, Oldenburg views this 'masculinization' of the economy

[27] According to historical records, a million-and-a half Punjabis perished in the famine of 1876–77 (Oldenburg, 2002: 12).

as directly responsible for making a male-focused family desirable. Similar analysis has been done for the Jats of Haryana by Prem Chowdhry (1994: 47–62). Thus, dowry in Punjab transformed from being as asset for the women in the form of *streedhan* into an item of display and fully reflecting the nature of the market. This was particularly true for the urban cities directly under Western influence. The impact of British patriarchy on gender relations in various parts of India can best be described as conversion of women into 'objects'. Thus, even in areas where they had full jurisdiction, they were marginalized and men were initiated into the position of decision makers.

Lata Mani has discussed how in the debate concerning sati, women were made an object of debate between men. Even when they were converted to *bhadramahila* or given elitist status, they were still under male supervision. The burden of becoming devis sat heavily on the shoulders of ordinary women, and carries its repercussions into the modern times. Changes in property rights were especially effective in creating the patriarchal family with a male head who also controlled both property and the fate of the other members; in fact, the position of women was not improved but rather declined when more Indians moved into the nuclear family structure in the cities. The kind of freedom that women had enjoyed in the *antahpur* was curtailed and women came under more direct control of men. However, as pointed out by Chakravarty (1989/2006: 79), only certain kinds of women felt the transformations in the colonial period; the rest, most of whom fall under the category of dasi, as discussed in Chapter 1, were unaffected or marginally affected by the social norms and transformations of the colonial period but ecological and economic changes of these times affected them drastically.

But let us first go into a greater detailed discussion of education of women and the emergence of an educated elite woman, a new kind of devi.

3 Elite Women

Education and Emergence of Feminism

Introduction

The first part of this chapter describes the introduction of education for girls by the British, mostly by missionaries and social workers. From family history and narratives, I describe the opening of schools and the reaction of Indian families to the education of women. Queen Mary's school, opened in the 1930s in Delhi by a missionary woman, is taken as a case study to show how it introduced some girls from elite Muslim and Hindu families to education. The nature of education imparted to girls is described, who were mostly educated to become ideal housewives to elite husbands.

This chapter is a continuation of the previous one as it describes the impact of colonial presence in moulding a new kind of elite woman from existing concepts of 'devi' or upper-caste women, that is, women who would be fit companions to a new generation of Western-educated men who often held responsible positions in the administration of the British government as well as were forming a new cadre of professionals like doctors and lawyers. A special kind of education and upbringing was becoming necessary to produce the 'wives' who would be befitting such men.

While the earlier chapter focuses more on the concept of the educated woman, this chapter will detail the processes, especially formal education, that went into the making of such a woman. However, not all women became only 'wives' as a result of education. Several women became professionals, doctors, writers, poets and educationists. To some of them can be attributed original thoughts about gender constructs and about men and women in society.

In the second part of this chapter, I shall problematize the notion of feminism in India and also describe the emergence of women who became pioneers and broke away from established models set for them by patriarchy, such as Iravati Karve, Pandita Ramabai and others.

Indian feminism had to negotiate its way around the familial and social relational structures into which most South Asians are embedded. One

needs to problematize the notion of selfhood itself in order to understand how feminism in this region could never have taken the path of individual liberty as in the West. The introduction of Western education had established the essential premise for the emergence of individualism and free-thinking characteristic of the Western mind. Yet, this education was not imparted to individuals disjointed from their familial and cultural settings. Thus, most Western-educated South Asians, both men and women, continue to exist in terms of various levels of amalgamation of the inner and outer selves, part embedded and part imbibed. The beginnings of women's education produced just such an intersection of home and school in the young persons who attended a system of education quite foreign to their ways of thinking. Although the selves have transformed over the years, yet the disjunction may be still found in the Indian diaspora, in the students who attend prestigious Western universities and even in the home-grown persons reconciling the 'objectivism' of Western education and the 'subjective' consciousness imbibed in the interactive milieu of home and environment.

I begin with a description of my mother's school-going process as it is an example of the initial Western education provided to young Indian girls. She was born in the year 1917, and began her schooling in Delhi that was not as advanced as Bengal in terms of British education. Even in 1922 or 1923, she was among the first students to attend a school established by a British woman of missionary zeal.

Girl's Education in a Hindu Household

My mother has a vivid recollection of an incidence that happened when she was about 5 years of age. While she was playing in her home,[1] her father called her to his office (he was a lawyer of some repute and had a chamber in his residence). She entered to find a woman seated with her back to the door, a tall (as she appeared to the child) Englishwoman in a long skirt and her hair tied high on her head. Her father asked her if she would like to go to school. My mother kept quiet as she had no idea what it meant. The English lady looked at my mother and then turned to continue her conversation with my grandfather in English that was not understandable to my mother who, till then, was brought up to speak only Bengali.

[1] Their house was in Dariba, a neighbourhood in what now is known as Old Delhi. It was then a fairly middle class but Muslim-dominated area. This may be one of the reasons that most of her other schoolmates were Muslim girls, recruited no doubt by Miss Jerwood in a similar manner by house-to-house visits.

This Englishwoman was Ms Helen Jerwood who founded the Queen Mary's school in Old Delhi.[2] It began as a small preparatory school and then grew to be a full-fledged secondary school, up to the tenth standard (referred to as matric), as in those days, college or undergraduate studies began after the tenth standard with one year intermediate. The missionary women like Ms Jerwood usually went from house to house teaching women of any age the English language, hygiene, child care and some basic skills like knitting and darning. My maternal grandmother had been taught all that at home. But Ms Jerwood was more ambitious and she wanted to start a regular school to give formal education, and the only way in which she could persuade girls to come to her school was by door-to-door campaign. So, my grandfather decided to send my mother to school.

However, he had no authority over the domestic sphere that was ruled by his wife's mother, or my mother's grandmother. How my mother's maternal grandmother came to reside in her daughter's house at a time when parents of girls were morally bound not to visit or take food at their affinal household is in itself a story that reflects the society of those times. This is also a story about the 'navigation'[3] (Gunewardena and Kingsolver, 2007: 5) by women of their living conditions to make space for survival against odds. A young widow at the age of 17 years, with just an infant girl child to show for her marriage, my great-grandmother anticipated that her life in the house of her in-laws, who were wealthy landlords, was not going to be easy. By this time, towards the end of the nineteenth century, widow burning (sati)[4] had been outlawed, but young widows faced the prospect of sexual abuse at the hands of brothers-in-law or other male members of the

[2] Ms Helen Jerwood, who was a Cambridge graduate, came to India as a self-supporting missionary. She wanted women in India to be educated. With this specific purpose in mind, in 1912, she opened an English-medium 'Purdah' school in a small house in Jama Masjid area with eight students, who were all Muslims. However, by the end of the year, there were forty students belonging to all communities. In 1914, when the school shifted to Kashmiri Gate, it had more than eighty students. The same year, land was given in Tis Hazari area to build a proper school. A special permission was taken from the then reigning mayor. On 23 March 1915, Queen Mary's shifted into its present premises.

[3] The term 'navigation' has been used here in the sense of 'the myriad encounters women grapple with…and their efforts to exercise *agency within constraints*' (italics in original). Although Gunewardena and Kingsolver (2007: 5) use this term in the context of globalization, I feel it can be well used here with equal appropriateness.

[4] 'Sati', a practice of immolating widows on the pyre of their husbands, was outlawed in 1829, by then Governor General of India, Bentinck, mostly at the insistence of Indian men like Raja Ram Mohan Roy.

husband's family. Even if that did not happen, a widow would be under strict control of the elderly women in the *antahpur* and lead a life of humiliation and hardship. The wealthier the household, the more power in the hands of men, the threat of sexual abuse and seclusion was more real. My mother recalls one of her young and beautiful aunts, who after becoming a young widow had to do all the dirty work like cleaning of drains and was made to shave her head and wear only white. The older women in the house treated her with special viciousness to get rid of her youth and beauty, considered dangerous in a widow.

My great-grandmother Lily, for that was her name, was a gutsy woman. She demanded from her brothers-in-law her share of her husband's property to which she was entitled under the Dayabhaga system prevalent in Bengal and decided to escape with her daughter. She managed to get 5,000 rupees (a highly respectable sum of money at that time) and in the dead of night, escaped from her in-law's house with only a small bundle of necessities and her daughter in her arms, in a hired boat. She came to the city of Calcutta and sought refuge in her natal household. However, the intelligent woman that she appears to have been, she realized that her life would be almost as harsh in her parent's house as it would have been in her husband's house. A widowed daughter was equally marginalized in her parent's house and treated like a virtual slave. To become a widow was viewed as a retribution for past bad deeds (karma in a previous birth) and therefore, widows were shown no compassion by most people.

As soon as my grandmother was slightly older, that is, of marriageable age according to the norms of that time, her mother looked around for a suitable match for her daughter[5] and found my grandfather, a young widower with a small son, who also had little family support. My grandmother was by that time 12 years of age and my educated grandfather wanted to marry a girl who was at least 16 years of age. However, this enterprising woman raised her daughter's age by two years to fourteen and bargained with my grandfather to give him the entire sum of 5,000 rupees that was her *streedhan*[6] as dowry, to marry her daughter; the condition being that she would thereafter stay

[5] Upper-class women at that time had no mobility, but marriages were arranged through what were known as *ghatak*s (middlemen for marriage negotiations). These could be the family Brahmin, the barber, the washerman or any relative usually from the girl's mother's side.

[6] The concept of *streedhan* has been discussed in the earlier chapter and although it usually comprised of the dowry ornaments, in this case, it included the share of property that my mother's grandmother got from her husband's family.

with her only child. My grandfather, anxious to set up practice as a lawyer, was tempted, and in addition, being an orphan, thought it would be a fair arrangement where the mother could run the household that the child bride could not. They came to Delhi and set up household when my grandmother was only twelve and her mother was not yet thirty, being a few years younger than her son-in-law who was in his early thirties. The mother-in-law observed strict avoidance from her son-in-law, especially as she was also younger to him, but otherwise became the mistress of the domestic sphere ruling over her minor daughter, and later her children, with despotic authority. My grandfather prospered and in the course of time, had many children of which my mother was the eldest but there was a son from an earlier marriage (whose mother had died) who was accepted as one of the siblings.

So, this is the reason why permission had to be sought from the grandmother for putting my mother in school and being the kind of woman that she was, she gave in readily but again on the condition that the education had to be delayed for one year while certain ritual requirements were going to be fulfilled. School going was going to be an important rites de passage and had to be treated as such. So, to make transition from one stage of life to another, this year was treated as the liminal (Leach, 1987; Turner, 1969) period and my mother's head was shaved and her ears pierced; both these are purificatory as well as growing-up rites for girls. She was instructed in all the Hindu rituals and life ways, a necessary condition before she embarked on what was considered in the domestic sphere as '*firangi*'[7] education. So, by the time she went to school, my mother had been taught to get up early in the morning, take her bath, offer *puja* to the household deity and only then go to school.

But the school began at 7 a.m. and so, the young school-going child had to get up early, around 5 a.m., and take her food to go to school, but the household was not used to such early schedules. The child's mother, at that time, barely 20-years-old and already the mother of three children would not get up; the grandmother was busy with her own ritual activities, so it was my grandfather to whom fell the duty of sending his daughter to school (probably as a revenge on him for sending her to school in the first place). My mother recalls his valiant attempts to light the coal-fired stove and to giving her cold milk to drink as he often did not succeed and how she had to remain practically hungry till she came home to a sumptuous dinner, only to

[7] '*Firangi*' generally refers to anything foreign but in this period of Indian history, referred exclusively to the British.

fall asleep while eating it. In those days, food was served on the floor near the kitchen in big brass plates. The tired child would eat rolling on the ground and then fall asleep right there even as the last morsel was put in.

She was however pampered in terms of being provided smart dresses to wear to school as, in those days, there was no uniform for students. She recalls her mother looking up brochures sent from White Ways, a store in England, and then placing orders for frocks, socks and shoes and other accessories, that would arrive by shipment from across the ocean in big cardboard boxes. A girl child from an affluent family, even in those days, could wear Western dresses till she reached the age of puberty, after which she had to start wearing a *saree* covering her legs. The young mother had great interest in doing this as it served her own desire for shopping, of which women had no scope in those days. For the *bhadramahila*, the market was not an accessible place and all clothes and ornaments were bought at home. *Saree* vendors and other traders like jewellers would come home with their ware and women would pore over these and place orders. Western goods were ordered often directly from England through printed catalogues.

The separation of the public and private domains in an upper-caste household was well established and the kind of tasks that my grandfather was required to do was not normal, or expected. Yet, the situation of sending a girl to school in those days was perhaps seen as a transgression of normality and therefore treated as such. The 'crossing over' of boundaries was ritualized and the purificatory ceremonies performed before the female child was allowed to go out.

Going to school was another kind of ordeal as most other girls were from Muslim families in the neighbourhood that was a predominantly Muslim area. In fact, when the school was begun in small rooms in the Jama Masjid area, it had only a few Muslim girl students. In traditional Delhi, a pattern that is still followed, people of one community would cluster in one place, as a means of security and also sociability. Since this family came from Calcutta and was among the few Bengali immigrants to Delhi in those days, they had no neighbourhood of their own and so, they had to settle down wherever they found space and a few families of their own kind. Most of the girls (in fact, almost all) picked by Ms Jerwood were from well-to-do Muslim families (giving a lie to the stereotype that Muslims do not educate their daughters). The journey to school was undertaken in a closed carriage with one elderly woman (*badi bee*)[8] in attendance. The carriage was closed by dark cloth all

[8] A common respectful term in Urdu implying an elderly woman.

around as the Muslim girls observed *purdah* (veil) as almost all of them were much older, some being almost grown up (that is, past adolescence). My mother was a small child and she would feel suffocated and try to lift the encompassing dark cloth a little bit to peep outside, only to be reprimanded by both *badi bee* and the other students. Once when she protested saying that *she* was not in *purdah*, the other girls remonstrated saying that 'people from outside will not know that it is you and not us lifting the veil'. This also indicates one more social fact of that time, that among Muslims, girls were not married at early ages as among most Hindus. My mother recalls being the youngest child in her class surrounded by older Muslim girls.

The architecture of the school followed the norms of those times and it was closed in from the outside with a large garden on the inside, called aptly the *purdah* garden, a name that continued even after the practice of *purdah* was totally given up. The classrooms were arranged around a central courtyard that allowed the girls to come out and sit whenever free from classes, but on no account could they peep outside on to the street and be visible from there to outsiders. All older schools and even colleges for women in Delhi,[9] built before the 1950s, follow this pattern of classroom, corridor and courtyard, with the latter two turned towards the inside, just like the residential houses I have described in Chapter 1.

There was a big hall adjacent to the *purdah* garden where food was brought from the homes of these aristocratic girls (several of them daughters of nawabs) by an array of servants and warmed on large coal *angithi*s (stoves) at lunch time. My mother had been strictly forbidden by her grandmother to eat anything cooked by the *mlechcha*[10] (here, Muslim) and in spite of being offered the delicious food by her schoolmates, always refused to touch it.[11] An interesting fact that emerges is that even in the early part of the twentieth century, there were at least enough Muslim families that were willing to send their daughters to school, and that the girls who attended school were generally much older than Hindu girls of comparative families; in other words, the age of marriage for girls was probably higher for the

[9] One has to see the colleges like Miranda House and Indraprastha College for Women affiliated to Delhi University to see this type of architecture and also, apart from Queen Mary's, the schools for girls like Presentation Convent and the Convent of Jesus and Mary in Delhi.

[10] *Mleccha* may mean anything from non-Aryan, non-Hindu or anybody not having a caste status or not observing Hindu norms of purity and pollution. It is never, however, used for the untouchables, for they are viewed as falling within the Hindu fold.

[11] This was only because of the grandmother, as later in her life, she had no such inhibitions.

Muslim than for the Hindu girls. The stereotyping of Islamic conservatism towards the education of women thus appears to be a recent phenomenon, and when formal education for girls began in India, the Muslims were as, if not more, enthusiastic than other communities. Vatuk, in her description of a Muslim joint household in Chennai (South India), also says with respect to girl's education in the late 1990s, that 'a substantial proportion of girls are educated through high school and college and are even pursuing post graduate studies' (Vatuk, 2002: 260).

It is also to be noted that among the upper classes of Muslims, women stopped observing *purdah*, probably with education and westernization, and even today, many Muslim women in India (and entire South Asia) are seen absolutely without any kind of *purdah*. It is not necessary that all these women belong to upper strata of society, in fact, most rural and poor Muslim women, working as labour or domestic help, do not observe *purdah* and probably never had.

The Curriculum

Most of the teachers in schools run by missionaries were from England but there could be a few Indian Christians as well. Educated girls from Hindu or Muslim families did not work outside their homes, not even as school teachers; although in a few years things changed and some women at least, including my mother, took up teaching school children. Hindu and Muslim women worked in the schools opened by Indians that had a predominantly Indian culture, like Indraprastha school and college (now only college) for women in Delhi. The schools for women were thus not really interested in churning out professional women but rather accomplished housewives. The main focus was to teach the three R's (reading, writing and arithmetic) and a host of useful domestic skills like knitting and sewing. Also included was training in morality and emergency skills through the Boy and Girl Scout programmes introduced in India by Baden–Powell. As Talwar (1989: 220) has pointed out, by the year 1927, in the Hindi provinces, the matter of women's education was more or less settled among the upper classes. The issue that remained was 'on the kind of education that was deemed suitable for women' (ibid.).

There had been debates regarding the medium of education, whether it should be English or the local language, and many were in favour of local language as it was deemed that English education may corrupt the minds of

the young girls by exposing them to Western values. Another debate was on whether women needed only practical education such as hygiene and home-running skills or did they require exposure to the philosophies and the sciences. At that time, it seems that most schools must have settled for a little of both, although the schools established by the British and other missionaries preferred English as an equal medium of instruction, in addition to the local language. Except perhaps in few institutions, it was never only English. The emphasis on girl's education continued to be on not only making them good housewives but also good subjects of the state. Nationalism and loyalty to nation were virtues that were inculcated early, initially towards the colonial and later towards the independent state of India.

When I went to the same school in the mid-1950s and passed out of high school in the late 1960s (1968), things had not changed too much. There were many hours devoted to what was then known as Domestic Science that included skills in cooking, hygiene, first aid, sewing and knitting. At the age of 5, girls knitted small squares of wool and then the teacher sewed them together to make a blanket that was taken to the hospital to donate to the patients. A lot of time was spent in playing sports like basketball, volleyball and in physical training – all as a package for building up of the moral and civic self. There were classes for spiritual training where the Bible was read and we sang hymns with great enthusiasm. The girls were told that teaching and nursing were the only appropriate vocations for girls and most of us were dedicated to the ideals of Florence Nightingale (about which our teachers told us in great details) at the age of nine, but soon outgrew when we reached about twelve. Yet, during the Indo-China war of 1962 and the Indo-Pak war of 1971, we sat in school knitting sweaters and stockings for the men fighting on the front. In the same spirit as the West (Sims, 2000: 175), we were socialized in the school to support the war and idealize the '*jawans*' (soldiers). In fact, one aspect of being socialized in this way was also to become the wives of high placed army officers.

The children were taught to sit at tables and eat with napkins, forks and spoons while still in the pre-school stage, that is, in the kindergarten stage. I recall having our own towels hung up on little towel stands, being told to spread our napkins on our laps and keep our elbows off the table, as 3–5 year olds. The regime of eating at a common dining table, supervised by teachers, continued till we reached high school and then we could bring lunch from home and eat it in the *purdah* garden. Many of these skills were then taken onto the dining rooms of the army mess and a large proportion of girls graduated to being gracious hostesses of affluent households.

With teenage came freedom, but only of the imagination. Elvis Presley, Dean Martin and the Beatles fuelled part of it, while the rest was taken up by Indian and Hollywood film stars, cricket players, and so on. India in the 1960s had not yet got over its colonial hangover and the Indian youth were deeply under the influence of the 'Hippie' culture and the Western way of life, even while such a life was in deep contrast to the home where mothers were rarely educated formally and lifestyles followed conservative models based on Indian regional folk ways. Yet, there was no radical separation from the normative, and most childhood fascinations and 'crushes' ultimately resolved themselves on the marriage altar with a groom of proper caste and class credentials, chosen by the parents.

Interestingly, by the 1970s, most schools, including those meant exclusively for girls, had turned towards imparting education meant for them to have a career. It was no longer considered that girls from middle and upper classes were to only become housewives. Yet, there persisted a few very elitist schools like the Maharani Gayatri Devi school in Jaipur, attended by mostly girls from very elite families, that continued largely the 'cultural' and 'aesthetic' education to make elite housewives rather than career women.

From Caste to Caste/Class

India, to talk of any kind of transition from caste to class or from tradition to modernity, etc., is a misnomer, for there never was such a transition. The changes that took place were in the direction of amalgamating class with caste and to reinterpret traditions to suit current objectives and social goals. Even today in India, many cultural traits exist from the past and are being reinvented for political and social gains as well as the continued existence of caste society. Women were recast and reinvented not to challenge patriarchy but to fit in with its newly designed formulation.

While my mother was educated at the time of the British, her education had less British influence, for the household was still run in strict orthodox Hindu manner. Yet, some cultural traits like learning to play pianos, singing and learning languages like French in addition to English were viewed as accomplishments that befitted women from elite classes. Although my mother had imbibed strict Hindu values from her grandmother, yet, the British influence was evident in her sense of hygiene and morality; she always would tell that because of the oath that she took as a girl scout, she found herself bound to lead an upright life. She also had morbid fear of dirt and infection

that led us into a childhood where there was liberal use of Dettol and other antiseptics, and infection, was a spectre that loomed large over every action that was taken. For example, we were told never to accept anything that was not confirmed to be germ free, including the *prasad* from temples.

Yet, the formal education that she had continued by being shifted to Indraprastha school for girls to complete her matriculation, and then going to St. Stephen's College to pursue a bachelor's degree in history, did not make her bold or independent. The women who controlled the domestic realm always had their say in the future of the girl child. She was shifted to another school at a later age for attaining greater proficiency in Bengali, her mother tongue, that was taught only at the Indraprastha school. At Queen Mary's, apart from English that was the medium of education, the only other language available was Urdu, the *lingua franca* of Delhi in the pre-independence era. But the grandmother did not approve of the learning of another *mlechcha* tongue (the child was already well versed in English) and preferred that the child be shifted to a school with a more Hindu culture and language training.

Thus, formal education was deeply influenced by home and cultural values, and at no time was it viewed as the only form of learning. The traditional household continued to be a seat of pedagogy where rituals, deportment and moral values were taught to the children of both sexes. In this sense, I cannot agree with Levine et al.'s distinction between the pedagogical model and the pediatric model of child care (Levine et al., 1994), for even if the children were not being socialized to go to school, they were not simply left to grow up; even in the poorest households, a degree of moral and practical education was given to children, even if it was in the traditional occupation of the caste (like among the washerman caste group).

My mother recalls how even in cooking, a selective approach was taken by her grandmother to teach those dishes that indicated that she came from an affluent background. 'Aristocratic girls were not expected to either know or do routine cooking', yet, they must know the expensive and exclusive dishes, those items that were not cooked in lower middle-class or poor households. Thus, while my grandmother never cooked ordinary food, she was adept at making exclusive delicacies like lobsters and '*biryani*' (an aromatic rice preparation with expensive condiments). Girls from upper-class families were expected to learn to handle and have knowledge about expensive food items and their preparations (equivalent to caviar and wine in Western culture). Thus, while she was getting to learn arithmetic and geography in school, she

was being trained in different kinds of domestic skills at home. At the age of thirteen, for example, she was expected to take care of the expenses, keep accounts and organize a wedding preparation. Most girls from upper-class households in every part of India grew up knowing how to handle servants, to organize large family gatherings and to negotiate social relationships with relatives of all age and sex categories.

Almost exclusively at the insistence of her father, higher education again took my mother to St. Stephen's College, because her elder brother had studied and then later became a teacher there. At St. Stephen's, she became a pupil of Percival Spear, the noted historian. Most teachers in the college were Englishmen; in those days, there were no women professors. My mother recalls the tragic incidence of a young English teacher who committed suicide because his wife left him and ran away. There were only a few women students, but of course, not too many men students either. The group photograph taken in 1937, when my mother graduated, shows only four Indian girl students, with my mother standing next to her brother and behind Percival Spear, who is seated along with other members of staff. The only other women present are the wife of the Principal, Rai Bahadur[12] S.N. Mukherjee, and another Englishwoman, most probably a teacher. There are seven Englishmen who must be teachers and the total group is around seventy persons, the entire strength of the college. Only my mother has her head uncovered and all other Indian women have the *saree* drawn over their heads, including the wife of the principal, an Indian Christian, and the girl students. It is also to be mentioned that while some girls from upper-class families did go for higher education, they were rarely kept unmarried. Thus, the women with their heads covered were probably all married. Therefore, it is conclusive that husbands and in-laws also encouraged women's education in many instances.

At that time, women's education was never seen as a threat to her domestic life. The education that was received both in school and in college, along with the enculturation at home, was not designed to create an independent woman, or one who would take too many decisions on her own. The aim was only to create perfect ladies, good hostesses and good mothers. The precedence for this particular mode of women's education was set in Europe of the early modern period, where 'along with reading, writing, and religion, sewing and other domestic skills were also often part of the curriculum' (Wiesner–Hanks,

[12] Rai Bahadur was an honorific bestowed by the British government on distinguished Indians who they thought served the British well.

2008: 145). As Seymour (1999) has pointed out in her study of Orissa society at a much later date, in the 1960s, it was men who got educated first, and it was to cater to their demands for educated brides that women were educated. The fathers may have had more liberal views, for example, my grandfather was keen to send my mother to England with Sir Percival Spear to pursue further education in England and become professional, but my mother was brought up by her grandmother to be a conservative Hindu housewife and refused to travel to England alone, preferring to get married and bringing up children. She had a brief stint as a school teacher, probably less than a year, and then never worked outside of her home for the rest of her life. Not only that, all the other sisters who had learnt to paint, to sing and to dance gave up everything after they got married, turning into accomplished housewives and giving up on the public realm altogether.

The education of women was not related to women's emancipation but was a class-based phenomenon: as upper-caste men became educated and began to become professionals like lawyers and doctors and high government officials (Seymour, 1999: 108), they formed a class of persons with achieved class status who wanted to further cement the class status with wives who were seen as a further reinforcement of this status. Thus, no matter how highly placed a man was, to have at his home an uneducated and 'rustic' wife would definitely place him at a social ladder lower than that of a man with a cultivated wife. But very rarely did such class considerations override caste, thus a suitable match always involved the criteria of caste with class added on at a later period; even today, most though not all parents would grudgingly accept a son-in-law from a different caste/religion for their daughter only under duress.

Probably the only real education for emancipation of women was envisaged by the dalit leaders like Jyotiba Phule, who regarded education to be a powerful tool for dalits, both men and women. It was his critique of the upper castes' patriarchal attitudes towards their women that had prompted Phule to open a school for dalit girls and an ashram for upper-caste widows.

The Women and Their Kin

Most gender studies are focused on the relationship between men and women as partners, or in complementary roles, but in the context of women's education, the role of father is highly significant. In the entire South Asia, it is seen that the father–daughter relationship has been significant in shaping the

lives of women, especially of the upper classes. Daughters like Indira Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto were groomed by their fathers to become heads of states. Jawaharlal Nehru was so concerned about the education of his daughter while he was in jail that he wrote the entire *Discovery of India* as letters to her – a book that is now a text book for most Indian children to learn the history of India. Wiesner–Hanks (2008: 158) writes about the most learned woman of the seventeenth century Europe, Anna Maria van Schurman, who 'was educated at her father's command alongside her two brothers'.

My grandfather had refused to be cowed down by the pressures from the domestic front to educate his daughters, and he was willing to send my mother to England and allow her to remain unmarried in order to pursue a career. The interests of fathers were therefore not always directed towards getting a suitable groom for the daughter (though that may also have been one of the reasons), but sometimes just to educate the daughter for her own sake. Thus, the real changes that may have come over women could have had their genesis in their fathers' paternal love and pride in their daughters. For the initial changing generations getting education, the men may have found that an educated daughter was someone with whom they could share their ideas and intellectual cravings more than with the wives, who may have not been educated or interested in being educated. Daughters could be moulded by the fathers into archetypes of their ideal womanhood. My mother recalls how her father would often consult her on various issues and share his thoughts and problems with her rather than with his uneducated wife whom he had married when she was barely a woman. This situation could have also varied from household to household depending upon the circumstances. Even when I was in school, several of my classmates, especially those with uneducated mothers, would remark how much their fathers depended on them for advice and for sharing their 'tensions'. They said the father would often tell them, 'Your mother will not understand'.

The role of the daughter in the household often continues after her marriage. Often, married daughters come in to intervene in family disputes, especially those involving the male members of the family, like fathers, sons and brothers. Educated women hold special status in this respect as they are seen as having both moral authority as well as 'good sense'.

The education of women, such as Sarla Debi (Chakravarti, 1989/2006), Pandita Ramabai and the famous Hindi poetess, Mahadevi Verma, was made possible by the efforts of their respective fathers. Although it is not easy and proper to generalize, the case of Pandita Ramabai (ibid.: 66–72) is

unique among other women of her times, for she was able to carry on the initial education given to her by her parents to great heights, ultimately becoming a physician and going to America and writing several books; most others were able to do what they did by family support. It was, again, only Ramabai who was able to challenge most conventional models of womanhood and ultimately break completely out of the devi role that she could have taken on as a highly educated woman of the upper caste (even if poor) by converting to Christianity. It could have been her unique life experience that was radically different from most other women of the comfortably placed middle and upper classes pursuing education at that time that set her apart. In her and Uma Nehru (Talwar, 1989/2006: 229), we see signs of the true feminist spirit of individual achievement of goals as against dedication to social or common causes like nationalism, showing an embedded rather than individualistic subjectivity.

The surprising aspect of education in the subcontinent is that there was little gap between the introduction of formal education by Macaulay on 7 March 1853, and its spread to include women, so that there were functional schools for girls by 1863 (Chatterjee, 1993: 128). This, in turn, is sufficient to indicate that the kind of stereotyping that was taken for granted about women's subordinate position in India and propagated by the so-called Indophobics such as James Mills (Trautmann 2004a) was not true. One woman, Kadambini Ganguli (1861–1923), was the first woman medical doctor in India. We can compare this with the case of 'Dr. James Barry' or Miranda Stuart (1795–1865) who had to disguise herself for her entire life as a man in order to become a physician (Alexander, 2002: 45–58). Thus, while Bentinck and Macaulay were deriding the Indians as savages and regressive, the women in their own country were not allowed to become doctors or hold high positions in public life. Not many persons have noted the fact that women's education in India appeared very close on the heels of that of men and had received the support of men, both in form of fathers and husbands and as social reformers who wanted to introduce education of women *per se*.

It may be the value placed on a woman as mother, and the role of the mother in producing and educating her children, that had validated women's education in India, so early. In fact, it was the uses for her extended family that gave women's education its validity. As an educated daughter, mother, sister and of course, wife, a woman was seen to best utilize her education and it was rather negative for her to use it for her own gains. Even as a member of larger society, it was deemed appropriate for educated upper-class women

to do 'social work'. The most stigmatized and problematic aspect was the pursuit of an individualistic career. In this sense, the elite women in India seem to have been following the path set by European women of the nineteenth century, as described by Smith,

> In place of the aristocratic woman and her pleasures, the middle class woman developed the culture of domesticity resting on her household and family. The comforts of this way of life depended on servants and more abundant goods. But domesticity also involved an array of rituals such as charity work and upper class etiquette that were closed off to working women. (Smith, 1989: 135)

Most households in India were, at least till the 1990s, averse to daughters going in for any kind of paid work. Most wanted that they should go only for respectable work, of which teaching took pride of place. I know even of women who, having done their medical education, were persuaded by their families not to take up a paid job and use their education only for charity work. It also went against the ego of well-placed men that their wives were working outside the house thereby reflecting upon the husband's inability to support the wife. Even if the daughter or wife insisted on working, by the definition of respectability, the father or husband would refuse to touch that money. Thus, it was not simply the expectations regarding the women's role that influenced women's education and ability to work outside of the home, but also the ideal role expected of a man as a breadwinner and supporter of his family.

Therefore, many households insist that the daughter-in-law should not be working in a paid job as it reflects negatively on the status of the entire household. Apart from the negative light it throws on the family's ability to maintain her, a woman working outside is also often subservient to a man at the workplace. Such a relationship has its sexual dangers as the unequal relationship may lead to sexual exploitation; an apprehension not unfounded. Such values are still predominant among the elite of India, although in many middle class, highly educated families, women may be allowed to do 'charity' or 'social work', or enter into politics, or help out in the family business or do such kind of work like having her own clinic or hospital or boutique where she is independent. In other words, it is feared that the subordination of a woman in the workplace to other men will affect the honour of men of her kin group. I shall discuss these issues in greater details in the next chapter. But it must be remembered that in all instances, in South Asia, individuals do not stand on their own but are always embedded in relational networks.

As Chakravarti (1989) points out, the role of women in propagating a 'superior' race or Aryan culture gave impetus to reformers such as Dayanand Saraswati to encourage women's education among the upper castes or Aryans. It has already been pointed out that women's education was a part of the nationalist agenda *of the men*. So far, most of the causes and rationale for women's education, and also the impetus, came apparently from the men. In the early part of the twentieth century, there were probably no women who could have educated themselves or gone out on their own without at least initial support from family and men. It is only Pandita Ramabai who had shown some degree of independence at a later age, but in her young age, she was accompanied by her brother and when he died, she felt compelled to marry a person known to her as her brother's friend. Does that imply that women did only as they were told?

The devi image in South Asia, as already described, is not a passive one. It does not require women to be a passive subject and that may be one reason why women were initiated into activities that put them as partners to men. During the colonial period, there were many women who stood ground on their own, after the initial support from the family. However, courage, integrity, adventure and agency were all subordinated ultimately to the will of parents. Chakravorti (1989) recounts the case of Sarla Debi, who belonged to the aristocratic Tagore family and had an illustrious mother. Although this woman was able to show a lot of independence in her early life, by the age of about 32 years, which must have been considered a very old age in those times, she was forced into marriage by her mother's emotional blackmail and thereafter gave up most of her independent lifestyle to settle down to a life with her husband.

The pressures of family and parental control, not so much in terms of physical but emotional and moral control, is something that plays a critical role in the life and minds of most South Asian women, even today. Even in the beginning of the twenty-first century, few Indian or South Asian women would opt to strike out an independent existence totally disconnected from family, and especially parental attachment. In this way, the concept of feminism in India cannot be understood except by taking another critical look at the concept of personhood itself.

The Emergence of the Independent Woman?

During the colonial and even early post-colonial period, education for women, both in Europe and in colonial India, was largely confined to unmarried women and most women were expected to give up education in favour of

domesticity after marriage. Even if women did some productive activity outside of the home, they were always viewed responsible for household activities, either doing it themselves or getting it done, as is still prevalent among the middle and upper classes of India. The Indian freedom struggle had brought many women onto the streets, especially to participate with Mahatma Gandhi, in the civil rights movements. The nationalist movement provided the higher cause, like religion, for which women could be allowed to come out of the inner realms of the house. Thus, in Rabindranath Tagore's classic novel, *Ghare Baire*, the protagonist, Bimala, is the wife of a wealthy landlord who is normally confined to the inner world of the house, not meeting any unrelated man. Yet, she is allowed to, rather encouraged, by her husband to come out to meet a freedom fighter, a strange man, in front of whom a woman of her class would never have appeared. Thus, nationalism, also projected in the symbolism of a religion, allowed at least some women to come out of the home into the outside world. They even crossed the barriers of purity and pollution to court arrest and go to jail, like Gandhi's wife, Kasturba.

Prior to the nationalist movement, the only reason for which an upper-caste woman was allowed to come out was to go for pilgrimage, and this was usually allowed only for the old. But from 1918 onwards, a large number of women did venture out of the threshold of their homes, and some, like Sarojini Naidu, even became prominent public figures, who appeared in front of large crowds to give speeches. In some parts of India, especially where the impact of education was felt early, women had been receiving education from the end of the nineteenth century. Whether or not, however, a woman was accepted or was acceptable in a role was largely determined by the men in her life, in which both father and husband played significant roles. Allowing their wives to go to jail was part of the nationalist agenda of men like Gandhi and Nehru. Getting their daughters educated was the prerogative of men who belonged to the upper strata of society (Talwar, 1989: 226). The rising competition of local men with their British counterparts led to a steep rise in women's education and as Chatterjee has reported, 'From 95 girl's schools with a total attendance of 2,500 in 1863, the figures went up to 2,238 schools in 1890, with a total of more than 80,000 students' (Chatterjee, 1993: 128). The lives of women in smaller towns were also not untouched by change, and Bagchi (2009) has recorded the lives and activities of some outstanding women of a small town, Dinajpur, now in Bangladesh.

An interesting aspect of transformation noted is the involvement of these educated women in the welfare of the marginal women around them. The

'divide' that Chatterjee (1993) has discussed with respect to the creation of the *bhadramahila* and their distancing from the rustic women may not have been as radical when seen from the *point of view of women*. Thus, Bagchi describes the weekly market system introduced by the local Balurghat Mahila Samiti (the women's association of Balurghat), of Dinajpur, that 'opened up a new space whatever small it may be, before the wretched, poor and helpless women with minimum capital' (Bagchi, 2009: 122). As described by her, in such markets, both the buyer and the sellers were poor women who had little buying capacity or capital, yet they were able to mutually support each other.

On a recent visit to a small rural area in the Himalayas, I met an aristocratic woman (Lakshmi) coming from an affluent family, who had made her home in the vicinity of local villages. Although she and her husband lived with quiet dignity and style, she was also actively involved with the education of the local women, teaching them also to sew and knit and thus make a living. The Gandhian spirit of rural upliftment had been taken seriously by many women of the colonial and early post-colonial era, before globalization and a new set of values hit the Indian society.

A part of the construction of elite women was the notion of service or giving. At some point, the education that was directed towards creating model women of great virtue, managed to instill in some of them, the virtues of service that can belong properly to the devi image. While talking to the villagers about Lakshmiji, the term devi was almost used always as a mark of respect. Thus, the devi image or the model, as used in the analytical scheme being used here, does not necessarily confine a woman to her household. She has scope for outward movement, even against her affinal family, if the cause that she espouses is considered universal, sacred and unselfish. The devi is not necessarily having only one image and in fact, she is always seen as having many *roop* (forms). It is this broader range of the concept of devi that has given Indian women their scope for expansion beyond certain stereotypical roles and images. Thus, the notion of moral superiority that was projected as both a nationalist and a patriarchal agenda (Chatterjee, 1993) could reinvent itself to give rise to women's work outside of the home, especially for the sake of a morally superior or in other words, appropriately devi-like activity. Thus, the women of a small town like Dinajpur, even in the early part of the twentieth century, could begin to organize and get involved in activities that, even though social in content, could be validated by the incorporation into the overall nationalist spirit of that era. One may not also assume that women ventured out of their homes only because men wanted them to do

so; some women, especially from the marginal areas imbibed the true spirit of revolution, yet at some level, the moral control of society remained.

The test case is that of Pritilata Waddedar, a young girl from a small town and from an ordinary family, and not belonging to a upper caste, who became involved with the revolutionary movement of the cadre of young men like Surya Sen, who treaded the path of radical action against the state, inspired by the revolutionary ideologies of the West. She was actively involved in physical acts of violence against the British monarchy and ultimately, injured in a gun battle with the police, took her own life to evade arrest. The inner subjective consciousness of the young woman in taking her life cannot be analyzed so easily, but the act itself was one that could only be classified as 'altruistic' suicide, in Durkheim's terms. Whether it was fear of contamination by the touch of the white men or fear of betrayal of her compatriots under torture, if caught alive, no one shall ever know. But it was not an act of isolated individualism. It was certainly an aspect of her embedded consciousness of selfhood.

My mother tells me that her father told her that she could take part in public protests and demonstrations during the nationalist movement, '*as long as she took care not to get arrested by the police*'. The purity of a Hindu girl's body was still a matter of great concern, for her, for her family and for society at large. Under no condition were the upper castes of Hindu society going to allow defilement of the bodies of their women. The British men were particularly sought to be avoided in terms of physical contact, not only because they were men, they were also outside the precincts of purity as deemed necessary for the maintenance of caste sanctity by the upper-caste women. Thus, while a man could still share food and sit at the same table as a white person, a Hindu woman could not do it, no matter of what class and education. This is not to say that there was no mixing of blood but it happened more on the peripheries than in the core.

The educated women of that time were not necessarily guided by men, nor were they totally dependent on them. As Talwar (1989) narrates from his study of women's journals published in Hindi, from the years 1910–20, the women writing and editing these journals had independent views on matters relating specifically to women, reflecting the kind of 'sisterhood' of women we find in the early feminist movements in the West. The agenda that they prioritized certainly were the concerns of upper-caste/class women, such as child marriage, the mismatch in the ages of men and women in marriage and widow remarriage. None of them were, for example, concerned with

poverty, marginalization and the problems of existence faced by lower-caste/class women, especially precipitated during colonial rule. Much of the discussion, however, was not directed towards deconstructing the devi image of upper-class women but only to slightly redefine it. As Talwar puts it, the changes sought were not to make a radical breakaway and establish independent identities for women but, 'efforts were made to improve the lot of women within the framework of patriarchy so that as wives, mothers and daughters they could have a better deal inside the family' (ibid.: 205).

One important historical and social fact to understand is that women's position has not been a static category in any part of the world and one can never assume a linear progression towards more freedom and rights. On the contrary, we can see that every epoch has brought different conditions, and in Europe, the period of colonization was the period of increasing domination for women. Although the early period of industrialization had seen many women of the working classes in the factories, but alternately, the men began to demand family wages that was meant to keep the women at home. With increasing prosperity due to colonization, the women were restricted more and more, and in the Victorian age, the moral repression reached a new height. Thus, when we talk of Western influence on India, we are looking at the peak of moral conservatism in the colonizing influence. Therefore, the kind of moral and ethical values that were imported into India and imposed on the local populations, including norms of modesty, family values and women's confinement to the domestic sphere, were also specific to the particular era in Britain. Even in France, although women had gained considerable political power during the revolution, under the Napoleonic Code, women were subjected to a conservative legal system, 'Hence 1804 can represent better than most other dates the nadir of European women's power and status' (Hughes and Hughes, 1997: 143). The significance of this date becomes all the more potent when we realize that 1857 is the date of the final incorporation of the Indian continent into British Empire. Thus, the colonization experienced by India was when women's position was already demeaned in the West. Therefore, it is only in this context that the specific character of the devi emerged as one who is confined to the domestic domain.

Independence as such was probably never the goal of Indian women and in this sense, although a lot of discourse was directed towards women's welfare, the question of freedom never came up. The freedom that was talked about was of the nation, and the nation symbolized as a woman, the mother. Real women needed to be nurtured and not thrown out on the streets to be independent.

Indian Feminism

To analyze women's movements in India it is not possible to have a blanket categorization and the analysis needs to be rooted in the inner differentiation of the categories of women, as already explained. The term feminism itself is fraught with difficulties as unlike Western women who fought for a place in the public domain, the Indian women began first by fighting for improved situation within the domestic domain. Although the timing for both can be put in the nineteenth century, and around the same time, the demands are very different, and also the kind of problems faced by Western women, namely, legal and public recognition was made available to Indian women by the men only. Thus, at no point of time in India, the subject of universal franchise was even under consideration. As soon as India became a democracy, every citizen of India and of entire South Asia, including even the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, was given the right to vote. Unlike in the West, neither gender nor race was ever an issue.

Women in South Asia have their identities merged with that of their families and castes. Women as a category separate from men are hardly recognized in terms of the dichotomous categorization established in Western philosophy. In the West, feminism was the label given to women's struggle for the right to vote and to have legislations allowing them to have legal and political rights, most of which was granted to South Asian women in an uncontested fashion. Thus, while every woman in India could vote after 1947, when India became an independent democracy, the 'Norwegian women were the first Europeans to win the unrestricted right to vote in national elections, in 1913; Swiss women were the last, in 1971' (Hughes and Hughes, 1997: 141). While women had the right to vote in South Asia, they were not expected to exercise this right as individuals but as members of families, as wives and daughters; just like the men were supposed to vote, again, not as individuals but as members of larger social groups, caste, regions, religions and ethnic groups.

Prior to the twentieth century, the feminist thinking was dominated by what is known as relational feminism that had 'companionate, non-hierarchical, male–female couple as the basic unit of society' (ibid.: 154); on the other hand, the individualistic point of view projected the individual to have equal rights irrespective of gender and other characters. In the modern Western world, the latter has assumed greater significance, although the post-modern feminist thinking has now moved towards a celebration of 'being woman'. In other words, while earlier women had striven to be given equal

recognition as men, now they are more oriented towards being recognized and *given rights as women*. In India, none of these modes of thinking had been accepted in totality, although a particular generation of feminists who belonged to the highly westernized and upper strata of society had attempted to emulate the individualistic model but with little success as most women in India were indifferent to the issues and terms such as individualism, and even liberty and equality were meaningless to them in their own context. In fact, the particular label of 'being a feminist' was stigmatized by a major portion of Indian society, by both men and women, as it was associated with being 'too Western', 'elitist' and 'non-feminine'; in other words, the women were neither to be classified as devis, because they appeared as non-maternal, unwifely and not fitting any established models of being either a devi or a dasi, the latter in particular, as they were educated and often belonging to the elite classes.

But, more importantly, there were few issues that Indian women had in common to the Western feminists who had been socialized in the political movements, particularly to gain legal and political rights for women. In India, on the other hand, the feminist movement, if at all we can call it that, had its roots in the nationalist movement, where women had emerged as equal partners to men at least politically. The women had first taken to the streets not simply as women but as equal partners with men, much as in the French Revolution. Much like the French Revolution, after independence, women were expected to get back to their homes.

Greater success has been achieved by Indian women as social activists, as women fighting for a cause, than in fighting for feminine liberation; a concept neither understood not appreciated by Indian women. Most women's organizations at the grassroots have been fighting for and gaining success in movements for closing down liquor shops, punishing men for sexual harassment and even coming together for an environmental cause. But almost none have been directed towards achieving personal space. Space as a social concept, as associated with an individual's bounded identity, separating one's existence from that of others and getting away from relationships, is something that few, if any, woman in India would desire to have. For that matter, most men would not either. Such existential separation from bondage, in India, is viewed more in terms of spirituality than in terms of social existence. Individual liberty can be and has been achieved by both men and women through the path of spiritual existence. Women took to the path of liberty in the *Bhakti* movement (Tharu and Lalitha, 1991; cf Hughes and Hughes, 1997: 53-60) and many women were able to express their inner strivings as individuals through the medium of songs and poetry.

One of the key issues of Western individualistic feminism has been the right of a single woman to live independently, in a non-family existence, that in the West means that the woman is not married and does not have children. But in India, not getting married does not lead to a non-family existence. Everybody in India, with almost no exception perhaps, are embedded in extended familial relationships. The majority of unmarried women continue to live with parents, siblings, nieces and nephews, and so on. Even if they are not actually living with them, these relatives are an intrinsic part of their existence as social beings. It is only in the very cosmopolitan and urban cities that one may find some women striking it out on their own, but they too have parents, siblings, etc., who may be located elsewhere. More than the actual incidence of women living alone, it is the question of a woman actually wanting to be on her own. In South Asia, few women want that option for themselves.

Relational feminism, on the other hand, does find a better acceptability and modern women in India have been orienting themselves towards such a situation, but there are inherent problems in applying this model as the notion of the devi image is still strong that precludes the notion of absolute equality; rather, it promotes the superiority of women. It is because of this that women as social activists, women as reformers and women in apparently selfless roles like political leaders are both acceptable and eulogized in India. Also, women in public life are never viewed as 'sexual', nor are they expected to project themselves as such. Within the family too, the mother holds the highest position, above her sons, and sometimes above her husband as well.

The social reform movements that brought women out into the public sphere legitimized their political and even economic roles in society, but only at the higher positions. Women command respect, not simply as women, but as devis only. It is this question of acceptability in larger society and the fact that enculturation in India is directed towards producing 'dividuals' rather than 'individuals' that few women, even now, opt for what in the West may be called as feminism. Women intellectuals like Vandana Shiva and Arundhati Roy have oriented themselves towards a methodological feminism (Harrison, 2007) and others have taken up social causes (Kiran Bedi,[13] Aruna

[13] Ms Kiran Bedi is the recipient of the prestigious Magasaysay Award and was the first woman Indian Police Service (IPS) officer in India. She is well known for her jail reforms and giving a human touch to the police force.

Roy,[14] Medha Patkar,[15] Ella Bhatt[16]) rather than try to establish a feminist social revolution.

Sexual revolution, for example, has almost never been on the agenda of any large-scale feminist discourse in India. Most women who are prominent public figures maintain, to this date, a discreet respectable image. A few feminists of the 1970s, who did indulge in cigarette smoking and beer drinking in a kind of overt rebellion against the devi image, slowed down in a few years and from then on, it has mostly been about social reform, tackling major issues of women's oppression and also tacking overt manifestations of patriarchy like violence against women, female infanticide and sexual harassment. There has been a convergence of feminism with other major issues like environment, caste and neo-liberalism. Like in the nationalist era, women have found it more expedient to align themselves to larger causes in order to prove their worth than to indulge in any kind of anti-male or anti-establishment activity (where establishment has been equated with the masculine order) as in the West.

One reason for it may be the very different form of family relations in India, where women are thrown more against each other than they are in a male–female oppositional dyad (the nuclear family) as in the West. Talk to any young woman in India and she is more likely to be seeking liberation from her mother-in-law than her husband. As one young man in a Haryana village told me, 'Even if I want to do something for my wife, like get her to eat good food, I cannot. Everything is controlled by my mother. It is she who decides what *any one* should get.' Thus, within the household, it is the women who rule. It is they who decide and they who take action.

In rural areas, such control is even more prominent than in the urban areas. In Haryana, a region in North India, the physical space of the household is

[14] Aruna Roy is a well-known social activist and has played a key role in bringing about the Right to Information Act in India.

[15] Medha Patkar had single handedly taken on the state for the cause of the river Narmada and its oustees. Her immense efforts forced the government to formulate some rights-based resettlement programmes for the people ousted by big dam projects. She has also raised concern about the environmental impact of large dams. Being unmarried and devoted to a social cause, she is regarded as a devi by many people.

[16] Ella Bhatt is a Gandhian woman of immense social influence and one of the founders of Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) that has done commendable work in getting women their due. Earlier, the middlemen used to make all the profit while the women toiled. With SEWA, the women began to do their own marketing and were able to directly reap the fruits of their labour.

divided into the *ghar*, *gher* and *baithak* (Channa, 1997). The *ghar* (home) belongs to the women and the small children, including boys. The *gher* (enclosure) is the cattle pen, an important area in an economy largely dependent on animal husbandry and agriculture, and the *baithak* (sitting room) is the public arena of the men. It is here that adult men spend most of their days and nights. Food is cooked in the *ghar* and transported to the *baithak* by children. As soon as boys become semi-adults, they begin to spend more time in the *baithak* with the men than in the house with the women, but one important aspect of any person's life, namely, the formative years of socialization, are almost entirely controlled by the women. Thus, as a man is growing up, the most powerful women that he perceives in his life are his female caregivers, that is, grandmothers, mothers and aunts. In later life also, the men remain subservient in domestic matters to the women. Even when they get married, they accept the authority of the wife in domestic matters almost unconditionally.

Yet, women socializing women are the strongest source of patriarchal values. Mothers tell daughters to serve the brothers, sacrifice for them; women tell stories to each other about the virtuous women who sacrificed everything for their husbands. In fact, in women's ritual sessions of keeping fasts and telling stories, where men are not even allowed, the most stringent patriarchal values are upheld. But in almost all cases, it is the sexuality of the woman that needs controlling through parental or marital authority. In a report prepared by the Nepal Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, 2010, that covered twenty-four of Nepal's seventy-five districts, it was found that 62 per cent of the women interviewed thought that domestic violence was the rightful manner of husbands controlling wayward wives (*The Statesman*, 19 September 2011). In addition, an equal number believed that the mother-in-law had the right to physically chastise the daughter-in-law if she did not bring in enough dowry, or went out without informing or did not finish her housework on time. However, in almost all situations, the mother/mother-in-law remains most powerful in household matters.

The authority and control of mothers over their sons is explicit in a rather public matter that came up in the Indian corporate scene in 2008, when the internal feud between two brothers, the Ambanis, of the richest business house in India was settled not by anyone else, but by intervention from their mother. Thus, even the court directed, in 'national interest' (as the movement of their stocks practically dictates the Indian stock market), that the mother, a semi-literate housewife, settle the business dispute between two highly educated (MBAs from the most prestigious institutes in the world), middle-

aged (both in the late forties or early fifties), married men with children of their own. Interestingly enough, she did settle the dispute, to the satisfaction of court, public and the business world at large. Even more interesting is the fact that the dispute in question was initiated not by the brothers, but by a fall out between their *wives*. So, the fate of a multi-billion dollar industry, one of the largest in the world, was both threatened by and settled by women in the domestic realm.

Western forms of feminism have been critiqued on these issues by many anthropological works dealing with non-Western communities. Yet, does this imply that women have undisputed power in Indian society? The answer is no, they do not. They still remain tortured, bound, killed and suffocated. The very discourse on the power of women, which is also a discourse both created and controlled by men, has thwarted women's liberation in India. The women, especially from the upper strata of society, have been trapped in their own devi image and a hegemonic control exerted over their minds and bodies. This very pedestal on which they have been installed has trapped them, body and soul, into one of the most ingeniously crafted systems of patriarchy.

The Devi in Chains of Her Own Making

Since mothers are primarily responsible for the socialization of children, it is evident that most of the primary values imbibed by children of both sexes are transmitted to them by women. While the mother figure is eulogized in India, it must be remembered that the *mother who is worshipped is the mother of sons and not of daughters*. This theme is recurrent in all dimensions of Indian life; in mythology, powerful women like Kunti and Satyavati are mothers of sons, not of daughters. In fact, most mythological heroes do not have any sisters at all. Rama, the greatest of all men (*Purushottma*) has no sister. The Pandavas, the heroes of the epic Mahabharata, are only five brothers; there is no mention of any sister. Their mother holds sway over her sons and emerges as a powerful woman in her own right, but only as the mother of five sons.

In the lowliest of Indian households, no matter of which caste or class, not having a son may mean a real disaster. As the mother of two daughters, even today, I am often regarded with sympathy or scorn by women, who often ask, in a condescending way, 'Oh! So you do not have a son?' Again, it is not men but women who are more concerned about the fact of having a son. It is the mother-in-law who will deride her daughter-in-law for not

producing a son; the father-in-law has no say in the matter, he in fact is not supposed to say anything. It is women with sons who will deride ones who do not have one. In a household, it is the mother who gives the delicacies to the son and deprives her daughter.

I remember vividly, once while travelling in a train, I was accompanied by a young mother, with two small children, one boy and the other a slightly older daughter. The mother took out some sweets and at first, gave both of them equal amounts. The boy quickly ate his share and then began to demand from his sister's share also. The mother then persuaded the girl to give from her own share by the words,

> He is only a boy, he is *bewaqoof* (stupid), you are a girl, you are *sayāni* (intelligent and smart). But since he is stupid, he will not understand, he will keep making unreasonable demands. You are a good girl, you understand, so *give him some of your share of sweets*.

In other words, the girl was praised for her understanding, her reasonableness and her goodness and ultimately, made to deprive herself of her share of sweets, for the sake of an idiot, unreasonable brother!

This is the story of every Indian woman almost. In every situation, they have been told that they are superior, they have more *tolerance*, more *wisdom*, more *patience*, more understanding, so that in action, it translates into they have to pamper the men, take care of them, give in to their demands, not because men are superior, but because they are *inferior*. Every mother says she loves her daughter, as she must, but her identity as a woman is linked not to her daughter but to her son. No mother perhaps actually thinks that her son is better than her daughter, but she knows that her position in society is because of her son. Every role model that she has been told of, in folk tale, mythology and popular narratives, *defines a mother as the mother of a son*. Even today, in many parts of rural India, if asked about the number of children she has, a woman tells only the number of *sons* she has.

Thus, a woman is trapped into her own motherhood, her devi image, where she has to reproduce and nurture her son, and then socialize him into becoming a patriarchal male. Thus, patriarchy reproduces itself in South Asia by the active cooperation and practices that are vested in *women* rather than in *men*. For a woman, the most important man in her life after her father is her brother, the sibling born of her mother. The husband forever remains outside of this core unit of attachment between a brother and sister. In this sense, the 'Companionate, non-hierarchical, male–female couple as the

basic unit of society' (Offen, 1988 cf. Hughes and Hughes 1997: 154) that is automatically viewed in Western society as the husband–wife or a sexually engaged couple, loses its significance in a society where the most important cross-sex relationships are kin or blood relationships of mother and son or sister and brother rather than husband and wife.

These kin relationships are not just confined to the actual relationships but are extended to cover the entire public life of the people. Thus, women and men who are completely unrelated commonly use appropriate kin terms like brother or sister or even mother to address each other, say, in the market, or in the public transport or anywhere else. Women in public positions are always addressed with some kin term like '*behenji*' (sister) and '*mataji*' (mother). The chief minister of one of the eastern states of India is called 'didi' (elder sister) almost universally; similarly, a major political leader and a chief minister of a northern state is referred to as '*behenji*'. Both being unmarried cannot be referred to as 'mother', in spite of being middle aged. This universe of putative kin relations allows women to navigate a safe space for themselves in public and in private. Unlike in the West, where any unrelated man may be looked upon as potentially sexual and therefore in a potentially dominating position, to a South Asian woman, sibling and filial relationships provide a safety net of negotiable space. However, to be acceptable in this kinship world, women must project themselves as asexual and therefore fit to be put in this cognitive category. Thus, in contrast to Sarah Palin's efforts to glamorize herself for the elections in the United States (US) as a candidate for a political position, the women in India, who contest for or aspire for public posts, need essentially to deglamourize and enter into the acceptable non-sexual, kin relation of either universal mother or sister. Not only do they find acceptance in these roles, these are cross-sex relationships where the woman has a higher position to men.

> A brother is a protector, one in whom a sister can confide, turn to and who always helps. The intimacy, trust and benevolence shared between a brother and sister in this protected relationship, also compensates to a degree for the lack of personal relationship between husband and wife. (Bhave, 1988: xii–xiii)

In the Indian family, all men grow up learning to respect and obey their mothers and sisters. In case of a sister, the relationship is viewed as sacrosanct and even a younger sister can have authority over her brother. The women are seen as the moral superior of men and the repository of the family honour. As long as they maintain this image, the men feel duty bound to put them

on a pedestal, to treat them as devi. Thus, Indian men have no problem in being subservient to women in high positions and women may command immense respect. This is the reason that 'In no other region of the world have women been so prominent as heads of state as in South Asia' (Hughes and Hughes, 1997: 206). But at the same time, women must conform to the ideal of the '*worshippable*' categories of women. So that while women in public places in the West are preoccupied with glamour and a sexual image, the women in public places in South Asia constantly run down this image in favour of the non-glamorous kinship role. Even film stars, who have had a glamorous past, play down this image and put on sedate clothes and an aura of respectability when they enter politics.

When the Indian state passed a legislation giving equal rights of inheritance to both sons and daughters, very few women came forward to claim their rights as against the brother; and most gave the rationale that they much preferred to have the lifelong security for themselves and for their daughters than to claim a one-time inheritance. A man is not just required to take care of his sister but also his sister's daughters for the entire life. No wonder women prefer such security in face of individual rights. Given the strong security – emotional, psychological and even material – that kin relationships provide to a woman, it is not surprising that the strong anti-male feminism of the West is lacking in South Asia. Although women have spoken out against patriarchy, they still prefer to navigate the safe waters of kinship and not put all men in the same category. The voices have been raised against *patriarchal values* but not as much as against men in real terms.

The Feminist Critique

As shown by Tharu and Lalita (1991) in their excellent compilation of women writing in India, women's voices have been raised in verse and prose to make a critical assessment of their social positions and cultural values placed on their existence as women. It is not just Western-educated women, but women from rural and marginal areas who have expressed themselves in oral and written words to rebel against their condition and to give vent to the hidden desire for freedom in their souls. Thus, Deb Sen (2002: 301–04) has described the folk version of Ramayana as written by a rural woman, Chandrabati, located in sixteenth century Bengal. This version is not only told from the point of view of Sita, the wife, but takes a critical stand on the conduct of the so-called hero, the perfect man, Rama. Narrating the story in Sita's voice, the author takes up a strong and dissenting voice but allows

Sita to remain a conservative and loyal wife. In other words, Sita's image of a devi is retained, while the narrator heaps abuses on the conduct of her husband, who is portrayed in a negative light. As Deb Sen points out (ibid.: 303), the use of a feminine genre is itself interesting as the entire story is told through Sita's voice in the form of a local song sung by women describing the various seasons through the twelve months of the year (*baromasi*) and keeping in mind the narrator's voice as well is 'twice mediated by feminine sensibility' (ibid.). More interesting is Deb Sen's observation that when she went to visit the original village of Chandrabati (now in Bangladesh), she found 'contemporary Bangladeshi women criticizing Rama in a language close to Chandrabati's' (ibid.: 302).

At another level, from the point of view of a highly educated woman, we have Karve's analysis of another epic poem, the Mahabharata (Channa, 2007). Iravati Karve was a woman from a highly respectable Chittapavan Brahmin family of western India and was educated by her father and by her husband, in both America and Germany, to get a PhD in anthropology and become one of the most respected doyens of academics in the early twentieth century. Although there was no feminist discourse at her time, yet, she does fulfil the criteria of following a feminist methodology in anthropology because she is able to reinterpret key symbols of Hindu society and do a reinterpretation of the key scenarios of the major epics that form the backbone of the projected moral fabric of Indian society. The two major Hindu epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, have as their central character, an ideal superhuman male, an avatar of the supreme god Vishnu. Thus, Krishna and Rama are idealized and worshipped as gods and their lives projected as depicting the ideal life of a Hindu male of the royal lineage, especially that of Rama, whose Rama Rajya became the ideal for the most idealized leader of India, Mahatma Gandhi.

Yet, Karve goes against the grain and puts forth a highly critical assessment of the superheroes and of the idealized women, like Gandhari and Kunti, whom she depicts not as cast in the mould of the devi, but as flesh-and-blood women with real passions and emotions like hate and revenge. An analysis of her works indicates that at a deeper level of her consciousness, she assumed a subjective position of sharing an empathetic understanding of the various women depicted in Hindu mythology. Here it is prudent to mention that she takes the characters not as divinity, but as living human beings. The Mahabharata she treats as a historical text, while the Ramayana to her is nothing but a *mahakavya* (epic poem), an aesthetic work of fiction. In this sense, she does not take a devotional stand towards the various characters, not even the avatars, like Krishna and Rama, worshipped all across India.

Looking at the texts outside of a theological frame of reference, she subjects them to a critical and evaluative analysis.

For example, Karve brings to dust a much revered figure in Hindu mythology, the great patriarch of the Kuru clan, Bhisma, the great-grandfather. She has nothing but contempt for a man she thinks spent all his life wronging women and bringing them to misery for his own glorification and ego. Throwing all conventions to the wind, she is able to write,

> How all these women must have suffered! How they must have cursed Bhishma! He alone was responsible for their humiliation. Bhisma was the active leader of the Kuru clan, the one who had wielded authority. In his zeal to perpetuate the house, he had humiliated and disgraced these royal women. (Karve, 1991[1969]: 14)

These are her words for a man held up as the ideal man by all Hindus, a person deemed most unselfish and upright, honourable and wise.

Another major deconstruction is with respect to Gandhari, a woman upheld as the epitome of a devoted wife, one who bandaged her eyes for her entire life because her husband was blind. To Karve, it was not an act of devotion but of hurt and outrage; an act of revenge for being cheated into marrying a blind man. The poignant conversation between Gandhari and her husband Dhritarashtra, in the forest at the end of their lives, reveals the bitter relationship of an angry woman and a husband who felt the resentment of his wife but was unable to do anything about it. He wants to kill her but cannot, he wants her to open her eyes and show him the world, but she does not, punishing him and punishing herself, but keeping the fire of hate glowing. This act of Gandhari also indicates the kind of negotiable space that women have within patriarchy to take action. A young princess is brought all the way from her home in the far-off hills of Gandhar (now Afganistan), only to realize that she is to be married to a blind prince. Instead of throwing tantrums or questioning anybody, including her own family, for condemning her to such a life, she takes a thick cloth and blindfolds herself for life. Her act is seen as fit and appropriate for a devi, a devoted wife, but Karve narrates the anger and resentment of the young prince who had hoped that a seeing wife would help him along in life, in these words,

> At night when you came to the bedchamber, your eyes were still bound, and you came stumbling, clutching someone's hand. I was born blind. I had become used to moving about without seeing. But you had deliberately

> covered your eyes. Your body was not used to blindness. What a horrible night! I don't know why I did not kill you right then. (ibid.: 38)

Thus, not only women but men also are trapped in their roles, imposed on them by the society. Thus, Dhritarashtra cannot kill a woman because he is a high-born prince, and it is considered a dastardly act to kill women for a man such as him. He could not tear off her blindfold because then he would be going against her devotion, her devi image. Such helplessness of men in the face of women's action too is an integral aspect of Indian patriarchy.

Because women can punish men through their acts of high morality, the men often remain powerless in the face of women. For example, Mahatma Gandhi had told women that if they found that their husbands were transgressing the moral path, they could punish them by withdrawing sex. But such a role model is applicable only to upper-caste/class men; not so to men of marginal sections of society, for *their women are not to be treated as devis*.

Thus, South Asian women have their own space for navigation, set out by the models of morality and appropriate conduct set by society, and the paths to such navigation are not necessarily those deemed necessary or meaningful by Western women.

4 Work and Gender Relations of a Low-caste Group in Urban Delhi

The dalit[1] women have been the quintessential 'dasi', the woman whose life is seen as dedicated to the service, both economically and sexually, of the elite of society. They stand apart from the devi in more ways than one. In fact, it is upon bodies of these women that the devi has been able to keep her image intact. The purity expected of the upper-caste women was made possible because their men satisfied their sexual desires with these women. These women, like the courtesans, the *devadasis* (women dedicated to the temples) and the lower-caste women working in the fields and the streets who were not bound by the strict norms of purity expected of the women of the inner realm, were seen as existing to satisfy the collective sexual lust of elite men.

In Chapter 1, we had discussed the dasi, the woman who belonged to the public realm but had power as a woman in her own right. In ancient Indian society, there was the public woman who also held power and who may have been a woman of exceptional character who did not want to be confined to the inner world of the home. In the Western sense of the dichotomy of the public and domestic (Sanday, 1981), these women could be seen as belonging to the real public domain that was often the seat of political power. Yet, although not domestic, she was also often akin to a goddess (for example, Amrapali) and may still be like Jayalalitha, a powerful woman of Indian contemporary politics who by her choice of remaining unmarried and being a upper-caste Brahmin has assumed the role of a devi, without falling into the stereotype of domesticity. Some public women were accessible only to the highest echelon of men and were held in high esteem. The *devadasis* of

[1] The term dalit has been coined as a self-reference by the lower castes otherwise referred to as untouchables (*asprishya*) and Shudras (the lowest varna in the caste hierarchy). Dalit means crushed and has a political connotation. For more on the term, refer to Omvedt (1994).

Jagannath temple in Puri were designated as the brides of the King of Puri, who, in turn, was viewed as the living embodiment of Jagannath. Brahmin priests and other high-class men also had access to them but not commoners. Thus, although we have created a conceptual dichotomy, in reality, there are many in-between categories. The dasi need not always be at the bottom but she could have been, and still may be, a woman of power and prestige.

But the lower-caste women, the workers of society, are the ones forever exposed to exploitation and whose bodies are not seen as the property of their own men, like that of the upper-caste women, but of the society in general.[2] If we consider that the category of dasi can be graded in terms of degradation and humiliation, these women would occupy the extreme end of the spectrum. As Berreman describes,

> High caste women, upon whom the precarious purity of the castes rests…are put on a pedestal of purity, honor and incorruptibility. Low caste women, the purity of whose offspring is not jeopardized by the possibility of high caste paternity, are assumed (by high castes) to be not virtuous and readily accessible to men of high caste. (Berreman, 1967: 66)

Yet, the degradation that is assumed is also imposed on them from outside. While upper-caste men and women may view them in either negative or paternalistic manner, the truths of their existence are never as monochromatic and unmitigated as one may suppose.

Superordinate–subordinate relationships between groups are usually centred on creation of stereotypes, usually derogatory about each other. Although both parties in a hierarchical power relationship, more so an exploitative one, have unfavourable views of each other, the dominated group suffers more because it is helpless in the projection of its point of view, being deprived of a platform from where to voice its opinions.[3] The very lack of a voice is part of its degradation. The dalit women are such a muted segment of society, whose voices are stilled by the male power holders who exploit

[2] In Punjab, there is a popular saying, '*Garib ki joroo sabki bhabi*' (a poor man's wife is everyone's sister-in-law). The term sister-in-law (brother's wife) has a sexual connotation in Indian society, and especially in the North-West region, with its tradition of levirate.

[3] To a large extent, the dalit movement was organized to provide such a platform but not all members of the lower castes, and especially the women, have access to such a power centre. Many, like the dhobis mentioned later in the chapter, have never been in any such movement.

them and simultaneously decry them. What these women experience has rarely been a part of the society's repertoire of folklore and fiction or even oral history.[4]

In this chapter, we shall describe these women not only as how others perceive them but also as they see themselves. Their own self-worth and self-respect is an important component of who they are. From the perspective of a gendered methodology that has been adapted for this work, it is essential to deconstruct the dominant point of view and to look at the world through the eyes of the marginal groups.

Caste and Gender

In assigning a particular gender role to a woman, caste considerations have been of paramount importance, not just in absolute terms but in metaphoric terms as well. Thus, while women of some caste groups, because of their association with menial work, have remained at the bottom of the hierarchy, there are some kinds of work which, because of the metaphor of low-caste ranking assigned to them, have delegated any woman working in that capacity to the status of a lower-caste woman, or to the category of the exploitable.[5]

In this chapter, however, we are concerned with those women who by birth are condemned to a life of hard labour and because of their low-caste position, remain vulnerable to sexual harassment and exploitation by the men of the upper castes. Since the women of the upper castes are ideally cast in the role of the devi, they are not expected to be overtly sexual. The sexuality of an upper-caste woman is always played down and the manner of socialization of these women was to restrain and curb their natural impulses and train them to be sedate and less demanding in all aspects of life. In many upper-caste communities, girl children are not given the

[4] Even when the dalit construct their oral history in opposition to the dominant point of view, like the story of Chuharmal, the dalit youth, with whom a princess falls in love, documented by Badri Narayan (2001), they do it with the help of male heroes; dalit heroines are very rare but, of course, not non-existent. There is the story of Rami, a woman of dhobi caste, who is said to have been the beloved of the famous Bengali poet, Jaidev, the creator of *Gita Govinda*, a lyrical poem in the Bhakti tradition, describing the love of Radha and Krishna.

[5] There are some works, otherwise very important and well paid, which are still considered as low status in India because of their association with menial work or the work that is done by servants, like an air hostess, a nurse and a receptionist. And many middle-class parents of high-caste ranking do not encourage their daughters to enter these professions.

so-called 'hot' food that will increase their sexuality. They are, most often, fed a vegetarian and restricted diet of such items as buttermilk, fruits and simple vegetables. Smoking and drinking is a complete taboo for the so-called 'respectable' women, and neither are they expected to be bawdy, engage in sexually provocative language or betray that they have sexual desire of any kind. Their compliance to the wishes and dictates of the male members of their family can be extreme and many women end up incapable of taking control of their lives.[6]

The men, however, are not generally put under any such restrictions. In the law book of Manu, which is viewed as the core of the Brahmanical patriarchy of caste-based society in South Asia, there is a rule which allows men of the higher caste to access the body of the women of the lower castes, but not the other way around. Thus, although preferably a Brahmin should marry a Brahmin woman of the proper jati category, it is not necessary that he remain confined to her. He could have as secondary wives, women of lower varna categories like Kshatriya, Vaishya or even Shudra, but the 'untouchable' woman was never given the status even of a secondary wife or concubine. Most often, they could be had when and wherever at the whims and fancies of the upper-caste men. There was no social and moral protection prescribed for them. At the same time, the upper-caste women had to suffer silently the humiliation of being ignored by their husbands. One may recall here the classic Hindi film, *Ankur*, directed by the renowned filmmaker, Shyam Benegal.

In this film, the young village landlord is shown having a sexual relationship with the low-caste serving woman in his house, while his young wife is secluded and has no voice. She watches helplessly as her husband carries on his liaison with the servant girl. However, it is not the upper-caste wife but the lower-caste woman who finds a voice to ultimately challenge the high-born man because he beats up her disabled husband. She fights like a tigress to protect her own man even as she heaps abuses on the landlord. This agency and aggression shown by the marginalized woman is in complete contrast to the mute presence of the high-caste wife in this particular film, but it is a representation of the reality of Indian social life.

[6] In April 2011, Delhi was shocked by the incidence of two highly qualified sisters who had locked themselves up in their house after the death of their father and literally starved to death. Their father, a retired army Colonel, had died sometime back and according to the psychiatrist who was consulted, they had no capacity to take decisions on their own and had become completely depressed after his death.

It is common to see a low-caste woman take on, in a loud voice, a man or anyone who dares approach her in an aggressive manner, while a middle-class girl would quietly walk away if sexually harassed. The upper-class girls are taught from childhood to be as invisible as possible, not to draw attention to themselves and be least conspicuous so that people do not talk about them. After marriage, they try to hide rather than bring out any deficiencies in their husbands. If a woman says anything against her husband, it is taken as a negative reflection on her rather than on him. In recent times, Indian society has seen several high-caste wives keeping quiet or even standing up for their husbands even if such husbands have been publicly exposed for sexual crimes, including rape. Many high profile cases of men in high positions being accused of sexual harassment or rape, including a former deputy inspector general (DIG) of police and a film actor, have seen the wives stand up and defend their husbands in public. A woman's acknowledgement of her husband's infidelity is a confession of her failure to be the ideal wife and exactly how it is interpreted by people around.

Traditionally, neither divorce nor remarriage was permitted to women of the high castes and they had to accept whatever husband they got for their entire life. The lower-caste women did not have such restrictions and if they did not like a husband, they could remarry, and often did. They also did not consider it an imperative to put up with a husband if he was unfaithful or abusive. Since they do not have a reputation or prestige to defend, these women had far more freedom in terms of control of their own lives. The freedom was, of course, projected in highly negative light by the upper castes, who had already typecast the ideal woman as the one whose interests were completely aligned with that of her husband, having no existence outside of him. In fact, most women even now believe that it is the men in their lives, that is, father, brother, husband and son, who really matter, and even highly educated women may actually feel that they are only appendages.

The sexuality of women of low caste is often expressed in folk idiom and myths. She is often portrayed as a seductress and one who actually 'enjoys' sex. A low-caste woman's body was not one that needed to be respected in any way. She was not just exploited, she was supremely 'exploitable'; in other words, she did not count, she was not a woman, not a person. To understand this, one needs to understand, in somewhat greater depth, how personhood is conferred in caste society.

Caste and Personhood

As we shall discuss presently, the gender constructs are neither uniform across class/caste nor the same for men and women. What is expressed most overtly are the opinions of upper-caste men, who by their power, have the 'voice' that is heard, but that does not mean that the others cannot or do not speak. But let us first look at the commonly propagated viewpoints.

A Hindu is born a Hindu yet attains full caste status only after being conferred a sacred thread by the hands of a Brahmin. This ritual called *upanayana* is a must for all adolescent boys of the upper castes, if they claim ritual caste status. In the past, many lower-caste men could, if they attained wealth and political power, pay sufficient money to an eminent Brahmin to confer the sacred thread upon them to make them into Kshatriyas.[7] The Brahmin status was however not easy to attain, though it was easy to lose. The women, on the other hand, are not given the sacred thread and there is one view that says that women have no caste status. In other words, even though the husband is a Brahmin, the wife has the status of a Shudra, or the status difference between a man and a woman can never be dissolved. This has implications for the relative status of men and women in all caste categories and one to which we shall return presently.

In terms of the hierarchy between the four varna categories, only the upper three, namely, the Brahmin, the Kshatriya and the Vaishya are regarded as the twice-born castes, and therefore have the full personhood of caste status. The Shudra are not conferred the sacred thread and are not therefore full persons, and this again justifies the comparison of the status of all women to the Shudra category. Although many upper caste men express that women have no caste status, this does not translate into indifference towards the caste status of a wife. According to the law giver Manu, only a child born of both parents of proper caste status has the right to proper caste ranking; all others are placed in different categories depending upon the relative ranks of their parents. It is important here to mention that a Brahmin has a legitimate right to women of all lower ranks, and the children born of such unions are not as low in status as the children born of the reverse set of unions, namely, between a woman of higher status and a man of lower status. The lowest of all humans, the most degraded, is born of the union of a Brahmin woman with a Shudra man.

[7] For example, history gives us the example of Shivaji, who having attained political power, paid a handsome sum of money to a Brahmin from Benaras to confer Kshatriya status on him.

The Hierarchy of Men

These rules have deep political symbolism. Although played out on the bodies of women, they actually express the inequality between men. First of all, it is importantly expressed through the ritual of *upanayana* that only men are worthy of proper conferring of personhood in society. To frame it in a different way, it is only the personhood and ranking of *men* that is important, that of women is secondary. Thus, men differ from each other and are ranked in significant hierarchies that matter to society as it is they who occupy positions in the public arena. In view of the existing debate regarding the meaning of the terms public and private/domestic, in terms of caste society, public refers to mainly caste ranking and the inheritance of caste status. Women's role is secondary in this respect as their bodies are the earth on which the seed of men is planted, yet the seed is always the more important factor in an agricultural society (Dube, 1986). Women are, at best, regarded as having only half a caste status, important only in conferring status on their children, especially the male child. The woman is merged into her husband's lineage after marriage.

Yet, there is an interesting variance in the perception of her status as viewed from within her household and as viewed by outsiders. From the outside, women are ranked according to the status of their husband. Thus, a Brahmin woman holds the highest position in society and a Shudra woman, the lowest. However, their relative status within their households differs in the reverse. For the Brahmin woman, her status relative to her husband is that of a Shudra, as she does not carry the sacred thread. But for the Shudra woman, her status relative to her husband is far more equal as he too is of as low a rank as her in terms of caste status. Thus, between husband and wife, ideally speaking, the ranks are as Brahmin–Shudra in Brahmin household and Shudra–Shudra in a low-caste household. Such differences are not simply ideological, they are also expressed in practice and in a multiple set of idioms.

Referring back to the relative status difference between men, these ranking express themselves in certain rights and privileges. In a society with status-based rankings, it was the caste hierarchy that determined the resources to which a man had access and very importantly, it included the bodies of women. Thus, the Brahmin's ability to access the bodies of women of all ranks, in turn, expressed the lesser control of men of lower ranks on the bodies of their own women; thus, the Kshatriya has less rights than a Brahmin, the Vaishya even less and the Shudra, none. Therefore, the men at the bottom of the caste hierarchy had no resource at their disposal, not

even the bodies of their own women. This view still prevails in spite of the centuries that have passed since the laws of Manu (for details, see Tambiah, 1975) were formulated. Such deep-seated concepts of rights and privileges are still held by upper caste and elite men in Indian society. I will cite one very recent example. A film actor was recently charged with the rape of his maidservant, a case that has caused quite a sensation in the Indian media. In the entire medley that ensued with the case, one statement was very striking: the man was heard muttering that he never thought, 'It was such a big issue'.

The Dhobis

With this backdrop, let us describe the lives of women of a low-caste group, namely, the dhobis. This particular community that comprises of a single category of occupation, namely, laundering of clothes, is found all over India. For the upper-caste Hindus, the dhobi, *dhopa*, *dhoba* and the various other names by which they are known all over India are an essential part of the caste system as it is they who wash dirty clothes, including menstrual clothes and those a woman may be wearing during childbirth. Just like the upper-caste women's purity is maintained by the exploitation of the bodies of lower-caste women, the purity of all ranks of the twice-born castes is maintained by the exploitation of the labour of the lower-caste groups. Dirty clothes, hair, leather and garbage, for example, are all polluting objects that defile anyone who comes in contact with them. If a Brahmin or upper-caste man or woman were to touch a dead animal or clean a toilet, they would immediately lose caste. In fact, sometimes castes were lost for even less. It is said of the family of the noted poet Rabindranath Tagore, that the ancestors of their family were degraded by smelling the food cooked by a Muslim as it is said in Bengal, that smelling is half the process of eating (*grahnam ardhabhojanam*).

Therefore, it is essential to have certain communities assigned to certain polluting tasks in order to maintain the purity of the bodies of the upper castes. The dhobis is an essential caste group that absorbs the pollution of the dirt of the upper castes. They take away dirty clothes, wash them and return them clean. The women among them do the ironing of clothes in the cities, where clothes once washed need to be ironed as well. They also help the men wash the clothes, spread them out to dry and also collect and deliver them from house to house.

In Delhi, over a period of time, in the process of the city transforming from a pre-capitalist to a capitalist city, the occupation has undergone some,

though not too much of a change. During the colonial period when dense forests were removed to make the city of New Delhi, the very heart of the city called Connaught Place had in its vicinity, the Minto Bridge area, which had a number of washing areas called dhobi ghats as part of the cityscape. During the Mughal period when the city of Shahjahanabad (the city of Shah Jehan) was built, the city was right on the banks of the river Yamuna and the dhobis used the water from the river directly to wash clothes. At that time, the dhobi ghat was just a stone slab on which the dhobis would beat the clothes to get the dirt out. It also included the area where they not only washed the clothes but also steamed them in kilns and hung them out to dry (Channa, 1985). The clothes were transported to the ghat by the donkey that used to be a ubiquitous part of the dhobi identity. The dhobi's dog even now carries a well-known proverb, '*dhobi kā kutta nā ghar ka nā ghat kā*' (a dhobi's dog belongs neither to the house nor to the ghat, implying that since a dog has the habit of following his master around, he keeps shuffling between the house and the ghat, thereby belonging nowhere); the real pun is intended for the dhobi that he belongs nowhere and hangs between these two places. However, the ghat is as much part of the domestic domain of the dhobi as is the house.

During the colonial period, the ghats were built around the places of residence of the civil servants, the government officials, and there are several dhobi settlements in the railway quarters near the heart of New Delhi and elsewhere. At these places, water was made available to them in what came to be known as the '*pucca* ghats', cemented tubs with taps attached to them. Such ghats, with even more modernization such as plastic sheets and tubs, are still found in Minto road and other areas. On the banks of the Yamuna, the Delhi government had first provided the dhobis with cemented ghats in place of the sandy riverbanks where they washed clothes on the stone slabs. Later, around the decade of the 2000, these were again removed in the name of preventing pollution of the Yamuna. They are now working from the *pucca* ghats interior to the city and use tap water primarily to wash clothes.

The occupation thrives because in India, the link between certain traditional occupations and caste is hard to break, especially as certain kinds of work were, and are still, associated with pollution and a low status. No other caste group will take up certain works as washing clothes, tanning leather and sweeping the streets except for those who were traditionally born into these occupations. Even today, in many modern haircutting saloons, most

men who cut hair belong to the barber caste. In some places, if a particular occupation becomes lucrative, the members of the caste themselves do not allow others to enter that profession. In one of my visits to a village in Uttarakhand, members of the leather-working community told me that they have formed a strong caste-based union to keep other castes out of the business of dealing with carcasses of dead animals as this has now become a well-paying occupation; the bones, hides and hooves have all assumed great commercial value. The leather workers now claim hereditary rights to this occupation and do not want competition.

The earlier prohibition on washing of clothes at home has almost completely disappeared. Most housewives wash the clothes at home, or employ someone to wash them by hand or use a washing machine. However, the washing of clothes has received a new lease of life by the mushrooming of various commercial establishments like hotels, hospitals and clothes manufacturing factories that need a large-scale laundering of clothes. Laundries and dry-cleaning shops have also come up in most neighbourhoods. In the 1970s, when I did my first fieldwork, the laundry shops would be owned mostly by upper castes but the actual people employed to wash the clothes were still dhobis. Even all the institutions such as embassies, hotels and hostels who needed the clothes washed, had to turn to the dhobi for this work, as no other caste would do it. This gave a degree of viability to their profession and even as of today, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, they are continuing with their occupation. The women, however, have taken almost fully to ironing clothes and in the city, one can see a dhoban (as a woman was referred to) standing at street corners and under trees ironing clothes. Almost every neighbourhood in Delhi has its dhoban (although many of them do not like to be called as such any more). Men also iron but it is regarded mostly as a woman's work. (The viability of their traditional occupation and the dependency it involves with those of high castes has prevented the dhobis from wanting to engage in political activity of the kind of a dalit movement. They, however, have their own script for protest, but an elaborate discussion on that is beyond the scope of this chapter).

The men used to wash at the banks of the river Yamuna that flows through Delhi, but nowadays, because of the heavy pollution and lack of flow of the river water, they use tap water for which they have to pay money to the municipal corporation. Many of them have now installed washing machines, driers and electric pumps for pumping water. But the quality of

their lives remains the same and a visit to the dhobi *katras*,[8] in 2005–06, gave a sense of deja vu. Very little seemed to have changed in terms of the kind of housing, the kind of lifestyle, the women ironing clothes, and the overcrowded rooms packed with furniture, people and clothes in piles that have come to be washed.

Gender Relations

In the 1970s, I met a couple during the course of my fieldwork who were desperate to have a daughter and were going to the shrine of Vaishno Devi in northern Himalayas to pray for one. They were willing to make a vow to get a daughter. In another household with only sons, the daily work was almost coming to a standstill as the parents of the girl to whom the eldest son was betrothed were raising their demands before they were willing to marry their daughter. 'They are taking advantage of our situation that we have no girl in the house to run our day to day life,' the boy's father had complained. The only woman in the house was the middle-aged mother of the grown-up sons who had to spend almost the entire day in ironing clothes and collecting and distributing them to her clients. The husband and the sons were engaged almost full time in washing, so that there was no one to do the daily chores like cooking, cleaning and taking care of the household money that was assigned largely to unmarried girls.

The girl child in a dhobi household was a boon and not a curse as she is considered in many upper-caste households even today, as the falling sex ratio of India in the 2011 census shows. The girls grew up helping their mothers and took up responsibilities of running the household at an early age. By the time she was thirteen or fourteen, a dhobi girl was adept at cooking, lighting the hearth, taking care of her younger siblings and managing the household budget. Since parents were usually away at work the entire day, the household money and the responsibility of getting items of daily use from the market was entrusted to the girls. Even when she herself did not go to do shopping, a teen-aged girl would command her younger or elder brother to run errands for her and usually assumed a commanding position within the household.

[8] A *katra* is an enclosed neighbourhood usually with a narrow opening that opens into a small courtyard with rooms all around. A typical dhobi household occupies one or two small rooms around this place and they have all kinds of improvisations to increase the small space provided to them. The *katra* promotes a cooperative lifestyle around the shared courtyard and is very secure.

Young daughters-in-law were required to spend more time in ironing of clothes than to look after their children, or to do the cooking, as this was mainly done by the unmarried girls. As an adult married woman, a woman's job was to shoulder her responsibility in the traditional occupation for which she was trained since childhood. In my discussions with the young men, I sometimes broached the subject of inter-caste marriage. Most of them countered this by saying, 'But in our household, the day she enters, the new daughter-in-law is supposed to pick up an iron and begin ironing clothes. How can we marry anyone outside of our caste?'

Thus, for a dhobi household, the birth of a daughter was essential for it was the girl child who carried the domestic duties on her shoulders and continued the traditional occupation as she grew older and married. As she advanced in age, her work input diverted more and more towards the ironing of clothes and the livelihood rather than performance of any kind of domestic duties. An older woman was not expected to do any kind of household work but concentrate on ironing as soon as a daughter-in-law entered the house. For reasons of sexuality, the younger women were restricted more to the inside of the *katra*, while the older women went out to do various kinds of work that they were required to do.

The dhobis, both men and women, realized the potential threat to the women as they walked around the neighbourhood and stood ironing clothes in a public and exposed area. The unmarried girls were never made to do these jobs and were kept in the safe confines of the house, rather the *katra*.[9] The young married women would help with ironing and sorting and folding of clothes but from within the house itself. It was only when a woman was past the age of sexual attractiveness, that is, when she became a mother-in-law, that she would venture out into the open.

The men had deep respect for their women and they learnt even as young boys to obey their sisters and mothers. A woman among the dhobis is considered more capable and intelligent than a man and men often suffer verbal abuse from the women in silence. I have seen even grown-up boys being slapped by women related to them, such as mothers or aunts, for not doing their work properly. A wife uses the familiar '*tu*' for her husband and not the honorific '*aap*' as used by the women of upper castes. In fact, none of the cultural etiquettes used by the upper-caste wives to show respect to their husbands was prevalent among the dhobis. I often heard wives abuse and ridicule their husband as they made them do chores around the house

[9] For details about the *katra*, see Channa (1985).

just as they were used to be doing to their brothers before marriage. Neither did the husband and wife maintain any distance or overt formality with each other as has been recorded by anthropologists working with upper-caste families (Madan, 1965/2002).

The relationship of men and women was of camaraderie, sharing work and the hardships of life together, what has been called 'shared oppression' (Lorde, 1992: 50).[10] The men were quick to defend their women and asserted the purity and moral character of their sisters and wives in direct contradiction to the stereotypes of sexual laxity projected for lower-caste women by the upper castes. I recall a woman once telling me,

> I was going with my husband and he walked much ahead of me. I did not know how to call him so I called him aloud by his name. He came back but later asked me as to how I could call him by his name in public? But I told him that it was not such a big issue, after I was only calling my own husband and not anyone else, so he did not say anything.

This easy and equal relationship has often been romanticized in fiction and folklore as a man and his wife forming a working group; toiling together is a theme that is also looked upon as attractive, even by the elite. The love between a dhobi couple was immortalized in a Hindi film of the name *Pukar*, made in the 1940s by the famous filmmaker of that time, Sohrab Modi. The central figures of the film were a dhobi couple who were shown happily working together on the banks of the river Yamuna near the Red Fort that was the residence of the Mughal Emperor, Shah Jahan, along with his beautiful and much loved wife, Mumtaz Mahal. The magnanimous king had put a large bell on the gate of the fort that anyone with a grievance could ring and would be immediately granted an audience with the emperor himself. The name *Pukar*, meaning 'The Call', comes from this. The happy dhobi couple's life was shattered when an arrow thrown from the direction of the palace accidently pierced the heart of the husband who was washing clothes on the ghat. Unlike an upper-caste woman, the dhobi woman was not to take anything lying down. She strode to the palace of the king and rang the bell, summoning him (hence, *Pukar*).

[10] In her description of rural women in the Himalayas, Mehta writes, 'Older members of the community say that a relatively egalitarian division of labour was commonplace up until a generation ago when there were few off-farm employment opportunities available; before men started migrating in large numbers into the plains, they had little alternative but to assist women in various subsistence tasks' (Mehta, 1996: 185).

The king called her in and asked about her grievance. She complained that it was none other than the *malika* (empress) whose arrow had killed her husband and she wanted justice. The king turned pale but the empress was summoned to court. The contrast between the two women is vividly brought out in this scene. While the elite empress is a shadow behind a curtain, the low-caste dhobi woman stands in full view of everyone in the court, with no veil, defiantly asking for her rights. The king has to give in to her demand for justice. He steps down from his throne and stands in front of her. He tells her that according to the Islamic law, she was entitled to equivalent compensation and could use the bow and arrow used to kill her husband to kill him and thus render the empress a widow, as she had become. The dhobi woman is overwhelmed and chooses to forgive the empress and at the same time, praises the emperor's sense of justice.

This brief description of the film illustrates the gender constructs of the elite and the working-class woman: the empress and the dhoban. The latter is not depicted in any negative light but comes across as a devoted wife, yet strong woman, who is determined to seek justice for her husband. In the film *Ankur*, the servant girl is likewise shown standing up strongly in defence of her husband. Thus, although the general society has been constructing its images informed by the rules of patriarchy and caste hierarchy, the creative and artistic mind has been able to capture the dasi in a more romantic genre, elevating her to the status of a strong and loyal woman.

In fact, the strength of the low-born woman has often been brought out even in mythology. In the Mahabharata, Queen Satyavati has to summon her son (by a previous alliance), the sage Ved Vyas, to impregnate her two widowed daughters-in-law, in a bid to save her husband's lineage. The two high-born princesses cannot tolerate the fierce looks of this sage and the first one closes her eyes, thereby giving birth to a blind boy; and the second one turns pale, giving birth to an albino boy. But the maidservant who is brought in to satisfy the sage, who is obviously not happy with the earlier two consorts, is compliant and suffers no such fears. Her son is the wise and normal Vidur, who remains a strong and sane character throughout, giving support to his two rather deformed brothers, but who cannot become king being the son of a maidservant. Here, the maid is a stronger character than the princesses. Thus, the dasi always came out stronger than the devi when it was a matter of courage and strength of character.

The Construction of the 'Other'

While the dominant discourses in society are constructed through the exercise of overt power, there are many contra currents where the marginal too construct their own narratives. The theory of 'alterity' works both ways. Since the mind, unlike the body, is free in spite of all kinds of impositions on the body, the dominated have their own version of the world that keeps alive their self-esteem, their pride and their humanity. The dhobis, too, had many ways of contradicting the stereotypes heaped upon them by society. They had their own narratives, like when I had asked them as to why they do not have the Brahmin to perform their rituals, the reply was, 'We were created before the Brahmins' (*Hum Brahmin se pehle paida huey*).

One of my very first conversations with a group of young men in one of the dhobi *katra* still remains vivid. They were very keen to criticize the girls from upper classes,

> These girls come to college and go around wearing pants like boys. They have no sense of honour. Look at our women! They are always so decently dressed. Our women are very conscious of their honour (*izzat*). They know how to conduct themselves in public but these girls from rich families are proud of their money and status. They think just because they are travelling by a car they can get by with anything. But we know that they are nothing. They have no honour.

This aspect of decent dressing is adhered to strictly by all the lower-caste women who have to walk the public pathways in order to get a living. Even today, in my visits to the dhobi areas, I found the women dressed in their traditional attire, with heads covered and a tendency to cover their faces when talking to a stranger. The dhobans who stand by the roadside in neighbourhoods also assume a demure body language, usually working with their body and heads covered as much as possible, even if they are older. Only if a woman gets really old she may discard so much of covering and be more relaxed, taking off her head covering and sitting in a relaxed posture by the wayside. But at the same time, if provoked, these women can raise their voices and be very aggressive. The upper castes create a stereotype of the lower-caste women as being 'brazen, foul mouthed and shameless'. This is especially true of the scavenger women who, out of necessity, are seen on the streets sweeping in full public gaze. People often make sarcastic remarks about their verbosity in dealing with any untoward action by a stranger or

passer-by. An often-repeated scenario of urban myth is that if a 'decent' girl is teased or sexually harassed, she will run away and keep quiet out of sheer embarrassment but the lower-caste woman, like a woman from the dhobi or scavenger caste, will 'shamelessly' take on the aggressor till he has to retreat in embarrassment. A phrase often used in Hindi in North India is '*Inke muh nahi lagna chahiye*'. It literally means do not take on a lower-caste woman, you are no match to her. But what is meant in a more insidious way is that such a woman has no sense of shame so she will tackle an aggressor directly to his face. An upper-class girl has more shame and is more compliant and will not protest. In other words, even to protest against assault is, in the idiom of upper-caste men, a 'non-feminine' and 'undesirable' trait in a woman.

Women must keep quiet, women must tolerate – that is what most high-born women were taught by their parents. Thus, a mother would instruct her daughter, 'Not to say anything. To run away or keep quiet about things even if they happen.' I have earlier cited the example of women who keep supporting their husbands even if they have violated their relationship with other women.

Another stereotype of the lower-caste or lower-class woman (from the slums) is that instead of 'putting up with their husbands they retaliate, they will take up a broom and beat them up if they do anything to them' or 'these women do not tolerate any thing, they are ready to abuse at the drop of a pin'. From the point of view of upper-caste men, these are highly undesirable qualities in a woman. A woman who is properly brought up, that is, she is a lady or a woman of virtue, is tolerant of everything. The true devi-like qualities are to be patient, compliant, uncomplaining and to tolerate everything from men. In this way, the 'other' woman is stigmatized with 'unfeminine' and 'unattractive' qualities. It is these very qualities, shunned by upper-caste men, that the marginalized women develop as a matter of self-defence. Since these qualities make them unattractive to the upper-caste men, they consciously use them to repulse attention from them. However, the fact that they do not succeed is substantiated by the numerous cases of abuse against marginalized dalit women. Yet, these myths and stereotypes are a kind of symbolic violence that the upper castes, both men and women, heap upon the dominated sections of Indian society.

These stereotypes are also simply not in language and folklore; to a large extent, they do condition practice. From her childhood, an upper-caste girl from a middle-class family is told to pull in her chest, walk with her head down and keep her voice down. Most women develop an unconscious body

language where they pull themselves in as much as possible. At least till the present generation of women, it is rare to find a woman from a respectable family who is able to walk with her body straight to the extent that many of them begin to suffer from posture-related illnesses by the time they reach old age. However, the same is not true of women who have to do hard physical labour for a living. A woman who has to walk with a basket on her head, or balance a bundle of clothes or sweep with a broom develops, of necessity, a different body language. They walk straight and often with a swing to their hips, and these are considered unwomanly and at the same time seem to be attracting the upper class of men. Searle–Chatterjee (1981) in her ethnography of the sweeper caste has also mentioned how these women walk with long strides, proudly with their heads held high, holding their brooms. From the overt and expressed point of view of the men from the dominant groups who would like women to be both weak and compliant, these are not very attractive traits (yet covertly, they find it sexually attractive). The women of the upper castes also look upon these women as a threat as they feel that they would be sexually attractive to their men by their very so-called 'brazenness'. However, with changing sexual mores, that we shall discuss in another chapter, such a body language may be now incorporated within the upper classes also.

The practices and routines the dalit women sometimes develop are a defence mechanism against the vulnerability that they feel at a conscious level. This is true not only of the dhobis but of most other low-caste groups in other regions as well. On a field trip to Haryana in North India, I was told by an elderly woman of the untouchable caste group:

> We have to take care of our own *izzat* (honour). We cannot send a young daughter-in-law or daughter out to get water or fodder. The women of Yadav community (the dominant caste in this region) can go where ever they like. Their *men have the power* to make sure that their women are safe. Who is there to protect the honour of our women? It is *we* who have to take care of ourselves.

This statement speaks a lot. For one, she very perceptively puts the onus of protection on powerful men. The men who have the power can protect their women, but the dalit men have been deprived of such powers both by the society and by the Brahmanical prescriptions. Even if today the dalit men do not believe in the laws of Manu, they lack political as well as economic power to defend their women.

The knowledge that their men are powerless against the world to protect their honour forces the dalit women to themselves take up the responsibility to protect their bodies against the outside world. In this process, they also develop rhetoric of virtue that is itself protective as it gives them a psychological boost to face the world. Every dalit woman I have talked to was convinced of her own virtue, and every dhoban was ready to gossip about every so-called respectable household she visits while asserting her and her family's moral superiority. It was always that 'We may be poor and downtrodden but we are more virtuous than *them* (the upper castes)'.

Their strong sense of honour can be conceptualized in Josephide's terms as, 'The action of respectability, reputation, and integrity as well as the idea that each person should act correctly according to their role and position in society' (Josephide, 1988: 36). In Indian society, and for the dalit women in particular, the notion of 'correctness' accrues to their sexual modesty. In a closely knit and physically clustered community, actual behaviour and gossip about behaviour cannot be segregated. Women must take care not to be the subject of any gossip. Anyway, the densely packed lifestyle makes very action, rather every spoken word, highly visible and heard, so real liaisons – both pre-marital and post-marital – would be hard to execute. Earlier, this kind of closed living for the lower castes would have been necessary to protect their women from the outside world and at the same time, imposing some kind of visibility for all concerned.

This conversation from *Sangati*, a book about the lives of dalit women, says a lot. A little girl is afraid to go by herself with her elderly grandmother, Patti, to collect firewood from the forest as she fears both men and spirits. The grandmother, a widow, tells the girl not to be scared and that she has been going alone to the forest many times. She tells her granddaughter as to why she is not afraid,

> You don't know anything about me, really. Even the people of our street don't know me. I'm an *orutthankai pattini*, I've slept with only one man. I won't allow any other fellow anywhere near me. They don't know this, those whores of the Paraiya Street who say all sorts of things about me, curse them! (Bama and Holmstrom, 2005: 9)

Here, typically, the old woman is retaliating against the usual gossip that follows a woman who is attractive and without a husband and belongs to the dalit caste group. There is no way even her own community (the people down Paraiya street) would be convinced that she is a woman of virtue. The

dalit young widow is a woman of the most vulnerable category as she has the added disadvantage of being a dalit among the general vulnerable category of young widows. Indeed, such a woman would be open to exploitation at every step. As Kolenda (1987) has pointed out, such young widows among the low castes are sometimes even sold off by their own kinsmen. Yet, Patti (described as an attractive widow from a young age), having achieved the impossible, is justly proud of herself.

However, there is another aspect to this sentiment, namely, the influence of upper-caste patriarchal values. This is true for most dalit communities that live in close proximity to and have social interaction with the upper castes. The notion of the power of a 'woman of virtue', a sati, is found all over the Hindu mythology and folklore, but communities situated away from direct influence of Brahmanical Hinduism may not be so much influenced by such values. But those who are, including the dhobis, are certainly influenced, and also emulate in a strategy of boosting self-respect. Apart from sexual virtue that seems to be a primary node of contention between the upper and lower castes, each claiming their own superiority and the other's laxity in this respect, there are other areas of gender-informed values that become areas of concern. One such is the notion of motherhood.

Motherhood

As discussed earlier, the devi is constructed largely in the image of the ideal mother. A woman is to be regarded as the ultimately virtuous woman if she fulfils the role of an ideal mother. Yet, what exactly is this role has been modified over time and been given completely different images and interpretations.

In Indian mythology, there is no particular emphasis on the individual mother–child relationship, rather the woman's image as a mother is more of the celestial life-giving principle rather than being an affectionate or nurturing mother. The mother was one who provided food and shelter to her children, but in a generalized manner. In the joint households of the upper castes, individual mothers had little role to play and in traditional households, too much attention to one's own child was considered as not right as all children had to be treated equally. The mothers or mother surrogates were generally associated with the kitchen and identified as food givers. Sometimes, they would also be nurses but not necessarily only for their own children. The noted filmmaker Satayjit Ray, who was an only child of a young widowed

mother from an elite upper-class Bengali family, recalls that apart from being an extraordinary cook, his mother was an outstanding nurse who would take on herself the duty to nurse anyone in the larger household who fell ill. He also recalls the English books his mother would read out to him when he was a small child. Thus, for the upper-caste/class women, the main work expected was in the domestic realm of nurturance and taking care of people, including children. In my own childhood, the only other role apart from cooking and generally taking care of the household that I recall my mother performing was to teach me the alphabets and some rudimentary entry into the world of the three Rs. Yet later, the role of education was totally left to the school and parents completely withdrew from it. Thus, the ideal mother was more a construct of the media, especially from the 1970s, a fact that I have mentioned in the earlier chapter (Chapter 2) as well.

The 1970s mother assumed larger than life roles in the collective imagination of the people. However, since the devi image was associated with the upper castes, the low-caste woman was never expected to fulfil this image of the ideal mother. But by the 1970s, the lower castes like the dhobis had generated consciousness to contest these imposed images. The conflict between the older and younger generations of women was evident against this backdrop as the concept of 'being a mother' for the dhobi women, and for most other women who had to earn a living by hard labour, was confined to the biological act of giving birth alone. It did not extend to nurturing the children, taking care of them and showering them with undue attention. However, the dhobis were only one generation behind the upper classes of India in this respect.

Even among the elite and middle classes, the mother's role by the middle of the last century was not particularly demanding. Most of the nurturing and care was either left to servants or to elder siblings. It was only after colonization and the imbibing of Western values that some mothers, at least, began to include hygiene and education of children within their role as mothers. My grandmother had twelve children, yet none of the children (that is, my mother and her siblings) have any memory of being bathed, clothed or fed by their mother, most of which was done by servants and, at best, by siblings. These Western values were taken on by the new generation who were expected to shower more attention and be ideal mothers taking care of the children in a much more personalized manner. This was reinforced by the preponderance of the nuclear family where the mother alone, rather than a houseful of women, became singularly responsible for her own children.

Thus, in the 1970s, in the urban middle-class families, the role of the mother had began to change in a direction that put much more responsibility on this role, although not as much as we see now.

The young dhobi women of the 1970s, the new mothers, of my own age group at that time, often would complain to me about the obstacles put in their efforts to become what they considered as ideal mothers. In the words of one young woman,

> I really want to take care of my children. I want to keep them clean, give them proper baths, clothe them, feed them and generally shower attention on them. But my mother-in-law thinks it is just a waste of time. She wants me to spend all my time in doing the household work of ironing and sorting out clothes. She tells me that children are brought up by God's will. They will grow up anyhow. What is the role of the mother in making them adults? It happens just like that. All children grow up and if they do not it is God's will again. The mother only has to give birth and give milk and the rest happens according to fate.

They often asked me in details what I did for my own child, what I fed her, how I bathed her, and so on.

Sometimes, they would tell me, 'You know I bought Farex for my child because you told me you feed your daughter Farex. I am sure that will make it grow strong like child from a good family.' Thus, they had acquired aspirations to be like the middle-class mothers being propagated on television and media (which had begun to make its presence felt by this time). Advertisements for baby foods played an important role too. The conflicts that arose in the dhobi households were between generations of women who had different notions of gender and motherhood and what it meant to be a woman.

The Public versus Domestic Domains

But what is important to note is that motherhood, as such eulogized so much in literature and in anthropology as a mark of womanhood, is not really an important aspect of being a woman as one may think it is. In the Western dichotomy between the domestic and public, this issue is very important as the public versus private has centred on the domestic role of women and external, meaning economic and political, role of men. Anthropological ethnographies have come out in criticism of this stance, specifically, as

Collier and Yanagisako put it, 'without simultaneously understanding the organization of political and economic arenas that provide goals and resources for both sexes' (Collier and Yanagisako, 1987: 6).

As pointed out by Moore (1988), the rigid public/domestic dichotomy envisaged by Rosaldo and others is a result of nineteenth century Western ideology, mainly arising out of the 'natural' role of mother. Motherhood as an ideology encompasses not only the fact of giving birth but also the nurture and care of children along with housekeeping chores. Quite rightly, Moore advocates a necessity to investigate, cross culturally, the concept 'mother' and what it really means in different cultures. Further, Etienne and Leacock (1980) take gender relations outside of the confinements of the household or domestic and relate it to wider politico-economic relations in society. Thus, I argue that instead of dichotomizing activities in domestic versus public, and then understanding the position of women therein, it is better to begin with the community vis-à-vis its relationship with the larger society of which it is a part.

Historically speaking, the scope of the wider society is becoming expanded by the process of globalization and the market forces of capitalism, of which the dhobi, by their situation within the city of Delhi, are an integral part. Yet, the traditional caste society has not disappeared and nor have the pre-existing hierarchies. When we look at Delhi, and especially those communities and regions of Delhi that have been part of the pre-industrial city of Shahjehanabad, Alavi's comment makes sense:

> ...every society builds on inherited, social institutional and cultural products of the past. Capitalism does not erase them totally and substitutes new social institutions brought out from nowhere. It takes legacies from the past as the raw materials for building its society for the future, combining them into new social and cultural realties it does also create. (Alavi, 1982: 174)

For a community like the dhobis, there is very little in terms of societal resources available in terms of money or prestige for both men and women. The men traditionally did not work in any public realm that bestowed them either with prestige or money, or that gave them any judicial or political powers that they could use to segregate their women and confine them to the domestic realm like the men of the upper classes we have discussed in Chapter 2. The separation, in fact, between the house and the place of work itself does not exist. In every dhobi *katra*, the neighbourhoods they were assigned in the old city, one could see evidence of their work, in the

carts and nowadays, cycles parked and the piles of clothes that are heaped everywhere, and every *katra*[11] had some *hauda*s or tanks for washing clothes, driers and women ironing clothes that made the entire place look busy with the laundering work that is their distinctive identity.

When I asked one dhobi about the location of a new *katra* in a different area in Old Delhi, he told me the direction as one has to take a Metro, etc., and then said you will recognize it immediately *by the clothes being hung out to dry*. In other words, even today, no residential area of the dhobis is free from the identifying marks of their occupation.

In such a scenario, the separation of the public and domestic becomes irrelevant. Both men and women have to work in the household occupation and both divide their time between the home and the ghat that is situated away from home yet considered as part of the domestic realm. A dhobi woman would walk to the ghat and help her husband with the drying of clothes, spreading them out on the ground and carrying them to and fro, although women did not light the *bhatti* (the kiln) or beat the clothes. But I knew of one woman who was a widow and who had no male member in the family to help her, who used to go to the ghat to wash clothes as well. If you asked the dhobi, they would say that women do '*ghar ka kaam*', quite literally meaning household work, yet the meaning of this 'household' work was not at all how it would be understood for a middle-class, upper-caste woman, or what it means in general for a Western audience. It does not mean that women cook, clean, look after children and take care of the home. It means that they share equal responsibility with their men for carrying out the traditional occupation to which they have been assigned by their caste.

In fact, the conventional notion of household work was not at all included into the role performance of a woman. She was not expected to be a proficient cook or to spend time looking after the health and hygiene of her children. In the 1970s and to some extent now, I found that small children still run about with running noses and barely clean. I have never seen a mother feed an older child except those that are breast fed. Most of the time, a mother who is busy with chores like ironing would continue to finish her task at hand even if her baby was howling. During my fieldwork, I was never told about any woman that she was a good mother or a good cook, something that one hears often in middle-class households. Rather women, especially

[11] These *katra* are typical of the pre-industrial city where as Sjoberg writes, 'It is usual for each occupational group to live and work in a particular street or quarter, one that generally bears the name of the trade, in question' (Sjoberg, 1960: 169).

older ones, would proudly tell me how proficient they were in ironing clothes, how many clothes they could iron in an hour, and so on. Even in the socializing of girl children, I was told that they are given small clothes to iron at first and gradually learn to iron more difficult ones.

One skill which one woman proudly claimed was that of coding the clothes. The dhobis had a complex system of coding the clothes that came to them for washing as they were illiterate and could not write receipts, etc. These were pictorial images made at one corner of the clothes with a special indelible ink. Every dhobi woman knew the code of specific households and they have interesting symbolization. Even today when many of them are literate, they continue with this coding system which only a dhobi man or woman can do.

Thus, for both men and women, the traditional skills were most important and these were skills specifically pertaining to their identity as dhobis. All other work such as cooking and taking care of children was relegated to the category of inconsequential work. One need not be a dhobi to do such things as cook or clean vessels, nor very importantly to raise children. In fact, young girls and even boys or anyone else was entrusted with taking care of a child. Even an older sibling as young as 8 years could be seen carrying around a child of about 2 years of age. The importance of adolescent girls in the household economy also prevented them from having child marriages as was prevalent among the upper castes in India. Women among the dhobis and also other service castes contribute to productive labour, and therefore are married at a later age.

Neither was the division of labour too much gender specific. Men could and did cook fairly frequently in the house. They would also help look after children. Within a dhobi household, there was little else as household work, except cleaning vessels that mostly young girls would do. Specifically middle-class activities done by housewives like cleaning the house or tidying up were unnecessary as there was hardly any space to clean or sweep. The dhobi households normally have barely a few feet of space that may be left open and sometimes not even that. In every house, the beds are raised from the ground by putting bricks, etc., to accommodate a lot of stuff underneath. Every conceivable space is taken up by the bundles of clothes. In fact, the only open spaces that could be found were the few feet of courtyard that formed the centre of the *katra* that could, in some lucky places, have a tree to provide some green and a place to sit under in the heat of the afternoon sun. It was a convenient way to live as most women and men were busy coming in and

going out, performing their household rounds and coming and going from the ghats. The children were left in the open spaces where they were kind of collectively taken care of, even if some member of the immediate family was around. This was and is a system of cooperative community living that the dhobis still follow.

Even when many of them began to move out or were forced to move out of some of their homes in the old city where they say they had been settled from the time the city was built by Shah Jahan, they quickly rebuilt their community life as there was a tendency to form clusters rather than live in separate houses. This is the reason when I was making enquiries about a new settlement, I was told, all I had to do was to locate 'clothes hanging out'.

In this community life, individual parenting did take a back seat. Women were valued for the work they did for the household as a contribution of labour to make a living. Devoid of any power in the economic and political realm, the men had little to show up to claim high status and deference from their wives. They would happily, or at least ungrudgingly, do the household work so that as long as they were dhobis, the separation of public and domestic was meaningless. They all did '*ghar ka kaam*' and the woman's contribution was as important if not more than that of the men. In her ethnography of the sweepers, Searle–Chatterjee (1981) has likewise mentioned that men do all kinds of household work and help their wives to cook and do other domestic chores.

At the same time, in all the dalit caste groups, women have specific roles to perform that although traditional and caste based, cannot be classified in any clear terms in either the public or the domestic realm. Yagi (1999: 269) lists the tasks performed by the women of the service castes in a North Indian village and that includes the female *nai* (barber) whose work is to cut nails, paint them, decorate the bride and attend on the bride and groom during a wedding. In Bengal, the female *nai*, or *nain* as they are called, would come regularly to give the women a pedicure and paint their feet with *alta* (a red dye put on feet by married women). The chamar or leather worker caste women were midwives; in fact, in some places, even the *nain* is a midwife and is brought in to cut the umbilical cord and assist in childbirth. The dhoban or washerwoman in this system washed the clothes of the women, especially menstrual clothes and those after childbirth. All these tasks are community specific and fall within the range of household or traditional work. As Tokita–Tanabe (1999: 197) points out in a kind of criticism of Chatterjee's designation of the home and beyond, or *andar* and *bahir*

(discussed in Chapter 2), that in the rural areas, and here I would add for the lower castes engaged in manual labour, these distinctions do not make sense put exactly in those terms.

For the upper castes and elites, the inner and the outer realms may involve not only a physical segregation but a concern with domestic spirituality and external nationalism. For the service castes and the rural folk, the inner realm is that which belongs to the 'identities of family, caste and village community'. Thus, the inner is those areas of life where one belongs to the community and to the caste.

Therefore, for the dhobi woman and for others like her who are not devis confined to the inner realm of the home but women who have to venture out to work, the work itself is an identity that provides them with the same security as the inside of the house provides to an upper-caste woman. For example, while people may raise eyebrows if a woman is sitting or standing by the wayside who may look as if she belongs to a middle-class family, no one even notices the dhoban as she sits or stands the entire day in the open. For her, the action of ironing clothes, of having the overall appearance of a dhoban, is security in itself. Few persons would either question or take as amiss her presence outside. It is the same with the sweeper woman and others who create, as it may be said, a 'space' around them, that is, insulation, for it is their *ghar ka kaam*, so recognized by the world at large.

Thus, the concepts of inner and outer also carry with them connotations of appropriateness and inappropriateness that, in turn, are informed by the caste, class and occupational identities. Thus, the gendering of space has nothing absolute or even region or culture specific. It is also a matter of who belongs where and which particular category of woman is to be seen in which appropriate context. Here, we come to a very important issue, namely, the body itself as a marker of appropriate identity.

Crafting of Bodies

Since caste is not race, there is no real difference in physical appearance between women or men of one caste or the other. Yet, it has been an imperative from the ancient times to create such material adjuncts of the body as to make clear the caste status of a person, especially that of women, but men too are not exempt from such rules.

It was essential, for example, to differentiate visually between women of various strata as the society's practices towards them were highly differentiated.

Thus, in India, there are very overt markers of marital status inscribed on a woman so that she is treated in an appropriate manner. However, what has been most important in caste-based society is to distinguish an upper-caste woman from a lower-caste one. The lower-caste women were always open to sexual exploitation from upper-caste men and very obvious demarcations were made in this regard; for example, in southern India, the lower-caste women were not allowed to cover the upper part of their body and they were not allowed to wear shoes and certain kinds of ornaments, especially those worn by upper-caste women. The Brahmin women were always distinguished by their diamond earrings. Low-caste men too could not wear good clothes, carry an umbrella and wear shoes. There were many ways in which caste was inscribed on the body and while some of it was dictated by traditions, some of it was a deliberate creation of the upper classes to maintain their distinction from the lower categories of society.

The dhobi and other low-caste women in North India were prohibited from wearing nose ornaments and also gold jewellery. They were not expected to appear in fine or very modern clothes, something that they avoid wearing even now. It is also a matter of praxis as they need to avoid being too conspicuous and to look appropriate to their role. While caste prohibitions were an issue earlier and women of low castes were forcibly prevented from looking like upper-caste women, the restrictions have now become almost self-imposed.

Here we can observe an interesting phenomenon, especially for those women who still engage in traditional occupations. Earlier in this chapter, we have discussed the notions of the appropriate space that is occupied by each category of women. However, the overt signifier of appropriateness would be in terms of dress and body language. What these appropriate signals are, are imbibed through the habitus. They are the unconscious yet conscious ways in which each person imbibes a sense of belonging, a sense of doing the right thing, and not to appear out of place.

Thus, a woman who sweeps the streets has in addition to her body language, an appropriate sense of dressing, so that while she is doing what she is doing, she does not appear to be wrongfully situated. If she is able to send out the appropriate signals, she will *not be noticed*. It is this very ability of passing unnoticed that creates a sense of security. No one will look twice at the dhoban standing by the roadside as long as *she appears to be one*. This is also how the public becomes, in practice, the private. It is interesting to note that women of different occupational categories also have their

own dress codes; thus, a sweeper woman will not look like a woman who irons clothes and of course, there are regional variations also. Therefore, appropriate body signals is something that is also socialized into the girls as they grow up, although a large part of it is unconsciously imbibed or learnt through imitation.

Changing Dimensions of the City

The dhobis are not static and have never been. When we speak of tradition, it implies something that was in existence till some new situation took over. In this case, my work had focused in the 1970s on the urbanization of Delhi, the introduction of new avenues of work, even as the old avenues were getting eroded. In the older prevalent system of caste values, upper-caste women did not wash clothes, yet, when the new detergents and soaps hit the market, along with synthetic fibers like polyester and nylon, the need to give everything to the dhobi was reduced. More important was a new set of work ethics that came up with reduced attention to notions of purity and pollution. After the Partition, many Punjabi women who were seeking to survive by work took to washing clothes for others as a living, and getting a maid to wash clothes rather than giving everything to the dhobi became a norm for most middle-class homes. However, even till the 1980s and the 1990s, many households continued to give at least some clothes like heavy linen and curtains to the dhobi to be washed. Many continued out of sheer habit and because there were hereditary relationships with dhobi households that had continued for generations and could not be terminated just like that.

Further changes have taken place as the dhobis themselves have taken to doing other jobs. The policies of positive discrimination or reservations have played a key role and we shall discuss its effects in the Chapter 5. Even in the 1970s, some boys were going to college and later, they took up jobs as bank clerks – one of them is now a manager – and several others went into white collar jobs also. Yet, the change has not been so drastic that the character of the community has changed. A majority still continue with their age-old occupation, with added frills that we have already discussed. As of now, no major change is visible in their lifestyle. Clothes still hang out of every dhobi neighbourhood; the ghats at Minto Bridge and other locations are alive with the sound of clothes being washed; and every neighbourhood has its dhobi men and women who stand ironing clothes. Since the work of just ironing

has become quite lucrative, many dhobis who are older and cannot do the hard labour of washing clothes take to it. Thus, gender differentiation of work also gets diluted with age and older men and women tend to occupy similar roles in work.

However, changes in aspiration had become visible even during the 1970s. There was a tendency to take on the lifestyle of the upper castes in the immediate neighbourhood as the political implications of a casteless society had began to filter down and change the worldview of the lower castes. Time and again, even as they went to school, and especially college, the broad vision of the democratic Constitution of India was revealed. On ground of course, then and as now, the caste discriminations were practised in full swing. Some dhobis tried to rationalize it in terms of the rhetoric of the upper castes that they should change their lifestyle in order to make a claim to respectability.

Their marriages began to incorporate some of the rituals of the upper castes, although no Brahmin ever came to get them married nor were any Brahmanical rituals like *saptapadi* performed. I distinctly recall a marriage that I had attended in which some elderly male relative tried to light a fire with some bits of newspaper for the bride and groom to take rounds instead of the highly ritualistic sacrificial fire prepared by the Brahmin in a high-caste Hindu marriage. The circumbulation of this meagre fire, which in a Hindu marriage is done with Vedic chants and a sense of great sacredness, was done by the groom with his shoes on; a sacrilege in a high-caste marriage.

To understand these changes better, it would be appropriate to give a brief description of the dhobi marriage and family system; a system that was prevalent in the city of Delhi before capitalist and consumerist culture steadily changed a pre-industrial city to the capital of a nation-state.

Marriage and Family among the Dhobis

The dhobis are not one but many communities and in Delhi itself, even before the migrants came in, there were five communities of dhobis, each group endogamous within itself. It is not the scope of this chapter to go into the details of how these divisions came about though they are discussed in my earlier book (Channa, 1985).

The choice of bride and of a groom is limited and a marriage was and is negotiated by elders, usually a father's sister's husband, although in a small community like this that is packed into close living quarters, the information

is always present as to who is of marriageable age, who is a suitable match, and so on. However, a formal negotiation by elders of the family always preceded a marriage. Since girls were considered an important economic resource, the parents of the girl used every tactic to delay a marriage, and often substantive gifts or even cash had to pass from the man's side to make the girl's family agree to an early marriage. In one case, even in the 1970s, the bride's side was demanding 5,000 rupees to let the girl come over to the bridegroom's house. The usual tactic was to do the formal betrothal and then delay the marriage.

The nature of prestations in a marriage took the form of a collective gift giving in which every relative made a present that would help the newly weds to set up a household of their own. At least a few vessels, some clothes, an iron and some other necessary items constituted what a girl would get from her home, in addition to a few sets of clothes and some ornaments, usually passed down from mother to daughter. To the groom also, a cycle, a wristwatch and some clothes were the usual gifts. The girl's father did not have the sole responsibility of taking on the entire expense of the wedding, even if it was comparatively less (as compared to upper-caste weddings), and gift giving was shared by all family members where although, ideally, it should have been of the nature of generalized reciprocity, each giving according to their ability, a sense of balance was always maintained and people kept a record of what was being given. The latter may have also been something that they had learnt from the upper castes and were able to execute because of at least some literate members by the 1970s. In the past when they were absolutely illiterate, they may have had some other system but I had no data on it.

While negotiating a marriage, a main consideration was that the girl should be of the right age; here again, there have been changes as in the 1970s, the age of marriage of a girl was about 16–17 years, with the man a little older, but my recent visits to the community have shown that the age has risen to the early twenties and many girls are now getting a college education. Other considerations included excluding any direct lineal or collateral relationship. Dumont (1970) has mentioned that in North India, among the upper castes (specifically Sarjupari Brahmins), a girl and her father's sister should not be married into the same family as it amounts to a cross-cousin marriage. Yet, such marriages took place among the dhobis and were condemned by upper castes in their vicinity. The biggest consideration however was that a girl should be able to iron clothes and be adept at the dhobi work, knowing all aspects of it.

A young daughter-in-law was made to iron a few clothes as her first work in the affinal household. This may be compared with an upper-caste marriage where the new bride usually prepares some sweet dish in the kitchen when she is accepted as a member of the household. Thus, the symbolism of cooking for an upper-caste bride affirms the domestic duties that she is expected to perform; and for the dhobi bride, it is her economic contribution to the household that is symbolically emphasized. What was completely set aside was any reference to physical beauty, such as complexion, height and physique. For neither boy nor girl, any mention was ever made about appearance. If a person had four limbs intact, it was considered enough.

The post-marital residence pattern among the dhobis is that the young couple live for a few years with the parents and then set up a new unit. Since the dhobis have to live confined to their own neighbourhoods because of both positive and negative factors – they will not be accepted in an upper-caste locality and also, they would like to stay close to other members of their community – the available space is very less. Thus, when a young couple separate, it is done only in the form of what they call '*chullāh alag karnā*', that is, to separate out the hearth and it is not to have a new house for them. It is an economic and not a physical separation where the major factor is that the parents give them a few client households for washing and ironing of clothes, or if the son is enterprising, he finds some work for himself. As a consequence, the expenses of the kitchen are separated. The reason for separation is not as much as why to separate but as there being no reason to continue to live together. Unlike in agricultural societies, whose norms are followed by the upper castes and the resource-holding communities such as traders, the parents cannot hold the family together by their control of resources over either land or property. In fact, it was shown by Shah (1998) in his historic survey of family types in India that families were joint only among the resource-holding dominant castes.[12] Among the tribes and

[12] Let us see what he has to write about Radhvanaj, a village consisting primarily of upper-caste Rajputs and Brahmins: 'According to the Census of 1825 Radhvanaj had a population of 716 persons divided into 159 households and there were 25 castes'...(1998: 109)'73 % of the total number of households were very small or small in 1825. The ideal of the so-called joint family household was not very strong in the village and this was even before the beginning of industrialization and urbanization.'(ibid: 111) But even though there were no joint families, the Rajputs, namely, the Rathods of this region formed exogamous lineage groups. But in the very same village, such lineage groups were not found among the other caste groups. 'By and large, strong and elaborate lineage groups were associated with control over land.' (ibid: 120) As Shah has further elaborated, landownership provided stability of

lower-caste groups not holding large and individual resources, it was never the norm.

The dhobis never placed any value on having a joint household, it being understood that the young couple will separate out their expenses as soon as they are able. The couple is provided with the basic tool of their livelihood, namely, a couple of irons at the time of their marriage, after that they need only a few fixed clients and they are ready to set up their own kitchen. Other necessary resources such as a place for washing, large vessels and kiln are property of the community and they can access them as long as they are part of this community or *biradari* (see Channa, 1985).

Since labour is the major resource of a dhobi couple, the young and able bodied are better able to create new clients for their own selves than are the older couple. The old are protected by the rules of the hereditary caste relations by which, at least in the earlier set-up, the relationship between a service provider like a dhobi, *nai* or even goldsmith stretched over generations. Since the incomes are very marginal, each unit (of a nuclear family) fights over the resources and the ageing parents rapidly lose authority. I did not see much respect for the aged as one sees routinely in upper-caste households. The young people often ridiculed and cracked jokes at their expense and they were rarely addressed with any honorifics. Among the rather democratically inclined dhobis, the familiar modes of address such as '*tu*' is more common than more respectful terms such as '*aap*' that is reserved mostly for outsiders.

The young woman who enters the affinal household as a daughter-in-law has to bear with the lowly status bestowed as a matter of custom on the new daughter-in-law in all Indian households, but only for a very short period of time. She very soon sets up her new household and becomes its mistress. Unlike among upper castes, the young women make frequent visits to their natal family and are always available to help their parents in the times of crises. This mobility was aided in the city by the close proximity and easy travel conditions between a woman's natal and affinal households. In fact, I found that throughout their life time, parents depended more on their daughter's support than on that of their sons. This is all the more reason that the birth of a daughter was welcome among them.

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residence and facilitated growth of the lineages. Landownership also provided power and therefore, lineages with the help of the unity provided by the kinship bond, tended to be repositories of power (Shah, 1998: 120).

The stability of marriage among them is very high and as of now, I have not had report of a single divorce or separation. Widows and widowers, if young, can remarry again but of this too, I did not find any actual cases. There was one case of polygamy in the 1970s and there was one man with two wives, but all other families were monogamous in nature.

Within the community, the caste council or panchayat, that is, the council of elder men gave decisions on marital discord, divorce, remarriage, etc. While in the 1970s, the panchayat was quite functional and used to meet every new moon night on the banks of the Yamuna, on my subsequent visits, I found that people's interest in participation had began to dwindle, as even marital discords, if at all they occur, are now taken to courts.

Changing Gender Relations

While no real changes have come about in their marriage patterns or family structure, yet perceptible changes in gender roles are occurring mainly due to the changes in the occupational patterns. When the dhobi's primary occupation was to be attached to households, the women played an important role. Not only for washing clothes but the dhobans had a ritual role as well at marriages, birth and death, when they were important functionaries for the absorption of pollution of the high-caste women. In addition, the dhobi woman was an important carrier of neighbourhood gossip for the upper-caste women with their restricted access to mobility. As she went around collecting clothes and delivering them, she came in direct contact with women of the households who, in turn, were always ready to listen to a juicy piece of gossip from her. Even today, the woman standing at one point in the neighbourhood ironing clothes is the node for every sort of information. Anyone wanting any kind of information regarding a neighbourhood, like looking for a person or house, wanting to take a house on rent and trying to locate a shop, will first go to the neighbourhood dhoban.

However, when the work shifted to public institutions such as hospitals, hotels, embassies and export houses, the women lost their access. Since these were public institutions, where the contact persons were also mostly male, it was the man's job to go around collecting and delivering clothes. One would never find a woman doing rounds of such places. These contacts also required a different, more formal mode of dealing and a secondary group relationship. Thus, if in a household, most of the work was concentrated in such institutions, then the woman was confined to home, ironing clothes that her husband brought in. Yet, her economic importance remained.

When a man took on a non-dhobi job like working in a bank, then the wife had nothing to do. A man working in an office also did not want his wife to stand on a street corner ironing clothes, for he now had a different sort of prestige to maintain. Anyone working in an office in a reasonable position would not want his wife to be seen publicly working like a low-caste woman.

Here, the real changes have begun to take place. The values that were non-existent in the earlier generation where women had a key economic role were being transformed, at least for some families. Initially when boys began to study and go for white collar jobs, they had to marry women who were raised to be dhobi women, but who were then made to behave like they were not. In the 1970s, I remember, one household of dhobis in this community had made it good as entrepreneurs. They ran a tire shop and were quite wealthy. However, when the young son got married, he had to marry a dhobi girl of his own community although he himself was educated and had his peer group among middle-class people. I had attended the marriage and the boy, in an attempt to be 'modern', asked his wife to shake hands with me. She was all wrapped up in layers of clothes in the traditional manner but had to take courage to bring out a hand and shake it with 'madam'. I remember noticing that although she was fair skinned and very pretty, her hand was rough and weathered like all dhobi women. It indicated that she had been brought up like all other girls of her community, doing hard work from a very young age.

I was once sitting in a household where one girl of about ten was ironing clothes using an iron with coal. Her elder brother jokingly asked me if I could lift up that iron. I tried but found it was too heavy. The people around me joked and said, 'See how strong our women are? Even a ten year old child is stronger than you and she can lift up a heavy iron with just one hand, maybe even with her left hand!' But in many households, such values had begun to disappear even during those days. Anticipating that men who have jobs and are educated will not want to marry girls who were trained only to do the dhobi work, some better-off families had began to educate their daughters in the hope of marrying her to a job-holding boy. The aspiration of every girl was to get away from what they considered as the drudgery of dhobi work. But at the same time, the reality was that to get work was not easy, and for a dhobi boy to get good education was even more difficult. Children faced great difficulty in keeping up with school homework and education was a difficult commodity to acquire from the noisy, overcrowded atmosphere of the *katra*. Most students had no place to sit and study, illiterate parents could

not help them and they had humiliation heaped on them by their classmates and even teachers.

The changes were therefore more in terms of aspirations than in terms of any real transformation of life conditions. The school dropout rates were very high and most young boys made a small living by cutting paper and binding books in the paper industry that flourishes in that area. Even in my recent visit to the dhobis in the year 2007–08, I found that very few men had made it to any kind of paid job or had managed much education. I was even told that as of today, the teachers in the local schools humiliate and discourage the dhobi boys from studying. Yet, even in the 1970s, people had begun to give dowries, although no demands were made for such. It was considered upper class and prestigious for the girl's family to give her gifts at her marriage that simulated the lavish wedding gifts given to upper-caste girls. At one wedding, I found cheap sofa sets, beds and suits for the groom as gifts. One boy made a comment on the quality of the bed that if anyone stepped on it once, it was going to break. The bride made noisy and vociferous comments in defence of her gifts and shooed away the boy. I am tempted to compare this incidence with that of a middle-class girl married into a rich family who accepted quietly all the taunts that she had to face regarding the gifts given by her family from her in-laws, who actually returned most of them complaining that 'they were below standard'.

The girls were also inculcating values regarding looks and make-up that were not found at all in the earlier generations. Use of make-up and talks about who looked like what, who was wearing what, had started to be popular in the conversation of girls. In other words, the perceptions about women as of purely economic/social value were being taken over by considerations of aesthetics and fashion. Exposure to televisions and films had changed their self-perception to one in which the values introduced by a consumerist society were being included.

Education for girls had also begun in the 1970s and in my latest visit to the house of one of my earliest informants, I found that his daughter-in-law was a school teacher. His son was a professional wrestler, his father too had been one and was well recognized in the neighbourhood by the name of *pehalwan* (wrestler). The *pehalwan* was also a bone setter in addition to being a dhobi. Having become much older, he had now taken to full-time profession of bone setting but his sons had had the opportunity to enter the national-level wresting championships and get some accolades. Thus, the matter of a good physique of which the dhobis were always proud is now giving them

a new opportunity in the newly developing field of athletics. The wife of a recognized athlete is also now not doing the work of ironing clothes. The woman in question appeared to be brought up in a somewhat different way than what I had observed for young girls of an earlier generation. She was educated and dressed more like a middle-class woman.

But the more remarkable difference was in the now established or perhaps emerging notions of a woman's role as a mother and a housewife. My earlier informant's daughter-in-law said that she had given up her job as a school teacher to look after her newly born infant son. I remembered her mother-in-law who had once walked into the house after walking in the hot sun from the Yamuna bank to her residence, a distance of about 5 kms, when she was almost eight months pregnant. I was then told that a dhobi woman gave birth even while she was ironing clothes and would get up and get back to work almost immediately after she had given birth. The wife of the very same boy who was born a month or so later, quite healthy in spite of his mother having worked hard till the very end, had now given up on her job to look after her baby. I was also told that most babies were now being born in the hospital rather than at home as was the practice earlier.

Importantly enough, her husband who was present also emphasized on the need of the mother to be around to look after the baby and therefore the necessity of her having to give up her job. Of course, the nature of her work, that of a school teacher, was something that could not be classified as what is still called as *ghar ka kaam*. I could still see pregnant dhobi women carrying around bundles of clothes, child bearing and rearing and this is seen as compatible with the traditional work.

Or perhaps, it is more likely that those who are still carrying on the original work have not transformed their values to the extent of those that are now emulating the lifestyle of middle classes. A woman who is educated and has imbibed the values of her non-dhobi peer group will be socialized into thinking that a baby needs full-time mothering like most middle-class households in India. No doubt notions of parenting are being affected by the exposure to modern values all around, but the feasibility of the application of such values lies only with those who are now leading a life different from what their parents had led. Another important transformation is that when the husband is not competing with his father to wash clothes and is doing a job that is not dhobi work, he often does not separate his hearth from that of his parents. Thus, those women whose husbands are doing jobs usually continue living with their in-laws, and therefore have to assume the role of a compliant daughter-in-law for a longer time.

However, since the dhobi women who are the mother-in-law, as in the case just cited, have not imbibed the values of being dominant as mothers-in-law in a upper-caste Hindu household, the daughters-in-law among the dhobis are perhaps not yet suffering the kind of discrimination that is faced by the middle-class woman under the rule of her in-laws. It remains to be seen whether the truly patriarchal values of upper-caste and class Hindus are finally adopted by the dhobis as they have been adopted by some other lower castes which have scaled the heights of social mobility at a faster pace.

The Dasi: An Overview

The discourse on dalit women has often referred to their being doubly discriminated against and highly marginalized. For example, the Charter of Dalit Human Rights – put forward by the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights in India, an organization fighting for the abolition of untouchability – states, 'We recognize that Dalit women have three-fold discrimination. They are discriminated against because they are women (gender), because they are Dalits (caste) and because they are Dalit women by their own men folk (gender and caste)' (Asian Human Rights Commission, 1999). I find this statement a true representation of what may be called as a paternalistic attitude; rhetoric that takes away from the marginalized women any agency that they have and selfhood that they may possess. If we describe them as thrice oppressed, we are denying them both personhood and power and making them just objects of pity of the upper classes.

Anyone who belongs to the category of a dalit, or who has had a chance to come close to them, does not think that these women are any more dominated or exploited than the women of the upper castes and classes. My close association with dhobi women and narratives such as that constructed by Bama (2005), or ethnographies such as that of Searle–Chatterjee (1981) and Kapadia (1995), indicate that the centuries of oppression or domination to which these groups have been subjected have had a less effect on these women in eroding their self-image or their confidence in their own worth than one may suppose. In fact, whenever we try to compare them with the upper-caste/class women, we find that these women come out more favourably placed in terms of self-confidence and self-worth than their more privileged sisters.

I am not talking in terms of real conditions of existence that may, for many of them, be absolutely abysmal in terms of health, nutrition and physical well-being. What one needs to compare is the relative well-being

of these women with respect to their own households. Here we can bring in what Sen (1981) has called the concept of entitlement, where a person is entitled to some share of what is available in a particular situation and not in absolute terms. The dalit may be suffering from absolute poverty but the entitlement of women is better than that in upper-caste and class families where the relative deprivation of women and of the girl child is far higher. The dhobi women and girls were never denied a share in the non-vegetarian food or even alcohol; they ate and drank exactly what the men ate. A woman after childbirth was given bone soup and soup made of the hooves of goats, both of which are considered very nutritious. All women drank alcohol and smoked bidis.

In fact, it is as part of the gender transformation that younger women, in the imitation of upper-caste women, stopped drinking and smoking as they began to think it was unfeminine. But in this respect, men, too, at least were talking about giving up alcohol as they said that one reason why people looked down upon dhobis was that they drank too much. While the upper caste always took special care to mention women in their denigration of the dhobis, the fact of women drinking was not highlighted by the dhobi men. In fact, while dhobi men often engaged in self-criticism, they rarely if ever criticized their women, unlike upper-class men who often use stereotypical and degrading expressions for women. Thus, while upper classes often degraded the dhobis in general by referring to the drinking habits of dhobi women, the dhobi men defended their women by saying that they work so hard the whole day: 'What was wrong if these women also relaxed in the evening by drinking a little'. They also said that 'while men can get drunk and misbehave, women never do so and even if they drink, they never misbehave.' As a consequence, the women have a well-developed sense of self and rarely suffer like upper-class women from feelings of guilt and inadequacy. The lower castes quite often acknowledge the contribution made by the women, and even though women could hardly be called exemplary mothers by Western or urban people, yet the dhobis often displayed great emotion and sentiment regarding their mothers, though very rarely for fathers.

Thus, as Unnithan–Kumar states, 'The projection of an uncontrolled sexuality onto women of a community other than one's own is often connected with the desire to maintain a distinction and hierarchy between the two communities' (Unnithan–Kumar, 1997). The dasi exists in the collective imagination; she is not really the exotic, sexual being nor the completely degraded non-person as upper-class/caste people may construct.

She is constructed out of the ideological elements that constitute caste society, the realities of existence where particular hierarchies based on purity and pollution have been built on the sweat and toil of the service castes, the workers of society. The dasi, like the men of her community, has been absorbing pollution both fictional and real from the bodies of the upper castes. Her body has formed a buffer to absorb the excesses of sexuality filtered down from the top, the sexuality that the pure bodies of the devi could not absorb.

The upper castes project her body as a 'natural' sponge for the absorption of pollution that includes sexuality. Yet for her, it is not natural; in her own construction of her self-image, she is a woman of virtue and her body has the same purity as that of the upper castes. Therefore, the construction of the 'dasi' is a symbolic violation of her self-conceived selfhood, an unnatural assault on her personhood. However, in the last instance, as Unnithan–Kumar (ibid.) has pointed out, the bodies of women are nothing but boundary markers, marking out the boundaries of power between men.

5 Globalization and the Emerging Gender Issues in India

Introduction

Globalization can be understood in various ways (Appadurai, 1986; Inda and Rosaldo, 2002; Long, 1996: 37) and one way is to rely on anthropological narratives and people's views as to what is happening to them in the age of 'modernity'. The value of ethnographically rooted inquiry into the lived conditions of globalization is intrinsic to a feminist methodology that seeks to unravel the multiple threads of negotiation and navigation, 'the dynamics of globalization from below' (Harrison, 2007: 24), without discrediting the other perspectives in any way. While globalization may be dated variously by various authors,[1] its most intensive effects were felt from the colonial period onwards, where apart from the opening up of markets, communication and the movements of peoples, cultures and knowledge across every existing boundary of the world, there has occurred the privileging of one kind of life world, one kind of knowledge and one kind of cognitive authenticity of the ontological reality engendered by the spread of Western civilization. Simultaneously, the conditions were set for a reformulated language of protest and of negotiation that may be seen vividly in the freedom movement in India, when a generation of Western-trained and English-speaking leaders took on the colonial regime, communicating with the dominant in their own language.

Ethnographic works such as that of Keesing (1994) have shown how the colonial hegemony was realized not by force or by ideology but by the 'power to determine the structuring rules within which struggles are to be

[1] According to Omvedt (1994: 83), the traditional marking dates for the incorporation of India into the world capitalist system can be said to be 1757 (the Battle of Plassey) and 1857, the supercession of the East India Company by the Brtish state and the First War of Independence (or the last major resistance war of the traditional society). The coming of the Europeans during the period 1750–1850 marks the integration of India into the world capitalist system as defined by Wallerstein (2004).

fought out' (Crehan, 2002: 203). We have seen in earlier chapters how gender, in South Asia too, was restructured around borrowed norms and practices, ostensibly as part of a process of creating a national identity. In most so-called developing countries, the post-colonial phase was set on achieving as quickly as possible such institutional structures and cultural reorganization as were legitimized during the colonial era as progressive. Thus, Jawaharlal Nehru,[2] the first Prime Minister of independent India, had said that the hydroelectric dams were the temples of the newly developing socialist democracy of India. The differences between tradition and modernity assumed a fictionalized stereotyping with modernity being always equated with westernization. The more recently introduced liberalization also duplicates Western models. Taking stock of India's five year plans, Saradomoni writes:

> By the mid 1990's, the main concerns were output increase and technological progress rather than an enlargement of the choices and opportunities open to those who were poor in both income and other terms. Such increases in jobs as were expected to occur were not part of any Plan or programme but were to depend on the strength of the 'trickle down' following private investments and consumption. Saradomoni (2002: 173)

Thus, as Ong puts it, 'third world nationalisms have remained a prisoner to western rationalistic discourse and need always to assimilate to the West in order to be modern' (Ong, 1996: 83).

By the end of twentieth century, these modernizing agenda were shown to have rather devastating effects on people, especially women's lives and environments (Escobar, 1995; Lewellen, 2002). The people's perception of the loss of their life ways and environments thus generated many contestations and protests; some of it based on an idealization of the 'indigenous'. Thus, beyond a point, there can also be seen a reversal to more indigenous (viewed as non-Western) ways, although such indigeneity may itself be a constructed and imagined one (Heatherington, 2010). Post-Second World War, the world can be seen as subjected to two simultaneous processes: one, of increasing homogenization (following a largely Western model); and at another level, increasing parochialization as identities are trying desperately to keep afloat in the face of threats of complete submergence. The emerging and equally

[2] The Eton-educated Nehru was highly anglicized and a close friend of the British leaders, especially of Lady Mountbatten. With the Indian intelligentsia, the British shared a close relationship and the term 'brown sahibs' was much in vogue during the colonial period.

ephemeral social situations remain a complex interplay of such processes. Thus, there is no one-way flow but a number of cross-cutting currents that seek continuously to modify and redefine the ever-shifting realities of the ongoing 'present'.

In India, even as of today, to be 'modern' means to be able to speak English and/or other European languages and wearing Western clothes. These two external markers of modernity are verbalized and stereotyped in popular culture, media and literature. Implicit in this notion of modernization is included acquisition of a 'scientific' point of view, discarding so-called superstitions. Money and its accumulation too have assumed a status of universal rationality. As Ortner (1984) has effectively critiqued, in the twentieth century, it is the capitalism-oriented worldview that has been seen as progressive and taken hegemonic control of all historical analysis. Anthropologists have been struggling to keep afloat the notion of individual and non-Western histories and knowledge. But this enterprise has inadvertently supported the continued opposition of tradition and modernity, where within some discourse, 'tradition' has acquired a political power that privileges some practices, as legitimate rights, if the community can prove its authenticity (Crehan, 2002: 53). Such 'traditional' rights are quite often in contest with rationality and secularism and equality (ibid.), and feminists and supporters of human rights have found the assertion of such rights as problematic. Thus, the romanticization and linking of certain cultural practices to identity has often led to regressive reversals that are most likely to affect women adversely. We shall return to this issue later in this chapter.

The assertion of rights, especially if they emanate from marginal communities, focus our attention on another aspect of emerging Indian nationalism, namely, that development has also acquired another meaning, that of an 'internal' colonial attitude of a hierarchical opposition that involves the mainstream, upper-caste *Hindu* India and the 'Others'. In this sense, the indigenous, the non-Hindus and the lower castes, are all deemed worthy of 'development' following a model of 'progress' comprising of Western and indigenous (upper-caste) values that was created and put in place during the colonial era and discussed at length in this book. The marginal are not always passive recipients and the very process of imposition helps in consciousness raising and contestation of superimposed life ways. The results of such contestation are often a mixed bag of achievements as well as compromises; for example, some environmental causes may be partially won (like the reprieve of the Kond tribes of Orissa from the Vedanta

project[3]) (see also, Padel, 2009: 335) but at the same time, the communities may become integrated into the mainstream in ways that ultimately lead to demise of their identities and assumption of dominant lifestyles, often the very lifestyles that they were contesting. Such transformations may lead to a depreciatory attitude towards their own community values, often impacting negatively the women in these communities. For example, when the lower castes contest their marginalization, they may do it in a manner that the practices and values that were put in place to create the bondage for upper-caste women are similarly reconstructed for the marginal communities. So, as part of their community's efforts to gain respectable status, their women are also bound within similar confining norms and practices (Channa, 1992; Kapadia, 1995: 61–67).

The effects of the structural violence of neo-liberal policies, directed towards setting up of global markets and supporting global capitalism at the cost of local resources, human and non-human lives and the environment, have been documented extensively by political anthropologists like Gunewardena and Kingsolver (2007), Harrison (2002, 2009) and others. The process of 'structural violence', the 'symbolic, psychological and physical assaults against human psyches, physical bodies, and socio-cultural integrity that emanates from situations and dominant institutions' (Harrison, 2002: 53) is inclusive of the many regressive values that are being reinforced and redirected through the very same technologies of so-called modernity and technological advancements. A key example is female foeticide that is bringing the Indian population to the brink of disaster, with an ever-dropping female sex ratio made possible with the modern techniques of ultrasound and prenatal sex determination tests.[4] Although the reasons for this may lie

[3] Under pressure from continued and sustained protest by the tribes of the Niyamgiri Hills in Orissa, the Union Ministry of Environment and Forest headed by Jairam Ramesh, a committed environmentalist, rejected the clearance for Orissa Mining Corporation to mine Niyamgiri Hills for Vedanata's aluminum refinery. This was one of the biggest blows to multinational company's efforts to encroach forest and tribal area in India with the connivance of local politicians. The plea of the tribes was that Niyamgiri was their god, and also this area provided them with their subsistence and livelihood to which they had a right.

[4] According to reports of demography issued by the Census of India, the overall sex ratio of India in 2011 is 949 females per 1,000 males; in which, the sex ratio in Haryana is lowest at 861 to 1,000 and in the capital, Delhi, the most urban city in India, it is only 866, a reflection on how sex ratio is actually negatively impacted by urbanization. Even in the rural–urban figures, the rural sex ratio in 2011 was 946 as against the urban sex ratio of 900 females per 1,000 males.

in very contemporary economic and social realities, yet it is only so-called 'tradition' like dowry that is invoked as explanation. This is an example of the insidious ways of the effects of globalization where whatever powers that are effectively monitoring from the top, also create an illusion, shifting blame of any negative parameters onto the past, to tradition, to custom and so on.

Thus, both what is meant by globalization and what is meant by the social and cultural impacts of such forces, howsoever one may analyze them, is fraught with the problems of complexity and mystification. However, if one unravels the cat's cradle, some threads may become visible and throw some light on what is happening on the ground. At the onset, I need to warn the reader that the analysis in this chapter, in particular, is eclectic and intuitive. It is based on my field observations and that of many other scholars of Indian society, sociologists, anthropologists and historians. The universe that I have in mind is largely of the metropolitan urban centres like Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata, although references to rural and tribal areas will come up in the course of discussions. The people being talked about are those who traverse the roads and public spaces of these cities, irrespective of community and language, although caste and class remain important variables in analysis. My data here are based on the popular usage of terms appearing in the public media such as televisions and newspapers and the personal narratives and experiences of men and women in big cities. I agree with Gutmann (1996) that many so-called stereotypes of 'tradition' may often be formed out of contemporary processes of media and popular culture, but which nevertheless form a reference point for the people, even though not many may actually follow it. For the purpose of this chapter, modernity may be taken to mean what it means to a majority of Indian people, 'an equation with Western values and lifestyles' and tradition as 'adherence to a non-Western way of living'. Thus, rather than any theoretical meaning, we refer to the common sense understanding of these terms as concepts *in use*.

Legal and Political Impact of the Indian Democracy

The formation of the Indian nation in the post-colonial period gave rise to some fundamental transformative processes that had real effects on the existing social and cultural dimensions of the people of India. As India emerged as a democratic republic, it evolved with a vision that was quite at variance with what a majority of Indians thought or believed in. Yet, the existence and impact of some of these transformative paradigms is undeniably woven into the emerging complexities of Indian society.

First of this is the Constitution of India that regards every citizen of India as equal and 'individual' in front of the law but also grants some privileges to certain sections of society, based on the criteria of historical injustice. The latter are the compensatory mechanisms put in place to redress the wrongs done to those who, in the past, were not seen as equal in the eyes of law and society; as they are being seen now. The logic is simple that since justice was denied in the past, the present must make compensatory amendments. The second major source of change is the emphasis on the individual, something that was introduced into the Indian legal system by the British legal system formed on the Benthemite principles of 'individualism'. It is at this point that a major disjunction has occurred between Indian law and governance and Indian society that is still rooted in relationships and not on a sense of the 'individual' as a standalone entity.

The third transformation is based on the possibilities of physical movement; a possibility that is made realistic by social and technological transformations that began from the late twentieth century along with concurrent political–economic changes. People are finding it more and more easy not only to move out of their homes, villages and towns but also to other countries, to cross seas, so as to say. A combination of these three ideological and material transformations is enabling creative and conservative processes to interact and form multiple interfaces. The forces from the top and those from the bottom meet each other on unequal footings, yet the results are always multiple, and the situated negotiations, contestations, protests and strategies disable any kind of monolithic outcome of external pressures and forces.

The Constitutional Amendments

My mother often told me an interesting story. Just before the Sarda Act[5] – the law preventing the marriage of girls below 14 years of age – was passed, most political leaders got their own daughters married according to Hindu norms of that time, that is, below 12 years of age. They did not want the sin of having a post-puberty unmarried daughter on their heads, but were forced

[5] The Sarda Act is also called the Child Marriage Restrain Act 1920 that was initiated by Rai Sahib Harbilas Sarda on 28 September 1929, during the colonial period. This Act fixed the age of marriage for girls at 14 years and boys at 18 years. This Act became effective from 1 April 1930, and was supported by women's organizations such as the All India Women's Conference, Women's India Association and National Council for Women in India.

to concede to the demands of a westernized and 'liberal' leadership. Thus, even while the constitution was adapted to meet the demands and approval of a largely Western world, many Indians remained and till today remain unmindful of the legalities and the vision of an individualistic society based on equality and human rights; child marriage, for example, is still rampant. The noted anthropologist, Iravati Karve, was openly critical of introducing the notion of monogamy in the Hindu Marriage Act[6] that, she said, was quite against Hindu values, and B.R. Ambedkar, who framed the constitution, was openly sceptical about its actual efficacy. He, of course, spoke in particular about the possibility of having a caste-free society where every individual would be seen as equal. Such a reality also has not come about (Narula, 1999).

In post-colonial India, the indigenous power holders held on to many of the colonial notions of 'civilization', and many of the ills that we find today in Indian society can be attributed to this Eurocentric vision of modernity and faulty policies. There was much misunderstanding of local values and worldview and some remedies such as those pertaining to the status of women were ill conceived by paying heed to the now much criticized axiom of 'universal subordination of women' introduced from the West. The values informing gender construction in South Asia were based on entirely different premises than those informing gender in Europe. Hindu mythology and religious ideology has always recognized the strength and energy of women (*Shakti*) (Riddle and Joshi, 1986: 5). Further, as has been shown by Moore (1998) and Hughes and Hughes (1997: 4), the British put in place a legal system that was informed by their own laws and by powerful local men:

> British scholars of the classics, in consultation with Indian experts, complied and translated ancient Hindu and Muslim texts. The overriding belief in the superiority of the British law coloured the entire process: there were mistranslations; translations accompanied by the distrust of Indian scholar's own interpretations, and misplaced emphasis on certain textual authority over others. (Moore, 1998: 39)

There is no doubt that an integral part of the misinterpretations was the strengthening of patriarchal values.

[6] The Hindu Marriage Act, passed in 1955, retains some elements of the traditional marriage practices but changed some other vital rules. It still upholds the *sapinda* rule and disallows marriage of close relatives. But it calls for monogamy, not a part of Hindu tradition, and also allows separation and divorce, both not permissible in the past.

Law and Women

The legal reforms introduced during British rule are being followed, more or less, with few modifications in contemporary India. This unquestioning adherence has systematically undermined much of value in the older systems, including the space that rural and tribal women enjoyed and the respect granted to women as a category.

The easy acceptance of Indian men of granting constitutional equality to women is not to be taken lightly. It is significant to note that the equality of women, at least in principle, was never questioned in India. In fact, most Indians are accustomed to thinking of women as superior rather than inferior to men. The crucial distinction that needs to be made here is between the 'suffering' of women and their degradation. Indian women have undergone suffering not because of their being considered inferior but paradoxically, superior. Thus, in her paper on 'sati', Sunder Rajan (1993) describes how the burning body of the sati *is not supposed to feel pain*, because it is transformed into a sacred body from an ordinary mortal one. Therefore, the burning of the woman is not seen as her suffering but her transcendence of it, in fact, the opposite of suffering. The reverence and deification of the immolated woman can be compared to the burning of women as witches in Europe, where they were viewed as personification of evil.

But the Indian leaders easily accepted the Western received wisdom of trying to rescue suffering women and in the process degraded many traditional bastions of women's power and virtue. For example, women such as the *devadasi*s (the divine consorts of the deity) were reduced to temple prostitutes, a designation that completely eroded the sanctity and aesthetics of the entire system.

Emancipation of women has mostly followed a Western model, encouraging women to get educated, take up jobs and develop their personalities as individuals. Although some of these trends have yielded good results, yet, most working women face more opposition and frustration than they can handle. Trying to live as individuals on their own terms can often be a struggle that becomes self-destructive. In recent times, there have been a number of cases of suicide of young women in show business/or office jobs who have opted out of life because of loneliness or frustration due to not having enough emotional support. Most of these women were from small towns who came to the big city looking for a livelihood or glamorous life. The divorce rates are going up and so are crimes against women. Also, although women are a large part of workforce and intelligentsia, there is a

lot of contestation of values that may lead to irreconcilable situations. The young women are yet to find a footing in the new world and the old have become marginalized. The knowledge system of older women was cast off in the name of Western science and their rights over community property were dissolved when the rights to property were granted to individual males. Yet, one cannot say that everything in the past was good. The raising of the age of marriage, education and increasing control of women over their own lives has at least given much agency to women, so that they are somewhat equipped to contest their conditions of life.

Thus, secular and rationalistic view had both positive and negative effects. It is now generally recognized, as part of a feminist critique, that not every non-Western trait is good and not all traditions, insofar as they do not subscribe to the vision of a humane and just world, are of value. I would agree with Pouchepadass that 'systematic hallowing of the pre-colonial and the indigenous as opposed to the colonial, if handled without caution as a heuristic tool by the historian, can lead to gross oversimplification' (Pouchepadass, 2002: 96). What needs to be examined is that in all historical epochs and worldviews, there are many acceptable and non-acceptable traits. But in the post-colonial era, the major mistake was the kind of wholesale transformation attempted and that too towards a borrowed Western model.

Individual and Law

It is important to note that constitutional amendments based on the individual as unit cannot be imposed on people who can only think of personhood and social reality in terms of relationships, and that too of a kin and family nature. A simple shout for attracting an unknown person's attention in India, refers to him/her as not 'mister' or 'miss' or 'madam/sir' (usual in an English-speaking country), but as 'hey brother', 'hey sister' or aunt or uncle or for older women, as mother. Children grow up in a universe of such relationships so that from childhood, they are accustomed to referring to anyone and everyone in relational terms. Almost 90 per cent Indians are routinely being referred to by their real and fictive kin relationships and not by name. Even in offices and at work, to call a colleague by name is a sign of westernization and sophistication, while most people not used to such an unfamiliar use of personal names stick to 'brother' or 'sister', especially for persons of the opposite sex; or it may be a use of the last name with an honorific '*Ji*' added to it, like 'Sharmaji'.

In such a situation, 'individuals' as equal before law is a proposition that does not easily find acceptance. Most people have an attitude that rights are one thing and norms are another. Majority of Indians, embedded as they are in larger kin and community relationships, cannot accept individualism. It leads to a sense of alienation where people are often told that they cannot prioritize their kin, a value that is not understandable to many Indians. For example, what in Western terms would be an ethical practice is seen as immoral by most Indians, that is, to view one's kith and kin in terms of impartial merit. What in the West is called as nepotism is viewed as duty or responsibility in South Asia. If a person does not favour his/her near kin, he or she is regarded as a bad human being, a person derelict in duty towards one's near ones. In case a person is distanced from his/her family and community, such a person faces an individualistic life that may actually cause pathological symptoms.

During the colonial period, the rules bringing common property under the state, or distributed for individual ownership, had particularly negative effects on the marginal and the women, who were supported by such common resources. For example, with reference to the Girasia of Rajasthan who are primarily dependent on forests and their resources for their livelihood, Unnithan–Kumar (1997) remarks that the British policy of separating forests from the villages and bringing them directly under state ownership went against the interests of the villagers. When the area was under feudal rule, the forest was part of the village resources and common property of all villagers who had usufruct rights to the forest. The tribals could use some products of the forest, otherwise considered of no commercial value, although they did not have rights to the timber. The women, in particular, had to depend on the forest for fuel and fodder and various minor forests produce like berries and fruits, as they had no right over agricultural land that passed in patrilineal lines. When the forests were appropriated, the men continued to enjoy their land rights but it was the women who were deprived of such resources as they could collect from the commons.

The Indian government not only continued the policy of alienation of resources from the community, they went further and tried to extract the communities from the forested areas where they have been living for centuries in the name of 'national interest', which is a thinly disguised term for capitalist expansion. Today, such people constitute the bottom-most layers of urban slums. Most urban people complaining of mushrooming slums in urban areas do not realize that these slums are results of the dams built to provide them with electricity or mining in forests to boost industrial growth.

This process of alienation of forests and common resources has merited much attention from post-colonial scholars, and Guha's (1989) work in this regard is noteworthy. He has traced the history of alienation of the forest and natural resources from the peasants of Uttarakhand progressively by a colonial and then a post-colonial regime.

Caste and Politics

At the same time, some kind of constitutional rules have had a long-term effect on the relational organization of society, especially in the field of political aspirations and equations. It is here that significant transformations are visible. One of them is universal franchise and the second one is positive discrimination or reservations for the socially backward and underprivileged in various institutions of the country but most significantly, in education and jobs in the government sector referred to in India as the public sector. After a tumultuous implementation of what is known as the Mandal Commission report,[7] job reservations were effectively implemented, but much before that the right to vote was present with every Indian, and as shown by Beteille (1965) and Kothari (1995), the caste factor was incorporated within the arena of Indian democracy in what is known as vote bank policy. In other words, to carry forward my argument about the lack of being an 'individual', even voting is perceived as 'block' voting based on caste, religion and community, and of course kinship. One reason why there was no question of denying vote to women was that apart from being perceived as more intelligent and responsible than men, it was also taken for granted that their votes will lie where their men (husband, brother or father) are aligned.

Since the lower castes and classes are numerically preponderant in India, the effect of such block voting has served, to some extent, to change the

[7] The Mandal Commission was established in 1979 to assess the reservation policy of the central government. I remember a host of politicians coming to the Department of Anthropology to hold a meeting as they were doing in whole of India. The recommendation of the Commission was to increase the level of reservation to 49–50 per cent of all government jobs, by including what is termed as OBCs or Other Backward Castes. The earlier 27 per cent reservation was for what is known as Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs), pertaining to some of the tribes or indigenous people and to the erstwhile 'untouchables'. The OBC category included those who had suffered acute marginalization without being untouchable. When it was actually sought to be implemented in 1990, after nearly eleven years of inaction, it created India-wide protests, mainly from upper castes who felt that they would loose out on government jobs because of the huge percentage of reservation. But after much violence, the protests died a natural death and the reservations stand confirmed.

political leadership of India (Beteille, 1965, 1974, 1992; Jaffrelot, 2003; Kothari, 1995), although such a change of leadership does not necessarily change the ground-level situations. But the political negotiating power of the lower strata as more of their representatives get voted to power has given much edge to the reservation policies and made them far more effective than they were before. The rise of dalit intellectuals has certainly given some credence and visibility to their demands. Although social perceptions and stereotypes from the higher echelons of society have not quite transformed (Channa, 2005a) but what has changed quite definitively is the view from the bottom. I am certainly at odds with those people like Moffat (1979) who believed in a passive acquiescence of the lower strata to their domination, that at some level there was an acceptance, a reference to fate or the inevitability of inequality.[8]

But with positive discrimination, the rise of dalit intellectuals and the political transformations of democracy, the level of counter-hegemonic consciousness is certainly on the rise. Yet, as already pointed out by scholars such as Crehan (2002), both hegemony and counter-hegemony are not simplistic, monolithic processes but nuanced in complex ways. For example, in my study of the dhobis, a lower-caste group in Delhi, I found that while most young men and women did not believe for one moment that the Brahmins were superior to them or that they were created as a lower caste as a punishment for the bad 'karma' in a previous birth (overtly Brahmanical ideology), yet they did believe that to gain respectability in society, they had to follow the norms of day-to-day life of the higher castes. Thus, at another level, they did accept that the way of life of the upper castes was superior to their own, even though in conversation and overt statements they would deny it vehemently.

Even when no actual change has taken place, a condition of 'psychic mobility', or what Gramsci would call contradictory consciousness, takes place. Members of a dominated group become conscious of the injustice and irrationality of the degradation being faced by them and strive for a state where they have more rights or are supposed to have more rights than

[8] It is also true, as Moffat pointed out, that there is internal regulation of the lower castes interaction based on relative caste status and that they too follow rules of purity and pollution. In the 1970s, the dhobi women would tell me that they do not accept clothes from the untouchables like sweeper castes. But the reason was also because the upper-caste clients would not accept this and they would lose work. Thus, to large extent, this 'acceptance' of caste norm was also controlled from the top.

they actually have. In such a situation, they may overtly challenge the ways of life of the dominant but even as they do so, many of them still want to emulate the very lifestyles they denigrate. Thus, although in the 1970s, the young dhobi boys were criticizing the manner of dress of upper-class girls, today, many girls from the marginal communities also come out dressed in Western clothes. The mental distance that 'we are different from them' is decreasing although the actual life conditions may not. Therefore, of the major transformations that I have mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, positive discrimination is playing a key role in transforming the lives of the marginal, but the real situation may not bring all positive gains, certainly not for the women. However, it is only because of such legal reforms and opportunities that at least slowly, the life of these people is changing, and more than actual lifestyle, it is the rise of counter-hegemonic consciousness that needs to be applauded, which gave rise to such effective representation by the dalits at the World Conference against Racism, held in Durban in 2001 (Harrison, 2005).

Quite significant changes, for example, have occurred in the marriage practices of the lower castes as the men began to enter into non-traditional occupations, especially of the white collar variety.

Changing Marriage Practices

Thus, as I have mentioned earlier (Channa, 1992), as soon as a dhobi boy got a government job, by way of reservation, he would no longer like his wife to be ironing clothes by the wayside. Values such as the beauty and delicacy of women began to creep in. In the time when everyone was engaged in laundry work, a woman was valued for her own sake, as a contributor to the family income; but later, with the incorporation of more elite values, girls began to beautify themselves, and the young men also developed a liking for so-called 'pretty wives'. Especially if a young man got a white collar job, he would not only prefer to have a pretty wife but a dowry as well. In the 1970s, families had begun to give dowry to their daughters in preference to the earlier existing practice of bride price. The practice of dowry, in accordance with the practices of upper classes, was a way to get a better husband for their daughters as now people had a 'choice'.

When everyone was engaged in same kind of labour-oriented work, women were an asset and marriages were conducted according to community norms. Kapadia (1995: 46–67) has shown that the ability of parents to get a groom

of their own choice, by giving a dowry, changed the marriage practices of the low-caste Pallars towards the more Brahmanical preference for non-kin marriage. The interesting analysis of Kapadia shows that the lower castes differ significantly from the Brahmins, not in the universal practice of cross-cousin marriage (see also, Dumont, 1983) but in the focus on a *female ego*, as opposed to the universality of the male ego, both among the Brahmins and the anthropologists (Trautmann, 1981: 201), but also in the preference for *a particular type of kin*, to be married. The Pallars, speaking from a female ego's point of view, preferred a mother's brother or a mother's brother's son in marriage, showing a clear matrifocal bias. The Brahmins, on the other hand, preferred a father's sister's son, showing a patriarchal preference.

From the point of view of a woman among the Pallars, it was her own natal family that remained important if she married her daughter to her brother or brother's son. For the Brahmins, it was the man's family that remained important if he married his daughter to his sister's son. As Kapadia (1995: 51) points out, among the Tamil and Telugu Brahmin upper castes, the marriage of a girl to her mother's younger brother or a mother's bother's son, also meant that the girl regained her mother's '*gottra*'[9] name. This was like the vine that turned 'inwards' and was not preferred in the patriarchal society of the upper castes. For the non-Brahmins, the women are valued far more and 'until very recently, it was the bridegroom's family who made the largest wedding presentations, thus making the Non-Brahmin system approximates a "bride-price" system' (ibid.: 53). Unlike the upper castes, the marriage ceremony among the non-Brahmins takes place at the bridegroom's house and the majority of the expenses are borne by them. 'This practice of holding the wedding virilocally continues largely unchanged today in all four Non-Brahmin castes' (ibid.). Women among the non-Brahmin castes also refer to their natal house always as their mother's house and most Brahmin women refer to their parent's home as their father's house. In Bengal too, the upper-caste women always refer to the parental house as father's house, but in many parts of northern India, the non-Brahmins do refer to it as the 'mother's house'.

Thus, in other words, as I have also described in my work on dhobis, the marriage systems and gender relations among communities where women

[9] A *gottra* or *gotra* among Hindus is the name of a clan-like group believed to have descended from a mythical ancestor. Since all these ancestors are Brahmin *rishi*s, it is believed that the non-Brahmin upper castes got their *gotra* name from the officiating lineage priests. The most important significance of *gotra* is that it is strictly exogamous.

work hard and contribute to the family income in a big way were different from the higher castes where marriage was primarily a means of procuring progeny of the right caste status. But with the changing occupations and changes in work pattern of the men, the marriage systems of the lower castes are also transforming. Referring back to the work of Kapadia, she says that one effect of education and working in office jobs (highly preferred over menial work) by men of the lower castes was that many parents were keener to marry their daughters to non-kin grooms with better education and jobs.

But while on one hand it served the parent's ambition of getting their daughter married to a suitable high-status groom, for the bride, the situation became more problematic. When married within her kin, a girl felt secure and did not feel scared to pick up a quarrel and run to her parent's house. The relationship between the bride givers and bride takers was almost equal and the principle of hypergamy followed by upper castes where the bride takers are always superior to bride givers was not applicable. But in the case of non-kin marriage, such an unequal relationship is automatically assumed, and often these marriages may be accompanied by dowries. Since the bride is going to a stranger's house, she feels insecure and cannot assert her rights as freely as she does in a kin marriage. Further, after paying dowry, the parents do not encourage the daughter to keep coming away to her parent's house as they fear that a breakdown in marriage will lead to wastage of all their efforts and money. Thus, while the parents and community may enhance their status by a non-kin marriage, the very assumption of elite marriage values puts the bride in a more vulnerable position than she would have been in a traditional kin marriage.

The breaking away of individuals from the community pressures of cooperative work of the traditional type often leads to the dilution of community pressures on their conduct. This breakaway has only been possible by the constitutional provision of providing every child with the opportunities of education and also the reservation of jobs for the socially backward. This has also led to internal hierarchies within caste groups based on economic and social status. Thus, men with higher education and jobs become more preferred as grooms and the earlier equality between the bride's and groom's families found in non-Brahmin and lower castes disappears, giving rise to inequalities characteristic of upper castes. The advantages of positive discrimination, reservation and availability of higher education have made an actual difference to the social status between men and women (see also Kapadia, 1995: 56), one that was non-existent when both were manual workers.

Sometimes educated and well-placed men from lower castes prefer to marry upper-caste educated women with more 'sophistication' than women of their own caste. One powerful dalit politician was known to have discarded his own wife in the village to marry an upper-class woman. In my own circle of known people, several highly educated dalit intellectuals have upper-caste wives even though it is difficult to get a woman from a higher-caste/class community for a man of a lower caste. Such marriages are only possible if the decision has been taken at an individual level as most people in India still follow caste norms fairly strictly in arranging a marriage. Even when marrying within their own caste, an educated man would prefer an educated bride, and girls from lower castes are also getting educated in order to get a better placed husband. But here the situation becomes somewhat more problematic, for the girl needs to have only as much education as enables her to get an educated groom. Anytime she opts to be too well educated, she is left without a husband. I was told by a tribal woman with very high education that one great disadvantage for her was that she had to opt out of a family life. 'I have no option,' she said, 'I do not want to marry a man who is less than me in education and I do not want to marry a man who is not from my own people.' Similarly, I have seen some students from my own faculty from marginal communities with high education opt not to marry as they face the same situation. It is only after the community, region or caste has had the full advantage of education and occupational diversification for at least two generations that women with high level of education are able to find a match, given that the value of a man being higher in status to his wife is ingrained in the South Asian psyche.

Not only is a woman averse to marrying a man with lower status but even a man does not want to do so as it goes against the notion of masculinity where a man is supposed to provide for his family. But one must note that such a notion of masculinity is also upper-caste/class, where women have for long been abstaining from working outside the domestic domain. When the marginal groups change their status towards the upper strata, they accept these values which then become a part of their day-to-day lives, playing out an implicit hegemony.

Thus, positive discrimination directed towards improving the life conditions of the oppressed groups of society does not work always in favour of women. Hence, there is always a gendered disparity where, with greater acceptance of upper-class values, the women become demoted in their own communities. Even when the overall political and economic

status of a community improves, the immediate repercussion is to reinvent their lifestyles to be acceptable to the dominant groups and part of this 'improvement' lies in imposing stricter restrictions on their women.

Mobility and the Redefining of Space

Let us first examine the kinds of mobility that have taken place, beginning from the 1970s, onwards when at least two generations of formal education has been achieved even by women in most upper-class families. When I was in school, in the 1950s and the 1960s, there was only one girl in my batch whose mother was a doctor, and to her it was a great trauma, as all other children went 'home to mother' while she had to cope with a working mother. Yet, in my daughter's generation (those going to school in the 1970s to 1990s), the number of working women had greatly increased, although most of them still worked in stereotyped roles like that of a teacher, a doctor or office assistant (secretary, etc.). Yet, after the 1990s, with the specific goal of neo-liberalization, a new genre of work emerged in India, most of which came via the multinational companies that provided completely new avenues of occupation that were not heard of before. Suddenly, many young people joined what came to be known as 'call centres', along with a variety of jobs based on some basic knowledge of computers, management skills, etc.[10] The nature of these jobs has had an immense effect: first, by their sheer volume and second, by their non-elitist nature. There was, in other words, a democratization of the white collar jobs that were no longer a prerogative of upper class, well-educated men and women but which could and did employ a large number of young men and women from less privileged, less educated backgrounds, who may not have been raised in elitist schools and colleges and who could just pass muster in language and other skills and yet, for each one of whom there was some kind of a job.

Let us begin with the first generation of women who ventured out to work, and excluding those who were already situated in the field of labour, like rural poor and low-caste women and those like the dhobi women, already discussed, working within the symbolic confines of their traditional occupation. Women from upper-castes/classes, the devis, began to go out to work very sparingly by the 1970s. At that time, there was a clear distinction

[10] Interestingly enough, the turmoil caused in 1990 because of the implementation of the Mandal Commission report died down in 1992 as large number of non-governmental jobs became available.

between what was considered 'respectable' work, fit for a 'lady' (a term borrowed from English society but used extensively in India even today as an equivalent for a respectable woman) and work that was not meant for women of upper classes of mainstream Hindu/Muslim society. The most preferred was the work of a school teacher as it involved a respectable time frame, that is, a woman could work and come back before her husband and children came back home (from office and school) and look after the house; and second was being a doctor or a professor, both of which were considered too high up for an ordinary marriage so that many women who were in such professions often found that they could find no one to marry if they followed community norms.

Few women joined administrative service or other such demanding professions. Many of them had to opt out of marital life if they became too successful. For most women from respectable families, to do a job was, first of all, to only move around in space that was respectable, with male colleagues of impeccable credentials and those who did not have too much power over them. Since at that time most schools were not co-educational, a woman teacher teaching in a girl's school was as secluded from the outside male world as the students. Similar situation prevailed in girl's colleges, and most families, if they allowed the women to work out, preferred this kind of all woman or mostly women atmosphere. Women doctors preferred to be gynaecologists, dealing mostly with women patients. If a high profile woman was in a senior position, she commanded a lot of respect from male colleagues or subordinates. Deference to powerful women comes naturally to South Asian men, used to showing deference to older women in the family, especially mothers.

The low profile jobs and those that involved being subordinate to men, like an office secretary, or a nurse or a clerk, were only taken up by women from either a marginal community that did not have Brahmanical Hindu values, like Anglo Indians and Indian Christians, or low castes. At one time, even actresses were mostly from such communities, or from very poor families or from communities of dancing girls and singers.[11] But most importantly, the reasons for a woman wanting to work outside of the home had to be specified. In a middle-class family, a woman working outside for money was seen as a disgrace for her family, both natal and affinal. Many fathers

[11] There were, of course, a few outstanding exceptions like actress Devika Rani, first married to the famed cinema star and director, Himanshu Rai; and later, after being widowed, she married the aristocratic Russian artist, Nicholas Roerich.

preferred to give high education to daughters but only for self-fulfilment and inner development, not for doing a paid job. Even in my own generation, very few of my co-students from school went on to do a job, even if some of them acquired high levels of education; to view education as a means to getting a job was seen as demeaning and not worthy of high-class values.

Yet, by the 1980s and the 1990s, a large number of women were working outside and the 'double income' family was becoming popular with the lower and middle classes even of the upper castes. Women were increasingly seen in public places: for seeing movies, shopping, going to school and going to work. However, none of these activities were yet, and even now, seen as appropriate for women of respectable families unless following certain 'accepted rules', the origins of which lie in the substratum of gender construction in South Asia. In most conservative families, it was and is still considered inappropriate for women to go for grocery shopping or to go to market to buy vegetables. Men are mostly entrusted with the job of picking up groceries on their way back from offices. Higher-income families will send servants to do such work. But most importantly, if a woman did go out to the market, there were still norms to be followed that would ensure that she was not treated like a low-caste woman or one with no respectability. She should be accompanied by her husband or even better, by a servant. She was not expected to carry loads, certainly not publicly. Also, while a woman could buy fruits and vegetables, it is still mostly men who are seen at meat and fish shops and no woman must be seen around a liquor shop.

Thus, symbolic lines are drawn around the feminine and masculine and the sexual and non-sexual parts of the environment. The parts of the market that deal with shoes, garments and food are feminine, but the parts of markets that deal with motor parts, electronics, meat and fish, liquor and masculine objects like truck tires will not see any women visitors. Even today, there are many parts of the city and markets where women are told, 'You cannot go there'. The division on the lines of what objects are appropriate to be used by women and men respectively. Thus, women may buy things of personal use and it is here that quite often men take a back seat. At a recent visit to a jewellery shop, I found that women were the upfront buyers in most instances while men of the family just stood around with the money bags. The primary decision of choice of design and even budgeting was left entirely to the women. Women are also the ones who decide on what is to be bought in the domestic sphere irrespective of who (family men or servants) goes to buy. However, when it comes to objects like liquor, cigarettes and

non-vegetarian foods, women are rarely allowed to buy. Since women are also not symbolically associated with mechanical things like cars and trucks, they are viewed as out of place in such predominantly 'male' markets.

It is also to be noted that in traditional or pre-industrial cities (Sjoberg 1960), the market was divided into specialized zones; in the Old Delhi area, built by the Emperor Shah Jahan in the seventeenth century, such demarcated markets still exist but as the city has grown and urbanized, the new zones are marked by more multifunctional markets, yet some of the older restrictions still exist. For example, there are separate shops to sell groceries and liquor and still there is some kind of specialization. The real changes have come with the mall, the closed, air-conditioned and high profile integrated shopping-cum-entertainment areas built directly on Western models. The restrictions are also graded not only by gender but also by age and class. Thus, young and upper-class women face the most restrictions and are most secluded to the extent that even today, a girl from a highly placed family may not be allowed by her family to use public transport. She may not be allowed to or prefer to go to the outpatient department of a public hospital, preferring to go to a private specialist; she certainly would not like to enter a police station, even to lodge a complaint.

Yet, while public space is slowly being redefined to include women, the very presence of women is changing the landscape. As of today, many areas are marked out as feminine and masculine, and public transport and public institutions like banks, train stations, train bogies and buses and bus stops may be demarcated for use by men and women, just like public toilets. The coming of malls or what is perceived as high-class shopping centres has provided a space for movement of upper-class women, and in most metropolitan and now even smaller towns, has legitimized the movement of women from so-called respectable sections of society to move freely inside. Such malls are covered and usually air conditioned; they are clean and house respectable shops manned by fairly accomplished staff. They are different from the smelly, hot, congested and often dirty market areas meant for lower-class people, where one may have to rub shoulders with lower-class men and women.

Thus, the movements of women, into the public spaces, are still guided to a large extent by the earlier norms that informed the public and private dichotomy of the inner world of women and the outer world of men. The women's world must still be 'asexual', thus women must move into spaces largely or exclusively occupied by other women. Even in the Delhi Metro (the underground railway), separate coaches have been earmarked for women.

There are similar coaches in trains and seats in buses and sometimes, as in the case of the student's buses, entire bus can be earmarked for women, the Ladies Special. In most counters, like at railways and banks, there is a possibility of a separate queue for women.

Thus, women are moving out of their homes. They are also moving into other spaces and one significant movement that can be perceived is that of the movement towards the big metropolitan cities by the girls and boys from small towns, a movement that is often called as the 'bright light' movement. Unlike the high placed and 'respectable' jobs favoured by upper-class women, the girls from the fringe areas are ready to fill in a variety of jobs. Also, with globalization, as already noted, a large number of different kinds of occupations are coming in that need not be highly paid or prestigious but also do not suffer from stigma as they fall into a completely new cognitive sphere; thus, there is no category for a computer assistant or a call centre job, many of which are now being filled by young women.

The Danger of Being a Woman

The biggest fallout of globalization and increasing urbanization is the increasing rates of crimes against women. It is also significant that such crimes are highest in the areas around the Hindi belt, including the capital city of New Delhi, often sarcastically referred to as the 'crime capital'. Delhi, thus, provides a test case that may be used to understand urban violence against women. While some urban centres like Kolkata and Mumbai are known to be safe for women, relatively speaking, Delhi has now got the dubious distinction of leading the country in crimes against women. To understand this, one must look into Delhi's history of urbanization as against that of early British-established cities like Kolkata and Mumbai, where westernization came almost with the establishment of the urban centre, as these developed as economic and trading centres for the British, and specially Calcutta or Kolkata was established and developed purely as a colonial city.

Delhi, on the other hand, is an orthogenetic city with a strong conservative substratum. Often, people attribute the negative attitude towards women to its conservative roots, the presence of strong Islamic culture and its location in the strongly patriarchal Hindi belt. Yet, in my analysis, I do not wish to evoke the usual explanation of 'tradition' to explain the dangers of being a woman in a city like Delhi; rather, the ills are a fallout of urbanization and the ill effects of neo-liberalization that has hit the city since the 1990s, and

it is evident from the crime graph that criminality has been on the increase with greater so-called modernization than on the decline with the ushering in of amenities and superficial facelifts. Some of the dangers that plague women in urban centres all over India, in greater or lesser degrees, are the harassments faced by them while moving in public transports, on roads, in driving vehicles and moving individually on the streets.

We have discussed that in India, the women were always held in high esteem as mothers and sisters and also as women, but only when they fitted a particular model, that of the devi. Working women were treated as superior when they travelled by cars and held high-status jobs regarded as *Shakti* in another form, but when they were moving around on the roads and did not have any protection, they were just like the lower-class/caste women who had been always open to sexual harassment and exploitation. Moreover, if they were engaged in work that did not involve commanding men, but to appease them or to take care of them, they were automatically relegated to the status of a *dasi*, a servant or a menial worker. I have often been repulsed by the manner in which some Indian men treat air hostesses: as subservient servers whom they can order around; in their eyes, they are nothing but 'glorified maids'. Women working as receptionists or as secretaries, and in subordinate positions, also may be treated as 'available' and the deference shown to powerful women is completely missing in the context of a woman worker in an inferior status.

In a similar way, the people in the streets of Delhi and conservative towns find it difficult to adjust to the presence of foreign women and even women from those parts of India such as the North-East who are not familiar with the signifying map of body language of the mainland Indian women. Even among the elite women whose emerging consciousness is contesting the hegemony of patriarchal impositions on their appearance and dress, there is still considerable confusion regarding appropriate body language. Women moving in urban space are always facing the problem of satisfying their urge to wear fashionable clothes and the practicalities of movement where a little daring in dress may prove dangerous. Many elite families thus do not prefer that their women travel by public transport. There is also the contesting point of view, progressive and rational, that refuses to accept that women's harassment is engendered by their dress and movements, centring it rather in men's lack of morality and to patriarchal values. This view is often emanating from feminists that question the targeting of women for crimes committed on their bodies. They uphold women's rights to their bodies

and their movements, holding regressive values projected through social institutions, media and political rhetoric as responsible for crimes against women. Certainly, as Menon (2004: 101) asserts, this tension is a product of a historical moment, where a third world country like India is caught in the complexities of globalization and internal politics.

Thus in India, even today, women are respected or not respected not just because of their sex, but by the intersection of sexuality with existing caste–class norms of society. It is where and how they are situated that determines the attitude and mannerism extended towards them. The respect granted to Indian women of the upper strata of society was because of their moral and spiritual values, but average Indian males cannot ascribe such superior moral status to the smartly turned out women in revealing and Western dresses they see in offices and streets in the contemporary urban centres of India. Such a dislocation is obviously located in the older generation of men rather than in the younger ones brought up in a different world.

On a crackdown on men waiting outside women's colleges in Delhi, it was revealed that most men thus apprehended were of middle and even older age. Recently, in 2011, a middle-aged man arrested for teasing women had daughters of the same age and his wife had expressed 'disgust' at the incident. In urban centres, there are other factors that encourage such behaviour: one is of migration and the second one of a cultural disjunction, also associated with migration. Most rural and semi-urban regions in India are strongly relational; the individual is deeply embedded in social relationships that afford little privacy. Almost every act of an individual is recorded and observed, so that anything that may be classed as immoral will have immediate repercussions. Women in such smaller places move in a larger kinship-oriented world where their safety is guaranteed by their social location. By this very rule, the women of the lower castes and classes are vulnerable and there is actually little redress for them. Thus, lower-caste women in a village in northern India had told me, 'we have to be very careful of our safety, for while the upper caste women are protected by the very power of their men, who is there to protect us'. Situations of vulnerability of low-caste women have been brought up in literature and popular media, for example, in the 1970s film, *Aakrosh* (Rage) and in the book, *Sangati*, by Bama (2005).

In the city, men lose the surveillance that they face in the smaller towns and rural areas; they feel that they can get away with improper behaviour and no one will be able to socially stigmatize them, if they are upper-class/caste, or punish, if they are lower-caste/class. The anonymity and population

density of cities gives a cover to many kinds of actions that are not possible in regions of greater visibility. Yet, this is not the only reason; the men who indulge in such acts of symbolic and real violence against women are often from the lower rungs of the social and economic ladder. In the places from where they come, they are subjected to humiliation and their women are often subjected to sexual exploitation. The urban situation allows a certain freedom of expression of their rage against the upper-castes/classes that may, in some specific situation, also come out as sexual violence. Thus, rape of minor children, a phenomenon often reported from slums and poorer areas, may only be a form of outlet of frustration and psychological depression caused by structural inequalities. What I mean to say that such may not be comparable to genuine pedophiles, reported from across the social world.

There is also a culturally 'constructed' dimension to this attitude of disrespect to the women.

These Women are Not Like Our Mothers!

The working women or even housewives and students, seen on the streets of urban centres, are not anything like the image of the ideal Indian woman, imprinted on the minds of many Indians. The media, till very recently, has been playing up these images to perfection and the archetypical villain's moll in a Hindi movie or television soap is a visually westernized woman, that is, wearing Western clothes and often with a cigarette dangling from her lips.[12] In the 1970s, the image of the ideal mother was being ruled by Bombay film industry's portrayal of the ideal self-sacrificing, all forgiving and virtuous mother, at that time being played in film after film by the thespian actress Nirupa Roy. It also happened that she most often landed up playing this role as the mother of the then superstar Amitbah Bacchan. The manner in which this sari-clad, demure mother image had captured the public imagination was perceptible in every class and walk of life. In fact, prior to this, the mother was portrayed as more symbolic of the nation, like in the film *Mother India*.

Although some advertisements and films may now show at least a young mother in Western clothes, it is always modest, unglamorous clothes that typify a housewife and respectable woman. One may cite the attempt in August 2011, to take out a 'slut walk' in Delhi, following the lead given

[12] This may be one reason why the generation of feminists, wearing Western clothes and smoking, were totally rejected by the mass of Indian society.

by feminists from Canada. Yet, ironically, the women who took part did not dare to, or want to, actually dress like sluts, and they turned out in perfectly respectable clothing to support the idea that it is not the dress that women wear that leads to their harassment but the attitude of the men. In fact, the 'walk' met with little popularity in spite of good media coverage. Respectability of dress has deep symbolic significance in Indian society as it is related to class/caste and kinship status. In fact, changes in pattern of dress are often symbolic of changes in status from an unmarried (hence available) to a married, hence respected woman, as many women change their pattern of dress with changes in social and marital status.[13] In many celluloid situations, the girl changing over to wearing Indian clothes and becoming shy is a sure symbolization of 'falling in love' or accepting the patriarchal values to be imposed by lover or husband. It is as good as saying, 'I submit'. My mother had to take to wearing only white saris (symbolic of elderly status in Bengal) once my elder sister grew up, although she was herself quite young at that time, and as a younger daughter, I almost never saw my mother in a colourful sari. Even in media, mothers are shown, by and large, as dressed modestly and almost never having the possibility of sexuality.

While on a field trip with my students to Haryana, a strongly patriarchal and conservative belt of northern India (Channa, 1992), some young men told me (a mother figure) quite frankly that they could not think of the jeans-clad, semi-western looking girls accompanying me as their sisters or kinswomen, to be treated with respect. I remembered my visit to the dhobi *katra* in the 1970s, when while engaging in conversation with a group of young men on a rooftop, I was told,

> ...the girls who come to college in jeans and western clothes are only flaunting their wealth. They have no real *izzat* (honour), but know that they can get away with wearing such clothes just because they come from rich families and come to college in cars.

The situation has changed somewhat in the twenty-first century, when even girls from dalit families and lower strata of society have taken to wearing Western clothes; yet, the class difference always remains, the upper strata

[13] Most young girls in India, even a hundred years back, used to wear dresses and frocks in the Western style till such time as they reached puberty or got married, which may not have been too far apart in time. Also, women are expected to undergo changes in dress pattern with increasing age, as certain ways of dressing are not seen as 'appropriate' for elderly women, or women with grown-up daughters or married sons.

is moving towards greater exclusivity (like designer clothes) to keep their distance. The lower class of men look at these 'unattainable', yet to their minds 'impure' women and seek victims, who may sometimes be women of upper strata of society, but most often the rage is directed inwards. While it is rare for men from communities such as the dhobis, who are rooted in the urban society, to actually indulge in sexual violence, the migrant men may often be driven by the very frustration of their existence into such crimes that may, in the absence of any other opportunity, be directed inwards onto their own women and children, equally deprived and vulnerable.

It is the self-destructive rage and anger that seeks out the most vulnerable of victims: a poor, unattended child playing by the roadside or a woman out to work doing a menial, unprotected job. Yet, the man who perpetuates such crime is himself a victim of what is called as 'structural inequality', an inequality not derived from tradition, but of the very economic and political contexts that constitute the so-called modernity. These men, quite often young boys, are brought on to the streets of urban cities because either their forests have been cut or their land submerged by a dam – the 'ecological refugees'; or their livelihood threatened by introduction of new technologies; or simply because there is nothing to earn from where they come. The city welcomes them with poverty and marginalization but at the same time, bombards them with visual allurements from a global media. These visuals put forward provocative sexual images, inciting them but giving them no legitimate outlet as some of them may be too poor even to visit a prostitute. Many of these men are migrants who have left their families behind; many may not have a partner because of the high male to female sex ratio in most parts of India. Most are struggling for their very existence and feel a great deal of frustration and face real violence from the system they feel too fragile to confront.

The nineteenth century civilizational agenda of the West, that circulated the globe through colonization, provided 'development' models to the leaders of the decolonized countries such as India, Indonesia and others, a possibility of short cut to developed status through a top-down model of industrialization and rapid urbanization. During the regime of Rajiv Gandhi, in the 1990s, for example, massive efforts were made to send televisions, satellite communication and computers to the remote parts of the country. While not denying the empowerment brought about through access to information and broadening of vision that such information revolutions achieved, one must also look towards the negative impacts of such liberalization of visual access. The soft pornographic images transmitted by American television

and now even Indian television (in order to raise TRP ratings), and the hard pornography one can easily download from the Internet, is drawing the people into an unrealistic virtual world that they may either treat as a fairy tale or it may incite in them violent emotional responses that they cannot control. A real damage done is the deconstruction of women as respectable and worthy of worship; especially since the word goes out that the women that you see in these images may be women from upper classes. No doubt other factors also operate in the rising incidences of rape and crime against women, but one cannot underestimate the power of images bombarding people, creating conflicting messages. The Western philosophy of woman as a sexual object is permeating into non-Western cultures through a globalized mass media. Thus, no amount of legislation[14] is actually effective in controlling sexual harassment of women at both workplace and elsewhere.

Such conflicting values and historical contradictions created by a commercialized world bent upon selling everything, including sexuality and human bodies, interacts with a globalizing culture that, on one hand, assumes all that is being projected from the West is authentic and 'superior'.

The Changing Family Scene in Urban India

The wife is never viewed as only a sexual partner and even today, in India and in rest of South Asia, a wife has a place that is much more than just being a sexual partner to her husband; in fact, that aspect is the least important of the overall relationship that is always embedded in larger social relations, especially of the wider kin group. Even as of now, most Hindus believe the woman is 'Lakshmi' (goddess of prosperity and wealth) and most good fortune that befalls a man after marriage is attributed to what is called as '*stribhagya*' (the good fortune of the woman). A woman is often referred to as 'Annapoorna' (a goddess who provides nurturance to the world).

[14] The legal redressal for sexual harassment was passed in the Supreme Court according to Article 14, Article 15 and Article 21 of the Constitution of India that pertain to enforcement of fundamental rights. See *Vishakha and Others vs State of Rajasthan and Other*, AIR 1997, SC 3011, placed before Chief Justice of India, Hon. J.S. Verma, Justice Sujata Manohar and Justice B.N. Kirpal, decided on 13 August 1997. This was the case where the Supreme Court of India laid down rules for controlling the sexual harassment of women in all working places, with reference to Articles 14, 21 and 19(1)(g) of Constitution of India, along with reading of International Conventions and suggested guidelines for safe working conditions of women.

> ...in preparing and serving food a woman experiences her family's dependence upon her in a very direct way: she is conscious that she controls a vital resource. And then there is the positive moral evaluation given to the preparation of food and the ritual purity of the cooking hearth in Hindu tradition. (Sharma, 1980: 126)

The control of the women over the domestic domain means that at least within the household, it is her rules and regulations that have to be followed. The woman who has the greatest say in these matters is, of course, the eldest and most senior. If the mother is present, then her word is law. The rules imposed by women are not seen as a direct control over the activities of men, although that is what they really are, but norms to preserve the sanctity and purity of the house that, in most Hindu households, is viewed as the abode of the gods who preside over the welfare of family members. The men have to take recourse to strategies to indulge in activities that are tabooed by women; and most commonly, they pertain to the eating of meat, drinking alcohol and even smoking.

In Delhi, there is a male culture of drinking in parked cars. Most street side vendors in Delhi keep, along with soft drinks, a few bottles of hard drinks, glasses and ice. Often, middle-aged men drive up and are served surreptitiously a drink in their cars before driving back home. The men are not just afraid of the women, they are also conscious that the home is a sacred place where norms need to be maintained. One often used refrain is, 'what will the children learn, if they see the father indulging in such acts'. Most South Asians do not consider the home to be focused on the 'marriage bed' but on children. Thus, use of moral pressure by women on their menfolk, whether husband, father or son, is a common occurrence. The more 'traditional' a family, the more is the power of women.

As mentioned earlier, when I speak of 'tradition' here, it is not in terms of a time frame of being old or recent, but as understood by most Indians: the difference between being 'traditional' and 'modern' is the difference between being rooted in an Indian ethos or a Western mindset. Principally, it refers to the notion of personhood; anyone with an individualistic sense of self is 'modern', while those who remain embedded within their larger social relationships are traditional. Other things follow, for example, when it comes to getting married. The traditional mode is to get married according to the norms of a larger relational involvement in marriage where it is not viewed as a relationship between two individuals but as a means to propagating the family line, the '*kula*' and the '*vamsa*' (Karve, 1953). Thus, anyone who

decides to get married on the basis of a self-choice, prioritizing the role of the individual in marriage, is acting as 'modern'.

In the traditional marriage, a wife is chosen on the basis of caste and family status, presumed virginity and good behaviour. I say 'presumed' for unless otherwise proven or known, an unmarried girl is always regarded as a virgin in Hindu society. In an earlier paper (Channa, 1997), I had written about the role of village exogamy in northern India that serves to hide any misdemeanor on the part of a girl. The community simply pushes the affair under the carpet and gets the girl married off in a far off place. The real virginity of the girl is not an issue but what is at stake is the good name of the family. Similarly, there is no clear-cut definition of what is good behaviour except that she should not have been heard too much or *heard about too much* before she gets married. Once married, the demure wives open their mouth and can, at times, become formidable.

The requirements of a good wife were mainly in the relational sphere where what she was perceived of as in the community was more important than what she actually was. More than the parties to the marriage, it was always the status of the involved families that was of concern. A significant clue was the earlier marriages that had taken place in the households; one good marriage paved the way for more and conversely, one bad marriage could spoil chances of an appropriate match for most other members of the family.

After marriage, the husband–wife relationship assumed a very minor role to the relationships the young woman, the incoming bride, was supposed to build up with her affinal family. Husband and wife came close after many years of marriage, mostly when their children were grown up and parents had become too old or were dead. The control exerted by a mother-in-law over her daughter-in-law was also to minimize the interaction between the young couple. In many parts of India, it is not considered prudent to get a beautiful daughter-in-law as the family feels that the young man will get too attached to his wife and neglect his duties towards the rest of the family. In fact, in most arranged marriages, the bride and groom only saw each other on the night of the wedding itself. Such practices are present even to this day.

In some communities if a young man 'saw' a girl, he was obliged to marry her. I know the case of a rather good-looking boy who was forced to marry a girl who was quite plain looking. But he made the mistake of going along with his family to see the girl, and once seen by the groom, a girl could not be rejected. For a man to look at a girl before rejecting her was considered to be great humiliation for the girl's family, a dishonour for the boy's family

and a disgrace for the entire community. In South India however, such a situation rarely arose as the girls are married into kin. But the question of rejection did not arise here also. As a trend towards becoming 'modern', most boys still accept whatever girl their parents choose for them but try later on to 'mend' whatever they have got. The multimillion dollar beauty industry is working overtime to put right, figures, skins and hair, to the satisfaction of men and women alike. But whatever else may be the reason for getting divorce or getting separated, one rarely hears of physical attributes to be a cause of marital breakdown in India. In fact, for most women, the effort to look good ends with marriage or with the birth of the first child.

The preoccupation with physical appearance is truly an import of globalization, especially among the ordinary people. The worth of a woman was in the contribution she made to the household economy, in begetting progeny and in taking care of the domestic affairs. Women were viewed as repositories of knowledge, especially with regard to cooking and healing, including midwifery and women's ailments. Almost every woman learnt these skills from the older women in the family, who jealously guarded this knowledge, usually imparting the real secrets to their daughters-in-law towards the end of their life. It is noteworthy that, in really traditional families, such knowledge was rarely given to a daughter, who was seen as becoming part of another family.

With women getting educated and taking on jobs, the real transformations began in the urban families. An educated daughter-in-law was less likely to show deference to her less educated/illiterate mother-in-law; the knowledge that the older generation had mostly became redundant in the face of modern gadgets and lifestyles. The tussle for power between the older and younger women became bitter as older women looked upon the younger ones as contenders for their position in the household by virtue of better education and earning power. The marginalization of older women meant that there often developed a sense of frustration and even hostility, and sometimes, such animosity even led to what has come to be known as 'dowry deaths', the killing of a young daughter-in-law by her affinal family members. It is to be noted that in most cases, the key culprit is the mother-in-law, although the husband and other members may also be implicated. Although blamed on dowry, the real reasons may be more complicated and involve the power imbalances and frictions inherent in a situation of changing power dynamics.

The modernization of kitchen meant that women no longer had to learn to light a wood or charcoal stove or learn to make 'rotis' (wheat pancakes),

and many traditional ways of doing things were replaced by mechanical and electrical devices like food processors. However, in South Asia, there are many more families that prefer to cook fresh and eat than to eat out of packaged food. In fact, packaged food is something that is yet to catch on and therefore, the women still retain their dominance over the domestic domain because the men still depend on their wives to cook for them. In fact, with the lack of servants and the predominance of nuclear family living in urban areas, this dependence is increasing rather than decreasing.

In the traditional families, the husband and wife were rarely thrown against each other as most household work was done cooperatively by women and servants. In the urban family where, because of migration and reasons of work and lack of space, many more couples are living in nuclear units, the relationship between husband and wife is becoming more direct and intimate. As pointed out by scholars of family in India, the large joint families were mostly found among the rich and landowning castes/classes (Shah, 1998). The poor, the marginal, the low castes and tribes always had the nuclear family, and therefore the relationship between husband and wife was far more equal, as has been described in Chapter 4 where I have described the dhobis. One reason why many women from rural areas want to marry a man with a job in an urban city is that they will get to live with him away from interference from larger family members.

In an urban area, a man needs a wife who will have to take on many of the tasks not taken on by women in earlier times. An urban wife has to do the shopping, drop the children to school, take them to various activities, go to the bank, pay the bills and in other words, do a lot in the space outside of her home. For this, she often needs to drive or to travel by public transport. This makes her visible in places where women from upper strata of society were not supposed to be seen even a couple of decades back. As already discussed, such stretching out of space and dislocation from traditional normative allocations have created problems that are clearly visible in rising crime graphs against women.

Within the domestic space itself, the clearly demarcated duties between husband and wife have also become blurred, giving rise to a power game in which they often come to compete, a situation not conceivable within the traditional household. Instead of the separation of the male and female domains, the modern apartment in a high-rise urban building pits the man and woman in a face-to-face contestation where the results can be sometimes devastating. The normative definition of a man as breadwinner becomes

problematized with women often contributing substantially to family incomes. As pointed out by Gullestead, in modern marriages, the increasing independence of women from men, who continue to be emotionally dependent on women, and in most Indian families on their domestic skills as well, renders 'definitions of masculinities particularly problematic' (Gullestead, 1993: 159).

In the West, the individualistic orientation makes it a one-to-one confrontation of the man and his partner but in India, the situation is made more problematic by the embeddedness of this relationship within a larger kin network in which parents continue to play key roles, with siblings and affines joining in from the sides. In a modern family, a man, after his marriage, is often caught between his traditional loyalty to his mother and the newly created dependence on his wife as a social partner. The westernized legal system has given the wife the largest chunk of rights over her husband, although this goes contrary to pre-existing norms where the priority of a person lay first with his parents, sisters and other family members and only then with his wife. But under modern Indian law, the wife was given the prime rights over her husband, creating a lot of trauma for parents who had traditionally depended on their sons for maintenance. However, in most cases, the man cannot ignore his parents and often this leads to friction with the wife, especially if she has imbued the Western values of individualism.

A woman in an urban situation also has her roles redefined according to the needs of a modernizing husband, who continues to nurture the deep-seated patriarchal values while imbibing some fragments of Western individualism and notions of freedom. Since these values remain fragmented and somewhat haphazardly internalized, the expectations of the spouses from each other have become unrealistic. Thus, in an urban middle-class household, a wife is needed to teach the children, be educated enough to assist her husband, modern enough to accompany her husband to parties and dress up in fashionable clothes and even acquire a degree of glamour, all characters neither expected nor preferred in the traditional wife. At the same time, she is expected to show deference to her in-laws, be obedient to them and maintain the moral superiority of the devi. Since such virtues may not be simultaneously present in a single woman, although often depicted in soap operas or popular cinema, real life becomes fraught with frustrations.

A man caught between parents, especially mother and wife, may feel emasculated, and a perceived threat to his masculinity may result in violence as a means to reaffirm his identity of self. Thus, modern and educated

women are often victims of domestic violence and even incestuous rape is becoming common as frustrations and competing loyalties rise within the domestic domain. While upper-class men are facing greater tensions within the domestic sphere arising out of imperfect reconciliation of traditional and modern values, the lower class of men are subjected to the structural violence of the system, forcing them to turn the anger inwards towards their wives and children. The frustration of men forced to depend on their wives' earnings has been discussed by Kapadia, who writes with reference to untouchable men in Tamil Nadu forced out of their livelihood by the mechanization of agriculture:

> This suggest that a deep contradiction exists between the ideal self-image of Pallar men and reality. They like to see themselves as authoritative and in control, but in fact, they have to regularly depend on their wives' incomes. This may contribute to their depression and frequent drunkenness. (Kapadia, 1995: 210)

Daughters

Family life is being impinged by many different sets of needs, values and hitherto unimagined contingencies. One immediate problem is to renegotiate the role of the daughter. In traditional families, daughters were hardly viewed as family members. Being married off at a very young age, a woman's life was seen as located firmly in her husband's house. Most of her married life, a daughter was treated like an honoured guest in her natal family and while her father and brother did fulfil many obligations towards her, her identity and social position was with her husband and his family.

With the new legislations of India that put the girl at par with her brothers as far as her status in the natal family is concerned, the family dynamics have become quite problematic. It is most evident in situations of wealth sharing and family businesses. Earlier, the girl from a wealthy family was married off with a good dowry and could expect expensive gifts and support throughout her life. But many girls, nowadays, may want a share of family's immovable wealth. In a recent article in *The Statesman* (6 October 2011) by Asha Ramchandran, it has been mentioned that while women as entrepreneurs and women in high corporate positions are quite acceptable in India, the question of daughters taking over their father's business remains problematic. It is difficult for a father to visualize a daughter as a successor, primarily because the role of her husband and affines remains unresolved.

By the tenets of South Asian culture, especially among the Hindus where marriage is a sacrament, a married daughter's loyalties always lie with the affinal household. In such a situation, a man may be reluctant to hand over his hard-earned wealth and business empire to a family that always remains situated slightly on the negative side. A son-in-law is rarely viewed as substitute for a son, although in case a man does not have a son, he could take a resident son-in-law but prefers to hand over his property to the grandson who is viewed as more of 'one's own'. Thus, rich families have greater contradictory emotions towards daughters as they are also seen as potential contenders for the family wealth without *being true members of the family*. It is here that the real difference between Western kinship and Indian kinship becomes manifest. While in West, especially in more modern societies like the American (Schneider, 1968), blood is seen as the most important attribute of being a relative, in South Asia, on the other hand, it is the lineage or clan that is most important, thereby excluding women born to the lineage that go out at marriage (daughters) and including women who enter it at marriage (daughters-in-law). But the latter may never be seen as true members, not being born there. Thus, women remain in an ambiguous kin position, not being part of groups where they were born and not being quite acceptable in groups where they are married.

In terms of Hindu mythology, the wife (*ardhangini*) has all the rights and is the true representative of the lineage as seen in the epic Mahabharata, where the widowed Queen, Satyavati, takes on the full responsibility of continuing her husband's lineage. But in actual life, the situations may vary, still; in most households, the daughter-in-law can evoke more legal and ethical rights while the daughter can only appeal to emotion and morality. In many parts of India, especially in northern India, the family heirloom jewels are given to daughter-in-law and not daughter, as the feeling always persists that whatever is given to daughter-in-law will *remain within the family* while what is given to daughter will go out.

In communities with less money and power, the daughter's position is far more equal to that of a son and she often is viewed as an integral member of the natal family even after marriage. Women regularly come to their parent's house to tide over crises and remain an integral part of the workforce. When I was working with the dhobis, I was told that a girl would come running whenever her parents had too much work, or were ill or facing any other kind of problem. In fact, the reason why the dhobis choose to stay close to each other was that daughters were married nearby and the spatial as well as

conceptual separation between the parental house and the husband's house was minimal or non-existent. Among most poorer and marginal communities, the daughters position within the family remains strong as marriages most often take place near at hand. It is only the wealthy that send their daughters out far away in marriage to a suitable groom and also, perhaps, to keep the affinal family away from their wealth and property.

Thus, to hand over family business to daughters means that de facto one is in danger of handing it over to another family, the affinal family of the married daughter. Therefore, if daughters are not given rights in business, it is not because they are *women*, but simply because they are daughters. Wives, for example, may take over the business and run an empire. Even today, many important business houses see the active involvement of wives and mothers. Thus, the question is not about a negative attitude towards women or about gender at all; it is about marriage practices and lineage norms. Unlike in England where the ruling queens were daughters, in India, the ruling queens were always wives. It is because in Indian patriarchy, the wife is seen as merged with the body of her husband, and daughters become anomalously placed; they are loved and honoured but cannot be seen as successors to fathers because as soon as they marry, they become merged with the identity of their husbands.

Thus, the marked lack of preference for female progeny may be traced not to the practice of dowry alone but to the facts of patriliny and the symbolic value of marriage as a merging of the woman with the patrilineage of her husband. Marriage is also seen as sacred and binding, and also necessary for a woman. Daughters in India are usually referred to as held in trust for another; terms like '*paraya dhan*' (someone else's treasure) are used. The parents of a girl are not expected to take anything from her affinal house. In North India, elders never visit a daughter in her affinal house as they are not supposed to accept even a glass of water not only from her house but even from her village. Such strict regulations however are not found in every part of India, only in North and North-west where prevalence of female infanticide and foeticide is also the highest. The prevalence of a severely imbalanced sex ratio is thus found in those parts where the severance of a married daughter from her natal household is most complete. Also, these regions are the ones where, as narrated by Oldenburg (2002), the colonial rule had served to destabilize environmental conditions to the detriment of agriculture and subsistence economy leaving the men little choice but to join the Indian army. Because of the emphasis on the masculinity of men employed in armed forces, the

women became downgraded and were not seen as contributors to the family economy. Rajasthan has had a warring tradition even during the medieval times and the girl child among the Rajputs stands a very high chance of being eliminated. The reasons are not so much dowry as the protection of the family honour. When the men were engaged in wars, the purity of women left behind was a major concern, therefore every family tried to have as few as possible.

However, the contemporary value of having as few girl children as possible is seen more among the urban middle class and less among the poor and the rural people. The reasons too seem to be very 'modern' as many middle-class educated families consider having too many children as a mark of being uneducated and not 'modern'. A family with more than three children faces the prospect of being laughed at by their peer group and feels embarrassed in the social network. In fact, it is considered very 'enlightened and progressive' to have one or two children. However, although families may project themselves to the outside world as progressive, they still carry the same values regarding patriliny as they have received as part of their family values.

Even today, few parents in most parts of India would be comfortable living of the earnings of their daughters or being supported by daughters in their old age. Only in South India, because of the prevalence of kin marriage, parents have more rights over their daughters, but as soon as they want to marry their daughter to a non-kin, they have to pay a heavy dowry. It is because of these reasons that the urban and educated do not want to have too many daughters and they can also afford the expensive prenatal sex determination tests as well as go for safe abortions. For the poor people, daughters are assets in more than one way. If they are too poor, they abandon or even sell off the daughters; some communities may force them into prostitution. In the eastern part of the country, although female infanticide is unheard of, the trafficking in women is rampant.

In India, poor upper-caste parents would never sell daughters or allow them to do any kind of work that may bring disgrace on the family. Even very poor families, if they are of high caste, do not allow their daughters to work outside. Therefore, not having a daughter is a better option as the notion of family honour is very high in the northern parts of the country. Having a daughter brings with it too many responsibilities that include protecting her virginity, getting her married and then taking care of her for the rest of her life, and also, this responsibility is extended to her daughters if she has any. All over India, the mother's/mother's brother's family plays a

key ritual and social role in the life of a daughter/sister's daughter. All this is to be done as a one-sided affair. Sometimes, as in Bengal, the problem of dowry was solved by what was known as an exchange marriage (*palti bodol*), that is, cross sex-siblings were exchanged, a boy for a girl and vice versa. In Rajasthan, near Udaipur, I worked in a field area where a bride could only be brought in for a son in exchange for a daughter. I met a man who was unmarried. He told me that all his sisters were exhausted in getting his elder brothers married and although it was the duty of the eldest brother to give one of his daughters to get a bride for his youngest brother, he preferred to use them to get brides for his own sons.

However, in urban areas and with education, such forms of marriages are looked down upon. Most parents want the best for their daughters, not so much for her happiness but as a status symbol for themselves. In the contemporary world of consumer culture and also what Ortner (1984) calls hegemony of capitalism, the marriages have become a statement of status. Unlike in the West, wealthy men in India do not splurge on beautiful women and having a jet-setting life; they prefer to spend on marriages of their children. The recent example is of one the richest Indian men in the world, Mr Lakshminiwas Mittal having his daughter married at the Versailles in Paris. But this very competitiveness and the fact that children serve as the symbolic capital of parents implies that even for a relatively wealthy family, having several daughters means that they will have to spend proportionately more on the weddings and not only that, the new legislations that gives daughters equal rights of inheritance mean that they may have to part with a substantive part of their business and immovable property to another lineage.

Thus, more the legislative efforts to bring about equality between sons and daughters, the more is the reluctance of well-off parents to have more daughters; in fact, the wealthier the family, the higher the stakes and more incentive for going in for female foeticide. Among poorer labouring families, the number of children is a social and economic asset and they may not want to have less number of daughters for they not only contribute to family economy, the pressures to give dowry are also less. It is the high-status families that are more under pressure to keep up their social image and therefore, would not like to have more daughters than they can marry off with pomp and show. Also, in families with high level of education and money, a substantive amount is invested in the education of daughters and then, an even larger amount of dowry has to be given to get her married to a groom of higher qualification or at least equal status. Thus, a number of issues are involved here.

The first is that children are *not viewed as individuals with their own rights* but as extension of the parents. The concept of the individual remains, as of today, only a legal fiction in India. Globalization has not affected the perception of children but only added greater material dimensions to the negotiation of status through one's children. In the pre-capitalist days, a dowry consisted mostly of items of household use that a new couple would require to set up their conjugal unit within the joint family or even outside of it. In Bengal, for instance, it would include the marriage bed, utensils for household use, clothes and jewellery for the bride. Among the dhobis, it included a couple of necessary utensils, one iron and a set of new clothes; in addition, the parents gave a few of their old clients for the couple to begin their occupation of washing clothes. The moveable wealth in terms of cash and ornaments given to the bride at the time of marriage comprised her '*streedhan*' (woman's wealth), to be useful to her at the time of need.

But as more and more consumer goods are entering the market, they are being added onto dowry items, under the excuse that all these are for use of the young couple. Cars, washing machines, computers, refrigerators, televisions, microwaves and mobile phones are now seen as necessities. In rural areas and in less sophisticated families, as soon as a girl was born, a trunk was kept aside where the mother would keep accumulating clothes, utensils and other items for her wedding and at the time of marriage these were used. But today, any young person would want the latest designs and fashion items; everything has to be the latest in the market if one has to keep up the family pride. Handmade clothes and those accumulated over years are seen as 'outdated' and even in less well-off families, the groom's side would feel let down if such items were given.

In fact, as the range of a wedding is spreading wider because of globalization, as relatives arrive from far-off places on the globe and even the groom can often be a non-resident Indian (NRI), the cost of weddings is rising. The more global a wedding, the more 'modern' and high status it is considered to be. For power holders or those aspiring to power, the wedding display is seen as a kind of 'potlatch', a status catching mechanism. Thus, wedding expenses and marriages are simply old values grafted onto a new market and status-driven society. In earlier times, before capitalist values had taken root in the South Asian mindset, the status of a person was measured to a large extent by the good conduct, the moral standing and values of a family. In the urban metropolis, people are judged not by who they are as persons, but by what they can spend, what is their 'conspicuous consumption' status.

In this situation, what happens to girls from poor families? If these girls are from a generally poor and marginal community, there may not be much hindrance in getting married, but life in general will be hard (one can read Bama and Holmstrom 2005 for a realistic description of dalit women's lives). India still has one of the highest infant mortality rates and maternal deaths in the world. If the girls are from a poor family of high-caste status, then they face miserable prospects in life. Either they have to do with a groom of not quite up to the expectations, or the family has to stretch its budget to the breaking point, often having to sell meagre assets or to go into debt. In such a strata, even foeticide may be too expensive an option, so girl children are neglected, given less food, warm clothes, medical care, etc., in the hope that they die young. Thus, the survival rate of living girl children is also quite depressing. At times, one hears of suicide by young girls to spare parents the burden of arranging a marriage. The expenditures also do not stop at the marriage itself. The groom's family generally expects to get a gift at all ritual and ceremonial occasions. In the expanding consumer market, there can be no limit to demands. 'Dowry is no longer a onetime payment, often a series of demands are made, and if these are not met the bride is sent back or ill treated even to the point of being killed' (Dube, 1997: 135).

Globalization: Creating a World of Illusions

Gender and Modernity

One of the biggest contradictions in Indian society today is that the ideals of womanhood have not been transformed to include the modern woman. For a majority of Indian men, the ideal is still their mother. Since the generation of working and educated women is still young, there is an immediate opposition between the ideal womanhood embodied in a mother, who is totally devoted to household work and raising children, whose world is confined to the domestic domain, and the wife or younger woman who works outside the home, who is able to argue with her husband and who sometimes may earn more and hold higher status. Many husbands are not able to accept the fact that their wives are more intelligent, articulate and better placed socially than them.

Such contradictory values become apparent in matrimonial advertisements, itself a hybrid of traditional values and modern technology, making use of websites, the Internet and newspapers to project values of arranged marriages most often based on caste, religion and regional considerations. A look at

the classified in one of the largest selling newspapers, *The Times of India*, indicates that there are various types of classification: based on region and language like Bengali, Gujarati and Kashmiri; based on religion like Hindu, Christian and Muslim; based on caste like Brahmins and Kayasthas; and then, based on occupation and location such as medical, engineer and also NRI; and also interestingly cosmopolitan (meaning that the people concerned do not care much for traditional markers of status but modern ones like education, occupation and class). A common thread that runs through is that most advertisements require a girl with good education but traditional home-based values (designated as homely).

But more than anything else, the problems arise out of the constant friction between husband and wife in their day-to-day affairs. In the joint family, such tensions were non-existent or diffused between other members of the household. Women's expectations out of marriage are also based on reading of popular English fiction eulogizing romance and sex in a relationship and values of rights and space also intrude into the marriage, especially for highly educated women. The new generations of highly educated and informed women are not insulated from global values of feminism and equality of rights that are now contained within a Western discourse as against the traditional ones.

The constant bombardment from the media of global aesthetic and cultural images have led to construction of imagined ideals of both masculinity and femininities that men and women find hard to realize, especially as such imaginary constructions are a blend of the old and new. Thus, men have, as their fantasies, slim and svelte beauties who are able to carry off high fashion clothes, articulate and educated, yet nurturing and submissive to the interests of the husband and his family. The fantasies of women have undergone more radical transformations. Women visualize kind men, cooperative partners, the ones who would not stand in their path of self-expression. Women also understand that they have to live up to the standards of physical perfection that modern husbands demand, although this aspect is yet to take root as a pervasive value.

Physical beauty of a wife is a value that is creeping in very slowly and standards of beauty are also changing. Earlier, families would look for a sturdy girl who could produce children and do household work. However, now the standards of beauty are tilting towards Western models projected by global advertisements. The advertisements of cosmetic companies and fashion channels of television add to the confusion of values. While most

men covet the sexy looking models they see on the screen, they would rather have a wife who was more modest in looks but more respectable. In India women have been respected and treated as devis for their virtue and non-sexual spiritual character. It is for this reason men who see women in public spaces in Western or smart clothes, looking glamorous and sexual, find it difficult to give them respect as 'respectable women' and mentally categorize them as women of easy virtue.

In a television interview of several young male models, they were asked by the anchor as to whether they would like to marry any one of the girls they worked with. The unanimous response was, 'Not those girls!' One reason they gave was that those women looked like sticks; they wanted to marry real girls, with real bodies! Thus, what prevails at the moment is a difficult reconciliation between various values and fragments of consciousness, where people of varying mindsets and opinions are contesting each other. This contest itself is the product of globalization where many things are no longer accepted as *doxa* but subjected to a debate with numerous participants.

Thus, globalization has brought in seemingly contradictory situations and conflicting values. On the one hand, some customs like dowry that had a completely different meaning and relevance in the past, mainly as a means to recognize the status of the girl child in a situation of patrilineal inheritance and to provide her with some economic security for future, have become a power game of consumerist display. On the other hand, providing a young couple with the necessities of life to set up a house, it has instead of become a status symbol, thriving paradoxically on the very fruits of modernization and technological advancement that are supposed to bring a good life for many. How is it that globalization, which was supposed to have ushered in rationalistic, universalistic and egalitarian values, has actually done the opposite?

Caste, Class and Gender

One has to refer to Gramsci to view class as a lived reality: 'How class is lived includes the ways in which different inequalities are gendered, ethnicized, or present themselves in the form of particular rational realities' (Crehan, 2002: 195). In the pre-westernized India, the major social determinant was caste that intersected with class to produce a dynamic society that thrived on military power and trade. With the aggressive westernization of the country bringing in notions of individualism, nationalism and mobility, the class system has become a hybrid of various cultural remnants grafted onto

modern consumerism, market and capitalist mindset. Thus, some values as marriage within one's *jāti*, marriages as the sacred duty of parents, children as embedded within the family identity, and the necessity of a male child to continue the lineage, to perform death duties and to support parents in old age are all thriving; only global consumerism has been added on. Added on also is the commodification of children as parents enter into mental calculations as to the cost of upbringing, marriage and prestige value of having boys or girls. Not only that, the modern value of restricting the number of children, especially in upper-class families, makes this game of choice even more insidious as parents choose time and again not to have a girl child as, according to their calculations, she will not only be an economic and social burden, her symbolic value is also far less than that of a son. The ultimate loser in this game of choice and not chance is the girl child. Earlier, parents would lament their fate if they had too many daughters, blaming it on their stars; not so now. The modern world has given them a means of control; one exercised ruthlessly so that in some parts of India, the sex ratio is dropping to unheard of levels.[15] Thus, daughter remains an unhappy word and one kind of gender relationship that although it inspires the greatest sentiments of care and love, may at another point of intersection spell only doom even for the unborn female foetus.

With globalization, the window of opportunities has opened up, to a very large extent, for many earlier marginalized sections of Indian society. A large number of peoples have been thrown together and the diversity of India is now interacting and intermingling with each other. In some ways, there has been an opportunity for creative and critical understanding of their own lives by many people. The media, apart from introducing values of consumerism and mass culture, is also an effective tool for dissemination of information, and also helps provide a common platform for a vast section of people who could not ever meet face to face. But the power of the media is itself so strong that it introduces the desire to emulate dominant lifestyles and creates a virtual world of fantasies and playing out of dominant values, as well as projection of an unrealistic life way that may, at times, prove dangerous if not emulated with caution.

[15] According to a United Nations report published in most major newspapers in India on the 8 October 2011, an overwhelming majority of the 117 million missing girls in Asia are from India and China. The all-India figure for the female to male child ratio is 914: 1000 and in the city of Mumbai, the financial capital of India, home to some of its richest and high profile people, the ratio is a miserable 892 female per 1,000 male children.

Many young working women face the dilemma that if they listen to their emerging consciousness about independence, about patriarchy, about what they consider as the ideal situation to be, and sometimes actually attempt to act on them, they do get entangled in situations from which there is no escape. The reality of the streets of the metropolis is where a new power dynamics is being played out; here frustrations with failing lives, poverty and isolation, forcible evictions from communities and psychological pathology introduced by disappearing values and anchors create a dangerous arena. If women want to act on their emerging consciousness, if they want to exert what they perceive as their newly established identities based on education, economic independence and self-worth, they may be rudely shocked by sexual violence and a violent rejection of such attempts to renegotiate their selves.

The imagined world of gender constructions has not yet allowed the emergence of the independent woman, who is projected in media and in academic discourses. In the period of late colonization and for a few decades after independence, women were still looked upon through the lens of being either dasis or devis. Women, in general from upper castes and classes, were held in high esteem and even till the 1970s, popular culture such as films and television were replete with the deified mother image and the denigrated vamp image; the former a highly conservative mother or wife figure, demure, self-sacrificing and pure, and the other, a sexual metaphor symbolizing embodied lust. Today, the distance between these two images is getting blurred as many wives and mothers are out in the streets, wearing Western clothes (earlier worn only by the vamp) and engaging in work that was only assigned to low-caste women, such as serving food in aircrafts and attending to male bosses in office. Of course, there are doctors, engineers, scientists and pilots too; but here too, there has been a visible change in bodily signification. Earlier, all such jobs as were considered respectable required and were occupied by women who maintained what was considered as strict physical decorum. The contemporary women are often rebellious against what they consider as received traditions.

Moreover, as the visible aspects of caste hierarchy are disappearing, a new form of class distinction is trying to take over. The highest elites of India are going global and appearing as Western women in attire, in attitude, and yet, at the core, they all maintain the 'devi' image of loyal wife, devoted mother and most importantly, the pillar of morality of the household. The very same women who appear in clubs and parties dressed in revealing designer clothes from the best of fashion across the world are, at the same time, seen

at shrines and temples or presiding over family functions dressed in demure Indian clothes and who routinely make it public that they are devoted to family and husband. Thus, while appearances may tell otherwise, the core is consciously projected as conservative and 'very Indian'. This projected 'traditional' image of women following all conventional norms even as *they appear not to be doing so*, has set another kind of model of ideal Indian womanhood, one that truly represents the globalized India, the amalgamation of a Western-*looking* woman who is conservative *inside*. But the part that is 'conservative' is drawn heavily from the nationalist devi construction, the moral and ethical pillar of society, the quintessential mother and devoted wife.

The real women who set out to fight the conventions of society, women who can stand up and challenge the system of hegemony, are able to engage in real counter hegemonic actions, like the pink sari brigade, women who are picketing the multinational companies like Vedanta in the forest of Orissa, who are readily facing bullets to fight for their rights to livelihood and who are in a privileged position to see the real inequalities of power, are not really *appearing as modern*. They look modest and conventional and have sun-blackened and work-hardened bodies but it is these dasis who are ultimately engaged in the real battle of transformation in the age of globalization. The women at the bottom and from the bottom are using their indigenous mechanisms to challenge the power at the top. They have the real consciousness that is coming from within their own conditions of existence and is not borrowed from a Western model. Even as this book in being written, thousands of women are sitting along with men to protest against the setting up of a nuclear power plant in their vicinity; they are out to contest the imposition of army atrocities on their sons and families in Manipur. These have all been marginal women, women who have never been deified, yet they are the ones who are representative of true *Shakti*.

6 Conclusion

Redefining the Feminine

Many issues have come up in the chapters that have preceded this final chapter. All of them revolve around the notion of gender in a regional context, its construction, its evolution and its centrality in any valid description of the social and the cultural. The basic premise on which arguments have been centred is on the concepts of 'difference', 'power' and 'lived realities' but in interface with 'social imaginations'. The dynamics of interaction between the collective and the individual, the notions of constraint and agency, of construction and contestation, have been contextualized in the backdrop of South Asian narrations.

The theoretical questions under interrogation have been the relationship between caste and gender, the notions of sexuality and its interface with caste/gender, the dynamics of gender and its relationship with division of labour, resources of society and power and prestige. This book focuses on South Asia[1] and in the post-colonial period, on India; although as we know, the subcontinent contains, within its roots, cultures of adjoining areas with which it has been in historical interactions (Basham, 1954/2004; Pandian, 1995). Most of the issues concern the philosophical and historical foundations of emergence of multiple forms and multi-vocal notions of gender and indicate that gender is but an expression of the overall values and collective beliefs, cast in a historical framework. While attempting to give some kind of an identity to culture, South Asia in this context, I also add the notion of historicity which has again been a central focus of feminist methodology (Bhavnani, 1994; Harrison, 2007). Cultures may have coherence to some extent but are not static; they evolve and change according to the historical conditions of politics, economy and society. Processes of hybridization, invention, re-appropriation and contestation are simultaneous and ever

[1] Since South Asia was a unified region till quite recent times, unless we are talking of the post-colonial period, to talk about India means to talk about South Asia.

present. Thus, 'What comes to be called "culture" covers a vast stock of material inventories, behavioral repertoire, and mental representations, put in motion by many kinds of social actors, who are diversified into genders, generations, occupation and ritual memberships' (Crehan, 2002: 187). In some contexts, the term 'life way', defined by Grim (2001: xxxiii) as 'a concept that brings together indigenous human communities, the natural world, and the realm of holy beings', has also been used.

Let us now recapitulate some of the arguments and data that we have presented in this book.

Society and Gender

Ever since Margaret Mead (1935) gave her classic analysis based on three small communities of Papua New Guinea that sex is not destiny and that the masculine and the feminine are culturally constructed, she set forth a gendered perspective[2] that indicated that gender has a cultural and interpretative content to it and is not simply natural or biological. However, this was only the beginning of a long-drawn discourse whose end is not possible to locate, for the simple reason that new voices are constantly being added to it and fresh perspectives emerge regularly (Caldwell et al., 2009; Moore, 1994; Yanagisako and Collier, 1987). One accepted point is that gender is not uniformly constructed across a society and internal differences intersect on the axes of race, class, ethnicity and caste (Harrison, 2005), to name a few major variables. In fact, gender may itself be a condition that predetermines how it is constructed, like men and women may have their own constructions of what is meant by masculinity and femininity depending upon their own masculine and feminine habitus. Moreover, Moore (1994: 4) suggests that gendered subjectivities are not necessarily fixed and singular and may vary across a series of subject positions assumed by individuals or categories of persons. At the more radically feminist level, we have arguments such as that of Butler (1990) who questions the very existence of gender and women, and who even questions the existence of a 'body' behind the construction and that 'the substantive effect of gender is produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence' (ibid.: 34). One accepts her view that whatever exists as gender is 'discursively constituted' (ibid.: 3) within patriarchal political systems.

[2] Mead has herself not used this term 'gender'.

Gender is an essential aspect of the larger cosmological principles and the worldview that predominate any society, as discussed in Chapter 1. Other dimensions informing gender perception are social, political and economic, yet none of them are singularly deterministic and one needs to view gendering as a process that is integrated with all aspects of life and living. Gender constructions are linked with patriarchy, with the assumption that whatever goes into the construction of gender is ultimately suited to serve the interests of dominant males in society. In this way, patriarchy is essentially one aspect of the general principles on which inequality is justified and perpetuated and consequently, gendering as a process cannot be delinked from other hierarchical principles such as caste, class, race and ethnicity.

In the communities that I have studied in India, I have found that patriarchy exists everywhere but varies in its form and degree; like while it was very severe in, say, nineteenth century upper-caste Hindu society, it is still very dilute among the Kinnauries of Himachal Pradesh. In its extreme form, it not only leads to physical and mental subjugation of women, it also creates apparatus for their torture and humiliation. In its mild form, it may just exist as a notion relegated mostly to the metaphysical conceptualization of the worlds, like among the Bhotiya of Uttarkashi (Channa, 2010a, 2010b), where although the men are ritually superior and more pure than the women at the cosmic level, at the social and economic level, women have control and agency far beyond what is found among the upper castes of peninsular India. In other words, one may hypothesize that patriarchy is coterminous with other forms of inequality and varies in its intensity with them.

Since the dominant Hindu majority, and especially the elite among them, have managed to propagate a Brahmanical cosmology as the true 'Indian' perspective, projected as Indian culture even internationally, we cannot deny that it is most relevant, at first, to examine this point of view as its influence is far more expansive and controlling than that of the others. One can also raise the question along with Moore that although dominated groups do have their contra perspectives to the dominant discourse, yet, 'can people actively recognize and choose the subject position they take up, and to what degree are they able to resist the terms of the dominant discourse?' (Moore, 1994: 5). Therefore, it is essential to begin with the dominant discourse and then examine the critical ones.

Referring specifically to South Asia and to the Hindu varna system, I have tried to create a model at a highly abstracted level, incorporating caste and varna ideologies pervading the Hindu dominant majority that by its very

dominance has managed to transmit caste values to other communities as well.[3] Hindus are often criticized for their ambivalent attitudes to women as, while on one hand, they worship her as a devi (goddess), at the same time, they degrade her and dominate her as a dasi (servant). I was tempted to pick up these words from two sources. One, in Bengal, traditionally, the Brahmin women attached the suffix devi to their names, and the non-Brahmin, including the Kayastha (Shudra) varna, attached dasi. Among the Manipuris, even today, the Meitei (Hindu Brahmins) women use the suffix devi, while the Naga and lower-caste women do not; thus devi and dasi are two terms explicitly denoting upper and lower-caste statuse of women in some parts of India. Second, I was inspired by Chakravorti's (1989) paper on how Hindu nationalists' have always ignored the dasi in their reconstruction of a glorious image of Hindu women in the Vedic past.

Interestingly enough, as I have explained in the earlier chapters, the category of dasi too was differentiated, and while the *devadasi*s, like the ones dedicated to the Jagannath temple at Puri, often came from higher castes, they were accessible only to the highest elite. In southern India, in some parts of Andhra, like Kurnool, and Belgaum district in Karnataka, as reported by Omvedt (1994: 72), there was a dalit version of the *devadasi*, where dalit girls were dedicated to the Goddess Yellamma and remained independent, without getting married. They were absolved of any sin or stigma if they had sexual relations with any man. As Caldwell (1999) points out, such a woman had unlimited sexual freedom and often indulged in public display of violent emotions. However, these girls were not attached to any temple and did not have the high status of *devadasi*s of Puri temple, who were kept completely isolated from the general public and had special guards appointed by the king himself (Zaman, 2007). Thus, even as *devadasi*s, the upper-caste women had less freedom and led confined existence, whereas the *matangi* (women dedicated to Yellamma) had full freedom and led free lives. However, as Omvedt points out, 'by late feudal times it also helped to institutionalize the sexual accessibility of Dalit women for high caste men' (Omvedt, 1994: 72).

In Brahmanical Hinduism, as practised by the dominant Hindus (not marginalized ones like in the hills), the status of men was graded according to their position in the caste hierarchy and with this status, came access to societal resources – economic, political and cultural. But since most differences

[3] In his very first census survey, Risley has reported that while Muslims did not have strict rules of pollution, they did have status groups that were caste like and the lower sections did have caste-like divisions (Dirks, 2001: 218).

are played out on the bodies of women, it was here that distinctions took on their most exploitative forms. The distinctive names (like devi and dasi) were only one aspect of marking out bodies that were exploitable and those that were not; since the upper castes had rights over the bodies of the lower-caste women, these bodies were also crafted by dress, ornaments and specific mannerisms to identify the varna status. For example, Cohn (1996: 139) describes an interesting case involving the Nadar women and their protest in the Travancore state in the nineteenth century:[4]

> The Nadars were supposed to remain thirty-six paces from the person of the Nambudri Brahmins…They were prohibited from carrying umbrellas and wearing shoes or golden ornaments. Their houses had to be only one story high and they could not milk cows. Nadar women could not carry pots on their hips nor could they cover upper part of their body. (Cohn, 1996: 139)

The Nadars were untouchable toddy tappers and the bodies of their women were coded to make them stand out from the upper-caste women. However, under the influence of Christianity, Nadar women began to cover their breasts with the breast cloth typical of the Nayar women and the British Resident at the Travancore court in 1913, John Munro, permitted them to do so. But here came the problem, as the *rajah* of the state objected saying that if they dressed the same, the difference between high-caste and low-caste women would be obliterated. Although Munro tried to persuade the Nadar women to wear jackets similar to the Syrian Christians, they refused. They were more interested *to look like the Nayar women* than to just wear any garment. The problem centred not on norms of modesty but on caste-based markings. Such crafting of bodies has been prevalent in most parts of India, and in the dalit movement initiated by leaders such as Phule and Ambedkar, the dress of the women played an important role. As Moon (2001) has described in his autobiography, Ambedkar always called upon dalit women to appear neat and clean, to wear shoes and keep their hair dressed properly. He himself was careful of his attire and preferred Western dress to the Gandhian khadi sported by most other leaders as an obvious rebuff to upper-caste nationalism.

[4] The princely state of Travancore is situated in the present state of Kerala. The Namboodri Brahmins are at the top of the caste hierarchy and the Nayars belonging to the Kshatriya varna are next. Even though many Keralites are now Christians or Marxists, yet caste continues to operate among them as beautifully illustrated in the novel, *The God of Small Things*, by Arundhati Roy.

The dalit leaders were fully aware that the real repercussion of these markings was not just difference, but violation of the marked bodies, as has been shown by the assault on the bodies of women of marginal sections of society, both lower castes and tribal. The Human Rights Watch report prepared by Narula describes numerous cases of such violence, 'At a Madras conference on women's rights held in 28 and 29 April 1995, dozens of Dalit and tribal women publicly came forward to testify about their experiences of custodial rape at the hands of Tamil Nadu police' (Narula, 1999: 118). Thus, in most situations, dalit women are singled out for sexual exploitation by men in power as the earlier Brahmanical privileges have been taken up in modern India by anyone in a privileged position. Thus, the crafting of dalit women's body and of men was not simply a matter of 'cultural difference'; it was a process of marking out potential victims and therefore, any attempt by the dalits to overcome such identity markers have been dealt with by more violence (Ram, 1977).

Yet, patriarchy did not spare the upper-caste women, rather made them its worst victims. The seclusion and the silencing of their voices has been acutely constraining, for unlike the low-caste women, the upper-caste women were socialized to accept violence and to collude with the men, not only to submit to subjugation but also subjugate their own daughters and daughters-in-laws. In other words, the upper-caste women have been used by society as active reproducers of patriarchal regime by their ideological enculturation into its values.[5] The numerous cases of dowry deaths have always shown one clear pattern that in most of the situations, the parents of the girl had forced her to go back or to 'adjust' with her in-laws for reasons varying from family honour to the marriage of a younger sister. As many men point out rather gleefully, many victims of family violence in India are victims of same and not cross-sex violence. Even though it is midwives who collude with the mother-in-law to kill a female infant, or a woman goes in for female foeticide apparently voluntarily, she is doing so to protect her status in a patriarchal society. Her own subjective self has been constituted by the patriarchal values that she imbibes from infancy.

[5] In discussing two female patients of hysteria, the renowned psychoanalyst, Sudhir Kakar, comments, 'I have suggested that Asha (but also Shakun) has much in common with Freud's women patients from the Viennese bourgeoisie. The similarity does not lie in their symptom but in the underlying hysterical personality which they share...an intense exotic attachment to the father and an unresolved Oedipal conflict, a fear of sexuality accompanied often by a strong but hidden interest in it' (Kakar, 1990: 75).

In an interesting episode of a popular soap opera[6] that I watched on television about a middle-class household of early colonial Bengal, the daughter-in-law is told by the mother-in-law that she cannot go out of the house. 'But why,' asks the younger woman. 'Because the *Shastras* (ancient texts) say so.' The daughter-in-law then asks her, 'I want to read the *Shastras* to see where it is written.' 'No,' says the mother-in-law, 'It is forbidden to women to read the *Shastras*.' The younger woman, who is also intelligent, then retorts, 'First we are told that we cannot do certain things because the *Shastras* say so, then we are told that we are not allowed to read them so that we have to blindly accept whatever is told to us, but *who tells us*?' 'The *wise men* do,' is the final word of the older woman by which the conversation is closed. Thus, the hegemony of male wisdom is instilled in women, especially of the upper castes, who then perpetuate it to their next generations, but somewhere along the line, the minds and thinking change, and have been changing over the generation. This particular conversation is illustrative of brewing discontent in the younger woman who refuses to blindly accept what is told to her. But in Bengal and elsewhere, it is ultimately the *wise men* who became the harbingers of change, even for women, as discussed in Chapter 2; so that even when change takes place, it is only to usher in a different form of patriarchy.

It was thus women's education (discussed in Chapter 3) that really brought about a change in the mindset of society, and historically, women's movements that do, most of the times, provide a critical vantage point for society to really transform. And it is precisely this reason that education has been withheld from the marginalized sections because it is they who have the privilege of being able to locate the real roots of oppression, or at least of their own oppression.

Thus, varna was a concept that carried out oppression at several levels by creating hierarchy between men and superimposing this hierarchy onto a gender hierarchy between men and women, and extending it to all other aspects of society like occupation, materials and resources. The most effective dimension of caste-based oppression and the key to its extreme efficacy and endurance is that it never allowed a binary opposition to take place but always created a layered system of oppression, where at each level, the sequence was repeated, so that the majority were situated between two layers and neither at top nor at bottom (Dumont, 1970).

[6] It refers to the Bengali serial, *Subarnalata*, based on the novel by an eminent woman writer of the twentieth century, Asha Poorna Devi, known for her sensitive portrayal of women's | issues.

There is another dimension to caste values entering into gender construction. I had mentioned in Chapter 4 that the pollution and purity of a caste depends upon the nature of the tasks performed by it. Even today, many educated and liberated people rationalize caste hierarchy by referring to the degrading aspect of the occupations performed by the lower castes and it is often heard that 'We do not believe in caste hierarchy but how can you eat at the same table with a person who has been cleaning lavatories?' In this perspective, some tasks have been marked out, from the repertoire of new, generally considered caste-free occupations that have come up in the modern times, as equivalent to the traditional degrading occupations (Channa, 2004).

It is here that the insidious effects of a lingering and deep-seated prejudice against menial work and public appearance of women play a significant role. I have seen air hostesses being treated with contempt by male passengers and also, many middle-class families saying that they did not want their daughters to be an air hostess as 'it was only a glorified version of a maid's work, like having to serve food to people and picking up garbage'. Here also, the gender dimension comes in because more than the men, it is the women on whose shoulders rests the burden of family honour. Thus, if an upper-caste family is in need, they might send a son out to a demeaning task, like being a steward, but they will be much more reluctant to let a daughter do the same thing; and are even more resistant to let a daughter-in-law do it. It is again an often repeated refrain that 'Men can do many things, it does not matter for them, but it matters much more for the women.' In North India, women are referred to as '*ghar ki izzat*' (honour of the house).

Even in the public arena, the public woman with higher power is treated with respect but a woman with less prestige or power in her job is treated with contempt and a similar attitude of accessibility is attributed to her as a low-caste woman; like the difference between a doctor (respected) and a nurse (contemptible since again involves serving people). In the West where there is a nearly uniform consideration of women being nurturing and less intellectual, there is almost a societal expectation that a woman is more likely to be a nurse than a doctor and no stigma as such is attached to her profession (Sims, 2000; Kirstmundsdottir, 1999: 48).

However, when I refer to the low status assigned to lower-caste women and the notions of unbridled sexuality and accessibility attributed to her, this is a version of gender attributes constructed mainly by the upper castes, and primarily by men. From the point of view of the low castes, both men and women, the values and morality of their women are no less than that of the

upper castes. However, the manner of proving their virtue often indicates the introduction of insidious indoctrination from above. The stereotypical images of virtue often are not indigenous but acculturated from top, transmitted by powerful social agents. The elite too had transformed under the influence of the British and Chapter 2 describes the reconstruction of the devi under colonial influence.

It is otherwise well known that representations of virtue vary from society to society and from one time period to another time period. Even myths and ancient texts change over time and their interpretations differ from one kind of subject position to another. (Elsewhere, in Chapter 3, the interpretation of Ramayana and the Mahabharata by women and from marginal social positions has been discussed). The Kinnauries of Himachal Pradesh, for example, regard themselves as upper-caste Hindus (Kshatriyas) and have all the pride in their caste status. Yet, among them, polyandry is practised as well as women and men can remain unmarried out of choice and lead independent lives. During my fieldwork done in 2008, I found that the indigenous values of women's independence had received a greater boost as women were carrying on entrepreneurial activities, running shops and businesses and also working as teachers and officers. In the hills, a woman living on her own is acceptable and no eyebrows are raised. Since they have polyandry, out of necessity, several women remain unmarried but are full-fledged members of society with no stigma attached. This, for example, is in great contrast to Rajasthan where an elderly woman almost fainted when she learnt that none of the full-grown girl students with me were married as a girl is still married off almost in infancy in this region. Thus, while the varna status of both these communities is the same, their values are vastly different.

Yet, for many, like the elderly woman described by Bama and Holmstrom (2005: 8–9), the standards of virtue are gradually falling into the politically charged images of virtue set up by the dominant elite that, in turn, had their standards and attitudes modified by colonial presence and Western education. The Bhotiya women, under influence of Hinduism, have started to keep fasts and generally adapt the ways of 'virtuous' womanhood to the best of their ability and knowledge. For the dhobis that I have described in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, the gender values have been changing as from bride price they have shifted to dowry and have also begun putting more premium on a woman's non-productive assets like beauty. Thus, when a dalit woman assumes that she is virtuous because she is a 'one-man woman', it may be the upper-caste values that she has imbibed, and many of the self-imposed restrictions, such

as in dress and manners, may also be a defence against the advances of men by gaining respectability.

In fact, the entire notion of respectability is controlled and manipulated by the elite as to 'appear respectable' means that one gets approval from the gaze of others. It is not an emotion like self-respect or sense of virtue that is an inner feeling, although even this is, to a large extent, externally induced. But to be respectable means that one must visibly and in an embodied sense fit into the dictates of the powerful others. Thus, as I discussed in detail in Chapter 4, the lower-caste women take special care to appear respectable as it is only this facade that they have to protect themselves, in the absence of all other resources. For the upper-class women, on the other hand, there is no need for such projections as their bodies are protected by their power and social resources at their command.

However, having given so much primacy to caste/class in constructing gender images, I wish to now problematize the notion of caste itself and look upon its historical variability.

The Realities of Caste

From the 1990s, the historical and social reality of caste has been a raging debate among the scholars of South Asia, and many scholars (Cohn, 1996; Dirks, 2001; O'Hanlon, 1997; Seneviratne, 1997; Trautmann, 1997; and others) have critically examined the historical impact of colonial rule on the constructions of caste and also gender (Bannerjee, 1989; Chatterjee, 1993). Many of these debates have been examined in the Chapter 2 but what we need to recapitulate here is the historical context of caste and society.

The hypothetical origin of caste society has itself created a debate between two groups of scholars. Some like Karve (1961) and Kosambi (1985) believe that caste differentiation was due to a conglomeration of various communities and groups in to a larger whole. As Wolpert explained, describing the spread of the Aryans[7] (pastoral migrants from somewhere between the Caspian and Black Sea) from the North-West to peninsular India, that 'Such a process

[7] There is considerable debate over the identity of the Aryans and Kosambi for one says, 'The danger of treating "Aryan" as a homogenous unit over any considerable extent of time or space, or even in any large literary source formed over many centuries, may easily be demonstrated' (Kosambi, 1985: 20). He mentions some Pali texts as saying that Arya was used for a free man as compared to a slave. Similar misgivings have been raised by many other scholars.

of expansion, settled agricultural production, and pluralistic integration of new people led to the development of India's uniquely complex system of social organization, which was mistakenly labeled as the caste system by the Portuguese' (Wolpert, 1997: 41). The second group led by people like Dumont (1970), Mayer (1960) and Tambiah (1975) believes that it was through processes of fission that the complexity of the caste system has developed. But on the basis of the extreme differences of customs like between the Rajputs of Kinnaur and the Rajputs of Rajasthan, and even of a community like the dhobis, that I have described elsewhere, it is prudent to presuppose that the cultural differences are predominantly due to fusion; but at the same time, fission cannot also be denied. The fusion of various communities with varying practices is observable in the myriads of practices and beliefs that are still subsumed under the rubric of being Hindu. In other words, we are dealing with an extremely complex and ancient civilization into which waves after waves of immigrant populations have made their contribution and which like a sponge has absorbed cultural elements and belief patterns of a number of civilizations, communities and ways of life (Pandian, 1995).

There is certainly enough evidence to indicate that the kind of Brahmanical patriarchy that is observed today was not as widespread in the pre-colonial times. In the South, matriliny was found in many communities, including the high-caste Nayars, and also, women had their space in many arenas, including the sexual one that had not become constrained by Victorian morality (as also discussed in Chapter 2).

An even more important historical point to be made is that the Sanskritic or Brahmanical cultures were not actually dominant in many parts of India for many centuries of this ancient civilization (Dirks, 2001). In fact, the entire subcontinent has a deep inner layer of indigenous cultures that still exists in diverse forms all across India and informs the complex rituals and gender constructions in all the rich diversity that is seen. Certainly, women played a very different role than what is presupposed by the patriarchal joint family model. I have already mentioned Kinnaur and other hill communities like the Bhotiyas, who profess to be upper-caste Hindus, yet follow highly non-Brahminic rituals and customs and a have a very different gender perception than the peninsular Hindus. The latter, in turn, refuse to concede that these people are Hindus; they have been officially classified as 'adivasi' and '*janjati*' and not recognized as Hindus.

Caldwell (1999), in describing the ritual of *mutiyettu* (a possession ritual involving Goddess Bhagvati), writes about the historical backdrop of the

development of this cult saying it was an amalgamation of patriarchal Aryan traditions with an indigenous cult involving the sacred and dangerous power attributed to the female and sexual principles. This was further associated with a religion predominantly in the control of low castes with an emphasis on the 'passionate and violent nature of supernatural energy' (ibid.: 16). Also, women played an important role in ritual and public life as shamans and dancers; and these women had an identity of their own without the bondage of marriage just like that of Bhagvati herself who is complete without a consort, yet having the image of being 'simultaneously a chaste virgin and a caring mother'.

The pre-Aryan era in the South, also referred to as the *Sangam* age, extended from the first to the fourth century CE and was characterized by what is known as the Dravidian culture. Apart from other aspects, there was a great deal of emphasis on female goddesses and public display of sexuality and primal energy. 'Devotees of the ancient war goddesses Kottavai included female dancers who accompanied male warriors to battle singing, dancing and drumming...Female court bards called *viralis* and *patinis* sang, danced and played music, glorifying the bravery of the king' (Caldwell, 1999: 23). These female servants of the king were transformed in later eras into the *devadasi*s (*nitya sumangali*s) of South Indian temples. Some like Riddle and Joshi (1986: 52) also believe in the substratum of matrilineal organization that they believe persisted in the South of the country after a patrilineal society took over from the North.

As recorded, 'with the advent of the Brahmanical Aryan culture between the fourth and seventh centuries, ritual power moved out of the hands of low caste ritual specialists and indigenous female shamans' (Caldwell, 1999: 25). Thus, the ancient Aryan culture introduced both patriarchy and hierarchy of the caste system. In ancient times, the so-called polluting castes wielded considerable power in the supernatural realm. Also, both socially and politically, many of them, like the Pullyas of Kerala, were quite prominent. Even today, at the ground level, many Brahmins will take the help of the untouchables to deliver them from some dangerous and polluting deity. Since the Aryan civilization was superimposed on a substratum of female worship, it combined the two. Thus, paradoxically, while the Hindu religion, largely constructed out of the Brahmanical texts and the colonial interpretations, became more and more patriarchal, the substratum of devi worship never disappeared. Thus, in modern India, a question is often raised as to why society is patriarchal and degrades the woman, at the same time worshipping

her as a goddess. It is because in India, there has never been a single but multiple strands of culture and tradition, the intermingling of which has given rise to a richly textured tapestry that is in danger of losing its brilliance with the monolithic impositions that began during the colonial period.

The reason why the European colonial rulers favoured a Sanskritic as against a, say, Dravidian interpretation of Hinduism and Indian society was that they themselves were the carriers of such a culture. Thus, Victorian puritanism shuddered at the liberty given to single women under the *devadasi* system. It is a fact that such women were the repositories of culture being dancers and singers and players of instruments, as also they were held in high esteem in society being the wives of the gods and hence forever auspicious (*nitya sumangali*). Being patronized by the rulers, they often had access to political power as well. The important thing being that they were free from marital bondage and not part of any family set-up. The British could interpret these women only as prostitutes, and the new term for *nitya sumangali* in the English language was 'temple prostitute', thus depriving her of all the power and glory she enjoyed as consort of the deity.

What remained of the cults of the mother goddess soon passed into male hands and was subjected to Brahmanical rituals. Thus, instead of untouchable oracles and women dancers, most of the temples and religious institutions became dominated by patriarchal Brahmanical religion. As Dirks (2001: 164–66) mentions, when L.C. Miller, the acting District Magistrate of Madurai, outlawed hook swinging, a large number of people signed a petition to protest this ban, including many high-caste Brahmins. Yet, later it was the Brahmins and other upper castes who objected to this practice, deeming it barbaric and non-Hindu as they were interested in projecting a version of Hinduism that was 'civilized' in the Western sense of the word. In another way, they wanted to prove the superiority of their religion in the eyes of the British by pruning it of all rituals that may have been dubbed as unacceptable to the Western mind; much as it was done by the Hindu nationalists. However, the primordial roots of the earlier practices refused to die down and there are still remnants of these rituals and cults all over India. For example, Kosambi mentions that the sacred grove recognized as the birthplace of Buddha was the site of a mother goddess cult that still exists by the same name even when the 'Sakyas and Buddhism have vanished from the locality' (Kosambi, 1985: 5).

Thus, as any anthropological fieldworker can vouch for, there are many strands of customs and rituals and many ways of life, not only among the tribes but also among the Hindus. It is well known that Hinduism is in itself

no religion, and India has seen many heterodox sects like the *Bhakti* cults, the Bauls and the *tantric* ways that are set quite contrarily to what is today recognized as mainstream Hinduism.

And it is here that we can interrogate the role of colonization in constructing a 'Hindu culture' and its overt symbolic paraphernalia. The historian O'Hanlon (1997: 155), while admitting that colonization played a key role in consolidating Brahmanical values over a large part of the Indian peninsula, puts the clock back to the seventeenth and eighteenth century to look for factors that really put the Brahmins at the top of the social hierarchy. While the process may have began there, it took a definite shape, including the term Hindu[8] itself, during the colonial period where the print media, the census and the British attempts to regularize the Indian legal system (Moore, 1998) together contributed to certain degree of homogenization that made some graspable reality of the caste system available across India.

However, one issue that remains is of hierarchy and the practice of untouchablility. As Omvedt (1994: 72) has pointed out for the custom of the *matangi*s, where a practice that had originally given a degree of freedom to women was ultimately converted to one where they were exploited by the upper castes, we find a steady hardening of Brahmanical and hierarchical values over time. Subbamma (1992) has given an exhaustive account of the privileges enjoyed by high-caste women in *Rig Vedic* times, and also lists a number of women scholars and administrators from second century BC to AD 1296.[9] She also mentions that widow remarriage for upper-caste widows was only banned in first century AD. However, a society based on stratification in which the higher varna enjoyed certain privileges may have existed from ancient times, thus while there are mention of education and privileges enjoyed by high-caste women, none such advantages seemed to have been accessed by the women of lower classes even in early recorded or mythical history.

Wolpert is of the opinion that although there is no mention of the term 'untouchable' in the *Rig Veda*, the main reference point for present-day Hindu

[8] Even today in India, in the Indian languages, it is the term 'Sanatan dharma' or the dharma that has always existed that is used to refer to the ancient customs and beliefs.

[9] Nayanika of Sathvanas (second century BC), Prabhavati Gupta of Vakataka (fourth century AD), Vijaya Bhattarika of Chalukya family (seventh century AD), Sugandha and Didda of Kashmir (tenth century AD) and Miriyala Kama Soni of Andhra and Rudrama Devi of Kakatiya dynasty (AD 1262–96) (Subbamma, 1992)

religion, yet, 'fears of pollution became so pervasive in Indian society that it is difficult to believe they were not pre-Aryan in origin' (Wolpert, 1997: 32). For our analysis, it is essential to understand that from fairly ancient times, at least from the time of the epics, there was some kind of interface of gender with caste, and by the nineteenth century caste had become an essential aspect of Indian life, although considerable hardening of varna identities seemed to have been present from medieval times. Zinkin (1962: 15) writes substantiating that caste was an integral aspect of one's being in India that even the late Girija Shankar Bajpai, the Secretary General for Foreign Affairs, had confided to her that it was only because he was educated and westernized, he could bring himself to eat at the same table with Pandit Nehru who although a Brahmin, was a Kashmiri and a non-vegetarian!

In other words, we can assume that caste, whatever may have been its origin, is present in India as a system of discrimination and hierarchy superimposed on a vast cultural differentiation which encompasses practically every kind of way of life, economically, aesthetically and in terms of marriage and family variations. In the face of this variation, it is difficult to conceive of a process of gender information based on caste or its operational form, '*jāti*'. But in my model, I have used varna more than caste or *jāti* (as defined by M.N. Srinivas) as also ground-level realities informed by local traditions and conditions of existence. Again, as Zinkin points out, it is not the uniformity of what pollutes or how pollution takes place but the local people's knowledge about what happens in their sphere of social interaction that is important and it is here that the generalized models of varna hierarchy take on a concrete shape and affect practice.

Thus, even among the Bhotiyas of the central Himalayas, considered as non-Hindu and adivasi by the census of India, but who by their own worldview are high-caste Hindu Rajputs, there is a category of untouchables from among their own group who, in turn, are less of untouchables than the Kolis, who are their neighbours in their village. Of course, the degree of discrimination is nowhere near the kind practised in South India, yet there is a cognizance of caste and untouchability even among the Kinnauries in Himachal and most other groups who even remotely profess to be like Hindus (Allen, 1978; Fischer, 1978).

Thus, caste can be taken as one of the deepest substratum of ideas that informs gender construction on the subcontinent and with this, we move on to the consideration of the next aspect of gender construction that has drawn attention of theorists, namely, the public/private domain.

The Public/Private

This is one area where the data presented in the book can throw some light. The very notion of looking at the world in dichotomous terms is debatable and has received much criticism (Unnithan–Kumar, 1997: 25). It is almost undeniable that some definitional categories like the private and public, or inner and outer, or domestic and extra-domestic or even village and forest, in almost all cultures, define gender roles. Yet, what needs questioning is for one, the fixing of gender categories and second, the designation of public and private that is often more notional and metaphysical than mere physical location. As we have discussed in Chapter 4, the physical location does not determine the designation of particular spaces as private or public, it is the appropriateness of the location in terms of the assigned gender roles that makes it private or public. Thus, for the dhoban and other categories of women assigned to traditional home-based occupations, the designation '*ghar ka kaam*', the nearest equivalent in Hindi of the English term private, that within the cosmology of the Western worldview is also conflated with the domestic, may be physically located away from the house where she lives. A dhoban may visit the ghat (may be several kilometres away), or may be standing at the street corner, again some distance away from her house, or may be visiting neighbouring houses and still be doing 'domestic work'. In fact, it is the equation of the domestic with mothering, childcare and cooking that is a subjective culturally conditioned point of view. For many others, domestic or domestic work may refer to any work that pertains to the household economy, or in the case of say a rural community, its subsistence activity.

The Bhotiyas of Uttarkashi (Channa, 2002, 2005, 2010a, 2010b) consider the forest near the village as appropriate domain for the women to go as they need to go there to collect fuel, fodder, medicinal and other herbs and forest produce for domestic consumption, but the farther forests are meant only for the men to take the sheep for grazing. The women can never go to the pastures and the far forests for they are the abode of powerful sacred beings who can only tolerate the pure bodies of the men and not the impure bodies of the women. Thus, here the inner and the outer are graded not divided, for it is a gradual transformation of profane to sacred, in terms of power of the spirit beings and the corresponding purity or impurity of the body.

Yet for the Jad Bhotiyas, purity and impurity, and consequently gender itself, is not as inherent dimension of biological sexual division into male and female but the condition of the body in terms of its reproductive and

productive powers. Here we come closer to Butler (1990: 34) in understanding gender not as constructed onto a given body but as the body being constructed through a performative process. The non-reproductive and non-productive children (maybe below five) are treated as non-gendered and all are considered pure like the male. Similarly, the old who have lost both productive and reproductive powers are confined to the village and the old men are treated exactly like old women, doing exactly the same tasks, including taking care of babies and spinning wool; and the old women also become ritually pure and can do any ritual tasks like the men. But neither old men nor old women can take the sheep grazing or do any task appropriately done by the young and middle aged. Thus, sexuality and gendering is strongly interconnected in this culture and the non-sexed beings like small children and old men and women become non-gendered, uniformly pure but socially non-essential beings. Since personhood is located in gender, the personhood of the very young and very old is diluted and they are just treated as 'beings', marginal to active social, economic and even political life of the village.

Thus, gender is also about personhood and a fully gendered being is also one who is a full person in society. The location of gender thus lies in the social relationships and meanings embodied in them. This is further illustrated by the non-gendered character of many supernatural beings. In Hindu cosmology, *Ardhanarishwara* is a popularly conceived form of Shiva that incorporates Parvati. Supernatural beings can change form and appear as men or women; like Vishnu taking on *mohini roop* (beautiful form) to attract Shiva in one myth. The Jad Bhotiyas were often confused about the gender of a deity and different individuals would refer to the same deity alternatively as male or female, and many times people simply did not answer the question when asked making it quite clear that the gender position of a deity was not important; or that a deity was not a body on which gender could or needed to be marked.

In a position contrary to that of the dhobis, among the elite classes, some areas within the physical confinement of the house were considered as public space where the women were not allowed and that included the sitting or drawing room and even the dining room if outside guests were being entertained. This brings us to another issue regarding space that it is not constructed passively but created by the activities and presence of people in it. A room when vacant may be a private domain but if occupied by someone of a forbidden category, it becomes an excluded space. Thus, for example, if

a category of relative from whom a woman observes distance or avoidance comes visiting, then the room or area occupied by that person becomes public or tabooed for her, but this may be only limited to his presence. If the dining room of a house entertains guests like in the colonial period, then for the women of the house, it becomes extra-domestic or out of bounds. This exclusion was practised in many upper-class houses as it was believed that it is women who carry the burden of maintaining the purity of the house in their bodies. The men may dine with the *mlechcha* (impure)[10] foreigners but not the women. Thus, the gendering of space and the construction of gender itself follows some cosmological norms.

For Hindus, the bodies of women are more sacrosanct and also more vulnerable to pollution because they are not protected by the sacred thread. Whichever way one looks at it, it is the feminine body that is bound by more restrictions than the male. Yet again, like the Bhotiyas, only the reproductive and actively sexual body is more subject to taboos for ultimately, it is the man's control over the sexuality of women that is signified in all such taboos. The very young and the old may not be bound by the norms that bind sexual bodies as they are not perceived as sexed in cultural terms and therefore not gendered either. Thus, even in tradition-bound Hindu society, the very young girls and the very old may have been exempt from some binding conditions incumbent on fertile women.

Another aspect of appropriateness that I discussed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 is the visibility of a person while occupying a particular space. If the person goes unnoticed, then he or she is appropriately located, and if not, then the person has transgressed the norms of dress, speech or mannerisms. How many of us notice doormen, lift attendants, waiters, etc., as long as they blend or appear appropriate for their surroundings. We notice only something that appears striking from the vantage point of our own cultural sensibilities.

Thus, the spaces are defined by the quality rather than location, and some spaces are charged with the meaning of being appropriate and some others are not, and these are again allocated not according to any binary opposition of male and female but by the qualities appropriate to maleness and femaleness. Therefore, who may be appropriately assigned to a space depends not just on biological sex, but on the process of gendering that may vary according to the subjective positioning of the individual.

[10] According to high-caste Hindus, all foreigners, that is, those without sacred thread are untouchables or *mlechcha*.

Defining the Feminine

What then is feminine and what is masculine? Gender in every culture is designated not through the biological division of sex but according to what are the culturally appropriate qualities that represent maleness and femaleness. These may be distributed according to sex or may not be; thus, even in a culture as obsessed with dichotomies as the Western culture, there are categories such as tomboy and sissy. If masculinity and femininity were essentialized in sex, then such terms would make no sense, for then a boy would, by virtue of his sex, be masculine and a girl similarly feminine. But that does not happen because gender is not essentially embodied; it is a quality, an essence, an ephemeral entity that is acquired, bestowed and appropriated. Thus, gendered spaces qualify occupation by certain bodies that have an appropriate qualitative association with that space. This appropriateness is also visually coded so that to go unnoticed is to have successfully navigated the space.

In South Asia, there is no appropriate division of masculinity and femininity in an absolute sense as is there in the Western philosophy. There is nothing which says of any quality that this is essentially a feminine quality and that is essentially a masculine quality. Thus, there is an array of devis and an array of dasis. In our analysis throughout, there has not been any finite delineation of any quality or character immutably assigned to any definitive category.

The concept of *guna* or quality is not assigned to gender but to varna, the division of the cosmos into the four ranked categories, and that is what is ultimately the 'root metaphor' or the 'master narrative' around which all other variations are built in Hindu thought (Smith, 1994: 12); it 'was a classificatory system which attempted to encompass within it all of the major sectors of the visible and invisible world' (ibid.: 8). As has been brought out in every chapter of the book, actions, occupation and people, both male and female, are evaluated not according to maleness or femaleness but according to which varna these fit into.

Thus, a woman may be a warrior, or a mother, or a servant or a prostitute; her rank, prestige and occupation are determined by her varna, her caste and her class, and not by her femaleness. The definition of femininity and sexuality is likewise depending on who she is rather than by the mere fact of being a woman, and similarly for a man. In Western thinking, for example, strength, valour and determination may be seen as masculine qualities, but in India, these are qualities for some kind of men. No one, for example,

would expect a Brahmin priest to be brave, or a landless labourer to be wise or a shopkeeper to show strength; and if these qualities are to be exhibited by any category, they would be common to men and women both. In both history and mythology, the women of the ruling or Kshatriya varna were often required to take up arms and show valour, like the Queen of Jhansi, Lakshmibai, or Empress Razia who ascended the throne of Delhi. Thus, there was nothing unfeminine about a woman fighting or being strong but it was appropriate only for women of a certain class. Thus, the King of Mandu married a tribal woman who showed exceptional valour as he thought she was more appropriate to be a queen or a wife of a Kshatriya ruler.

Women work at construction sites in India on a regular basis and are seen doing all kinds of heavy work like breaking stones and lifting up heavy loads, but these are women of a lower class, often lower caste. Similarly, if a woman is seen as serving people (even on an aircraft), she is immediately mentally assigned to the dasi category, or if she is attending to personal needs of patients in a hospital, she is a dasi, but if she is a doctor and highly educated, she becomes a devi. A woman in a powerful position always becomes a devi, although people may have many reservations about granting such a position to a woman of a lower caste or class.

Inherent qualities of masculinity and femininity are absent from South Asian thought and therefore in this region, there has never been any problem about accepting women as leaders or heads of state, especially if they were associated with high-status families, like Srimavo Bandaranaike, Benazir Bhutto, Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Hasina. Power is seen as an attribute of caste and class and not of gender. Thus, an untouchable woman becoming a sarpanch of a village may not only face hostility but may be even eliminated or subjected to violence, and the very same men who do such an act will willingly grovel before a high-born woman in a position of power. Since a woman is half part of her husband, *ardhangini*, in South Asia, the widow is often seen as an apt replacement for her husband, especially in positions of power. On the other hand, when I asked some Bhotiya women if they would like to marry a strong man, they rolled over in laughter saying, 'Why, do you think we want to be beaten up by our husband!'

It is only under Western influence that even in films, the strong and masculine (Western concept of macho) hero has become popular. Right up to the late 1960s, in Hindi films, the hero was soft, gentle and sentimental; he may have been good looking but no one cared for a tough physique or fighting ability in a hero; these were seen as better attributes of the villain.

Thus, if we want to define the feminine in India, we need to define caste, class, situation and context, and again put these in a historical framework. The strong masculine, yet ascetic man was, for example, a product of the nationalist movement. Yet, the father of the modern Indian nation was a highly feminine man, a man who was more comfortable in projecting himself as a mother figure rather than a father figure. As described by Fischer,

> Gandhi was not only his family's authority and teacher, but was nurse and midwife to Kasturibai as well. He helped care for his infant sons...He had studied a popular work on childbirth, which constituted a full course in obstetrics and infant care, and when labor came too swiftly for professional help to be fetched, Gandhi himself delivered his fourth son. (Fischer, 1962: 53)

There are no specifically male qualities that Indians have looked for in a leader, in a film star, in a hero or in a common man. Similarly, no specific femininity accrues to a woman for her to be defined as such.

There were cultural attributes that did define femininity but these are highly region and community specific. In one part of India, women may be required to be hard working and strong, like in the North-West, while in another part, they may be required to be musically or aesthetically oriented, like in the East. In a Brahmin family, a woman is required to be proficient in helping her husband carry out rituals and also to maintain the purity of the house by its cleanliness and hygiene. In a dhobi household, she is to help her husband with his occupation and not give too much attention to housekeeping.

However, there is always a sense of what has been referred to as 'heteronormativity' (Nielson, Walden and Kunkul, 2000: 283), a culturally coded sense of appropriateness of men and women, in gender-appropriate tasks. Here again, as I have mentioned earlier, there is a great deal of intersection of class, caste, region and local culture with the normative. In the cities, the influence of Western culture has both created new norms and a new sense of gender dichotomization that may not have existed before.

Gender and Patriarchy

We are now at a problematic point in our analysis. If there is no binary opposition between the notions of feminine and masculine, is there no patriarchy? The answer can be obtained by a look at the homologous notion of caste. As I have mentioned earlier, quoting from Dumont (1970), the caste

system is not a binary oppositional system but a layered one in which each layer does look down upon the lower one and thinks, 'It is they who are lower than us, we are not at the bottom'. In this sense, each has some sense of superiority and some sense of inferiority; it is also this that keeps the system contested and dynamic, and also alive. But does that mean there is no absolute code of dominance in the form of untouchability, an uncontested form of degradation? As discussed earlier, the entire rationale of our model rests upon the social reality of a metaphoric oppositional hierarchy; there is a opposition between the concepts of devi and dasi although this may manifest itself in a myriad of ways; like '*jāti*', these concepts may have multiple expressions, yet at the root lies a world divided; just as it is between the notion of a man and a woman. It is not notions of masculinity and femininity that we are dealing with here, but an opposed notion of sexuality.

Gender is an identity, an aspect of social personhood, and as Moore puts it, 'The key component in the construction of identity in North India is sexuality... female sexuality rather than male sexuality is a threat to family honor' (Moore, 1998: 140). Since the family is patriarchal, it is the male honour that is vested in the female body and at the root of it is caste identity. An upper-caste man needs to protect the wombs of his women so that the identity of his '*jāti*' does not get polluted. Just like in the Western concept of race, blood and hence purity of blood is underneath the domination of female bodies (white) and exploitability of female bodies (black), the upper-caste female bodies are vested with the honour of the men and the lower-caste female bodies are exploitable because they have no honour to protect as the lower-caste men are not seen as having any. Instead of blood, the '*jāti*' system operates on the metaphysical concept of shared substances.[11]

As Inden (1976) concludes from his analysis of Bengali kinship, the concepts of 'bodily substance' and 'code of conduct' are not separate in Hindu thinking; in other words, the duality of mind and body does not exist for human beings: '...human *Jātis* and *kulas*[12] were defined by the combination of human bodily substance with three other life giving substance as well – "worship", "territorial" and "occupational"' (ibid.: 16). The emphasis on marrying within the *jāti* was rationalized by this notion of shared substance or compatibility of persons belonging to the same *jāti*. The *kula*s (clans, lineage

[11] Both Dumont (1970) and Marriott (1968) have mentioned the body as of central concern in Hindu society and culture.

[12] For a detailed definition of *jāti* and *kula*, refer Inden (1976: 12–15).

or family)[13] were ranked according to certain criteria and they carried the meaning of 'coded bodily substance' (ibid.: 21). These rankings were largely on the adherence to a proper code of conduct and which, in turn, 'all centered on the complex act of marriage' (ibid.: 36), a marriage that would bring good name to the *kula*; inevitably, a good marriage was mostly defined according to the qualities of the bride, whether she was of the same *jāti*, whether she was a virgin, of a family with a good reputation, and so on. The higher the man in caste hierarchy, the stronger the circle of purity drawn around the bodies of his women; for, if anything gets polluted, it is the body of the women.

I had read an article in Bengali that narrated that how parents in the early twentieth century in Bengal would murder a daughter for whom they could not find a suitable groom while she was still in the pre-puberty age. It was reported that a fairly large number of girls, in the age when they were about to enter puberty, like 13–14 years, died mysterious accidental deaths. Thus, a family would rather see its daughter dead than face dishonour by having a post-pubescent unmarried girl on their hand. A very high-caste Brahmin with no other means of subsistence would sometimes make it a profession to marry girls of high caste which poor Brahmin households could not afford to marry off. The noted Bengali novelist, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, has described in his classic work, *Srikanta*, how two poor Brahmin sisters were married to an old Brahmin, whose only contribution to the marriage was to collect his dowry and disappear.

Very appropriate to the patriarchal construction of purity and pollution, we find that the body of the high-caste man does not get polluted by sexual contact with a lower-caste woman, but is polluted by accepting food and water from her. I recall an interesting story narrated to me by an elderly woman. She told me that somewhere in the 1950s, she was sharing a room with a girl from Kerala. One day, this girl came to make a strange request from her friend who happened to be a Bengali Brahmin, 'My father is coming to meet me, can you cook for him?'. The other woman replied that she would gladly do so, but why she could not cook for her own father? To this the girl replied, 'You see I am a Nayar and he is a Namboodri Brahmin, he will not accept food from my hands.' Thus, in Kerala, the Namboodri Brahmins have had a custom by which only the eldest son would marry a Namboodri woman and the younger sons had to get a wife or concubine from among the Nayars, a high-caste group of the Kshatriya varna. They could marry

[13] Ibid., p. 15.

and have sexual relations but would not accept food and water from these women, even if one of them happened to be his own daughter!

The opposite is however not true; the body of an upper-caste woman is polluted by the slightest transgressions and the strictest norms of purity guide her every action, and let alone sexuality, even the sight of a lower-caste man may pollute her. Thus, the gendering of patriarchy is operationalized around the norms of purity and pollution and the notions of shared substance but most importantly, it is played out on the notion of honour and purity, two concepts most attributed to women than to men. Thus, gendering in the Indian context did not take into account, like the West, the qualities or attributes of being a woman or a man. They primarily clustered around the attributes of purity and pollution, honour and power, the notions of caste and varna; in short, around social rather than personal attributes.

Feminism in India is thus meaningless in the sense of the Western notion of a collective feminine struggle against a collective masculine world. In India, the women's struggle is not for liberation from men, but from the combined oppression of social, economic and now ecological burdens. Women, for example, did not have to fight for civil liberties like right to vote, as in the West. What they have to fight, and are still fighting, is to be liberated from the notions of honour and purity, caste and kinship status that are still oppressing them and even killing them even before they take birth.

In Chapter 5 I have discussed the impact of global market forces, modernization and changes in Indian society with relation to their impact on gender construction, and the conclusion was that the deep and underlying principle of coded bodies is still informing the way in which Indians, even in the most modern metropolitan cities like Delhi, view their women (Channa, 2004). Whatever transformation has taken place has been more from the women's side than from that of men. If women have got educated, taken up all kinds of occupations, shed off their inhibitions, got into wearing trousers and travelling by public transport and dared to face the world, they have been met with rape, murder, disfigurement, not only at the hands of strangers but quite often at the hands of their family, even their parents. Even one week's newspaper reading would apprise anyone about the extreme forms of violence practised on female bodies in the northern part of India, where the community and '*jāti*' values are in complete contradiction to the sweeping transformations largely induced by a booming market economy and transnational values propagated through media and advertisements; some of which are themselves extremely conservative and regressive.

As women struggle for their existence and freedom, they get more and more relegated to the category of dasis, that is, they become exploitable and dispensable. Freedom and agency was always the prerogative of the dasi, from mythology to the present day. The devi must, if she wants to retain her so-called respectability, subscribe to the powerful stereotypes of idealism constructed by men and for their own glory. Women must restrain themselves in every field of life; they must not project themselves as more than men. It is well known that in India, if husband and wife are working in an office in the same job, the wife will almost willingly forego elevation in rank if it takes her above her husband. A successful wife remains a support to her husband, is an inspiration to him and allows him to scale greater heights. A recent obituary describes the perfect wife, the perfect lady:

> Although she was just 18 when she began the demanding life of a fighter pilot's wife...(she) soon charmed her way into the hearts of so many. As her husband's career progressed so did her responsibilities, for she was fully aware that domestic difficulties could impact on professionalism. She was a constant source of comfort and guidance to IAF[14] wives, particularly the younger ones who found it difficult to adjust to a new way of life. She performed that role to perfection till the very end. (*The Statesman*, 18 April 2011)

The perfect devi!

A more telling example is that of Irom Sharmila, a young Meitei[15] woman, who has been on fast for the last eleven years, in protest against the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958, imposed in Manipur that has led to many Manipuri women being sexually abused by the army. She lives on a feeding tube inserted through her nose and has become a symbol of courage and *Shakti*, symbolizing not only the women of Manipur, but the struggle of the people of Manipur against the excesses of the state. Yet, in the newspaper, *The Statesman* (12 September 2011), there was an article that stated that the people of Manipur were enraged at the publication, in a local newspaper, of an interview with Irom Sharmila where she had expressed that she was in love with a fellow activist, a Goan by birth and a British citizen. To the people of Manipur, Sharmila had assumed an iconic status, like a goddess, a devi. Her expression of normal desire for a man would reduce her to the level of an ordinary woman. The touch of sexuality would take away the glory

[14] Indian Air Force.

[15] The Meitei are the upper-caste Hindu population of the north-eastern state of Manipur.

of purity and sacrifices that she represents, the spirit of passive resistance, institutionalized in India by Gandhi, and for which he too was raised to an iconic status of a Mahatma (a saint).

Thus, women in India can be trapped into the devi image for which they will be worshipped but which is no less than a prison from which there is no escape!

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