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**Made In India?**

**Nationalized Genders and Colonized Sexualities**

presented by

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has been accepted towards fulfillment

of the requirements for

**Ph.D.** \_\_\_\_\_ degree in **Anthropology**

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Date 15 August, 1998

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**MADE IN INDIA?  
NATIONALIZED GENDERS AND COLONIZED SEXUALITIES**

By

**Dimple Suparna Bhaskaran**

**A DISSERTATION**

**Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**Department of Anthropology**

**1998**



## **ABSTRACT**

### **MADE IN INDIA?**

### **NATIONALIZED GENDERS AND COLONIZED SEXUALITIES**

By

Dimple Suparna Bhaskaran

This study explores the construction and reproduction of gender and sexuality in post/neo colonial India, and its relationship to national identity. It focuses upon how Indian women serve as designated repositories and preservers of *authentic* Indian culture and tradition, and as symbols of national identity. This dissertation demonstrates this process occurs across particular locations of class, sexuality, caste, geography, and moments in history.

This study analyzes three high-profile, contentious national events in contemporary India. All three events are distinct but deeply connected. In all cases I examine contradictory variations on the discourse of cultural authenticity, modernity, decolonization and Westernization, which are always catalyzed by challenges to normative gender and sexual identity. I demonstrate the daily and institutional management of normative gender and sexual identity, or compulsory heterosexuality, by entities that include the state, corporations, the media, families, and individuals, vis-a-vis the discourses of anti-imperialism, decolonization, economic liberalization and *authentic* Indian identity. The prescriptions of these entities regarding gender, sexuality and thus *authentic* culture, are juxtaposed against individual stories of complicity, cooptation and resistance. I conclude by suggesting that the construction and reproduction of normative gender and sexual

identities are deeply tied into the heteropatriarchal institutions of kinship-making, and embody and inform the ideologies and practices of state-making, nation-building, and the discourse of authenticity.

The study also critically evaluates specific ethnographic methods and epistemologies, and through a collage of models I explore ways to pursue politically-engaged feminist ethnography in a world that is increasingly marked by unequal global exchange, migration, and diasporas. I understand cultures as unbound dynamic intersections and this cognizance of culture has, in turn, informed my understanding of persons or identities (including that of the ethnographer) as having multiple locations, alliances and audiences. As a result, the boundaries between the researched, the ethnographer and the various audiences are also increasingly blurred, intertwined and unbound. I suggest that these blurrings and interconnections have an important place in contemporary anthropology and ethnographic projects.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As I write these acknowledgements the entire research and writing process flashes through my mind, and I am struck by how it would have been impossible without the many people who have inspired, supported, pushed, and cajoled me through it all.

I would like to begin by thanking my dissertation committee, David Dwyer, Marilyn Frye, Rita Gallin, Anne Ferguson and Maxine Baca Zinn. I owe a special debt to Marilyn Frye and David Dwyer, co-chairs of my dissertation committee, who co-chaired a large interdisciplinary committee. They have also by example of their teaching and work outside the academy shown me ways to bring closer the all too frequently separated domains of academy, politics and daily life. I would also like to thank Nicholas B. Dirks for valuable critique of my chapters on colonial history and law. Furthermore, I would also like to thank Ruth Behar for her seminar on "Autobiography and Ethnography" that facilitated much of my thinking about ethnographic writing.

In addition I would like to thank an army of family, friends and colleagues, in the United States and India, who have in their own way sustained, enabled and enriched me intellectually and emotionally. I thank Kristin Long for all of this and much more. Giti Thadani for her generosity, careful critique and discussions. I also thank her for facilitating my research at The Sakhi Collective in New Delhi. Amber Katherine and Kali Majumdar for offering me comments on chapters, and commiserating with me through the dissertation process. Crista Lebens, Lisa Knight, Olga Kits, Karen Willis, and Lisa Sayles who graciously endured me and

offered me diversions of life. I am grateful to Lisa Sayles for her technological wizardry. I would also like to thank Michael Ennis-Mcmillan for offering me comments on chapters and commiserating with me through the dissertation process. I am grateful to Geeta Patel and Anabel Dwyer for valuable comments on specific chapters. Further, I would like to thank Karen Willis who spent hours assisting in editing and discussing my dissertation, and to Jan Heisey who helped edit the final draft. And then there are my parents who I would like to thank for their support through the process.

Last but by no means least, this project has received crucial material support at Michigan State University, the Department of Anthropology and the Teaching Assistant Program.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

This dissertation explores the construction and reproduction of gender and sexuality in India, and its relationship to national/cultural identity. Specifically, I focus upon the construction and control of Indian women's identity and sexuality through the systemic apparatuses, ideologies and daily practices of multiple forms of patriarchy. In other words, I explore how Indian women are made and unmade. By multiple forms I mean an amalgamation of indigenous and western systems of patriarchal practices and meanings. The construction and control of female identity and sexuality also constitutes the larger-scale political and cultural process of state-making and national/cultural identity. The relationship between Indian women's sexuality and national identity is explored within the institutional webs of post/neo colonial patriarchy. As the 'natural' bearers, producers, reproducers and preservers of 'authentic' Indian culture, and as 'natural' repositories of tradition, Indian Women serve as symbols of the nation and culture. The relationship between national identity and the construction of gender and sexuality, I suggest, also reveal mechanisms by which women's identity and sexuality is controlled.

In *Nationalisms and Sexualities* the editors point to the "commerce between eros and nation" (Parker et al., 1992:1). They maintain that this "love of country" or "eroticized nationalism" or "national affiliation" has often been discussed by scholars of national identity and nationalism, "without reference to sexuality." My dissertation asks how Indian women's identity and sexuality is constituted by the primary institutions of patriarchy -- marriage, motherhood and compulsory heterosexuality - - and how this controlled female sexuality mediates the symbolic order and discursive

fields of the nation or national identity. I ask how being constructed and controlled as an Indian woman is connected to the dominant representations of Indian tradition and cultural authenticity.

To demonstrate my thesis, I discuss three distinct yet deeply interconnected national events in modern India that embody contentious discourses on gender expectations, normative sexuality, national identity, authentic tradition, modernity, decolonization, domination, and justice. The first event I analyze is the legal battle over a colonial anti-sodomy code between a local human rights group and the Indian government. Specifically, I critically evaluate the conceptual apparatus of the code and its genealogy and political implications. In the second part I look at the relationship between the meteoric growth and political reception of the Miss Universe and World contests in India, the booming multinational beauty industry and the rearticulated identities for the new Indian woman of the 1990s. In the third section I examine the press coverage and representation of the increasing incidence of double suicides of women and marriages between women in small towns, and the ramifications of resisting patriarchal codes.

The thread that connects all three events is the active and implicit management of normative female sexuality and gender. I say implicit because explicit discussion or reference to autonomous female sexuality is generally considered taboo and dangerous. Therefore, vis-a-vis less volatile referents such as tradition, culture, nation, and male sexuality, women are constructed within patriarchal culture. As the symbol of the nation, the repositories of tradition and the preservers and representatives of culture, dominant mythologies of national identity get fixed and naturalized through women's bodies.

As an Indian woman, what I find strange is the unrelenting concern among

Indians about the marital status of Indian women. Unmarried women are viewed as striking anomalies and often provoke unseemly attention in daily Indian life. The institutions and practices that maintain, support and reproduce this concern are what I refer to as compulsory heterosexuality. The blueprint of this obligatory heterosexuality, a term used by Gayle Rubin (1975:179), is contained within the three selected events. I explore how debates about Indian national identity are deeply gendered, [hetero]sexual, classist and casteist, and demonstrate the uneasy dynamics of decolonization and modernity. And I explore how Indian women across different locations serve as the grounds on which these debates occur. The construction of women as repositories of tradition is initially analyzed through the ideologies and the structures of multiple forms of Indian patriarchy.

### **Indian Women: Construction and Domination**

The construction of Indian women ideally as wife and mother is a dominant perception in India, and permeates and saturates institutions and practices. This dominant perception embodies the key institutions of patriarchy: marriage, motherhood and compulsory heterosexuality. Marriage is one's ultimate duty and 'logical/natural' destiny as a woman. Motherhood is perhaps the most venerated expression of female sexuality but is permitted only within the parameters of marriage. The venerable duties of marriage and subsequent motherhood can only exist via compulsory or obligatory heterosexuality. My dissertation explores how women's sexuality and identity is managed within these webs of venerable duties--daily and institutionally.

Most anthropological research on the lives of Indian women and the construction of gender and/or sexuality in India presumes that sexuality = heterosexuality and that gender identity = heterosexual (see Raheja, 1995; Raheja and Gold, 1996; Roy,

1972; Wadley, 1995). Furthermore, the fact that some of these studies focus on gender (or women's lives or relations between women and men) does not necessarily mean that the researchers are critically evaluating patriarchal practices or are feminist anthropologists. Those anthropological studies that look at women's subordinate positions or resistance to domination have done so primarily within studies of caste, religion and folklore within rural contexts (see Dube, Leacock and Ardner, 1986; Fruzzetti, 1989; Kolenda, 1982; Nicholas, 1981; Wadley, 1980). What is common to most anthropological research on India is its heterosexual assumption and lack of analysis of the workings of heterosexuality in patriarchy. Implicit in these studies is the notion that issues of sexuality are trivial and elitist and that any focus on such issues would 'smell' of a 'westernized' approach insensitive to native categories or realities.

Furthermore, patriarchal institutions coexist in different forms within much demographic variability (such as language and class) and cultural contradictions.<sup>1</sup> Despite much variation across language, caste, religion, economic class, education and ethnicity, Indian women as a group are in a subordinate position to Indian men. Due to the great variations within India, I see multiple forms of indigenous patriarchy (or patriarchies). In addition to this, new forms of patriarchal ideology (introduced into local ideological structures by colonial powers such as Britain and from Northern nations such as the United States) have changed and strengthened some local patriarchies and have also undermined others. For example, the banning of Sati (widow burning) in British India undermined certain factions of upper-caste Bengali patriarchs.

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<sup>1</sup>For example, much of Hindu mythology valorizes the feminine, female sexuality and Goddesses as the source of power, but simultaneously domesticates and controls this source of power.

Furthermore, instituting monogamous marriage within the Kerala Nayar community (a matrilineal community where women had relatively more decision making powers over property and relationships) in British India undermined autonomous women but strengthened the power of many upper-caste and upper-class Nayar patriarchs. The coexistence of many forms of women's subordination (indigenous, colonial and neocolonial) is what I then refer to as multiple forms of patriarchy.

### **Post/Neo Colonial India: Continuity and Change**

Many contemporary feminist studies on Indian women and gender have begun challenging the rural-urban dichotomy by analyzing colonial discourse (sometimes referred to as postcolonial approaches to gender) (Vaid and Sangari, 1989; Krishnamurty, 1989). My analysis of the management of women's sexuality, specifically compulsory heterosexuality, is tied into how an ex-colony reimagines and remakes itself in the modern world. I use the term postcolonial/neocolonial India to suggest the coexistence of the discourses of decolonization, increasing global integration and continued nation-building. Furthermore, the nexus of post and neo serves as reminders that "colonialism continues to live on in ways that perhaps we have only begun to recognize" (Dirks, 1992:23), and that Northern powers such as "the United States have replaced the great earlier empires as the *dominant* outside force" (Said, 1989:15). By analyzing three nationally reported events I argue that national identity is deeply gendered and sexual. National identity becomes yet another forum to regulate, change and maintain intersecting categories of sexuality, gender, caste and economic privilege.

## **Woman as Symbol, National Identity and Eros**

Conceiving an independent India entailed the nationalist idea of an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983:15). Anderson's study and term "imagined community" have proved for many scholars to be useful conceptual apparatus to think about nations and nationalism. Instead of simply rejecting nationalism as a symptom of false consciousness, Anderson sees the nation "as a variable cultural artifact that is neither reactionary nor progressive in itself" (quoted in Parker et al., 1992:5). According to Anderson, modern nations are characterized by being limited but having elastic boundaries--"...beyond which lie other nations" (Anderson, 1983:16); nations are imagined--"because members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1983:15); and nations are communities--"because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson, 1983:16). Building this community (or cultural artifact) requires mass reform and cultural production. Indeed, Richard Fox argues that "national culture is malleable and mobile. It is the outcome of a constant process of cultural production" (Fox, 1990:2). Women, real or imagined, are central to the process of cultural production of national culture and identity.

The conceptual apparatus provided by Anderson or Fox has little to say about gender and sexuality. Feminist scholars, however, have pointed out that modern nations have usually been imagined in relationship to a "virile fraternity and passionate brotherhood...accompanied by the 'respectable' ideally feminine Mother--who produces, secures and represents the nation" (Parker et al., 1992:6). My dissertation centers upon the construction of women's identity and sexuality within heteropatriarchy

where the nation too is constituted within this heteropatriarchy. I draw from M. Jacqui Alexander who points out:

The nation has always been conceived in heterosexuality, since biology and reproduction are at the heart of its impulse (Alexander, 1997:84).

Biology, reproduction, cultural production and loyalty to communities, imagined, invented and/or biological, such as family, race, empire or nation, are the preserves of marriage systems, motherhood and compulsory heterosexuality. Alexander also states that:

Women's sexual agency, our sexual and erotic autonomy, have always been troublesome for the state. They pose a challenge to the ideological anchor of an originary nuclear family, a source of legitimation for the state, which perpetuates the fiction that the family is the cornerstone of society. Erotic autonomy signals danger to the heterosexual family and to the nation. And because loyalty to the nation as citizen is perennially colonized within reproduction and heterosexuality, erotic autonomy brings with it the potential of undoing the nation entirely, a possible charge of irresponsible citizenship or no citizenship (Alexander, 1997:64).

My dissertation looks at the political economy of this loyalty to the heterosexual family (and by extension to the larger imagined community: the nation and culture) and how this loyalty constitutes women's identity, sexuality and agency. I ask how and why Indian women are constituted as the preservers of tradition and the essence of Indian identity, where, according to Lata Mani (1989), Indian women became the grounds on which the indigenous elite and the British disputed Indian sovereignty. Studying the process by which the nation is constructed through women has helped me to find the interconnections between the discourses of Indian identity, national identity and normative sexuality. According to Partha Chatterjee, Indian women signified the nation. According to Chatterjee:

The new patriarchy advocated by nationalism conferred upon women the honor of a new social responsibility, and by associating the task of

female emancipation with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood, bound them to a new, and yet entirely legitimate, subordination (Chatterjee, 1993:130).

Furthermore, Lata Mani points out that the construction of a new nation, in sync with the ideals of modernity (such as full citizenship, a just nation-state, and democracy), is posited through its symbol--women.

For the British rescuing women becomes part of its civilizing mission. For the indigenous elite, protection of their status or its reform becomes an urgent necessity, in terms of the honour of the collective-religious or national (Mani, 1989:118).

Respectable women symbolize "Mother India" or the essence of true Indian-ness. The respectable Indian woman for the newly independent India and nationalists is remade for a transnational India of the 1990s. The political and economic reforms in the 1990s to "liberalize" India more fully into global capitalism have been accompanied by and have facilitated the complementary ideology of a new "liberated" Indian woman. The new "liberated" woman signifying, the new transnational India, is the daughter of the earlier nationalist "Mother India."

The political and economic reforms in the 1990s have been referred to as part of a period of Indian reintegration with the global capitalist economy. This period has been characterized by increased capital inflow and foreign equity, and the emergence and consolidation of an Indian middle class (D'Costa, 1995:257). The reintegration to the world economy marks a shift from earlier forms of economic nationalism, state monopoly and self-reliance. Ideologies of this global reintegration or economic internationalism are increasingly represented by the "liberated" woman, who can now "choose" careers outside the home (national and international).



## **Tradition, Modernity and Authenticity**

Any resistance to normative heterosexuality by Indian women has been interpreted as disloyalty to the institutions informed by the ideologies of patriarchy, such as the nation, culture, ethnicity and family. Often the response has been accusatory, where such a woman is thought of as destroying her tradition, rejecting her Indian identity, becoming too western and/or not being a real woman. In my dissertation I explore this process where tradition, and therefore its corollary, authentic Indian identity (or the dominant discourse on national identity), is automatically questioned when normative sexuality is challenged. I also look at the ways in which tradition is invented within the cultural and political context of a modern state to meet different ends.

## **A Collage of Models**

My dissertation critically evaluates specific ethnographic methods and epistemologies, and through a collage of different models attempts an exploration of ways to do reflexive and politically engaged-feminist ethnography.

This dissertation does not have an arrival scene, nor does it have or anticipate a departure scene. Rather, it is akin to a series of journeys exploring the discursive, cultural and political construction of identities in a decolonizing and transnational India, by a migratory Indian ethnographer. Alongside this investigation I outline recent theoretical developments in cultural anthropology, feminist anthropology/theory and social theory. I see these epistemological and political debates as explorations of the identity and practices of the Ethnographer and explorations of the current concern about becoming conscious situated/positioned intellectuals. This two-pronged endeavour of looking at the politics of identity (in the discipline of cultural

anthropology and in post/neo colonial India) has taken root in a historical moment in cultural and feminist anthropology in which many ethnographers stand at the unsteady crossroads of being the observer and observed, or the voice of the writing-analyzing researcher and the "data providing" informant/researched. I suggest that these blurred boundaries have also become more problematic for a positioned ethnographer who inhabits two or more cultures (such as India and the United States) and for the discipline of Anthropology, a field that has keenly begun challenging traditional understandings of culture, cartography, ethnographic authority, writing and ethnographic practices. These issues are explored in more detail in Chapter Two.

### **Overview of Chapters**

Chapter Two, Epistemologies, Practices & Identities: The Politics of Intimacy and Distance, outlines key theoretical debates in Cultural Anthropology that have challenged elements of the monopoly of the traditional ethnographer (or the "Lone Ranger," according to Renato Rosaldo) who goes off to distant lands or communities to collect *other* people's stories for an audience that is always assumed to be completely removed from these *other* people. I explore debates that question the political, moral and epistemological significance and ramifications of this endeavour. These debates have in turn problematized claims to objectivity, impartiality, ethnographic authority, fieldwork, and some of the conceptual apparatus of anthropology. Recent responses in cultural anthropology have called for a more responsible and consciously positioned ethnographer. I draw from feminist anthropologists such as, Kath Weston, Kamala Visweswaran and Ruth Behar who point to the standpoint that researchers from historically marginalized communities have and why such a standpoint should have a place in contemporary anthropology.

Furthermore, the "textual turn" in cultural anthropology has brought attention to the interconnections between voice, power, representational styles, and writing and the issue of multiple audiences. I evaluate these debates and situate myself within these debates.

The subjects under investigation (including myself, other persons, texts and institutions) represent and embody an ongoing conversation about decolonization and transnationalism. I began my dissertation with the intention of exploring the institutional and everyday management of normative gender/sex and sexuality. Specifically, I wished to focus on the strategies by which "obligatory heterosexuality" was reproduced and maintained for Indian women. This exploration into postcolonial/neocolonial heteropatriarchy, through three highly visible national events (each explored in separate chapters), began to reveal to me another interlocking but contentious debate: whether or not certain issues, activities, identities, behaviors and voices were Indian (indigenous) or Western.

The discourse of nativism has brought to the forefront notions about who or what gets to be considered traditional or authentic. In other words, what must an ex-colony reject or adapt from its colonizers (or the North). This project of nation-building was also an enterprise of making national identity and culture. My dissertation focuses on how this process is deeply gendered, [hetero]sexual, racial and classist.

Chapter Three, The "Chakka" Who Was Not "Pukka": The Politics of Section 377, examines and deconstructs the language and underlying presuppositions of a colonial sexual code that is being contested by a human rights group in postcolonial/neocolonial India. This chapter shows how in this dispute the government has adopted a colonial sexual code as Indian tradition, and positioned this code against

the civil rights of gay men and prisoners, which it characterizes as frivolous Western mimicry. In this chapter I show how any challenge (symbolic or otherwise) to normative heterosexuality is resisted by the modern, postcolonial state. Further, much of the challenge from human rights groups has significant symbolic value for stigmatized men--such as gay men, especially those from lower economic backgrounds. The resistance of the State and individuals from varied backgrounds gives concrete shape to an identity and practice that was formerly taken for granted and assumed to be natural. And finally, this chapter shows that the language and cultural meanings of this code conceptually and symbolically exclude female sexuality.

Chapter Four, *From Mother India to Ms. Worldly: Trafficking in Essences*, explores how nationalist- and mass-media-produced notions of womanhood are essentially heterosexual and elitist. The recent national euphoria over Indian women winning the Miss Universe and Miss World contests is critically examined. I demonstrate how, through mass-produced fantasies, women become the bases on which the discourse on and projects of progress, development, freedom, nationalism, nativism, authenticity, liberalization (privatization) and global integration are advanced. Further, I explore how these practices connect state, media and corporate sponsorship to the everyday life of families, relatives and friendships. I document how the identity of the "new Indian woman of the 1990s" emerges as an ideology to maintain the core patriarchal institutions of marriage, motherhood and heterosexuality. By reproducing these institutions via the rhetoric of tradition, the essence and spirit of womanhood is inscribed.

Chapter Five, *Duty, Tradition or Choice? Stories of Co-optation and Resistance*, is a continuation of several of the themes introduced in Chapter Three, namely the issues of duty and marriage. This chapter includes a collection of stories of women

who are acquaintances and friends. These conversations are explorations into women's resistance, co-optation and acceptance of dominant ideologies of respectability and duty, within the hegemony of marriage and normative sexuality. These narratives come from women who are married, divorced, want to be married, ambivalent about marriage versus companionship, conflicted by their desire for autonomy and finally those who are unequivocal marriage-resisters. The chapter uncovers some of the tensions and resolutions of the "love" versus "arranged" marriage dichotomy in the lives of Indian women. Although the possibility of "love" marriage is seen by many heterosexual women as the creation of more choice, it is also recognized by some women that marriage, "love," "arranged" or any permutation of it, is influenced by the ideology of modernity and is very much normative.

Chapter Six, *Interpreting, Inverting and Inventing Tradition*, looks at the invisibility of Sakhis in relation to the New Women of the 1990s, within heteropatriarchy. The term Sakhi literally means, in Hindi, female friend and confidant. I have chosen to use the term, after many conversations with Indian women, to refer to women who have chosen to live their lives together as close friends (*maitri*, *saheli*), lovers (*shamakami*, *khush*, lesbians), "soul mates," and partners in *gandharva* marriage. The chapter looks at Sakhi's exclusion and erasure from the economy of heterosexuality and raises significant questions about economic privilege, cultural authenticity and westernization.

In Chapter Seven, the Conclusion, I suggest that the construction and reproduction of normative gender and sexual identities are deeply woven into patriarchal institutions of kinship-making and embody the practices of state-making, nation-building and the postcolonial nation's language of cultural authenticity. Specifically, women's erotic autonomy is the basis for this debate. This debate occurs

very tacitly in Chapter Three through the bodies of prisoners and gay men, where, without any reference to female sexuality, procreative sexuality is explicitly identified as authentic Indian practice. Furthermore, the championing and packaging of procreative sexuality as tradition or modernity in turn makes Sakhi realities even more invisible and marginal.

Finally, I suggest that the understanding of cultures as unbound and dynamic intersections (such as transnational or post/neo colonial colonial India) has informed my understanding of persons or identities as having multiple locations, alliances and communities (including that of the ethnographer). As a result, the boundaries between the researched, the ethnographer, and the audiences are also increasingly blurred, intertwined and unbound. I discuss how these blurrings and interconnections have an important place in contemporary anthropological practice, and in understanding the cultural politics of marginality.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Epistemologies, Practices & Identities: The Politics of Intimacy and Distance**

This chapter contextualizes and locates my dissertation, methodologically and theoretically, and provides a selected commentary on some of the current epistemological and political concerns and debates in cultural anthropology. Specifically, I explore the dilemmas confronting anthropologists who stand at the blurred boundaries between the researching/observing ethnographer and the researched/observed Other. This dilemma directly relates to the issue of ethnographic authority, the ethnographer's location and identity, ethnographic practices, and one's audience. This chapter demonstrates how these concerns have been addressed by particular anthropologists and how they have provided me with some models for my dissertation. The epistemological and political concerns raised and complicated by these debates situate my dissertation project.

The blurring and questioning of the schism between the ethnographic Self and the observed Other, alongside a growing awareness of being and becoming situated intellectuals in and outside of the academy have taken form in different ways within cultural anthropology. This questioning includes at some fundamental level a questioning of ethnographic authority and the strategies employed by the ethnographer to maintain this monopoly. Many strategies of distancing between the researcher and researched allowed for this long-unquestioned authority and the construction of the identity of the Ethnographic-Self. The strategies of distancing also embodied anthropological methods, concepts, and practices.

This chapter will demonstrate how the critical evaluation of ethnographic authority by ethnographers such as James Clifford has been received by those ethnographers who have the added dilemmas and responsibilities of occupying multiple locations, specifically between the place of the researcher and that of the

researched. Although I categorize the reception to the critique of ethnographic authority as different moments, these moments are limited and often overlapping (since many of these ethnographers would claim multiple identities and politics). These moments include: challenges and alternatives provided by "native," "third world," feminist, hybrid, lesbian/gay ethnographers and ethnographers of colour. Many of these challenges are also conversations (often one-sided) with the "textualist critique" or postmodern critique of anthropology (Clifford, 1988; Clifford and Marcus, 1986). These conversations have been, for some, troubling, disappointing, and yet full of possibilities. I conclude by situating myself and my dissertation within these moments.

The concerns regarding the boundaries between the researched and researcher also provide an avenue into issues regarding the conceptual apparatus, the practitioners and practices in anthropology, and the audience. In this chapter I show how the critical evaluation of ethnographic authority and the ethnographer's location by particular anthropologists has identified for me four interconnected areas. They are: (1) The conceptual and methodological apparatus in anthropology: such as the categories of *culture*, *home* and *field*, *participant-observation*, and the *Self-Other relationship*; (2) The identity of the ethnographer: such as political location and experiences of the ethnographer; (3) Practices of ethnographers: such as travelling to a foreign or an unfamiliar community/culture ("out there"), encountering, describing and reporting that reality to another community/culture; and (4) The audience: to whom the ethnographer is writing and who she expects to read her ethnography.

These four areas significantly overlap and interlock. By complicating taken-for-granted categories, practices and people involved in the ethnographic process, the debates that I outline in this chapter provide the framework of my dissertation. I will first situate my dissertation within these four areas and then provide a select



commentary on some of the current epistemological and political concerns and debates in cultural anthropology.

### **Epistemologies, Locations, Practices and Audience**

Renato Rosaldo has suggested that we begin to understand cultures as intersections, versus the standard anthropological notion of cultures as homogeneous, bound, static wholes (Rosaldo, 1989). Drawing from his work, I explore what it means to be an ethnographer or a cultural self, located at many intersections or locations: an Indian woman, a 'native' and a feminist ethnographer, and as a cultural critic who inhabits both Indian and U.S worlds. Understanding cultures and persons in this manner can help to deconstruct some of the myths of anthropology, such as the myth that one person (usually an 'outsider') can objectively and 'holistically' represent a culture/community/peoples; or that certain established tropes or "gatekeeping concepts" (Appadurai, 1986:357) are emblematic of a culture/geographic region/peoples. For example, Appadurai notes that the "trope of caste" (such as focusing on relationships between different caste groups, or looking at how caste hierarchies are maintained) has dominated anthropological research on India. Further, the scientific quest for a 'balanced' and 'holistic' representation tends to privilege the covering of as many people/informants or institutions as possible, which in turn justifies its corollary--covering more people and institutions equals a more holistic, objective, complete and balanced view. This has been put under scrutiny, for example, by Ruth Behar, who has shown how one woman's life story (Esperanza, a woman from Mexico) and/or her own auto-ethnography (as a Cuban Jewish immigrant to the U.S.) can illuminate and connect cultural politics with the personal (Behar, 1993 and 1996).

With a more dynamic and complicated understanding of culture, communities

and peoples (ethnographers included), there can be more room to consider making the familiar strange. Much of cultural anthropology has sought to make the strange familiar. Practitioners of the discipline have endeavoured to make, document, interpret, represent and translate unknown, alien and foreign worlds (foreign especially to the anthropologist and her/his audience) and render them understandable and knowable. Contemporary North American anthropology, however, has witnessed the notion of foreign-ness expand and blur significantly. The project of making the strange familiar has ranged from going to a different geographical region that in which one lives and works (such as an American citizen going outside the United States or a white American going to a Native American reservation) to more recently going to different locations within the United States (such as a middle-class and highly educated ethnographer going to a working-class community where generally the highest degree attained by member's of the community is a high school certificate or a bachelor's degree).

My dissertation also seeks to translate, interpret, document, and represent lives and realities, but in reverse. In reverse fashion, my dissertation makes the familiar strange. In other words, I seek to evaluate taken-for-granted practices and institutions of daily life as member and participant.

### **The Crises In Anthropology: An Historical Overview**

William Roseberry (1996:5-25) has identified three political and epistemological moments in American anthropology.<sup>1</sup> The first is characterized by

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<sup>1</sup>Although Roseberry, Grimshaw and Hart (discussed later) believe that there are political, epistemological and economic crises in the discipline, Roseberry believes that some of it has been manufactured from the 1980s onwards and that certain "elite" and "mainstream" contingents have not really been affected by it. Grimshaw and Hart also have suggested that in many ways anthropology as a discipline has always been in flux due to its flexible, interdisciplinary components.

"the emergence of the U.S. as the dominant world power" in the period after World War II (1950-69), when American anthropologists had even more access *to study the Other and their practices* in the geographic South (namely, Africa, Asia and Oceania). This was in addition to the existing access to Latin America and Native America. The opening up of these world regions to "U.S. interest and influence" intersected with paradigmatic shifts, i.e., from an emphasis on "small scale communities" (say the trading system of the natives of New Guinea) to "complex societies and peasants" of larger nation-states (such as notions of purity and pollution amongst Brahmins in Indian villages or land tenure and the Mexican peasantry). In other words there was a move away from the classical anthropological subject of small-scale 'primitive' societies (or "primitive isolates") and themes of functional theory (Roseberry, 1996:6).

The second moment (1970-89), Roseberry maintains, was a period that "attempted to address a number of silences" in anthropological practices such as complicities with colonialism and androcentrism (Roseberry, 1996:6), and is a period marked by specific anthologies (Asad, 1973; Hymes, 1969 and Reiter, 1975). Many North American anthropologists, including Roseberry, suggest that this was a period when many academics were influenced by and involved in the black civil rights movements, the women's movement and anti-Vietnam-War demonstrations.

The final and current moment (1990s) Roseberry calls the "rewriting of anthropology," in which there is greater emphasis on the poetics, practices and modes of representation in and of ethnography (Roseberry, 1996:17). Roseberry seems quite skeptical of developments in this period and he questions whether or not claims about the "crisis of representation" and "crisis of intellectuals" are "exclusivist and exclusionary claims" of "crisis managers and mongers" in elite universities (Roseberry, 1996:21). Roseberry is skeptical of the "language of marginality," the

"increasing openness--to new, critical perspectives, to more diverse, multicultural authorships and texts, to a wider range of styles of work, texts, forms of representations" (Roseberry, 1986:20).

Roseberry questions the sincerity of this discourse by stating that such language is mostly cosmetic and does not reflect much change within the hierarchies in the anthropological establishment. Although Roseberry is quite skeptical of what he calls the "rewriting of anthropology" and the "language of marginality," much of the current questions explored by feminist, native, third world, lesbian/gay anthropologists and anthropologists of colour are in a dialogue with many of the authors of *Writing Culture* or what has been called the "textualist critique" of anthropology.

Anna Grimshaw and Keith Hart also provide a critical overview of the rise and fall of scientific ethnography and anthropology's professionalization (Grimshaw and Hart, 1994:227-262). Their sketch focuses on developments in British anthropology, a close cousin of American anthropology. Grimshaw and Hart, "locate the roots of anthropology's crisis in the collapse of its central paradigm, scientific ethnography" (Grimshaw and Hart, 1994:228). As a genre, scientific ethnography facilitated ethnographic authority and expertise through its monopoly of *other* people's lives (primarily the non-west and non-white). "...Scientific Ethnography became identified as writing objective reports of locally circumscribed, exotic peoples after prolonged immersion in their societies" (Grimshaw and Hart, 1994:228). This monopoly of objective reportage via subjective means (first-hand experience through fieldwork and participant observation about daily life or experience of institutions) began to be challenged in the late sixties. Although Grimshaw and Hart say that this monopoly has been "seriously undermined" I would argue that the basic tenants espoused by scientific ethnography, whether the ethnography is theoretically and

methodologically categorized as "interpretive" or "political economy," still inform anthropological practice.

Grimshaw and Hart provide an outline to contextualize scientific ethnography, the paradigm most "identified with Malinowski and his heirs." The first period, 1890-1945, is identified as the birthing and launching of anthropology, or the period of professionalization. "At its core lay the development of scientific ethnography, a modern intellectual practice based on fieldwork" (Grimshaw and Hart, 1996:232). According to Grimshaw and Hart, the publication of Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, in 1922, is often marked as a revolutionary moment in anthropology.

The distinctive object of inquiry was primitive society, conceived of as isolated, self sufficient peoples found largely in the distant fringes of empire....This meant that everything was open to investigation by what constitutes the only valid discovery of the new discipline, its fieldwork method. (Grimshaw and Hart, 1994:233)

The persona of the fieldworker-theorist is referred to by Grimshaw and Hart as "the Lone Ranger with the note-book" (Grimshaw and Hart, 1996:233). The narrative of the unified, homogenous, simple, static, isolated, holistic society contributed to the construct of the Metropolitan-Western persona (belonging to a complex, mobile, alienated, unsuperstitious society). 'Primitive society' and its natives were the Western Self's Other, but were also a part of anthropology's liberal project of counteracting existing forms of overt biological racism (such as Victorian racism). Malinowski and Boas, through scientific ethnography or "the ethos of scientific democracy" also "extended the conception of rational humanity, simultaneously questioning Western arrogance and demanding intellectual respect for primitives" (Grimshaw and Hart, 1996:234). Although scientific ethnography may have challenged Victorian racial hierarchies, the primitive, or primitive society, was invented and rearticulated into what Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls, the "savage slot"

(1991).<sup>2</sup>

The second period, 1945 to the present, is identified as the "post war boom" as well as the "lingering death of scientific ethnography" (Grimshaw and Hart, 1996:245). In the post World War II period, Euro-American anthropology increased in its professional consolidation (specifically, U.S and British). This development occurred simultaneously with independence movements and independence in British colonies, increasing mobilization of civil rights movements in the U.S., growing U.S. hegemony, increasing integration of world markets, increasing migration of peoples across nations and "a boom in the welfare state." According to Grimshaw and Hart, the 1960s was a time of unparalleled expansion for academic anthropology. However, they suggest that the publication of *Writing Culture* catalyzed an "open confrontation with the methodological and political consequences of the scientific-ethnographic paradigm" (Grimshaw and Hart, 1994:251). This "open confrontation" has often been uncritically cast as the "antithesis of scientific ethnography." It is this "open confrontation" of ethnographic authority, with a specific focus on James Clifford's work, that I will outline in the next section. Furthermore, I shall explore the contributions and weaknesses of Clifford's analysis.

### **Deconstructing Ethnographic Authority**

James Clifford outlines the evolution of a fundamental mode of the distancing mechanism--"ethnographic authority" (Clifford, 1988:21). This mode of distancing historically set up *Us* (the metropole, white, academically-trained expert, Self) and *Them* (Natives of the colonies, non-white, the studied, Other). Further, this model of distancing was hierarchal and based on unequal power (such as across the axis of

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<sup>2</sup>Trouillot's notion of the "savage slot" is explored later, in this chapter, in the section: Resisting the Savage Slot.

nationality, race, gender and educational privilege). There was also the geographical distancing between the Metropole v.s. Colony or Home/Academy v.s. Field. The "persona of the Fieldworker-Theorist" emerges most forcefully through the work and efforts of Malinowski (Clifford, 1988:26). The ethnographer as the "best interpreter of native life" is constructed against the amateurs (those who write travelogues, or confessional accounts), the *biased* accounts (of missionaries and colonial administrators, who had been around longer in the field but *had an agenda* to convert or rule the natives) and the *armchair* theorists (who simply didn't want to leave their offices and libraries and get their feet wet in "the field"). According to Clifford, Malinowski "played a central role in establishing credit" for the Fieldworker-Theorist, who became an institutionalized persona and a hegemonic rite of passage and practice with the professionalization of anthropology (1900-1960s). The *science of man*, through the "assertation of presence" (the ethnographer was there) and imbued with power inequities, gave the Fieldworker-Theorist "unquestioned claims to appear as the purveyor of *truth* (Clifford, 1988:32). Clifford points out that the authority of the academic fieldworker-theorist was established between 1920-1950. At the core of *going out there* was the paradoxical method of participant-observation. This method established the 'scientific validity' of objectively "I-Witnessing," collecting, recording, describing and interpreting native customs or beliefs (the native's point of view) and of the immersion experience of empathy (participation--but not to lose objectivity by 'going native'). Going there was thus accompanied by an "arrival scene" (Pratt, 1986:47). This 'first-hand' research and experience was also considered to be informed by scientific neutrality, innocence, and holism (Clifford, 1988:30).

"The collection of data by academically trained natural scientists defining themselves as anthropologists" provided theories and gave histories to the West under

the rubric of human diversity, social evolutionism, development, progress and modernity (Clifford, 1988:30). Ethnographic authority at once allowed for an objectification and appropriate "intense personal experience." Just so long as one didn't *go native* or *was not native*. This "intense personal experience" distinguished (and thus gave more authority to) the anthropologist from those who may have been *too abstract* (the armchair anthropologist, philosophers, etc.) or 'too concrete' (as in native informants who supposedly couldn't make the critical connections the anthropologist made, thus giving the anthropologist more authority).

Clifford's essay provides a careful critique of the consolidation of unquestioned ethnographic authority-- as "omnipresent, knowledgeable" and as 'spokesman' or voice of others/cultures (Clifford, 1988:43). He concludes by introducing new forms of ethnographic writing and practice. These strategies include what he calls experimental, interpretive, dialogical and polyphonic.<sup>3</sup> Clifford's call for polyphonic and dialogical approaches was also echoed by the co-editor of *Writing Culture*, George Marcus. Along with Clifford, Marcus suggests that ethnographers recognize the difference in power relations set up within the practices of the "quintessential anthropologist" or "monophonic authority," and collaborative efforts and "plural authorship" (Clifford, 1988:51).

Anthropologists will increasingly have to share their texts and sometimes their title pages with those indigenous collaborators for whom the term informants is no longer adequate, if it ever was. (Clifford, 1988:51)

As mentioned earlier, Clifford's work, along with his cohorts,<sup>4</sup> catalyzed an "open confrontation with the methodological and political consequences of the

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<sup>3</sup>Clifford provides a list of "exemplary" experimental, polyphonic, reflexive, dialogical and interpretive ethnographies, such as Rabinow (1977); Dwyer (1982); Crapanzano (1980); Dumont (1978); and Shostak (1981).

<sup>4</sup>George Marcus, Michael Fischer and contributors to the anthology *Writing Culture*.



scientific-ethnographic paradigm" (Grimshaw and Hart, 1994:251). The reception has been mixed and I cannot provide a comprehensive overview of these debates in my dissertation. Clifford's limited critique of ethnographic authority and easy dismissal of many critical ethnographic works (such as those of feminists, native and/or of people of colour) is, I believe, due to his privileged location. However, what I provide below is an elaboration of responses to Clifford from particular cultural anthropologists. These anthropologists have deconstructed various aspects of ethnographic authority (some before Clifford, such as feminist anthropology's deconstruction of androcentric anthropology or third-world anthropologists's critique of anthropology's colonial heritage) and they are sympathetic to Clifford's challenging of objective, holistic, scientific neutrality and uncritical authority, but also critique some of Clifford's limitations. What unites these responses is the initial dilemma of standing at the intersection of the researcher and researched. I locate myself at this intersection, where the boundary between the researcher and the researched are not clear cut.

### **Can There Be A Native and Decolonized Anthropology?**

I begin with a close reading and critique of Kirin Narayan's essay "How Native is a Native Anthropologist?" (Narayan, 1993:671-686). Narayan asks "How 'foreign' is an anthropologist from abroad?" These questions have caught anthropological attention especially since the ex-colonies began talking back; although characterizing the response from third-world intellectuals as talking back is also a debatable and contentious issue. In other words, do 'natives' talk back if they simply echo the sentiments and replicate the objectifying practices of the discipline in foreign/brown/black faces? The first issue that Narayan raises and questions is the binary logic of the 'regular' versus 'native' anthropologist; the 'native' versus the

'non-native' anthropologist; and the *outsider/insider* and *observer/observed* schisms in cultural anthropology. The second issue that she finds problematic is the automatic assumption by *regular* anthropologists in the metropole that native anthropologists would have a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of their culture, an insider native's point of view if you will. She invokes academia's current favorite epithet--the specter of essentialism. She feels that the romantic notion that the native anthropologist, who supposedly enters the land of fieldwork "from a position of intimate affinity" is "essentialist." She writes "as someone who bears the label of 'native' anthropologist and yet squirms uncomfortably under this essentializing tag" (Narayan, 1993:672). It is this uncomfortable squirming and "this essentializing tag" that I would like to explore. And thirdly, Narayan concludes by calling for the "enactment of hybridity." In arguing against the fixed dichotomy of *regular* and *native* she would like to view anthropologists as researchers with "shifting identifications amid a field of inter-penetrating communities and power relations." Further, she points out, "the enactment of hybridity" will also be reflected within ethnographic writing where the authors can belong to many worlds--such as being "minimally bicultural in terms of belonging simultaneously to the world of engaged scholarship and the world of everyday life" (Narayan, 1993:672).

Narayan's call for the destabilizing of the dichotomies of the *regular* versus the *native* anthropologist, anti-essentialism and the "enactment of hybridity" comes at an important moment in anthropology when many monopolies are being questioned. She notes that the opposition between the *native* and *regular* anthropologist can be historically placed within the heydays of empire when Western anthropologists went off to distant lands (usually the colonies) and studied the Native-Other. She also suggests that this opposition was initially more clear cut but eventually grew complicated when natives, including informants, began being trained by

anthropologists and receiving doctorates at universities in the metropole. Almost always these native anthropologists were sent back to their cultures to study their own. Narayan quotes Franz Boas, who describes a trained native as having "the immeasurable advantage of trustworthiness, authentically revealing precisely the elusive thoughts and sentiments of the native" (Narayan, 1993:672).

Narayan explores her deep unease with the essentializing difference between insiders and outsiders. According to her, this binary framework needs to be destabilized due to many changes within anthropology and anthropological identities. First, anthropology is being practiced by third world anthropologists within, between and outside of the geographic third world as well as by people of colour in the United States. In other words, the original savage other/native now observes with a trained eye, analyzes and represents, and is a full fledged anthropological-self. Also, Narayan claims that feminists have "destabilized the category of Other and Self" due to their recognition of differences amongst women (Narayan, 1993:673).

Unfortunately, Narayan does not elaborate upon this statement. Third, the American anthropological gaze has also turned inwards, back to the Metropole and therefore the idea of the field is also flexible. So, in other words, the field can be a New Jersey high school that the anthropologist may have attended, a Greek village, or a garage in Philadelphia. The inward gaze is in addition to the traditional outward gaze--so studying Hindu temples in India or peasants in Mexico is still very much a part of the imaginary of anthropology's geography. So, the field now includes original locales like the colonies or ex-colonies, and also the metropole's backyard. Arrival scenes are marked by departure scenes for some. And the field has become home for some.

Narayan finds it objectionable that native anthropologists are seen primarily by their native-ness rather than their contributions to the field. She makes a specific

reference to M.N. Srinivas, an Indian anthropologist trained under Radcliffe-Brown in Oxford during the 1930s and 1940s, whose 'classic monograph' was on the Coorgs of India. Narayan feels that "despite the path breaking professional contributions," his "origins remained a perpetual qualifier" (Narayan, 1993:672). She quotes Radcliffe-Brown, who had written a forward to M.N. Srinivas's monograph, as saying that his official training and Indian origins contributed towards "an understanding of Indian ways of thought which is difficult for a European to attain over many years" (Narayan, 1993:672). Narayan rightly points out that the native's insiderness, based on his race and colonial subjecthood, was used to further the interests of good data collection by the white metropole "regular" anthropologist. This native was allowed into the "charmed circle" of Oxbridge anthropologists. This, Narayan felt, was a form of romanticizing the native or romancing the noble savage. She writes that it is this native, "the adequately westernized native," who received full professional initiation into a "disciplinary fellowship of discourse, who became the bearer of the title 'native' anthropologist" (Narayan, 1993:672).

However, Narayan doesn't take into account the following: (1) native anthropologists, an identity externally imposed due the subordinate location of the Other-Native Self, were allowed access into these charmed circles due to their stigmatized race and colonial locations (in the case of M.N. Srinivas) or their Savage-Otherness within the metropole (such as Native Americans or Black Americans), and (2) 'native' anthropologists had some basis for political alliances with the White Metropole Anthropologist based on sex/gender, class, educational privilege and professional politics. Both Radcliffe-Brown and Srinivas followed similar criteria for reporting (objective, scientific, holistic reportage) and doing the Science of Man for similar academic audiences. M.N. Srinivas's politics and poetics were not too different from those of his mentor, which in turn made his membership

in India and understanding of *all* Indian realities more authentic and representative.

The theme of identification versus distance is repeatedly invoked by Narayan. Throughout the essay she points out moments of identification and distance that the ethnographic-Self encounters. Narayan's ethnographic-Self experiences shifting identities. She provides some biographical information, such as being "minimally" bicultural and biracial (Indian and white German-American parents, growing up primarily in the United States), educated in an elite U.S. university and being based in the United States. Narayan did fieldwork in Nasik and Kangra (small towns in Northern India, the former being her father's hometown). On the one hand Narayan felt like she "often share[d] an unspoken emotional understanding with the people" with whom she worked and on the other she states: "all too aware of traditional expectations for proper behavior by an unmarried daughter, in both places I repressed aspects of my cosmopolitan Bombay persona and my American self to behave with appropriate decorum and deference" (Narayan, 1993:674). She says she felt "uncomfortable, even ashamed, of the ways in which my class had allowed me opportunities that were out of reach for this bright and reflective man." The man she refers to is Swamiji, a Hindu holy man, whose stories were collected for Narayan's book, *Saints, Scoundrels and Storytellers*.<sup>5</sup> Narayan felt that her identity within the community was "unstable" due to the fact that she was at times accepted as a granddaughter and at other times distanced as someone doing business with a camera, tape recorder and notebook. At times she felt bonded by "an unspoken emotional understanding" (due to historical familiarity with the locale, people, language and culture) or ridiculed by Swamiji and his followers when he mockingly questioned why educated people do what they do--directly referring to what Narayan was doing

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<sup>5</sup>In this ethnography, Narayan (1989) researched songs and lives of women living in the Himalayan foothills, a place she had visited annually since she was 15 and where her German-American mother settled down to live.

and researching in his town.

Narayan's moments of identification or stable identity included the following: common language, familiar people, a history of visitations, a sense of familiar culture, ancestral bonds, and inclusion into kinship as a daughter, granddaughter and sister. Narayan's moments of distancing (which she often associated with "unstable or shifting identities") included being marked as an academic outsider entering a space (familiar for the most part) with a camera, notebook and recorder; polite exclusions from day-to-day activities or personal information; ridicule or questioning of her project; experiences of differences marked by gender, class, education and geographical locations (the cosmopolitan Bombayite in semi-urban Nasik or semi-rural Kangra or the nonresident Indian in India) and the longing for a time of independent living in California. So Narayan was at times included as an outsider to the village (Kangra where she "had no deep local roots"), by village women, as someone from the outside--i.e., from Bombay and/or America who had come all that way to record their lives and activities. And at times she got excluded as an insider in Nasik, by Swamiji, who knew her as his friend's granddaughter and treated her as kin, but also knew that she was visiting, recording and collecting his stories for a dissertation in the United States and who sometimes challenged the motives of educated people. Part of her inclusion into Swamiji's world also required following the rituals of local patriarchy by not touching a holy man's feet while menstruating.

Narayan's unease in uncritically adopting "a position of intimate affinity" with rural Indian women as an urban Indian-American woman is quite different from the position Faye Harrison takes. Faye Harrison, an African-American anthropologist, travels to Jamaica to research the "Jamaican underclass." In *Decolonizing Anthropology* (Harrison, 1991:88-126 and 1991:1-14), Faye Harrison (along with the other contributors) calls for "an activist anthropology" from "politically responsible

Third World Intellectuals,” a critique of anthropology as colonial discourse, a “meaningful dialogue and reconciliation” across multiple locations (nation, race, class, culture) and ultimately an “anthropology of liberation” (Harrison, 1991:104). In her research of the Jamaican underclass and U.S.-Jamaican relations, Harrison, like Narayan feels an affinity with her ‘informants’--specifically black Jamaicans. Harrison states that:

Although I was a foreigner, in many ways I felt at home in Jamaica. Intellectually, I knew that I shared with Afro-Americans an African diaspora, that my enslaved African ancestors had probably passed through the Caribbean archipelago, and that it was an historic accident that my pivotal fore parents had settled in the Virginia colony rather than in Jamaica, Barbados, or Cuba. Beyond this intellectualized notion of kinship and affinity, there were many times when intuitively I felt familiar with things Jamaican. (Harrison, 1991:102)

Harrison’s sense of this strong identification is coupled with an “organic responsibility” towards “oppressed peoples, especially to peoples of Africa and of African descent” (Harrison, 1991:104). She says that after dealing with the community’s initial bouts of suspicion and tension directed against her (the foreigner, outsider, American), especially “during a time when the American presence was considered by many to be ominous,” she was given honorary Jamaican citizenship by Ras John “a self-taught artist” and community member. According to Harrison, Ras John, accepted her as a sister “from the same ancestral mother-Africa” and, despite the fact that the African diaspora had separated them, “blood is thicker than the waters of the sea.”

Edmund Gordon, another contributor to Harrison’s anthology, is an African-American anthropologist, researches the lives of Afro-Caribbean peoples in Nicaragua, and demonstrates his identification with the third world (as an anthropologist and as a black American). He says: “By ‘third world’ I mean the underdeveloped nations of the world and the people who inhabit them. I include in this definition the ‘minority’ populations of the United States and other capitalist

Western nations. These peoples of color and their communities are internal colonies" (Gordon, 1991:164).

Narayan's familial connection with the community and her subsequent sense of outsidership while researching the community provides an interesting juxtaposition with Harrison, who as an American and complete stranger enters new terrain in the geographic third world which felt like home. It is interesting since, on the one hand, Narayan's style of anthropology is not necessarily about liberation or a sense of "organic responsibility" (but she questions some of her outsider and privileged locations) and, on the other, Harrison demands "an activist anthropology" (but does not seem to address how her fieldwork and "organic responsibility" to the Jamaicans or Jamaican underclass are connected).

Narayan's essay opens the door to questioning limited categories, "gatekeeping concepts," (Appadurai, 1986:357) and uncritical politics regarding authentic or inauthentic ethnographers and geographical space. However, I found Narayan's call for the "enactment of hybridity" (where identities and locations are "multiplex" and constantly in flux and where native origins should not be an important factor in determining respectable ethnographies) and her charge of essentialism problematic and disempowering. It is disempowering to those anthropologists who have some connection and identification with a community (such as sharing similarities in economic class and/or visions and strategies of political justice). Those with marginalized histories/experiences do have a certain kind of epistemic privilege or privileged access. It is also problematic to ignore differences (in politics and/or privilege) or to ignore connections (in political visions and/or similar experiences of prejudice/discrimination).

The current vogue of calling acts of identification, connection or similarity essentialist ignores systematic, historical and structural dimensions of inequality,



domination and exclusion. It is often assumed that connection and/or identification ignores differences between, within and across communities/identities. Some of that happens. Kirin Narayan doesn't consider the possibility of people connecting due to their differences or plurality of shared experiences or across differences. The enthusiasm to denaturalize or reject biological determinism often forgets the physicality of structural domination. The geopolitical difference between the United States and India or Mexico, skin colour, economic privilege, or the privilege of the voice to speak, observe and represent, still matters.

### **More Parallel and Intersecting Questions**

Parallel questions about insiderness and outsiderness have been asked by feminist anthropologists and social scientists (such as: "Can there be a feminist ethnography?" (Abu-Lughod, 1990 and Stacy, 1988)). Furthermore, with growing numbers of ethnographies that deal with lesbian and gay realities in the U.S. and cross-cultural sexualities and genders, some gay and lesbian ethnographers in the U.S. now claim that despite historical and structural heterosexism, "These Natives can speak for themselves."<sup>6</sup> The parallels and intersections of these questions, statements and claims are simultaneously connected to the continuing legacy of what Renato Rosaldo has referred to as the Lone Ethnographer, multiple systems of historical, resilient and restructured domination, and the many *reinventions*, *crises*, (real or imagined) and *recapturings* in and of anthropology. The next section outlines the questioning of ethnographic authority by feminist anthropologists and their reaction to issues raised by Clifford in *Writing Culture*.

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<sup>6</sup>This is the logo printed on the shirts sold by the Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists (SOLGA). The politics of this logo is explored in the next section.

## **Can There Be A Feminist Ethnography?**

In Anthropology it is always the other woman, the native woman somewhere else, the woman who doesn't write, the !Kung woman, the Balinese woman, the National Geographic woman....exposed, pictured, brought home, and put into books. (Behar, 1996:1)

Feminist Anthropologists expressed their dissatisfaction with the androcentrism in the discipline and daily life with the publication of *Woman, Culture and Society* (Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974) and *Towards An Anthropology of Women*, (Reiter, 1975). Both anthologies were greatly influenced by the U.S. women's movement. "This book has its roots in the women's movement," wrote Rayna Reiter (1975:11) in her introduction. In *Woman, Culture and Society*, the authors hoped to correct the masculinist tradition in anthropology, in which women's lives, activities and interests had been largely ignored. This gap and invisibility was to be rectified by "the anthropological study of women" and through theoretical exploration of how "women are universally 'the second sex'" (Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974:1). The analysis of the universality of women's subordination was to be assessed through the varieties of "sexual asymmetry" in different cultures. The "Nature-Culture" debates also grew out of these anthologies in which it was pointed out that "sexual asymmetry" was a cultural fact, rather than the "nature of human societies" or a fact of nature, and that this asymmetry can be altered through human intervention (Ortner, 1974:67-88).

In *Towards An Anthropology of Women*, the authors sought to understand "the origins and development of sexism" and trace those origins in their many permutations and transformations. This meant challenging the "double male bias" in anthropology. In other words, this involved dealing with masculinist ideology in the discipline (such as what questions are asked, what issues are considered important, and how one collects and writes information) as well as "the potential male dominance in the field." For example, a feminist anthropologist's assumption that as

a group women are often subject to similar (but not the same) forms of male dominance, may lead the feminist anthropologist to ask how patriarchy (the system of male dominance) is experienced by a woman, whereas an anthropologist may not see it as an important issue. The project of challenging the trivialization, exclusion and misinterpretation of women's lives results in essays on a reinterpretation of the literature in physical anthropology, cultural evolution and kinship; the exploration of the origins of women's subordination through feminist (Simone de Beauvoir) and nonfeminist (Marx, Engels, Levi-Strauss and Freud) theories; and a revisioned focus on 'studying women' in the third world and Europe.

The call for *the anthropology of women* in the 1970s mushroomed into the anthropology of gender, or gender relations in comparative perspective (Moore, 1988:188). Women studying women was rearticulated in the 1980s as *studying gender*. Since the late 1980s, the limitations and dissatisfaction with the anthropological study of gender relations began being articulated by some feminist ethnographers. This discontent was primarily a dialogue (and in some cases a troubled dialogue) with the book *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). *Writing Culture* contains essays that seek to highlight the link between "the poetics and politics" of cultural anthropology and the maintenance of ethnographic authority. Although the collection acknowledges that the colonial encounter was a key factor in the creation of the authoritative-expert ethnographer, the book's key contributor, James Clifford, ended up disappointing and frustrating some feminist ethnographers. According to Deborah Gordon, experimental ethnography "relied too heavily on assumptions from Western critical theories," which was in turn used as the grounds for rejecting feminist works (Gordon, 1988:21). *Writing Culture* highlighted for anthropology the workings of power not only in the realm of fieldwork but also in the theoretical and political assumptions and strategies of writing. For example, the

relationship between the ethnographizing subject and the ethnographed subject in the final products of anthropological experience--texts/ethnographies was under scrutiny.

Lila Abu-Lughod called for "writing against culture" since she felt that *Writing Culture* excluded not only feminists but also "halfies" (persons with mixed cultural, biological and educational backgrounds) (Abu-Lughod, 1991:138).

According to Abu-Lughod, the boundaries and fundamental hierarchical distinction between Self and Other are still very much intact for the authors of *Writing Culture*, despite calls for textual innovations such as "letting others speak" through

"dialogical" or "polyphonic" strategies. Abu-Lughod is critical of feminist

anthropologists like Marilyn Strathern who is influenced by Clifford's work but misses why there is an "awkward relationship" between feminism and anthropology.

According to Strathern, there is an "awkward relationship" between anthropology and feminism despite an "interest in differences" (Strathern, 1987:12). In the case of

feminism, becoming conscious that woman is man's Other is fundamental for feminist self-discovery. Centering the conscious feminist Self in opposition to its

Other (Man or Patriarchy) is an act of distancing the feminist Self from an

oppressive Other. "...The goal is to restore to subjectivity a self dominated by the Other, there can be no shared experience with persons who stand for the Other"

(Strathern, 1987:288). On the other hand, in the case of anthropology, Strathern feels that anthropology deliberately maintains "distance and foreignness" with "affinity"

(participant-observation) and "the Other is not under attack. On the contrary, the

effort is to create a relationship with the Other." The ethnographer "must first

translate another's experience through his or her own and then render experience in the written word" (Strathern, 1987:288). In other words, the Anthropological Self

"can be used as a vehicle for representing the Other" and is in collaboration with rather than in opposition to its Other.

Abu-Lughod points out that Strathern seems to completely underplay the historical and current inequities in the Self-Other relationship in anthropology. Abu-Lughod claims Strathern can't quite grasp the awkwardness or tension between the Feminist Self and Anthropological Self, and it is probably hard for Strathern to explore more deeply because both Selves have been Western and/or white. The Feminist/Antropological Self as a potential oppressor (across nationality, race, class or sexuality) seems to have been missed by Strathern and many other feminist anthropologists (Abu-Lughod, 1991:140).

In the introduction to *Women Writing Culture*, Ruth Behar explores this awkwardness further when she says that "this book was born of a double crisis--the crisis in anthropology and the crisis in feminism" (Behar, 1995:3). According to Behar, the first crisis is marked by the "postmodern or textualist critique" of anthropology, "best exemplified by" *Writing Culture*. This challenge to the anthropological establishment came from within the academy ("fell squarely within academic territory") and was "the product of a limited-seating 'advanced seminar'" (Behar, 1995:3). The second crisis is marked by the critique of white, middle-class, heterosexual feminism by the authors of *This Bridge Called My Back* (Anzaldua and Moraga, 1983). This "emerged from outside the academy and yet entered the women's studies mainstream" and was a "challenge to the closed borders of that territory" (Behar, 1995:3).

Behar (like Deborah Gordon) acknowledges the important contributions made by *Writing Culture*, such as pointing out that anthropologists "write books and teach books" and have created a Western canon by "planting real people and places" (usually the non-West) in their books (Behar, 1995:10). *Writing Culture* has also questioned the processes and tropes of planting people by questioning objective and holistic accounts of homogeneous and static culture. However, Behar questions the

dismissal of women's accounts (on the grounds that they were not feminist enough or textually innovative) and the appropriation of the strategy of "personal voice" by women (once thought of as too subjective, but now rearticulated and valorized as reflexive and experimental when used by male ethnographers).

The feminist response to *Writing Culture*, Behar maintains, is accompanied by questions (raised in *This Bridge*) concerning "the distancing and alienating forms of self-expression that academic elitism encouraged." "If *Writing Culture's* effect on feminist anthropology was to inspire an empowering rage, the effect of *This Bridge*, on the other hand, was to humble us, to stop us in our tracks" (Behar, 1995:6). The authors of *This Bridge Called My Back* challenged the feminist othering of women. According to Behar, the initial one-sided concern of the feminist ethnographer/observer to find the origins of sexual inequality (in the 'field') to "explain and liberate Western women" is no longer adequate and continues to perpetuate the exclusion and erasure of the voices of "the objects of [the] ethnographic gaze." Behar concludes by stating that *Women Writing Culture* is written in multiple voices (as ethnographer, writer and community member), challenges the personal and public schism in anthropology, and attempts a "rebellious undoing of the classical boundary between observer and observed" (Behar, 1995:8).

### **These Natives Can Speak For Themselves**

The first time I noticed someone wearing a shirt saying "These Natives Can Speak For Themselves" was at an anthropology meeting in 1994. The slogan immediately caught my eye and very soon I learned that the shirt was sold by The Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists (SOLGA). My very mixed reactions to this slogan lead me to explore why SOLGA had decided to sell these shirts in the first place. I discovered that the shirts were produced specifically in reaction to a

confrontation between some members of SOLGA and a panel of anthropologists considered to be 'stars' in the establishment. On discovering, in the preliminary program of the 1992 AAA meetings, that there was a panel (by invitation only) on "AIDS and the Social Imaginary" organized by Paul Rabinow and Nancy Scheper-Hughes, many members of SOLGA "became concerned." This initial concern led to a series of conversations between SOLGA members, the panelists and the organizers that ended with much distrust, tension, and anger (especially for SOLGA members).

In the report published in the SOLGA newsletter, SOLGA Co-Chairs, Ralph Bolton and Mildred Dickerman state that the initial concern stemmed from the exclusion of participants who had done work on AIDS or who had been affected by AIDS. In other words, they (Bolton and Dickerman) asked: "where were the voices of the 'natives' in this session?" A brief conversation between Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Dickerman occurred where Scheper-Hughes maintained that this session was an informal discussion/dialogue between "outsiders" and "non-specialists." After this initial conversation, Scheper-Hughes sent Dickerman a copy of a syllabus of a course on AIDS, her talk and a letter cowritten with Paul Rabinow (a response to SOLGAs concerns). Subsequently, Dickerman requested that they include a commentator (someone with "long [term] involvement in AIDS research, and with knowledge of homophobia.."), specifically Bolton. Bolton "reluctantly agreed, concerned that he would be seen only as a token gay AIDS researcher." Scheper-Hughes and the other organizers agreed to "recognize him [Bolton] as the first audience from the floor."<sup>7</sup>

This initial polite exchange was followed by a tense and packed session.

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<sup>7</sup>This information is from the SOLGA (Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists) newsletter, under the special feature "The 1992 AAA Panel From Hell--AIDS and the Social Imaginary," February, 1993.

According to Bolton and Dickerman, Scheper-Hughes “charged that we wished to ‘silence’ the panel or the occurrence of the session” and stated in her opening remarks her problem with the idea “that only AIDS-affected people could conduct AIDS research and only gays could study gays.” SOLGA members, like Bolton and Dickerman, were angered by other developments in the session, such as the participants reading formal papers (versus the initial claim that this was an informal dialogue) and homophobic (“deeply offensive and condescending”) remarks by other participants (Bolton and Dickerman cite Rabinow’s opening comment: “my friend Michel Foucault died of AIDS.”).<sup>8</sup>

The exchange between some of the members of SOLGA and the ‘all star’ panel, as reported in the newsletter, in some ways parallels and intersects with the concerns of feminist anthropology in the 1970s. Lesbian and gay ethnographers have to deal with societal and institutional (including the discipline of anthropology) forms of exclusion, invisibility and pathologizing<sup>9</sup> as an Ethnographic-Self and in their research projects (Weston, 1993:340). According to Kath Weston, there were a few ethnographies that were written in the late 1960s, however, “by the 1990s ethnographic analyses of homosexual behavior and identity, “gender blending,”

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<sup>8</sup>This information is from the letter sent by Dickerman and Bolton (SOLGA Co-Chairs) to the AAA President (Annette Weiner) and Executive Director (John Cornman), January 19, 1993. This piece was printed in the SOLGA newsletter, under a special feature on “The 1992 AAA Panel From Hell--AIDS and the Social Imaginary,” February, 1993.

<sup>9</sup>Kath Weston refers to the epistemological roots of anthropology (and other related and coterminous disciplines such as sexology and psychology) within an existing Anglo-European culture that perpetuated and reproduced “stigmatized categories” of homosexual behaviors, identities and practices. Weston notes that earlier versions of ‘expert’ knowledge that perceived homosexuality as a “matter of individual pathology” (such as the medical and the psychological models) began to be challenged by scholars of “the social constructivist school in the 1970s.” Furthermore, Weston notes that the few anthropological works on homosexuality in the late 1960s arose within the context of a burgeoning lesbian and gay movement in the United States.



lesbian and gay male communities, transgressive sexual practices, and homosociality were flourishing" (Weston, 1993:339). Weston identifies some trends within this moment. (These patterns are situated within a matrix defined by the tension between the politics [explicit or tacit] of "breaking the silence" and the ongoing "legacy of silencing" within anthropology.) The glaring absence of same-sex relations, sexualities and gender ambiguity in anthropology has been met with the initial thrust of compensatory scholarship, empirical data gathering and documentation of that which was ignored, erased and rendered invisible. "...Lesbian/gay studies in anthropology has not been immune to the documentary impulse that brushes aside theory in the rush for 'facts'" (Weston, 1993:340). Thus, it has also meant the readopting and rearticulating of the "the salvage motif." This move has often resulted in what Weston refers to as "a form of ethnocartography" or "looking for evidence of same-sex sexuality and gendered ambiguity in 'other' societies" (Weston, 1993:341). This move parallels the feminist anthropologist's need to see "ourselves undressed" elsewhere. Michelle Rosaldo cautions against feminist practices in anthropology where,

we want to claim our sisters' triumphs as a proof of our worth, but at the same time their oppression can be artfully dissociated from our own, because we live with choice, while they are victims of biology. Women elsewhere are, it seems, the image of ourselves undressed, and the historical specificity of their lives and our own becomes obscured (Rosaldo, 1980:393).

The "savage slot"<sup>10</sup> was (and still is) very much intact even before the anthropological study of same-sex sexuality and gender ambiguity was allowed legitimate status in the discipline (i.e., past the medical and psychological models of thinking about same-sex sexuality as culturally constructed/patterned). However, in the 1990s, Weston notes "lesbian/gay studies in anthropology is currently going

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<sup>10</sup>See the section entitled Resisting the Savage Slot, discussed below in this chapter.

through a transition reminiscent of the shift from the anthropology of women to the anthropology of gender" (Weston, 1993:345) and "breaking the silence about homosexuality becomes equally problematic after scholars begin asking what counts as homosexuality in a transcultural context" (Weston, 1993:346). I would add that lesbian/gay studies in anthropology in the 1990s is also confronting the contemporary concerns of the blurred boundaries between the Self and Other. Most of this has emerged within the context of returning 'home,' where the borders between 'field' and 'home' or 'field' and 'academy' are also blurred and very often intersecting. These issues can be seen in Kath Weston's 1991 ethnography, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*.

In many ways Kath Weston's descriptive ethnography, with numerous interviews and life stories, stylistically resembles the traditional ethnographic genre. However, her project of looking at the contemporary American discourse of what constitutes a family and who gets to be part of 'legitimate' kinship, challenges many practices and ideologies in anthropology. Weston's endeavour of sketching a much-contested terrain of what 'family' means to gays and lesbians (specifically in the San Francisco Bay Area) and the invented schisms between "families of choice" versus "biological families" (based on the heterosexual institutions of: marriage and procreation, and therefore of 'blood') provides a powerful cultural commentary on heterosexism in and outside of the academy and American culture.<sup>11</sup>

Weston's ethnography creates a space fraught with ambivalence for the

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<sup>11</sup>Weston explores hegemonic understandings of what kinship/family has meant in mainstream culture, the ongoing exiling of lesbians and gay men from this particular understanding of kinship and how lesbian and gay men create and therefore 'choose' their own families and kinship networks. Weston also challenges the standards and theories used in kinship studies in anthropology. Weston's ethnography covers interconnected topics that include issues such as how lesbians and gay men form or 'choose' their families or come out to 'blood' relatives/family, parenting in lesbian/gay families, xenophobic policies and attitudes in the U.S. regarding lesbian and gay men.

researcher. She is a positioned subject and the lines between her academic writing and work, professional and personal lives, and audience often dissolve. She notes:

Everything around me seemed fair game for notes: one day I was living a social reality, the next day I was supposed to document it. Unlike anthropologists who have returned from the field to write ethnographies that contain accounts of reaching 'their' island or village, I saw no possibility of framing an arrival scene to represent the inauguration of my fieldwork, except perhaps by drawing on the novelty of the first friend who asked (with a sidelong glance), "Are you taking notes on this?" (Weston, 1991:14)

and

For me, doing fieldwork among gay and lesbian San Franciscans did not entail uncovering some "exotic" corner of my native culture but rather discovering the stuff of everyday life. (Weston, 1991:14)

### **Anthropological Identity**

The gap between engaging others where they are and representing them where they aren't, always immense but not much noticed, has suddenly become extremely visible. What once seemed only technically difficult, getting "their" lives into "our" works, has turned morally, politically, even epistemologically, delicate. The suffisance of Levi-Strauss, the assuredness of Evans-Pritchard, the brashness of Malinowski, and the imperturbability of Benedict now seem very far away. (Geertz, 1988:130)

The late 1960s and 1970s in American anthropology was marked by some movement to recognize a variety of things that the politics of colonialism facilitated: the 'study' of the Other, travel to distant places (mainly the colonies, many of whom were becoming ex-colonies by the 1960s), and travel grants and funding from private and state sponsors of a "global super-power," and recognized that there were (and still are) power inequalities between these Others and the anthropologist-Self.

Renato Rosaldo's caricature of the *Lone Ethnographer* is a myth-history of the evolution and insertion of the concept of culture, its collectors and performers within the imaginary of the classic monographs. Rosaldo writes:

Once upon a time, the Lone Ethnographer rode off into the sunset in search of “his native.” After undergoing a series of trials, he encounters the object of his quest in a distant land. There, he underwent his rite of passage by enduring the ultimate ordeal of “fieldwork.” After collecting “the data,” the Lone Ethnographer returned home and wrote a “true” account of “the culture. (Rosaldo, 1989:30)

The story of the Lone Ethnographer (or the Lone Ranger) and his/her various reincarnations and permutations is also about the making of the identity of the anthropological-Self or the privileged-I/Eye--an identity often unconsciously made in relation to the primitive-Self or Other-native/Self. The privileged-I was and is also made in relation to specific activities, conceptual frameworks and categories, and specific modes of self-fashioning in culture-writing and collecting. For example, the notion of culture as hermetically-sealed, time- and space-bound, and self-contained allowed for parallel constructions of *home* and *field* and the analyzing and representing ethnographer versus the performer of culture -- the native (informants included) who unconsciously (or consciously) provided raw data.

Though it may no longer be savvy to quote Malinowski, anthropology’s ‘founding father’ of fieldwork methods and anti-hero (especially since his diaries were released), I will do so---since I repeatedly encounter his legacy.

Unfortunately, the native can neither get outside his tribal atmospheres and see it objectively, nor if he could, would he have intellectual and linguistic means sufficient to express it. And so the Ethnographer has to collect objective data, such as maps, plans, genealogies, lists of possessions, accounts of inheritance, census of village communities. He has to study the behavior of the native, to talk with him under all sorts of conditions, and write down his words. (Malinowski, 1961:454)

Whether or not one rejects Malinowski’s blueprint, there have been occasions when anthropologists have uncritically adopted *authentic* native informants. This issue is raised by Narayan when she points out that natives trained in anthropology are sometimes viewed as the providers of a more authentic account. I would add that this is more likely to occur if native anthropologists followed the same tropes of classical

monographs. The Privileged-I evolved within a larger and earlier historical context of what Michel-Rolph Trouillot has called the "savage slot" (Trouillot, 1991). Trouillot notes:

Anthropology did not create the savage. Rather, the savage was the *raison d'être* of anthropology. (Trouillot, 1991:40)

### **Resisting the Savage Slot**

But anthropology is also rooted in an unequal power encounter between the West and the Third World which goes back to the emergence of bourgeois Europe, an encounter in which colonialism is merely one historical moment. (Asad, 1973:16)

I believe it is a mistake to view social anthropology in the colonial era as primarily an aid to colonial administration, or as the simple reflection of colonial ideology. I say this not because I subscribe to the anthropological establishment's comfortable view of itself, but because bourgeois consciousness, of which social anthropology is merely one fragment, has always contained within itself profound contradictions and ambiguities--and therefore the potentialities for transcending itself. (Asad, 1973:18)

In 1973, Talal Asad noted that it is no longer "a matter of dispute" that anthropology emerged as discipline during European colonial expansion and burgeoned as a profession towards the decline of European expansion, or that during this period "its efforts were devoted to a description and analysis--carried out by Europeans, for a European audience--of non-European societies dominated by European power" (Asad, 1973:15). However, despite this recognition, Asad maintains that the close relationship between anthropology and colonialism, and its historical and structural power imbalance between observer and observed (manifested in the practices of fieldwork), is often "trivialized or dismissed" or "not consider[ed] seriously."<sup>12</sup> Asad points out that this power imbalance and domination facilitate

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<sup>12</sup>Asad (1973:16) makes a specific reference to Victor Turner in his introduction to *Colonialism in Africa 1870-1960*, where Turner says that "thus yesterday's 'socialist' has become today's reactionary," and that "there is no point in special pleading or contentious argument; there are 'objective,' 'common sense' and

relatively easy access to the cultural and historical worlds of the colonized (anthropology's *original* Other) through a one-way, outsider-imposed intimate physical proximity--participant-observation.

Asad notes that:

The colonial power structure made the object of anthropological study accessible and safe--because of its sustained physical proximity between the observing European and the living non-European became a practical possibility. It made possible the kind of human intimacy on which anthropological fieldwork is based, but ensured that intimacy should be one-sided and provisional. (Asad, 1973:17)

Asad provides a powerful critique of romanticized notions of the ethnographer's quest for experience of other people's lives and reality, and his own claims to political neutrality. The claim to political neutrality is fundamentally tied to what and whose theories are used and what topics are considered worthwhile studying, and "the mode of perceiving and objectifying alien societies." These romanticized notions of fieldwork also valorize subjective experiences (of the anthropologist in the 'field' and his/her rendition of the experiences of the community observed) and one can trace their genealogies to anti-armchair anthropology--most explicitly and systematically propounded by 'the father of fieldwork methods' in the 1920s, Malinowski. The claims to political neutrality (or objectivity), Asad observes, also set up the 'bad guys' (the colonial administrators, missionaries, business people, travellers, amateurs, and traders) versus the 'good guys' (the professional anthropologists), where the anthropologists were "accusingly called 'a Red,' 'a Socialist,' or an 'anarchist' by administrators and settlers."

Further,

If he was sometimes accusingly called 'a Red,' 'a Socialist,' or 'an anarchist' by administrators and settlers, did this not merely reveal one facet of the hysterically intolerant character of colonialism as a system, with which he chose nevertheless to live *professionally* at peace?

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'professional standards' in anthropology."

(Asad, 1973:18)

Asad's critique of this "bourgeois consciousness" in anthropology, whereby the anthropologist is at once (with "contradictions and ambiguities") complicit with colonial structural and individual privilege, and sometimes an uncritical caretaker/protector of alien cultures (or an underdog) also provides the space or "potentialities for transcending itself" (Asad, 1973:19).

In a parallel essay, almost twenty years later, Michel-Rolph Trouillot addresses the possibility of the "potentialities of transcendence" for anthropology in the 1990s (Trouillot, 1991). According to Trouillot, the multiple challenges to anthropology in the late twentieth century and the subsequent mixed response to the textualist/postmodern critique of anthropology, "require an archaeology of the discipline and a careful re-examination of its implicit premises" (Trouillot, 1991:17). Trouillot notes that the postmodern/textualist response has been "the most vocal and direct response to these challenges." Furthermore, Trouillot points out that the "discursive fields" (or "symbolic fields") that once made and now houses anthropology need to be excavated and critically interpreted. Trouillot places anthropology and its roots in a context that goes beyond and historically deeper than European colonial expansion. In other words, Trouillot maintains that one needs to connect the politics, ideologies and conditions that made Europe (or invented Christian Europe from Christendom), that created the Renaissance and Enlightenment, and that created the contemporary West. A fundamental requirement in the invention of Europe and the West is the creation of the Other. The Other evolves in this symbiotic equation as the Savage, to be discovered, understood, eliminated, assimilated, domesticated or represented. The savage slot thus existed prior to the emergence of the modern discipline of anthropology, however, the historical inequalities between the West and the rest has facilitated the evolution and

professionalization of modern anthropology as a primary 'caretaker' and representor of the savage slot.

Anthropology came to fill the savage slot in the trilogy order-utopia-savagery, a trilogy which preceded anthropology's institutionalization and gave it continuing coherence in spite of intradisciplinary shifts. This trilogy is now in jeopardy. (Trouillot, 1991:40)

The trilogy that Trouillot mentions refers to a contradictory relationship, "symbolic and material," where European/Western economic and political expansion and ideological warfare informed, justified and perpetrated one another's projects. It justified the colonial administration's "management of the subjugated peoples," traveller's accounts, colonial surveys, ethnographic reports, "fictional utopias" in literature, European notions "of an alleged state of nature," 19th century armchair anthropology, 20th century participant-observation, and the discourse of 18th century Philosophy. This trilogy did not always present a homogeneous picture of European/Western hegemony. This was so because, on the one hand, the savage's world was either seen as utopic, Edenic, pristine and untouched by capitalism and western alienation (represented and justified by the trope of "salvage anthropology") or barbaric, chaos/disorder to be rescued or eliminated from or assimilated into the moral order of the West.

This "trilogy which is now in jeopardy" provides an opening "to attack frontally" the imaginary and political practices of sustaining the savage slot, "to uncover its ethical roots and its consequences, and to find a better anchor for an anthropology of the present, an anthropology of the changing world and its irreducible histories." Trouillot calls for breaking the silence in anthropology to "destroy the savage slot." He points out that postmodernist anthropology came close to reading "the internal tropes of the savage slot, no doubt a useful exercise in spite of its potential for self-indulgence," (Trouillot, 1991:40) but failed to recognize, address or destroy the processes ("discursive fields") that allow for the making of the



slot. In this way, Trouillot suggests, postmodern anthropology ends up "morosely" perpetuating "the empty slot."

To be sure, one could reinvent the savage, or create new savages within the West itself--solutions of this kind are increasingly appealing. (Trouillot, 1993:35)

Objective or even subjective reportage (via paradigms such as: functionalist, political economy, interpretive, reflexive and various permutations) still tends to split an ethnographic-Self (who goes somewhere, usually outside of her/his day-to-day life, who always writes about some other community's day to day life) and a personal-Self (the day-to-day life issues, joys or struggles inside or outside of their profession). The ethnographic-Self as problematized by Narayan has become a more plural or hybrid Self. She or he occupies and is aware of her/his multiple locations: sometimes between and across race and citizenship; and across different writing genres (doing analytical essays or telling personal narratives); across lives "touched by life-experiences and swayed by professional concerns." This is an important shift or recognition in anthropological practice and theory-building. The plural and hybrid ethnographic-Self potentially rejects the earlier ethnographer-Self, the dominant, authoritative, unified Self of the Lone Ranger with the Privileged-I. The privileged-I embodies a Self that is individualistic, nonrelational and founded upon hierarchical oppositions. It is remarkable that the Lone Ethnographer contradictorily claims both universality and particularity; universality with the Metropole-Self as the standard and claims of neutrality and authority and particularity through examples of the personal day-to-day lives of their 'objects of study.' Claims of neutrality and authority (by the Lone Ethnographer and his loyalists) were and are based on politics and projects that dis-locate and distance. For instance, the ethnographer's personal and political lives are sometimes completely separate. Take, for example, a reflexive classic monograph, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*, where Paul Rabinow's self-

making in the ethnography is marked by the tropes of western man's alienation (Rabinow, 1977). Rabinow's confessions/reflections give some body (and visibility) to him as a beneficiary of U.S. postcolonial/neocolonial hegemony. However, this body is alienated/dis-embodied from an engagement with ongoing U.S. progressive anti-colonial and anti-racist activism/politics occurring at the time he was completing his research and writing.

### **Alternatives to the Monopoly on Native Discourse**

The legacy of the privileged-I/Eye, through silence and the preservation of the savage slot, continues in new ways. A point of entry into challenging the savage slot, Trouillot suggests, is "an epistemological reassessment of the historical subject" (Trouillot, 1991:40). This would possibly entail giving up the "monopoly on native discourse," becoming and recognizing oneself as a situated intellectual and creating a space for stigmatized voices speaking in the first person (Trouillot, 1991:40).

The historically built-in theory and practice that splits privileged-I from the 'objects of study' makes the possibility of resisting the savage slot and/or activist-anthropology an uphill task. The ethnographic-Self is still the standard where writing, reading and debating is housed (often narrowly within the walls of the academic/metropole establishment). So although anthropologists recognize or minimally embrace hybridity, and supposedly the "savage has vanished," the savage slot still remains.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot writes, "anthropologists to this day keep telling both undergraduates and lay readers that their practice is useful to better understand 'ourselves,' but without ever spelling out exactly the specifics of this understanding, the utopias behind this curiosity turned profession" (Trouillot, 1991:28). Trouillot notes that the curiosity and motivation to "capture human diversity," understand the

Self through the detour of the Other, and make the strange familiar is not all that innocent.

It is then easier to see and feel Narayan's discomfort at being labeled Native when she 'studies' people with whom she generally doesn't keep company. A point that Narayan doesn't consider is that the totalizing authority to represent all of a particular culture, community or peoples, that was once presumed by the regular anthropologist, was uncritically passed on to the native anthropologist. This authority was often presumed since anthropologists were describing 'simple' societies. James Clifford's work has systematically described this phenomenon and has demystified this authority.

In *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, Kamala Visweswaran points out that "Self writing about like selves has thus far not been on the agenda of experimental ethnography. To accept 'native' authority is to give up the game" (Visweswaran, 1994:32). Although James Clifford's essay has cast some doubt on the ethnographic authority of the academic fieldworker-theorist and his/her "intense personal experience and scientific analysis" of participant-observation an uncritical anti-essentialist stance would suspect all authority of experience. An uncritical and unspecific anti-essentialist position ignores the fact that political identities have physical dimensions and consequences, where one's writing, politics, identities and projects can be about empowerment and counter-hegemony. It is a place where my/our voice is in the first person or perhaps autobiographical, and committed to fighting injustices: injustices that are personal and collective and injustices that affect me/us as individuals, alliances and coalitions. It is a place where ethnographic writing can be both for and about communities (one lives in) and is constantly creating. As I write about experiences of patriarchy, I hope to be accountable to people beyond the academy. This includes myself and those who are actively creating

plural communities of resistance.

### **Arrivals and Departures**

"You couldn't be researching something like that! Who would research something like that? There must be a mistake," said Mr. Ghosh, a legal and office assistant to Barrister Sanyal. Yes, a mistake had been made. After researching in Mr. Sanyal's law library, a library that was handed down to him from generations of lawyers in his family, I had found some literature on cases that dealt with Section 377 (the anti-sodomy statute set up in British India). The procedure at this law office (like many other offices, libraries and archives in Calcutta) was that when I found something that I wanted to copy, I would note down the page numbers and take the material to be copied to Mr. Ghosh. Mr. Ghosh would be in charge of copying the material, which would then be available for pick up and payment the next day. When I came back the next day to pickup my copying, I realized that Mr. Ghosh had copied cases pertaining to Section 376 (statutes regarding rape). Mr. Ghosh seemed a little concerned that I was researching such an 'unpleasant topic' like rape, but when I tried to tell him that I was really interested in Section 377 cases he was even more resistant. "Are you sure?" Mr. Ghosh continued. Finally, I told him that ideally I would like to do a comparison of the two sections (376 and 377) for my research. "Yes, that might be interesting; Section 377 is very controversial. Now where did you say you are studying?" he queried skeptically. The next day Mr. Ghosh had copies of Section 377 ready for me to pick up.

In many ways my dissertation topic and research questions are taboo subjects. Section 377 provided me a small opening into the even more taboo topic of female sexuality. The normative naturalness of heteropatriarchy was so deeply imbedded in people's psyches, that simply publicly naming or identifying it seemed like a difficult

project. As an Indian woman in India it was also taboo for me to ask questions about sexuality.

In attempting to make the familiar seem strange, I began my dissertation by articulating a notion of experience that was not legitimate, but has gradually been articulated in different ways since the 1970s. The kind of experience I had in mind would connect the academic process of writing, one's life (public and personal), and the communities one lives and works in (temporarily or semi-permanently), studies, or represents. In other words, I wondered where participant-observation would fit in when I wanted to talk about how my peers and I had learned to become Indian women? And why is this kind of experiencing less legitimate? Why is this kind of experience not recognized as the subtext of ethnographies? After all, the ethnographer's personal and professional experiences and identities influence her/his research. Ruth Behar has noted that:

As a student I was taught to maintain the same strict boundary Malinowski had kept between his ethnography and his autobiography. But I'd reached a point where these forms of knowing were no longer so easily separated. (Behar, 1996:19)

Further, Behar has described the genre of the essay as:

An amorphous, open-ended, even rebellious genre that desegregates the boundaries between self and other...(Behar, 1996:20)

Behar's notion of the essay as a genre that can be used to "desegregate the boundaries between the self and other" is a useful model for my dissertation research in which I can connect autobiography and ethnography, home and the field, and the politics of (my)self and social issues. The three events that I examine in my dissertation follow the format of the essay as a genre where the ethnographic Self and observed Other meet at several points to critically examine the events. Further, I see my dissertation contributing to anthropology as a way of doing ethnographic work that is not detached, where like Weston and Behar one can critically connect

one's professional and personal lives.

In addition to the issue of what kind of experience, participation and/or subjective knowledge counts, the issue of deconstructing patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality is also still a taboo topic in many arenas in India, the United States and in academic anthropology. By describing and analyzing highly visible national events (Chapters 3, 4 and 6) I have sought to make interconnections between taboo topics (at home, the field and work), issues of social inequality and injustice, the stuff of daily life (and academic life) and anthropological methods/theories, and to interpret *experiences* (including my own) in a more complex way.

Further, by participating in a dissertation and writing process that is not politically detached I hope to join other anthropologists who are building bridges, coalitions and alliances beyond academia, with multiple communities, to address issues of social inequalities, exclusion, marginalization and social justice. Most of all, I hope to be accountable to more than one community.

## **Chapter Three**

### **The "Chakka" Who Was Not "Pukka" The Politics of Section 377**

In this chapter I examine and deconstruct the language, meanings and underlying presuppositions of a colonial sexual code, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code,<sup>1</sup> that is being contested by a human rights group<sup>2</sup> in post/neo colonial India. I do this in order to demonstrate how supporters of the code defend a colonial sexual code as Indian tradition, and in turn position the civil rights of gay men and prisoners as frivolous Western mimicry. The resistance of the State to removing the anti-sodomy statue and allowing distribution of condoms in prisons represents its investment in maintaining and imposing normative sexuality. This maintenance represents the modern postcolonial state's commitment to tenets espoused by the colonial state (in its construction of empire and imperial identity) and to modernity (in the construction of the nation and national identity). And finally, I demonstrate in my dissertation how the modern state's explicit management and reproduction of normative sexuality via gay men represents the implicit control of female identity and sexuality.

I first look at the code's conceptual apparatus in relation to religious, cultural, legal and political developments in Britain and British India. The re-

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<sup>1</sup> Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code: Of Unnatural Offences reads: "Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine" (Ranchhodda and Thakore, 1992:431).

<sup>2</sup>The human rights group is the AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (ABVA) or the AIDS Anti-Discrimination Movement.

mapping of Victorian sexual-political agendas and the consolidation of empire in colonial India is then investigated in relation to the construction of colonial masculinity (through the category of the Pukka Sahibs), femininity (through the category of the Memsahibs) and thus respectable/normative sexuality. I suggest that what is being preserved by the modern postcolonial state, and by certain individuals, in the name of authenticity, tradition and nature is a contradictory continuation of imperial-nationalist policies. Furthermore, the conceptual apparatus of Section 377 and the state's resistance to changing a colonial artifact of sexual/cultural domination represents to me the state's (colonial and postcolonial) investment in normative sexuality. Compulsory heterosexuality as tradition provides a critical avenue for the post/neo colonial state to claim modernity by not losing its national identity and cultural tradition. As Nicholas Dirks notes:

Colonialism continues to live on in ways that perhaps we have only begun to recognize....Despite decolonization, certain destinies and identities seem fixed, while others seem chaotic, disorderly, unfixed. Colonialism is coming back to haunt "new nations," where shifting identities and precarious polities are anchored against the modern by the reinvention of forms of tradition that too often clearly betray the traces of a colonial past. (Dirks, 1992:23)

### **Ye Aidus Kya Hota Hai?**

For years India has been assigned the dubious reputation of being explosive, or, specifically, population explosive. Since 1990 India has been considered to be a time bomb, an epicenter, in relation to the AIDS/HIV pandemic. With a population of 900 million (second only to China), India is in the spotlight in a continent that includes seventy percent of the world's



population. The discourse of AIDS/HIV has implicitly and explicitly drawn in and intertwined discussions of morality, sexuality, gender expectations, culture, tradition and responsibility. The discourse embodies the ideologies of institutions of surveillance and punishment, namely the police, the jails and the legal system. The discourse of the AIDS/HIV explosion has targeted certain groups that includes: women, prostitutes, economically disprivileged persons, self-identified gay men, men who have sex with men,<sup>3</sup> and I.V. drug users.

One day while I was walking down Park Street (in Calcutta), I overheard a man ask a bystander about a mini-bus advertisement "Ye aidus kya hota hai?" or "what does this aidus mean?" He was curious about the advertisement on the bus about AIDS, which he pronounced as "aidus." Condom advertisements in the 1990s are not just about the population explosion, such as "After Two Declare" (the advertiser using cricket terminology to promote the two-children-should-be-enough-policy) but also about the dangers of "aidus." The recent Kama Sutra condom advertisements with Pooja Bedi<sup>4</sup> in seductive poses inscribe new meanings onto a contemporary cultural climate of 'no sex please, we are postcolonials.' The state-sponsored ideology is on the one hand, sexually repressive and conservative (i.e., sex only after marriage) and generally avoids any talk of sex. It is, on the other hand, utilitarian (i.e., dominated by

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<sup>3</sup>Men having sex with men (MSM) is used by activists to distinguish between homosexual behaviors versus identity. For example, there are many heterosexual men (married and unmarried) who engage in "homosexual activity" but do not self-identify as gay. For many MSM's homosexual activity is sometimes viewed as play or dealing with excess discharge.

<sup>4</sup>Actress and model.

development ideology to control population growth, supposedly for the good of the world and India) and there is explicit talk about having sex and using condoms. The new advertisements add mass-produced glamour and desire to this conservative/development ideology.

Section 377 first came to my attention when a human rights group in India, the ABVA (The AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan or the AIDS Anti-Discrimination Movement), challenged Section 377 vis-a-vis the government's policy on condom distribution in jails. The discovery and rise of AIDS/HIV in India's largest prison, Tihar Jail, triggered heated debates among prison personnel, policy makers and activists of all persuasions. A survey coordinated by Indian Medical Association President Dr. K.K. Aggarwal, documented that two thirds of Tihar prisoners have participated in 'homosexual activity.' This finding resulted in the demand (by some medical doctors and activists) that condoms be distributed to all prisoners as part of a basic HIV prevention policy. Resistance by many agents of the state to condom distribution was justified on the grounds that it would encourage a bigger 'crime,' known only in the West (read: homosexual sexual activity), this reaction further catalyzed the debates concerning India's colonial anti-sodomy statute.

Tihar Jail was built to house 2,000 prisoners but currently houses 8,000 individuals. Kiran Bedi, a popular, well-known Inspector General of prisons in Delhi, claimed that she could find better ways to deal with AIDS in prisons than by distributing condoms among prisoners. Official refusal to allow condom distribution in Tihar on the grounds that it would be equivalent to legalizing homosexual activity was followed by a petition filed by lawyer and President of

the Family Conciliation Service Center, Janak Raj Jai, supportive of the official position. This ultimately sparked off the legal battle against Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code.<sup>5</sup> Janak Raj Jai, a socialist who was jailed during Indira Gandhi's Emergency,<sup>6</sup> claimed that Mahatma Gandhi would have been upset if homosexuality were to be de-criminalized. He also stated that during Gandhiji's (Mahatma Gandhi's) lifetime AIDS wasn't around and "male white fluid" was not wasted.<sup>7</sup>

Inspector General Bedi claimed that "the number of homosexuals in jail is very small and the jail is too crowded for their acts to go unnoticed...we just sort out the gays by giving them medical and psychiatric help" (Trikone, 1995:9). Her solution, if forced by the courts to provide condoms in jails, would be to separate homosexuals and heterosexuals. "We will greet all new arrivals at a special reception desk with the query: 'would you prefer a gay room or an ordinary cell, please?'" (Trikone, 1995:10). Bedi's solution was echoed by Janak Raj Jai's demand "that suspected homosexual prisoners should be segregated and neon lights be used in the wards during night hours..."

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<sup>5</sup>The Indian Penal Code was established in the 1860s by the British Raj.

<sup>6</sup>A state of emergency was declared by the Indira Gandhi government in June 1975. The Emergency spanned 21 months, and during this time press censorship was imposed and leaders of opposition parties were jailed. The Emergency ended in 1977 with the electoral defeat of Indira Gandhi.

<sup>7</sup>From conversations with activist Anuja Gupta. Anuja reported on the Section 377 trial at the 1996 United Nations Tribunal in New York.

## **No Sex Please, We're Postcolonials**

*I was taking a walk with a friend through Nehru Park. We were talking when two policemen came, took me aside and asked me to give them my watch and gold chain. They said they would take us to the police station and punish us. I was very scared. My only thought was that they can take anything they want so long as they leave me alone. If they had taken me to the police station they would have raped me. They kept repeating that they will beat me up and sodomize me. I got really scared and gave them what I had in my pocket - Rs.200 and my watch. Then they asked me to come back next month with more money. I knew my friend was also scared - which is why he just kept quite.*

(From a conversation with Manohar, a resident of New Delhi)

*One evening around 8 o'clock I was waiting outside Nehru Park when I noticed a bunch of boys who came running out shouting that the cops were here and that they had caught somebody. Although I was hesitant, since I could run the risk of being molested, raped or beaten up by our police, I decided to go ahead and find out what was going on. I saw two uniformed cops armed with sten-guns [sub-machine guns] where one of them had grabbed a young boy by the scruff of his neck and was violently shaking him. Both the cops smelled strongly of liquor and neither was wearing his ID badge. I casually asked the cops what was going on...they were really surprised to see me walk up to them ....especially a woman...and furthermore inquire about their actions. One of the cops said that he had been chasing the boy who was doing something dirty and unnatural and was arresting him under Section 377. It's quite common, as you know, how these cops misuse the law, so I asked them further about what exactly the boy had done. The police, hesitantly, said "vo sucking kar raha tha" ("he was sucking").*

*I told the policeman that "sucking" was not a crime under 377 and even if the boy was sucking where was the guy he was sucking. It was pretty clear that the cops had made up the charges to potentially sexually harass and blackmail the boy. The police were amazed that I continued to question them and visibly became more uncomfortable. The last thing he said to me was, "but Madam, you can't do such dirty things here, this is a public place. And no wonder AIDs is spreading." After getting shoved around some more with some verbal abuses the boy was let go.*

(From a conversation with Anuja Gupta, activist.)

Most urban public spaces in cities such as Calcutta and Delhi are symbolically and literally occupied by men. Stores, government offices and businesses are owned and ‘manned’ by them; taxis, cars, cycles and scooters are driven by them; if the traffic is not that hectic, some urinate in public;<sup>8</sup> and if they are unemployed they sit around in packs near a paan shop or a dhaba smoking cigarettes or bidis.<sup>9</sup> This is not to suggest that women aren’t around in public spaces. But women occupy a disproportionately smaller percentage of public space in cities even though we comprise approximately fifty percent of the population. Generally, if women are in public spaces, they are usually with a man or in a group (with other women and/or men).

The events narrated in the above conversations are not unusual incidents in urban India. The first incident involved a lower middle-class, English-speaking man and a police officer. In the second incident, it is important to note that the woman confronting the police was middle-class, English-educated and urban. These and other events were narrated to me and sometimes to audiences by activists (women, men, homosexual, heterosexual and lesbian) at seminars and meetings. Both of the events related above represent an encroachment in male public space affecting those of a lower economic class and stigmatized sexual identity.

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<sup>8</sup>Public bathrooms are generally hard to find however it is uncommon to see middle-to upper-class men urinating in public.

<sup>9</sup>Paan shops are stores that sell paan (betel leaves with assorted fillings). Paan is often eaten after meals as a breath freshener or digestive. Many people are addicted to chewing paan as well. Dhabas are small cafes found all over India. Bidis are indigenous cigarettes: tobacco rolled inside special leaves and smoked without filters.

Male mobility and access to public space is also a prerogative of gay men and MSMs. Often parks are the preferred spots or 'major cruising zones' for gay men who usually do not have private space in their homes. Such 'cruising spots' are popular sites for lower middle class heterosexual couples as well.

However, along with this 'access' to public space comes arbitrary police harassment, extortion and blackmail. For example, in 1992 there was a planned initiative by the Delhi police to arrest homosexuals or potentially gay men under a "clean up" the parks campaign (from a conversation with Ravi Malhotra, activist in New Delhi). Plainclothes policemen would hang out at parks (especially at the popular cruising spots like Nehru Park, Buddha Gardens, Palika Bazaar, Jantar Mantar or South Extension)<sup>10</sup> and approach men and invite them for coffee and a walk. If they accepted these solicitations, they were arrested and taken to a nearby police vehicle. Eighteen men were arrested in three days, and at a press conference the police released their names and work addresses.

The police did not use Section 377 to justify these arrests, rather, they invoked Sections 92 and 93 of the Delhi Police Act for public nuisance. According to activists Anuja Gupta and Debanuj Dasgupta, Section 377 has generally not been used by the police. But with the publicity that the court case to repeal Section 377 has received, the police misuse it as yet another weapon of harassment. Also, prior to learning about Section 377, the police regularly used their existing arsenals of harassment, including: illegal arrests, rape, extortion, and blackmail. In many ways challenging Section 377 has provided much more

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<sup>10</sup>Different neighborhoods in New Delhi.

symbolic value to gay men and their allies.

### **The "Chakka"**

Street level perception, though, lumps homosexuality with all other types of alternate sexuality. Therefore the eunuch, transvestite, transsexual and homosexual are chakkas. This term can and is often used in threatening situations by homophobic persons and hustlers. (Bombay Dost, 1990:20)

It was Wednesday morning in Calcutta at the Naz Trust office. I decided to explore the symbolic value of the challenge to Section 377 with two gay men who are activists in the arena of sexual health and psychology (specifically for gay men in Calcutta). Both are in charge of coordinating a non governmental organization (the Naz Trust). One of the issues I ask Vivek and Sayeed about is how the term "chakka" is used to verbally assault gay men.

**Vivek:** *"In today's culture there is a lot of antagonism directed against hijras and this is transferred onto gay men. A lot of abusive terms are borrowed from the hijra community<sup>11</sup> and changed into derogatory words for hijra and gay men."*

**Suparna:** "I guess if they encounter anything that appears (to them) as ambiguous or if they see any deviation from looking like a girl or boy it's hard to handle it without verbal assaults."

**Vivek:** *"Yes, also in Hindu numerology the triangle pointing*

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<sup>11</sup>The "hijras are a religious community of men who dress and act like women" and "undergo an operation in which their genitals are removed." Serena Nanda, *Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, pp. xv, Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1990.

*up symbolizes the male and the number 3. The triangle pointing down or with its apex pointing downward is female and also the number 3. When the two are superimposed or joined you get number 6 and gender ambiguity. "*

**Suparna:** "Is this what some numerologists or Hindu scholars refer to as the joining of prakriti (nature) and sanskriti (culture) or prakriti (nature/woman) and purush (reality/man)?"

**Vivek:** *"Yes, that's another way of looking at it. You also get a state of androgyny at number 6, or chakka, which may be how hijras see the category as symbolic. This word is now used derogatorily against gays, who are often understood as hijras....especially gay men or men engaging in homosexual behaviors who like to be penetrated....it's equated with being castrated ....like a hijra ....like a woman..."*

**Suparna:** "The numerology theory sounds great but do you think that homophobes are that smart or creative enough to come up with that?"

**Vivek:** *"Often men who penetrate are considered still okay. They are still the purush or manly...it's the people who get penetrated - men, boys, hijras and women-- who are weaker and not real men."*

**Suparna:** "So that's why the cops carry on raping boys and men (of course they never have a problem when they rape a woman or girl) in the cruising areas? I



mean, they feel okay about their actions, even though they've just had sex with a male, but make a big show about 'unnatural' and 'dirty' acts of the one being penetrated"

**Sayed:** *"Why just the police?...Indian men in general! They all are married but they like to penetrate men and boys too on the side. This still maintains their mardangi...masculinity..."*

**Suparna:** "Yes, you mean like the popular male saying-- '...with the wife it's duty time and with the boys it's fun time'..."

**Sayed:** *"The cops here in Cal, when they do the rounds of the parks or the usual cruising grounds, they don't use 377 to arrest. The guys who are familiar with it are usually the gay guys who get generally nervous or apprehensive around the police."*

**Suparna:** "Well most people look a little uncomfortable and nervous when the police decide to give them trouble."

**Sayed:** *"So the cops use public nuisance or indecency as the grounds to harass or charge people with. So if a couple (gay or heterosexual) is sitting too close or in a dimly lit area in the evening, the cops will give them trouble. We just seem to have a problem with sexuality in general. Heterosexuality is so normative that it is unseen, invisible and neutral. Marriage allows for this invisibility. In this way marriage becomes an identity, being the way things are, or duty. The cover of marriage shields any talk of a heterosexual identity or activity, so one can only imagine the problems lesbian or gay identities pose for cops and/or the majority culture."*

**Suparna:** "Yes, the overt articulation of a heterosexual identity is still a novelty

in India. So imagining a modern gay or lesbian identity is unimaginable. When I meet friends from high school and I ask them: what they are doing? they answer: 'I'm married.' They say this even if they are in school or have a job somewhere. Or when they ask me the same question and I say I am working on my dissertation, they reiterate: 'NO, what are you doing?' Meaning are you married...or the holder of the seemingly implicit normative sexual identity? One probably does not encounter this as much with men."

**Sayed:** *"As men, we too have this pressure--but we can get away with it a little more. But once they realize I am gay, most heterosexuals tell me that penetration from the back is unclean and unnatural. Penetration from the front is the way it should be and has always been....but then what about the fact that fluids and substances also come out of the woman's vagina?"*

**Suparna:** "Well, women have not been made to feel too comfortable or safe about their bodies. Our bodies are considered unclean and sometimes dangerous. But it sounds to me like anal penetration is viewed with much fear and disgust, because substances that come out of the anus are considered unclean and polluted. Interestingly enough, substances coming out of the vagina have also been considered unclean, dangerous and polluting. I was reprimanded as a teenager by an aunt when she discovered that I had been in a temple when I had my period. Another aunt, who is a medical doctor, was asked to sleep on the floor by her husband (who is a gynecologist!) when she had her period. But what is constructed as dirty and dangerous needs to be controlled, domesticated and subjugated...."

The conversation with Vivek and Sayeed reflects the value placed on

heterosexual procreation and the phallus in defining normative sexuality (which is often seen as invisible and natural). However, the issue that many activists and gay men don't address is the unconscious and conscious importance placed on the phallus and the implications of this emphasis for female sexuality. On the one hand, the only place women have is within procreation (as mothers and wives) and in relation to the phallus. On the other hand, what is seen as not-procreative (and thus unnatural behaviour and identity) is seen in terms of purely as sexual or desire-based activity, such as homosexual sex engaged in by gay men or MSMs. The latter activity too is seen in relation to the phallus. Despite the fact that there is no reference to female sexuality, Section 377 has been used against women who have wished to live as long-term lovers or friends (*maitri karar*) in their adult lives. It has also been used against those same women who have tried to apply for marriage licenses in civil courts. These specific cases are discussed in Chapter 6. The different forms of domination of female sexuality through this invisibility are explored in Chapters 4 and 6.

### **The AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (ABVA) or the AIDS Anti-Discrimination Movement**

The ABVA is a non governmental organization (NGO) working on issues related to human rights of people with HIV/AIDS. Their activities include protests against discriminatory policies of the Indian government and administration, the medical establishment and international bodies such as the World Bank and W.H.O. The ABVA has campaigned and demonstrated against discrimination faced by target groups in India such as women in the prostitution

industry, professional blood donors, gay men, I.V. drug users, immigrants and travelers.

In the midst of the controversy over condom distribution in Bihar, the existing anti homosexual sentiment via Section 377, antipathy towards HIV-positive persons and police harassment of lower income women and men, the ABVA filed a case against the Indian Government.<sup>12</sup> Extortion, blackmail, sexual violence and harassment by the police in public places directed against women and men, especially those belonging to working class and lower middle class backgrounds, in public places has a long history in India. The current context surrounding Section 377 also has a tradition of police and military surveillance and harassment directed against prostitutes, women who are assumed to be 'sexually immoral, men who have sex with men, and gay men. Moreover, the battle over condom distribution and the spread of HIV/AIDS has provided a forum for the discussion of homosexuality. These discussions of homosexuality have focused primarily (if not solely) on the practices of gay men or men who have sex with men in India. Sakhis (discussed in Chapter 6) and/or lesbian identity/sexuality is completely overlooked and invisible in this discourse.

On 14 April, 1994, the ABVA filed a petition against the High Court of Delhi,<sup>13</sup> directed towards the following bodies: the Union of India, the Delhi

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<sup>12</sup>This petition and campaign has received support from several Asian human rights groups including, Action for AIDS (Singapore), Arambh (Delhi, India), F.A.C.T.(Thailand), GAPPA (International), KKLGN (Indonesia), The Library Fund (Philippines), The Naz Project (U.K.), Pink Triangle (Malaysia), Sakhi (Delhi, India), Pravartak (Calcutta, India), Shakti (U.K.) and Trikone (U.S.).

<sup>13</sup>The petition reads: "A writ petition under Articles 226 and 227 of the Constitution of India challenging the constitutional validity of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code of 1908 and for the issuance of a writ in the nature of

Administration, the Inspector General of Prisons, the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO), the Superintendent of Tihar Jail and the District and Sessions Judge.<sup>14</sup> The ABVA requested the following: that Section 377 be deemed unconstitutional, illegal and void and thus be repealed; that steps be taken to prevent the segregation and isolation of prisoners identified as homosexual and/or suffering from the AIDS/HIV virus or "...suspected to have participated in consensual anal intercourse;" that condoms be made available, accessible and free of cost to Tihar prisoners at their dispensary without the threat or fear of persecution for requesting condoms; that disposable syringes be used at the Tihar dispensary; and, finally, that jail officials regularly consult with the National AIDS Commission (NACO).

Because of numerous delays caused by changes of the overseeing judge, this case is still being pursued in the courts by the ABVA. In the next section, I explore some of the underlying meanings and historical contexts of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code.

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mandamus certiorari, prohibition or any writ direction or order directing the respondents to take appropriate measures in order to prevent the spread of the disease known as AIDS and the targeting/segregation of certain groups or individuals." ABVA v.s. Union of India etc., pg. 2, 1994.

<sup>14</sup>Petition of the ABVA, pg. 2, 1994.

## **Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code: Of Unnatural Offences**

**Section 377: Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.**

**Explanation.-Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section.**

**Comment.-This section is intended to punish the offense of sodomy, buggery and bestiality. The offense consists in a carnal knowledge committed against the order of nature by a person with a man, or in the same unnatural manner with a woman, or by a man or woman in any manner with an animal.**

(Ranchhoda and Thakore, 1992:431)

On my first reading of Section 377, I was particularly struck by the language, and dissonances it produced in me. The classification "Unnatural Offences" can quite obviously and quickly lead one to believe that this must be about taboo sexuality, namely permutations of sexuality that was non marital and non heterosexual. In a global and local climate that institutionalizes and enforces marriage and patriarchal heterosexuality, this deduction would not be terribly hard to reach. But what do such terms as "carnal knowledge," "carnal intercourse," "against the order of nature," "nature," "buggery," "sodomy," "voluntary" and "bestiality" mean in post/neo colonial India? Why is it assumed that homosexuality is unnatural and homosexual acts are criminal offences in postcolonial India? What is the significance of this statute to women? And why is non consensual vaginal sex (rape) considered a 'natural' criminal act? (Section 376: Sexual Offences). Furthermore, could there be any possible connection between India's supposedly favorite pastime--procreation which has led to the

population explosion and unnatural sexuality which has supposedly led to the AIDS explosion? These are some of the questions I explore in the next chapter.

### **Contextualizing the Colonial Metropole**

The colonial quest for uniformity, codification and control must also be understood in relation to the influence of canon law, and the processes of the secularization of English civil and criminal legal politics and culture. This section briefly outlines some of the political events and the intellectual climate in the metropole, which bore significance in the English consolidation of power over a colony of primarily non-Christians.

According to historian John Boswell (1980),<sup>15</sup> aside from the Bible, there were three overlapping moral traditions that had major impacts on Christian attitudes. These were (1) the Judeo-Platonist schools of Alexandria, (2) the Dualist aversion to the body and its pleasures, and (3) the Stoics, and their concepts of natural sexuality (Boswell, 1980:128).

Theologians of the Judeo-Platonist tradition saw nature as a "semi-divine" force, and thus, in following divine laws of nature, the only "natural" use of sexuality was to procreate. Therefore 'unnatural' meant the non-procreative.

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<sup>15</sup>Boswell maps out intellectual traditions and attitudes in Europe towards "minority groups," in specific homosexual men, between the beginning of the Christian era and the end of the Middle Ages (4th-14th century). Persons included in these groups were heretics, gay persons, witches, women, Jews, lepers, the insane and the poor. He traces profound transformations in popular attitudes and coexisting contradictory sentiments. Further, he suggests that attitudes until the 12th century were significantly more tolerant than those between the 12th-14th centuries. He also discusses the canonization of certain Church texts (such as the Bible in 1546) which were influential in the codification and institutionalization of ecclesiastical and secular legal codes of Europe.

"[A]ny use of human sexuality, potential or actual, which did not produce legitimate offspring violated 'nature': all moral issues were subordinate to the primary duty of males to procreate. Celibacy was as 'unnatural' as homosexuality, failure to divorce a barren wife as 'unnatural' as masturbation" (Boswell, 1981:148).

The philosophical tradition of Dualism proposed that there are good and evil forces warring for control over "man's soul." Sexual activity, sexual pleasure, the body, the flesh or "the carnal" were considered weapons of the evil forces against the good, the spiritual and the soul. Antipathy toward anything bodily seemed to be integral to the Dualist tradition. Furthermore, matter was viewed as evil and relegated to the realm of the feminine. Also, Dualists seemed contradictorily opposed to most activities involving bodies and considered the production of children via heterosexual intercourse to be the entrapment of souls. This contradiction suggests the Dualist ambivalence towards any sexual activity (including both non procreative and procreative).

The Stoics espoused the notion of a 'natural sexuality' which to them meant a sexuality that was procreative and, therefore, moral and ethical. Co-existing intellectual thought would sometimes exalt animals as models for untainted behavior, but Stoics often did not entertain such notions. "Pleasure is a vulgar thing, petty and unworthy of respect, common to dumb animals-- something to which the smallest and most contemptible of them fly" (Boswell, 1980:154).

Within these threads of thought evolved contradictory and slippery notions of what nature, procreation, morality, the body, sexual activity and



gender expectations supposedly should be. Take for instance the category of 'nature' or 'the natural.' The semantic arena for the term 'nature' included: characteristic of something (as in the nature of gas) or as in innate characteristics of something, typical or familiar about certain things or individuals, native to someone or somewhere. Nature was sometimes given the same status as reason and sometimes understood in opposition to reason. For example, nature was understood as 'ideal nature' that transformed the ideal into real, an immortal universal law, the 'ideal nature' of 'man' (or reason) and as 'the order of creation.' Or nature was simultaneously understood as untouched by reason or 'man.' In the latter case, nature was untutored, wild and not subjected to civilization. Also, animals are viewed as free and untutored (by reason or civilization) and wild, unclean, sexual aberrations. Women are often equated with animals due to their supposed commonalities, such as being too bodily (carnal) unclean and not possessing reason (Tuana, 1993:60).

The 12th and 13th centuries also saw the emergence of a closely related concept of the Goddess Natura as "...the champion of heterosexual fecundity" (Boswell, 1980:125). Increasingly, these coexisting meanings were being used to signify non procreative activity such as homosexuality. According to Boswell, homosexual acts were increasingly viewed as "sins against nature," they "offended grace, reason and nature," "impediments to the reproduction and rejuvenation of the race and nation," and the "unnatural" "emission of the seed outside the 'appropriate vessel'" (Boswell, 1980:154).

Boswell has pointed out that semantic shifts occurred in another related concept, sodomy, in the intellectual milieu of Europe. At various historical

moments sodomy, "..that utterly confused category..," has had broadly multiple interpretations (Foucault, 1980:101). The interpretation of sodomy covered a large constellation of acts and sins: rape (as in when the men of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah had intercourse with the visiting angels); inhospitality (of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah toward the visiting angels); gluttony; prostitution; heterosexual intercourse in an 'atypical position;' oral and anal sex amongst and between humans, animals or beasts; adultery; any sexual relations outside of marriage; and the acts or beliefs of heretics, traitors and pagans. In fact, Boswell points out that male homosexuality is "given no greater attention than other sins" and often thought of as "less grave than such common activities as hunting" (Boswell, 1980:180).

Sodomy also came to refer to any emission of semen not directed exclusively towards procreation of a legitimate child within the confines of marriage. St. Boniface, an English missionary of the 8th century, referred to the "sodomitical lust" of German pagans as "despising lawful marriage and preferring incest, promiscuity, adultery and impious union with religious and cloistered women" (Boswell, 1980:203). The growing animosity towards homosexual acts and the increasing institutionalization and codification of European nation-states was coupled with a general intolerance for difference. The hostility towards sodomy was also a device through which an anti-Semitic, anti-pagan, anti-Muslim nationalism was being justified (vis-a-vis the Crusades, Christendom and the Inquisition). By the 13th and 14th century sodomy was equated with homosexual acts/homosexuality, which was automatically equated with anal sex, which was unnatural, violent and horrific and on a par with

bestiality, cannibalism and repugnant anti socialness. By the 13th century, the church regarded sodomy as "carnal sin" and "between 1250-1300 A.D. homosexual activity passed from being completely legal in most of Europe to incurring the death penalty." (Boswell, 1980:293).

### **Modern Britain and the Penal Code**

In 1533, Henry VIII and the British Parliament instituted and passed the first civil injunction against sodomy in British history. Henry VIII's Parliament made the "detestable and abominable vice of buggery committed with mankind or beast" a felony. According to Ed Cohen (1993:174), the "transformation of sodomy from an ecclesiastical to a secular crime must be seen as a part of a large scale renegotiation in the boundaries between the Catholic Church and the British State."

Henry VIII was encountering problems divorcing his wife, Catherine of Aragon (who was unsuccessful in producing a male heir) so he could marry the next Queen of England, Anne Boleyn. The Catholic church's hegemony regarding marriage alliances and property clearly did not suit Henry who nonetheless found new ways to get rid of troublesome wives and defy the church. Henry's responses included beheading wives and instituting new legal codes in conjunction with a new church, namely the Church of England. Henry's recodification of acceptable sexual behavior was intrinsically connected with access to property and power over the bodies and souls of his Christian subjects.

The statute against sodomy, later referred to as 'buggery,' suggested a rearticulation of multiple spheres of power. This included a shift from the

canonical laws of the Catholic Church to the secular laws of the British state, monarchy, church and legal imaginary. Sodomy which had been immersed solely within ecclesiastical meanings also came to embody the rhetoric of criminality--buggery. Sodomy shifted from just being understood as a sin and religious blasphemy against God and procreative sexual practices, to a sin-crime. In other words, the exclusively religious sin/offense of sodomy was now fused with a legal injunction that made non procreative sexual practices a crime against the state.

According to Cohen, the shift from the category sodomy to buggery can be viewed as the rearticulation from simply a sinful act to a sinful-criminal act, and as the growing power of a British monarchy and state, and its intent to move away from total Papal control. The term buggery therefore encodes such shifts in politics, culture and economics.<sup>16</sup> According to Boswell the term "bougre" was a common French word for heretics, specifically a heretic of Eastern (Bulgarian) origin, and that ultimately referred to persons who engaged in sodomy. The French "bougrerie" also referred to the crime of usury. By the 16th century buggery was being used in English law to mean homosexual acts. The influence of the French on English Law suggests that the French too had early statutes that were hostile to buggery.

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<sup>16</sup>The Buggery Act was changed and reenacted several times during the 16th century under various monarchs of different persuasions. Under Henry VIII it was re-enacted in 1536, 1539 and 1541. Under Edward VI it was repealed, but re-enacted in 1548 with amendments so that it no longer fortified the felon's property to the crown. Under Queen Mary the act was repealed in 1553 and under her sister, Queen Elizabeth I, who wanted to establish her claim as the true heir to her father Henry VIII, it was re-enacted with the same severity as in 1533.

Much English popular folklore encouraged the association of sodomy, buggery, and usury with Italians from Lombardy in a context that fostered the popular sentiment that the Roman Church was not only oppressive but also a "hot bed of sodomy." The Papacy was often equated with "the second Sodom," the "New Sodom," "Sodom Fair," and "a cistern full of sodomy" (Boswell, 1981:293). The terminological change from sodomy to buggery reflected a change in the balance of cultural, political and economic power between the Roman Catholic Church and the English State.

The Buggery Act was piloted through Parliament with the help of Thomas Cromwell,<sup>17</sup> Henry's chief minister, in an effort to support Henry VIII's plan to reduce the legal authority of the ecclesiastical courts to try certain offenses and to seize Church properties. The Buggery Act now allowed the state and monarchy to issue death sentences against those convicted and to appropriate their property. People from poor socioeconomic backgrounds would not provide much in terms of property appropriations, which suggests to me that the Buggery Act represented a clash between powerful men.

The British legal system under the stewardship of Sir Edward Coke reorganized and renamed the 'unnameable vices' as a civil code and a crime against the nation-state. Within 300 years after the 1533 Buggery Statute was passed, jurist Edward Coke in his legal treatise *Third Part of the Institutes of the Laws of England*, provided the "systematization of English Penal Code" where

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<sup>17</sup>Thomas Cromwell (1485-1540) was the King's chief advisor and minister. He presided over Henry's divorce to Catherine of Aragon in 1533; Henry's break with the Roman Catholic Church and a series of administrative measures (facilitated by Cromwell) strengthened the power of the Crown.

canon law collapsed into secular English Law.<sup>18</sup> According to Coke, buggery was "a detestable and abominable sin among Christians not to be named, committed by carnal knowledge against the ordinance of the creator and order of nature by mankind with mankind, or with brute beast, or by womankind with beast" (Cohen, 1993:175). Here the civil and legal, ecclesiastical and canonical are intertwined and imbricated. Legal authority is constructed by positioning sodomy/buggery as essentially foreign (un-British, Greek or, Roman) and against British nature. Sexual transgression is mapped onto religious and national xenophobia, thereby fueling the ideology of the naturally superior British civilization and nation-state. What made the British empire respectable and powerful continues to live on in the garb of the postcolonial nation, where sodomy is essentially foreign (i.e., un-Indian).

After setting the legal, political, cultural and religious climate for the crime, Coke goes on to consider the criteria for determining 'legal culpability.' According to Coke, "carnal knowledge" was acquired or inflicted only if the body "bore the marks of penetratio." With understandings of buggery wedged between the categories of crime-sin, there emerged new forms of moral management. The "vices of sodomy" in a society that was now increasingly being influenced by the Protestant ethic, instead of solely Roman Catholicism, were now being deployed as "an index for a variety of excessive behaviors" (Cohen, 1993:173). The contemporary moral idioms employed included excess, extravagance, irresponsibility, confusion, weakness, disorder and despair. The

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<sup>18</sup>"If any person shall commit buggery with man or beast by the authority of parliament this offense is adjudged a felony." Cohen (1993:174) quoting Sir Edward Coke.

Church of England, which defined itself as juxtaposed against the Roman Catholic Church's reputation of excessive religious and political oppression and extravagance, had fewer established means of monitoring and controlling individual behavior (such as the confessional in Catholic Churches). This need for such surveillance was quite compatible with the continued talk of moral degradation and surveillance, and it was with this purpose that the Society for the Reformation of Manners emerged in Britain in the 1690s.

The Society was initially formed by skilled craft workers and merchants. The organized crusades of the Society for the Reformation of Manners "actively encouraged individuals to watch for and report violations among their neighbors" (Cohen, 1993:181). This crusade began initially in the lower hamlets of London's East End but eventually spread throughout and beyond London.

The targets of the society were "mollyhouses" which included public houses, ale houses or taverns where homosexual men rendezvoused. Often the geographic locations of mollyhouses, which mushroomed during the late 1600s and early 1700s, coincided with other stigmatized but much used and frequented "subcultures" such as brothels. The societies thus negotiated "between the church, the law and the public sphere," and were valuable because they provided a grass roots mode of surveillance for "moral enforcement" desired by an increasingly bureaucratic nation-state (Norton, 1992:23).

By 1826 the Offenses Against the Person Act passed, whereby sodomy was recriminalized into a capital offense and was recodified and when the two simultaneous proofs for conviction were dropped. Only proof of penetration was required. The earlier emphasis on procreation only was now rearticulated into a

certain moral standard for individual behavior. This moral standard for personal behavior was in line with the creation of the new British masculinity and middle-classhood of the 19th century. The semantic appeal towards eliminating relations and acts of 'gross indecency' via sets of amendments<sup>19</sup> was significant for its effect on several other forms of non procreative sexual acts. Homosexual relations, acts, and soliciting were often attempted to be cured by doctors by channeling homosexual men toward another well established industry of the non procreative heterosexual kind--prostitution. Opposition to brothels, primarily frequented by married men, and the movement to raise the age of sexual consent for girls from thirteen to sixteen years, coexisted with, defined and reenforced the political discourse on 'gross indecency.' Parallel developments occurred in colonial India (which I shall refer to in the next section).

By the end of the 19th century, medicine was joining in and rearticulating the sin-crime framework of sodomy/buggery via new categories of madness, moral insanity, sickness and disease to form a reinvigorated nexus of sin-crime-disease. Also, by the 1880s the family as the procreative-heterosexual-monogamous marital unit was the paradigm defining a stable society. What authors like Boswell do not address, however, is that "lust," as in non procreation and nonconformity to the normative family, was still defined in relationship to the phallus. The conspicuous absence and lack of any direct

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<sup>19</sup>Such as the Labouchere Amendment of 1885, The Vagrancy Act of 1898, and The Contagion Diseases Act of the 1860s. For example, The Contagion Diseases Act was promoted as the curtailment of middle class men's access to women (especially working class women) outside of marriage. This act was intended to curtail prostitution and was directed towards the "protection of women and girls."



reference to women represented the fact that female erotic autonomy directly threatened economic-political alliances within and outside empires.

### **Codifying the Colonial State**

The colonial dominance of India developed within a context in which the British were often in conflict with one another over their interests in India.<sup>20</sup> Initially, British commercial interests were consolidated in India with the creation of the British East India Company in 1600. The British East India Company, which was comprised of merchants from London, politicians and British royalty, was established by a charter from Queen Elizabeth I that gave the company full trading rights in Asia and Africa. The company's initial charter was created for fifteen years with the provision that the company could be closed down by the British Parliament and the Crown within two years if it was not profitable but, if it was profitable, the company's contract could be extended for another fifteen years (Puri, 1992:111). The company was given certain judicial powers with which to form its own constitution, to regulate its affairs in India and to set up factories in India. Between 1612-1690 factories were set up in the towns of Surat, Madras, Bombay and Calcutta by acquiring land rights or zamindari<sup>21</sup> from local Mughals, Hindu rajas (kings) and earlier European traders

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<sup>20</sup>These tensions within the empire were sometimes between businessmen (East India Company), politicians (Parliament) and royalty (the Crown), and later between those British who had different administrative and cultural policies in India.

<sup>21</sup>Zamindari were the rights enjoyed by landowners during the local Mughal administration, such as collecting revenues and maintaining civil and criminal law and order.

such as the Portuguese.

By the 1700s, the earlier quest for trade and profit was supplemented by increasing interest in territorial acquisition and management for which the interlocking network of judicial, economic, political and cultural power co-evolved. By 1668, the East India Company shifted from being simply a trading association to being a dominant territorial sovereign, and the company was authorized to declare war and make peace for the Crown. In 1726, overall control over Presidency towns<sup>22</sup> was given to an appointed Governor. In a charter issued by George I in 1726, a uniform judicial system was created for the three Presidency towns of Madras, Bombay and Calcutta. Such a charter aided in the increased insertion of English law and uniformity into India and avoided the "confusion and arbitrary" decisions of those who were untrained in English Law. Each Presidency had a Mayor's Court, and the rules and regulations in these towns were formulated and enforced by Englishmen (following the principles of English law) on both Indians and Europeans.

The next one hundred years (1726-1826) saw the heightening of British imperial power through the East India Company. The company gained increasing access to property and land revenue and initiated several treaties with local rulers. These treaties usually granted significant powers to the British for which the local leader would receive a proportionate commission and the protection of the British. Further, provinces and districts that were newly acquired by the British were reorganized with new divisions. Often the administration of civil

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<sup>22</sup>Areas remapped by the British in British India into zones of political control were referred to as Presidencies.

law followed the principles laid down by the local princes. Although the highest authority was the British courts (especially in Presidency towns), the Governor and his British servants worked together with local qazis, muftis, maulvis and pundits<sup>23</sup> in civil and some criminal procedures.

The company increased its political authority by 1757, after winning more wars and diwani rights<sup>24</sup> (such as the Battle of Plassey and Buxer and the diwani rights of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa). However, in 1772 the company claimed bankruptcy and asked the British Parliament for loans. This resulted in the Regulatory Act of 1773 whereby the British Parliament gained significantly more control over company affairs. Parliamentary control was further increased by establishing a Governor-General and his Council, with both civil and military powers, who answered to Parliament and the Crown. In 1774, the first Supreme Court with a Chief Justice (Elijah Impey) was set up in Calcutta, followed by Supreme Courts in Madras and Bombay. Beginning with the first Governor-General, Warren Hastings, the First Plan of Reform, that is, to unify, standardize and translate Anglo-Indian law, was initiated. Although some native judges were allowed in some of the lower ranks of the judicial system, they were left to handle civil cases (such as matters of inheritance or succession among Muslims

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<sup>23</sup>Qazis or kazis are judges who are entrusted with upholding the holy laws of Islam and carrying out numerous civil functions. A mufti is a Muslim jurist who issues public decisions on legal matters. Ulemas are men who have been trained in and have studied the Sharia or the holy laws of Islam. Pundits are Hindu priest\scholars knowledgeable in Sanskrit and in the scriptures (which included Hindu law such as the Laws of Manu). Maulvis are Hindus who are learned in Hindu laws.

<sup>24</sup>A diwan was\is a fiscal or revenue officer within the Mughal administration. The rights of revenue collecting were acquired by the British from local mughal rulers and were often rearranged to suit company needs.

or Hindus) or what was referred to as personal law. It was officially recognized that separate personal laws of native Muslims and Hindus existed, that applied principally to marriage, inheritance, succession and "other religious matters" (Puri, 1992:91).

Under Warren Hastings' governorship, one of the earliest English translations and codifications of Hindu law was brought about (Halhed, 1776:121). Pundits selected by Hastings and his collector translated works from Sanskrit to Persian (since there were no Europeans in Calcutta who knew Sanskrit) and the Persian-to-English translation was taken over by British civil servant H.B. Halhed. Bernard Cohn points out that this legal treatise set precedent for something that was significant and enduring, namely the establishment of Indological Studies in Europe, "where the work was read in English and in translations in French and German, for information about the 'mysterious Hindus'" (Cohn, 1985:303).

Another barrister from England, who like Hastings believed that hidden in 18th century India was an "ancient constitution," was Sir William Jones. Jones wanted to unlock ancient Indian texts and the minds of pundits and maulvis, eliminate corrupt interpretations by native scholars and capture the true and untainted essence of India's ancient jurisprudence. Jones, and his successor H.T. Colebrook, began the ambitious project of assembling *The Digest of Hindu Law on Contracts and Successions* in Calcutta, which was completed by 1798. Sir William Jones received support from then Governor-General Lord Cornwallis.

Heterogeneous Islamic communities also underwent colonial homogenization as 'Muhammedans' (Muslims) whose Muslim law seemed to

prevail in precolonial courts. The British assumed that the Muslims had more of a 'fully developed' court system that accommodated some Hindu law (especially in the arena of personal customary law). Initially, for the British, this 'fully developed' court system needed to be systematically understood for the purpose of revenue collecting. Legal Orientalist scholarship had to negotiate Arabic and Persian translations into English in order to maintain effective political and cultural control with minimal militaristic interventions. Criminal courts, until 1860, followed Muslim law when it was replaced by British law. Also, by 1864 court maulvis and the Persian language were replaced altogether in the criminal courts by jurors trained in English Law and the English language. This change reflected the shift in power from the Muslim rulers to the British. Also, the Hastings Plan facilitated the creation of hierarchies amongst the civil and criminal courts. Therefore, only civil courts were to deal with personal laws (marriage, inheritance, caste. etc.) of Hindus and Muslims. What is also significant is that although the British were instrumental in translating most of Hindu and Muslim law (including what constituted as personal) it was the one arena set aside for the elite patriarchs of Hindu and Muslim law to control. This control of the personal or family law by local elite men (such as the brahmins in the case of Hindu law) set up another colonized layer of indigenous patriarchal laws and practices.

A charter established in 1833 made it possible for all provinces under the East India Company to come under a relatively uniform legal code. This charter instituted a series of law commissions which met from 1833 onwards to meet the following goals: codification of penal law; outlining of laws applicable to British

servants; codification of civil and criminal procedures; uniform substantive civil law for the whole of India (whereby personal law of Hindus and Muslims would be established by the British who would "carefully" consult scriptures and/or scriptural experts like pundits\brahmans, maulvis, quazis, etc.); and that English law should be made the basis for codifying the law in India. The Law Commission was chaired by Lord Macaulay, Governor-General of British India, and included members who were "acquainted with English and Indian Law."

The 1850s saw significant gains in political authority by the British. In 1857, the "Sepoy Mutiny," or the first major war of independence, was waged against British imperialism by Indians. In 1858, Queen Victoria assumed direct control and administration of India and proclaimed herself Empress of India. This resulted in the end of the so called indirect rule by the East India Company as the Crown took over the dual roles of economic expansion and state making. In 1860, the Indian Penal Code was passed and in 1861 the Code of Criminal Procedure was passed. In describing the task of codifying all law (criminal and civil) for the whole of British India, Macaulay claimed:

I believe that no country ever stood so much in need of a code of law as India and I believe also that there never was a country in which the want might be so easily supplied. Our principle is simply this--uniformity when you can have it; diversity when you must have it; but, in all cases, certainty (Macaulay, 1897:56).

Preparations for the Indian Penal Code drew from the following sources: English law, Hindu law, Muslim law, Livingston's Louisiana Code and the Code Napoleon.<sup>25</sup> Macaulay felt that since the Muslims were 'governed' by the Koran

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<sup>25</sup>From conversations with ex-Chief Justice, Padma Khastagir in Calcutta.

and the Hindus by the institutes of Manu, qazis and pundits were to be consulted if unavoidable. The Indian Penal Code, which was passed after revisions in October, 1860 was to deal with substantive law<sup>26</sup> and the Code of Criminal Procedure, which was passed in 1861, was to deal with "adjective law."<sup>27</sup>

The colonial enterprise, whether it advocated policies of coercive integration (Warren Hastings) or policies of coercive isolationism (Lord Cornwallis) with the native populations, rearticulated, dismantled, destroyed, collaborated with and froze existing modes of socio-political-economic relations in India. Since the 1860s, the Indian Penal Code, which is still the law of the land, may very well have fulfilled William Jones's prophetic analogy of the "British as Romans" (Cohn, 1985:295). Jones liked to compare himself to Tribonian, the compiler of the Justinian Codes, but "in a scientific mode," and, by association, Governor-General Cornwallis would be like "the Justinian of India."<sup>28</sup> Hastings's and Jones's quest for the "Ancient Indian Constitution" was rearticulated as "English law as the law of India" (Cohn, 1985:295).

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<sup>26</sup>Substantive has been described as that part of law which creates, defines and regulates the rights and duties of parties.

<sup>27</sup>Adjective law has been described as that part of law which provides a method and prescribes practice, procedure or legal machinery by which substantive law is enforced or made effective. V.D. Kulshreshta's *Landmarks in Indian Legal and Constitutional History*, pp. 52, Eastern Book Company, 1992.

<sup>28</sup>William Jones quoted in "The Command of Language and the Language of Command," B.S. Cohn, pg. 295 in *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, edited by Ranajit Guha, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1985. The analogy of the British conquerors in India to the Classical Romans conquerors of the Greeks, notes Cohn, was also expressed via "visual reminders" in the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta, where there are statues of Jones and Hastings in the garb of Roman senators.

## **The Pukka Sahib and Memsahib**

The colonial policies of coercive integration and isolationism embodied concerns about sexuality, gender expectations, racial purity or impurity and economic power. Ronald Hyam (1990) in *Empire and Sexuality* suggests that the success of the "imperial race" through the expansion of the British empire meant following state-directed policies of sexual-political restraint and relaxation which framed modes of relations and interaction between rulers and the ruled. Further, he argues, the sexual politics at the home base (Britain) were driven by "fanatical Purity Campaigns," which were intrinsically linked to those individuals located at bases set up in the colonies. In other words, "sexual opportunity" was also part of economic opportunity and rule. "The expansion of Europe was not only a matter of 'Christianity and commerce' it was also a matter of copulation and concubinage" (Hyam, 1990:2).

Under the policies of integration in the late 18th century, the keeping of Indian mistresses (or bibis) became a well-established practice, justified as increasing the knowledge of "native affairs." Native mistresses included both Indian and Anglo-Indian women and "...a deliberate policy of intermarriage was encouraged by the company, in the interests of building up the army" (Hyam, 1990:116). Around the 1890s, however, these policies were reversed. The reversal was influenced by factors that included the 1857 Indian Revolt and shifts in political attitudes towards native governance. This shift led the country towards an isolationist and indifferent bureaucratic imperial state where sexual, social and racial purity was imperative.

Isolationist policies focused on the health and size of the imperial army



and race. As more Indians and Anglo-Indians were discharged from civilian and military posts, annual "cargo[s] of young damsels" or the "fishing fleet" were organized for British men in India. White British women exported to British India were to serve the political and economic projects of racial and sexual purity and normativity for imperial dominance. Further, Ann Stoler has pointed out that the presence of white European women in many colonies maintained racial separation between whites and nonwhites (Stoler, 1989).

The category of the memsahib or respectable femininity/womanhood emerged to conceptually complement the sahib or pukka sahib--the "aristocratic middle-class," hyper-patriotic, Christian, white, respectably married and heterosexual (later on elite and middle-class native men adopted this ideology to assimilate better). In Hindi and Bengali, the word pakka means fully-cooked, mature, solid, done or ripe (versus cutcha which is raw or uncooked). Pukka also meant and means proper, having character, conforming to prestige and upholding the image of the proper (read: British) colonial gentleman.

The memsahib was intended to eliminate any lingering interest in acquiring native mistresses. The pukka sahib was the distanced married man who would protect his mem from native men who were dangerously [hetero]sexual and protect native women from religiously fanatical and/or effeminate native men. While the pukka sahibs were to symbolize homogeneous and impermeable imperial dominance, civilization and power, his mem maintained him and his projects. She was the guardian of imperial social etiquette, racial purity, social distance and imperial standards of womanhood. She was to also signify, embody, caretake and reproduce white honour and prestige through high-class domestic

service. While the mems where "custodians of respectability" their poorer and single sisters held other menial jobs.<sup>29</sup> Single women were held in great disdain. Due to their relative lack of economic and political opportunities (via marriage and memsahib-dom) they were suspected of falling prey to immoral local customs such as prostitution. The Pukka Code or the invented image of the imperial race-family-colony was not buttressed by white single women (Ingram, 1986:117). Their single-ness and independence challenged prevailing ideas of natural and respectable womanhood (married, dependent on a husband and heterosexual). The distanced heterosexual and imperial sahibs and memsahibs exemplified another version (versus policies of integration) of the intersections of colonial racial purity politics and patriarchal heterosexuality.

The Pukka Code of middle class aristocracy was also maintained by "the illusion of an essentially elite European community" of "civil servants, army officers, planters and businessmen" (Arnold, 1983:23). David Arnold points out that in 19th century British India, almost half of the white population was composed of poor whites. They included people who were laid off from army and navy and civilian semi skilled jobs as well as people who came from Britain in search of colonial opportunities. The Raj's obsession with maintaining its imperial-pukka image often manifested itself in attempts to make white poverty and destitution invisible and criminal. Poor whites (and sometime Anglo-Indians) were contained and tucked away into orphanages and asylums (in hill stations--towns on hills far away from hot, busy cities, which often served as

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<sup>29</sup>For both British men and women, getting to the colonies was considered a great economic and political opportunity.

getaways for the British) or placed in workhouses (which were like labour camps in prison). This isolation was based on two concerns: (1) that poor and/or destitute whites would be shameful 'loafers' and threaten the invention of white prestige and morality in India, and (2) poor whites needed to be isolated from the oriental vices found in heathen and hot environments and trained in servitude to the colonial state.<sup>30</sup> White European boys were trained for the colonial army and navy as semiskilled workers, and as a link between upper class whites and "low-grade Indian subordinates." If the boys couldn't be trained they would be placed in jails or asylums or deported to Britain. White European girls were trained to do lower-class domestic work: maids for middle-class white families, as wives for English army personnel who may not have demanded too much dowry, lower grade school teachers, midwives, nurses, typists and telephone operators.

Special economic and social measures were taken for non-civilians, i.e., army men. Increasing cases of 'the clap' were a major threat to the well being of the imperial army. Bringing in memsahibs to encourage respectable heterosexuality in the army proved to be expensive since the costs of marriage quarters and allowances would increase the colonial army's budget. There were concerns that not having wives would encourage the imperial army to turn "...intoreplicas of Sodom and Gomorrah" (Hyam, 1990:123). The fiscal solution was to turn unofficial, unregulated and brothels into officially regulated ones for

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<sup>30</sup>Vagrancy was singularly associated with white destitutes in the colonies. The Vagrancy Act of 1869, in British India, criminalized vagrancy, and poor whites could be arrested for begging on the streets. If the poor whites could declare themselves as vagrant then they could avoid arrest and be placed in workhouses to perform manual labour for room and board (Arnold, 1979:118).

the army. This resulted in the passing of the Anti-Contagious Diseases Act in India. The mid-1850s saw the establishment of state-regulated brothels where native women had to register and undergo regular medical exams. One woman on average served forty-four men. The regulated brothels or Lal Bazaars (or quite literally the Red Market) were primarily for white use, although "...Indians could use them while whites were on morning parade" (Ballhatchet, 1980:91).

In 1894, Viceroy Elgin claimed "...no prostitutes meant even more deplorable evils...there is already an increase in unnatural crimes," such as homosexual activity (Ballhatchet, 1980: 101). Sending men (both Indian and British, civilian and army) to women prostitutes who might be deviating from normative sexuality or pukka-ness was regarded as a popular cure. For example, in October 1893 in *Sanjibani*, a Bengali weekly edited by Keshab Chandra Sen and Krishna Kumar Mitra, an advice column offers a cure for Indian school boys engaged in "unnatural and immoral habits"--that of visiting prostitutes." <sup>31</sup>

The debates in Britain regarding the Anti-Contagious Diseases Act travelled to India as well. In the 1880s, Lal Bazaars began facing criticism and were officially suspended in 1888. The Purity Campaigns in the metropole, which included the Anti-Contagious Diseases Act<sup>32</sup>, the Age of Consent Act<sup>33</sup>,

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<sup>31</sup>*Report on Native Newspapers*, India Gazette File, 1893. I am grateful to Debanuj Dasgupta for pointing this out to me.

<sup>32</sup>Ending state-regulated brothels.

<sup>33</sup>In 1875 the age of consent for girls was raised from 12 to 13, and eventually to 16.

anti-homosexuality movement<sup>34</sup>, and anti-Soliciting laws<sup>35</sup> travelled to British India. These campaigns exported categories of manliness and womanliness where the pukka sahib and mem sahib were to maintain a fiscal imperial polity and economy free of common<sup>36</sup> and 'special Oriental vices'<sup>37</sup> and costs.

The fictions of the Pukka Sahib and his heterosexual complement, the mem sahib, were part of the empire's elaborate fantasy of the "super-race." "The seductive vision of British India as an empire almost exclusively for Europeans of power, wealth and respectability was one which its rulers strove hard to maintain in reality" (Arnold, 1983:124). The creation, maintenance and organization of the family, normative heterosexuality, gender expectations, race, class, rank, prestige, nation, and empire need to be viewed through the inventions of the imperial nexus of dominations. Colonial rule and sexual management was racist, classist and heterosexist in its logic.

### **The "Pukka Chakka"- the Post/Neo Colonial Way**

**Dilip:** They know who not to mess around with. They know who can speak in English. My specs [spectacles] and gaalis [swear words] in English will stop him from going any further. Gaalis [swear words, insults] like "shut up," "idiot," "fool," generally are enough

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<sup>34</sup>Anti-homosexuality laws were exemplified by the Labouchere Amendment, which made all male sexual activity, regardless of consent or age, illegal.

<sup>35</sup>The initiative to clean up the streets, i.e., of sex-traffic.

<sup>36</sup>Such as getting the clap.

<sup>37</sup>Specifically homosexual activity.

to send the message to the police that I am an English speaker, which automatically accords more respect.

**Suparna:** "So they'll let you off even if they suspect?"

**Dilip:** You know the practice of men having sex with men and women outside of marriage is so common and has been around historically. But men having sex with men is an open secret. This point was raised by a married guy in one of our consciousness-raising groups. The men know what is going on -- it's like breathing. It happens at all class levels. You know, I almost wish that someone famous dies of AIDS - then the issue of sexuality may come to the forefront.

**Suparna:** "That is if the families release the cause of death to be due to AIDS?"

**Dilip:** Oh yes, that's the other factor. I've been following a lot of famous deaths--and a lot seem to be reported as pneumonia...which in itself is interesting. So many rich people getting pneumonia. The families know what is happening but pretend it's not going on; the open secret. It's inside the house and outside with the police and law. The police will simply assume men are having sex with men in public spaces like the park--whether it's happening or not - but most importantly they will assume that the other guy, who doesn't seem middle class and an English-speaker, is the perpetrator. The cops harass him. Before Section 377 was publically challenged they didn't have the law or legal language to tout--now with the publicity given to the case and to AIDS, the cops have added ammunition. Once I was wandering around Chittaranjan Park. I

came across a water fountain and stopped to get a drink. As I was drinking the water I felt like someone had crept up behind me. When I turned around to look--it was a cop. He had the tone of a concerned elder brother. "What are you doing here at this time of the night?" he inquired. When I told him I was simply getting a drink of water and taking a walk through the park, he replied, 'Don't you know the type of people who wander around here after 8:30 p.m.? You should be home at this time with your family. It's because of these dirty people we have AIDS in Calcutta.' These arrests are about appearances, class appearances and sexual open secrets."

**Suparna:** "Such attitudes, daily and institutional, are then directly connected to problems faced by advocacy groups related to sexuality and AIDS funding in India?"

**Dilip:** Well, advocacy groups are generally marginalized despite the fact that AIDS/NGOs are now a money-maker in South Asia.<sup>38</sup> There is a lot of money available, international that is, regarding the AIDS

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<sup>38</sup>There are a growing number of programmes in India, including those of NGOs, that are responding to the HIV pandemic in India. Providing an overview of these initiatives is beyond the scope and focus of this chapter and dissertation. However, *Broadening the Front: NGO responses to HIV and AIDS in India*, by Jaya Shreedhar and Anthony Colaco, is a useful reference and beginning. Shreedhar and Colaco explore the response of 7 NGOs in different cities and towns in India to the AIDS epidemic. However, it was pointed out to me that there were only 4 advocacy groups in India that specifically addressed and included concerns that connected sexual health, men having sex with men, advocacy around Section 377 issues, sexual identities and lesbian and gay civil rights. These groups were identified as NAZ-Calcutta, NAZ-Delhi, Humsafar Trust-Mumbai, and CAN-Madras.

crisis in India. And there are lots of people here who are making a lot of money claiming to establish local services and education. The international spotlight on AIDS and India has also placed much of the responsibility on women, and it is assumed that women are the carrier of the virus. Like Section 377, we too have to piggy-back on the AIDS bandwagon to get any funding. Getting rid of 377 may be of some help--especially in terms of the police using it to legitimize their usual harassment - but they did it before they knew that Section 377 existed in the law books. Also, once you get into the courts, such cases, especially volatile ones like Section 377, get stuck in litigation--nothing happens. Look at Section 377. The daily shame, harassment and fear one deals with one's family, relatives and friends remains the same.

**1998:** Section 377 is still at a standstill--in litigation. The political and symbolic significance of such a case seems to diminish for many hopefuls. It is after all just something in the law books - how does that change day-to-day reality many question. On the one hand, the publicity of this case has raised the issue of sexual identity, normal and 'perverted sexuality' (read: homosexuality) as a civil right. On the other, it has provided "law enforcement" units further ammunition to harass the same communities and individuals--men and women. These include prisoners, sex workers, the working class and poor people, men who have sex with men, self-identified gay men, to some extent self-identified shamakamis/lesbians, and women who get married to one another under Hindu



rites. The distribution of condoms in prisons and in the streets still remains a contentious issue and an illegal act. The AIDS pandemic, via the rubric of sexual health, then provides the potential avenue in a culture where under most circumstances we don't talk about sexuality--let alone homosexuality. Claiming a self (especially for women) is seen by many as alien (read:Western), selfish, abnormal and individualistic. Selfhood seems to be only understood as individualistic, rather than a Self that is plural, interdependent and social. Personal identity is subsumed in kinship structures defined by marriage and procreation or in other words, normative heterosexuality. So claiming a heterosexual identity is often just as much an anomaly as claiming an identity or civil rights based on nonheterosexual realities. (This issue is explored in Chapter Four, where heterosexual identity is discussed as an emerging feature of Indian reality through the national metaphor of the liberated/liberalized woman of the 1990s.)

### **Conclusion**

By sketching a collage that moves in and out of metropole and colony, and of colonial and post/neo colonial India, I have attempted to demonstrate the contradictions in the adoption of a colonial sexual code by the post/neo colonial nation-state. The colonial sexual code which was set up in the building of a strong empire constituted within imperial hetero-patriarchy, is equally useful for a post/neo colonial nation in building a strong, modern nation. By managing nonprocreative sexuality (female prostitutes in the Lal Bazaar, or homosexual sexual activity in the colonial army or postcolonial prisons) and by valorizing heterosexual procreation, the modern state is tacitly controlling and defining so-

called possibilities for its citizens. The fact that Section 377 has no direct reference to female sexuality but in an indirect and negative way affects and has been used against women is significant. Women's sexual identity can only be understood in relation to the phallus. The natural and inevitable identity as procreator--married mother and wife. But women are also subsumed within the so-called unnatural relationship to the phallus--with homosexual men. Without any reference to female sexuality, the explicit state-sponsored policy of compulsory heterosexuality, via Section 377, maintains the marriage-motherhood-heterosexuality economy for women. Furthermore, attempts by women to live adult lives with one another (through marriage or friendship contracts) have sometimes been thwarted and Section 377 has been used against them. Section 377 has been used mainly by the fathers of the women who have wanted to live their adult lives with one another. (Chapter Six discusses these cases.) The next set of chapters explores how women's identity and sexuality are more explicitly constructed in relation to national/cultural identity and authenticity.

**Chapter Four**  
**FROM MOTHER INDIA TO MS. WORLDLY**  
**Trafficking In Essences**

This chapter explores how Indian women are made and unmade. I explore how Indian women become the grounds on which the discourse and projects of progress, development, freedom, nationalism, nativism, authenticity, and liberalization. Further, I explore how these practices are connected to the sponsorship of what has been a media, state and corporate sponsored mass fantasy-- 'the new Indian Woman of the 1990s.' Underlying this mass fantasy are rearticulated notions of what mainstream and nationalist discourse on Indian Women refer to as the essence and spirit of a woman. I explore what this essence is and how it is related to India's dutiful passion---marriage. Talk of marriage is so pervasive, common and natural among Indians that it also naturalizes another aspect of patriarchy--compulsory heterosexuality. This pervasiveness is demonstrated through conversations in women's households, including mine, in this chapter and Chapter Five.

This chapter also explores the different ways in which women's sexuality is controlled through different reincarnations of heterosexual discourse. These reincarnations of heterosexuality are encoded in the discourses of nationalism, economic policies, the beauty industry, everyday talk, and different state and media-sponsored events. The economic, cultural and political sponsorship of marriage and normative sexuality, I demonstrate, is also about the construction of postcolonial nationhood and cultural identity. I demonstrate how this process is related to a class-specific notion of the respectable Indian woman who

symbolizes the nation.

### **The Shameful 'Fieldworker' and UnDutiful Daughter**

*I wasn't ashamed this time. I say this time because the last time I was home was in 1993. I had returned after a three-year absence to do anthropological fieldwork. Now it was December of 1995. I wasn't ashamed this time, especially since I was dealing with someone, one-on-one, over the phone. After five years, I immediately recognized Mira Auntie's voice. "So is there any good news?" she probed in a loud, perfunctory and inquisitive manner. "Good news?", I replied playing dumb but very conscious not to perpetuate the usual assumptions and meaning systems. "Yes, any good news? How come you're suddenly here?", she persisted. You mean I need a reason or good news to come back to India I thought to myself defensively. "Well, isn't the good news that I am here enough?" I played on. "No, I mean are you getting married or something? Have you brought along a nice American or Indian boy?" Mira Auntie persisted, either missing or ignoring my meanderings. Ah, finally the translation of "do you have any good news." "Oh no! I'm NOT getting married nor do I have any plans to do so!" I replied emphatically with the confidence of an anonymous phone caller. "God you are just like Gita ..all she does is work in the hospital..I should bang both of you nutcases's heads together.." Gita is Mira Auntie's unmarried daughter. "Good for her!", I replied.*

A combination of anger, irritation, shame and guilt accompanies me when acquaintances, strangers, peers from high school, family friends and relatives feel that they have complete moral authority to arrogantly question or pity me and other unmarried women about why we are not married and why we should

be. They are usually people who have had very little interaction with you or don't know much about you, other than the glaring fact of your marital status.

Ever since I turned twenty years old, this constant questioning is something I encounter at least once a day. Recently when I called up an old friend, Vineet, from high school the first thing she said was "So how much more are you going to study?! Isn't it now simply a waste of time? Your poor parents!" "What do you mean my poor parents?" I asked angrily. "Well, don't you think you should stop torturing them now and start thinking about them? They have done so much for you, the least you can do is to settle down and get married!"

Vineet and I went to Loretto House, an all-girls Catholic private school. Vineet came from a middle-class Sikh Punjabi household. She was the perfect combination of what is being referred to as the 'new Indian woman of the 1990s' and her predecessor. She was not 'good' at maths and sciences, or studies in general, which placed her at the margins of popular groups in school. Vineet was not good in sports either so that also removed the possibility of being in another "in" group. However, she was good at Cookery Class and we used to wait in long lines after her cookery class to sample her experiments. In our high school, there was a definite hierarchy of "in" groups. These hierarchies were often combinations of the following: how good a student one was or your smarts, the subjects one was smart in, your class background, ethnic/linguistic background, and your looks and personality. I was most conscious about these markers of hierarchical difference. Generally speaking, the girls who excelled in Mathematics and Natural Sciences were at the top, followed by those who were

good in Economics and Accounting and finally, English and History. At the very bottom of the hierarchy were cookery and sports.

Vineet was a blending of the 'the new Indian woman' and her fore-mother. She was like her mother because she was not too interested in going to college to simply get a bachelor's degree (however, Vineet did end up getting an appropriate professional degree); she did not go out of her way to mix with boys or acquire a boyfriend (she only hung around her friends' brothers or their boyfriends); she always planned social events with her married aunts instead of simply socializing with girlfriends; and, most importantly, at the right age (by the time she turned twenty-five) she agreed to an arranged marriage with a man of similar class, religious and ethnolinguistic background whose family did not believe in the dowry system. By the time I called her up she also had given birth to two daughters and had a career in interior design.

Later on in the day, I passed on Mira Auntie's message to my mother. "Poor Gita, she's having knee surgery done in Delhi. She's fat and does not exercise or diet properly. She's now in her early thirties and she used to say that she was not interested in marriage. But now she regrets that-she is so lonely and dissatisfied. It's easy to say such things when you are in your twenties....but when you get older you will feel lonely. You are not having any knee problems are you?" my mother adds. "No, not as yet," I reply, feeling some shame creep up my neck. "You know how these Americans are...theyare obsessed with how they look and how much people weigh .....you must watch out for yourself.....you won't get any jobs otherwise," my mother added.

I was ambivalent about what my mother had said, especially about her

theory on Americans, but I did not want her to realize this. What she had to say about Americans could easily be applied to Indians, especially those in the middle- and upper-class. The worlds that I grew up in were and are transnational and hybrid. Like many peers, I grew up in many languages: Malayalam, Hindi, Bengali and English (and in many accents). We grew up in urban India where we got contradictory messages about swadeshi and videshi.<sup>1</sup> The constant dialogue and monologues between the realities of swadeshi and videshi is still very much a feature of post/neo colonial Indian lives.

In high school I had trouble learning both Hindi and English. Hindi, the second language at our Catholic school, was the imposed" national language. Like English, it was the other (second only to English) language that promised mobility. At home no one knew how to read or write Hindi, much less speak it. My parents are Malayalis.<sup>2</sup> The world of Hindi presented many contradictions to me. It was the language of national identity, marking most of the songs of Independence and Republic Day.<sup>3</sup> It was at once revered for its purity (Shudh Hindi, or Pure Hindi) and national authenticity by our instructors and politicians, and ridiculed by some of us because Hindi instructors had funny accents when

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<sup>1</sup>Swadeshi means own and desh means nation or native. So Swadeshi means self-rule, or a nation that was independent and uncolonized and capable of being governed by indigenous leaders. Videshi meant the opposite, external rule, colonization and foreign dominance. So for example, the Indian nationalists advocated swadeshi and the elimination of videshi culture and dominance.

<sup>2</sup>Malayalis are an ethnic community from the state of Kerala. The language that we speak is also referred to as Malayali.

<sup>3</sup>India gained its independence from the British empire in 1947. Independence Day is on August 15th, marking India's freedom from British colonialism. On January 26th, 1950, India became an independent republic, thus Republic Day.

they spoke in English.

For many non-Hindi speakers Bollywood<sup>4</sup> offered us exciting tutorials. Here the Hindi was impure, racy and street-wise. This impure Hindi took some of us to worlds where we learnt what a good 'desi' (native) versus 'firangi' (foreign) 'mems' (women) were supposedly about; what 'sanskriti' (culture and tradition) was about. Some of these 'filmi'<sup>5</sup> depictions of women and men reflected and refracted our realities. But for the most part I was told Malayalis were far more advanced in terms of the treatment of women than of "those North Indians."

English, the first language at school and the promise of upward mobility, was intimidating to me due to the pedagogical practices of the English teacher, a nun from Ireland, Sister Aluigi. Sister Aluigi had us learn by heart numerous Shakespeare plays and poems by English and Indian nationalists. This was why, many would argue, Indian education was tough and superior. In our last years at school, we began to get a taste of America. America, specifically the United States, seemed mysterious, untouchable, dangerously exciting and powerful-- more so than Britain or Germany. When the opportunity arose, my friends and I would carefully study pieces of American artifacts. This included Levi's jeans, Archie comics, bootlegged music, Time magazine, and satellite TV shows ("Three's Company") via Bangladesh and Singapore. It is within these worlds that my peers and I learned about becoming ethnic or postethnic and national or

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<sup>4</sup>The film industry based in Bombay (now Mumbai). This film industry produces three times more films than Hollywood.

<sup>5</sup>Filmi is the result of cross pollenization of Hindi and English, or Hinglish, and slang for Bollywood representations.



postnational. It is within these complex webs that we learned about the duty of becoming women.

### **Ruling Through Looking**

India cannot be free until its women are free and women cannot be free until India is free (Liddle and Joshi, 1986:39, quoting Sarojini Naidu, a nationalist and leader of the Indian Congress Party).

The problem is that they are currently being told how ugly they are and how difficult it is to find a husband for them. They'll come out one day in droves--from the wheatfields of Punjab and the backwaters of Kerala, from the hills of Coorg to the salt lakes of Calcutta. And some day, these beauties will rule the world (Bidapa, 1995:10).

Earlier, only girls from Anglo-Indian, Christian or Parsi families felt comfortable entering such contests. Now, values have changed and even girls from conservative Hindu and Muslim families don't feel that there is anything wrong in taking part (Patil, 1995:3).

The usual national and local (specifically, in urban centers like Calcutta) euphoria that accompanies a cricket match won against Pakistan is nowadays comparable to another game of postindependence nation-building. Billboards, TV headlines, newspapers and magazines proclaim "India, we did it again!," "We have conquered the world" and "Double whammy for India." Time and space still may be referred to as Kaliyug<sup>6</sup> in some circles but the urban information industry now refers to the 1990s as the Sen-Rai Era.

In 1994, Sushmita Sen became the first-ever Indian woman to win the Miss Universe title and later on her rival (for the Miss India Crown), Aishwarya

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<sup>6</sup>"Yug" means time or age and "Kali" either means the Goddess Kali or dark/black. So literally it would mean the Age of Kali or dark times. One interpretation of the Hindu calendar says that the age we live in is Kaliyug, which is marked by chaos and despair and where unnatural rights are being claimed by women. Another interpretation says that we live in a time positively influenced by the Goddess Kali and that in itself is auspicious.

Rai, won the Miss World title. It was as if a simmering volcano, one that had been slowly bubbling for a while, had erupted and completely changed the landscape and climate. The eruption and meteoric rise of the beauty-fashion-advertising-media industry, some argue, is symptomatic of India's economic liberalization policies under the prime minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, since 1991. The nineties have seen swift increases in foreign investments and collaborations by Multinational Corporations (MNCs) in the crores/billions.<sup>7</sup> It is a time when the nation-state of India is advertising itself anew, shedding its pseudo-socialist pro-Soviet orientation in an attempt to seriously and aggressively take on the world capitalist system. It is quite the marketing coup then to claim the world's and universe's best ambassadors, i.e., Sushmita and Aishwarya, as *100% Indian*.

*Sushmita Sen and Aishwarya Rai have become role models for many of the college girls. Why just college girls--even any smart girl from a good family. These girls are good in studies and can easily become doctors, computer scientists or businesswomen. But now they are choosing this career. There is a lot of money in it and it is respectable. Now there are modelling schools cropping up everywhere, especially in Bombay, Delhi and Bangalore. Calcutta there aren't that many--but you know how Calcutta is. Totally backward-moving. People are leaving this place if they can.*

*Did you know Jyoti Basu's<sup>8</sup> niece entered a beauty contest here!? I think she was runner-up or something. The Communists will shout objectification of women when it's other people's women--but when it's their own daughters it's a different story. But basically your family has to at least put in a big investment for a modelling course, say 7,000-10,000 rupees. Then you must keep up with your facials and make-up, keep thin, so regularly exercise at home or in*

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<sup>7</sup> One crore equals 100 lakhs and 1 lakh equals 100,000 Indian rupees. Approximately, thirty-six Indian rupees (Rs. 36) equals one U.S. dollar (\$1).

<sup>8</sup>Jyoti Basu is the Chief Minister of West Bengal. The ruling party, in the state of West Bengal, that he heads is the Communist Party of India (Marxists) or CPI(M). The CPI(M) headed by Jyoti Basu has been continuously in power since 1977.

*a gym, have a good tailor -but if you are really rich you can buy directly from these designers-all this is easily another 2,000 rupees/month. Easily 1 or 2 lakhs per year. It's a gamble-if it pays off you've got it made--or else you could go empty handed.*

(My conversation with Sunita Pancholi, a younger sister of a high school friend. Sunita is a college student in Loretto House-Calcutta.)

Hopeful women begin their entry from the regional rounds. These preliminary rounds are held in Bombay, Bangalore, Madras and Calcutta. Each of these contests are sponsored by one business house--usually MNCs. The preliminary contests are as follows:

**Preliminary Contests**

**Business Sponsor(s)**

1. Miss Photogenic
2. Miss Beautiful Eyes
3. Miss Ten
4. Miss Catwalk
5. Miss Beautiful Skin
6. Miss Talent
7. Miss Beautiful Hair
8. Miss Congeniality
9. Miss Beautiful Smile

Phillips-Powervision  
Bausch & Lomb  
Phillips-Satinelle  
VIP Strolley  
Lakme  
ITC-Sundrop  
Sunsilk  
East-West Airlines  
Close Up

What was initially backed by indigenous corporate patronage (Femina, Lakme and Bollywood) has boomed into a full-fledged multinational enterprise. State sponsorship has significantly increased alongside aggressive corporate investment and media coverage. The increase in the number and variety of multinational capital has diversified state, corporate and media interest and involvement. So, for example, along with Doordarshan coverage there is Star or Zee channel.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Doordarshan is the state-sponsored national TV station. Doordarshan was started in the early 1970s and until recently had a complete monopoly. Star and Zee Channels are private TV stations that started operations in the early 1990s. Star Channel is owned by the U.S. media baron Rupert Murdoch, the owner of

Regional contest winners then make it to the national round--Femina Miss India--which is held in Bombay. Femina Miss India is the stepping stone to the international circuit (such as the international titles like Miss Universe and Miss World and international modelling agencies in the U.K. and U.S.); domestic modelling and designing careers; and/or the film industry. At the Femina Miss India contest, there are three kinds of winners set up in a hierarchy. (1) Miss Femina India-I: the woman who comes in first and is the chosen Indian candidate for the Miss Universe contest. Up front she wins 1 lakh in cash, a colour TV, an air conditioner, a designer wardrobe and other prizes. The Miss Universe contest is a U.S. based company--the most prestigious of all contests. (2) Miss Femina India-II: who comes in second but is the chosen Indian candidate for Miss World. Miss World is a company based in the U.K. (3) Miss Femina India-III: the woman who comes in third is the chosen Indian candidate for the Miss Asia-Pacific contest. This category is less prestigious and lucrative. The winner in this category receives almost the same prizes but the cash amount is halved (Honawar, 1995:16). Businesses involved at the national level include Proctor & Gamble, Ford, L'oreal, Revlon, Yardley, Benckiser, Pepsi Foods Limited, Coke, Kawasaki, Godrej, Cinthol, Garden, Kelvinator, Colgate-Palmolive, Prestige and various airline companies.

The official reception ceremony held for Sushmita Sen and Aishwarya Rai was attended by the Indian President, the Prime Minister and the powerful wife (Sonia Gandhi) of assassinated Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. This is a

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the Fox Channel in the U.S. and several TV stations in Asia, Australia and the U.K. Zee Channel is owned by Indian entrepreneurs based in Mumbai.

remarkable consequence of explicit state sponsorship and aggressive Indian capital. A powerful nexus of image-producers of the new India and new Indians (specifically Indian women hailed as India's latest ambassadors), big business and MNCs dominate the ideological, economic and political imaginary of middle to upper-class urban India. Alliances between corporate patrons, state-controlled investments and the media provide a strong interlinked infrastructure. This nexus has allowed for the unusual transformation of a once small-time, primarily local (although lucrative) business to a major national passion and postnational enterprise. Indian feminist, Madhu Kishwar, points out that "up until the 1970s, beauty contests used to be peripheral affairs, only covered by specialized women's magazines such as Femina and Eve's Weekly" (Kishwar, 1995:9). Beauty contests now are "topic[s] of animated discussion in middle class homes" and have "acquired a prominence in our social life totally out of proportion to their significance" (Kishwar, 1995:9). Corporate and governmental sponsorship have simultaneously influenced high media coverage (TV and front page coverage in high status national newspapers and magazines). Further, Kishwar notes that this national passion has "proliferated in thousands of women's colleges and in hundreds of local clubs and hotels" (Kishwar, 1995:10). This increased interest, she points out, is also engulfing non-elite women's institutions. As an activist and Marxist in the 1960s and 1970s in Miranda House,<sup>10</sup> Kishwar says that beauty contests were pet projects of elite women. Kishwar actively opposed beauty contests and, as the President of the Student Union, managed to ban them. At the time, Kishwar felt this ban was a victory

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<sup>10</sup>A women's college in New Delhi.

against the pro-elite, western, and English-speaking (with the right accent) bourgeois culture.

The victory was short-lived and seemed hollow when there was a "shift in power from the English Department to the non-elite departments like Hindi and Sanskrit" and the new college principal brought in a repressive and religiously chauvinistic culture that "advocated oppressive norms for women in the name of protecting Indian culture (Bhartiya Sanskriti)." This change in power, Kishwar notes, has led her to rethink her politics of "forming campaigns against beauty-contests"--since opposing the "pro-western and elite" faction has allowed for the possibility of another unacceptable outcome--"a repressive Victorianism in an Indian garb" (Kishwar, 1995:15).

Although Madhu Kishwar raises important points regarding the objectification and commodification of women's physical attributes and reveals her caution regarding outright campaigning against these events, she does not make enough connections between the two forms of hetero-patriarchies. Why does one group of loyalists feel it is progressive and liberating for women? And why does another feel it is shameful and evil? Or why do some feel it is objectifying and demeaning? Kishwar also points out that now "bhenjis"<sup>11</sup> have beauty contests.

Making it to the top three of the Miss Femina India opens the door to transnational funds, celebrity, media coverage and diasporic commodification.

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<sup>11</sup>Bhenji literally means sister, but is sometimes used derogatorily to mean an unsophisticated urban woman who does not have the right English accent or who went to a school where the first language was not Hindi. Another term used in the same way as bhenji is "vernac"--meaning one who primarily speaks vernacular languages.

For example, Miss Universe Sushmita Sen, was the star spokesperson for the New York Independence Day Parade. With a breathless voice and tears streaming down her face, Sushmita Sen proclaimed "I love you!" to the New York crowd full of her non resident brothers and sisters whose hearts are always with India. Sushmita Sen was even accompanied by the Indian Ambassador to the United States.

Crucial players on stage are politicians, the cricket industry and of course Bollywood. For example, Sushmita Sen was the special guest and Mistress of Ceremonies at the 1995 World Cup Cricket Match held at Eden Gardens, Calcutta. Also, after winning the Miss Universe/World titles, Sushmita Sen became the spokesperson for Coke, and Aishwarya Rai became the spokesperson for Pepsi, following only in the footsteps of cricket stars like Sachin Tendulkar, Kambli and Kapil Dev. Arjun Appadurai has traced the decolonization and spectacularization of Indian cricket and its stars (Appadurai, 1996:89-113). According to Appadurai, the initial "Victorian moral integument" intended for the "moral disciplining of the Orientals" has through a series of indigenous sponsors (native princes, corporate and state patronage, vernacular print, and the media) become both a masculinist nationalist and postnationalist (nationalism after independence) enterprise (Appadurai, 1996:107). I find the bond between the beauty and cricket industries compelling, especially since this relationship exists at a time when the Indian market is becoming saturated by the "aggressive mood of Indian capitalists." In the 1990s, both projects (the cricket and beauty industry) are recruiting from communities relatively diverse across class, ethnic and linguistic lines- marking itself as a project of equal opportunity.

Just as cricket is "quintessentially [a] masculine activity encoding virile nationalism, sportsmanship and unquestioned loyalty" (Appadurai, 1996:108), our beauty queens are postnationalist India's ambassadors who embody the essence of the contemporary Indian woman. Says Sushmita Sen, "the origin of the child is the mother, and is a woman. A woman is one who shows a man what love and sharing and caring is all about. That is the essence of a woman."<sup>12</sup> The beauty industry produces the new Indian woman who is marked by a sex/gender hierarchy and who is loyal to her nation, community service and essence. However, the main purpose of being a "metacommodity" like her cricket male counterpart, is that she is available to promote hetero-patriarchal ideology, economy, and infrastructure through herself and her ancillary industries (such as Coke, Tips and Toes nail polish, Fair and Lovely Bleach, India, and so on). Finally, just as Bombay "was the birthplace of cricket for Indians and still retains a preeminent place in Indian cricket culture" so does its counterpart--Miss Femina India. One can't help but notice the underlying perfect heterosexual match--the "virulent nationalist" and the "postnationalist beauty ambassador" -who await transnational bliss.

Some business watchers in India have suggested that the expansion of the Indian advertising industry in order to keep up with neighbouring Asian countries and to attract MNCs has led to the media-publicity escalation. The efforts to present India as a profitable third world launch pad for international capital is fundamentally connected to its symbol--Indian women.

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<sup>12</sup>Sushmita Sen's answer to the question asked during the final round of the Miss Universe Contest. The question was, what does it mean to be a contemporary Indian woman?



Under the political and cultural discourse of economic liberalization lies a discourse of essences--the essence of a postnational India represented by Indian womanhood--of the urban middle- to upper-class kind. She now symbolizes liberation, awakening and worldly sophistication. Just as Indian raw materials, know-how and labour are cheap and efficient for Microsoft or K-Mart, the modelling-advertising crews are crucial in pushing products, images and categories for companies inside and outside India, in the South and especially among the diasporic communities in Europe and North America.

The Indian women (models) pride themselves on having that international look. Increasingly, women with the much coveted international look (adaptable to populations in Latin America, Africa, Middle East and Asia) are discovered in pageants held in third world and/or nonwestern locations. The international look is part of the shifting terrain that is increasingly defining dominant representations of gender and sexuality. The average height for Indian women (according to the national census) is around 4' 10" to 5' 4". Models who signal the coming of the new Indian woman usually start at 5' 8". In terms of height and weight, she is to match her comrades in the United States or Europe. The weight loss industry has also become big business in contemporary India. Exclusive fat-farms (more marketable if all natural) with long waiting lists cater to the upper- and middle-class, despite the fact that there have been lawsuits against them. For the mid- to lower-middle classes there are some affordable options: body wraps, the ever affordable fasts, weight loss clinics, gyms with body vibrators from the 1950s, and the yoga industry. Her body is hair-free (specifically, legs, arms and face) and she is expected to have long hair with

minimal curl. Should there be unacceptable curls she can always fall back on the growing hair-straightening industry. Dark Dravidian or adivasi looking<sup>13</sup> women need not apply either. The fairer you are the better--which is why there is Fair and Lovely a natural lotion to bleach your skin in case one gets burnt with "unnatural" salon bleaches. Increasingly, representations in popular culture (e.g., television, movies, advertisements, etc.) employ internalized racist-imperialist imaginary to construct the fair, enlightened and worldly self (dominator) and the dark, parochial, and tribal other (subjugated).

For those serious about modelling careers as well as back-up career prospects in multinational India, multinational capital has found the answer for the upper-class. Barbizon-India. Barbizon is the U.S.-based chain of modelling schools that has branches world-wide in about 200 countries. The New Delhi branch boasts of its political correctness and equal opportunity policies. Barbizon "accepts students regardless of height, weight, bone structure-and age." In fact the youngest successful applicant is five years old. Barbizon prepares young women not just to be models but to combine their training in looking and acting like the new woman in back-up careers after marriage such as being interior designers, boutique-owners, sculptors and beauticians. The men too supposedly get trained in back-up careers of being bank executives and sales managers. The Vice-President of Barbizon, Jyotika Jhalani (an ex-model) claims: "everyone has the right to look like a model, if not actually be one. If a 4' 2" girl walked in, I wouldn't turn her down" (Sen, 1995:3).

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<sup>13</sup>Dravidians and Adivasis are usually equated with the indigenous and tribal peoples of India. It is assumed by many that Dravidians and Adivasis are much darker than the average Indian.

There are two reasons Barbizon claims that an applicant would be turned down. First, if she cannot meet the costs. The 72-hour "Female Modelling Course" costs approximately Rs. 27,000 (approximately \$800) and 45-hour "Male Modelling Course" costs about Rs. 15,000 (approximately \$450). The second reason an applicant gets rejected is if she/he can't speak English. "How do you translate 'tuxedo' into Hindi?" explains a successful applicant. The owners of Barbizon not only want their students to be linguistically comfortable but to get rid of their supposedly outdated notions of gender activities. "Sissy stuff" like manicures, hand care and "sashay walking" are to be learned and valued. In a review of Barbizon, the reviewer notes that even though Barbizon has pink and purple balloons and streamers at its inauguration party - the "official colours of the gay and lesbian movement in America"--"nobody seems to worry too much about sending out the wrong message. There's a certain innocence about that" (Sen, 1995:3). Read: India and Indians are essentially heterosexual and know their genders despite exposures to the really horrendous Western practices and movements--namely, the colours associated with gay and lesbian struggles in the United States. The reviewer of Barbizon informs *Business Standard* readers that the 1990s is "the post Sen-Rai era" and "the Age of Anorexia' where "the key to feeling good about yourself is to work from the outside in" and most importantly, "the Indian psyche is open to the great American dream" (Sen, 1995:4).

Pageants that were exclusively held in New York or London with a metropole audience in mind are now being produced in Manila (Philippines) and Sun City (South Africa) which get broadcast to most "democratic-third world

nations" (*India Today*, 1995:1). Loyalists of the mainstream Indian media industry claim that increasingly the top-ten finalists are nonwhite and/or non-western and belong to countries that are liberalized, thereby suggesting that only liberalized countries could produce liberated women, and that beauty queens are liberated women.

### **The Beauty and the Batsman**

*I was intimidated by Vinni. Especially Vinni and Malini combined. When they joined their forces it was usually for one reason. Boys. Older boys. Vinni was a 'prefect' in class twelve and my neighbour. She had long and straight hair, only to be washed by Sunsilk or Flex Shampoo from abroad. Her dream was to be a model. She probably could have been one because she had a really thin body. I first met Vinni and Malini when I was 10 years old.*

*Vinni was also called Rainbow by the boys at LaMartiniere.<sup>14</sup> The local story was that every day of the week Vinni would find and dump a new boy. Vinni and Malini were two girls that I knew who were extremely confident around boys. Although they were two years older than me I was always self conscious around them. Perhaps it was because they insisted that they shocked me with all the things they did with the boys. Their stories really did not have much shock value because I knew girls who were getting abortions, and girls who liked girls.*

*Almost every day I would get to meet Vinni and Malini's boyfriends. This was when they came over to play badminton in the evenings. After careful research and measuring, our garden was marked with chalk to make a badminton court. My father had also installed some lights so that we could play badminton into the evening. The garden was often used as a cricket pitch, depending on the cricket season. I loved badminton and cricket. It was my dream to play for a national team. I could beat any boy at badminton; at cricket I was average. Every month, on a weekend (usually Saturday and Sunday) Sanjay the oldest boy and his side kicks would organize either a cricket match or Badminton match. It would be girls versus the boys. If it was badminton the match was close. Girls usually lost in cricket. Vinni would enjoy getting bowled out usually on the first ball. But Malini would put up a good fight. Meera, another girl in the neighbourhood, was our best player. She was a great batter and bowler. Vinni and Malini didn't particularly care for Meera--namely for two reasons. One, Meera knew lots of interesting boys who weren't friends with Vinni and Malini. And two, according to them, Meera had "big hips and fat thighs." Just knowing*

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<sup>14</sup>A Calcutta high school.

*this would freeze me up during a cricket match. It meant I had to move more cautiously with my body. Vinni and Malini liked me and so they would often say "you have such a pretty face....if you lost only 5 kgs more you would be stunning." When I froze during fielding, I knew the cricket captains were rethinking their decision of selecting me.*

*Once a month we had yet another grand contest. This contest was organized by Vinni and Malini. Vinni and Malini would round up all the girls and boys from Class 6 to Class 10. This was the grand beauty contest. The boys were in charge of music and lights. The girls would have to dress in saris, skirts, shorts and sometimes in swimming costumes. They would get on stage and walk in a peculiar way--the way Vinni instructed them. At first I was forced to wear a sari--but I protested and whined so much that they let me handle the lights. There was something about wearing a sari that frightened me. You know I thought about this later on in life and I think this was because wearing a sari meant losing control or power even if it meant gaining the kind of power that Vinni and Malini had over boys.*

*It was 5:30 p.m. already. Vinni was getting ready for the finale, her favourite American song "Popcorn" was selected for the turntable. There was a knock at the front door. It was my cousin. Luckily, I was summoned for my daily badminton game.*

(Conversation with Vilasini, a friend from high school.)

## **Old Patriarchies and New Patriarchies**

What is the connection between liberalized India and liberated Indian Women?

What do liberalized and liberated mean in contemporary India? How do the practices of nation-making interlock with the making and remaking of Indian women? I began exploring some of these questions through a reading of one of Partha Chatterjee's essays. In it, Chatterjee suggests that the framework of Indian nationalist thought was such that it resolved the issue of what was referred to as the "woman question" in "complete accordance with its preferred goals" (Chatterjee, 1989:237).

Nationalist cultural politics of the early- to mid-1800s, such as the Bengal

Renaissance, was characterized by the impulse of social reform. Social reform included the practice of either identifying or inventing what was Indian tradition, and what about this invented past was glorious or embarrassing. The reforming of unenlightened practices (which were practices usually oppressive to women, stigmatized castes and the economically marginalized) also meant for nationalists and social reformers the following: (1) the colonial civilizing mission should no longer run their affairs, especially their women; and (2) an independent and self-sufficient nation needs to take care of its women since strong (physically and mentally) women/mothers produce strong sons and mothers for the new nation. The premise and claim of British colonial rule in India, and its corollary that Indian Swaraj (self-rule) was unimaginable and impossible, was that they (the British) were a "force of liberation in India, especially for [Indian] women." (Liddle and Joshi, 1986:24) The colonial position that they were the true knowers, facilitators and architects of the fruits of the Enlightenment tradition in India was contradictory on many fronts. Other than the obvious fact that the British ruled over Indian subjects and reaped economic, political and cultural capital, the inconsistent (although far from unanimous) policy of the protection of "brown women from brown men" has been pointed out by Rama Joshi and Joanna Liddle. While, on the one hand, the British claimed that they wanted to ban the practice of Sati (widow burning), on the other hand they eroded certain matrilineal traditions among the Nayars of Kerala. In 1896, sambandhams (relationships) between women and men that involved sexual relations and children were required to be defined as a monogamous marriage, where the wife and children became properties of the husband. Fathers and husbands among the

Nayars now gained rights to inherit the Nayar women's properties.

At this juncture in Indian history too "...the fate of the woman and the fate of the nation become inextricably intertwined" (Mani, 1989:113). In her analysis of the indigenous and colonialist (both progressive and conservative) discourses on Sati, Lata Mani points out that "women are neither subjects or objects, but rather the ground of the discourse on Sati" (Mani, 1989:113). Furthermore, she maintains, for the parties involved in the 19th century debates, women represented either "embarrassment or potential," or "both shame and promise." Such discursive constructions of womanhood were litmus tests to prove who could really take care of and protect India.

The woman question evolved within this context for nationalists and social reformers in the early to middle period of the 1800s. Social reform issues particular to Indian women included: sati, legalizing widow remarriage, abolishing Kulin<sup>15</sup> polygamy, women's education, reforming marriage laws, and raising the age of consent for girls. Although some women, especially middle- to upper-class and upper-caste women, may have benefitted to a certain extent by these reforms, by the end of the 1800s it was assumed by the nationalists that the woman question had been resolved. As far as the nationalists were concerned, it had been resolved as a social issue and now it was time to concentrate solely on hard-core political issues. This dichotomization, Chatterjee suggests, was a fundamental characteristic of Indian nationalist thinking, in which cultural reality was organized into two distinct spheres of the material and spiritual.

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<sup>15</sup>Polygamy practiced by Brahmans in West Bengal.

The material domain is dominated by the claims of western civilization, science, technology, rationality, forms of economic and political organization and modern methods of statecraft. The spiritual domain housed the true identity or essence of people. This was where the East was morally superior and developed in relation to the ethically-depleted West, but had to selectively master Western material dominance. This dualism parallels anti feminist thought that dichotomizes the political-economic from the social-cultural or the public from the private or, for that matter, the personal from the political. The material-spiritual dichotomy, Chatterjee suggests, is quite analogous to other dualisms such as the outer and inner and the world and home. The outer employed the imaginary of being outside, on the surface and being influenced by external phenomena, whereas the inner was inside, true and virtually unaffected by external influences. The world (bahir) was the cut-throat, treacherous, competitive realm of men and the home (ghar) was represented by, built by and maintained by women.

Therefore, superior material reality (Western) had colonized and subjugated the inferior material reality (Indian). Within the nationalist logic, social reforms had only strengthened the already distinctive Indian essence and inner self. This essence was to be protected against imperialist annihilation--it was the source of superior spiritual strength and cultural tradition defined within the logic of nationalist discourse. The inner sanctum was to be protected from western contamination and the outer sphere, or the battleground of direct confrontation, was to selectively imitate and learn from the West. When nationalists and social reformers introduced the woman question national women



gradually began entering certain arenas of the debates and activism. Kumari Jayawardana (1986:90) has noted that of the many "women activists and pioneers in the 19th century and early 20th century, the majority [were] linked by birth or marriage to social reformers and nationalists."

Nationalist women's activities included addressing issues pertaining to women's education and medical training.<sup>16</sup> Social work activity, such as sewing and first aid classes, also provided avenues for mobility outside the home. Women activists and nationalists were involved in addressing issues pertaining to widow remarriage and helping political prisoners and trade unionists-- all of which were tied in a complex web of anti-colonialist and social reform activities. By the early 1900s, women were not only members in anti-imperialist organizations but also in bodies that were solely under their control. For example: the All India Conference for Educational Reform<sup>17</sup> (1927) concentrated on reforming women's access to education and marriage laws, making education compulsory for women, abolishing child marriage and raising the legal minimum age of marriage for women to fourteen.

For some Indian women mobility away from the family was facilitated by activism in nationalist struggles, social reform projects and growing access to education and universities. Nationalist women, perceived by nationalist men as too threatening to local patriarchal practices/institutions, were often subjected to

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<sup>16</sup>For example, Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) started the Mahila Samaj (women's groups) to address these issues. However, her critique of Hinduism and Hindu scriptures did not make her too popular with the nationalists.

<sup>17</sup>In 1928, the name changed to All India Women's Conference. Other national women's groups included Women's India Association (1917) and the Ladies Congress (1908).

ridicule and accusations of being loyal to the imperialist agenda. These women often ended up living in exile (and conducted their anti-imperialist activities from other countries) or sometimes, like Pandita Ramabai, converted to Christianity and traveled around the world with their activism.

Nationalist and pioneer women were often lauded for being good satyagrahis (nonviolent and noncooperative activists following the path of truth) but were also recruited for violent and 'militant' forms of nationalist projects. Radha Kumar (1993:45) notes that in Bengal, nationalist women got increasingly involved in "revivalist and extremist elements" of nationalism. Revolutionary terrorism tapped into two overlapping forms of gendered nationalism: a militant mother-centered and a goddess-centered nationalism. Mother India (Bharat Mata) and Mother Goddesses (such as Kali, Durga and Chandi) became intertwined in meanings, political rhetoric and revolutionary violence. "Kali, who was till then the goddess of marginal groups such as dacoits, thieves, thugs and, significantly, prostitutes (themselves symbolic of vagina dentata, or devouring sexuality), was fore-fronted as a goddess" (Kumar, 1993:45). Revolutionary means and rhetoric included death (self-inflicted or otherwise) and the "immortalization of death" for the goal of national liberation.

The idea of Mother India encompassed all forms (violent, nonviolent, reformist, or extremist) of nationalist imaginary. This was where the fate of the nation repeatedly interlocked with the fate of Indian women. Mother India concurrently represented all of the following: a victim/passive object (of the British to be saved and freed); a fierce warrior-goddess/active subjects and agents of reform (like Goddess Kali); and a nurturing mother and supportive

wife. Mahatma Gandhi would refer to Indian women as "[a] repository of spiritual and moral values, as preceptor for men" (Kumar, 1993:45). And Sarojini Naidu would put it as - "...the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world" (Kumar, 1995:46). Sarojini Naidu's version of Mother India as the inner-spiritual power of woman-ness and motherhood was supplemented by another version which claimed that healthy strong mothers produced a healthy race or nation. The later position also strongly supported the objective of women's education which was to produce emotionally and intellectually strong homemakers, wives, appropriate socializers of children/future capital for the nation. This was a fundamental avenue for women who were national devotees or worshippers to contribute to mother-Goddess India. Although respectable middle-class and elite women were more easily identified with Mother India, working-class women were given the responsibility to produce healthy workers for plantations, factories and armies of nation-building men.

According to Radha Kumar (1993:79), under the umbrella of Mother India, nationalist women glorified and self-represented what was claimed to be the essence of Indian woman-ness: the self sacrificing Hindu woman (Annie Besant); the self-sacrificing Indian mother (Sarojini Naidu); the self-sacrificing peasant woman (Kamaladevi) and the representative of the Hindu race and the Muslim people (Margaret Cousins).

The iconography of Mother India has also been fodder for other interest groups. The category of Mother India was and has been utilized by ideologically varied persons and communities. These communities included nationalist men and women, social reformers, religious revivalists and imperialist women and

men. For example, Mrinalini Sinha (1994) has explored the controversy and polarization generated by Katherine Mayo's book, *Mother India*, in 1927. Mayo, an American writer, utilized the Mother India symbolic to present to the West the thesis that the complete victimizations of Indian women (by their men) was adequate proof, basis and justification to reject any Indian nationalist claims for cultural-economic-political autonomy and "that Britain and America shared a common imperial responsibility for the people under their dominion" (Sinha, 1994:9). Responses to Mayo's book came from both nationalist women and men in India. Rebuttals usually were parallel attacks on Western 'sexual perversions' or a positive rendering of Indian tradition. But once again Indian women emerged as the core symbol representing a nation's potential for freedom and native self-governance. Nationalist women like Sarojini Naidu, who seemed to embody the nationalist ideal of the new woman (or in other words, the carrier of tradition and an anti-colonial activist) and articulated challenges to Katherine Mayo's version of Mother India, were perceived by some nationalist men, as "... the best unofficial ambassador for India in the U.S." Although there were some anti-colonial Indian women (like Uma Nehru) who challenged both Mayo's racist-imperialism and indigenous patriarchal practices and the "hypocrisy of male nationalists who prescribed the ideals of Sita-Sati-Savitri," Mrinalini Sinha (1994:13) points out that the polarization caused by the Mother India debates "served to legitimate the dominant nationalist ideology." Challenging indigenous patriarchy was often equated with being disloyal to one's own civilization, culture, race or nation. By the 1950s, Bollywood took on the project of resurrecting Mother India to new heights by producing the film *Mother India* in

1957. Mother India, as personified by actress Nargis, was a projection of Nehruvian socialism. The failure of Nehru's postindependence policies and the promise of postnational global capitalism is embodied and symbolized by Mother India's successors--Miss World and Miss Universe.

Scholars of colonial Indian cultural history have described the evolution of new forms of Indian middle- and upper-class notions of respectable masculinity and femininity. For example, in Bengal the discourse of the Bengali babu or bhadralok (the respectable middle-class man) and the bhadramahila (respectable middle-class woman) was a prescription for the new indigenous elites and at the same time was ridiculed for imitating English ways of being. The bhadramahilas could be put in their place by criticisms of being too leisurely and self-indulgent like the memsahibs or western women. Although the bhadramahila was allowed some outer activity, she was not to be like her Western counterpart who valued luxuries and leisure. Rather she was a woman who staunchly valued her home life. The *essence* of the bhadramahila or the *new Indian woman* during the early part of the 20th century, would not be tainted by certain outside activities like getting an education as long as she was trained for a domestic life where she would know modern methods of hygienic and efficient housekeeping and childrearing. She was still *homely*, chaste, self-sacrificial, devoted and loyal to her husband and kin, but she was no longer a victim of unenlightened patriarchy, like her mother and grandmother. She liked freedom, as defined by the new forms of patriarchy. In this case freedom meant being aligned with the ideals of patriarchal-nationalism. The new woman was also distinguished from single, working class women and sexually aggressive women

who were often characterized as "coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of moral sense" (Chatterjee, 1989:244). The bhadramahila is marked by appropriate behaviours, mannerisms, dress-codes, traits and intonations, for example, her degree of religiosity and/or demeanour around men. These qualities, traits and conduct marked her essential femininity and spiritual commitments to her kin and home. With this intact she could step outside the household and attend school, travel in public and sometimes get employed. "Formal education became not only acceptable but in fact a requirement for new bhadramahila" (Chatterjee, 1989:246).

Nationalist practice that produced the discourse of the new Indian woman, of the respectable kind, explicitly distinguished the new Indian woman from less respectable women such as the following: 1) the earlier generation of native women, such as her mother and grandmother, who were victims of an unenlightened patriarchy, 2) lower class or poor native women who were considered unrefined, coarse, loud, and unladylike, 3) sexually aggressive native women, and prostitutes, who were morally, emotionally and intellectually 'debased' and took freedom too far, and 4) the Western woman, or the 'grasping suffragettes' who represented and loved luxury, leisure and laziness, and who simply consumed while their men exploited and produced.

### **Extending the Essence**

On the cover of *Gentleman*, a magazine for the urban middle to upper class heterosexual man, it says "*Are you ready for the New Woman? She is Single. She earns more than you. She swears. She doesn't care for silicon. She*

*demands satisfaction. And she doesn't give a damn*" (Thayil, 1995:23). These claims are explored further with photographs and interviews with the new women of the liberalized India. The phrase the "new Indian woman" enters the national vocabulary once again at a time when the nation is undergoing economic, political and cultural changes.

According to writer Jeet Thayil (1995:23), the new Indian woman, is nothing like her mother or a sister a man may have grown up with (one would think the sister too would be like a new woman). She "may or may not be a feminist but she has no penis envy at all." The new Indian woman is independent more than ever--"economically, sexually and psychologically" and even knows it. Most importantly, Thayil maintains, the new Indian woman is sexually (read heterosexually) aggressive. She does not have to be forced into arranged marriages any more, she can find men who don't ask for dowries. She can smoke and drink in public places and maybe drink in front of her parents. "She uses four-letter words. She likes frank talk about sex. She is aggressive, ribald and cocky" (Thayil, 1995:24). In other words, Thayil says, the new woman of the 1990s is in control of her body, mind, thoughts, desires and, her career and her sexual activities.

Thayil attempts to prove his point through interviews. There is Chandini Sehgal, MTV's new CEO, who declares, "women have a great scene going in this country. The status of women in India is far higher than most other countries with similar socioeconomic conditions" (Thayil, 1995:26). However, Sehgal claims, the rural women of India are "far more liberated. They don't have any conditioning." Kamal Siddhu, a V-Jay (Video Jockey) for television,

hosts the "1995 Gladrags Manhunt Contest" and says "a good man is hard to find, but a hard man is ...good." Magazines like Gladrags, Savvy, Society and Femina cater to the cosmopolitan woman, and these magazines sponsor the nation's major beauty contests. For example, Miss Femina-India launches national and international careers for the new women. Before going to interview Farzana Versey, a self-identified feminist, Thayil wonders whether this "proud feminist" who may very well "hate all men," would be a "leather-clad dominatrix deriving pleasure from pain, self-inflicted or otherwise." Or a "bitch-goddess, siren, witch" or a "coquette, femme fatale, muse." Or, he wonders, was she a stereotypical feminist type--all "scruffy and hostile." But he was relieved to find that Versey "was extremely well turned out, perfectly dressed and coiffed" (Thayil, 1995:32). Versey "enjoyed looking feminine...and being a woman." In fact she claimed that she did not fit into the stereotypical Indian feminist look of having "dirty finger nails" and "coarse saris," a stereotype I hadn't heard of before. Not only did she enjoy looking like a real woman but she got a "thrill" and lots of "pleasure" when she menstruated. Menstruating was, after all, "an assertion of my womanhood." There's more. Versey defines her feminism. She is quoted as saying that women's "public postures" need not coincide with their "private practices." In other words, women should have the "choice" of being publicly feminist, i.e., challenging male chauvinism or "Male Chauvinist Pigs (MCPs)," but should be able to change their minds privately. So, on one day a woman can challenge MCP behavior and on another she should be entitled to the joys of a man opening doors for her. Another woman, Rehmat Jamal Muthana, who is married and has children, says, "marriage stinks!" and



that "it is not your duty to have orgasms." Muthana is all for love marriages where men and women are friends and partners and "nonmonogamous" (Thayil, 1995:41).

Thayil's article proceeds with more interviews with more women between the ages of 21 to 35 who are fashion designers and models, both unmarried and married. For all, especially if married, "work comes before everything except family and God." Some women would prefer living with a man before marriage but would prefer it if their man made just a little more money than they did, since "Indian MCPs are so insecure." Ritu Beri says that she wouldn't respect her man if he was insecure about such things because she is "willingly looking for a submissive role" (Thayil, 1995:41).

Although it was not his intention, Thayil's article pointed out to me the various levels of co-optation, resistance and complicity in which some women engage. Thayil's article is, on the one hand, reactionary and misogynist and, on the other hand, reveals the assimilation of women with significant class privilege. Most are upper-class women, all are from major urban centers (like Delhi or Bombay) and all are espousing some form of normative heterosexual freedom. By some form I mean that either they were married or had boyfriends or believe that having a husband or boyfriend was a key goal in life (monogamous or otherwise). The forms of normative heterosexual identity included only wanting a love marriage or only wanting an arranged marriage.

Thayil's misogyny is quite explicit in his inventions and fantasies of the dominatrix feminist or the sexually aggressive single woman--as well as in the kinds of women he chooses to interview. Having competitive and well-paying

jobs in the corporate sector may very well be progress and upward mobility for women in a male-dominated capitalist system. Other gains that certain segments of women may have won include having a choice to work outside the home as well; the possibility of smoking and drinking in public or in front of parents and relatives; openly challenging MCP behaviour (but not too far); challenging sexual duties to husbands and openly valourizing the pleasures of (hetero)sexual practices. These segments of women include middle- and upper-class, upper-caste, formally educated and urban women. Women publicly talking about their sexual practices and preferences (with friends, lovers or in the media), who they want to marry or why "marriage stinks" are in themselves a definite shift from the repressive urban upper- and middle-class culture that existed twenty years ago. But this discourse is still dominated by the hegemony of natural duty--'this (marriage) is way things have always been,' 'what's wrong with it (marriage)?,' 'the whole world and all of India does it,' 'this is your duty as a daughter, Indian, woman and human being,' - towards marriage and compulsory heterosexuality. And this hegemony extends and carries with it the earlier version of dominant nationalist respectable womanhood and cultural identity. In this case one could say the new woman of the 1990s or the "new New woman" is the same old "new woman" (of early part of the 20th century).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have sought to describe the multiple modes in which the language of essences is deployed historically, structurally and through lived experiences. Public debate over what it means to be essentially an Indian, a new

Indian woman, decolonized or liberalized, occurs on the bodies and psyches of women. Women are the grounds on which such meanings are contested. Although Indian women can access more spaces (such as spaces that are no longer sex-segregated by patriarchy), many of the sex-integrated spaces are possibilities only through her loyalty to compulsory heterosexuality. Normative heterosexuality and compulsory marriage are fixed features in the discourse of shifting essences. The daily oppressive reminders of marriage that an unmarried woman is subjected to, along with the rituals of gendering (such as weight maintenance), racialization (applying skin bleaches) and class-ing (such as lower class women are 'trashy' and do not practice respectable sexuality), deeply intersect with the high-visibility theater of the beauty contests and popular misogynist writings. These different spaces inform one another and inscribe women's lives. However, through multiple modes of resistance, cooptation and complicity, women make and unmake their realities.

## **Chapter Five**

### **DUTY, TRADITION OR CHOICE? Stories of Cooptation and Resistance**

This chapter includes a collection of life stories. These stories are described through conversations with women who are my acquaintances and friends. These stories embody the themes discussed in the previous chapter. The dialogues are explorations into women's resistance, cooptation and acceptance of dominant ideologies of respectability and duty within the hegemony of marriage and respectable sexuality. These narratives come from women who are married, divorced, want to be married, who are ambivalent about marriage and their unmarried status, conflicted about their desires for autonomy, and finally those who are unequivocal marriage-resisters. The 1980s and 1990s have allowed some segments of the population of women relatively more possibilities to work within the grid of the marriage economy. The older dichotomy of arranged versus love marriage, which presupposed stricter sex segregation, is now more blurred. Love, arranged or some permutation comfortably co-exist and are very much fashionably normative. Love marriage in some circles is considered more fashionable and modern. Nevertheless the possibility of love marriage is seen by many heterosexual women as the flowering of more choice for Indian women.

The narratives of duty resonate strongly in my life and in the lives of many of my peers. Not only is it one's moral duty and obligation to get married, but being unmarried proves to be an obstacle in the paths of other people's duty. And if another person's duty is being obstructed, yet another connected person's

(usually other blood kin) duty doing is also blocked--a chain reaction of sorts. A domino effect of duty, if you will. For example, when I did not fulfill my duty to get married, I was told by a very hurt and worried father that he was also not properly fulfilling his duty as a conscientious father. As a man who has done most of his duties as a Hindu man (as a child, son, brother, husband and householder) he had failed as a father. Furthermore, he revealed that he was being criticized by other kin, such as my grandmother, for being a bad father. He had failed in his duty of raising me correctly. His unmarried daughter was living proof.

As a woman, one is expected to fulfil, above all, one's duty in life: to be a good daughter, wife and mother. This is the usual (dominant) understanding of the essence of a woman or being a woman. Being a good daughter means fulfilling your parents' wishes--one acts, behaves, looks and does as they wish or inscribe for you. Fundamental to this grooming and training is the ultimate goal in life: settling down or marriage. Even unmarried beauty queens have similar expectations placed upon them. However, after marriage they usually lose the iconic status they once enjoyed. The dominant understanding is that it is your duty to marry and it is the rite of passage from official childhood to official womanhood. It's when a girl (ladki, penne, mai) can be called a lady/woman (aurat, mahila, stree). It is when alliances (political, economic or cultural) can be made between and across families, class and caste. It is the primary identity a woman can have (e.g., from daughter to wife, and ultimately mother). With the new woman who has 'more sexual choice'--the discourse explicitly may be not of one's duty, but it is still the dominant normal thing to do. The discourse

today justifies marriage as: everybody needs companionship so we need to get married. This minimal shift on the emphasis from duty to need internalizes the practice of marriage even further within women's psyches. Although the slight shift signifies real change (a modernizing effect) in legitimations and punishments, this shift is far from absolute.

### **A. Dutiful Fathers and Dutiful Daughters**

#### **Ujjwalla: December 1993**

I was over at Ujjwalla's parent's place for dinner. In high school I had felt special for being included in a group of girls who were two grades older than me. The group comprised of Ujjwalla, Dipali, Linda, Esther, Roshni (all senior to me) and myself. Ujjwalla is also a family friend. She comes from an upper-middle class Konkan an ethnic and linguistic group from southern Indian family. When I told her that I was doing some dissertation research, she felt uncomfortable. She said that "if any of our conversations have been helpful, use it responsibly, but I don't want to answer any specific questions related to what you are researching. All that stuff sounds scary; ask Sonia or Malini, they will be willing to talk about all this stuff about Indian women. They are always running around being interviewed by people about their lives. Besides I haven't seen you in years--can you stop analyzing my life as an Indian woman and talk about what you have been up to?" A year later, Ujjwalla and her husband, Ramesh, appeared on the cover of *Business India*- as representatives of the new Indian middle-class. Inside there were photographs and interviews about their life as a middle-class Indian married couple.

**Ujjwala:**

*"I've always defied my father--usually unintentionally. Nanda, my elder sister has always been Papa's pet. She always did what he told her to and, when she didn't, she never got caught! She always got decent marks in school, went into science, didn't smoke or drink, at least in front of him. She only drank some brandy that he may have given her for a cold. I know she used to drink at school parties and also have boyfriends. Papa let Nanda have boyfriends though. But when the time came to settle down, Nanda said OK to an arranged marriage. She was not with a boy then and that was the time to get married. Papa found someone from a similar background, but who was progressive. They both want to study medicine. Sumangala, my younger sister, always got away with everything. We (Nanda and I) fought for everything and Papa was trained, or maybe he had given up, by that time. I was stuck in the middle. I was always a tom-boy, didn't go for the sciences and did average in studies. Usually if a girl does not do well in her studies, she is expected to marry soon. I'm not sure what Papa thought. I wasn't the typical Kannada [ethnic and linguistic group] girl. I was tomboyish, never wore saris or skirts, never dressed up, never acted coy around boys or men. I think he was generally worried about me and expected the worst. Well, I finally ended up falling madly in love and marrying. Papa is fine about this. I've finally done something that Papa is comfortable with. I mean he was concerned about Ramesh and his family, but now he has seen us both together and met his family and is more at ease. The fact that we both have jobs in the same company (United Breweries) and have settled down in the same city has made him very happy. I was worried about not changing my name when Ramesh and I got*

*married. In my gut I wanted to have the same name...it seemed strange that I had to take another name after being married...it felt alien...but I know Papa would be unhappy about this...also, some friends who feel that they are feminists were challenging me about this. They felt that I was succumbing to male chauvinistic practices if I took my husband's last name. Maybe I should have got a hyphenated last name. Ramesh is very understanding about all this. He doesn't mind either way. Ultimately I changed it to Ramesh's name. I don't like labels like "feminist" and so on. Why should I? We are all humans and I think we all should be treated and treat others equally with respect. But I think there are some compromises everyone should make and some duties we should fulfil in life.*

*It's funny how things worked out for the three of us. Nanda, Papa's favourite, decided to go for the arranged marriage with Ashok. She went for medicine--and so did Ashok. Papa wanted all these things for her--but never forced her. With me, he never expected me to achieve what Nanda has done! He expected the worst, and all he wanted from me was to not smoke. But I ended up getting a job at Apple and marrying the man I fell in love with. Papa and Ramesh really get along. Gala is the only one who had so many boyfriends! And she doesn't hide much with Papa at all! She is the baby of the family and the spoiled one! Gala too will go into medicine--that Papa is really happy about. Now I just have to worry about not getting fat! "*

*"Do people ask about when you will have children?" I ask.*

*"Oh, not you too. Ramesh and I are not ready for it. Besides I don't feel any urge to have them. It's OK if you or Sonia aren't married. Although I'm sure your parents are worried about what will happen when they die. In a way I*



*feel like I helped Papa with completing his duties as a father...I am settled...with a job and a husband. He can live his life a little more peacefully. He only now has Sumangala to worry about...but she has a boyfriend so he won't have to arrange a marriage for her."*

## **B. Be All That You Can Be**

### **Rosebud, December 1993**

Rosebud and I were having breakfast at Tripti's, a South Indian restaurant in South Calcutta. We had met after almost ten years. One of the first things we tried to find out is if the other is married. The usual question by most married women acquaintances or old friends is something like: "So what are you doing nowadays?" and when I answer by informing them about my dissertation, the question is re-asked, "no, what are you doing now?" I've learned that I am really being asked "are you married?" or "do you have a husband and children?" When I decided to double check, I thought I would ask them, "what have you been doing?" It was confirmed. "Well, I am married and all..." whether or not they work for pay outside the home or are in universities or are getting some technical training. It seems to me that a woman's central point of reference, explicitly or otherwise, is whether or not she is married. Rosebud informed me that she was studying educational psychology and was pleasantly surprised to hear that I was studying cultural anthropology since I was one of those maths--science types in high school. Three years after our meeting I heard from a common high school friend that Rosebud had "settled down 'in Bombay.'

**Rosebud:**

*"I think I am spiritual, not necessarily religious. Religion has contributed in my life to see the good in people--but I am not a practicing Jew. I pray once in a while. Our family was more egalitarian compared to other traditional Indian families. We did not know many Jews. My father would cook, which was very unusual in a middle-class family. They encouraged me to be independent. By the time I was 22 years old my parents told me to start thinking of marriage. My parents sent me a letter with a proposal when I was away at college in Bombay. They didn't push like most parents. They insisted that I should get to know the boy and only marry after I got a B.A. When I turned 23, they urged me a little more. But then I said I needed to finish my M.A. But you know it's good to be thinking about marriage. And you need to be sure about yourself and ready for marriage. You need to also know what you are about and what you want to do in life. Marriage is like a negotiation, an intense relationship with you and your partner within the oldest societal system. I know I want marriage and especially children--but education has given me security, goals and more of an identity. Education has given me maturity, a personhood. I feel less confused like a teenager. At the same time I feel guilty about giving my parents worry--I worry about giving my parents anxiety. When you are unmarried you always have your parents, emotionally and financially, they will always be there for you. After they are gone who will be there? My friends will have their families and they will have the companionship and support that I won't have. I blame myself for taking so long to decide. As I get older I realize that this would be what would give my parents security. It is also one of my goals in life, just like getting an education*

*(a B.A. or M.A.) and being independent, like I was encouraged to by my parents.*

*As a Jew I dreaded going to Catholic schools. But Sister Aluigi at Loretto was the greatest influence in my life. She really encouraged me in my writing. But Loretto was also the place that enforced a lot of information about values....mainly Catholic values. How to be ladies. The whole training was how to be ladylike. I remember sportsday or maybe it was Independence Day practice--when Sister Monica suggested that I wax my legs so that I could look more like a lady! I was so ashamed. But I started waxing my legs and now I shave them. My mother never really encouraged it but now it's more like a hygiene thing--I hate seeing all that hair on my legs and arms. My parents encouraged me to be anything that I wanted to be, but in school I was always told science is not for you, which meant I was not a good student. It was such a stigma not to be in science and maths. All the girls who were in upper Science and Maths were always pampered. They were the superior ones, and those who did English and History were going to be housewives anyway and those who did Economics and Commerce were going to be like baniyas [business people, or of the merchant caste]. Our educational system is so strange...still stuck with the colonial heritage."*

### **C. Love Marriage Or Arranged?**

**Sangeeta, February 1994:**

Sangeeta is 33 years old and was born in Maharashtra, but has also lived in other Indian cities and in the United States. Sangeeta lived with her husband in the United States for six years. During this period she got a Ph.D. in Social

Work. I met Sangeeta through a friend in Bangalore. In many ways Sangeeta resembles my friend Vineet in the previous chapter. Although Vineet never left India and insisted on a career with marriage. Both Sangeeta and Vineet come from middle- to upper-middle-class and upper-caste urban backgrounds. Sangeeta talks about getting a sense of identity when she was away from her biological family and when she got a Ph.D. This and the fact that she didn't have children immediately after marriage separates her from her mother's generation of perfect Maharashtrian women." The fact that she had 'choices' makes her part of the continuum of the new Indian woman. She had the choice to reject the husband selected for her by her parents, she had the choice to marry into an anti-dowry family, get a Ph.D. instead of producing children immediately and the choice to be a housewife.

**Sangeeta:**

*"In many ways I see myself as unconventional. By the time I got to class 8 & 9 you were considered grown up and you should start wearing sarees. But I also wore salwars and pants--even though you were expected to wear saris at ceremonies and marriages. But during the Emergency,<sup>1</sup> it was a college rule to wear sarees or else you would be reprimanded by the college officials. I was always told that I was talking too much, too loud and too fast. That was the only thing that got me into trouble! My mother trusted me with boys. Even though I did not have any boyfriends. My parents expected me to be married by the time I turned 23--which I did. I had many marketable qualities! I came from*

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<sup>1</sup>The Emergency was declared by Indira Gandhi and her government in June 1975. During this period the press was censored and opposition leaders were jailed. The Emergency ended in 1977 with the electoral defeat of Indira Gandhi.

*a good family, I was a good student and, as long as our horoscopes matched, things would proceed smoothly. My father did not believe in a dowry system and wanted a family that felt the same. In many ways I came from a liberal family. For instance, my mother didn't pray when she used to menstruate, but she let me pray during my periods. There was a part of her that didn't believe it but was concerned not to offend my grandmother. Did you pray when you were 'down' [i.e., having your period]? Well, I did, although I got mixed messages. My mother didn't object, but my aunt did. Whenever she found out she would complain to my mother. But since my mother was the eldest sister and didn't mind, she (my mother) would just tell me to avoid praying when my aunt was around.*

*My parents luckily found the right husband for me. My husband and I don't have a normal husband and wife relationship. For one thing I liked to giggle a lot--and I was told not to giggle too much the first few months of marriage--or else people would think that we had a love marriage and that you were happy to leave your parents home. The main thing is that we think of one another as companions. I have my own identity. We don't have children and we support this decision in each other. We get a lot of pressure from strangers and relatives about this. If you cross five years or more the pressure will be constantly on having children. But I should not be complaining--I have everything I dreamed about as a child--I am married, I have a Ph.D. and I have a home. Now I have the choice of being a housewife of a successful executive. Although I was not allowed any makeup by my father--my mother loved to dress me up. She loved to dress up and I think I picked that up from her. When I first*

*got married I used to wear a deep red bindi [dot worn on forehead] and thick sindoor [red powder worn by married women], always wore silk sarees and wore all the jewelry that my mother gave me--I loved to flaunt my married status! I loved wearing lots of bangles, anklets and matching sarees and bindis. My mother also got me into Anne Frenching!<sup>2</sup> After staying in the United States for four years I've stopped dressing up so much--well I didn't have the time and I would really stand out. Moving away from home and my education has given me a sense of identity. I realized I am not the perfect Maharashtrian woman like my mother, although we love sharing our Women's Era recipes! Oh no, don't misunderstand me, I hate the magazines but I love their recipes, just like Good Housekeeping. She is a perfect hostess and looks good all the time. I've stopped looking good now."*

**D. Is this the way things have always been ?**

**Anita, December 1993:**

Anita is 32 years old. She is a computer professional I met through common friends. She was born in Kerala (Kayamkullam) and lived in Kerala until she was 18 years old. She is ethnically a Malayali. At the age of eighteen, she left her parents' home to go to school in the United States.

**Anita:**

*"I think I live on the strength of my mother's and grandmother's prayers. The church really did not play such a big role--mainly my mum and my grandmother.*

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<sup>2</sup>Anne French is a British hair-removal product sold in India. The product is targeted towards Indian women.

*I often fall back on their stories but organized religion I don't care for.<sup>3</sup>*

*I knew I was different. I did not want to play the woman and man game. But I liked boys stuff--pants and shirts although for work I wear skirts. I feel more comfortable wearing pants. Things that give me freedom to move. Saris are so colourful and festive--especially kanjeevaram sarees. Once in a while I tried to fit in. I think it made me look better. But my mother is resigned to the fact that I wear less jewelry and generally don't dress up. She did not like me wearing pants--she preferred skirts or saris. My mom liked to make us, girls, chubby and always eat more. Eating was an important thing in my family. But I liked being thin--it meant more freedom and health.*

*I did not want to be dependent on a man like a woman, which is why I first moved out of the house and started working when I was 20 or 21 years old. But the pressure to marry was so great that I began having doubts about myself. I thought maybe I was being selfish and self-indulgent. I thought how bad can it be? Other people have done it. So I decided on going for the arranged marriage. This way I would not bring pain, sadness and disappointment to my father. This way I would stop fighting with my brother. And my mother would feel secure. I got married in 1987--and four months later I got a divorce. As I said, it was arranged--the guy was religious, very insecure and constantly needed his ego boosted, but at the same time he needed the good wife. I avoided having sex with him for the four months -telling him that I was shy and scared and that I was not ready. Although he let me get away with this--I am not sure how much longer I could have pushed it. I'm sure he also liked it in a way--that is, he would be my*

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<sup>3</sup>Anita is a Syrian Christian.

*first ever. Even after the divorce he would call me and ask me for my opinion.*

*I could not live with myself. I tried it out and I could not take it. Besides I was emotionally and physically interested in women. I always had girlfriends in school and eventually they would be forced into marriage by their family. I understand it. I tried marriage myself. But I could not imagine doing this all my life. I was not happy. I told my brother about this. He said, 'what do you want to do--kill your mother?' He closed his ears and said, 'I don't want to hear about it again.' We don't talk about this anymore.*

*You know all those stories you told me about the women in Kerala -- committing suicides together--I could really see myself in that position. Not of killing myself--but feeling this love for women. It's very prevalent in schools and colleges here. I felt such love, passion and commitment to my girlfriend, but this is something we can never talk about to our parents or relatives. I had so many girlfriends before I came to the United States! One day I will return to Kerala and visit them. We all promised each other that we would meet again. We knew we could get married to one another.*

*My father died three years ago--before he died he told me that he still loved me--but he wished that I was married--but he said that he wanted me to be happy--that was good to hear from him. He felt that in his life on earth he had to follow certain steps. And he could only die in peace once his daughters were settled, that is, married.*

*My parents came from a middle-class family and now I have built for myself a middle-class life in the United States. Generally speaking I was not afraid of my parents. I was always allowed to be mischievous. Education and*



*grades were important for them and I always got that. I always hung around with friends who were thought of as troublemakers. Although we were good in studies, we would get into trouble for stealing mangoes or sneaking out of school early. We also played lots of sports like track and basketball. I used to try and be the class clown. I always wanted to be independent, self-sufficient and go to college. I have managed to do that. I am not sure whether I would like to have children. Will I be able to raise open-minded children? I do want to contribute to the future. Being a woman has made me more compassionate and caring towards women, respecting cultural differences and one's teachers and elders. I resent that men have more importance in the family. I often try and prove that it doesn't have to be that way. Given the chances we can be better. We are taught to be women right from the start. It is ingrained--you have to be submissive in very subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Get an education and all that--but you should be married no matter what. My father has travelled a lot and was much more open. My relatives are very conservative. My grandmother was a strong and dominant figure in my life and in my family's life. People would fear her. But these were very conflicting images and messages. I was very much emotionally like my mother, although I wanted to be more independent. She generally discouraged me from having boyfriends or any friends who were boys. I was curious about them but I did not mind it that much. I was very competitive with boys when I played sports, etc. But the majority of my school life was all girls. I knew I did not like men that much--they always looked at you weirdly on the streets.*

*I think lesbians are women who have a deep emotional bond with women.*

*Bisexual people are plenty in India--they seem confused but very liberal. In Malayalam I think of women, especially lesbians, as koota kari or female friend and when you are involved in a committed or maybe not-so-committed relationship with a woman it is a sneh bandham or love bond or sneh sambandham love relationship or love kinship. I think marriage can be good. Being in committed relationships is desirable by all. I have been through many things. I have however tried to live my life the way I am. Not compromising myself--although sometimes I do. I have been forced into the institution of marriage and as a lesbian I am always still compromising myself at work. The church obviously does not accept me. I am also stereotyped a lot in this country because I am a foreigner and woman and I often cannot communicate properly with Americans because of my Indian background. I make a good research project, huh? Society may have pressured me in many ways--but I think I can change it. I am always learning to shift my priorities. My goal was to work for a Fortune 500 company but my priorities have directed me towards appreciating people more. I may not understand many people's struggles, but now I will try more. I know my voice, time and money is there to make changes for me and them."*

### **E. I Have Bought Your Fate Into My Hands**

Shagufta, January 1994:

Shagufta was born in 1964 in Calcutta. She comes from a lower-middle-class background and was raised in Calcutta, Delhi and Kota (Rajasthan). Shagufta is an Anthropology student at Delhi University. She has spent some time in the

United States as well.

**Shagufta:**

*"I touch my mother and father's feet everyday. He would bless me and give me good wishes. I felt proud to touch his feet, not humiliated. It is very Bengali. Although I do not believe in institutionalized religion, I like some of the rituals. I would fast on Fridays for 10 years--it was not religious, it was a challenge, a way to encourage discipline. Living an ascetic life was positive.*

*I wanted to either become an architect or professor by the time I was in my thirties. I would like job security and travel. I had very strict parents. I believe I am a feminist and a humanist, I believe women and men should have equal rights and that is not what the case is--so I need to fight. I do not believe in the institution of marriage. I am not sure if I can make a life-long commitment to someone. I do not want to be somebody's wife. I do not want to offer a man my services--I can't fall into that routine. Too much ownership. Ideally I would like to live by myself--even if I had a boyfriend or lover--but you know how that would be viewed in India. My parents would not be shocked. My mother has always encouraged and supported my decisions. I have been influenced by her philosophy of life. She is emotionally and spiritually strong. She was so strong and she never gave up her friendships after getting married to my father. Once when I was in Class 4 my aunt accused her of being a lesbian. As a daughter I should be an emotional and financial support for my parents.*

*I'm not sure if I want to get married. I would like the companionship of a man though. My mother has never nagged me about getting married. I guess I am quite unusual as far as Indians go! She would like me to have a companion*

*though. I would like that too without getting into the institution of marriage. I think if I participate in an institution that oppresses women, I am contributing in the oppression. Yes, I know women also benefit a lot. Especially someone like my elder sister! I feel sorry for my brother-in-law. How do you explain that? Is marriage oppressive to some men as well? The rituals involved in a Bengali marriage are very eery--the sindoor [red powder women apply on forehead] is symbolic of the man conquering the wife and her blood. It implies that he has bought her fate in his hands. The Naoh [the iron bangle worn by married women], used to be utilized to catch and shackle slaves/dasis. It still means shackle. People say 'Tumhar jouneh dase antey jabo,' we're going to get you a slave (wife/dasi) with the Naoh. Nowadays the Noah is gold-plated. Give me income, food, roof and nonsuffocating companions and friends any day!*

## **F. Punishment and Shame**

### **Usha Aunty, January 1994:**

Usha Aunty is a 45 year old Marwari (an ethnic and linguistic community) woman who lives in Calcutta. When I was in the fifth grade, she would give me extra tuition in Maths and Science. She gave me tuition for about two years.

After that we have always kept in contact. After her husband left her, she began her own embroidery and linen business. She also teaches in elementary schools.

### **Conversation with Usha and Suparna:**

**Usha:** "It's not a good idea to be a single woman in this country - you should stay in the U.S., no?"

**Suparna:** "Yes, maybe in some ways."

**Usha:** "But it is difficult to be on your own. I've been getting phone calls from this man all night long. I usually keep my line free for my sister to call me but I keep getting harassing calls from him. He knows that I live alone and he follows me around. I ask my friends to pick up the phone sometimes and he stops calling for a little."

**Suparna:** "Would calling the police help at all?"

**Usha:** "What would be the point of calling the police? You know what the police are like. It's not like America. They don't care. They will not help a single woman, leave alone any woman but, if she has a husband or grown-up son or older brother, maybe they might pretend to listen. You have your parents now--but what after that? At least you will have their house to live in--single women have the worst time finding flats. The landlords think she is a prostitute if she wants to rent on her own. So a woman can either have her parents or father, or her husband. And even when they live alone, all these men find out about it and they want to make your life miserable for not being married. Maybe I am being punished for disobeying my father and going ahead with a love marriage. My younger sister was obedient and went for the arranged marriage. But both my brothers had love marriages, that too with foreigners-but that didn't seem to worry my father too much. He has poisoned the rest of the family against me. My sister sometimes calls me on the sly. Now Mohan [her husband] has left me and father has completely disowned me. The only person I have in my life is my betu [son] Aditya. I hope he grows up to be an open-minded person."

I think it's easier for your generation to accept divorces and single

mothers. But for my generation--especially our parents it's about shame and failure. I have no problem with it; if you are in a bad marriage, get out! Make sure that you can work or have some skills. I'm glad that on the sly I learnt how to get into the linen and embroidery business. I would talk to a lot of tailors and retailers about cloth and customers. I've also learnt how to network with all these rich ladies who like to spend their money. Plus in a place like Calcutta there is such a big demand for decent bedcovers, bedsheets and pillowcases. The thing is your generation has been taught from the start to have a back-up if their marriages don't work. It's good to be independent. But every now and then I wonder what people think of me and my son."

### **G. The Ancestral Astrologer**

#### **Nalini, May 1994:**

Nalini comes from a working-class background and lives with her mother. During the week she works as a secretary for a local company, and during the weekends she too, like Usha Aunty, has an embroidery and linen business. Nalini and I met in 1993 at a weekend Yoga class in Calcutta.

#### **Conversation between Nalini and Suparna:**

**Nalini:** "I should have started my fast in '87 itself," exclaimed Nalini. "My mother kept telling me to do it!" Nalini and I were sitting in a cab headed towards Salt Lake. There was some work that Nalini had to take care of and I joined her in her mission. We were also in pursuit of lunch at Calcutta's Chinatown, known as Tangra, for Chinese chimney soup and soft shell crabs at Nalini's favourite chinese dhaba (small roadside restaurant).

"Well, you see, I went to my ancestral astrologer in Gujerat and he said that something was blocking me--especially the stars on Thursday [guru] and Saturday [Shani]--and, if I fasted on Thursday and Saturday for at least a year or so, that block would be gone. I didn't believe in all that. Then again I saw another reliable astrologer and he also told me the same thing. So now I've decided to start. I've done this for seven months. I generally have fruits and all that."

**Suparna:** "But why are you doing this? What block?"

**Nalini:** "You see it's a block...that my mother also thinks I have..." said Nalini looking a little sheepish.

**Suparna:** "Block?"

**Nalini:** "Well this way I can find a good companion. I don't want to marry for the sake of marrying. People do this kind of thing all the time here and they are so unhappy. But everybody does it."

**Suparna:** "Yes, it seems like they are blindly following a prescription."

**Nalini:** "Yes. But, you see, I feel that after a period of time we all need to settle down. Your parents or mother will always be there for you as long as they are alive...after that there is nobody. Your brothers, sisters, friends...they will be there if they have time from their families...but that's not enough, not secure...so I understand what my mother is saying; I know she is worried about me...what will happen when she dies. Who will take care of me...who can I confide in...trust?"

I don't want to marry some chap who wants me to be a maid...cook and clean for him. I can't just be sitting in the house doing all this stuff--if he wants me to

have a job that's also OK. This is why my mother thinks I have a block. I am too choosy. Too choosy! So, anyway, lets see what happens with this fast. At least one good will come of it--I'll also lose weight and my skin will become clearer. You should try it sometime--but your skin is nicer than mine.

It's very difficult for ladies in Calcutta. If you look mod they'll harass you...youknow eve-tease.<sup>4</sup> So I pack my trousers in a bag and change when I get to work. If you wear a saree or salwar kameez, it will be OK."

**Suparna:** "They'll eve tease you anyway, right? Maybe you are a little more acceptable with a saree or salwar."

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<sup>4</sup>Term used to describe public sexual harassment and humiliation of women by men. The so-called teasing is frequent, extremely humiliating and inflicted upon women (across different class locations) by men (across class locations, but often middle-class to lower-middle-class men). It is something almost all Indian women, including myself, have experienced at least once in their lifetime. It includes: purposeful brushing up or pressing up against women in crowded buses, crowded streets, cinema theaters; using sexually abusive/taunting language or movie songs when a woman walks past men (or a man), or grabbing a woman's breast (from the street, through the car window) when her cab stops at a traffic jam in broad daylight. It is called eve teasing to refer to acts of relatively 'less' violent nature (versus a more public act, like stripping a woman of all her clothes in a public place).

Women often deal with such behavior by including sharp objects (a ruler, pen, protractor from a geometry box) as part of their/our daily arsenal. Women's elbows also come in handy in crowded buses. Also, women carry books or bulky bags in front of their chest to avoid being touched from the front. I often walk around Calcutta streets with a tightly rolled poster or newspaper to give a frontal-sword like effect. There are also some brave women who react in physical ways such as: a swift kick or box, shaking the man by the collar or loudly questioning his sexual repression (and generally, a crowd of men from around will gather around the eve-teaser and beat him up for assaulting a sister).

Also, I have often heard some of my uncles talk about their tactics and successes in public places to touch the forbidden--women especially since women and men still are quite segregated from one another in much of India. The frequency and general reception of eve-teasing in many regions in India is as expected and frequent as encountering a tea stall.



**Nalini:** "Yes, but not so much. This kind of stuff will not happen in more developed cities like Delhi, Bombay or even Ahmedabad. There is more unemployment here and these boys and men hang around in bunches and call ladies names. Once I nearly complained to the police. I told one chap, who thought I might have been a young girl from the back, 'Mamma ka ghar jayega?' ["You want to go to Mamma's house?"] So he got scared and went away. Such a young boy and he is doing all this. Maybe he has learnt this from Hindi movies or other men in the para [neighborhood]."

**Suparna:** "Who is Mamma? Uncle? Whose uncle?"

**Nalini:** "Oh Mamma is just a code word for police. You see now they have laws for eve teasing."

**Suparna:** "In Cal? They actually do something about eve teasing?"

**Nalini:** "Well, no. Actually, you just make a complaint to the police...they write it down and do nothing. Police in Calcutta are the most corrupt in this country. They will not do anything for civilians who really need help. I found this out in other ways when gundas<sup>5</sup> were harassing us to vacate our flat. After my father died, I had to deal with all this alone. The police will do nothing...you see, they have ties with the gundas. You want something so you go to the dadas.<sup>6</sup> Every area has a dada...you do too, don't you? Usually women don't have to deal with them directly...but sometimes you have to. So I went to the dada of the opposition and my problem was immediately solved. Now if I have any problem I go to them. Why should I go to the police?"

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<sup>5</sup>Local gang members.

<sup>6</sup>Another term for local gang members, sometimes a gang leader.

Everywhere we go my mother will try and get friendly with people who are strangers--I know immediately what she is up to. Sometimes we will be travelling in a train or we may go to a friend's house. Her interest is in finding out whether they have a son or know someone for me. Sometimes it is funny. And I understand what she is feeling, after all she is your mother and she has your interests at heart. She says 'What will happen to you when I die? Who will look after you? Now I have you to look after me in my old age, when your turn comes, then what?' This really made me wonder about the value of friendship. In school and college we had such intensely close friendships. I couldn't imagine being without my best friend at any point in my life. It was almost a sacred bond. There were films and stories about friends (especially in adult life) giving up their lives for their best friends. But now friends fit a certain purpose. When you finish school you settle down. Friends come much later. But you are never their first or second priority like before.

My mother tells me that she can only die in peace after I am married. What can I do? I have had to reject some of these proposals. Everything nearly went through but he did not want my mother with us when we got married. I will not leave my mother for him. She is part of me and my family. I know there was something wrong--if he cannot accept my mother, god knows what else he will do after marriage...and what kind of person would make you choose between him or your mother? If he asks me to give up my job--OK I will do that. After all we all have to adjust a little sometime in our life. But I know I would go mad sitting at home--doing housework only. Mind you, housework is very difficult and I have always had to work inside and outside the house--but I

have always had my mother's help at home. She always cooks for us. But I have always worked and been independent."

### **Conclusion**

The themes of duty, tradition and/or shame inform all of these narratives. These issues are directly tied into the identity of being and becoming an Indian woman. The deep internalization of the ritual of marriage is striking. Marriage is at once a rite of passage and the ticket to an adult identity. Deviating from this norm is unimaginable, and considered going against 'the way things are,' and considered a loss of one's primary identity. One cannot remain a girl all of one's life (i.e., be unmarried). This underdevelopment (i.e., lack of adulthood and noncompletion of duty) in a woman's life reflects the failure of one's parents (in the case of arranged marriage) or failure of one's parents and self (in the case of love marriage).

The issue of shame is also particularly striking, even when some women know that this (obligatory marriage) is something they do not want to do. Some of the women are the sole providers in their families and have sacrificed their happiness (like getting married) to take care of their families. The sacrifice has left them ambivalent about arranged or love marriage, versus being economically and emotionally independent. Through these stories, I have attempted to demonstrate how the discourse of marriage saturates women's consciousness through notions of duty, shame, failure, natural rite of passage and sacrifice.

## Chapter Six

### Interpreting, Inverting and Inventing Tradition Three Modes of Resistance

The ideology and structural relations that facilitate the maintenance of the idea of the *new Indian woman of the 1990s* simultaneously and contradictorily juggles what is understood as *traditional* and *Westernized* or *authentic* and *foreign*. In the previous chapters, I examined how the notions of *the new Indian woman of the 1990s* pushed the boundaries of spaces that were previously considered *Western* or *Westernized*. I suggest that labelling certain behavior in Indian women as *Western* is a way of attributing disloyalty. Indian women were being disloyal to their nation, tradition, culture or civilization. Furthermore, at each successive historical moment in patriarchal ideology, what counts as being an Indian woman exists and is constituted by a coexisting disloyal and thus stigmatized identity. This chapter explores this identity.

Drawing from several conversations with Indian women, I have chosen the term 'sakhi' to refer to women who have chosen to live their lives (especially their adult lives) together as close friends (maitri, sahele), lovers (shamakami, lesbians, khush,), 'soul mates,' and partners in 'marriage.' By doing so, I run the risk of homogenizing complexities, and so I use it cautiously. But with the term sakhi, I hope to bring to the forefront resistance to the heterosexual-patriarchal imaginary. As a field of meaning, this space is examined in the following ways: (1) I look at particular representations (specifically the print medium<sup>1</sup>) that reproduce and impose

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<sup>1</sup>I focus primarily on print accounts in local newspapers (many translated into English from Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali and Malayalam by local activists) and I look at a popular novel by Shobha De which has had excerpts printed in local magazines.

heteropatriarchal reality. These representations embody the inability of patriarchal thinking to imagine bonds (sambandham) between women that defy heterosexual logic. They also illustrate how sakhis are at once erased, excluded and stigmatized *Others* of patriarchal culture and its ideologies of the new Indian woman.(2) Within the system of meanings that the news remakes and perpetuates I present stories and conversations with three women/activists. All three women self-identify as lesbian and feminist. All three women live in urban centers and come from middle-class families. Together we/they reflect upon their life stories and the news accounts of shamakamis, maitris and sakhis.

Marilyn Frye demonstrates the many ways in which institutions and conceptual schemes of dominant reality, namely within hetero-patriarchy, maintains, sustains and reproduces itself in "complex and paradoxical" ways (Frye, 1983). According to Frye, institutions "are humanly designed patterns of access-- access to persons and their services" as well as "artifacts of definitions" (Frye, 1983:107). The nexus of institutionalized access and its conceptual apparatus that defines citizenship and membership in heteropatriarchy deals with women and lesbians in different ways. Frye notes that:

the predicament of women apropos the dominant reality is complex and paradoxical, as is revealed in women's mundane experience of the seesaw of demand and neglect, of being romanced and assaulted, of being courted and being ignored (Frye, 1983:163).  
and  
we are on the other hand regularly and systematically invited, seduced, cajoled, coerced and even paid to be in intimate and constant association with men and their projects (Frye, 1983:166).

The "seesaw of demand and neglect" ensures that women's exclusion from patriarchal culture is not "simple and absolute." This paradoxical situation can be seen within the tensions of what counts as an authentic or traditional Indian woman,

a Westernized woman and the new woman of the 1990s. This tension frames what women can access (for example, have a 'choice' to have love marriages or arranged marriages), invest their/our energies into (for example, "choosing" to be beauty queens or join the women's caucus of the party opposing beauty contests in India) and be committed to. Furthermore, Frye maintains that the situation for lesbians "is radically different." Lesbians are excluded and erased from this scheme and are exiles.

Lesbians are not invited to join--the family, the party, the project, the procession, the war effort. There is a place for a woman in every game. Wife, secretary, servant, prostitute, daughter, assistant, babysitter, mistress, seamstress, proof-reader, nurse, confidant, masseuse, indexer, typist, mother. Any of these is a place for a woman, and women are much encouraged to fill them. None of these is a place for a lesbian (Frye, 1983:166).

Both realities of print and everyday life show the variety of ways in which women/sakhis make lives without husbands, and more specifically with other women. This chapter documents the consequences of attempting this dangerous practice and the inability of many people (including the liberal media) to imagine why women do this or whether or not some of these women are really women. Once again the issue of tradition, nature, authenticity, womanhood and Indian-ness become contentious issues when sakhi's resist normative sexuality. Important to the self-sustenance of the new Indian women of the 1990s is an Other. In this case, the Other is a sakhi. An Other that is paradoxically and simultaneously unnatural, uncivilized, uneducated, hyperwesternized, elitist and overeducated. I shall explore this paradox in the next section.

## **Is Sexuality A Luxury in the Third World?**

*"India lives at the level of discharge. When things get too hot, there is more discharge. Do you ever wonder why we have the world's largest movie industry? This country has managed to invent and mythologize the procreative logic and at the same time hide behind sexuality. Who we are and what we do--usually brainwashed as duty, religion or marriage--is to procreate. If there was any sexual identity it is simply based on procreation. How come sexuality is such a taboo--and I mean any sexual identity like heterosexuality or lesbian sexuality--in a culture that has such a long tradition of recognizing different forms of eros and ecstasy? Take heterosexuality for instance-how many Indians even would recognize they have a sexuality? People just learn how to become male or female in order to get married and procreate. Wives provide the real capital--children, boy children preferably. Boy children are rural and urban capital for the farmer, the chemical engineer or CEO. So women, especially lesbians, who get out or want to get out of this loop are in danger and are dangerous threats. What good is a girl who is not available for this major economic and political transaction? This may sound crude to many but all this occurs in respectable garb. Women's sexuality is a fundamental economic issue. You have all these fancy NGOs who want to help women get more empowered in India and control their fertility. What's the point of distributing more condoms? They run into husbands, brothers and fathers and in-laws who want to fulfil their economic and religious duties--procreate and have more boy children. They say education will empower women. What kind of education? Okay, say women get more skills as agriculturalists, which most rural and economically disprivileged women know already, aren't they still ingrained to become a wife and caretaker for their husband, children and parents? It is not a shared responsibility, as it should*

*be. But this just will double or triple their workload. If women want a life autonomous of the procreative logic, as unmarried women or as friends or lovers, they are in an economically Catch-22 situation. If you don't participate in heterosexuality, you lose the privileges of being a wife or mother, or if you leave your family of origin, you lose the advantages of other male protection --from your father or brother. But if you stay with your family of origin or participate in heterosexuality as wife and mother, you are trained to be economically and culturally dependent on male protection. This is felt most by middle-class women when they lose a husband or divorce. Women become women by being trained to depend upon and serve men. It's a Catch-22."*

(Conversation with Giti Thadani, independent scholar and activist)

Membership has its privileges. That is membership in marriage and heterosexuality. Even though this membership is invisible and taken for granted as a fact of life.

As most people see it, being heterosexual is just being. It is not interpreted. It is not understood as a consequence of anything. It is not viewed as possibly a solution to some problem, or as a way of acting and feeling which one worked out or was pushed by circumstances. On this sort of view all women are heterosexual, and some women somehow come to act otherwise. On this view, no one is, in the same sense, a lesbian (Frye, 1983:159).

And any resistance to this invisible sexuality or sexual practice/identity by lesbians or sakhis in modern India is viewed with much horror. The dismissal, demonization, pathologizing, exclusion and erasure of sakhis occurs in different ways. One way is the economic argument. Many middle-class people in India of many political persuasions often remark that lesbianism is representative of the elite class's Western impersonations. So therefore what is *Western* automatically is



assumed to be decadent and superfluous. Often feminists, lesbians and/or autonomous women in India are silenced by statements like: feminism and most importantly lesbianism are western and bourgeois products. There is no indigenous concept or language for autonomous female sexuality, desire or being. I use the term autonomous to include those women who resist being women of the heteropatriarchal culture and economy. Or statements such as paying any attention to matters of female sexuality and male supremacy is a luxury and that the *real* issues in a Third World nation are poverty, the environment, development, education and population control,--all of which are supposedly not within a political economy of sex and sexuality. In the next section, I demonstrate these commonplace sentiments, along with connected mythologies, through Shobha De's popular novel.

### **Shobha De's Strange Obsessions**

Cultural artifacts embody, represent, manage and maintain reality at various historical junctures. Cultural artifacts are part of popular, mainstream, dominant, oppositional, and day-to-day aspects of lived culture. A product that embodies and represents the tensions of post/neo colonial heteropatriarchy is Shobha De's pulp novel *Strange Obsession*. This pulp novel provides me an avenue with which to explore the connections specific cultural artifacts and their meanings have with the political reality in which they are produced. *Strange Obsession* has as its central character the new Indian Woman (of the 1990s) sometimes in conflict with her earlier incarnations and often combining present and past forms. Most importantly, *Strange Obsession* elaborately imagines and creates for us Indian women's Other--the nonwoman, the unnatural, the un-Indian, hyperurban,

ultraWesternized, upper-class, man hating, man aping, asexual and hypersexual, national anomaly--the lesbian. For the protagonist, Amrita Aggarwal, who champions the essence of the new Indian woman of the 1990s, the antihero--the lesbian--is her *raison d'être*. Just as the savage was anthropology's *raison d'être*, so the lesbian allows for the possibility of the discourse on cultural authenticity and respectable womanhood. And she (Amrita) needs to be saved from this homicidal, psychotic, obsessive, unnatural, repulsive aberration.

Shobha De's novel, *Strange Obsession*, was published in 1992 by Penguin Books, a booming multinational publishing house in India. Shobha De was born in India and educated in psychology at St. Xavier's College in Bombay. Since 1988, she has written the following novels: *Socialite Evenings*, *Starry Nights and Sisters*. She also is the founder, editor and contributor to several women's magazines in India.

Amrita Aggarwal is an aspiring model from a middle-class Punjabi family in Delhi. She *looks* and *acts* like the new woman of a liberalized India. Most importantly, she is beautiful and pleasing to the eye.

Perhaps it was the golden glints dancing in her tawny eyes or the radiance and freshness, she exuded each time she turned her head to face someone. Or, perhaps, it was the litheness of her magnificently structured body, with its long, toast brown legs, narrow waist, and breasts that stood out--proud, high and firm...However, it was when Amrita laughed, throwing back her head and allowing her rich mane of hair to flow around her face like the sea, that she was irresistible. Amrita knew the effect it had on people... and that always made her laugh some more (De, 1992:3).

Considering that some of the most accessible jobs in urban India for women are modelling, secretarial, or receptionist work at hotels, banks and travel agencies--to be pleasing to the eye is important capital.

Amrita is the 'new New woman'; she works for pay outside the home. She

is also leaving her parents' home for a job in Mumbai (Bombay). Usually, the primary reason a girl/woman leaves her parents' home is to get married and make a home with her husband. The new New woman is one who can express her [hetero]sexual identity. She no longer has to settle for arranged marriages, she can 'choose' to go for love marriages, have boyfriends in the open, and discuss sexual problems with her peers. She can have more than one man in her lifetime. She can actually have sex, openly, before marriage. She does not have to go through the pain and trauma of getting permission from her family to go out with boys. These are the perks of modernity, Westernization, liberalization and middle-to upper middle-class privilege. And, as a model, she is also a new kind of representative and embodiment of India.

After Amrita's first day of work, Minx was waiting for her outside across the street in her jeep. Meenakshi Iyengar or Minx introduced herself as the Bombay Police Inspector General's daughter. Minx was also the queen of the Bombay underground with several dada (hooligans, leaders of gangs) and corrupt police friends. Minx was ethnically a Tamilian (from Southern India) but was a native of Mumbai. Amrita was delighted that her new friend in Bombay was there to give her a ride home.

Minx's courtship of Amrita had begun. The next day Amrita received a bouquet with a note that said, "to your eyes." Minx was once again present all through the next day's shoot and waited afterwards to bring Amrita home. The third day Amrita finds one pair of her panties are missing, but realizes with amusement that her new friend Minx is up to some pranks, since Minx had also left behind a telltale musk-scented handkerchief. However, on the fourth day Amrita's amusement vanishes when she finds a crystal vase with a black stemmed rose with

a diamond ring inside the rose petals in her bedroom. On the fifth day she finds another present from Minx in her freezer. The gift is a chopped off, but very fresh, calf's heart tied with a red satin bow.

Minx rapidly permeates and invades every possible moment of Amrita's life. Minx begins to keep tabs on Amrita's whereabouts and religiously stalks her. No one in Mumbai dared to confront Minx, who incited fear and repulsion. However, Amrita finally decides to confront Minx, especially after receiving yet another gift - a pair of silk underwear with the message "wear them and think of me."

That is it!," Amrita snarled, "I don't want to be your friend. Why can't you accept that? We can never be friends. You are weird. Abnormal. I knew girls like you at school. (De, 1992:22)

To which Minx responded:

Abnormal? What are you talking about? You think I'm a bloody lesbian, don't you? Well, guess what? You are wrong. And so are all of them who've been telling you that. I'm not a dyke. I am not kinky. And I'm certainly not crazy. Don't ask me to explain it to you - but I am in love with you. I love you. I adore you. It is not sexual. I don't want to go to bed with you. All I want is to be around you. That's all. You'll have to accept my presence in your life. You see Amrita, you have become a part of me. You live right here in my body. I can feel your presence inside me all the time. Today it's a helpless dumb animal's heart in your fridge. Who knows, tomorrow it could be mine. Don't play with my life Amrita. You'll regret it. (1992:22)

Amrita's fears were put temporarily on hold and things looked up socially for her when she is "savagely kissed" by the "ultra-macho" "boytoy" model Rover the Rogue. Rover the Rogue was "maddeningly handsome" and "it was his utter lack of interest in anybody other than himself that she [Amrita] found disturbing and fascinating at the same time." Nevertheless Amrita falls in love with Rover the Rogue, despite the fact that he was a "narcissistic bore," and especially since they had painful yet pleasurable sex, and he wore crotch-hugging pants and had "Richard

Gere eyes." After Rover the Rogue decided to break off the relationship, Minx had him brutally beaten up and left to rot in his excrement and blood in a prison cell. Minx refrained from "chopping off Rover the Rogue's balls" or even the death by "bamboo up their ass" treatment (De, 1992:40). Minx also protected Amrita from other women (especially models) who may have taken away modeling assignments from Amrita. For example, Minx threw acid on Lola's (an aspiring model) face and minced up Lola's insides with a switch-blade shoved up her vagina (De, 1992:68).

Minx's stalking of Amrita enters a new phase when she pledges herself to Amrita at an old church, by slitting her (Minx's) wrist and placing her blood on her (Amrita's) "mang" (forehead). The practice of putting red powder or sindoor on a woman's forehead is a North Indian ritual which symbolizes the woman's marital and thereby reproductive status. Also, Minx's control over Amrita increases in intensity after being raped by Minx in her (Amrita's) parents home. After their first sexual encounter, a jubilant Minx goes to the local Kali temple, sacrifices a goat and dances around the goddess with bloody hands, and also purchases a ring for Amrita.

The experience of actually having sex with Minx made Amrita feel completely trapped whereby "her future was inextricably linked with" Minx. In Mumbai, Amrita moves into Minx's apartment and 'let' Minx manage Amrita's earning, career, and retirement plans. Amrita was isolated from others and was given a monthly shopping allowance. If Minx suspected Amrita was disobedient, she would fly into a rage and beat up Amrita, have violent sex, get Amrita drunk and videotape her in the nude. This was then followed by apologies and unusual and expensive gifts from Minx. Minx also warned Amrita to stay away from men or else they would become hijras. (Hijras are a community of castrated men in

India; the English concept that would be closest to the notion of hijras would be eunuchs or intersexed peoples.)

Shobha De's text reads like a standard pulp novel colonized within a postcolonial master code. It's two main characters--Amrita and Minx--bring to light the tensions of being disloyal to the heterosexual contract. Amrita being the upper-middle-class, urban, explicitly heterosexual (for Indian standards), 'Westernized,' model, who very much embodies the liberated/liberalized Indian woman of the 1990s. The character of Minx is perhaps the first-ever explicitly lesbian character imagined in a novel produced for consumption in mainstream popular culture. She is the antihero, self-hating, upper-middle class, urban and Westernized very much like Amrita. But what really makes Minx pathological and yet undecipherable to human perception is her lesbian-ness imagined and invented by Shobha De. Minx drives a jeep, has a sardonic laugh, smokes imported cigarettes, does not wear a bra, wears basic black clothes, hates her large breasts and hangs out with dadas and cops. She stalks, hunts, rapes, batters and makes nude videos of women, especially aspiring models. She also mutilates and tortures men who stand in her way. The only time she seems feminine or not ugly is when she remembers being raped and beaten at the age of thirteen by her father.

Amrita, on the other hand, had all the qualities of a woman who would be given a place within patriarchal reality but obviously could not escape predators. She has long hair (her mane), she's thin, she falls in love with men (remember Rover the Rogue) and most of all she is a "gorgeous young super-model." She is well packaged for her slot. She is "modern" in some ways, which could be a plus or minus depending on the men. She is in a profession that is very suitable and appealing to patriarchy. But her paradoxical existence in patriarchy depends on the

othering of lesbians as pathological or invisible. Due to the contradictory nature of patriarchy, if one is too modern a woman (that is, you would leave your parents' home unmarried and with a job) you would be subjected to all kinds of predators on the prowl (like men or Minx), or you would be corrupted and a predator (a she-man like Minx).

Another dynamic in this equation is the North Indian Amrita v.s. the South Indian Minx. Although this theme may not be all that overt in De's novel--North Indian hegemony (thus the North Indian Amrita and South Indian Minx) is part and parcel of Indian life. Additionally, the novel demonstrates Shobha De's *strange obsession* with the metropole and interpretation of Western ways of social-sexual behavior. Characters smoked imported cigarettes and hoarded imported chocolates. Amrita is asked by one of her male lovers to go get some sun on her legs. That is an unusual statement to make in India. Usually in India one is told to get out of the hot sun since that would make one's complexion darker, since fairer skin is more valued. The valuing of fairer skin represents internalized racism and "getting some sun on her legs" represents the paradoxical adoption of a white Euro-American practice--both having a history with the metropole. Finally, the valorizing of northern-vedic-brahmanical ideology is once again seen when Minx dances around Goddess Kali. Kali and her different forms (via other goddesses) are usually strongly popular in eastern and southern India.

While Amrita may have aroused admiration, Minx provoked repulsion. Minx was a deficient woman and an incomplete man. As an incomplete man, she dealt with this handicap with excessive man-like behavior (namely pursuing and sexually wanting women) by being hyperviolent and over-sexual. Minx's behavior makes it hard to imagine her as a *real* woman. Minx's sameness to a man was symbolized in

the following ways: she drove a jeep, and it is not all that common to see women in India driving any vehicle; she smoked imported cigarettes, and one does not see too many women who smoke openly in public; she primarily wore jeans, jackets and boots, western garb usually reserved for Indian men; she did not have a "mane" like Amrita and short hair is often symbolic of the loss of womanhood; she did not wear a bra, in fact she hated her breasts and often wanted to tie them down; she had sexual feelings usually for heterosexual women, especially models; she was never sexually attracted to any men; she was aggressive with men, in fact hung out with cops and dadas; she stalked, battered, raped and controlled just like a predator/or dysfunctional man; and she was possessive and territorial of her woman, whom she pursued relentlessly and managed. In all of these ways Minx was also not a woman. But the only time during which Minx appeared feminine (to Amrita) was when she was a victim of rape and battery, or when she was nurturing, i.e., finding out Amrita's favorite recipes from her mother. Minx's rape was possibly a heterosexist explanation of why she 'became' a lesbian or it's corollary--why she hated men.

While Amrita is trapped playing housewife to Minx, Amrita's mother actively seeks a suitable boy for Amrita, despite discouragement from her husband and sons, who feel that a modern girl like Amrita who has lived in Mumbai, has probably chosen a man all on her own and would not go for an arranged marriage. Nevertheless, Mrs. Aggarwal finds the perfect boy, quite accidentally during one of her husband's business dinners--Rakesh Bhatia, a successful businessman and NRI (Non-Resident Indian or Greencard holder) from New York. NRIs are probably some of the hottest commodities to barter with the transaction of arranged marriages or love marriages. The political economy of this transnational transaction is strong and thriving amongst Indians all over the globe, and is considered a very



lucrative and traditional practice. A practice that embodies all properties of dutiful essential Indian-ness. "[M]y girl, she's a good child. She'll marry the man Papa and I find for her," declares Mrs. Aggarwal to the rest of her family (De, 1992:136). Rakesh was easily convinced to fly out to Bombay and check out his future bride.

Although Amrita was opposed to the marriage since Minx would either end up killing or castrating men interested in Amrita, she heard the magic word--New York. The U.S. was Amrita's ticket out of Minx's clutches. When Amrita sneaks out to meet 'the boy,' Minx catches them and ends their lunch date at gunpoint and sexually violent punishment for Amrita. When Amrita wakes up in a hospital the next day she is greeted by Rakesh, who had figured it all out and rescued her.

After a smooth marriage ceremony in Delhi (and a brief fire, set by Minx, in the room adjacent to Amrita and Rakesh's honeymoon suite at the Oberoi Hotel), Amrita and Rakesh go on their honeymoon to Nainital, a hill station in India. The honeymoon is interrupted when Rakesh is kidnapped and held hostage by Minx. After torturing Rakesh and sexually assaulting Amrita, who shows up a little later, in a "psychotic trance" Minx begins wildly dancing and sets the whole shack on fire. The police, specifically Minx's father, arrive and rescue all three, but Minx is hurt the most and needs to be hospitalized.

Amrita, still the concerned friend, confronts Minx's father for physically and sexually abusing his daughter. Mr. Iyengar's (Minx's father) sadness over his daughter's terrible lies made Amrita understand how "deranged and pathetic" Minx really was. The novel ends with a pregnant Amrita and Rakesh who return to Delhi from New York after a two-year period for a holiday. Amrita catches the day's headlines in *The Hindustan Times*--"Meenakshi Iyengar passed away on 7th of

August in Bombay under tragic conditions. No condolences please." After reading the headline De concludes: "Amrita was free at last" (De, 1992:208).

Shobha De's bestselling novel represents post/neo-colonial India's multiple and paradoxical forms of patriarchal culture. De's novel reveals and represents a modern form of heterosexism that is quite Westernized and elitist. In many ways Shobha De's life, as an ex-model from Mumbai, resembles Amrita. All of her writings (novels and articles in newspapers and magazines, and television interviews) suggest an affinity with the upper class and *strange obsession* with Hollywood/Bollywood culture.

De's novel is directed primarily at upper-class and middle-class, urban and heterosexual women. In a paradoxical way, De implies that lesbianism is an aberration and by product of too much *Western style* freedom, power, money and mimicry. Further, De introduces and titillates her readers with her hybridized (Indian-Western) forms of lesbophobia. This form of assimilationist hybridized (Indian-Western) thinking assumes the Indian evolution towards western forms of modern heterosexuality as progress, more freedom and enlightenment. De's classism and affinity with this assimilationist Western-style heterosexism cannot imagine that *sakhis* exist in India. The classist assumption is that sexual identity is immaterial to women, especially rural and working-class women (since they only have to worry about basics, supposedly disconnected from sexual and gender politics, like food and water), but that it is possible for the modern Indian upper-class woman (who has more time to explore her freedom and enlightened ways of being). I explore such assumptions ahead by analyzing and describing several media accounts that have emerged since the late 1980s in India-- that have been documented and archived at Sakhi, a feminist, lesbian resource center in New

Delhi. But prior to addressing the news accounts, I would like to introduce a conversation with one of Sakhi's activists.

### **Finding The Language**

Today I (Suparna) was going to meet Geetanjali for the first time in almost 11 years. Geetanjali was a year my senior at school. One thing that I, and most probably many of her and my peers, remember about her is the 'running away' incident. There were other things that I remember about Geetanjali--she seemed not to follow the rules--at least the ones defined for her sex/gender. She was unlike most girls--never tongue-tied or nervous around boys nor was she giggly and flirtatious. I think she liked to think of herself as a hero or a filmi hero<sup>2</sup> around girls. She was very popular among the very popular girls and boys. And it didn't hurt that she came from an upper-class family.

The running away incident happened when we were in La Martiniere, in 1983. I was in Class 11 and Geetanjali was in Class 12. It was 6:00 p.m. on an August evening--my father had just returned home after work. He, my mother and I were sitting around the dining table drinking hot tea and fighting over a bowl of channa choor (snacks). Suddenly, Meera burst into the room exclaiming, "have you heard what happened?!!!" Meera was our neighbor and was in the same year in school as Geetanjali. Apparently Geetanjali and Kavita (a classmate and close friend) had run away from home together after cutting a half day at school. "But why? Where did they go? For how long?" I asked, somewhat excited and scared. "What a thing to do to your parents! They come from good families, why would

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<sup>2</sup>The word filmi is an Indian English term that describes something or someone as from the world of movies, or the way identities get stereotyped in films.

they so such a thing?” my mother pursued. “Yes it is very perplexing and irresponsible” my father added. “Well, I think it’s just too disgusting!” Meera declared angrily.

“Disgusting!” what an interesting word to describe this event, I thought. That wasn’t the word that would have immediately popped into my mind. The whole thing intrigued me, even scared me, but it did not seem disgusting. Perhaps I should begin to feel disgusted as well, I thought.

It was almost a month--Geetanjali and Kavita were still missing. Their families would place ads in the papers--especially in the Statesman<sup>3</sup>- saying “Please come home--we’ll work things out....we’ll forgive you...we won’t be angry and we will not punish you....we are worried ....please come home daughter.” Every other day in school I would hear reconstructions from peers. “When they ran away they took all their clothes and some money. They hawked some of the clothes--especially their U.S. made jeans, in Free School Street.” U.S.-made jeans and clothes were rare and “hot” commodities on some Calcutta streets.” I think they were spotted near the docks...maybe they hid on a ship to Singapore or Hong Kong” “Where could they be for so long?” “What are they doing? Why?” I would often wonder-how do they manage? Do they have money? Do they know someone who they can stay with? Was running away fun, freeing or dangerous? Are they alive?

One day (almost a month later) there was news that Geetanjali and Kavita were found...more like caught. Once again I began to hear stories through the grapevine...”while they were on the run, they were nearly attacked at the Calcutta

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<sup>3</sup>The Statesman is a Calcutta newspaper.

docks but Geetanjali (the more tomboyish one) beat up their attackers!" "...the police arrested them at a shopping center in Bangalore," "...they contacted a cousin in order to find a place to stay and the cousin notified the parents and the police."

Many of my friends, including myself, were in awe of this whole event. Two schoolgirls, defying parents and school teachers, running away together was unheard of. Also, these two were very popular students, from good families--and this incident seemed to add to their popularity among their peers. There also seemed to be this aura of secrecy that hung around--seemingly untouched. No one really talked about it, but it almost seemed like we knew something was there, it was almost as if 'it' was alright with us in school but it was taboo talking about it. It was taboo talking about anything sexual anyway. But not everyone felt okay about the sexual aura that clung to the running away incident. It was obvious to me why Meera had said that it was "disgusting." My first thought was she was too anglicized or western in her attitudes and behavior. At first, I didn't really know why that was what I thought, and felt as a 15-year-old high school student. But on reflecting later, I realized that both young women and men in India, who are segregated most of their lives, have very passionate relationships. But increasingly, the more westernized kids ridiculed that closeness. Also, many of us at school recognized that such close, same-sex, deep friendships were often quite erotic and very prevalent. Occasionally, some of us openly discussed these relationships with great pride, amusement and secrecy, but with no shame. Sometimes ambivalence and shame came in when we used an English concept (like homosexuality) to describe these relationships.

What they had done was courageous and almost romantic, some of us thought. But on the other hand, some of us also secretly wondered about this new

English category “the homosexual”--wasn’t that supposed to be abnormal and sick? Does it still hold true for people who we like and look up to? For the time being some of us ignored the other evidence pertaining to sickness and abnormalcy.

Years later, after I finished high school and undergraduate college, I was reminded of Geetanjali and Kavita once again. In May 1993, at a film series in Ann Arbor, I saw Geetanjali on screen! She was in a film called *Khush* directed by Pratibha Parmar, a feminist film maker from Britain. The word *khush* in Hindi can be interpreted as happy and therefore ‘gay.’ The film was about transnational Indian gay and lesbian lives and struggles.

In Calcutta, while doing my research I saw her again. One of the first things I asked Geetanjali was about the running away incident. The following section describes our conversation:

**Geetanjali:** “We were in love and our close friends knew about this. They would always find ways to help us meet and hang out. Kavita’s parents were very strict. One day her father discovered what was going on and barred us from ever seeing each other. There was also talk about him finding mental help for Kavita. We went about not seeing each other (outside of school) and one day on the spur of the moment we decided to run away together. We were sick and tired of running around scared. So we did it. We just ran away. Eventually we got caught and the same rules of not seeing one another were put upon us by Kavita’s parents and my parents. My father was quite tolerant. I don’t think he approved of what we did, but he knew about me...”

**Suparna:** *"Knew what? That you were into girls not boys?"*

**Geetanjali:** “Well yes, in a way. I knew I was different when I was 3 or so. I always found women and girls more beautiful--I had crushes on actresses in the

movies and girls around me. I also had a relationship with a female cousin. When I was around 10 or 11, I wanted to have a sex-change operation. I told my father about it. My father and I were very close and I told him everything. I wasn't close to my mother. He seemed really calm and handled this request very well. He said, why don't you wait until you are 21 and then let's think about the operation. But, by the time I turned 21, I realized that I could be a woman and love women. I didn't have to have a man's body to do that. Although all around me only boys were encouraged to be involved sexually--usually through marriage -with a woman."

*Suparna: "You and Kavita were banned from seeing one another? "*

**Geetanjali:** " "Oh yes, but we eventually began meeting in Malini's house or Ujjwala's house. Ujjwala was really sweet--she would arrange outings and help us spend time with one another."

*Suparna: "So where is Kavita now? "*

**Geetanjali:** "Well, I ended up going to college in the United States. And Kavita went to college in Bombay. After college she got married to this guy in Bombay. Her parents made her go see a psychiatrist--to cure her of this mental disorder. I'm not sure if she really was cured. She ended up doing what her parents and society wants--she got married and got a husband. You know I met her just before she got married. I think we will still have a special place for one another in our hearts. She's told her fiance about us and he seems okay about it. It's somewhat funny when I think about it now, but it was really painful and sad for us while we were being separated by one thing or the other."

*Suparna: "Geetanjali, have you heard about these incidents of "lesbian marriages" all over India? Especially in villages and small towns?"*

**Geetanjali:** "Yes, some of them. I think relationships between women and women are really prevalent in India. After all we are still quite segregated! Although it may be a problem to use the term lesbian?"

**Suparna:** *"Why?"*

**Geetanjali:** "Well I found out about it and saw lesbians in the West! The lesbian movement in the United States is strong compared to here--they face different problems. In the West it's very difficult for similar genders to be affectionate with one another--there is so much antagonism between women. Especially since they are all fighting to get men's attention! But with the American lesbians, they try so hard not to be straight women that they make what lesbian means very narrow. The term lesbian is so rigid in some ways--not fluid. Here it seems too easy to flirt with women. But here there aren't appropriate words to describe what is going on--I am often considered the boy or referred to in masculine verbs in a particular relationship. Women talk about jodis [pairs/couples] or marriages because that's the only available framework for relationships that include something sexual. So we have to work within that framework sometimes."

**Suparna:** *"So would you say you became a lesbian because you went to the West?"*

*And you were something else before then?*

**Geetanjali:** "Well, I just find the word not too helpful in the Indian context. Women are involved with women everywhere here. This is not to say that I don't identify as a lesbian--so it's a matter of finding the language. We need names, words...pretty much the language to describe and capture our feelings, desires and emotions. Women desiring women is an old Indian tradition."



### **Three Modes of Resistance**

The following section describes and analyzes the representations of sakhis by the mainstream news media. Within these representations, I find subtexts of resistance, which I broadly characterize as three different (but interconnected) modes of resistance by sakhis to hetero-patriarchy.<sup>4</sup> I do not want to suggest that all three modes of resistance imply that all of the women were involved sexually or that they identified as lesbians. What I do think is that in all cases two women wanted to live their lives together in a culture that could not imagine women without husbands. All of these incidents have occurred in working-class families and in small towns. Furthermore, only some of the women were fluent in English (in addition to their native tongue). Also, all the reports suggest that the women were in relationships that included an erotic element.

The first mode has been to get married at temples or marriage registries. In some cases, immediate family and friends have been supportive, but then the couple run into problems with government officials. In other cases, a family member (in this case a woman's father) has cited Section 377 to prevent the two women from being with one another. Also, the media attention from urban centers has often resulted in outright denial of any lesbian element in the relationship (by the partners or family members) and/or has resulted in a separation to avoid local punishment and ridicule. A second mode of resistance has been suicide. In many cases, this has involved high school or college students who have, at the end of their studies, realized impending separation due to heterosexual marriage. Often they have left

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<sup>4</sup>All of these cases are from newspaper clippings from several national and local newspapers (in English and the vernacular languages such as Hindi, Malayalam, Gujarati and Bengali). Many of these clippings were from collections at the Sakhi Archives.

behind love letters indicating their love for each other. The third mode of resistance has been to form a maitri karar (or a friendship contract) with the state to allow for the possibility of two unrelated adult women to live together and build lives together. Unrelated unmarried women often run into difficulty when they want to live together (either as lovers or friends). This is so because it is assumed by many that they are prostitutes since they are not with a husband or living with their family of origin.

### **A. Marriages**

This section describes and interprets four cases of what I characterize as press reports of marriages. All four were found at the Sakhi Archives in New Delhi. The first case (Urmilla and Leela) was documented the most by newspapers. In each instance, I directly transcribe and sometimes quote from the news report, and at the end of the section provide analysis and interpretation. Despite the heterosexism of the reports, in all three modes (Marriages, Suicides, and Friendship Contracts), I read the subtext of a kinship that breaks with heterosexual kinship (based on blood and marriage), where women value a commitment (emotional, intellectual and/or erotic) to one another, and where adult identity is not fundamentally dependent on, and defined primarily by, heterosexual marriage.

#### **Case 1: The Marriage of Urmilla and Leela**

The wedding of 2 women constables early this week has caused considerable embarrassment to the Madhya Pradesh Police. Mrs. Leela Namdeo (28 years) and Mrs. Urmilla Shrivastava (28 years), two police constables of the Twenty Third Battalion, in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, got married in December 1987. Leela the bride was a widow of a constable with 3 children. Her difficult life prompted her to join the police force. Urmilla, the groom is a resident of a village near Jabalpur and is a child-bride. She was married off when she was 3 years old and when she came of age she refused to accept her husband. She too joined the police force as "a way out of a tense situation" with her family and community.

On joining the police force both women were harassed and subjected to

discriminatory treatment-especially since they were unmarried women--one a widow and the other a child-bride who had deserted her husband. The two women had become close over a period of 18 months and suddenly hit up on the idea of marriage. They took a week's leave and during this period the lesbian marriage was solemnized as per Hindu rites with god as witness at Sagar last week, in the presence of the couple's friends. Their parents gave their consent to the marriage and were also present at the marriage ceremony.

On returning to the barracks, they declared themselves as 'man and wife' and their shocked colleagues immediately informed their superiors. The embarrassed authorities could not talk to them directly but asked guards to keep a strict watch over them. Urmilla, the husband, was dressed in well-cut male attire of Jeans and a T-shirt and Leela, the bride, was dressed in the traditional bridal dress and jewelry with lots of sindoor in her hair and a big red bindi on her forehead.

*(The Indian Express, 7 May, 1988)*

**Comment:**

Leela and Urmilla affirmed their friendship and commitment to each other by getting married at a Hindu temple. At the temple, they exchanged garlands at a gandharva ceremony. According to Giti Thadani, there have been many different traditions of marriage. One form was the gandharva tradition, one that was not contractual. "Gandharvas were celestial musicians and linked to divine erotic traditions. The gandharv form of marriage was based on erotic union with the sex of the partners being unspecified" (conversation with Giti Thadani). Both their parents supported their decision and were present at the temple. At the barracks, the news of their marriage resulted in immediate questioning, isolation (without food for forty-eight hours) and discharge. Leela and Urmilla were also "coerced into signing papers they had not read" (Anu and Thadani, 1993:83). After their dismissal, Leela and Urmilla were dropped off at the railway station at 2:00 am. The news of Leela and Urmilla's discharge without notice or any real cause catalyzed much urban media attention. The following interviews are excerpts from *The Illustrated Weekly of India* (May, 1988).

**Interview With Urmilla:**

**Q. Is it true that you were abandoned at the railway station at 12:30 in the night?**

A. Quite late in the evening four or five of them came, took us to a photo studio to be photographed, and left us at the station at about two o'clock in the morning.

**Q. Tell me about your marriage to Leela.**

A. There was no marriage at all. We never got married to each other.

**Q. Then how did the news about your marriage in Sagar originate?**

A. It is all totally false. We were so many girls living together and all of us were having fun this way-pretending that she is my wife etc. Like this, Leela too became my wife. Only for fun, there was nothing serious about it.

**Q. For how many days did you go on leave?**

A. Around five or six days only.

**Q. Was there any particular reason?**

A. I was not well. I even sent them a medical certificate.

**Q. What was wrong with you?**

A. The usual, nothing very serious.

**Q. Isn't it strange that both of you went on leave at the same time, for the same reason?**

A. No, even Leela was not well. Moreover, her uncle had died.....

**Q. Do you hate men?**

A. No, I don't.

**Q. Are you attracted towards women?**

A. No.

**Q. Do you know what the word "lesbian" means?**

A. No.

**Q. You got married when you were a child. What has happened to the marriage now?**

A. The man is not employed. He wanted me to work. But after all this gadbad [trouble and commotion] they wrote calling off the whole thing.

**Q. When did you start dressing like a man?**

A. I have been like this right from my childhood.

**Q. But other girls in your company say you started dressing like a man only after your training. After you met Leela.**

A. It is not true. You can even ask my neighbors.

**Q. Have you asked for reinstatement?**

A. No, I have not.

**Q. Why don't you want to go back?**

A. I do not know of this reinstatement.

**Q. Do you plan to sue the police for your discharge?**

A. Yes, I want to, but I don't know how to go about it.

**Interview with Leela:**

**Q. Tell me about your marriage to Urmilla.**

A. It is all false. There was no marriage, we never got marriage. We are just good friends, nothing more.

**Q. You mean your relationship is not physical?**

A. How can two women have a physical relationship? It is just not possible.

**Q. Then why are you staying here and not with your parents?**

A. I am not staying here permanently. I will be going back today or tomorrow. Also, I keep going to my parents' house to see my children.

**Q. Did you have a happy married life?**

A. You think I would have otherwise had three children?

**Q. It is said that homosexuality is very common among the girls in your company. Is that true?**

A. What you mean has never happened in the barracks. We were so many women staying together, and it was natural that some were more friendly with you than the other girls. Then we used to tease them saying "joda bana liya."<sup>5</sup> When you men are working together don't you get close to anybody?

**Q. How did you get friendly with Urmilla?**

A. It happened during our training. Both of us were feeling quite lonely, and we needed a friend. We just got along well.

**Q. You two are supposed to have gone on a honeymoon together when you were on leave. Where did you go?**

A. What are you saying? How can two girls go on a honeymoon? During our leave we came to Mandi Bamora and from there went to Damoh to meet my parents.

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<sup>5</sup>They are now a couple.

### **Interview with: Mr. Narendra Veermani<sup>6</sup>**

This interview was conducted after Urmilla and Leela were discharged without a departmental inquiry.

**Q. Was their 'marriage' the reason for their discharge?**

A. There was no marriage as such. No solemnization, no formalization, no settlement, no church or mosque. They, of their own accord, while they were undergoing training had this varmala<sup>7</sup> done. While they were here they got themselves photographed in male and female clothes respectively. Both girls have said in their statements to us that they got into the relationship for permanent security. That was the intention.

**Q. The relationship was not physical in any way?**

A. Not at all. That kind of physical relationship that could be between a man and a woman, or even in a person with homosexual tendencies, that was absent here. There was not even touching, kissing, nothing.

**Q. Have there been such cases before?**

A. No, this is the first time that such a thing is happening.

**Q. Maybe it is the first time that such a thing came to light?**

A. No, this has never happened before. In this case, if it had been two men instead of women, even then we would have discharged them. We make no distinction here. We go by our norms of professionalism and discipline.

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<sup>6</sup>The Inspector General of Police, in charge of the Madhya Pradesh Special Armed Forces under which comes the 23rd Battalion.

<sup>7</sup>Exchange of garlands at the temple.

**Q. Wouldn't it have been easier to have transferred them elsewhere?**

This was a policy decision. Even assuming that we had transferred them elsewhere, to different places, they would have insisted on being sent together. All this cannot be conducive to the maintenance of discipline. Such an act has implications that are not realized by civilians. Because we are an armed force we have our own rules and regulations, and high standards to be met. These two women were discharged because we had to set a precedent so that other women are not encouraged to do similar things, and also because such women don't make good officers.

**Interview with Mr. R.L. Amravanshi<sup>8</sup>**

**Q. Why did you discharge them?**

A. Can you imagine what effect the behavior of these two ladies would have had on the other women members of my company? Let us just say that it is not permissible to let something like this affect the discipline of the entire force. Moreover, the law does not permit two females, or for that matter two males, to marry each other. They have earned a bad name for themselves, but they cannot be allowed to earn a bad name for the entire company.

**Q. Is it true that such pairing off is very common in the barracks? Joda bana liya is what it is called?**

A. No, the women in the barracks may certainly be friendly towards each other, but nobody garlands other girls, applies vermilion, dresses up as a male and then gets photographed in this manner. All this violates the force's discipline.

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<sup>8</sup>Commandant of the 23rd battalion.



**Q. But isn't homosexuality becoming common everywhere?**

A. It is not. But even if such a marriage is common, it is a manifestation of an act that has already been committed. We cannot tolerate this in the force.

**Q. Have there been instances of men misbehaving with the women?**

A. No, no, we are quite strict about this.

**Q. How are the women treated in the barracks?**

A. I took over the battalion only recently, in February this year. I don't know what it was like before. Under me, I can say that all is fine.

**Q. Can I go to the barracks where all the women live?**

A. No we have decided not to let outsiders go to the barracks.

**Q. If the couple were to apply for reinstatement, will they be taken back?**

A. There is no saying with certainty. Their appeal will be considered favorably.

**Q. Assuming they are taken back, what happens to their relationship? You don't expect them to break off, surely?**

A. No, but this sort of behavior will not be tolerated by us.

**Interview with Mr. B.K.Mukherjee<sup>9</sup>**

**Q. Don't you think the entire controversy has shown your police force in a very bad light?**

A. You see, in this case actually there has been nothing as alleged, no lesbianism, no sex, no such thing. There was no such thing between them, they got so close to each other during the course of the training that they decided to live together.

That's all. Both are quite respectable persons. One is the mother of three children, a

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<sup>9</sup>Director General of Police in Madhya Pradesh.

widow, the other was married but was not accepted by her in-laws.

**Q. Then why were they discharged?**

A. Though both have good character, they were discharged primarily because we did not want any controversy. We did not want anything to affect our discipline.

**Q. Then what happens to their “marriage”?**

A. There was no marriage, they only had some sort of tie, that is all. This is all totally false.

**Q. Is it true that they started displaying lesbian tendencies?**

A. No, this again is absolutely false. We got them checked medically and found nothing.

#### **Reflections on the interviews:**

The reporters' questions (especially those directed at Urmilla and Leela) and the responses of the three superior officers represent their inability to imagine women outside of heterosexual marriage or as not-heterosexual. Legal, medical, professional and disciplinary reasons are cited to justify this stance. There is a curious tension between denial and acknowledgement that something physical happened. On the one hand, Veermani says that such behavior will encourage and promote other 'ladies' and, on the other, he claims that Urmilla and Leela did this (via an informal varmala) for "permanent security." The victimization of the women for choosing to be together is completely ignored, but Urmilla and Leela can only be accepted as victims (widow, child-bride) resorting to desperate action (such as wanting permanent security with a friend, joining the police force).

The gender confusion and thereby heterosexist explanation for the reporter can be seen in his perception of Urmilla, who "dressed like a man." He asks her if

she hated men and then goes on to inquire if it is her attraction to women or Leela that made her dress like a man, fully convinced that only a man (or one that wanted to be one or looked like one) could desire and be with a woman. Furthermore, Urmilla and Leela have complicated the notion of marriage in multiple ways. Although the institution of marriage is a fundamental institution of heterosexuality, for some reporters/observers they appear to have challenged its opposite-gender monopoly. Although they deny, to the reporters, that they got married (to the reporters) the reporters paradoxically cannot imagine any relationship, (especially between two women) without the framework of marriage. Further, they (Urmilla and Leela) temporarily challenged the hegemony of a colonial notion of what constitutes a sacred-legal contract with God and/or the state in a postcolonial India where communities have traditionally recognized different forms of relationships, marriages or unions. The next three cases received very little coverage in comparison to the previous case, but present similar themes.

## **Case 2: "The Bold, Beautiful, and the Damned"**

Shishir Joshi in a report titled "The Bold, Beautiful, and the Damned," gives an account of an unusual incident in Chandrapur, a small town 160km from Nagpur:

Vinoda Adkewar (18) and Rekha Chaudhary (21), who grew up in the neighbouring villages of Patri and Dadgaon, met 4 years ago at a family gathering. According to Joshi, Vinoda, "who defined herself as the wife" said that they had decided to elope to Chandrapur (about 60 km away from their villages) when they realized that they would be ostracized. "We decided to rent a room and stay after marriage," said Vinoda. The "shocked" registrar read their application and asked them to come back in ten days "to buy some time." The registrar then notified the "shocked" parents and local police. "Judicial officers and police personnel went into urgent deliberations." While this was occurring, "hundreds" gathered around the court premises for the decision by Hemant Karkare.

However, it "took all efforts" by the Registrar of Marriage, Arjun Kadse, and the Police Superintendent, Hemant Karkare, "to dissuade the lesbian couple" reports

Joshi. Although Vinoda was convinced, "the husband" Rekha was "enraged not at the law, but the manner in which she had been ditched by her beloved." She, Rekha, then "flung the red sari away...tears rolled down her eyes as she walked away, making a feeble attempt to smile." "Rebuked by parents and ridiculed by society, the couple, surely the first such instance in the region, have left to sulk in silence." "The girls, having been denied their bold dream," are now back in their respective villages.

Another account of the same incident in *The Telegraph* reports ( "Lesbians Fail To Get Married, 17 April, 1993):

Two girls from Sadi Taluka ran into problems with the Registrar of Marriage and police when they went to get married. Despite the fact that the parents supported the union, the police and registrar tried to dissuade them. Vinoda Adkewar (18 years old) the younger and "more educated one" who had studied till class eight, finally decided against the marriage and went home to her parents. The elder one, Rekha Chaudhary (21 years old), who was "illiterate," was not convinced and "in a rage threw away the saree purchased for the wedding."

(*The Telegraph*, 17 April 1993, Calcutta and *The Indian Express*, 18 April 1993, New Delhi)

### Case 3: Gender Troubles

The *India Today* reports in a piece entitled "Gender Jam: Case of A Curious Marriage" :

Tarunlata (33) underwent a sex-change in 1987 to become a man--Tarunkumar--to marry Lila Chavda (23) in December, 1989. Tarunlata and Lila met in 1985 when Tarunlata's sister, a candidate for the Congress(I) ticket, would while on tour stay over at Muljibhai's (Lila's "schoolteacher father") place. Lila lived in Paldi and Tarunlata in Dasade, two nearby villages. Tarunlata's sister began getting suspicious of Lila and Tarunlata's close friendship and revealed her suspicions to Muljibhai. From then on Lila would be regularly beaten up by Muljibhai. Three months later Lila and Tarunlata eloped from the village to get married. On finding out about the marriage Muljibhai decided to go to the Gujarat High Court stating that since "it is a lesbian relationship" action needed to be undertaken on grounds of Section 377 to annul the marriage. The "writ petition" states "Tarunkumar possesses neither the male organ nor any natural mechanism of cohabitation, sexual intercourse and procreation of children. Adoption of any unnatural mechanism does not create manhood and as such Tarunkumar is not a male." Muljibhai's lawyer claimed "even an impotent Hindu male can marry because impotency is no bar to his marriage. In this case Tarunkumar was not a Hindu male at the time of birth."

The *India Today* reporter quotes Tarunkumar, "as a child I would don male clothes and play volleyball, football and even judo and karate with other boys. If I had the money I would have got myself operated during my teenage days." Tarunkumar and

Lila declared that even if their marriage was to be found null and void by the Gujarat High Court, "we shall continue to live together because we are emotionally attached to one another." Muljibhai won the case. The couple now live in Tarunkumar's parent's home and they assert that the real reason Muljibhai objects to their marriage is that he will not get "dowry" from the groom (customary in their communities).

(*India Today*, 15 April 1990)

#### **Case 4: More Gender Disloyalty**

The *Bombay Dost* reports in an article "Woman Weds Woman" (1993):

On July 9 a wedding took place in a temple in NH-3 area<sup>10</sup> in the presence of family and friends. The wedding was between two women -- Neeru Sharma and Meenu Sharma. The "husband" Neeru alias Dinesh is self-employed and supplies electronic spare parts for TV sets and earns approximately Rs. 3000 a month. Meenu is employed with the ISD/STD phone company on a salary of Rs.1000/month and she earns Rs. 3000/month by singing bhajans in jagratas.<sup>11</sup> She is the eldest in the family and the only breadwinner.

Meenu met Neeru in a panchayati jagrata<sup>12</sup> in the neighbouring NH-3 area. "It was love at first sight and after that we started meeting regularly. I told Meenu all about myself. But initially she did not believe that I too was a girl," said Neeru. Neeru who prefers to be called Dinesh [a male name] stated that she has been wearing boy's clothes since childhood "I have never worn a salwar kameez." Dinesh (Neeru) is reported to speak in "masculine fashion" as well. Dinesh (Neeru) was married off 4 months ago to Jogesh Vaid in Faridabad but returned to her parents' home after one month. "I hated playing second fiddle to a male" she asserted. "That was a marriage against my wishes."

After the marriage to Meenu they rented a home but could only live there for five days due to water logging. They then moved back to their respective parents homes-but plan on living together once they find housing.

In another version of the report in *the Indian Express*, New Delhi, "Parents Deny Marriage Between Girls," by Sonia Wadhwa, Ms. Wadhwa states:

The parents deny that it was any "real ceremony." The photographer who clicked

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<sup>10</sup>A local neighborhood.

<sup>11</sup>Singing songs at local festivals.

<sup>12</sup>Village function.

them duped them into splashing it in various newspapers, the parents added. Further, the “girls were young and vain and they agreed...,” said Kaushalya Sharma (mother of Meeru “the bride”). Neeru’s mother “nodded her head in agreement to Kaushalya Sharma’s statement.” She said, “They regret acting so foolishly. Both are staying in their respective houses. This news of a marriage is a farce.” “I’ve become a laughing stock for my friends,” said Neeru’s brother. According to the reporter the person who “is perhaps having to face the worst consequences of the marriage” is Seema, Meenu’s younger sister. Seema, a standard X [tenth grade] student, “has to bear the brunt of her classmates jokes about hailing from a queer family.” “Didi’s foolishness has made things so tough for me. I hate going to school these days. Moreover, though it is the year of my board exams, I am so worried by what has happened that I can barely concentrate on my studies.” Seema “prays to God every night so that people will leave her and the family alone,” notes the reporter.

The marriage which has “generated immense curiosity in the neighborhood and the city’s media circle” drew comments from other locals as well. The city’s newspaper circle however, feel “let down” since the Police and Administration have not done enough to discipline the girls. A shopkeeper commented, “Neeru would smoke and drink and court Meenu all day. And Meenu would always manage to find excuses to visit the market whenever Neeru was around.” Senior citizens “expressed their horror” at the “ghastly and unnatural acts” and “an octogenarian” Ram Singh said, “if this is not undone, Faridabad [the town] will be cursed by the Gods.”

*(The Indian Express, May 1989, New Delhi and Bombay Dost, October 1989, Mumbai)*

### **Reflections on the Marriage Cases 2, 3 & 4:**

In all three reported cases, it is automatically assumed that one woman (usually the ‘masculine looking one’) desires women like a man, and wants to be a man. The possibility that she may not want to be a woman or a man in the heterosexual gender scheme is not considered. Nor is the possibility considered a conscious move made by two women (who want to be together in a committed relationship) to be more accepted in towns, by playing out normative gender performances (such as opposite gender/sex behaviors, marriages or dress codes) of heterosexuality. Another issue that stands out is the condescending tone of the

reporters who mark such behaviors as "uneducated," "illiterate" and therefore belonging to lower class, noncosmopolitan locals.

The next section looks at reports of suicides. specifically of younger, semi-urban women and high school girls.

## **B: SUICIDES**

This section documents six media reports of double suicides. The description of each case includes a combination of direct quotations and summary from the media reports, which reflect the sentiments of the reporters. All six cases were found at the Sakhi Archives in New Delhi. The sense of impending separation (by parents, families, local men in their communities and/or heterosexual marriage) lead the women involved to their only 'choice'--death. In some cases, biological kin provided support, but hostility from local men (threatening sexual violence) or police far outweighed these supportive gestures. The death of these sakhis represents the repressive cultural climate of compulsory heterosexuality and the ultimate erasure and invisibility of sakhi kinship. Thus, for the dominant imaginary, passionate or erotic kinship between sakhis can only be sustained through death, and, for some individuals, this becomes a lived reality.

### **Case 1**

In the town of Meghraj (N.Gujarat, 10,000 pop), Gita Darji and her "spinster friend" Kishori Shah hung themselves from ceiling fans in their hospital quarters. Gita(24) and Kishori(24) were nurses in a local hospital. Gita was married to Manoj just a few months ago and "abhorred" this relationship. A few month's ago Manoj had complained to Gita's brother about Gita and Kishori's relationship and had convinced him to pressure Gita to apply for a transfer out of Meghraj. This was the third "lesbian" suicide in Gujarat this year. Seven months ago, two police constables in Meghraj killed themselves "declaring undying love to one another." Four months ago, in Vadodara village, two school teachers committed double suicide.

*(India Today, April 1989)*

## Case 2

Two young women (22 and 23) in the Narkeldanga police station area [outside of Calcutta] were “physically, mentally and emotionally tortured” for being unavailable single women who also happened to be involved with each other. The abusive situation “drove one woman to suicide in front of train tracks.”

The police who have been more supportive than normal--have tried to shield the women from violent acts and threats from neighbors, including local goondas.<sup>13</sup> These neighborly threats included “pouring hot water on the women, flinging bricks and screaming obscenities at them.” The woman who is still alive said, “one of the goondas wanted to marry me. Because I refused, he could not tolerate my being with my friend. He and his friends abused and insulted us whenever they met either of us.” Other “youths” of the area had informed the women’s mothers that someday they would rape their daughters. The neighborhood is “not ready for this immoral act” and says Mohammed Riazuddin and Yasmin Begum, “this is unnatural, we don’t want all our women to follow the example and turn bad.”

Their mothers, Noorjehan Begum and Salma Begum, had finally decided to respect their daughters decisions (after initial beatings and starvations--which to their surprise did not seem to work). Noorjehan said that her daughter, “was born healthier than an average girl child. That’s why her father and I decided to bring her up like a son. She used to wear men’s clothes, talk and walk like a man. Despite being a woman, she is running a business successfully. That’s what’s really bothering the neighborhood.” Salma then added, “if they want to love each other and want to live together and the police say there is nothing illegal in it, I can’t stop her anymore.”

*(The Telegraph, Calcutta, 16 April 1995).*

## Case 3

Trichur, Kerala: “A girl student and her teacher who consumed poison together in a suicide pact, died here yesterday.” Gita (22) “of Aroor Chirapurath House” and Saijamol (16) “daughter of M.P. Neelambaam of Aleppy” were found in “a critical state when discovered inside a state transport bus parked in the bus stand at Trichur and subsequently admitted to the district hospital. They were lying unconscious inside a Ponnani-Ernakulam bus when discovered by the passengers who sensed the strong smell of insecticide emanating from the bus.” By the evening both had “recovered considerably and did even speak to their relatives who had come having received the news from the Town Police.” “Their condition suddenly deteriorated on Friday morning. Saija breathed her last at 8:30 a.m. and Gita died by 11 a.m. Saijamol was a first-year pre-degree student at Aquinas College at Edakochi. “Saijamol was a brilliant student and she has passed the SSLC examination last year with very high scores.” Gita was a teacher at a tutorial college at Kuthiyathodu

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<sup>13</sup>Another word for dadas or gang members.



and was Saija's tuition teacher for over five years. "Their relationship had gone beyond the limits. Police recovered a large number of love letters they had written to each other from the bags they were carrying. According to the police the girls decided to elope as they couldn't bear separation and finally had to commit suicide." "The dead bodies were taken back to their native places after postmortem."

("Driven to Death," translated from the Malayalam Daily, *Mathrubhumi*, by T. Murali, for *Bombay Dost*, 4:1, January 14, 1996.)

#### Case 4

Kilimannor, Kerala: Dhanya (14) and Sandhya (14) were two students studying in 10th standard at a government high school in Mithrumala. On the pretext that she (Dhanya) had forgotten her pen at home, Dhanya asked her friend Sandhya to accompany her home in order to get the pen. On reaching home, Dhanya confessed to Sandhya that she was in love with her and that since they couldn't be together she had decided that they should die together.

Dhanya attempted to kill Sandhya first by putting a noose around her neck from the ceiling and when this hurt Sandhya (who was resisting death) Dhanya decided to cut Sandhya's wrists with a knife. "Sandhya somehow managed to get out of her clutches and ran outside. However, outside Dhanya pushed Sandhya into a well in the compound. Once Dhanya was certain of Sandhya's death, she went indoors and hung herself. Sandhya managed a miraculous escape." She hung on to the wall of the well and cried out for help. Local people managed to get Sandhya out. Sandhya lived, but Dhanya was already dead. Pangod Police have registered the case.

("Till Death Unites," translated from the *Malayalam Daily*, *Mathrubhumi*, by T. Murali, for *Bombay Dost*, 4:2, 1995)

#### Case 5

Konchiravenketta, near Vempayam, Kerala: The "fire force fished out their bodies from a well more than 17 feet deep." "After postmortem the bodies were removed to Medical College mortuary." These were the bodies of Gita Kumari (22) and Sati Kumari (25). Sati was a volunteer teacher at The Complete Literacy Program. Gita was a travel agent at Kanyakulangara. Sati had gotten married a week ago and had returned from Karipur to see Gita--"The fact that they could not bear the thought of getting separated again is the reason for the suicide says a note written jointly by the two."

("Love Unto Death," translated from the Malayalam Daily, *Mathrubhumi Daily*, by T. Murali, for *Bombay Dost*, January-June, 1993).

## **Case 6**

Mallika (20) and Lalitambika (20), pre-degree students at Keralvarma College, tied themselves together and jumped off a ferry into the turbulent Cochin Channel. A sailor and fisherman however spotted them and got them out of the stormy waters. Mallika and Lalitambika were in love with each other and on discovering that one had passed and one had failed their final exams and realizing that this would lead to their separation, decided to commit suicide together.

The police charged them with attempted suicide and found among other things a love letter and a suicide letter to parents. Mallika wrote: "Lali after all everybody knows about our love, so here is a thousand kisses for you in public...." In the suicide letter Lalitambika wrote: "I cannot part with Mallika...now we are destined to go in different directions. I am not persuaded by Mallika to do this. Bury Us Together." It is reported that the relatives of the girls are still unable to grasp this." Mallika's brother says that the girls have agreed to "try and forget each other."

*(Connexions: An International Women's Quarterly, January 1982, "Bury Us Together." Compiled from The World of Homosexuals by Shakuntala Devi, Bell Press, 1978).*

## **C: Maitri Karar [Friendship Contracts]**

The third mode of resistance is a case (and the only one I could find) of maitri karar or commitments that were made between women friends to care for one another. These commitments did not exclude a sexual relationship--however, they symbolized the primacy of bonds between women along with other commitments as mothers, daughters, wives and sisters. Maitri Karars have a long tradition in Gujarat and in modern India, and now are being viewed as highly suspect, especially in English-speaking, upper-class and urban centers. Maitri Karars are quite unique in how two women seek out the courts to legalize adult friendship and commitment.

## **Case 1**

Two panchayati school teachers, Asaruna Gohil (31) and Sudha Amarsinh (29), in Vadadhali village, Naswadi Taluka, " created a sensation of sorts on Friday when they entered into a contract marriage by signing a statement before the notary republic and decided to live together." They had been living together for the past ten years and "since they did not want to get married and continue living together

they decided to enter into this friendship contract called 'maitri karar' in Gujarati." Asaruna and Sudha declared that they have known each other since 1978 from teacher training school and work together at different places in Baroda. This is the second publicly recorded maitri karar in Gujarat this year.

*(The Indian Express, "Marriage of Two Women," 7 May, 1988)*

### **Interpretation & Conclusion**

The dominant tendency amongst urban, English-speaking and economically privileged Indians is to imagine small town and rural India in particular ways. Despite diversity of political persuasions, the prevalent mode of seeing the village as more pristine, and therefore more real and indigenous, is common. These gate-keeping concepts are alive and well amongst many Indian and non-Indian academics, including those who are housed in the North. I am not suggesting, however, that this view is entirely false. There are regions/towns in India that are much busier points of departures from and entries into India. Mumbai, Calcutta, Delhi, Madras and Bangalore are very different from Jabalpur, Chandrapur, Paldi, Dasade, Kilimannor and Meghraj.<sup>14</sup> However, there is much traffic and exchange between villages, small towns and big cities. For example, many men and women from villages and small towns come to cities looking for employment. And many politicians, companies and Bollywood movies do business in villages and small towns. Although, in general urban centers are relatively more privy to decision-making processes and political power, many urban politicians and businesses are financed by rural elites. Imagining the urban and rural as static, homogeneous and hermetically-sealed entities relates to what Renato Rosaldo found problematic in

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<sup>14</sup>The villages and small towns where the marriages, suicide and maitri karars occurred. Many of these villages and small towns are unknown to most urban Indians.

dominant understandings of culture.<sup>15</sup>

Imagining the rural world as pristine is deeply connected to what is envisioned in the nationalist discourse as tradition, untouched by anything Western and authentically Indian. Tradition is understood within a constellation of meanings such as: unchanging, old, authentic, 'the way things have been, are and will be,' original, cultural, customary, formalized, ritualized, institutionalized and ultimately natural. And there are practices that are old, however, when people (and in this case sakhis) are erased and excluded from history and reality, invoking tradition is an act of power (over communities and persons) and domination. Nationalist discourse was about imagining an independent future via invented pasts. Inventing traditions is therefore not necessarily an unproductive and useless project. All traditions are invented and do not equate to untruths.

Sakhis from small towns and villages, with the support of their families, are practicing the women-centered traditions of maitri karar and gandharva ceremonies. And sakhis and lesbians at urban centers who may have been more exposed to the English language and the North are actively living lives resisting obligatory heterosexuality and its institutions.

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<sup>15</sup>Addressed in Chapter Two.

## Chapter Seven

### Conclusion

The construction and reproduction of normative gender and sexual identities are deeply tied into the patriarchal institutions of kinship-making, and embody and inform the practices of state-making, nation-building and the rhetoric of authenticity. In all three events discussed in the previous chapters (Chapters Three, Four, Five and Six), I identify contradictory variations on the discourse of cultural tradition (authentic, indigenous, pure or uncolonized) and Westernization (modernity, progress, corrupted or colonized). These discourses are always catalyzed by challenges to normative gender and sexual identity, which in turn are perceived to have an essential Indian core. This essential Indian core designates women as the repositories and preservers of patriarchal values and institutions. Despite economic, historical and political shifts, the explicit and tacit management of this essential core of what it means to be an Indian woman or an Indian is demonstrated in individual stories and in the practices of the public sphere. This tension, between traditional and Western or local and foreign, has also informed the conceptual apparatus of anthropology.

This dissertation draws from anthropologists who have sought to write politically engaged ethnographies in which often the boundaries between the Ethnographic Self and the Observed Other are blurred or "desegregated" (Behar, 1996:19). Writing the dissertation has been an especially challenging process since much of this literature has been only recently emerging in anthropology, and only some ethnographers see the bridging of schisms between the Ethnographic Self and

the Observed Other as a legitimate goal. By inserting and situating myself in the dissertation, I suggest that the Ethnographic Self as a member participant, the observed and the critical observer of communities studied is pushed to be accountable in multiple ways.

Furthermore, I show that critical reflections on lived experiences can connect and remake notions of home and the field, self and other, personal and political lives, the academy and social issues, in valuable ways. For instance, when the connections between the Ethnographic Self and the Observed Other is "desegregated" one's accountability to multiple audiences and selves is highlighted and at the forefront of one's consciousness. Or when the categories of home and the field blur, the culture associated with home and the field are no longer static, hermetically-sealed entities. The experience of being bicultural informs the subjectivities of Ethnographic Selves and Others. And finally, as feminists have repeatedly pointed out, the dichotomy of the public versus private is also challenged.

By examining the construction of gender and sexuality and its relationship to national/cultural identity, I have shown that these discursive practices are about the daily and systemic workings of power and dominant systems of meanings and entail audiences/communities of multinational reception. The initial project of evaluating the familiar, the daily and the institutional workings of normative sexuality and patriarchy on Indian women, led me to discover an interconnected nexus and relationship to what it means to be Indian. In other words, women's identities and sexualities are the grounds upon which Indian-ness was and is measured. Furthermore, *sakhis*, discussed in Chapter Six, demonstrate the challenging of tradition as invented by the modern Indian state (such as compulsory

heterosexuality) and the resilience of local traditions of anti-heteropatriarchal kinship-building.

In examining and deconstructing the language, meanings and underlying presuppositions of a colonial sexual code (Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code), I was initially interested in the transplanting of a code drawn from a Christian-legal tradition in Europe to a colony. The Indian state's resistance to the challenge posited by human rights groups suggested many things to me. First, it indicates the post/neocolonial state's adoption of a modern state apparatus modeled after Britain. Second, the overt expression of heterosexual identity of a nation and its assumption that normative heterosexuality is natural, invisible, modern (i.e., keeping up with the West) and traditional (not losing its spirit to the West). Third, the state's claim that anything outside of normative heterosexuality is not traditional (therefore a sign of Westernization). Fourth, the modern state's easy adoption of 'Western' heterosexism and the simultaneous claim that disloyalty to normative heterosexuality is adopting western values. And finally, I suggest that, in an indirect and negative fashion, the Section 377 issue represents the conceptual and symbolic exclusion of women and women's sexuality. Furthermore, I demonstrate that it is easier within patriarchal reality to construct procreative sexuality and identity (heterosexuality) in opposition to a nonprocreative sexuality and identity (homosexuality = gaymale sexuality) if it involves the phallus. In other words, Indian women can only be imagined within different reincarnations of heterosexuality and compulsory marriage (as demonstrated in Chapters Four and Five), and cannot be conceived within the dominant imaginary outside of compulsory marriage and heterosexuality (as demonstrated in Chapter Six).

The contradictory and convenient adoption of what is good from the West

and bad from the West by the modern ex-colony is also another thread that weaves through my study. The ambiguous and often arbitrary use of the term 'Westernized' is a recurrent theme in the discourse explored in all the cases. The contradictions represent the tensions inherent in the processes of nationalization, decolonization, and globalization. On the one hand, the Indian state and its reformers need to keep up with its colonizer's political, intellectual, economic, technological and scientific systems (modernity); and, on the other hand, on a psychological and spiritual level, the ex-colony rejects all things Western (measured by women's loyalties) and adopts newly invented traditions (important for decolonization) which resist new forms of global hegemony and homogenization (neocolonialism).

The contradictory identity of the 'new New Indian woman,' discussed in Chapter Four, rests upon the essence of her being loyal to new forms of heteropatriarchy. Should she step out of bounds, her authenticity as an Indian and as a woman would be under question. Failing to do her duty and get married at the right time is shameful, selfish and individualistic and thus westernized behavior. Therefore, unmarried women are subject to losing much of the privilege of the heterosexual economy.

However, women who are most disengaged from institutions of patriarchy--such as from marriage and compulsory heterosexuality--sakhis--are invisible and marginalized from a discourse such as that of Section 377 or the 'new New Indian woman.' I show that separating from heterosexual kinship forces sakhis to encounter much hostility, denial, shame, fear and in some cases outright death. I also demonstrate that the discourse on what is tradition is often contradictory and complex. Often the Indian state would invent tradition by adopting artifacts of the colonial state or by being loyal to patriarchy. On the other hand the long-standing



tradition of maitri karars or gandharva marriages by sakhis were not enthusiastically accepted as Indian tradition by agents of the state or individuals. Through the course of my research I have found it particularly striking that only one feminist has seriously analyzed some of the realities encountered by sakhis (Thadani, 1996).<sup>1</sup> This is tied to the presumption by anthropologists studying gender and/or sexuality and Indian women's lives, that sexuality=heterosexual, gender identity=heterosexual, gender and sexual identities are simple manifestations of caste hierarchies and religious tradition, and gender and sexual identity are simply natural.

In my analysis of multiple forms of patriarchy (colonial, post/neo colonial, British, nationalist, etc.) I have also found that political developments in Britain and India inform one another. That is, policies implemented by the colony are shaped by policies in the metropole and vice versa. My dissertation has focused on the influence of the metropole's political and economic cultures and imagination on the colony through the colonial encounter. Furthermore, the confrontations between the British and Indians involved intraconfrontations. That is, the British (like the Indian elites and nationalists) were often divided and heterogeneous in their intentions, alliances and policies. But despite this seeming lack of homogeneity, there was British domination of India alongside much resistance and cooptation. The dynamic of domination with resistance and cooptation worked particularly well in the daily

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<sup>1</sup>Thadani's primary focus, however, is on ancient India, Sanskrit/Vedic texts within Hindu philosophy and the reinterpretation of these texts. I have included personal conversations/interviews with Thadani in my dissertation. Also, some feminists (such as Mrinalini Sinha) have made a reference to the Urmila and Leela coverage. No anthropological research thus far has paid any attention to any coverage on sakhis.

functioning of obligatory heterosexuality. This is demonstrated specifically in Chapter Five.

The dynamic of power and domination catalyzed by the dialectic of resistance and cooptation can also be seen in the ways visibility can either be a source of hope or elicit explicitly hostile violence. For example, the visibility that Section 377 and homosexuality received gave the police new ammunition to persecute people in public spaces. On the other hand, identifying homosexuality (as a civil right or a legitimate identity) was of the most symbolic significance to politically active self-identified gay men. In some ways, the seemingly invisible and virile nature of compulsory heterosexuality in India was highlighted. The political economy of duty and the need for marriage (arranged or otherwise) was made more explicit. Making compulsory heterosexuality more explicit gave the modern Indian nation-state an instant connection to *progress and development*. That is, in making compulsory heterosexuality and heterosexual identity more overt, as in the West, India and Indians were finally catching up to Western notions of freedom and choice (unlike arranged marriages and segregation amongst the sexes). This idea is explored in the chapter From Mother India to Ms. Worldly. The 'new New Indian woman' signifies the shift from an amorphous to a more elaborate and explicit sexual identity of an essential, modern and naturalized heterosexuality.

As a final remark, my analysis of the construction of gender and sexuality in India and its relationship to national/cultural identity has sought to complicate gatekeeping concepts that have guarded particular anthropologies of India (such as looking solely at caste-related issues or in rural contexts) and dichotomies such as field and home, and the Ethnographic Self and the Observed Other. I have sought to move beyond these dichotomies by drawing from the works of feminists who

have pointed out the importance of epistemic privilege and standpoint epistemology. Or in other words, where traditional anthropological 'subjects' or 'objects of study' are 'taking back' and beginning to disrupt the borders between home and the field and the object (Native) and subject (Ethnographer).

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