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"You are Next": Unmarried Urban Women in India and the "Marriage Talk"

Abstract In this chapter, I focus on women's relationships with their families in relation to what I am calling the "marriage talk," that is, the conversation that revolves around when, whom, and even how a woman should marry. My concern in this chapter is not to contemplate the state of singleness, but rather to reflect on the ways in which women are interpellated by the institution of marriage so as to render any other choice, such as remaining unmarried, unthinkable. The paper also illuminates the gendered and casteist ideologies that underpin the institution of marriage and concomitantly, most "marriage talk" in India. This chapter centers its discussion on what it means to be a family, and engages with the changing role that daughters occupy as gendered human beings, and the shifts that occur when daughters are single. It asks how differently families might be constructed if we dislodge marriage from the central position it now occupies. In doing so, it asks what might change if women were to be recognized simply as individuals rather than as daughters, wives, and mothers.

Keywords marriage; family; caste; gender; education

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"You are next," booms your loud octogenarian uncle, rapping his cane on the floor.[1] His gap-toothed smile looks a bit like a grimace as you somehow resist the temptation to roll your eyes, for he is far from the first person at your cousin's wedding to make this announcement.

When an unmarried woman shows up at a wedding, it is a free-for-all for the extended family to announce that she should be "tying the knot," "looking for Mr. Right," "entering wedded bliss," or whatever other similar trite phrase they might care to use.

The above conversation is a composite caricature of my own memories and the narratives of the women I interviewed. For, misquoting Jane Austen, it appears to be a truth universally acknowledged that a single Indian woman of a certain age must be in want of a husband. This certain age might vary, depending on a woman's geographical location, family values, educational and employment status, and her bargaining power, but at some point, usually sooner rather than later, her family will decide that she needs a husband.

For many women, their relationships with their families are central to the ways in which they lead their lives. In this chapter, I focus on women's relationships with their families, more specifically with their immediate families (however they define these: an immediate family may encompass only their nuclear families, or they might include aunts and uncles who are siblings of parents, or even extended kin) in relation to what I am calling the "marriage talk," that is, the conversation that revolves around when, whom, and even how a woman should marry. My concern in this chapter is not to contemplate the state of singleness, but rather to reflect on the ways in which women are interpellated by the institution of marriage so as to render any other choice, such as remaining unmarried, unthinkable. I focus on the supposed universal desirability of the institution of marriage, though singleness or singlehood is often foregrounded in the narratives I deal with.

My endeavor is to explore how women are negotiating "marriage talk" by dodging it, challenging it, and in doing so, are reflecting on it in complex and nuanced ways. The intention is also to illuminate the gendered and casteist ideologies that underpin the institution of marriage and, concomitantly, most "marriage talk" in India. The chapter also engages with the shaming and infantilizing of unmarried women by their extended families. It focuses on the role that mothers are expected to play, and the sometimes-supportive relationship that is produced between mothers and daughters in the process. It examines how education and employment success may mediate these conversations in interesting ways. Finally, I argue that by being "difficult daughters," these women transform the terms of negotiation, therefore contributing towards challenging the hierarchical and gender-iniquitous nature of marriage and thereby questioning the institution itself.

This chapter centers its discussion around what it means to be a family, and engages with the shifting role that daughters occupy as gendered

1 I would like to thank Christiane Brosius, Nithila Kanagasabai, and Ketaki Chowkhani for insightful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

human beings, and the shifts that occur when daughters are single. It asks how differently families might be constructed if we dislodge marriage from the central position it now occupies. In doing so, it asks what might change if women were to be recognized simply as individuals rather than as daughters, wives, and mothers.

About the methodology

The chapter is based on twenty-one interviews with women who had never been married, though, upon hearing about my research, three divorced women told me separately that they had many stories to tell of their own parents' responses to their divorces and subsequent hopes for their remarriage. All of my interviewees had been brought up and were living in India. One interviewee had recently moved outside the country for work, while another one had moved abroad for higher education. Of these interviews, four were conducted in person, seven on the phone, and ten by email, based on the preferences of the women I interviewed. All identified as cisgender and heterosexual. All the names used for the women are pseudonyms, and where required, some details have been altered to protect their identities.

Since the focus of the research was on marriage, I was looking for unmarried rather than unpartnered women. Hence, of the twenty-one women interviewed for the present study, five were in romantic relationships with men, and two of these were living with their partners at the time I interviewed them. Of the rest, ten of the women lived on their own, seven lived with their families, one lived in a university women's hostel, and one rented a flat with friends. Some of the women were themselves actively looking for partners, depending on serendipity, digital connections, friends' friends, or familial suggestions. Some of the women had found great freedom in the single state, and pointed out that it would take something or someone very special for them to want to change that. Some would be happy to be partnered but were not willing to "settle" for anyone.

Of the twenty-one women I interviewed, ten were between the ages of twenty-five and twenty-nine, and eleven were between thirty and thirty-six years old. Eighteen of the women were Hindu, two Muslim, and one Christian, though many said explicitly that they were non-practicing. The two Muslim women identified as privileged-caste. The Christian woman said she did not have a caste. All but one of the Hindu women belonged to privileged-caste communities, and many acknowledged the advantages that came from their caste locations.

The one woman who identified as Dalit said,

> I belong to a Dalit family that is fairly well-connected. I can honestly say that I have never faced any consequence of my caste. Rather, I am realizing every day how fortunate I am for having had all the advantages that money or class could provide. And while it is true

> that I spent a long time hiding my caste identity from people for fear of rejection or ridicule, today I proudly own it.

This comment is relevant because it simultaneously asserts that she had not suffered any negative consequences due to her caste, yet also that she felt the need to hide her caste for fear of being shamed. This fear is a consequence of her caste location and must be read as such. None of the privileged-caste women I interviewed, expressed gratitude for the advantages provided by class in quite the same way.

Further, the group of women I interviewed had all had access to higher education. Every single one of them had a post-graduate degree or diploma, six of them were currently pursuing PhDs, two had plans to pursue PhDs in the future, and two already had PhDs. Further, sixteen of the twenty-one women had received an education that might be broadly regarded as situated within the humanities and the social sciences. All but three of the women identified explicitly as feminists, and the three who did not, said they believed in gender equality but did not know enough about feminism. The education and feminist politics of my interviewees inflect the ways in which they are able to view, articulate, and analyze the institution of marriage and their location as single women who are expected to enter it.

As is clear from the foregoing discussion, these women do not constitute a representative sample of women in this age group. They are not even representative of unmarried, urban, educated women who are engaging in conversations about marriage with their families. Despite this disclaimer, this cohort of women nonetheless raise deeply relevant concerns around "marriage talk" that might have a wider resonance than such a restricted group might otherwise suggest. What this chapter offers, then, is a closer look at the possibility of oppositional narratives that are part of any institution, which, in this case, is marriage.

"We have to look now, or all the good matches will be taken"

The assumption that a woman will marry often carries a sense of inevitability and universality in India[2]—a sentiment shared by China,[3] Japan,[4] among many other nations. In the context of the United States, Bella M.

2 Sarah Lamb, "Being Single in India: Gendered Identities, Class Mobilities, and Personhoods in Flux," *Ethos* 46, no. 1 (2018).

3 Wanqi Gong, Caixie Tu, and L. Crystal Jiang, "Stigmatized Portrayals of Single Women: A Content Analysis of News Coverage on Single Women and Single Men in China," *Journal of Gender Studies* 26, no. 2 (2017); Haiping Wang and Douglas A. Abbott, "Waiting for Mr. Right: The Meaning of Being a Single Educated Chinese Female Over 30 in Beijing and Guangzhou," *Women's Studies International Forum*, no. 40 (2013).

4 Eriko Maeda and Michael L. Hecht, "Identity Search: Interpersonal Relationships and Relational Identities of Always-Single Japanese Women Over Time," *Western Journal of Communication* 76, no. 1 (2012).

DePaulo and Wendy L. Morris note that there is an "ideology of marriage and family" that assumes not only that everyone will want to marry, but also that they will actually marry.[5] This scholarship from varied contexts seems to suggest a broad pressure to enter into heterosexual marriages, even though different cultural locations display variants on this theme.

In my interviews, while the perceived-to-be-appropriate age of marriage varied from twenty-three to twenty-seven depending on the caste, community, specific education, and class location of individuals, marriage was seen as an essential component of adulthood. Minal (twenty-six, PhD student) pointed to the assumption that marriage is inevitable. She said, "It would be easy to be stubborn about not getting married if I had women around me doing the same thing, but I know that as years go by, there will be fewer and fewer unmarried women, at least in my family."

For many women, it was suggested that they should begin the search for grooms early in order to "catch" the best ones. The weddings of other people were a common place for such an undertaking, and here it did not seem to matter whether you were even of a legal age to marry. Tarini (thirty years old, working with an information technology consultancy) said, "Until very recently, there was never a question in my family about *if* I would get married, it was more of a when. The first time it came up was probably when my older sister got married. I was *sixteen* at the time."

Geetha (thirty-one years old, working in a non-Governmental Organization [NGO]) had the question come up at her cousin's wedding. "The first time my parents spoke of marriage was in 2010. This was when my cousin got *nicely arranged married* to a nice Brahmin boy and everyone was very happy. She was twenty-five and I was twenty-three, and it was made evident that I was next in line 'on the market.'" Saying that you are too young or have just found a job is often not a deterrent, as relatives simply respond, as Geetha's parents did, by saying, "It can take five to six years to find a good boy. And it's not like we *will* find someone, and you *have to* get married to him. These things take time."

Weddings are supposed to beget more weddings. Kamila's (twenty-five years old, working in an NGO) older brother married just as she had finished her master's degree. She recounted, "My marriage was the peak thing to be discussed." She was fuming to find that her parents were very concerned about how she looked, since

> it is at such ceremonies that people "see" you, so you have to look a certain way or dress a certain way. Even though it came under the guise of "you have to look nice." When I said I don't like gold—I don't want to wear it—they said I had to wear gold, because what will people say if the younger sister of the groom is not wearing anything

5 Bella M. DePaulo and Wendy L. Morris, "Singles in Society and in Science," *Psychological Inquiry* 16, no. 2–3 (2005): 58.

> gold. I knew that it was about being seen as a prospective bride… I did not wear any gold, though it came with a huge fight.

Marriage also seemed inevitable to Madhavi (twenty-eight years old, working at a corporation): "My parents have been actively 'looking' for some four years now. Women in my family marry fairly young. Most have been married by twenty-five. So, at twenty-eight, I'm already old by their standards. Most cousins my age already have children." The question of marriage came up for Kriti (twenty-five years old, working in an NGO) when she had just begun her MA degree program and was considering an academic career. When she mentioned her plans to her mother, her mother said, "You can finish your master's degree." Kriti reflected:

> She *emphasized this.* I was taken aback by the timeline that had been created by my parents…In arranged marriage situations, the parents are the ones who hold the power. It is difficult to make out what they are doing—talking to people or presenting us in a certain way; there's a big gap in power. I had no idea if they were telling people to look out for me, or whether they were making a biodata[6], or going to a marriage broker… it gave me a lot of anxiety.

In many contexts, women are regarded as *paraya dhan,* literally translated as "wealth of others," suggesting that they belong to another family, namely, their would-be marital family, and not to their natal one. Within such a worldview, adult women are considered marriageable until married. All occasions, especially weddings, become spaces in which this status may be commented upon. This vision of women as implicitly marriageable often places a great deal of pressure on them.

Chitra's (thirty years old, working in social media) story underscores that parents often push things in a particular direction. It is clear from her detailed recollection that the incident was clearly etched in her memory:

> The first time my family brought up the topic of marriage was on twentieth August 2009. I was home on vacation for my mother's birthday. She asked me if I would be willing to meet a boy. I could see how excited my parents were and I agreed. After I met him, that night I got phone calls from more people in the family than I do on my birthday, all asking what I thought of him… and how I must say yes to marrying him. I said that he was nice enough. Somehow this lukewarm response translated to a "yes" in everyone's mind, and the emotional blackmail began. It took a few months of constant

6 A biodata is another word for a resume. Here the kind of biodata invoked is one that is circulated by the parents of potential brides or grooms listing their educational qualifications, employment credentials, and other skills and qualities that might mark them as desirable life partners.

> negotiating to finally get my family to agree to let me finish my master's program before any "ceremonies." The guy's side were in a huge rush for the wedding and thankfully disagreed. He called me ten days after our last conversation to let me know he was getting engaged—like he was window-shopping for shoes. Definitely a lucky escape.

When Neera (thirty-six years old, a university professor) was about twenty-six years old and had just begun an MPhil program, her parents placed an advertisement in the newspaper. She had no idea about this until her brother told her. "Thankfully, they themselves did not like the responses they got," she says. "But by the time I took it up with them and asked them, 'How could you not ask me?', a lot of time had passed."

Kriti, Chitra, and Neera's narratives gesture to the reality that women are not really consulted in the discussion of their own marriages. Women with greater bargaining power or more liberal families will have a choice of whom to marry (within a limited pool), but often not of whether and when to marry. Linked directly to such a lack of choice is the implicit eliding of any questions of sex and sexuality. Good young women are supposed to be ignorant of, or at least uninterested, in sex. Within this worldview, it is assumed that a modest young woman would not (and should not) display enthusiasm for her own marriage, and it is up to the parents to assume the responsibility and make decisions for their daughters' well-being. Young women's protests about not wanting to marry are thus often not taken seriously by their families; in fact, such protests may sometimes be seen as a performance of appropriate femininity.

There is often a connection between the stage of education and the question of marriage, in the sense that the beginnings and endings of educational degrees are moments when the marriage question tends to arise. This is a time that is seen as the window of opportunity for women to marry, and families often insist that once this has passed, all the good matches will already have been made.

Young women often find themselves negotiating education and employment with families, and where families are loving and accede to their daughters' wishes to some extent, young women often feel that they then have to respond to their parents' openness and liberalism by somehow accommodating their desires. Kamini (thirty years old, university teacher) started a master's program at twenty-three after working for a while, and she recalled that

> there was the sense that you were locking yourself in for two years. The pressure was highest in my mid-twenties—which was seen as the golden window to marry. That's the time my relationship with my parents was very fraught. I had decided what I wanted to study largely on my own—a rarity in my family, as my cousins had listened to their families. I felt that I had had my way for eight years and so I had to meet them mid-way.

Where parents are supportive of their daughters' desires to postpone or eschew marriage, extended families may remind them of their "duties." This is reflected in Padma's (thirty-two years old, medical doctor) narrative:

> I must have been about twenty-four, and one grand-aunt called my mother and said she knew this "good boy." This so-called boy was over thirty and lived outside the country. My mother told her, "Padma is not interested." My grand-aunt told my mother that she should not listen to me, that children don't know what's good for them, and that it is up to parents to decide.

In the Indian context, the institution of marriage is as much about parents as it is about the couple themselves. The onus of marrying off their children is placed on the parents. And because women occupy a much lower status in the marriage hierarchy, it is the parents of daughters who are counted upon to perform the task of finding suitable husbands.

Sanjana's (twenty-five, college teacher) family suggested that the biological clock was ticking, and that it was not good to wait. The idea was that

> more than twenty-seven or twenty-eight years is not good for reasons of pregnancy. My extended family keep on asking my cousin about her marriage plans. She is twenty-seven. Their reactions and expressions show that they do not like it when she says she does not want to marry now. There are awkward silences and uncomfortable questions.

Kamalini Ramdas points out that terms like "old maid," "biological clock," and "shelf life" are used to describe the singleness of women, suggesting deficiency.[7] She argues that "Single women are thus cast as…'women in waiting' as they have yet to complete what is seen as an important rite of passage."[8] Similarly, Asha L. Abeyasekera, in the context of Sri Lanka, has pointed out that "single women signify 'lack'—they are incomplete and, therefore, do not belong."[9]

Implicit in this idea of the "right age to marry" is the suggestion that if women pass a certain age, they will then have to settle for lesser matches in the eyes of the "world"—the circle of family and friends who matter. Chitra senses that, as she gets older, her parents feel that they will now not get the kind of groom they had hoped for, given their own status and connections.

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7 Kamalini Ramdas, "Women in Waiting? Singlehood, Marriage, and Family in Singapore," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 44, no. 4 (2012).
8 Ramdas, "Women in Waiting," 832.
9 Asha L. Abeyasekera, "Singleness and the world of 'not belonging,'" *Open Democracy*, December 5, 2016. Accessed July 2, 2020. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/gendered-dimension-of-space-singleness-and-world-of-not-belonging/.

This narrative that women will not find suitable matches is not new or even peculiar to India. Chinese women who are unmarried, have been labeled "leftover women" by a state initiative. Leta Hong Fincher argues that the state-sponsored media campaign denigrating these so-called "leftover women" (usually urban career women and single women over the age of twenty-seven) reflects a more general resurgence of gender inequality in contemporary China.[10]

As argued above, often women are not even seen as relevant to the conversations taking place among "elders" regarding their marriage, which may begin without their approval or knowledge. This serves to implicitly infantilize young people, and especially women.

"What do you know?"—Infantilizing single women

An unmarried woman is often still regarded as a child—as someone without agency, as someone who has not yet grown-up, or settled—regardless of how successful she might be professionally, or how independent she might be personally.

The elevation of the heterosexual, married dyad creates a space where, even when it is the unmarried daughter who shoulders the responsibility of caring for aging parents, it is her married siblings who are seen as the adults.[11] Ai-Ling Lai, Ming Lim, and Matthew Higgins, who studied the notion of abjectness in singleness in Britain, suggest that the experience of singleness is gendered, and pathologizes single women (in a way that does not affect single men), and seeks to discipline their sexuality.[12] Writing on the Indian experience of singleness, Rekha Pappu argues that single women are seen as "unfortunate, lonely, vulnerable, incomplete, frustrated, frigid, man-hater, woman-lover, self-indulgent, promiscuous, predatory, unpredictable, non-conforming, subversive, free, independent, or autonomous,"[13] once again problematizing their sexuality.

These assumptions are reflected in Nasreen's (thirty years old, PhD student with fellowship) observations:

> That I am unmarried often makes me feel like my value amongst my extended family is diluting. I have seen my cousin and sisters who were earlier taunted, be treated with respect once they were "respectably married." Unmarried women are not treated on par

10 Leta Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (London: Zed Books, 2014).

11 See, for instance, Lamb, "Being Single in India."

12 Ai-Ling Lai, Ming Lim, and Matthew Higgins, "The Abject Single: Exploring the Gendered Experience of Singleness in Britain," *Journal of Marketing Management* 31, no. 15–16 (2015).

13 Rekha Pappu, "Reconsidering Romance and Intimacy: The Case of the Single Unmarried Woman," in *Intimate Others: Marriage and Sexualities in India*, ed. Samita Sen, Ranjita Biswas, and Nandita Dhawan (Kolkata: Stree, 2011), 370.

> with married couples. I worry that if I remain unmarried for long, I'll lose the respect of my family, and my relationships will be strained. This makes me feel even more pressured to succeed in my professional life so that I can win their respect. And even if I don't win their respect, at least I won't remain dependent on them in any way.

Similarly, Lisa (thirty-one years old, PhD student with fellowship) challenged the idea that only marriage settles a woman.

> Family, mostly my mother, and older aunts and uncles, have been vocal about the need for me to be married and settled. The word "settled" annoys me. A woman is not considered to have done enough in her life if she doesn't have a man. I feel this is a way in which women are controlled and curtailed. It is a subtle hint that no matter how accomplished a woman is, she has not established herself if she is not married.

Geetha concurred with this, saying, "Many times, it's just the feeling of not feeling included in family affairs because *every* other woman your age is married and has a kid."

Madhavi added,

> It's really infuriating. Despite the fact that I have two postgraduate degrees and am doing really well professionally by any standards, even by those of my male cousins, in fact much better than most of them—it's the men, both married and single, and the married women cousins, who are asked for their opinion in the family. As a single woman, it is assumed that I can't possibly have anything of import to say. From their perspective, it is only when I marry that I will gain any kind of status.

Women are infantilized, considered to be not quite adults until they are married. I read the denial of status and any semblance of voice to young, unmarried women as yet another instance of women being coerced into complying with the pressures to marry. As Nasreen pointed out, by making unmarried women feel undervalued, natal families subtly and openly push them towards what seems like a more desirable status, that of a married woman. However, as a significant body of literature on marriages suggests, young married women in India tend to have even less of a voice in their conjugal families, whatever their marriage might do for their status in their natal families. Women appear to recognize this and sometimes make choices that take them away from, rather than towards marriage, even as, it is their marital status that tends to occupy the minds and opinions of people around them.

"What will people say?"—negotiating well-meaning and not-so-well-meaning others

Log kyā kahenge or "What will people say?" is the threat that is often used to get daughters to conform to hegemonic ideas. The idea that individual actions or, in this case, inaction, reflect on the family honor, which will be besmirched if they do not obey, is used to compel many recalcitrant daughters to marry.

Chitra's unmarried state framed her entire relationship with her family. Chitra said she went to a wedding where the bride was quite overweight by current, normative standards, and her mother's immediate response was, "If she can get a guy, how come you can't?" Chitra told me that this comment was not an aberration, and that every so often her mother would bring up *that first proposal*. "Even now when we have a fight, my mom reminds me—'We found such a nice guy for you.' My mom is on his social media, and every time he posts a picture of his wife, my mother says, 'This could have been you.'"

The people who are most likely to suggest matches and to talk about marriage are relatives. Neera told me how she strategically got her aunt to stop suggesting possible grooms:

> My *masi*[maternal aunt] would suggest someone every other month. One day I told her I had some problems related to PCOS [polycystic ovarian syndrome] and partial seizures—I told her that it's nice that you are recommending people, but whoever you meet you should come clean with my medical history. There could be reproductive complications. After that, she never volunteered—she was off my back for good. She was extremely hesitant to suggest to a relative a female who might be reproductively challenged—that worked like magic.

Neera's strategy suggests an interesting contradiction. Even as gendered singleness is pathologized as being aberrant, women are claiming, even flaunting their equally pathologized bodies, in this case, in relation to PCOS, to avoid being disciplined into marriage.

Talking about her uncle's intervention, Radhika (thirty years old, recently completed her PhD) said,

> My uncle did engage with my mother on this. My mother's response was that since I was in the process of writing up my PhD, he should wait till I complete it and then bring the alliances to my notice. It would be very distracting for me otherwise, is what she conveyed. Ever since, he stopped talking to me; he has also stopped talking to her.

Similarly, Sneha (twenty-six years old, working for a media organization) pointed to the insidious ways in which social pressure works. "When

people talk, I don't take it to heart—these are not people I am emotionally invested in. I also equate marriage comments with comments about my weight. The suggestion is often made that I should lose weight for this or that wedding or event." Women who do not meet the prescribed standards of appearance, are also at the receiving end of comments about their weight, color, or whatever is seen to be the problem, with the implication that if only they could address it, they would be able to find a husband.

Padma suggested that relatives might be misguided but in a benevolent, patriarchal way. She recalled that

> once my grand-aunt actually went to meet a family about a *sthal*—a possible proposal. She reported back to my mother, who gleefully reported back to me, that my rather conservative, though very loving, grand-aunt had decided on her own that that family was too religious for me. She apparently told my mother that they do *pūjā* [ritual prayers][14] every day, and expect that their daughter-in-law will do *pūjā* too. She said that she simply could not imagine me in such a role. So, though my relatives are annoying, they are also well-meaning, and I think they truly care about me. The thing, though, is that what they want for me is not what I want for myself.

Rhea (thirty-six years old, PhD candidate) noted that her mother was disappointed that her grandmother did not display an interest in getting her, Rhea, married off suitably. Speaking about her grandmother, Rhea said:

> She was very happy that I went to one of the well-known colleges in Calcutta. Even though she didn't have the opportunity to study, she was very proud that my mother had always been a very good student, and that she was good at mathematics. When I was younger, she used to tell me that I must study more than a master's degree, since my mother has a master's degree in geography. She felt that I must do something more with my life.

Though weddings provide her with substantial work, Keya (thirty-one years old, photographer) was quite critical of the consumer dynamics in large weddings and said that she was definitely not ready to marry herself.

> I have been shooting weddings for the past five years and it's been great. I love the energy and the chaos and of course I love making images—memories for the bride and groom. But the more I see these high-end weddings, the more I feel that sometimes it's not needed. I am grateful to get such projects but would not like to be on the other side. I also don't have dreams of a three-day wedding and an obnoxiously expensive outfit.

14 All translations, unless indicated otherwise, are by the author.

Keya added, "Sometimes my cousins call up my parents asking them when I am getting married but the fact is that I always wanted to travel the world, make photos, and experience it all, and now I am literally living my dream."

For Keya, the act of "living her dream" assumed center stage, and her comments suggest that everything else would then recede. Both Keya and Padma acknowledged that extended families often did not understand what motivated them and what they wanted from life. Women, then, are asserting that their needs and desires are different, and yet just as valid as the ambitions of marriage that their families have for them. They claim to know what they want and are convinced that they are right, which allows them to articulate what they want.

Women also encounter random comments and judgement not just from family, but from strangers too, as Keya discovered.

> I was shooting a wedding two years ago and I got to know that one lady thought I was a "characterless girl" just because I was single, a photographer, talking easily to people, and traveling the world. I laughed because I really didn't know that doing my job as a photographer, traveling the world, and talking to people could be seen as such a sin. This is something that has happened few times because my profession is male-dominated.

Even if Keya laughed this off, such comments are not unusual for single women above a certain age. The word "characterless," suggesting a person of questionable morals, appears frequently. In her book *Status Single*, Sreemoyee Piu Kundu narrates an interview she conducted with filmmaker Shikha Makan, in relation to questions of renting an apartment.[15] In this interview, Makan tells Kundu, "Essentially you are battling a deep-seated assumption that a woman who hasn't married past a certain age is 'characterless.'"[16] Makan is the director of a film that looks at single women's engagement with the city and housing, called *Bachelor Girls.* Research focusing on Delhi and Mumbai also suggests that single women find it harder to rent accommodation, even in so-called megacities.[17]

Rhea pointed out that even spaces that were supposed to be safe and gender-progressive might actually not be. Recounting how she won a coveted prize as part of her master's degree in women's studies, she told me how she had sought out a teacher who she felt, had helped her, in order to thank her. The teacher's response really upset Rhea: "She said that doing well in the two years and being nominated for the prize is okay, but since

15 Sreemoyee Piu Kundu, *Status Single: The Truth about Being a Single Woman in India* (New Delhi: Amaryllis, 2018).
16 Kundu*, Status Single*, 16.
17 Lucie Bernroider, "Single Female Tenants in South Delhi: Gender, Class and Morality in a Globalizing City," *Gender, Place & Culture* 25, no. 5 (2018); Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade, *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2011).

I was older, if I wanted to have my own children, I should get married soon." In another similar incident, Rhea was told by her supervisor that "women who aspire for higher education and the status that it brings with it may 'miss the bus of marriage' in trying to be too picky." Rhea's experiences suggest that even in institutions of higher education, there is the assumption that women will, and in fact must, marry, irrespective of whatever else they may achieve.

The number and range of comments that unmarried women are subject to, seem to suggest that the extended family, and indeed extended society, are deeply invested in ensuring that women conform to the hegemonic ideal of heteronormative marriage, thus ensuring the status quo. Further, it is not just marriage itself that is regulated, but also the choice of groom.

Endogamous boundaries: whom not to marry

Marriage is a, or perhaps *the* hard boundary to the mixing of castes and religions. The sheer violence enacted on those who break the codes surrounding inter-caste marriages testifies to how zealously caste endogamy is practiced.[18] According to the census of 2011, only 5.8% of Indian marriages are inter-caste, a figure that has remained unchanged for over forty years, according to Tridip Ray, Arka Roy Chaudhuri, and Komal Sahai.[19] Furthermore, they point out that whereas in other countries, education correlates more closely with a decrease in endogamous marriages (along social, ethnic, or racial lines), in India, education levels have little or no bearing on the likelihood of marrying outside the caste group.

It is unsurprising, then, that caste-related and religious endogamy forms the inevitable subtext to any "marriage talk." Padma pointed to this implicit understanding of caste endogamy as a given, where often, any other outcome was not even in the range of considered possibilities. For her,

> Nobody has mentioned caste. My mother says she'd be delighted if I found my own "boy." I am not sure what this obsession with calling adult men and women "boys" and "girls" in relation to marriage is. But going back to finding my own husband—she has not mentioned caste or even religion, but I don't think she imagines a caste vastly

18 Uma Chakravarti, "From Fathers to Husbands: Of Love, Death and Marriage in North India," in "*Honour": Crimes, Paradigms, and Violence Against Women*, ed. Lynn Welchman and Sara Hossain (London: Zed Books, 2005); Prem Chowdhry, "Enforcing Cultural Codes: Gender and Violence in Northern India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 32, no. 19 (1997); Perveez Mody, *The Intimate State: Love-Marriage and the Law in Delhi* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2008).

19 Tridip Ray, Arka Roy Chaudhuri, and Komal Sahai, "Whose Education Matters? An Analysis of Inter Caste Marriages in India" (Discussion Paper, Delhi Economics and Planning Unit, Indian Statistical Institute, 2017).

> different from ours. She could imagine that I'd marry a Christian or Muslim, and if they were of a similar upper-middle class and educated it would be okay, though in the present climate she might worry about safety if I married a Muslim, and with good reason. But I don't think she's thought about caste. All her friends, even the Muslims and Christians, are upper castes or similar. I don't think she knows anyone who is lower-caste or tribal as a friend, as someone she could have a relationship with. So, though caste has not been mentioned, I am sure she thinks I will find someone of a similar caste. Certainly, if she were looking, she would look within caste.

Sneha echoed Padma almost exactly:

> My mother in this regard is fairly liberal—she is not insistent on marrying from a certain community. But it is not apparent to her that there can be a huge caste difference. Caste is not in their imagination. She was born in a Brahmin household, and married into a Brahmin household, and all her friends are upper-caste—culturally, she does not consider that I might marry someone from a completely different caste background. Any difference, she might imagine, would be religious.

This is also the reason why even the possibility of an arranged marriage was anathema to Sneha.

> I've thought about the idea of arranged marriage in passing—all my principles would crash down on me. Endogamous arranged marriage is against everything I stand for. So not something I can ever do. Most of my cousins have had endogamous marriages, not just the arranged, but also the love marriages. That's how closed one's friend circle is.

Minal added, "Within my extended family, I don't know of anyone who has married outside of our caste or religion. Most of my cousins are still unmarried, but somehow I have a feeling that they won't [marry someone with a different background]."

Interestingly, in some cases, the desire to stay within caste boundaries includes the desire not to marry above caste. Kamini, who came from a non-Brahmin, privileged caste, said that her family was horrified when a cousin married a Brahmin, foreseeing that she might be looked down upon for her lack of Brahminness.

The foregoing narratives draw our attention to the insidious ways in which caste works, even in twenty-first-century India. Even as caste is often not openly acknowledged, it permeates social circles and is especially enforced in relation to marriage. Endogamous marriages are also linked to other structures of power, including unequal control and ownership of

land, and the idea of pure bloodlines where marriage is the final bastion of the perpetuation of caste hierarchies. *Indian Matchmaking,* a television show that was released on Netflix in 2020, also underscored just how deeply rooted caste and casteism are within the institutions of marriage and family. Marriage and the control of women's sexuality are central to what Uma Chakravarti has called "Brahmanical patriarchy,"[20] which she defines as "a set of rules and institutions in which caste and gender are linked, each shaping the other, and where women are crucial in maintaining the boundaries between castes." Chakravarti and others argue that endogamy is stringently enforced by these patriarchal codes to ensure that the caste system can be reproduced. Any violation of endogamous rules produces a violent reaction, including murder at the extreme end.[21] Even as many privileged castes are vocal in their opposition to affirmative action in higher education and the universities are fraught spaces of discrimination against Dalit and tribal students, the public universities are among the few places where people from different castes can meet as relative equals, and perhaps find friendship and even romance together.

Religion and caste are deeply intertwined. Often endogamous boundaries encompass both, and these may sometimes be represented as differences in food habits, such as vegetarianism. Minal said:

> My mother told me that I can marry whoever I want except a Muslim person or an SC/ST [Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes] person. They are also deeply concerned about how my partner's family should be "pure vegetarian." On a side note, though, they were not aware for almost a year that I am not vegetarian anymore either. When I said that I have had chicken, both my parents were almost horrified. One of my ex-partners, who my mother knew as being Brahmin, was not vegetarian. My mother had liked him I think, for multiple reasons—that he was an MBA graduate, was from a family who was also well-educated, and that he was Brahmin. When I told her that he was not vegetarian, she was surprised, but she said it was fine, people eat what they eat. But I don't think she would be *this understanding* if the caste or religion were different.

Interreligious marriages are not easily accepted either. In Madhavi's case, when her brother married across religious lines, she felt it restricted her own choices.

> My brother married a Christian woman. After that, it was clear to me that I would have to be the child who conformed, else it would

20 Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens* (Kolkata: Stree, 2003), 45.

21 Chakravarti, "From Fathers to Husbands"; Chowdhry, "Enforcing Cultural Codes"; Mody, *The Intimate State*.

> have broken my parents' hearts. They put on a good face about my brother's marriage, but for my parents it was not what they had dreamed of. They are happy for my brother, but I think very sad for themselves. If I ever marry, and it seems likely that I eventually will, I will not really be able to marry too far from our caste location.

Kamila and her brother, on the other hand, used a similar situation of inter-religious marriage to assert a specific kind of progressive politics:

> My brother married a Hindu woman, and with that I became the biggest conversation in my family—how will we find a match for the daughter? She will also learn these things… she will also marry whoever she wants. They tried to make him feel guilty by saying, "Think about your younger sister—who will marry her as the brother has married outside?" My parents were initially slightly uncomfortable—they too bought into this idea that it will be difficult to get me married. But my brother and I have a strong thing going on and we challenged it—we asked them, "Why would I marry into such a family who would care about this?" We convinced our parents, but the extended family is still talking about it.

Kamila and her brother's tactics were to suggest that the only worthwhile kind of person she might be interested in marrying would not care about religious differences.

Like Kamila, Minal was confident that she could convince her parents. She said, "Even their rules about *who* I can and cannot marry… I think I can break them, even if with some arguments. I would never be worried about them 'disowning' me under any circumstances whatsoever, and I think, at the end of the day, they just want me to be happy."

Sadly, though, if surveys are to be believed, then Minal, Kamila, and Kamila's brother might be in a minority. The Lokniti-CSDS–KAS (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies–Konrad Adenauer Stiftung) survey (2017) shows that thirty-six percent of Indian youth (aged fifteen to thirty-four) saw inter-caste marriages as completely wrong; twenty-three percent saw them as partially right, and only one third approved of them fully.[22] Similarly, with inter-religious marriages, forty-five percent were completely opposed to them, and only twenty-eight percent fully supported them. These figures reflect both urban and rural data, but they are nonetheless, not encouraging.

Nasreen's narrative suggests that there is more than a little ambiguity, even among professionals living in metropolitan areas.

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22 Lokniti-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), "Key Highlights from the CSDS–KAS Report 'Attitudes, Anxieties and Aspirations of India's Youth: Changing Patterns,'" *CSDS–KAS*, April 3, 2017. https://www.lokniti.org/media/upload_files/KeyfindingsfromtheYouthStudy.pdf.

> I have increasingly wondered about how Hindu men perceive a Muslim woman of marriageable age. Perhaps my curiosity stemmed from observing how many of my cousins dated Hindu women, but when it came to marriage, fell in love with Muslim women who would be accepted into the family and play the role of the ideal daughter-in-law. In my social circle, where premarital sex and casual relationships are the norm, I have wondered if it's possible that Hindu men think of me as someone who is okay to hook up or have a fling with but not marry. Even amongst journalists my age, where people have a rebellious edge towards societal norms, and mix freely regardless of religion and caste, though not always class, the thought has nagged me. The first time I met my [Hindu] partner's friends, we were at a house party talking about Tinder [a dating app]. One woman was going through another woman's Tinder profile and asked her. "Is it okay to swipe right [accept] for Muslim men?" It was an awkward moment and brought out clearly how even amongst secular, modern, urban, upper-middle-class Hindus who had Muslim friends, dating someone from the community was breaking away from the norm.

Anandi's (twenty-five years old, PhD candidate with fellowship) narrative illustrated that even when the family is progressive, the question of caste plays a role, albeit in a different way:

> My family has always been different. My parents too, had a court marriage, which was controversial in its day. Then, my mum did not change her name, they did not give me a surname, I call them by their first names instead of *aaie* [Marathi for mother] and *aho baba* [Marathi for father in a respectful way], they agreed to homeschool me for a few years, so we've been quite notorious in that regard. I feel the extended family were more surprised that I managed to be quite so conformist [same caste, opposite sex] in my choice of partner!

Caste and religion, and the implicit requirement that people marry inside these boundaries, are features of not just arranged marriages but also choice (or "love") marriages. Interestingly, for some women at least, the restrictions regarding whom they might marry are considerably reduced as they grow older. As Kamini pointed out,

> In my early twenties, [my family] would have been particular—maybe not necessarily looking in my caste, but along similar caste lines—based on the idea of cultural similarity, that it's easier to assimilate in a family like ours. But by the time I was twenty-seven or twenty-eight, they explicitly said they were not bothered about caste or religion.

Minal added to this, "I feel that my parents worry about me not marrying at all more than me marrying someone they don't approve of. So, I think they will be happy if I get married at all." This sentiment is echoed in Lisa's observation:

> When I was younger, I was very strictly told that I should not have a boyfriend and if I did, he should only be Christian. Now that I am thirty-one years old, my mother is okay with any guy… provided we are getting married. At twenty-five, my parents would not have been happy that I have a boyfriend who is older and divorced. But, I think after one turns thirty, many of these lines are blurred. The only focus is to be married.

Kamini laughed: "It's a running joke among my single friends that things begin to drop one after the other—caste, religion, then class, then finally just gender remains—is it a boy—yes, good idea—get married."

While Kamini's half-joking narrative about how the only prejudicial boundary left is the heteronormative one, makes one smile, these narratives do not indicate that caste, religious, or indeed class boundaries are gradually dissolving, but rather offer a wry observation in regard to how important heteronormative marriage is. Moreover, these exceptions do not make the pressures of conforming to endogamy any less real for most marriages.

The insistence on endogamous marriages seems to clearly suggest that the goal of marriage is not what women are often told it is, that is, companionship, but rather a way of maintaining the status quo. "Marriage talk," then, is not only about marriage itself, but also a conversation about caste, religion, sexuality, and race. The ideals of coupledom and the aspirational family are used to mask the fact that the institution of marriage is little more than a way of cementing hierarchical boundaries. However, when women refuse to comply with the universal dictate to marry suitably, the mask begins to slip, little by little.

Bad mothers with uncontrollable daughters

Mothers are perceived to be central to the socio-political economy of matchmaking. Therefore, mothers who are seemingly unable to discipline their daughters, and to a lesser extent, their sons, into submitting to this "highly desirable" institution, are often cast as unsuccessful, or worse, as uncaring and bad mothers. Mothers of unmarried daughters, especially those who are past the desirable age of marriage, face as much, and maybe even more pressure and social disapproval than their daughters. The patriarchal ideologies that cast marriage as the only important goal for women, implicate their mothers as well, who must demonstrate competence and virtue by marrying off their daughters to good, desirable grooms, preferably of the same caste and religion. This pressure on older

women to cajole, guilt, and even coerce younger women into marriage might be read among the ways in which patriarchy co-opts women into adhering to the status quo.

As Padma pointed out:

> I think the various calls from relatives made my mother feel that by not looking for a groom for me she was being a bad mother. Basically, she's a liberal person who agreed with me that I should decide when and if I want to marry, and also whom to marry, but she was not immune to the snide comments about me being too headstrong and that she could not control her daughter.

Similarly, Kamini said that her mother claimed that "she doesn't go out to family events because people will annoy her with questions about when I'm going to get married and she doesn't want to respond," but added that she had not "been someone who attended so many family functions anyway." Like Padma's mother, Kamini's mother was also told that "that's what the girls will say, but it's your duty to make them understand that there's an age for everything." Women are lectured to about maternal duty even when their daughters are adults.

Sometimes the pressure on mothers to have their daughters conform, leads them to shame their daughters in various ways. Chitra's mother is a politician and as part of her mother's campaign, Chitra was to give a talk at a college for women. Just before the talk, Chitra's grandmother told her that if the constituents asked, she should lie about her age. "My *nānī* [maternal grandmother] told me to say that I am twenty-three, not thirty and unmarried. She felt that people don't relate to leaders who let their daughters remain unmarried till thirty. There's a sense that, if you can't control your daughter, how will you be able to take charge of anything else?" Another time at a Diwali festival dinner, Chitra said, "One aunty asked, 'When are you calling me for a wedding?' My mother told her, 'She won't listen.' She told my mother, 'If it were my daughter, I would have locked her up.'"

Though this is much less common, occasionally fathers are also censured. Chitra said: "My dad and I have always been very thick, but now if I want to spend time with him, at half-hour intervals, this issue comes up. It also gets ugly sometimes: 'What kind of girl are you that you don't want to marry?' he asks. His friends tell him he has to marry me off and already it is very late."

In some contexts, mothers are required not just to marry off their daughters but also to embody in their own lives the kind of women that families want as daughters-in-law. In relation to the upper-class, Marwari business community to which she belonged, Kriti said that mothers were seen as representative of whom their daughters would become:

> My mother internalized the pressure to present herself in a certain way over a long time so as not to hamper our future. Even her own

> approach to relationships with other people—her need to present herself as a perfect Marwari *bahū* [daughter-in-law]. She feels a sense of pride that people will only say good things about her if they look at her as a role model for what I will turn into. When parents look at potential daughters-in-law in our community, they focus on the reputation and character of the mother of the girl.

Kriti went on to reflect upon how she had changed:

> Growing up, I used to passively accept everything around young women, and how we should behave and plan our lives. In college, I started thinking and seeing creative options for myself. My mum has tried to understand me—she said, "I understand you will not be happy in a business family where you will have to play the role of a traditional *bahū*."

Kriti added that it was often older women in the family who had the power to define what it meant to be "a good Marwari woman." Mothers of adult daughters, who were still themselves answerable to elders in the family, might then have relatively less power in influencing the discourse around marriage:

> Older women in the family—the matriarchs—ideal wives, mothers who have social capital, connections, money—are seen as the success stories in my family. There's a clear power differential and power hierarchy in my family. My mum's mum is still alive and she has several sisters—and they have an important role in their children's lives and those of their children's children.

Kriti's narrative suggests that women acquire power as they grow older, especially when they are women who have conformed. They draw power from the status quo, and often use it in the service of patriarchy to reinforce gender relations, in ways that underscore the "old ways" and the notion that "this is how we have always done things." Younger women have to fall in line if they do not wish to be excluded and perhaps even ostracized. However, external changes intervene to allow women access to different kinds of communities.

Kriti said that sometime in the next few months she was going to the wedding of a cousin. She was now a twenty-five-year-old unmarried woman, an age she considered as being on the cusp of becoming unmarriageable in her community. She pointed out that things had been different for her:

> Girls in my generation have not been raised with the amount of inequality that our mothers' generation were. Our mothers were barely sent to college. My parents have tried to give children equal opportunities in terms of education, encouraging kids of both

> genders to go out for studying. So, a lot of young women are not conditioned with being okay with what a traditional marriage looks like.

When women are educated, they may start asking uncomfortable questions. They are able to access worlds outside the ones they were brought up in. This allows space to challenge the power structures and hierarchies that might be taken for granted within their families. They may encounter older women outside their families, such as their teachers; they may encounter other young women, for example, their classmates and peers, with different ambitions; they may encounter feminism, especially in humanities and social science education—all of which may transform them. They may eventually choose to refuse to conform, because the ostensible threat of being excluded from familial approbation might actually be seen as a lesser evil than the reality of what conforming to the expectations of marriage might look like.

As daughters negotiate, avoid, and skirt the "marriage talk," parents also change with them. Just as parents often try to find truly suitable matches, they often understand when their daughters say they are not ready or do not want to marry. In some cases, parents were progressive to begin with, in others they change in negotiation with their daughters.

Some mothers are less bothered by their assigned roles. Keya said, "The funniest thing is when people call my mom telling her that she must explain things to me, like how important it is to get married, and she really needs to make me understand. My mom definitely is the last person who would actually have me sit down and chat about this. We'd rather have a talk about where we should travel next."

Rujutha and Deeksha both have liberal parents. Rujutha (twenty-eight years old, working in a media NGO) said she was able to "crib to [her] mother about being single and about being in a relationship. My mother is incredibly supportive about [her] being unmarried—she knows about my partner and that we live in together." Deeksha (twenty-nine years old, working for a corporate consultancy) added, "The question has come up now that I'm nearing thirty but in a very subtle way. I think I am lucky to have liberal parents who do not push marriage down my throat. I know of friends who have had very different experiences." Kalpana Sharma, in the introduction to her edited volume of essays by women who are single by choice, points out that in most narratives, one striking feature is the presence of supportive parents.[23] Sharda Ugra's essay in Sharma's edited volume recounts how the author was told by her mother that had she (the mother) "not been an obedient daughter… she would never have married."[24] This was something that stayed with Ugra as she made her own choices.

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23 Kalpana Sharma, "Introduction: Simply Single," in *Single by Choice: Happily Unmarried Women*, ed. Kalpana Sharma (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2019).

24 Sharda Ugra, "Stomping on the Cookie Cutter," in *Single by Choice: Happily Unmarried Women*, ed. Kalpana Sharma (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2019), 15.

Some narratives suggest that many mothers demonstrate a strong shift as they talk with their daughters, with the more status quo-ist discourse on marriage gradually becoming less important. Neera suggested that her mother felt that she, Neera, was living the life that her mother might have been able to live, if circumstances had been different. "I see in my mother's eyes—that I'm glad you are being able to do things I could not. My mother is the most excited when I travel. If I travel alone to difficult places, she takes tremendous pride in it. She really feels happy when I'm enjoying myself. That I am able to make the choices I make. It is much more than a resigned acceptance."

In most cases, parents evolve in their understanding as the conversation on marriage evolves. Kamini described the early years when her parents brought up the marriage question in the following words:

> Very quickly I realized it was not going to work. I was unhappy and they were unhappy. Talking to friends, I feel I had a very good equation with both my parents, even as a teenager. For the first time, I knew what it was like to not be on good terms with your parents, and how isolating it felt, and for them also it was the first time they struggled so much with me. Now I feel the conversation is much easier. Earlier it had an emotional tone, now it's about financial stability, are you saving—more practical and pragmatic. I find these conversations much more manageable. Those are things I want to do too.

In a similar vein, Geetha pointed out that other considerations had taken over. "My father is more worried about me getting insurance, investing, saving, buying a car, or filing my taxes. I think both my parents hope I will find someone I can get married to." Similarly, Neera said:

> My own relationship with my parents changed, as they were reassured that I am fine on my own. They are able to respond to people's questions by saying, "It's her life and our task is to facilitate this." They've also seen some failed marriages among my cousins and their colleagues' children. They've seen working women who were promised they would be treated better [by their conjugal family] but they were not. Families do try to domesticate these women. They [her parents] appreciate that I am able to do all of this because I am on my own.

While marriage continues to frame the discussion when daughters are of a certain age, in many cases parents are willing to reflect, to negotiate, and perhaps even to change. This discussion allows us to reframe the lens where those seen as bad mothers from a conformist perspective, might, from the perspective of their daughters, be the best kind of mother—mothers who understand that marriage might not be the most important thing for them.

How to define success? Education and careers as forms of negotiation

For many women, educational achievement or the perception of the pursuit of successful careers (not just jobs) mediate the "marriage talk." Both Neera and Kamini worked in highly-regarded universities and were seen by their families as successful women on a desirable career path. This success, then, is a source of comfort and pride for parents, and it silences the extended kin, who, in middle-class contexts, also recognize and acknowledge such professional success.

As Neera constructed it, "In some way, you are the black sheep—but because you have a PhD and are teaching in a university, you can't be *that* black of a sheep. I am the first academic from my family." She added:

> Had I not found a profession that others see as respectable—if I wasn't earning as I do, if I didn't have a doctor attached to my name, if I was not teaching in a university they think is good enough… it might not have been the same… This helps them feel confident—*thīk hain shādī nahī kī* ["it's okay, she has not married"], but she is doing something. They can rationalize these choices in front of others. Economic and social mobility compensates for a lot.

Kamini, who also worked in academia and came from an academic family, concurred with this analysis:

> The job was something very important to them. They wanted me to have financial independence. My father was very keen on my professional growth as it eased the pressures in terms of the larger extended family. Earlier, questions would be asked: "What is she doing—why is she still studying?" Though I have aunts who have PhDs, they did it later in life. The extended family did not see the PhD and personal life as being mutually exclusive. But getting a job in a place like this—not a local college, but in a place of national repute at my age. Education, in my caste location, was more important than even the amount of money you make. Also important are the places you studied—did you do engineering at an IIT [Indian Institute of Technology], are you in the top universities? The fact that I'm doing international conferences and publishing makes a difference. A lot of my family are in academia and they get what it means. They read this as success and therefore, they don't give me so much grief.

The suggestion that career success allows for some breathing space in relation to the "marriage talk" is echoed by those whose jobs are not seen as indicative of the same kind of success. Certain kinds of work are not recognized in the same way as others. In some contexts, they may even

be seen as frivolous and as a way of passing the time until women marry. For those who work in activism, families may disparage or undermine their work.

Kriti said she had a

> lot of ups and downs when I started working in an NGO, they thought I was volunteering my time. They felt I was not settled as they had no concept of a career with an NGO. My line of work was not considered meaningful in my community and was devalued. And because they thought I'm not doing anything with my life they saw no reason why I could not marry.

Kamila, who was also working at an NGO, added: "There is nobody from my extended family on either side who do the kind of work I do—they have no clue about what an NGO job is." Kamila continued:

> Even my parents call and ask me my life plans. They don't see what I do now as a life plan because of what I'm earning. They are uncomfortable that I am living in a class below what I was born to. They feel I need more money, should have a car. I say I don't need those things. They argue: when you are thirty you will want other things. I said I want to do a PhD—but I don't know at what point in life. Now they keep asking when I'm applying and whether I have identified colleges.

Kamila also learned from her brother that her parents were using her future PhD plans to vindicate themselves as good parents to relatives. "I hear that they are telling extended relatives that she wants to get a PhD first… The whole family seems to know I want to do a PhD. So, there's now another kind of pressure to get a PhD. So, I have started saying new things, I tell them I need more experience to get a scholarship."

Education enables women to renegotiate timeframes, to push boundaries a little. In these relatively privileged contexts, higher education is considered a good thing. As Kamila suggested, her reputation as an intelligent and studious girl had helped her navigate the expectations of her extended family. She said: "Who can stop someone from studying? That would make them very bad people. So, holding out the possibility of the PhD has worked for me." Kamila's narrative resonates with Neera's, which foregrounds the middle-class aspiration for education. To be educated is virtuous, and thus women who might otherwise be seen as difficult for refusing to marry, are nonetheless, able to present themselves as "good" middle-class girls if they pursue higher education.

Parents are also able to use their daughter's educational aspirations to present themselves as concerned but caring parents. Though Meera's (twenty-seven years old, journalist) parents are liberal, they too use the PhD excuse to respond to marriage requests:

> My parents themselves married late and did so outside the community, when their extended families were not the most liberal. The understanding in my extended family, both from my Marwari side and Punjabi side, is that because my parents married when they wanted to, I will be doing the same. Currently, when asked by "concerned" family members, their answer is, "She is too young, let her work and do what she wants, she will get married when she wants to." For the brief period I was unemployed… the narrative, which went out to the extended family, was, "She's applying for a PhD." Deflecting the "when is she getting married" question otherwise would have been tougher, I think.

The PhD or even the promise of a future PhD emerges as an important marker that not just women but also their families use, to signal to the extended kin and community that while their daughters might not be conforming by marrying, they are still nonetheless, achieving other desirable goals. The appearance, in my interviews, of the PhD as a tool of negotiation however, very clearly indicates that this sample is not representative of women seen to be of "marriageable" age.

Aside from the achievement of this degree and the possibilities it harbors in terms of avoiding marriage, there is also significant anxiety attached to women becoming *too* accomplished. In India, well-educated and successful women of a marriageable age often struggle to match with equally successful grooms, as there are not always enough of them to go around. This issue is of course tied to a hierarchical understanding of marriage where the prospective grooms must be more educated and earn more than the potential brides.

Neera pointed out that, now that she was a university professor, there were few men who were equally qualified, whom her family might suggest in an arranged marriage scenario. In this vein, Sarah Lamb, in her study of single women in Kolkata, has argued that

> single women's narratives also expose the problem of gendered mismatches of class. Marriage takes place not only between individuals but between families. If through education and employment a woman achieves a class status much higher than that of her family background, she becomes practically unmarriageable.[25]

Similarly, Sandy To argues that in the Chinese context, highly-educated women find it hard to marry, as Chinese men do not want to marry women who are more accomplished than them because of their fear of "being

25 Lamb, "Being Single in India," 60.

ridiculed or despised in a highly patriarchal society."[26] She suggests that men still feel the need to maintain superiority and control over women.

Families often respond to the educational achievements of their daughters by looking for a specific kind of potential groom. Kamila talked about a time when her father went to see a boy for someone else: "My father had gone to see some boy for my cousin. He liked him and called me, giving me info about this boy. He said he's a PhD in sociology and a teacher, and his father is also a professor. My father has grasped some idea of what kind of boy I would like and was trying to push this boy."

Kamini also said that education changes the kind of men families seek for their daughters:

> Now, even if someone approaches my mother about a *riśtā* [proposal], it's someone with a PhD in Europe or something. They are cognizant that being an academic means something, and that I should be partnered with someone who is equally academically qualified. Earlier there were engineers suggested, but not anymore. Also, there is the age factor—only people [of similar age] doing PhDs are still single.

There is an innate contradiction here. Sandy To's research suggests that women do want to marry but that their success makes them unmarriageable. My own narratives, particular as they are, point to another possibility. While it is assumed that "over-educated" women become unmarriageable, some women themselves use education as a means to delay marriage, and perhaps even to take themselves off the marriage market. This is most visible in Kamila's narrative, where she actively used the PhD, which she had not yet begun, to stave off possible marriage connections. Neera and Kamini's narratives, too, suggest some level of relief, even glee, that their degrees allowed them the space to make choices.

What if we were to see women's choices to pursue higher degrees not as something they do despite the fear of not finding grooms, but precisely because they are engaged in a quest to avoid marriage, either temporarily or permanently? Education, then, might be seen not as something that prevents them from achieving one goal, that is, marriage, but rather a way of achieving another one, namely the possibility of choosing their own futures, which may, or may not include marriage.

26 Sandy To, *China's Leftover Women: Late Marriage Among Professional Women and its Consequences* (London: Routledge, 2015), 38.

Difficult daughters

Single women are seen as difficult: difficult to please, difficult to talk to, difficult to reason with. They are seen as excessively choosy, picky, as never considering anyone to be good enough, and as somehow asking for too much.[27] Kinneret Lahad points out:

> In Israel, midlife selective women are called "*Bareraniot*." This adjective derives from the noun *Breira*, which in Hebrew can mean either an option or a selection. *Ravakot Bareraniot* (selective single women) in Hebrew slang designates women who have options but are too picky about them. Some of the contemporary interpretations of the term refer to the new kind of single woman: attractive, educated, independent, liberated from traditional constraints, yet overly selective. Part of the reason these women stir so much interest and contempt is that they defy the heteronormative injunctions to confirm to one's expected gendered duty to marry and reproduce.[28]

Lahad's arguments ring a bell for many. Geetha said:

> The worst has been me walking in on people discussing me in my absence. Usually, it's my maternal grandparents expressing anguish and worry to my parents about my unmarried status. It often takes the form of: "There is no point in being choosy. You have to settle, otherwise she is just getting older and older, and we are scared she will also become like"—and they mention the name of a single woman in family who is unmarried, and whom everyone has given up on, but who might in fact be successful and happy.

In a similar vein, Chitra says that her awareness of what marriage entails already marks her out as not a good girl.

> It is difficult to make them understand that I know the *shādī* [wedding] is not just about the party. I had to spell it out for them that I was not sexually attracted to this one guy. It is difficult to explain that I know that marriage involves sex. Everyone is talking about everything else. If you are a girl and you are engaged, you are expected to be excited about it and not ask too many questions.

Chitra remarked on how her family had failed to acknowledge that some kinds of safety were non-negotiable. She said:

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27 Kundu, *Status Single*.
28 Kinneret Lahad, "'Am I Asking for Too Much?' The Selective Single Woman as a New Social Problem," *Women's Studies International Forum*, no. 40 (2013): 26.

> There was this one guy who had traveled a lot. He got drunk one night and told me he'd slept with fifty women—so I told my dad that he should get a test for STDs. My dad said that nobody talks about these things—they will say the girl is *badtamīz* [rude]. But if I have this information and I don't protect myself then I'm stupid.

As if that were not enough, Chitra also found herself feeling guilty because she wouldn't make people happy the way they would want.

> My mother had dengue and was ill. I was looking after her. She said I had hoped to see you married before I died. When the first guy was suggested all my four grandparents were alive. Now only my *nānī* (maternal grandmother) is left. She [her *nānī*] says, "[The other grandparents] also wanted to see you married, but now, do it for me." I become this selfish person who won't do this for someone. I still get taunted for being stubborn, having a lofty opinion of myself.

Similarly, Lahad suggests,

> [A] single woman above marriageable age transgresses well-established systems of meaning. This is one of the reasons why selectiveness is also understood in terms of excess. Single women are merely exaggerating, they are represented as overbearing, overly demanding, and having too high an opinion of themselves, and in this sense, they are outside the confines of the normal. In other words, the label of selectiveness represents a disturbing vision of a subjectivity of excess.[29]

At the same time, narratives in my interviews suggested that women who were not afraid to stand up for themselves, wore the label of difficult women with pride. As Kamila put it,

> People are told to stay away from me. Because earlier there have been fights about other things—political things. Fights where I tell them, "I don't want to talk to you, don't call me." I am known as someone who is always angry. Cousins, aunts, nobody dares. Even in everyday conversations I call out sexist, or anti-Hindu, or casteist statements. They tell each other, *uske mūh mat lago* ["don't argue with her"]. So yes, nobody would dare introduce me to anyone.

Padma concurred: "Nobody will dare say anything directly to me [about marriage] as I'm known in my extended family as a firebrand feminist—this is not a compliment for them but I take it as such."

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29 Kinneret Lahad, "'Am I Asking for Too Much?'" 31.

While there is a growing economy that caters to single people, including single women, the inevitable stigma attached to them, persists. Even in the twenty-first century, single women are an anomaly. Being labeled "difficult" often means that women are seen as transgressive, and therefore unable or unwilling to conform. Here too, as in the case of education, being difficult is for many women a way of ensuring, as Kamila and Padma did, that nosy relatives are too intimidated to approach them, thus avoiding the "marriage talk" altogether. For the women I interviewed, their quality of being difficult had won them some amount of space for expression and articulation. Whether they wanted to marry or not, their refusal to be obedient daughters meant that they had gained a certain amount of bargaining power. Being difficult, then, may be as much of a choice, an explicit assertion of agency as anything else, for women who desire to make their own choices.

Conclusion

Women who refuse to see marriage as the central question in their lives, compel the negotiations around "marriage talk" to evolve, either out of their own sheer stubbornness, by being "difficult," or sometimes, even by engendering transformation within their families. This chapter asks: What if we no longer see marriage as demarcating women's relationships to natal and marital families, and women simply in the light of the roles of daughters, sisters, wives, daughters-in-law, and mothers? The act of removing marriage from the equation, or at least dislodging it from its central location in women's relationships to families, has the potential to be transformational. If women belong (if indeed we require them to belong somewhere) only to their natal families, then marriage is no longer the definitive institution through which women can belong or indeed, make claims. This may be the first step towards rethinking how we understand families and creating even small fractures in the patriarchal assumptions that govern them. My exploratory research suggests that where families are able to move beyond the centrality of marriage, they pose a challenge to the very idea of family itself. Being single, even temporarily, is then not just something that happens by chance, but must be seen as a political act.

While families remain invested in the idea of marriage, women nonetheless create spaces for themselves by choosing to be single or refusing to settle, as some of the narratives in Kalpana Sharma's edited volume *Single by Choice* and Bhaichand Patel's edited volume *Chasing the Good Life* suggest, as do the stories recorded in Kundu's work, *Status Single*.[30] Women

30 Kalpana Sharma ed, *Single by Choice: Happily Unmarried Women* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2019); Bhaichand Patel, *Chasing the Good Life: On Being Single* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2006); Kundu, *Status Single*.

are also choosing to, and even reveling in, navigating cities on their own as single women.[31] This chapter is a small intervention in the very large and widely researched area of marriage and family studies, and might also be seen as a contribution to the new and growing field of singles studies.[32]

Once we challenge the central role that the institution of marriage has long enjoyed in any discussion of single women, new and exciting questions may be asked. In one conversation, my colleague Nithila Kanagasabai asked, "Can we even begin to talk about single women as a community and not discuss it merely within the framework of individual choice?"[33] Ketaki Chowkhani is researching the ways in which consumer capitalist modernity inflects the lives and worlds of singles living in metropolitan centers.[34] Chowkhani is also teaching a post-graduate course titled "Singles studies"—the first of its kind.[35] This book also suggests many ways in which these questions may be phrased and addressed.

These questions fly in the face of the insistent question, "When are you getting married?" Even as the narratives in this study challenge the centrality of heteronormative marriage, they reveal exciting possibilities for rethinking ways in which one might lead a fulfilling life, and in doing so, invite us to reflect upon singlehood as a choice.

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31 Melissa Butcher, "Defying Delhi's Enclosures: Strategies for Managing a Difficult City," *Gender, Place & Culture* 25, no. 5 (2018); Sunny Singh, *Single in the City: The Independent Woman's Handbook* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2000).

32 Bella DePaulo, "The Urgent Need for a Singles Studies Discipline," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42, no. 4 (Summer 2017).

33 Personal conversation with the author.

34 Ketaki Chowkhani and Craig Wynne, *Singular Selves: An Introduction to Singles Studies* (London: Routledge, 2024).

35 Shriya Mohan, "Table for One, Please," *The Hindu Business Line*, March 13, 2020. Accessed July 2, 2020, https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/blink/know/table-for-one-please/article31050738.ece.

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