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Of Homes, Hostels, and Addresses: Intergenerational Perspectives on Habitations and Women's Singleness in Contemporary Kolkata

Abstract The essay examines selected working women's hostels in Kolkata to demonstrate how urban women's singleness is constructed through the spatial organization, administrative norms, everyday regulations, and interpersonal relationships of the inmates, as well as the specific histories and objectives of these institutions. From the 1940's with increasing women's participation in the workforce, these hostels came up, providing a supportive environment to women to work and live independently in the city. However, these hostels also bear the legacy of earlier organizations for single women, like "ashrams" for widows and shelters for destitute women or sexworkers that were established with a view to regulating the sexualities of unattached women. Using intergenerational perspectives of the inmates, the essay shows how these spaces understand single women's lives, needs, and problems. While providing a means to live outside the regimes of the heteropatriarchal family and home, they create their own regimes of "acceptable" female singleness in the ways in which they normativize notions of women's work, leisure, sexuality, and safety.

Keywords hostels; homes; Kolkata; working women; intergenerationality; single women

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In the 1979 Hindi film *Suhāg*, a drunk Parveen Babi drapes herself across the front of the jeep of a befuddled Shashi Kapoor, who asks her in consternation, "Kahān le jāun? Koi atā patā ṭhikānā hai?" ("Where should I take you? Do you have an address?").[1] In response, Babi sings, "Nā koi ghar hai merā, nā koi ṭhikānā—main to beghar hūn, apne ghar le chalo." ("I have neither home nor address / I am homeless, take me to your home"). Despite its title, *Suhāg* (marriage), the film's use of this song evokes a certain image of single women's lives in the city. It links ideas of women's singleness and homelessness, suggesting a difference between *ghar* (home) and *ṭhikānā* (address), between belonging and displacement. Driving through nighttime Bombay while listing the destinations that he could take her to, Babi suggests going to a hotel or a movie theater, or just cavorting in the streets like lovers. A scandalized Kapoor admonishes her for her boldness, since a hotel has associations of a socially forbidden extramarital, or in this case pre-marital, sexual encounter. Having exhausted the "respectable" options of public places that a single girl with a male companion could go to at night, Babi exasperatedly says, "To mujh se kar lo shādī aur mandir le chalo." (Marry me then, let us go to a temple). But before such a drastic step is taken, Kapoor finds Babi's identity card and drives her to the address marked on it—a ladies' hostel. The song ends, suggesting that for the single woman craving a nocturnal urban adventure in speeding cars, the best that her nervous gallant can do is to drop her off at a women's hostel, which is a *ṭhikānā* and not a *ghar*.[2] A disappointed Babi laments, "Lagtā hai ki merā ṭhikānā ā gayā / Nā ghar *āyā*, nā daftar *āyā*, ye to hostel ā gayā." ("It seems I have reached my address / Not a home, nor an office, but a hostel instead").

This chapter will deploy the distinction posited in the song between the *ghar*, or home, with all its moral and gendered associations of domesticity, respectability, and familial identity, and the *ṭhikānā*, a term which characterizes the hostel as a mere address, a place to stay, which carries no markers of belonging. This distinction will serve as a frame to map single women's experiences in contemporary Kolkata, erstwhile Calcutta, the nineteenth-century capital of the British empire in India. The binary of *ghar* and *ṭhikānā* has both a historical and contemporary relevance to forging ideas of women's single lives in Indian cities.

Partha Chatterjee's argument about the nineteenth-century Hindu nationalist configuration of the private sphere of the *ghar* as a site of Indian tradition, uncontaminated by colonization and embodied in the sequestered Hindu woman, is well known.[3] While for education and livelihood men needed to negotiate the colonial public sphere shaped by Western

1 All translations, unless indicated otherwise, are by the author.
2 Ironically, the hostel is named "Śiva", referring to the hypermasculine Hindu deity considered to be the model husband that single Hindu girls are supposed to pray to, and long for.
3 Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989).

culture, women were expected to uphold the sanctity of the Hindu home and its racial, religious, and caste purity. The East India Company's Permanent Settlement Act, passed in 1793, resulted in land subinfeudation, decreased earning, and landlessness, leading to large-scale male migration from the villages to Calcutta,[4] the imperial capital. Boarding houses or hostels, called *mess bāḍis*, emerged in the city to accommodate these fortune-seekers. These temporary, non-domestic, mixed spaces were demographically diverse. They thereby reflected the cosmopolitanism of Calcutta—a trade hub, and melting pot of the empire.[5]

From the early twentieth century, women's boarding houses began to appear. As women left their homes—sites of tradition and racial purity—to join colleges, offices, or political organizations in the city, they came to inhabit the transcultural urban spaces of hostels, which were *ṭhikānās* rather than *ghars*. This transition can be seen as marking the Indian woman's journey towards a civic identity beyond the familial and communal belonging associated with the home.Multiple generations of women who came to stay in the city's hostels and negotiate the urban space, helped to shape ideas of women's unaffiliated, autonomous, single lives. By exploring their experiences, this chapter revisits Ipshita Chanda's *Selfing the City*,[6] an examination of single women migrants in the twenty-first century who came to Kolkata as outsiders, and built new lives and identities, making the city their own. However, I focus not so much on the migrant identity of the women, but rather on their status as single women, outsiders to marriage, whose singleness is constructed in specific ways by the city hostels they stay in. I explore how urban women's singleness may be understood through the framing tropes of *ghar,* the family dwellings associated with ideas of safety, honor, and protectionism that women leave behind, and *ṭhikānā*, the institutional hostel spaces with diverse communities and specific norms that they come to inhabit.

The legacy of the nineteenth-century moral and patriarchal understanding of the home continues to play out in the social and self-perceptions of women living outside marriage, away from their families. As Rama Melkote and Susie Tharu write in their "Investigative Analysis of Working Women's Hostels in India,"

> A prospective landlord bases his decision to accept a single woman as tenant not just on her ability to pay the rent but also on his

4 In 2001, the government of West Bengal changed its capital city's colonial name "Calcutta" to "Kolkata" to reflect its original Bengali language pronunciation. This chapter would thus use Kolkata rather than Calcutta for post-2001 contexts and in all cases where the references are in Bengali.

5 Barshana Basu, "The Mess Bari Project: Documenting Kolkata's Diverse Boarding Houses," *The Messbari Project (Blog)*, January 8, 2019. https://messbariproject.wordpress.com/2019/01/08/the-mess-bari-project-documenting-kolkatas-diverse-boarding-houses/.

6 Ipshita Chanda, *Selfing the City: Single Women Migrants and their Lives in Kolkata* (New Delhi: SAGE and Stree Publications, 2017).

> judgement of her clothes, her looks, the likelihood that she will have visitors, the hours she may keep... It is amazing how thin the line is between social acceptability and unacceptability for a single woman attempting to live outside the protection of marriage. Often, especially if her income is limited, she has to resign herself to living in a hostel in order to protect her reputation.[7]

But even a hostel does not ensure respectability. Leela Fernandes points out that single working women in Mumbai often do not reveal to their employers that they are staying in hostels, since "the notion of an unmarried woman living on her own continues to provoke a stereotype of a socially or sexually immoral woman."[8]

> For a man in India, a house provides shelter and other basic amenities... A house is also a mark of his lineage... For a woman... to be housed is not to be on the streets. In a house she belongs to one man—father or husband—and is protected from all other males. Traditionally she does not own property, but she achieves position within a property structure, often as property, through the patriarch who takes her into his house. Her status and her value are entirely dependent on this housing.[9]

Without the moral status conferred by the home, the single woman living in the hostel is socially seen as having only a *ṭhikānā* and a somewhat dubious reputation.[10] It is through these dialectics of home and address, safety and freedom, respectability and sexual autonomy, that the present chapter examines certain women's experiences of singleness in selected Kolkata hostels.

This chapter is based on a study conducted between 2015 and 2018 on eighteen women's hostels across Kolkata. Selected to represent a range of institutions, both old and contemporary, set up by the government, communities, by nationalist organizations, or by leftist groups. The hostels included the following:

— The Saroj Nalini Dutt Memorial Association (SNDMA), set up in 1925 to commemorate Saroj Nalini Dutt (1887–1925), a reformer who pioneered women's organizations, worked with rural women, and promoted women's education and political rights. In 1944, SNDMA

7 Rama Melkote and Susie J.Tharu, "An Investigative Analysis of Working Women's Hostels in India," *Signs* 9, no. 1 (Autumn 1983): 164.
8 Leela Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 167.
9 Melkote and Tharu, "Working Women's Hostels in India," 169.
10 When asked what a single woman needs the most, a resident of a working women's hostel responded, "She can stay hungry for a night, but not without a roof over her head." (forty-nine years old, nurse by profession). She explained that for a single woman, a shelter is also linked to her social respectability.

started a working women's hostel in the Ballygunge area of Kolkata for "middle-class" women. The association continues to be involved in social activities like adult literacy campaigns, programs on the health of women and children, nursing and midwifery courses, and running printing and stitching training units for poor women. Some of the oldest residents of the hostel are employed in the association's activities.

— Pankaj Acharya Smriti Niketan (PASN), a working women's hostel established by the West Bengal *Nārī O Śiśu Kalyāṇ Sangsthyā*, a women's organization comprising members of the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), the women's wing of the Communist Party of India. The hostel was started in Kankurgachi in 1994 by AIDWA activist Mrinalini Dasgupta. The hostel authorities also run women's vocational programs and a school for poor children. Many hostelites are involved in these activities.
— The government-supported working women's hostels in Gariahat, Sahapur, and Baghbajar areas of Kolkata offering accommodation to employed women at nominal rates.
— St. Bridget's Hostel, Kidderpore, located in a nineteenth-century complex established by the Religious Congregation of the Daughters of the Cross. It was designed to house single working women aged between twenty and thirty years old.
— The Muslim Girls' Hostel, Park Circus, set up by the Muslim Waqf Board in 1994 to enable meritorious Muslim girls from the districts to pursue their undergraduate and postgraduate education in Kolkata.

These selected hostels housed both students and working women from middle and lower middle-class families in an age range from eighteen to seventy years old. The responses of the 119 residents of these hostels (who granted us one-on-one in-depth interviews) on singleness, marriage, friendships, family, home, domesticity, work, and the city demonstrate how the different environments of these facilities, their histories, institutional objectives, their administrative norms, everyday regulations, and the interpersonal relationships of the residents construct the singleness of urban women in distinctive ways. The hostelites' quest for a *ghar* or a *ṭhikānā* shapes their relationships to the city as well as their aspirations for an autonomous life.

For many of the young female migrants making their first "ambiguous journey to the city,"[11] as well as for their anxious parents, the hope is to find a hostel that is a "home away from home," a safe haven in the "big bad city" that enforces strict discipline, tight curfews, and curbs on late nights and visitors. However, for others, especially older boarders, the purpose

11 See Ashis Nandy, *An Ambiguous Journey to the City. The Village and Other Odd Ruins of the Self in the Indian Imagination* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

of independent urban living is to find a place that treats its residents as responsible adults and allows them to live freely, instead of replicating patterns of familial surveillance. These residents look for an empowering environment in the hostel, which, rather than extending the space of domestic control, provides safe access to the possibilities offered by the city. This chapter examines some of these inter– and multigenerational perspectives on the residents' relationships with the hostel and their singleness in the city.[12]

The idea of temporality also structures the binary of "home" and "address." For most single young women, the hostel is a temporary address while they wait to get married and make their own homes. Uma Chakravarti remarks, "Hostels have to stop acting as transits between fathers and husband[s]," seeing them as a kind of waiting room.[13] Kamalini Ramdas has described single women as women-in-waiting, who have yet to make the all-important transition into marriage.[14]

However, for many of the older boarders, the hostel is not a transitional *ṭhikānā* but may well become a home while singleness becomes a permanent state. In this sense, their life trajectories look very different from those of the younger women. For the women employed (for extended time periods) in the hostels as superintendents, matrons, cleaners, and cooks, who often choose to work there because they provide free lodging, the *ṭhikānā* becomes both workplace and home. Here it is important to note that the hostel and its community offer these women modes of domesticity which are not fettered by the familial entanglements that they have left behind. The relationships of these long-term residents with the hostel are thus constructed differently from those of the younger women.

The existing scholarship on women's hostels in India focuses mostly on young boarders. Melkote and Tharu's analysis of protests by hostelites does not take the residents' age or length of stay into consideration.[15] Kameshwari Pothukuchi shows how hostels avoid long-term commitments, preferring to house younger women who work in the city for a few years before marrying and moving on.[16] Fernandes describes Mumbai hostels that offer accommodation to young working women for a maximum of three years, not wanting to take responsibility for long-term,

12 Chanda's *Selfing the City* also sought to capture intergenerational perspectives of single women migrants to the city.

13 Uma Chakravarti quoted in Jahnavi Sen, "The Pinjra Tod Movement: DCW Issues Notice to Universities on Gender Biased Hostel Rules," *The Wire*, May 9, 2016, https://thewire.in/gender/the-pinjra-tod-movement-dcw-issues-notice-to-universities-on-gender-biased-hostel-rules.

14 Kamalini Ramdas, "Women in Waiting? Singlehood, Marriage, and Family in Singapore," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 44, no. 4 (2012): 832.

15 Melkote and Tharu, "Working Women's Hostels in India."

16 Kameshwari Pothukuchi, "Effectiveness and Empowerment in Women's Shelter: A Study of Working Women's Hostels in Bangalore, India," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25, no. 2 (June 2001).

ageing boarders.[17] Ritty Lukose's ethnographic study of a Kerala hostel focuses on young college students,[18] while Chanda analyzes the experiences of young women, aged mostly between sixteen and thirty years old, although a few older women are included.[19] Anveshi's recent study is also based on young female workers in Hyderabad.[20] The studies on Indian women's hostels are thus overdetermined by a focus on young residents and the impact of liberalization on their work and migration, while very little research exists on older boarders. This is perhaps because hostels are still regarded as stopgap residences primarily for the young. By focusing on older women who have consciously rejected home, marriage, and families to live in hostels, we can better understand hostels as spaces that enable women's desire for autonomy, rather than as "waiting rooms" for young women who will eventually transition to marriage and homes *(ghar)*.

The oral narratives of both the long-term hostelites and younger boarders in this study construct a gendered history of the city, focusing on the shifting trajectories of women's employment, migration, and housing, as well as on their relationship to urban spaces and to the ideologies of home, family, marriage, and singleness. Their memories act as an archive of city hostels, tracing the role of these institutions in informing urban as well as women's histories. This leads us to speculate whether Antoinette Burton's theorization of women's memories of homes as alternative archives could also be applied to women's hostel narratives:[21]

> Can private memories of home serve as evidence of political history? What do we make of the histories that domestic interiors… yield? And, given women's vexed relationship to the kinds of histories that archives typically house, what does it mean to say that home can and should be seen not simply as a dwelling-place for women's memory but as one of the foundations of history.[22]

Reading the history of colonial Calcutta and post-colonial Kolkata through the narratives of multiple generations of women hostelites, this chapter will analyze how the hostels mentioned earlier, with their diverse histories, and demographic compositions, as well as different visions of gender roles, frame women's singleness in different and dynamic ways.

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17 Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class*.
18 Ritty A. Lukose, *Liberalization's Children: Gender, Youth, and Consumer Citizenship in Globalizing India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).
19 Chanda, *Selfing the City*.
20 Anveshi, "City and Sexuality: A Study of Youth Living and Working in Hyderabad" (unpublished project report, Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, 2017).
21 Antoinette M. Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).
22 Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive*, 4.

"Where shall she live?"[23] Historicizing the question of women's non-domestic accommodation

The problem of accommodating single women living outside their natal or marital families has become steadily more prominent in the last two centuries. While in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the focus has tended to be on never-married young women looking for work in the metropolis, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed greater preoccupation with widows and abandoned women. Nineteenth-century social and legal reformers, particularly in Bengal, were most concerned about Hindu widows. After the banning of *satī* (widow burning), questions of how to socially assimilate a widow, keep her chaste, and house her safely, became critical in a context where families were unwilling to take on her responsibility. From the late nineteenth century, residential hostels were established for widows, along with schools and vocational training centers. Some of these hostels also housed abandoned wives and victims of domestic abuse.[24] In 1897, Christian missionaries started the Young Women's Christian Association "Home," a hostel for young, employed Christian women in Calcutta.[25] Boarding houses for female students were also opened in missionary-run educational institutions like Bethune College. In the 1920s, the Bethune College hostel provided an empowering environment for women revolutionaries like Preetilata Waddedar and Kalpana Dutta. As Malini Bhattacharya writes,

> Did not leaving home and coming to the hostel provide a freedom to their sensibilities? The role that they played in the Chattagram [Chittagong] uprising required them to dissociate themselves from traditional familial and domestic roles. They had to live with men, wear men's clothes. This revolution in thinking must have been facilitated by their experiences of leaving behind their homes to come to Kolkata and live in the unfamiliar communities of women's hostels.[26]

From the 1930s and 1940s, as women's participation in the workforce increased, more hostels sprung up in Calcutta to enable the new arrivals

23 See Mary Higgs and Edward E. Hayward, *Where Shall She Live? The Homelessness of the Woman Worker* (London: Edward E. Hayward, 1910).

24 Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 47–60; Sarmistha Dutta Gupta*, Identities and Histories: Women's Writing and Politics in Bengal* (Kolkata: Stree, 2010), 29–30, 34–35, 61.

25 The establishment of the Young Women's Christian Association and later their "Home" in London in 1855 was a response to the growing need for safe lodging for women since employment-related travel and migration among women had increased significantly in post-industrial revolution England.

26 Malini Bhattacharya, "Svādhinotā āndolane Kolkātāra Nārī Samāja" [Kolkata Women in the Independence Movement], in *Bishay Kolkata* (Kolkata: National Library Workers' Organization, 1993), 541.

to work and live independently in the city. For women from the districts, these spaces opened up social and intellectual horizons, enabling them to pursue higher education and participate in the nationalist and leftist political movements. Leftist activist Manikuntala Sen writes in her memoirs about her decision to leave her village home in Barisal, travel to Calcutta, and join the Communist movement in the 1930s—a move which marked a rupture with her religiously-minded family.[27] "I couldn't sleep at night. I used to pace on the veranda. My mother noticed this. One day she came, sat next to me and said… "Go to Kolkata. Stay in a hostel there and pursue your Masters. You will not survive if you stay here."[28]

While there was a steady flow of young single women migrating to Calcutta for education through the decades leading up to independence, the Partition of Bengal in 1947 led to a dramatic and sudden spurt of "unattached" refugee women arriving in the city from East Pakistan.[29] Dislocated from familial homes and forced to earn a living, many of these women found shelter in working women's hostels. Some who were victims of sexual assault sought refuge in a rescue home run by the All Bengal Women's Union. In the 1950s and 1960s, the government set up several hostels in the city to accommodate a growing population of working women. Later, the economic liberalization of the 1980s and 1990s expanded employment opportunities for women, which resulted in their increased migration to the city. To meet the new demand, private and community initiatives were undertaken to set up hostels for them.

The study tried to incorporate the rich diversity of women's hostels in Kolkata by including old nationalist organizations like SNDMA with its ideals of women's empowerment, institutions inspired by Leftist ideology, like the PASN, government-run hostels enabling poor and migrant women to build independent lives, as well as private or community-led hostels for younger women, mostly students. The attempt has been to situate women's experiences of singleness within a spectrum of urban and institutional histories.

The hostel as ideology: singleness, community, and politics

Historically, while women's hostels have provided an empowering and liberating space, they have also carried the burden of protecting the "respectability" of the "unattached women" by regulating their sexualities and ensuring their self-reliance and social assimilation by teaching them vocational skills and involving them in social work. This is evident in the early

27 Manikuntala Sen, *Sedinera Kathā* [*Stories of Yesterday*] (Kolkata: Nabapatra, 1982).
28 Sen, *Sedinera Kathā*, 33.
29 "Unattached women" was the official category used by the Indian state to describe refugee women who arrived without families. See Uditi Sen, *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation after Partition* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 201–241.

widows' schools and shelters for destitute or "fallen" women established by nationalist reformers. Women's hostel spaces have thus been ideologically constructed to manage women's singleness through Brahmanical patriarchal values of *brahmacharya* (asceticism).

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's 1924 novel *Padmarag (Ruby Red)* portrays the complex lives of the inhabitants of Tarini Bhavan, a residential philanthropic organization for women from diverse backgrounds. All the residents, including Dina-Tarini, the founder, are "*biye fail*," (wordplay on *biye*, the Bengali word for marriage, and B.A., that is, Bachelor of Arts), referring to single women who are either widows or who have histories of failed marriages and relationships. They find new lives in the social activities of the Tarini Bhavan community but continue to be socially reviled for living outside marriage and away from their homes. Rokeya is at pains to establish her protagonists as monastic celibates, dedicated to social causes, and almost Gandhian in their visions. "None bore any signs of extravagance. All they seemed to be garbed in was simplicity and generosity. It was as if the daughters of sages and ascetics had renounced their *ashrams* in the wilderness for the material world."[30] Thus, Tarini Bhavan was not just an accommodation but also an abode of chastity and spirituality, like an *ashram* (hermitage). The narratives of the older boarders of women's hostels like SNDMA appeared to bear the legacy of an idealized imagination of the hostel space.

Sixty-seven-year-old Arundhuti Sen had lived in the SNDMA hostel for thirty years, after leaving an unhappy marriage. She did not remember if there had been a formal divorce. The separation and the beginning of her new life was facilitated by the hostel *didis* (older sisters) working in SNDMA, whom she trusted. Employed in the SNDMA office in exchange for free boarding in the hostel, she reminisced,

> Everything changed when I came here. I found a new vocation. I suddenly found myself in a larger life. I got addicted to the activities that were assigned to me from the *Mahilā Samiti* that runs the hostel. We went to distant villages to sensitize rural women about health and hygiene, run awareness campaigns on HIV [human immunodeficiency virus] and AIDS [acquired immunodeficiency syndrome], and on dowry. We would go in groups with the *didis*, who inspired us by their example.

Although she first denied having any kind of a home or family, she later revealed the existence of a sister: "I go to my sister's house—I eat, sleep, talk, watch TV—but in two days I want to come back to my own place. My sister takes such good care of me—this is a kind of selfishness."

30 Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag: Two Feminist Utopias*, trans. Barnita Bagchi (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2005), 32.

For Arundhuti, the hostel was not merely a *ṭhikānā*, but had become a home—her "own place" to which she wanted to return, albeit guiltily, despite her sister's care. Although she felt that she was being selfish in wanting to be back in the hostel, it was not just a question of personal comfort: The hostel was her vocation and a means of accessing a larger collective life beyond the self. Asked if she had ever contemplated remarriage or having children, she said, "I never want to go back to the life of families. As for children, the *Mahilā Samiti* here had started *Anganwadis* and *Balwadis* [pre-primary crèches and schools] much before the government had thought of them. I have worked in those centers—there are enough children there."

Asked whether she faced any problems in the hostel, she said, "There are problems everywhere—you will see them as 'problems' only if you don't regard the institution as your own." Arundhuti furthermore declared that she had no insurance policy. "I have surrendered to the *didis* here. They will look after me till I die." The word "surrender" carried almost religious overtones, resonating with the concept of *ashrams* and their spiritual and nationalist ideals of selfless dedication. This idea of service and a mutually caring community framed Arundhuti's narrative of her life in the hostel. When asked if she was comfortable with her identity as a single woman, she said, "I am a member of the Saroj Nalini community. That is my identity." This immersion in a collective life was coupled with a strong sense of independence. "I am mentally independent. Nobody can touch that. I don't do anything which is beyond limits. Even if you give me unlimited food, I won't eat it; even if you take me to millions of places, I won't go. But if anybody shuts the gate and tells me that you can't go out, then I won't accept it."

In many of the older boarders, one noticed a continuous self-surveillance and a need to sublimate desires into a higher calling, even as there was a marked appreciation of the freedoms of a single life. They had internalized the administrative norms of the hostel and did not complain about its problems or rules. Having lived there for a long time, they held positions of relative power and were resentful of the younger boarders who were disobedient and "naughty," being unaware of the ideals of social commitment represented by Saroj Nalini Dutt and the *didis* of the *Mahilā Samiti.*

Although not an old nationalist institution like SNDMA, PASN was also established with a social and political vision by Leftist activists. The aim was to build a hostel for poor women workers who commuted every day to the city on crowded local trains. Insisting that the hostel should house only women in government employment, the state refused to pay the full grant amount initially promised for the building. One of the oldest hostel members, sixty-two-year-old Rekha Dutta, who had worked as the superintendent (and was also a boarder) for twenty-four years, recounts how the hostel was completed through the fundraising efforts of AIDWA women who deployed personal savings, scrounged for loans, and even brought back food for hostel workers from weddings they had been invited to.

Rekha attributed her dedication to the hostel to her early political apprenticeship in the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPIM. She grew up in a house where there were "no images of gods and goddesses on the walls but a small statue of Lenin in the drawing room," and joined the party when she was thirteen. She helped AIDWA members mobilize poor women, conduct literacy classes for them, bring them to political rallies, and organize them into self-help groups. Her narrative was suffused with Calcutta's turbulent history in the late sixties, when neighborhoods used to be marked off and targeted according to their political affiliations with the Congress Party, the CPIM, or the Maoist revolutionaries known as Naxals. Rekha recalled, "I have even run with live bombs in my hand because they were going to destroy a neighborhood… in these cases I went against my party and I was threatened with eviction." Rekha's story brought out a critique of the powerful communist party that ruled the state of West Bengal for thirty-four years, from 1977–2011. It also offered a glimpse into women's political work, and intimate and intergenerational comradeships. Remembering her friendship with Mrinalini Dasgupta, a senior party member and the hostel's founder who offered her the superintendent's job, Rekha described buying her mentor a car with her own savings. "She was so happy… she cried endlessly… and said, 'You must have been my daughter in my past life. No one, not even my own son, has thought so much for me.'… and because we had the car we did more work… we went to Sunderbans, Purulia. …[T]he car helped us to carry [out] flood relief."

For Rekha, the political party and the hostel were much more than a *ṭhikānā*—they were both family and community. Her relationship with the older Mrinalini and the younger women boarders provided her with the multigenerational environment of mutual care and nurture usually associated with a familial setting. She elaborated, "I live with women [in the hostel] and each one has her own story and own troubles. My time flies talking to them and solving their problems. I never feel that I need children, or my own family. The women and girls I live and work with are more than enough."

After her father's death, Rekha had to support her mother and siblings. After her sister was married, she was prepared to renounce the world, join a religious order, and teach in an orphanage. However, the party needed her services, and Mrinalini roped her into working for PASN. Ever since, she has tried to follow the original vision of the hostel to help poor women.

> I like to help young girls… [T]here is a girl here who received star marks [seventy-five per cent] in her *Mādhyamik* [school leaving] examination. She used to be a goatherd… a first-generation learner. I read about her in the newspaper, brought her here, and helped her to complete her education. Now she studies nursing at the Calcutta Medical College.

When asked why she did not marry, Rekha responded,

> Marriage is the worst thing... my mother never spoke to my father in front of us... the women in the slum got beaten up so badly by their husbands... married women had no will... I have seen the father run away with the mother's earnings, come back drunk, lock up the mother, and sit and eat sweets in front of his hungry children.

For women like Rekha who chose to remain single, the hostel provided a supportive environment. This was also true for those residents who were trying to escape forced or bad marriages, like the "*Biye fails*" of Tarini Bhavan. Rekha said, "Girls come and tell me when their families arrange their marriages against their wishes. I ask them what they want and advise them."

Although the initial plan of a crèche attached to the hostel could not be implemented, several single mothers had managed to rear their children there. When the hostel cook Henna Saha, joined PASN, her daughter was young. Rekha recounted, "We brought her up... all of us together." The hostel provided an alternative family made up of freely chosen intergenerational affiliations that were often perceived as being stronger than blood and marital ties. Rekha's nephew experienced the communal mothering of the hostelites. A hostel alumna who lay dying at childbirth from heavy bleeding wanted to entrust her newborn child to the care of the hostelites. Rekha recounted receiving a call from the husband of the woman and rushing to the hospital. "She was calling out for us... I took my blood donor's card and reached there immediately... she gave her child to us as she lay dying... we all prepared for the child to be brought up in the hostel... finally, her in-laws did not give us the child."

Having fostered a supportive community for and by women in the hostel—an alternative family providing succor—Rekha felt that the idealism that had once animated the hostelites was now on the wane. She remembered the early days, when the hostel attracted women from all over the country, and even one from Mauritius—a student of fine arts who helped decorate the informal education center for children. In those days, many of the boarders were engaged in the projects for poor women and children run by the hostel. But now, young hostelites no longer had time for these activities. Rekha elaborated, "Everyone is busy with their own lives, their mobile phones... no one has time for politics or even watching TV [television] with other hostel women... they would much rather be on Facebook."

This change could be linked to factors like the decline of the political ideology which had once inspired the hostel, a paucity of funds, the growing individualism of the hostelites, or the changing environment of the city. The neoliberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s, led to a weakening of Leftist politics, and the vision of social collectivism, as well as the institutions nurtured by the party. But this shift appeared to pervade other women's hostels too, including those without any particular political vision. In order to better understand this change, we spoke to some old boarders

of government-supported hostels for working women and young women from community-supported hostels. Their responses are analyzed in the following part of the chapter.

Government hostels for working women and displacement, migration, and desire

Government-aided working women's hostels in Gariahat, Sahapur, and Baghbajar have nominal rates: The monthly boarding rate ranges between INR 100–550 (ca. one point five to eight euros), whereas the average monthly rent for private hostels is INR 1500 (ca. twenty-two to twenty-three euros). The Gariahat hostel was previously run by a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) in the 1950s for middle-class women professionals and was later acquired by the government. The older boarders reminisced about a fellow hostelite, Captain Durba Bannerjee, who was the first woman pilot of Air India, and for whom the hostel curfew was relaxed since her duty hours were irregular. They remembered her putting on her "smart" uniform and leaving in the middle of the night. They lamented that such women did not stay in the hostel anymore, as the hostel was now in a state of decline, populated by residents who were mostly from poor families and who had nowhere else to go.

Most of the Gariahat hostel respondents were employed in the government's Integrated Child Development Scheme and earned meager salaries. Many were orphans, or refugees from the Partition (1947), and some had been dumped in the hostel by their relatives. Having lived on their own for most of their lives, these women had no sense of a home or family. When asked where her home was, seventy-year-old Krishna Dey said, "Home is what I do not have." Krishna came to Calcutta shortly after 1947 as a refugee from East Pakistan—part of an exodus of over 350,000,000 people who came to India between 1947–1951, leaving their homes to start new lives in Calcutta. Young single women took a lead in this rebuilding process, often becoming the sole breadwinners for aging parents and young siblings. Nipa, the female protagonist in Ritwick Ghatak's 1960 Bengali film *Meghe Dhākā Tārā* (The Cloud-Capped Star), represents the single women whose lives were spent in putting their dispossessed families back on their feet. Our respondent Krishna, however, left her family because of crushing poverty and the pressures of marriage, and spent most of her life in the hostel. She remembered, "We came here as refugees, but we didn't have refugee cards. My father owned a large business in Rangpur town, but during the riot we had to leave everything behind and escape overnight… He could not imagine living on some refugee cards. So, we struggled a lot."

Although aware of their limited family resources, Krishna wanted to take music lessons and possess a harmonium. When her brothers failed to fulfill her wishes, she left her studies and resisted their attempts to get her married. In her narrative, she did not directly articulate her own worries about a single life and a lonely future, yet it came through in her anxious

and empathetic description of aging eunuchs: "Once I went to the place where eunuchs live... I was led to a tiny room where the old eunuchs live. It was a dreadful sight. I found them so wretched that once I came back, I wrote a piece asking [Lord] Govinda why the eunuchs do not have a marriage ceremony or any siblings."

Krishna's implicit identification with the queer community of eunuchs acquires a special valence when read alongside her description of Pratima, the woman whose memory suffused her life, who had brought her to the hostel and finally abandoned her.

> When all my siblings were getting married, I felt dejected... then I met Pratima at a function. She proposed that I should stay with her. She used to live with her husband and mother-in-law. Five years later, I escaped from my house and went to Pratima. She used to take me to parties, which I disliked. But she mistook my dislike for parties as a dislike for her. So, without informing me, suddenly, she arranged a residential job for me at this hostel. I pleaded her not to send me away—all in vain.

Krishna revealed a tragic story of social transgression—of two women drawn to each other across gender and class barriers, but who failed to build a life together. Although she did not frame her experience as such, probably because the vocabulary was not available to her, Krishna's narrative was an account of queer desire leading to alienation from the family. Resolved not to marry, misunderstood and chastised by her brothers, she acknowledged her "strangeness" in the following way: "My brothers were strict. Moreover, I was unkempt and oddly dressed. I used to put *ālatā* (red paint) on my feet and wear white saris like widows." But then she paused and said, in a seeming non sequitur,

> I adore Pratima. I love her. She is a Brahmin woman. I used to be fascinated by her lifestyle, her demeanor, gesture, her voice. I still am... when I confided to Pratima's sister-in-law about what she had done to me, Pratima charged me with ingratitude. Even now when she banters, she appears hypnotic, but when she attacks me so rudely, it is as unbearable as poison.

Krishna's story provides a glimpse into the intensity of a type of queer love which remained unarticulated within marginal, single lives because of class and gender norms. The hostelites' responses revealed how these yearnings texture the everyday lives of women living in close proximity to each other. However, queer yearnings are perceived as a threat to the "respectability" of the hostel, and when discovered, they are brutally suppressed.[31]

31 This is also because pornography is rife with male fantasies of women involved in sexual liaisons with each other in a girls' hostel.

The hostel superintendents related stories of "girls caught in the act" and thrown out, although the boarders hardly mentioned such incidents. Most young residents considered heterosexual marriage as an inevitable step that would follow their lives in the hostel. By contrast, some of the older women spoke of their love for women and their desire to live as part of a female community. Krishna said, "I have always wanted to stay with someone either as mother and daughter, or as sisters, and pursue music peacefully." Forty-eight-year-old Shorma Biswas, an orphan who grew up in an *ashram*, said, "I wish there was a woman older or even younger than me who would look after me and treat me with respect... I would live with her." Disappointed with the frequent fights between hostelites, she valued relationships of mutual care: "During illness... we all look after each other because we have only each other." For her, living in a collective meant that "we have the option of knowing varied perspectives on one issue. If you stay at home... you miss out on the various kinds of advice." She also valued the freedom that the hostel afforded her. "After a hard day's work, I can come back and rest... sleep without having to answer any questions... this would not happen at home, right? They would bother [me]... I would have to take care of people."

Krishna's appreciation of the autonomy of singleness and the hostel life implied a criticism of women's status at home, hemmed in by patriarchal relationships, domestic roles, and gender norms. "You can come and go as you like, save for yourself, and spend as you like. In most households, women... get the smallest share. It is all very unfair... the men would get the best things... It's great that I am single."

Coming from poor and sometimes abusive families, the respondents' desire for single lives often originated from a fear of violence. Shorma declared, "I do not trust any man... all of them cause hurt to women... I have seen my mother being tortured by men and so I grew up with a deep fear of them." For her, marriage, family, and children were just *"chhāipāṅś"* (ashes and dust). She remembered how her uncle had tried to get her married to "a pickpocket, a leper, a beggar, a dacoit." For her, marriage was associated with coercion and rejection—with her family's attempts to get her off their hands. Fears of marital discord and violence leading to suicide caused sixty-year-old Lily Karmakar to speculate, "One can never be sure... after marriage will I be lying under a ceiling fan or hanging from it?" Despite grinding poverty, none of the hostelites were willing to consider a marriage of convenience as a means of survival. A resident pointed out that, as single women, they at least had the independence of thoughts, although they might lack the independence of means.

A different narrative of singleness emerged from the forty-eight-year-old Anju Bose, an insurance agent from a district town who had been a hostelite for the past ten years. She had chosen not to marry because of a thwarted romance: "He went away once I refused his proposal. Now he lives in Jamshedpur... earlier I used to be [in touch with him]. But after my illness, I never met or contacted him, nor gave him my address; it is of

no use." When relatives still suggest that she should marry someone else, she says, "How can I? I don't like anyone else." She explained that she had initially rejected him because of her father's ambitious plans for her. She remembered having several suitors: "But my father... used to drive them away. He used to dream about his daughter becoming a railway officer. That his dream could not come true pains me." The story of the suburban girl with a lost love and an ambitious father is a recurrent motif in the accounts of the older boarders. It offers a vignette of the 1980s when economic changes had opened up new opportunities for women's work, leading to their increased migration to the cities. New experiences of independent urban living facilitated shifts in their ideas of love and marriage, even as it changed their relationships to their homes and families.

This motif also emerges in the narratives of the older members of the Sahapur hostel, which, although subsidized by the government, has a more up-market resident profile compared to Gariahat. Middle-aged Dola spoke about her father sending her to the National Cadet Corps (NCC) camps to learn self-reliance.[32] Speaking of her experience there, she recalled, "I went to the NCC camps... I was quite strong. I was skinny, but I could pull big trunks... My father... gave me a lot of freedom and made me strong mentally." However, Dola's assertive personality came in the way of love: "I can't say that I didn't like someone, but that doesn't mean he did too... I want to live my life with my head held high... I don't know how to propose to people... the humiliation that women have to go through—being submissive—I can't do that, sorry!"

Although not interested in marriage, Dola wanted a child and described her visit to the doctor who had apparently delivered one of Calcutta's first test-tube babies. Most respondents, however, dismissed the idea of single motherhood, while some spoke of their fear of childbirth, and others of how they considered their nieces and nephews as their own children. Like Krishna, Dola also described a passionate female friendship across class lines. Thrown out of her natal house after an accident, Dola was taken in by a friend who had married into a wealthy family. "She was Miss India... very beautiful. She has two sons. She has grandchildren now, a full family. We fight a lot, but when she hears something has happened to me, she comes instantly." Dola recounted how her friend cared for her in illness and took her traveling.

Other Sahapur residents, mostly migrant working women, also spoke about how their fathers had inspired them to live alone in Calcutta. Forty-two-year-old schoolteacher Maksuda who came from a conservative Muslim family, was grateful to her liberal father: "The generation before my father's was conservative, and they created problems when I said that I will not marry... He [her father] handled all this criticism... and supported

32 The NCC is the youth wing of the Indian Armed Forces, which conducts training programs for student volunteers from schools and colleges on basic military operations, handling small arms, and parades.

my decision." Forty-five-year-old Jahnabi Ray from Bolpur, who held two master's degrees in economics and computer science, and a good job in a private shipping company, also attributed her success, self-reliance, and singleness to her father:

> In the Naxal period, a man had been murdered. His wife was running helplessly... My father stood by her, called a rickshaw when everyone else had shut their doors and switched off their lights. He was not scared... he took the man to hospital and then the crematorium, did his last rites... [He had] this courage and willingness to help others... if I show that [courage] as a woman, my in-laws will not like that... they want someone who is feminine. But I have grown up differently... my father got me into the NCC when I was in class eleven—he would draw moustaches on my face. I played with boys and trained in NCC camps, hanging from tires, doing parades... I lost my femininity.

Jahnabi's memories of her father and of watching classic English films with him had shaped her ideas of masculinity, making it impossible for her to settle for a Bengali man. "My father was crazy about Gregory Peck... and then I watched *McKenna's Gold* and since then I have found no one more attractive. But if I was married to a Bengali man in an arranged marriage, I would never have that passion at all."

When she came to Calcutta, Jahnabi found the men in the city to be effeminate. Her narrative of a Bolpur childhood, spent listening to the English music of the 1950s and 1960s and fantasizing about Bruce Springsteen and Gregory Peck, reverses the binary of the insulated provinces and the cosmopolitan city. The Sahapur narratives demonstrate how the sources of the respondents' independence and their choice of singleness lay in their childhood spent in district towns, attending NCC camps and learning to be self-reliant, as well as in inspiration provided by their fathers. Their subsequent lives in the city hostels merely helped them to realize their youthful dreams.

Among some respondents, however, the quest for autonomy and resistance to the normative structures of home, marriage, and family did not preclude affiliations with religious institutions. In fact, they framed their singleness through ideas of religious celibacy and spiritual sublimation of sexual urges and worldly desires. Several reported being disciples of the Ramakrishna Mission. Dola had close family connections with the Mission, which she wanted to nominate as the beneficiary in her will. She spoke passionately of her guru: "He is my bosom friend—he is a god to his devotees, but to me, he is a father, my 'property'... I fight with him, he loves me too—I am lucky." This intimate relationship with gurus and "gods" helped many of the respondents to cope with loneliness. Sometimes the bond with the deity was almost facetious, humanized, and hovering between belief and skepticism. Forty-six-year-old Rekha Biswas, an orphan

who grew up in a shelter, and is currently a resident at Baghbajar hostel, pointed to the line of idols in her room and said: "All of them are here. But if I am depressed… I abuse them… I don't give them food or water… and this Gopāla [the infant form of the deity, Kṛshṇa] sitting in a bowl? I have no home; my Gopāla has a bowl at least."

The women's half-believing act of reaching out to gurus and deities represents a search for a support system. This is also manifest in their hankering for a community. Many spoke fondly of participating in programs jointly organized by the hostelites. Maksuda remembered how the birthdays of Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam, as well as the Indian Independence Day, were once celebrated at the hostel.[33] She also pointed out the need for the superintendent to be a part of the hostel community, noting that "she should have been single, [like other hostelites] who would stay with us, not run back to her family every evening at seven p.m." Mridula spoke about the importance of a collective life, which influenced her to choose a hostel over a rented accommodation. Some boarders found communities among colleagues or like-minded people, like Maksuda's trekking friends and fellow commuters on the local trains, or Jahnabi's group of animal lovers.

The city wove in and out of the single women's narratives, emerging in their recollections of their experiences of work, politics, public transport, walking the streets, attending events, friendships, love, unexpected communities, and also of sexual harassment. This manifested in a series of vignettes, from Jahnabi taking leave from work to join the street rally for Nirbhaya,[34] visiting the Kolkata Book Fair, or devouring *phuchkās* (a type of street food) on the pavement, to Dola eating alone in *Arsalan* (a restaurant), to Maksuda going to watch plays with her fellow local-train commuters. These memories bring to life a dynamic geography of the city, claimed and animated by single women who choose to live and work in it. A collage of urban political history also emerges through their narratives, including references to the Partition, the refugee influx, and the Communist and Naxal movements. A rich tapestry of a gendered social history unfolds, depicting women's growing presence in the public sphere, their increasing mobility, changing relationships with the home and family, and their shifting perspectives on marriage, love, and singleness.

An interesting insight which emerges from the interviews, concerns the changing terrains of women's work. While most of the Gariahat residents had low-paying government jobs, the Sahapur women had livelihoods ranging from teaching and nursing to working as typists, doctors' secretaries, architects, physiotherapists, and corporate executives. There

33 Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) and Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899–1976) are well-known Bengali poets and are celebrated as cultural icons in Bengal.

34 Nirbhaya, or "Braveheart," was the name used to refer to the young physiotherapist who was gang-raped in a moving bus on December 16, 2012, in Delhi. This case sparked unprecedented protests across India by an irate public demanding justice for her as well as more safety for women.

was even a woman working as an officer in the Indian Intelligence Bureau. Compared to the heterogeneous experiences of the older respondents, the younger hostelites presented a more uniform picture, also because several of them (in the private and community-led hostels) came from similar religious or geographical backgrounds. Their views on living singly in the city, on hostels and homes, livelihood and marriage, romance and risk, and security and independence, were significantly different from those of the older residents, as we shall see in the following section.

Young hostelites and the necessity of marriage

The younger respondents of PASN were unaware of its history and political vision. For them, the hostel was a temporary *ṭhikānā* providing them with facilities that they paid for. They complained about the poor quality of food and the inadequate number of toilets, while one of them resented the "interference by the seniors." Unlike the older boarders, the young women retained close links with their families. They had little sense of belonging to a larger hostel community and were unaware of the festivals celebrated in the hostel or the social projects conducted there. They spent their leisure time watching films, listening to music on YouTube, and chatting on social media. A twenty-one-year-old woman remarked, "The phone is everything. If you have a phone there is nothing to worry about."

Despite enjoying the freedom of independent living, the young boarders felt unsafe in the city, went out only in large groups, and appreciated the hostel discipline. One of them suggested that an earlier curfew should be imposed. Although none of them mentioned the 2012 Nirbhaya incident, its memories seemed to frame their anxieties about women's security. The case, while highlighting the need for women's safety, had also led to an increased surveillance of, and restrictions on young women's mobility and autonomy. Most respondents had internalized these restrictions as being "for [their] own good." This is particularly interesting in light of the *Pinjra Tod* (Break the Cage) movement, started by young female students in Delhi who were protesting against patriarchal hostel norms, including early curfews, CCTV camera surveillance, and the moral policing of residents.[35] Contrary to the Delhi women, our respondents were demanding greater restrictions. This is in line with the findings of Chanda's study of young female migrants who also felt safer in hostels with rigid rules and early curfews.[36]

35 Pinjra Tod is an autonomous women's collective of students and alumnae of colleges from across Delhi, which seeks to make hostel regulations less restrictive for female students by challenging the protectionism which curbs women's freedom in the name of safety. The collective also demands affordable accommodation for women.

36 Chanda, *Selfing the City*, 88.

Although the younger boarders professed a hatred of politics, they were conscious of gender inequities and familiar with the language of women's rights. When asked about their views on single and unwed mothers, most expressed admiration for their courage. However, they did not consider singleness as a viable life choice for themselves and spoke of marriage as inevitable. Despite this, they did not associate marriage with romance, sexuality, or the desire for children. Rather, marriage was framed as a "responsibility" that required "adjustments" and the "ability to serve others"—an act that was, above all, a measure of "maturity." Unlike the older boarders who had spoken about lost loves, the younger women hardly mentioned relationships or affairs. Most interviewees considered single lives difficult, giving examples of relatives and neighbors who had suffered due to choosing to live alone. A twenty-year-old student remembered a neighbor who had been abandoned by her husband and had lost custody of her children: "People talked behind her back… She had a boyfriend who was attacked by her neighbors." Others spoke of single aunts who were humiliated by the family. A young student from Chhattisgarh said that single women in her community were accused of being witches. For these reasons, the choice of a single life was seen as unfeasible.

Most of the young respondents at St. Bridget's hostel run by Catholic nuns were Christian women from the districts. They were students or workers in advertising agencies, beauty parlors, and schools. One was a civil engineer. Arriving from small towns with strong community networks, the women were bewildered by the city and recounted instances of harassment on the streets. Mentioning the Nirbhaya incident, one respondent advised her fellow residents to "carry themselves properly… keeping in mind [they] are alone, and the city is getting dangerous." Two residents said they carried pepper spray for safety and went out only in groups. For a young teacher, the hostel represented a safe haven in a violent city: "We have security here. Once we enter this place, we feel relaxed… I forget that I am in Kolkata." Although a few respondents felt that their exposure to Kolkata had boosted their confidence, most of them appreciated the early curfew and strict rules. One resident said, "We youngsters, we like to party and come back late… but I do feel [the nuns] are trying to save our lives. You don't know the world… whatever they do, they do for our good."

As practicing Christians, most respondents disapproved of live-in relations, pre-marital sex, and unwed motherhood. They avoided talking about sexual desires outside a marital context. One described sexual passion as a modern need: "In today's time, if you do not have sex, people consider you abnormal." Another respondent spoke of her fear of sex: "The desires are natural; the fears are also common." Some hostelites were involved in prayer groups and programs advising the youth against the dangers of "going astray" and watching pornography. One respondent spoke of lesbianism as a "psychological defect" and suggested counseling for women indulging in it.

Most residents regarded marriage as necessary and inevitable: "It will take place at the right time," said a twenty-one-year-old, remembering her single schoolteacher who regretted not marrying at the right age. For some, marriage was considered necessary for companionship, particularly in old age: "You need some shoulder to rest on, emotionally." A young engineer described marriage as a "holy relationship," which "will happen if it is in my destiny." Three respondents wanted to have arranged marriages. A twenty-nine-year-old said, "So far, I have been happy with whatever choices my parents have made for me. Since marriage is a big thing and involves families, I don't want to disappoint them. I don't go by looks but put more emphasis on the profession."

This same respondent said she had been in love but had had to terminate the relationship "since [their] professions and timings were clashing." Most hostelites wanted to consolidate their careers before entering romantic or marital relationships. One said that while "girls cannot remain single for long since people develop bad intentions towards them," she worried that "marriage will create problems in the path of [her] ambitions." Most narratives struggled to balance the demands of career and marriage, and though the women feared that marriage could impede their professional growth, they failed to overcome their anxieties about a single life.

At the Muslim girls' hostel, we spoke to eleven young women in their early twenties. The hostel was much more than a *ṭhikānā* for them. Rather, it was the space that had helped them realize their dreams pertaining to higher education, careers, and freedom. One respondent said, "When I am at home I am not allowed to watch TV, but here on my phone I can watch it, sometimes till two in the morning." Yet the independence afforded by the hostel did not compromise security. The women described it as a safe haven in a dangerous neighborhood with few streetlights, gangs of bike riders, and molesters. Most residents considered the city outside the hostel perilous. Two respondents related their experiences of living in paying guest accommodations in Kolkata, where one was harassed by the elderly landlord while another found voyeurs outside her toilet. But the hostel provided a safe space from which the young boarders could navigate not just the city but also the world outside. One respondent said that after living in Kolkata, she could live anywhere. For the young residents, the hostel had become a launching pad for their future journeys. However, while the city and the hostel taught them life lessons, it also made it impossible for them to return home. One boarder said, "I am from a remote village where people have to marry after a certain age. It is impossible for me to adjust to a rural life now. I want to have a job. I can't marry a man in the village and become a housewife."

The respondents had clear priorities, desiring to find a job before thinking about marriage. However, marriage remained an imperative. Most saw it as a religious injunction, while others described it as a social necessity. One claimed, "I have a disabled brother and a sister, so we need a male guardian... People don't take women seriously." Another said, "There is an

age for everything. This is a physical need. I cannot live an unfulfilled life. So why would I not marry?" The respondents were largely skeptical about inter-community marriages and expressed their preference to marry within their religion, unwilling to hurt their families' sentiments or to adjust to new cultural norms. Sensible of the opportunities they had been granted to forge independent lives, the residents of the Muslim hostel were also conscious of their ties to the very community that had helped them to do this. Unlike the highly-educated urban women interviewed by Shilpa Phadke in her essay in this volume, who spoke of negotiating, dodging, and challenging the pressures from their families and communities to get married, the young Muslim Bengali girls from poor and rural backgrounds did not resent the social expectation of marriage. They seemed only interested in deferring it, while the temporary *ṭhikānā* of the hostel helped them to do so.

Conclusion

Poised between the seduction of careers, mobility, and choice on the one hand, and the securities of marriage, family, and community on the other, the hostel potentially provides a space for the young respondents in this study to try out life options. However, convinced of the temporariness of the *ṭhikānā* and the inevitability of the *ghar* and marriage into which they must eventually move, they seemed wary of experimenting with the modalities of independent or community living that we saw in the older boarders. Unlike the long-term residents of SNDMA or PASN, the hostel did not represent an ideological space for them, nor did living in it signify a political choice or a life decision that would mark a deliberate break from home and family. While the older boarders of Gariahat and Sahapur underlined how the hostel enabled freedom and singleness, younger hostelites emphasized the need for security and protection. For the latter, the city was less a site of possibilities and more a locus of violence. Having internalized the scaremongering backlash of the Nirbhaya case, they saw the hostel as a shelter like home, which should impose strict rules to ensure their safety, even if it compromised their autonomy.

While for the older boarders the hostel stood for an alternative mode of collective living, the younger residents were hardly involved with the hostel community and showed little interest in its programs. Choosing to spend their time on social media, the younger residents were also more securely attached to their homes, families, and communities. These associations influenced their decisions to marry, which they planned to do mostly according to the wishes of their parents and within the community.[37] Unlike the individualized, sometimes passionate, even jocular relationships that

37 Anveshi's study on Hyderabad hostels reports a large number of respondents wanting an arranged marriage or a "love-come-arranged" marriage. See Anveshi, "City and Sexuality," 69–72.

the older women shared with gurus and "gods," the younger hostelites participated in institutional religion in more structured ways, which shaped their attitudes to marriage. Many of them rejected not just pre-marital sex and live-in relations but also romance. This was in contrast to the older respondents' narratives, often haunted by memories of lost loves or queer desires, and told by women who had chosen single lives over loveless marriages. But for most of the younger women, even those who were amorously involved, marriage was a "mature" responsibility that had little to do with the frivolous distractions of youthful romance.[38]

Lukose points out how, although globalization has opened up opportunities for young women, the "celebrations of liberalization's promises provoke anxious discourses and regulations of young women, their bodies, their sexuality, and their vulnerability."[39] It is because of this atmosphere of moral panic that young women themselves "navigate their entries into the world of education and work, all within the horizons of the normative understandings of marriage."[40] While in the period of colonial modernity and in the post-independence era, particularly the 1960s and 1970s, romance was associated with the exercise of women's choice and agency against the traditional arranged marriage, this appears to have been reversed in a post-globalization India, where rising levels of violence against women ensure their acquiescence to social norms. This shift is apparent in the ways in which the two generations of hostelites view marriage, singleness, autonomy, security, and the city in relation to the hostel space. Even as the contemporary feminist discourse of women's hostels in India, as articulated in the *Pinjra Tod* movement, envisions these spaces as restrictive of women's mobility and autonomy, the narratives discussed in the present study provide an alternative view. Whether they talk about the hostel as an enabler of collective life and freedom (as the older boarders do) or as a space providing protection from the violence of the city (as the younger women do), these voices imagine the hostel differently, with varying degrees of approximation to a *ghar* or a *ṭhikānā*.

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38 Sneha Krishnan, "Making Ladies of Girls: Middle-class Women and Pleasure in Urban India" (D. Phil diss., Oxford University, 2015), 28.
39 Lukose, *Liberalization's Children*, 12.
40 Lukose, *Liberalization's Children*, 19.

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