Negotiating Discourses of Womanhood in India: An Ethnographic Study of Young Women in a Chennai Hostel

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For my father Poonoly Varghese who strove to create for his children an environment that nurtured curiosity and intellectual growth. And for my mother Mable Varghese who is an infinite source of strength and acceptance.

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Abstract

There is a burgeoning body of literature tracing the changes that ensued India's process of economic liberalization in the last decade of the 20th century. Scholars have identified an ongoing re-conceptualization of womanhood happening parallel to the changing identity of India as a nation. This 'new Indian woman' is positioned somewhat ambiguously between competing discourses of 'tradition' vs 'modernity'; 'Indian' vs 'Western'; 'individual' vs 'community'; 'global' vs 'local'. Young women, often expected to be the authentic bearers of culture, are at the centre of the tensions unfolding between these competing discourses. Many postcolonial feminist scholars argue that this positioning of Indian women between oppositional discourses is reminiscent of colonial discourses, and are an effect of processes which have been termed as 'recolonization'.

In this thesis, I employ a feminist poststructuralist approach to study the perspectives and experiences of young migrant women living in a hostel in Chennai as they navigate competing discourses on womanhood in neoliberal India. Based on 10 months of ethnographic fieldwork done across two stages, this thesis delves on the experiences of young women, particularly around four themes of contemporary significance, namely safety and street harassment; dowry; relationships, sex and marriage; and practices and ideals of beauty. Rather than positioning women with respect to binaristic categories such as traditional vs modern this thesis strives to situate women within the complexities and contradictions of their daily lives.

Prologue

This thesis is deeply connected to my own life and experiences, which have been profoundly influenced by changes in India over the last three decades. Having spent most of my school years in rural Kerala and then moving to cities (first Kochi and later Chennai) for higher education, my experiences are connected in many ways to those of millions of young women belonging to a generation sometimes known as 'liberalization's children'[1] (Lukose, 2009). This era, which began around 3 decades ago, ushered in unprecedented socio-economic change along with new tensions (Nielsen & Waldrop, 2014). The socio-economic change relates to the influx of information and capital predominantly from the West[2] and a resultant a push towards a consumerist society (Thapan, 2004; Oza, 2006). The trigger for this was the implementation of structural reforms in the Indian economy at the behest of the International Monetary Fund (hereafter IMF) and World Bank in exchange for loans in the early 1990s (Chossudovsky, 1993; Dash, 1999; Basu 7 Miroshnik, 2016). This deal with the IMF and World Bank was necessitated by a balance of payment crisis, leading to an acute economic slowdown[3]- the worst India had seen in the post-independence era (Chossudovsky, 1993; Dash, 1999; Basu & Miroshnik, 2016). The subsequent macro-economic reforms (hereafter 'structural reforms') ushered in cultural shifts, especially among the growing urban middle class. Many things happened simultaneously during this time: the introduction of cable television with programming from outside India, predominantly from the English-speaking cultural centres of the world such as Hollywood (Fernandes, 2000; Oza, 2006); the Information Technology revolution and associated service sector boom; the privatization of telecommunications and other public sector monopolies and so on (Dhawan, 2010). These socio-economic changes resulted in the precipitation of certain tensions. India became a dynamic front where seemingly dichotomous discourses actively clashed, in numerous

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[1] The term 'liberalization's children' was coined by scholar Ritty Lukose (2009) to signify the generation who spent most of their lifetime in the era of liberalization-privatization-globalization (from the late 1980's onwards). The term 'liberalization's children' was conceptualized in contrast to 'midnight's children', the generation of Indians born in the post-independent era dominated by a centrally planned economy and Nehruvian politics.

[2] I acknowledge the debates existing in the academic and public spheres around the term 'West'. Here, I have used the term 'West' in the way Edward Said defines the West or 'the Occident' in his seminal work Orientalism (1979, p.10). Specifically, I refer to the dominant cultural and economic systems of Western Europe and Anglo America that benefitted the most from colonization of vast regions in the global south.

[3] The balance of payment crisis arose as a result of a number of factors. India, a nation then heavily dependent on imports for necessities, experienced a balance of payment crisis exacerbated by the fall of the Soviet Union and the Gulf war - two regions with which India had close trade links.

sites, for example, policy, media, educational institutions, public debate, and in families and communities. A major site where these tensions played out was (and continues to be) in the everyday lives of young women who are often considered the bearers of culture and national identity. Feminist scholars, from the 1990s onwards, have been studying and theorizing these visible contestations around the idea of womanhood which shape the everyday lives of women. Many scholars, notably, Leela Fernandes (2000); Meenakshi Thapan (2004; 2006; 2009); Rupal Oza (2006) to name a few, discuss the resurgence of the idea of the 'New Indian Woman' in public discourses- a figure that has been contrasted to the generic 'third world woman' that dominated general perception about women in India (Thapan, 2004). This thesis contributes to the body of literature around womanhood in post-liberalization India.

Slut-shamed at the age of nine

I spent my early childhood in Zimbabwe, where my father worked as a civil engineer for a British construction company. My earliest memories are those from Zimbabwe, and I still feel a deep connection to the land of my formative years. In the late 1990s, with Mugabe's sweeping reforms to the Zimbabwean economy, the company could no longer continue its operations there, and my family returned to my father's village in India. This shift had a significant impact on the lives of myself and my sisters. We were suddenly thrust into a new environment, new school curricula and a completely new culture. I was eight years old when I started learning to write my mother tongue, Malayalam. My sisters who are four and eight years older than me struggled even more as their classmates were already at a much more advanced level and studying the literature of both Malayalam and Hindi.

We stood out in our peer groups. My teenage sister got into trouble, for instance, for having a boyfriend, which was a fairly inconsequential matter in Zimbabwe. Being the youngest of the three, I had more time to adapt myself than my sisters. Yet I seemed to transgress the boundaries of femininity time and again. I was first slut-shamed[4] at the age of nine by the

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[4] Slut shaming refers to talk or actions that are intended to shame or discredit people, mostly women and girls, who are considered to be transgressing norms of feminine conduct, especially in relation with their sexuality. It derives from discourses of that link women's sexual 'purity' with morality (Sweeney, 2017). Webb (2015) defines slut shaming as 'the public exposure and shaming of individuals for their (perceived or actual) sexual behaviour' (p.2)

science teacher of my Standard IV[5] class. By that stage (Standard IV), boys and girls had been segregated in the classroom, with boys occupying one side and girls the other. In our classroom, girls outnumbered boys that year and we were unable to seat all girls comfortably on the girls' side. My class teacher[6], Ms. Ayesha[7] asked if any (one) girl could help alleviate the situation by volunteering to sit on the boys' side. She requested a volunteer to raise their hand. A moment of silence passed, which seemed like a long time. No one volunteered. So I raised my hand. I was invited to the front of the class where Ms. Ayesha congratulated me, appreciating my courage and willingness to help, and inviting a round of applause. I was then moved to the boys' side of the class, where slowly, I made new friends.

This was my second year in this school, and I was consistently among the high scoring students in the class. Teachers had come to expect me to always do well. A week or two after I had been relocated to the boys' side of the room, the science teacher, Ms. Nancy asked me a question related to her lesson. That day, I was unable to answer her question. Upon my inability to answer her question, she remarked to the class "Josephine was a brilliant student. What happened to her now? Perhaps she has lost focus in her studies after moving to the boys' side", followed by a subdued giggle. The class broke into laughter. This experience evoked a very strong response in the nine-year-old me. Like the passing of an electric shock through my body. I had been shamed for my decision- one that clearly no other girl in the class wanted to take, perhaps for fear of this very stigma I had 'brought upon myself'.

As years passed, I realized that such shaming was neither a rare nor unique experience. Girls around me - my friends and peers - were also subjected to it frequently. During the last two years of school[8], I and a friend of mine would occasionally bus to a nearby town called Angamaly (about 9 kms away) to treat ourselves to ice-cream sundaes or milkshakes at a popular coffee shop there. This activity was quite common among the boys of my school, but not among girls. Boys also had access to all tea stalls and food outlets in the vicinity of the school. Often these spaces were highly masculine and inhospitable to women and girls. So, we had to travel a longer distance, to a larger town (where more women were normally present in public spaces) to be able to treat ourselves. I and my friend were the only girls who

[5] Standard IV is the equivalent to Year five in New Zealand.
[6] The teacher who also took care of the administrative work related to the class.
[7] pseudonym
[8] The last two years of school are known as the 'higher secondary' stage.

ventured out and were deemed 'loose' for seeking out fun and pleasure. Even my loitering around the school campus (instead of staying within the classroom during breaks, which is what most girls did) was an aberration within the school community.

After school, I joined Sacred Heart College under the Mahatma Gandhi University for undergraduate study in Kochi, the largest city in Kerala. The move to the city presented a significant shift in the course of my life. While I was confronted by the chaotic milieu and ever-present, seemingly new dangers of a city, I was no longer slut-shamed for going to cafés and other leisure activities like going to the cinema or to the public spaces such as the Marine Drive. On campus, however, slut-shaming was embedded in the culture. Even there, I faced censure from both teachers and co-students for the way I dressed, for 'hanging out' with male students and so on. But the city provided the sense that I was not the only one disrupting the norms of feminine behaviour. The opportunities available to me - in terms of meeting new people, exploring interests and seeking leisure compensated for the slut-shaming tendencies of the campus community and I experienced a significant improvement in the quality of my life. It was 2006-07, and the beginnings of the social media boom in India. Google's Orkut had become the staple social media site for young people in India and was very popular in the university community. It offered us another platform to connect and debate competing discourses of 'local' vs 'global', 'tradition' vs 'modernity', 'Indian' vs 'Western', and individual vs community. Mobile phones were becoming common on campus and it was most people's first phone (the late 2000s rudimentary *Nokia*'s, mostly). Many students had mobile phones with multimedia capabilities. During my undergraduate study, multiple IT companies, domestic and multinational, came to our college to recruit students directly for jobs in their companies (also called 'campus selection'). The most prominent among them was Google, who presented an attractive introduction to their company and working culture: high pay and an environment that fostered creativity and innovation. Many were open to recruiting students with non-IT degrees, committing to getting us trained in the first 6 months or year before being given a full-employment contract. The jobs were located in bigger cities like Bangalore, Chennai, Gurgaon and Coimbatore. However, by the end of my undergraduate degree (2009), the effects of the global financial crisis (2007-2008) were being felt more. The number of companies arriving on campus declined. However, the Indian IT sector seemed to show resilience, especially compared to the rest of the world. India was rapidly changing. We were in the midst of the change.

After my Bachelors, I got the opportunity to live in Chennai, for my Masters' study I and preparation for a government exam. In both cities I experienced more space and more opportunity to express myself - to push the limits of acceptable feminine behaviour I was used to in the village. As I narrate my own move to the city, I must mention that I am aware my own experience is shaped by my social location - being an outsider in the city presented me with the anonymity that locals did not perhaps enjoy to the same extent. Being middle class also liberated me from a lot of the concerns many people in the city experienced. Having a mixed-caste Catholic background and being away from my immediate community freed me from any caste-related limitations. Nevertheless, moving to urban India presented a revolutionary change in my 'way of life', both the way I perceived my position in the world and how it manifest. And I was aware that I was not the only one experiencing these shifts. Increasingly, women were moving to cities, and often without their families - living on their own in radically different environments that presented diverse and often contradictory ways of constituting themselves as young Indian women. This was also a period of heightened public debate on issues like womanhood, public safety, sexuality and sexual morality. This followed: the *Nirbhaya* movement[9]; moral vigilantism targeted on women in urban centres; and increasing visibility of the queer movement. Through my own experience and those of my peers it was clear to me that young women's lives were an important site where the contradictions of changing India were playing out. In our everyday lives we had to negotiate between competing discourses on ways to constitute ourselves, which invited a range of responses from those around us, from censure and criticism to appreciation and acceptance. I was drawn to the deeper study of women's negotiations of these tensions.

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[9] The protest movement in response to the Delhi gangrape of December 2012.

Chapter 1

Introduction

> Modernization is not just about short skirts. There are some good aspects of modernization, which we should adopt from Western culture. Most of us around here, we are doing Bachelors, Masters, PhD, we are working. We are having a life for ourselves- we are developing ourselves. So things are changing. Women did not have an opinion or careers in the past generations. I thank our parents for allowing us to achieve what we want to achieve in life. Though there are some limiting customs around, they have embraced positive aspects of modernization.
>
> Ramola (2016)[10]

Ramola, a 23-year-old master's student was a participant in the ethnographic research for this thesis. She had moved to Chennai, India (from her hometown) for her undergraduate studies and stayed on to do her master's degree. In the extract above she reflects on how "things are changing". Ramola's comment reflects the discourses that dominate the media and popular culture and in particular – tensions or conflicts between various dichotomous discursive constructs such as: 'tradition' and 'modernity'[11]; 'Western' and 'Indian'[12]; old and new; and individualist vs communitarian (Sunder Rajan, 1993; Fernandes, 2000; Thapan, 2004; Oza, 2006; Lukose, 2009). The lives of young Indian women are one of the sites where this conflict unfolds. Postcolonial feminist scholars identify this as an 'entrapment' of women[13] in the clash between what is understood in their contexts as 'tradition' and 'modernity' (Sunder Rajan & Park, 2005; Thapan, 2004).

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[10] Ramola (pseudonym), a 23 year old master's student was one of the participants in the research for this thesis. Please refer to Chapter two for a table with basic details of participants.

[11] I use the term modern, and its various forms (modernity, modernization), while acknowledging the critique of Eurocentric conceptualizations of this term. I acknowledge academic contributions on the topic, such as multiple modernities (Einstadt, 2000; 2006), and postcolonial critiques of Eisenstadt's theorization of multiple modernities (see Bhambra, 2011).

[12] I would like to acknowledge not only the academic debates around the terms 'tradition' and 'modernity'; 'Western' and 'Indian', but also how these concepts are fluid and subject to frequent redefinition in public discourse.

[13] The cited works look at women in postcolonial nations such as India (Thapan) and Korea (Sunder Rajan & Park, 2005).

The contemporary 'entrapment' of Indian women in the clash between discourses of tradition and modernity shares similarities to that which existed in colonial times (Sunder Rajan & Park, 2005; Ghosh, 2018). This has been described as a consequence of "the processes of recolonization" (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997 p. xxi). The concept of 'recolonization', as articulated by Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty, has been an important one for this thesis and my academic journey. It refers to the re-assertion of colonial power and influence in the postcolonial era, through the processes of globalization and structural reforms pushed on 'developing'[14] countries by financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997). The 'free' flow of capital and information, Thapan (2004) argues, does not automatically lead to greater parity between nations and cultures, as was promised by the architects of economic liberalization. Rather, it has led to a reassertion of colonial power, which can be understood as a manifestation of the "postcolonial habitus"[15] (Thapan, 2004, p. 412). Sangari and Vaid (1990) suggest that the oppositional pitching of tradition and modernity, especially when equated to Indian vs Western, is a remnant the colonial project, and should be resisted[16]. With respect to the position of women's lives in this dichotomy, Sangari and Vaid (1990) argue that a more nuanced understanding should acknowledge the complexity of culture, social context and experiences that influence and shape women's everyday lives. This thesis employs feminist poststructuralism and postcolonialism to investigate the perspectives and experiences of young women in Chennai, who have moved to the city seeking higher education or employment, and how they negotiate the tensions between competing discourses of what it means to be a young woman in contemporary India. This is necessitated by heightened public debate around womanhood and gender in the past decade (see Taneja, 2019), and set against the background of intensifying neoliberalism and the parallel rise of liberal feminist and Hindu nationalist discourses. In the rest of the chapter, I set up the broader context within

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[14] In single quotes to acknowledge the debates around the term development.

[15] 'Postcolonial habitus' is a concept that utilizes Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) theorization of capitals and 'habitus'. It refers to the accumulated social, symbolic, cultural and economic capitals by those who benefitted from colonization. For example, from a macro-perspective, affluent nation states in the global north that benefitted from the colonization, such as United States of America, the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Netherlands, have a disproportionate advantage in the globalizing postcolonial world. They dominate socio-economic and cultural spheres of the world. Postcolonial habitus operates at micro-levels as well. For instance, within postcolonial nations, 'westernized' people (usually middle class and English educated) benefit from postcolonial habitus (see Thapan, 2009; also, Fanon, 1952).

[16] While I acknowledge this call for resistance, discourses dichotomizing 'tradition' and 'modernity' are ubiquitous in the media, literature and everyday life. They were also repeated time and again in my participant interviews and in the academic literature. I refer to these terms while fully acknowledging the critique presented by Sangari and Vaid (1990).

which this study is located, followed by the central research questions and significance of this study. Later, I present an introductory discussion about women's hostels in urban India. The last part of this chapter provides the structure of the thesis.

India post-Independence: From Fabian socialism to neoliberal capitalism

In this section I provide a brief discussion outlining the historical context of India within which structural readjustment programmes were envisaged. I focus on the contrasting discursive constructions of India during two phases: before liberalization, and after. This context setting outlines some of the changes that have occurred in India, affecting the everyday lives of Indians.

From the time of India's independence in 1947 up until the early 1990s India followed a heavily regulated, centrally planned economic model that foregrounded large-scale public-sector industries and infrastructure projects, such as dams and power plants (Mohan, 2018). The large industries, infrastructure projects and research centres commissioned during the early post-independence phase were christened the 'Temples of modern India' by the first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru whose government envisioned them as catalysts for the socio-economic progress and modernization of postcolonial India (De, 2014). India's economic policy aimed at achieving self-sufficiency through import substitution and state-directed industrialization (Panagariya, 2010). While the economic model was leaning toward socialism, India was averse to the Soviet model of nationalizing existing private enterprises. Economists Bhagavati and Desai explain that:

> […] nationalizations of existing capital stock were de facto ruled out. Rather, the government, through successive five-year plans, sought to increase the share of the public sector in total investment, expecting at the end of such a sustained effort to raise the government's share of the capital stock to a dominant level (1970, p. 213).

During this period, values and ideals deriving from the anti-colonial struggle dominated policy and the public imagination of India. For example, within formal discourses, the national identity of India was one that foregrounded India's villages and rural lives, where, according to Mahatma Gandhi, India's soul lives (Kant & Bhargava, 2019; Fernandes, 2000, Berry, 2003). The contribution of farmers and the working poor were at the centre of the

discourses that constructed the identity of postcolonial India, along with grand vision of self-sufficiency, poverty alleviation and anti-imperialism. Correspondingly, India's foreign policy was formally centred around non-alignment[17] during the Cold War period (Ganguly, 2010). Barring a few large family business groups[18] that had roots in the pre-independence period, the private sector was small and played a limited role in the Indian economy which was dominated by an overarching 'licence raj'[19]. During this period, the economic growth rate remained relatively slow[20], averaging between two and four percent per annum (Nagaraj, 2000; Panagariya, 2010). Economists and observers term India's socio-economic model, which was spearheaded by Jawaharlal Nehru (India's first prime minister), as inspired by the Fabian socialist model, a model he was drawn to during his time as a student in England (Desai & Bhagavati, 1975).

Economic Liberalization

In the 1980s, India gradually began to tilt towards economic liberalization, in response to many external and internal factors (see Pederson, 2000; Kohli, 1989). A major ideological shift from the welfare state model to neoliberal capitalism was unfolding under President Reagan in the United States of America and Prime Minister Thatcher in the United Kingdom. Additionally, developments in nations such as the USSR and China contributed to this change of orientation:

> [T]he fact that major communist countries like the Soviet Union and China seem to want to embrace the market is of considerable significance. For the present there are few exemplary models left in the world that could help sustain anti-market arguments (Kohli, 1989, p. 309).

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[17] The non- aligned movement (NAM), founded in 1961 was an alliance of newly independent nations who wanted to carve a path separate from the two global power blocs of the time- the NATO bloc and the Soviet bloc- during the Cold War era. NAM foregrounded principles such as anti-imperialism, anti-racism and anti-apartheid along with a commitment to support peoples struggling under such regimes in various parts of the world. The leaders that were instrumental in the formation of this movement were the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and the Yugoslavian President Josip Tito. The stated objectives of NAM include safeguarding sovereignty, independent foreign and domestic policies and territorial integrity of member nations (see Willets, 1978).
[18] For example, the Tata group, Birla group, Godrej group, Mahindra group.
[19] Licence raj refers to the elaborate bureaucratic process and accompanying red tape that made it very difficult to start enterprise in India between 1951 and 1991. The elaborate rules, conditions and regulations were put in place by an act in 1951, as part of the economic policy that foregrounded centralized planning and public sector industries (Hashimzade, Miles & Black, 2017).
[20] This was termed as 'the Hindu growth rate' (Panagariya, 2010).

Towards the end of the 1980s and the beginning of 1990s, multiple external crises affected the Indian economy, which added impetus to the shift towards liberalization. The Gulf War led to a surge in petroleum prices. The fall of India's major trade partner, the Soviet Union, exacerbated the situation, leading to a balance of payments (BOP) crisis. India, still predominantly a net-import nation, was at the verge of defaulting on its external debt and was forced to seek a 1.8-billion-dollar loan from the International Monitory Fund (IMF). In 1991, the IMF sanctioned the loan based on an agreement under which the Indian government was to carry out structural adjustments to the Indian economy, which would open it up to the global market and ease conditions for domestic enterprise[21] (Ahuja et al, 2005). This was a turning point in India's post-independence history, and the beginning of the liberalization, privatization and globalization (LPG) processes which have been followed ever since by successive governments to this day (Nayyar, 2017). The liberalization of India's economy was accompanied by a rise in India's economic growth and a significant shift in domestic and foreign policy. For instance, India moved significantly closer to the United States presenting a break from the anti-imperialist stance adopted during the Cold War period. These changes reflected the fundamental ideological shift among the political establishment, along with the influx of information from global centres of commerce and culture (predominantly located in the West) (Thapan, 2004; Oza, 2006).

Balancing tensions: The 'New Middle class'

The processes of LPG that have been taking place since 1991[22] have been facilitated by a paradigm shift in the socio-political ideologies, images and arguably the identity of India itself. This paradigm shift is visible, for instance, in the way government discourse has shifted from state socialism to one that is centred around consumption and globalization (Fernandes, 2000, 2006; Thapan 2004). Associated with this, there has been a shift in the national identity. From an anti-imperialist, socialist leaning nation that foregrounded the contribution of farmers and the rural poor, India's image became dominated by consumerism,

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[21] Domestic enterprise was reigned in through the operation of a 'licence raj' an archaic body of laws, fees and regulations that made it very difficult (in some sectors impossible) for private enterprises to enter the private market.

[22] Successive governments have been committed to the economic policy of LPG since 1991. Most recently, the new Modi government budget announced tweaks to foreign direct invest policy and promised increased government disinvestment from certain public sector enterprises like Air India (see "Highlights from finance minister Sitharaman's #budget speech", 2019).

urban life and a new middle class (Fernandes, 2006):

> […] while state socialist ideologies tended to depict workers or rural villagers as the
> archetypical citizens and objects of development […] in the early decades in post-
> liberalization India, mainstream national political discourses increasingly depict the
> middle classes as the representative citizens of liberalising India (p. 2416).

The shift towards globalization in India, Fernandes (2000) notes, was accompanied by a
politics that promoted consumption-culture. For example, in the late 1980s, then Prime
Minister Rajiv Gandhi marked a major shift in political discourse, talking about creating
access to consumer goods like colour televisions and washing machines that highlighted the
aspirations of the middle class (Fernandes, 2000). His language on rural India did not centre
around poverty. Instead, his vision was described as being "a computer for every village"
(cited in Fernandes, 2000, p. 613). Later, following the structural reforms of 1991, the
dominant focus within discourses of development shifted from the public sector to the private
sector and public-private-partnerships (Lukose, 2009). "Private sector jobs, private cars,
privately owned public spaces" became the marker of 'modernity' in a new India, along with
a general perception of the public sector as corrupt, incompetent and a relic of the past
(Krishnan, 2015; p. 11). At the centre of the image of this new India is the new middle class,
and within this is situated the 'new Indian woman', who is middle class, urbanised, integrated
into the global market (as a wage earner, consumer and an object of consumption), and
attempting to negotiate a socio-economic landscape in flux. The participants of this thesis are
part of the aspirational and upwardly mobile middle class of neoliberal India. Access to
higher education and jobs in the service sector industry has been a driving force for class
mobility among many of the participants.

Government discourse and policy (on women) in post-independence India

Although considered equals alongside men with respect to citizenship, the essentialized ideals
of the 'Indian woman' emanating from the anticolonial struggle upheld characteristics of
'respectability' deriving from upper-caste Hindu ideals (Choudhury, 2015) and the similar
Victorian British ideals of chastity and self-sacrifice. With the qualities of chastity and self-
sacrifice, the Indian woman upheld the 'honour' of the nation. Furthermore, feminists noted

that while the grand Nehruvian[23] visions of modernity and development provided women hope for progress, the laws and policies the government championed ignored the issues and needs raised by women (Banerjee, 1998). Instead, policy and law were formulated and implemented in ways that re-entrenched women's "unique and legitimate role in the family"[24] (Banerjee, 1998, p.4). Policies for women's welfare were centred primarily around motherhood and familial roles (Banerjee, 1998; Choudhury, 2015). Despite heading a pre-independence commission to understand and improve the position of women in India, the Nehruvian imagination of women's role in Indian society did not challenge the structural inequalities that affected Indian women (Chaudhuri, 1995). The following is an excerpt from Banerjee's (1998) article critiquing the Nehruvian era social policy relating to women:

> In spite of presiding in the 1930s over a committee on women's status, Nehru and the Planning Commission under his leadership in the post-independent India proceeded to discard the radical economic measures the committee had recommended to establish parity between men and women. Instead, the unproblematic tradition of regarding women as targets for household and motherhood-oriented welfare services was given recognition in official policy documents. Thus, challenging the patriarchal ethos of society has never been the agenda of the Indian state. (1998, p.ws2)

Significantly, in 1974, the Indian government under the prime ministership of Indira Gandhi, appointed a national committee to investigate the status of Indian women to mark the United Nations International Year of Women (Chakraborty, 2014). Feminist scholars, Dr Phulrenu Guha and Dr Vina Mazumdar headed the committee that conducted studies and interviews of about 500 women from each state of India (Choudhury, 2015). The findings, published in a report entitled *Towards Equality* were an 'indictment' on the nation's failure to address the structural factors that lead to inequality in the position of men and women (Tharu & Lalita, 1991).

Scholars note that the official policy and rhetoric since has not changed significantly[25] (Banerjee, 1998; Sunder Rajan, 2003; Chakraborty, 2014). In her book *The Scandal of the*

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[23] Related to policies and politics of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India (1947-1964) and a prominent leader of the anti-colonial struggle.
[24] See (Chaudhuri, 1995) for a detailed feminist analysis of the first five-year plan.
[25] See (Chakraborty, 2014) for a 40th anniversary review of the 'Towards equality' report.

State: Women, Law and Citizenship in Postcolonial India, Sunder Rajan (2003) suggests that "the state [itself] has grown to be a pressing concern for Indian feminism in recent years, especially following the Shahbano case[26]" (p. iv). Nearly two decades later, the language has not undergone fundamental shifts. Take for instance, the current government's flagship program for women and girls, *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*, which translates to 'save the daughter, educate the daughter'. The scheme, which was launched in 2014, aims to address the declining child sex ratio[27] and improve the education and health outcomes for girls (Kapur, 2017). The program title itself, however, uses the familiar terminology around having to 'save' and 'protect' girls and women, rather than promoting the idea that girls are as valuable and capable as boys, therefore deserve to be treated fairly. Furthermore, it can be argued that merely not killing the foetus based on biological sex does not constitute 'saving'. While many laws and programs[28] have been discussed and put in place to improve the status of women in India, feminist scholarship reveals that by and large, the state has been reluctant to fundamentally change how they perceive the role of women in Indian society[29].

Discursive constructions of Indian womanhood

> Our understanding of the problems of 'real' women cannot lie outside the imagined constructs in and through which 'women' emerge as subjects. Negotiating between these mediations and simulacra, we seek to arrive at an understanding of the issues at stake (Sunder Rajan, 1993, p.10).

The social construction of the figure/representation of the 'Indian woman' is a dynamic process. The processes that contribute to an essentialized ideal of womanhood are often understood as being dominated by men (and/or patriarchy). For instance, within colonial discourses, Indian women were framed as oppressed and lacking agency, waiting to be

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[26] The Supreme Court of India ruled in favour of the maintenance case made by Shahbano, a Muslim woman who was unilaterally divorced by her husband utilizing the Islamic personal law. The government under the leadership of Rajiv Gandhi, however, enacted a law in parliament that nullified the Supreme Court judgement, depriving Muslim women of their right to maintenance, which is available to women of other communities in India. Many have interpreted the government action as being driven by political motives, having given in to the pressure of Muslim orthodoxy (see Pathak & Sunder Rajan, 1989).

[27] The child sex ratio in India (the number of girls to 1000 boys, in the age range 0 to 6) was recorded to be at an all-time low in the latest Census report (Census of India, 2011). The inter-census decline is also notable. From 927 girls to 1000 boys in 2001 the child sex ratio declined to 919 in 2011.

[28] See the National Commission for Women ("Laws related to Women", n.d) for a list and details of the women-centric laws that have been enacted since independence. Link: http://ncw.nic.in/important-links/List-of-Laws-Related-to-Women.

[29] A more elaborate discussion on the history of feminism and women's movements in India is included in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

liberated by benevolent and 'civilized' White colonizers (Mohanty, 1988). The anti-colonial movement in India presented a counter-narrative to this. Women were constructed as powerful within these narratives, but their power derived from self-sacrifice and upholding their 'honour' for the nation and adhering to its dominant, upper-caste culture (Sangari & Vaid, 1990; Anjum, 2000; Berry, 2003). Needless to say, the ideals of Indian womanhood are subject to contestation and revision. These constructions (termed as imaginings by Sangari & Vaid) of womanhood continue to be of significance in the context of contemporary India. As Sunder Rajan (1993) argues, the everyday experiences and realities of women at the ground level, are constantly shaped by and evaluated through these constructions of Indian womanhood. In the following sections, I discuss scholarly attention to constructions of womanhood in colonial and postcolonial discourses.

Colonial discourses

A hallmark of colonial discourses is the dichotomous construction of the West and the East, or the 'Orient' and the 'Occident'. 'Western' is considered 'universal' and the culture of study is considered 'particular'. Postcolonial sociologist Inden (1986) has termed the larger system of knowledge colonial discourses were part of, and co-constructed as the 'episteme of Indology'. He traces its origins back to Hegel's (1956) essentialist ideas about the 'hinter' (middle east) and 'farther' (beyond the Indus) of the 'Orient'. Hegel's thoughts were influential on the body of work produced by Western scholars on India thereafter. Within such scholarship, Indian women were pitted against 'modern' women, a concept that was often used interchangeably with 'Western' women, despite 'Western women' themselves being subjected to oppressive gender-norms, and devoid of many fundamental rights in Victorian Britain and elsewhere (Chitnis & Wright, 2007). Eurocentric discourses on Indian women during colonial times (and often, thereafter), deemed them to be oppressed within a 'savage' or backward social system ethnocentrically defined by practices such as *Sati*[30] and the ostracization of widows (Nielson & Waldrop, 2014). They provided justification for the colonial project, through a logic of civilized White men saving helpless Indian women from savage Indian men (Chatterjee, 1995). Chitnis and Wright (2007) state that it was not only British and European men that reproduced this image of oppressed Indian women. They describe the role of British women, including suffragists, in the reproduction of the image of

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[30] Bride burning practice that was prevalent in upper-caste Hindu communities in some parts of India.

the suppressed Indian women who had been shorn of agency. In their article on colonial laws in India Chitnis and Wright write:

> The imagery of the civilizing mission, especially as it pertained to relieving Indian women of the horrors of their subjugated state, was profoundly attractive to British women who felt that they had some greater authority to speak on behalf of their Indian sisters than British men. But even these altruistic female reformers could not escape their imperialist roots. […] middle-class British feminists invoked images of Indian women as victims awaiting redress at the hands of imperial saviours in order to further their own claims for suffrage and political rights: […] [Even] as British women were advocating in England for civil divorce, married women's property rights, the abolition of the Contagious Diseases Acts, suffrage, and a host of other women's reforms, they would routinely praise the enlightened state of Western law as it related to women because of its stark contrast to the family laws that prevailed in India. These activists certainly could not unpack the socially constructed nature of the images of the degraded Indian woman and, in many respects, helped to construct those images (2007, pp.11324-11325).

Chandra Mohanty's 'Under Western Eyes' (1988) identifies and analyses some texts that fall within the colonial episteme. For example, the book *Frogs in a well: Indian women in Purdah* by Patricia Jeffrey (1979) defined women "primarily in terms of their object status" (p.66) rather than subjects with agency. Rather than understanding women's perspectives, experiences and resistances, Jeffrey's study is focused on how certain institutional systems perceived by western scholars as oppressive affect the object- Indian women. Another example is Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1935) which, according to Srinivas (1998) was so notorious for its caricaturization of Indian culture that it led to a general mistrust of Anthropologists among sections of Indian society. According to Das (1995), within the Eurocentric narratives, cultures of India "acquired legitimacy only as objects of thought", and were rarely ever understood as alternative modes or alternative "instruments of thought" (p.33).

The influential ethnocentric narratives on Indian women have continued in some shape or form ever since and can be identified within the media, literature, art and film, especially (but not limited to) the material originating from the West. Patel (2013) identifies the Orientalist-Eurocentric framing within the work of 'first-generation Indian sociologists' such as G. S. Ghurye who, in building an Indian sociological discipline, followed the European objectivist philosophy of creating a unitary narrative. Ghurye viewed India as a Brahmanical

civilization, viewing it as becoming less 'civilized', the farther it moved outside the cultural and literary realm of the upper-castes (Patel, 2013).

Within academic scholarship the colonial perspective prevailed visibly until the 1980s, when it was challenged by deconstructionist, feminist and postcolonial scholars. Important theoretical contributions by postcolonial scholars such as Gayathri Spivak, Edward Said, the subaltern studies group at the University of Sussex, Chandra Mohanty, Jacqui Alexander among others played a critical role in the shift towards postcolonial frameworks.

Postcolonial discourses

> It seems particularly unfortunate when the emergent perspective of feminist criticism reproduces the axioms of imperialism (Spivak, 1985, p. 243).

The identification of the colonial system of knowledge became possible through critiques by postcolonial scholars. Prior to the development of deconstructionist tools of analysis, Eurocentric perspectives were often taken as the 'objective reality', and a 'standard' against which societies around the world were compared or measured within global academic discourses[31] (Inden, 1986). As much as the Orient was constructed by Western discourses, the identity of the Occident was dependent on its supposed Oriental antithesis (Said, 1978). Sweeping generalizations about women's oppression in India were made by western feminist scholars who theorized 'universal oppression of women' through reductionist methods (Mohanty, 1988). A simplistic view of Indian society as male oppressors vs female oppressed did not account for more complex and diverse social locations (caste, class, age) of Indian women and corresponding variation in power and agency. Reddy (2014), for example, discusses how the status of Indian women improves significantly when older, and how in many cases women themselves reproduce gendered power relations, in their own interest (see Kandiyotti, 1988). A binaristic view invizibilizes the complexities and diversities that exist within Indian society. However, it is within this framework of binarism that Indian women, and in general, 'third world women' came to be viewed within the dominant academic discourse.

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[31] In many disciplines this tendency continues to this day

Postcolonial feminist scholars such as Gayathri Spivak (1985; 1988) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988) highlighted the necessity of breaking with the reductionist traditions of the West. Mohanty argued that ethnocentric reductionism was not helpful to advance the cause of women in third world nations. Recognition of women's agency, power and resistance within the complexities of their lived experience and culture are requisites to building solidarity between women around the world (Mohanty, 1988). Employing feminist ethnographic methods in research has been identified as effective in capturing and representing women's experiences, perspectives and agency within their complex socio-economic locations (Mohanty, 1988; Abu-Lughod, 2000; Crowley, 2014), and have been used by many postcolonial scholars.

For example, in *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India,* Gloria Goodwin and Raheja Ann Grodzins Gold (1994) employ feminist ethnographic methods to achieve an understanding of women's practices of resistance in what was considered the oppressive patriarchal cultures of rural north India. The authors recognized that women's critical perspectives and practices of resistance to the prevailing social systems were expressed during discussions amongst women themselves and during ritual performance of songs and other expressive traditions. Women in rural Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh navigated existing social norms strategically to maximize their agency and to express resistance. The authors conclude that within their respective socio-cultural locations their participants- women in two locations in rural north India- were 'as much feminists' as they themselves were.

Sunder Rajan (1993) explores the politics of postcolonial scholarship. She argues that postcolonial literature acknowledges the similarities in the political motivations between western and non-western feminists while highlighting the "differences in the questions confronting us" (p.1). It, therefore, provokes the "articulation of sameness and difference that is a necessary function of critical theory" (Sunder Rajan, 1993, p 1). Sunder Rajan explores the common notion that the 'excessive political correctness' induced by the postcolonial rethinking risks 'sterility' in regard to political messaging. But such a risk, Sunder Rajan (1993) argues, is still worth taking for the theoretical and analytical gains to be achieved that will help build postcolonial politics.

Recolonization

Recolonization refers to the resurgence of discourses with characteristic features very similar to those of colonial times. Scholars have identified this resurgence happening through neoliberal globalization and associated processes of information and capital flow whose dominant direction is from the West to the rest of the world. This pattern was discussed in the work of postcolonial feminist scholars Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty (1997) and later utilized in the analytical frameworks of many scholars, such as Maitrayee Chaudhuri (1999), Mary E. John (1998) and Meenakshi Thapan (2001, 2004, 2009). Alexander and Mohanty (1997) argue that the processes of neoliberal globalization have led to "further consolidation and exacerbation of capitalist relations of domination and exploitation" (p. xvii) which existed during colonial times. According to Thapan (2001), "recolonization is characterised by a mix of global elements translated into socially and culturally acceptable, and thereby legitimate ideas, values and practices in everyday life" (p. 359). Recolonization involves the return to Eurocentric binaries, of tradition-modernity, old-new, oppressed-liberated and so on, which inform constructions of Indian womanhood. Indian women are once again 'entrapped' within such binaries (Sangari & Vaid, 1990). This entrapment is evident in various sites, including popular culture. and media discourses, rather than the academic discourse. For example, in Thapan's (2009) analysis of representations in the popular Indian women's magazine 'Femina', she investigates how Western discourses of beauty are reproduced. While most models depicted in the magazine were light-skinned, Thapan noted that there was a darker-skinned model who was described using noticeably different language. Terms such as 'exotic' and 'wild' were used in her case, which is similar to the way models of colour are described within Western fashion discourses. The fact that the model who was deemed 'exotic' shared skin colour and hair texture with the large majority of Indian women is indicative of the processes of recolonization, where colonial language is reproduced in the era of globalization.

'Recolonization', however, does come with resistance (Thapan, 2001). A visible example includes right-wing political and religious groups[32] (Oza, 2006). For instance, it can be observed that the processes of neoliberal reform were accompanied by a parallel rise in right-

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[32] Although right-wing Hindu groups frame the world in terms of binaries too, although accompanied by different values associated with the binary opposites.

wing Hindu nationalism which, in its extreme versions, violently resists 'Western' ways of life, especially in relation to womanhood. Their resistance, however is driven by their own hegemonic version of Indian culture and identity (Berry, 2003). This right-wing Hindu nationalist version of Indian womanhood forefronts Brahmanical ideals as the standard for all Indian women. Some scholars identify this as another form of colonization, indicating women's double colonization (Spivak, 1988). The 'threats' to India's national identity are often articulated in terms of regulation of/violence against women who do not conform to traditional practices of Indian womanhood. This will be discussed a bit more, later in this chapter.

Demographic shifts

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the introduction of policies that marked the beginnings of the processes of liberalization, privatization and globalization[33] (often referred to, simply, as LPG) in the early 1990s presented a break to the then-existing postcolonial continuum. With the expansion of service sector industries, urbanization grew rapidly and a new middle class was formed. According to some estimates, the middle class comprises about a third of the total population (Krishnan & Hatekar, 2017), which is larger than the population of the United States of America. It is estimated that nearly 70% of people live in rural areas, but growth in urban centres has been increasing at an unprecedented rate (Census of India, 2011). In 2011, for the first time in India's history, more people were added to Indian towns and cities than rural areas[34] (see figure 1.1). Internal migration contributed significantly to this demographic shift (Census of India, 2011). Among the internal migrants to India's urban areas are a group largely overlooked in the academic literature: women migrating without family (Thapan, Singh & Sreekumar, 2014; Dutta & Shaw, 2019). These women, however, form a crucial part of India's changing identity in a globalizing world. My research participants form part of this rising demographic.

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[33] See *Prologue* of this thesis for a discussion on the balance of payments crisis which necessitated the structural reforms in the early 90's. Liberalization-privatization-globalization were processes that came about as a result of the structural reforms to the Indian economy.

[34] Census calculations happen once every decade in India. While the absolute number of people added to rural areas was 90.4 million, 91 million people were added to urban areas in the period of 2001-2011 (see Census of India, 2011).

Data Highlights – Census 2011

Population (in Crore)

	2001	2011	Difference
India	102.9	121.0	18.1
Rural	74.3	83.3	9.0
Urban	28.6	37.7	9.1

Fig.1.1: Table showing India's total population comparison between 2001 and 2011 with a rural- urban breakdown (Screenshot). Source: Census of India, 2011

In addition to urbanization, another significant shift has been taking place in India's demographic profile with respect to age. At present two-thirds of India's population is under the age of 35 (Sharma, 2017; Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation Government of India, 2017), and one in three people in India's cities is under 35 (Niranjana & Vasudevan, 2016). With an average age of 29, India is set to become one of the youngest nations in the world by 2020 (Bisaria, 2017). This demographic bulge, favouring those in the working-age group, is often termed 'the demographic dividend' (Basu, 2007). There is, therefore, an increased impetus for studies on Indian youth.

The 'New Indian Woman'

When I had just finished my undergraduate studies, a friend of mine sent photographs of myself and her to the 'Miss Kerala[35]' competition, in jest. I was shortlisted as a finalist after a preliminary audition that took place in my city. I was hesitant about taking part in the finals. My father was revolted by the idea of me participating in what he termed a 'beauty contest'. My mother and my friends were, however, thrilled. "This is a rare opportunity- just give it a go. We'll see what happens!" they suggested, and I heeded their suggestion. During the ten-day 'grooming session' for the finalists, we had classes with 'experts' in various aspects of self-presentation, beauty and public speaking. Our main 'groomer', Milan, was a pageant winner from one of the bigger cities in India. Larger cities that were more westernized held greater power and influence in the cultural spaces of India. The groomer was accompanied, to my curiosity, by her secondary-school-aged sister, who helped Milan in her work. Among other things, they focused on improving our walk, poses and English enunciation.

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[35] Kerala is my home state, in India.

Most aspects of grooming centred around Western fashion and beauty norms. On the topic of posing for photographs, for instance, Milan advised us "a slightly open mouth is sexy and looks great in photos". From a quick glance at 'international' magazines, we could see that she was right. Women with blank expressions accompanied by slightly opened mouths were everywhere. This, however, hadn't been common in Malayalam[36] cinema and fashion of the time. "It signals sexual availability", Milan later added. I was repulsed by this idea. I did not understand why we had to bring in what I considered 'objectifying' aspects of western culture when there was plenty of sexism existing in our own. I resisted many of the pageant organizers' suggestions. On the type of clothes, for instance, I firmly objected to their suggestion and asserted my preference. I could sense tension in the way they dealt with me thereafter.

In the last few days, groomers focused on the choreography for the main event and preparation of specific rounds (of the competition) for the night of the "big final". This included the judges' question and answer round. This segment of the pageant was glorified and advertised as a testimony to the claim that Miss Kerala was not about women's superficial beauty, but about intelligence, eloquence and confidence. The groomers discussed with us the 'best' way to answer some of the commonly asked questions. A regular theme was around what 'being a woman' meant. "The best way is to answer such questions is to balance tradition and modernity" the head groomer said:

> *A modern Indian woman is one who pursues her passions and works hard towards her career goals. At the same time, she is rooted in her family and traditions. If the question was to describe what kind of woman you represented, a good answer could be "I am an empowered 21st Century woman who also makes her grandmother proud."*

Questions of a similar theme eventually did get asked during the final night. Notably, one of the male judges probed a contestant further, challenging her to prove that she was 'rooted in her culture', by explaining the recipe for coconut chutney[37]. His challenge invoked loud cheers from the audience[38].

The idea of Indian womanhood reproduced by the Miss Kerala pageant[39] is one that is seen time and again in advertisements, television and cinema (Fernandes, 2000; Thapan 2004;

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[36] The main language spoken in the state of Kerala.
[37] Coconut chutney is a staple in Kerala cuisine.
[38] The reader could be curious to know what my fate in the competition was. I did not make it to the judges' questions round. I was eliminated after the first round on the final night.
[39] The previous year, the pageant had to contend with a legal petition filed by a civil society group who alleged that "minor girls were paraded in skimpy attire at the pageant" (High court to monitor Miss Kerala pageant, 2009).

Oza, 2006). The 'modern', 'new' or '21st century Indian woman' works hard to build her career, while simultaneously remaining rooted in her family and culture. To the male judge at the Miss Kerala pageant final, being rooted in culture and family implied that a woman had to know how to cook. To him, and to the audience members who cheered him, women knowing how to cook, was an obvious part of being a 'new' Indian woman (although not stated). In short, the idea of the 'modern Indian woman' is one that welcomes women's participation in the capitalist economy as workers and consumers while maintaining the status quo on gender relations, especially within the family. Scholars, both in India, and elsewhere, have discussed how such a reimagining of women, as being 'allowed to', or in other discourses 'empowered to', participate in the capitalist economy, without a fundamental reevaluation of taken for granted gender norms leads to the 'double burdening' of women, as they not only have to earn wages outside the family but also do the unpaid domestic work of caring, cooking and cleaning (Lahiri-Dutt & Sil, 2014; Hervey & Shaw, 1998).

Leela Fernandes (2000) links the reimagining of Indian womanhood in the post-liberalization era to the larger reimaginings of the idea of India itself, from being a state-planned economy that cherished anti-colonial values, to a fast-growing, 'open', globalized nation. The changing discourses from within and outside India are destabilizing the idea of India, and even more so the idea of Indian womanhood. Women, being the primary bearers of Indian culture, are often confronted with the need to actively manage such destabilizing discourses (Fernandes, 2000). During this process of active management, those who transgress what is deemed acceptable by arbitrary bearers of culture (this could be family, religious leaders, neighbours, community members or right-wing organizations) often face negative consequences.

The Rise to prominence of the Hindu Right-Wing

As important as the new discourses emerging from economic liberalization in 21st century India, is the rise of the Hindu right-wing (as mentioned above). Both these phenomena happened in parallel in postcolonial India, coming to prominence in the 90s and intensifying in the first two decades of the 21st century. While neoliberalism and right-wing Hindu nationalism seem to have reached a harmonious synthesis at the economic level with the concept 'free-market capitalism with Indian characteristics' (Das, 2020), on the topic of womanhood, aspects of the two ideologies can be in conflict (Graff, Kapur & Walters, 2019).

In January of 2009, a mob of 40 men belonging to a right-wing Hindu group *Sri Ram Sena* barged into a pub in the city of Mangaluru[40] and beat up the women who were present there. A video of the incident went viral on YouTube, and triggered public outcry. In an interview later that year, Pravin Valke, one of the founding members of Sri Ram Sena stated:

> These girls come from all over India, drink, smoke, and walk around in the night spoiling the traditional girls of Mangalore. Why should girls go to pubs? Are they going to serve their future husbands alcohol? Should they not be learning to make chapattis [Indian bread]? Bars and pubs should be for men only. We wanted to ensure that all women in Mangalore are home by 7 pm ("Mangalore Pub Attack Case Verdict Is a Win for Hindutva Bullies", 2018).

This incident is a violent manifestation of the clash of competing discourses on womanhood in contemporary Indian society. Here the Sri Ram Sene represents the rise of the Hindu right wing, who espouse a monolithic version of Indian womanhood, based on a narrow imagination which seeks to represent upper-caste Hindu values, as the authentic one. The pub-going women were young professionals in the service industry based in Mangalore, who represented certain aspects of neoliberalism and womanhood which were unacceptable to the Hindu-right wing.

While incidents of this scale are not common, the language used by the leader of the group reproduces prevalent discourses that circulate in the everyday lives of women and girls all over India, at multiple levels - within families, communities and institutions such as schools and colleges. The everyday 'management' that Indian women are having to do to remain within acceptable boundaries of womanhood, Fernandes (2000) argues, is an ongoing responsibility, a failure of which can lead to negative consequences as demonstrated in the incident mentioned above[41]. Referring to Fernandes' (2000) framing of women's ongoing management in the context of larger reimaginings of the idea of India, Thapan (2004) states:

> […] the 'new Indian woman' is an ambivalent entity shaped by the social and public domain which simultaneously portrays her as glamorous, independent, conscious of her embodiment and of the many forms of adornment and self-presentation available

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[40] Mangaluru or Mangalore (former name) is a city in the southern state of Karnataka, India. In recent years, owing to the presence of the IT industry and Business Process Outsourcing centres (BPO's or call centres), Mangaluru has attracted young professionals from around the state and across the country.

[41] It must also be mentioned here that most of the accused in the attack were acquitted by courts in 2018 (see Mangalore Pub Attack Case Verdict Is a Win for Hindutva Bullies", 2018).

to her, and yet enshrined in the world of tradition through her adherence to family and national values. The overarching trope, therefore, remains that of middle-class respectability, within which a woman is free to pursue her career and look after the interests of her family and her body repair and maintenance (p. 415).

This discussion on the 'new Indian woman', which investigates the discursive tension that exists in the construction of womanhood in India today, informs the research agenda for this study.

Recent debates around gender and womanhood in India

The past two decades witnessed heightened levels of activism, mass mobilization and spirited public debates on issues around women as well as the conceptualization of gender and sexuality in India (Taneja, 2019). The debates encompassed multiple fronts such as policy, law, civic activism and media. In this section, I outline some of the major debates and events around womanhood and gender that occurred in the last decade.

Innovative expressions of resistance against moral vigilantism (moral policing)

In the aftermath of the Mangalore pub attack (mentioned earlier in this chapter), and visuals of the attack going viral, a group of women organized through social media under the banner 'Consortium of Pub-going, Loose and Forward Women' and started a non-violent campaign, sending women's underwear to the office of the chief Sri Ram Sene, (the Hindu right-wing organization who orchestrated the attack). The campaign, which received national attention and tens of thousands of members, was strikingly named the *Pink Chaddi* (Pink panty) campaign. This movement, according to scholars, marks a clear change of course in feminist praxis in India, which hitherto approached sexuality mainly through the lens of sexual violence, which was assumed to be perpetrated by men and against women (Kapur, 2012; Taneja, 2019). The *Pink Chaddi* campaign and others that followed (see for example the *SlutWalk*, and the *Kiss of Love* protests) represented a new, agentic and sex-positive approach to Indian women's sexuality. The Kiss of Love protest of 2014 was similarly organized on social media, in response to the rising number of 'moral policing'[42] incidents in Kerala and

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[42] The term moral police refers to self-assigned extrajudicial vigilante groups who take up the mantle of protecting their version of India's culture. In some cases such as the Mangalore pub incident, they do so by adopting violent means to punish those who transgress arbitrary lines of acceptable culture.

across India (Murali, 2016). Young women, men and transgender people took part in it, kissing their partners/co-protestors with mutual consent, amid threats of violence from conservative factions of the society. The visible presence of the queer community was an important aspect of the Kiss of Love protests. Despite public outcry, moral panic and slut-shaming, protestors defiantly gathered at public sites across the nation, embraced and kissed. In Kochi, where the protest was born, the police arrested the peaceful protestors who were surrounded by conservative counter-protestors- an indication of where the State stands on issues of public conduct. The subversive and innovative protest methods used by activists in these movements, according to Kapur (2012), has shone a different light on women's sexual and bodily agency, opening up new avenues for feminist thinking, research and praxis in India, that is broader in scope than the male sexual violator vs female victim approach[43] which was dominant in the preceding decades (Kapur, 2012).

The Delhi gang-rape of 2012

Perhaps the most significant event of public mobilization on women's rights of the last decade occurred after the Delhi gang rape of 2012[44] (Bakshi, 2017). Thousands across all major cities and towns in India protested, igniting new debates around women's safety, consent, rape culture and gender socialization. These debates provide the crucial discursive context within which this thesis is set. The protest came to be known as the 'Nirbhaya' (fearless one) protests, in honour of the victim, Jyoti Singh (Bakshi, 2017).

In response to the protests, the Government of India instituted Justice Verma commission, tasked with assessing the prevailing situation (laws, governance, social norms) and suggesting changes in policy, law and governance that would assure safety and dignity of women. The commission had a behemoth task, inviting public opinion and conducting large-scale research projects with stakeholders[45]. The most notable outcome from the report was the Criminal Law Amendment Act (2013) which tightened rape law in India and endeavoured to give survivors more protection through law than what was then available. One of the

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[43] Kapur (2012) terms this approach to feminism (ie- men sexual oppressors, vs women sexual victims) as 'dominance feminism.

[44] Detailed discussion of the incident can be found in Lapsia (2015).

[45] The Justice J.S. Verma Commission report (2013) in its entirety can be accessed here: http://archive.nyu.edu/bitstream/2451/33614/2/J_S_VermaCommitteeReport.pdf
More discussion on the response to the report in Limjerwala (2013); Kale (2013).

outcomes of the mass protests was the admission on the part authorities that the system had failed to assure women the fundamental right to live in dignity and security. In the preface of the report, the authors stated the following:

> The constitution of this Committee is in response to the country-wide peaceful public outcry of civil society, led by the youth, against the failure of governance to provide a safe and dignified environment for the women of India, who are constantly exposed to sexual violence. (Verma, Seth and Subrahmanyam, 2013, p.i)

While the condemnation of the rape itself seemed near-universal, a diversity of approaches to the incident existed. For example, while liberal feminists in India's urban centres described it as an assault to women's autonomy and individual rights, conservative factions, although opposed to the rape, reinforced dominant narratives around gender and safety, advising women to avoid going out at night[46]. Many Dalit feminists while condemning the incident and supporting the protest movement, wondered why the gang-rapes of Dalit women, which occur in many parts of India never receive the attention this case garnered[47] both nationally and internationally (Lodhia, 2015). Yet others approached the issue from a perspective of tensions around class and culture, giving attention to the unequal growth under neoliberalism (Shiva, 2013)- the adverse economic situation of the offenders, especially in comparison it the victims[48], who were part of the upwardly mobile young population of the city, accessing higher education and leisure (Burke, 2013). The stark economic inequality existing in Delhi is indeed unmistakable, and this lies alongside starkly different conceptualizations of gender among different sections. According to Kapur (2012), Lodhia (2015) notes that the diversity of ways/lenses through which people understood the topic (the 'ideological traffic' or the range of discourses) is a reflection of "evolving gender relations in contemporary India and the patriarchal anxieties they provoke; class inequities in an era of global capital; and ongoing questions about women's safety and security in the public sphere" (p. 90).

The way rape is understood leads to completely different measures to address it, which can be in opposition to each other (Menon, 2013). For example, from a patriarchal perspective rape is viewed as a blot on the honour of the family, community or the nation itself. From such a perspective, rape is addressed through measures of 'protecting women' often by restricting

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[46] The incident happened at around 9.30pm when Jyoti Singh was returning from a cinema with her male friend.
[47] Jyoti Singh was of a high caste
[48] Jyoti Singh and her male friend. Both were attacked in the incident.

their movement and activities further. For many feminists, however, rape is an infringement on the personhood and equal rights of the victim, which leads to very different strategies to address rape and rape culture. Movements such as 'reclaim the night' are examples of new feminist responses to rape and harassment occurring at night (Bhalla, 2017). The impact of the Nirbhaya movement has also been viewed differently. While some have dubbed it a 'feminist revolution' in India (see Bakshi 2017), others have been more cautious not to overestimate the effect the movement has had on the dominant ways rape is understood in many sections of India (Lapsia, 2015).

Research agenda

As discussed earlier in this chapter, India has been witnessing unprecedented socio-economic change since the advent to the LPG processes. Young women are positioned at the dynamic front where these changes are unfolding or as Niranjana and Vasudevan (2016) indicate, they are "positioned at the cusp of transformations that are underway" (p. 70). Additionally, in this period, the number of women moving to urban areas in India on their own (without family) has been rising significantly (see Thapan, Singh and Sreekumar, 2014). Yet domestic migration studies rarely account for this, viewing women's migration as primarily family-related (Agnihotri et al, 2012; Thapan, 2006). In this context, this thesis acknowledges a group of women who are part of this trend and investigates, through an ethnographic study that employs feminist poststructuralism and postcolonialism, their daily life-experiences and perspectives. It attempts to address the following research questions: How do young women explain/ understand/make sense of their move to a city/Chennai? How do they experience/negotiate hostel life? How do they experience/negotiate city life? What challenges do young women face in the contemporary neoliberal context with respect to conceptualizing womanhood, and around issues of contemporary relevance, such as dowry, sex, marriage and beauty?

This thesis is informed by a poststructural feminist approach that, drawing on the work of Foucault, understands subjectivity or identity as constructed in discourse (see Weedon 1987, Gavey 1989, 2005). This approach acknowledges the dual nature of subject positioning - participants are both positioned by and position themselves in relation to various discourses. My interest is to explore how young women, living in a hostel context in Chennai, negotiate

discourses of 'traditional' and 'new' Indian femininities, in particular, within the site/space of the hostel and also in public spaces.

The City: Chennai

Chennai is the fourth-largest urban agglomeration[49] in India, following Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkata, with a population of 8.6 million in the city and surrounding urban continuum. Chennai is renowned as the cultural, commercial and educational capital of South India. Officially, it is the capital city of the southern state of Tamil Nadu (see figure 1.2) and is located on the Coromandel coast with a busy port that opens to the Bay of Bengal. In 2015, Chennai was among BBC's five 'hottest cities' to visit and live in (Galloway, 2015). In the report, Chennai is described as "one of India's safest big cities […] with easy access to beaches, temples and

Figure 1.2: Location of Chennai (Google Maps, n.d).

Tamil culture, which make it appealing to expats" (Galloway, 2014, para 10). According to Mercer's 2016 'Quality of Life Survey', Chennai was India's safest city (Lakshmi, 2016).

Being a centre of commercial and educational activity, Chennai attracts thousands of internal migrants and expatriates (third-largest expatriate population) each year. Since the economic reforms of the early 1990s, Chennai's commercial activities have expanded, including special economic zones and multiple IT parks. According to the 2011 census, one-third of the city's population is comprised of migrants. Among the migrants living in Chennai, about two-thirds are from other regions in Tamil Nadu, and one third are from the rest of India (Census of India, 2011). Chennai is one of the major cities in south India that receives single women who migrate for higher education and employment. This fact, along with my familiarity with the city made Chennai an excellent site for this study.

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[49] According to the Census of India (2011), an urban agglomeration is a continuous urban spread attached to a city, and often includes surrounding towns that have become part of the urban continuum of the main city/town.

Women's hostels in urban India

Since this study has been conducted in a women's hostel in Chennai, I now provide some background to women's hostels in India. Women's access to housing in India is generally circumscribed within familial relationships and roles (Pothukuchi, 2001; 2003; Gibbons-Trikha, 2003; Melkote & Tharu, 1983). From birth to the time of marriage, a woman's security and shelter are considered to be the responsibility of her natal family. Once married, she secures housing through her husband, as a new member of the conjugal family[50]. While it is true that access to housing within Indian kinship systems is usually achieved through family regardless of gender and age, men within the working-age group living away from home are generally accepted. Women's solo migration, on the other hand, evokes much greater resistance and concern (Afsar, 2011). The necessity to shelter women within families derives from the construction of women's sexuality as 'dangerous' and as a risk to a family's and community's honour and integrity (Chakravarti, 1993, p.579). Chakravarti (1993) links the anxiety around women's sexuality in India to the construction of 'Brahmanical patriarchy', which prescribes caste endogamy[51] and pre-marital chastity as prerequisites for familial honour and communal integrity in a caste-based society. Chakravarti (1993; 2000) argues that within this system, women's sexual 'purity' is regarded as sacrosanct and inextricably attached to morality. Caste endogamy is a central aspect of the caste system- a mechanism by which the purity and continuity of upper-castes are maintained. Women's bodies and sexuality have therefore historically been regarded as volatile and risky (Chakravarti, 1993), justifying the need for monitoring and control within the family home.

Until recent decades, alternative forms of housing for women outside the familial realm were not only discouraged but also quite difficult to obtain (Pothukuchi, 2003). Women who do not have a male spouse or guardian are considered undesirable tenants by most landlords who perceive them as a sexual risk or a moral liability (Patel, 2010). With women's sexual purity at the centre of discourses on honour, avoiding 'sexual risk' becomes a social 'responsibility'

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[50]There are exceptions to this. For instance, in the traditionally matrilineal Nair community in Kerala, descent happened through the mother to the daughters. Marriage was matrilocal (located in the mother's family), which meant that men had to go to their wives' residence upon marriage. These traditions, however, gradually faded in the 19th and 20th century, with an assertion of patrilineality across almost all communities. This shift is ascribed to the effect of 'modernization' under colonial rule- as a result of commercialization of land and codified masculine property rights (Nakane, 1962), along with British education which projected patrilineality as a morally superior 'modern' (Pillai, 2016).

[51] Caste endogamy refers to marrying within the same caste.

which in turn legitimizes the surveillance of women's bodies. It is in this context of 'risk control' (see Krishnan, 2016) that hostels become crucial institutions in the cities of India, providing a homosocial 'sanctuary' where women are protected from men and monitored constantly. According to Gibbons-Trikha (2003), the women's hostel "is a critical structure in the institutional and cultural life of the subcontinent" (p. 50).

Women's hostels are same-sex spaces almost exclusively for unmarried women that provide semi-permanent accommodation in cities, towns or other regions. They are often established in association with institutions of higher education or around regions where employment is available. Hostel residents share most amenities such as rooms (single rooms are rare and more expensive), bathrooms and toilet facilities, socializing spaces such as dining halls and balconies as well as a security infrastructure. Food is often organized by the management and, in most cases, it is prepared in the hostel's common kitchen by staff appointed for the task. The cooks often double up as housekeepers, taking care of the upkeep of common areas. Sharing of facilities in this way brings down the cost of living considerably, compared to other renting options. Hostels are usually managed by committees or management teams who oversee the macro aspects of running a hostel, such as total income, expenditure and hostel infrastructure-related decisions (Melkote & Tharu, 1983). Residents rarely interact with the management directly. The first point of contact for residents is the hostel warden[52], who is appointed by the management/committee to take care of the everyday matters in the hostel. The on-site management comprises warden(s) as well as food and housekeeping staff. Usually, hostels also appoint private security guards, who are on-site at all times (Krishnan, 2015; Melkote & Tharu, 1983; Gibbons-Trikha, 2003; Pothukuchi, 2003).

Thesis structure

This thesis comprises of nine chapters, a prologue, bibliography and appendices. The physical structure of it has been outlined in the contents page. Here, I will present a brief note on the contents of each chapter.

The second chapter: *Review of the literature* presents a discussion the relevant issues and debates within the literature that have informed this thesis.

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[52] Sometimes also known as 'matron'.

In chapter three: *Methodology,* I present a discussion of, and rationale for, the methodology (ethnography) and theoretical framing (feminist poststructuralism & postcolonialism) of this thesis. I have drawn from the ethnographic approaches of feminist and postcolonial scholars doing research at 'home'.

In Chapter four, *Methods*, the specific methods employed in this thesis are detailed along with the processes and rationale involved in their use. I have also discussed the analytical approach which facilitated an analysis of the data in this thesis.

Chapters five to chapter eight are the analytical chapters of this thesis.
In chapter five: *"Baby will you come with me": Young women's narratives about street harassment in and around Chennai*, I begin with a personal anecdote that frames the topic of the chapter. This is followed by an exploration of the ways in which the participants in the study frame, experience and negotiate 'street harassment' in their everyday lives. This includes a case study on complexity and contradiction in women's talk about, and responses to street harassment.

In chapter six: *"This is the way things are": Young women negotiate dowry practices,* I begin with a personal anecdote which frames the topic and then present a discussion on dowry in contemporary India, in particular, the contemporary context of Tamil Nadu. The analytic focus is on the diverse ways in which the participants understand the practice of dowry and the place it has in their own lives. While some resignedly accept the practice as something they cannot change, others see it as a way to make a 'good alliance'. Very few of the participants reject it outright (or are able to do so because of their families).

In chapter seven: *Love, marriage and premarital sex*, I investigate the ways in which the participants discuss love and marriage, in particular, 'arranged' vs 'love marriage', as well as 'sex before marriage'. I argue that the participants largely challenged the binary, oppositional positioning of 'arranged marriage' vs 'love marriage', often seen as equivalent to 'tradition' vs 'modernity'. I also consider the tension between acknowledging the sexual double standard between men and women alongside the persistence of discourses of sexual innocence and 'purity' that inform many participants' ideas about 'sex before marriage'.

Chapter eight: '*Fair and lovely'? Negotiating Indian Beauty norms,* begins with two personal reflections that speak to India's gendered obsession with light skin colour. Thereafter, I draw together fieldwork photographs, that depict the cosmetic products used by participants, and participants' conversations about skin colour and beauty from my fieldnotes. These highlight the ways in which gendered 'colourism' informs participants' understandings of beauty/attractiveness and their skincare practices.

Chapter nine: *Concluding remarks and reflections*, is the last chapter of the thesis where I present a retrospective account of my experience undertaking this thesis. I summarize some of the key observations, present the thesis limitations and finally, reflect upon Thapan's (2004) theorization of the 'new Indian woman' in the context of my research participants' everyday negotiations.

Chapter 2
Review of Literature

Introduction

This thesis delves into the experiences and perspectives of young women in a Chennai hostel. I locate this study within the context of larger changes ushered in through the processes of liberalization, privatization and globalization (LPG) in India. While there has been an abundance of interest in the changing dimensions of India's socio-economic fabric following economic liberalization in India, the topic of single migrant women living in cities without family is less recognized and studied (Agnihotri, 2012; Thapan, Singh & Sreekumar, 2014). These women form part of the larger socio-economic story of neoliberal India and are the focus of this thesis.

In this chapter, I review key literatures in the areas of focus of this thesis. I begin with a periodized discussion on the construction of womanhood in India, looking at literature that traces the women's movement in India. This is followed by discussions of the scholarship around the 'new Indian woman', and a discussion on body politics. Later, I discuss internal migration and gender, and women's hostels. I then review the literatures associated with the topics of the four analytic chapters (5-8) in the thesis: Street harassment and safety in the city; The practice of dowry; Marriage, love and premarital sex; and Fairness and beauty: the 'caucasianization' of beauty norms. While perhaps somewhat unorthodox, this structure makes for a more organized chapter that speaks directly to the substantive chapters, and can be used as a reference chapter when reading the analytical section of the thesis (Chapters 5-8).

Women's movements and feminism in India

In this section, I present a discussion of significant movements, debates and policies which have shaped the conceptualization of womanhood in India. I discuss insights from and debates among scholars who offer a temporal classification of Indian women's history, such

as Pande (2018), Kumar (2014), Menon (2009) and Anjum (2000). It worth noting here, that a focus on the periodisation of history has been critiqued by some scholars including Anagol (2008) who argues that the dominant periodic paradigm within Indian historical discourse-pre-independence and post-independence- and the binary framework of imperialism/ nationalism often leads to invisibilization of women's agency. Many feminist historians have, however, paid attention to women's agency within a periodization framework (see, for example, Raman, 2009; Anagol, 2010; Roy, 2014). A discussion that acknowledges the major influences on the construction of womanhood in India provides a necessary background for this thesis.

The early modern period of reform (1800-1915)

The early modern period was dominated by social reform movements, led predominantly by male social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Rabindranath Tagore, Jyotiba Phule and Savitribai Phule among others. A major influence for many reformers were values of liberalism emanating from the Haitian Revolution, the French revolution and other global events, made familiar through colonial education. The focus in this period was on reform around specific issues such as *sati*, widow remarriage, girls' education, polygamy and child marriage, rather than an overhaul of the larger framework of unequal gender relations (Melkote & Tharu, 1983, Pande, 2018). Although, many of the customs social reformers were fighting against were publicised as evidence of India's barbarism and the need for Britain's 'civilizing mission', the colonial government was reluctant to implement the changes themselves. Change, instead, came through relentless work citing contradictory Indian textual evidence (from the *Vedas*[53], for example), by Indian reformers (Sarkar, 2019).

While scholars generally discuss this period to have been dominated by liberal male reformers (Pande, 2018), some contend this by pointing at the major contributions of women leaders during this time (Anagol, 2008) such as Savitribai Phule, Pandita Ramabai and women's collectives which petitioned the colonial government, for example, to raise the age

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[53] *Vedas* refers to a body of literature comprising four ancient Hindu texts. The term *veda* translates to 'knowledge'. The British administration in India was reluctant to interfere in local customs and traditions and therefore reformists often had to rely on contradictory principles from ancient Indian texts to get reforms passed through the colonial government.

of consent in India (Sarkar, 2019). Key changes that occurred in India, from a legal perspective, include the abolition of Sati (1829), Widow Remarriage Act (1856), age of consent being raised to twelve (1891).

The most important contribution of the reform period was the construction of a secular space within the public sphere for women's activity. Prior to this, women's activity was largely limited to supporting family and religious activities (Pande, 2018). Women's education was promoted by the social reform movement but largely catered to training 'better' mothers and wives (Mazumdar, 1972; Anjum, 2000; Pande, 2018). There were, however, woman leaders who challenged patriarchal and caste norms such as Savitribai Phule, a Dalit woman and reformer who is regarded as the first female teacher in modern Indian history (Wolf, 2011). During this period, women's welfare organizations also started to emerge in various parts of the country, including Pandita Ramabai's Sharda Sadan (a place for refuge and education for destitute women and children) which was started in 1892 in Pune (Khan, 2018).

Period of the popular nationalist struggle (1915-1947)

The early modern period ignited public debate on women's rights in India. This, along with movements for women's suffrage and anti-colonial discourse paved the way for the establishment and growth of formal women's organizations such as the Women's India Association (1917) in Chennai, The National Council of Women in India (1925) in Mumbai and the All India Women's Conference (1927) in Delhi. However, in some respects, the anticolonial movement and women's rights movement appeared to be in conflict. Many believed that the nationalist cause should take precedence to the women's cause and urged women to join men in a united struggle against colonialism, rather than focussing on women's rights. Additionally, contesting discourses of rights-based liberalism and revivalism[54] which a section of nationalists focussed on, sometimes created tensions (Anagol, 2008; Sarkar, 2019).

The entry of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi to Indian political scene happened during this period. Gandhi was able to galvanise the masses across India to join the freedom struggle.

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[54] A significant discourse that existed within the anticolonial movement was revivalism, which involved looking to, and adopting aspects from, India's past glory and strength to overcome colonial rule.

Women were urged to participate in non-violent movements such as the civil disobedience movement, and this legitimized women's presence and participation in the public sphere (Anagol, 2008; Pande, 2018). Although rare, some women also rose to leadership positions, such as Sarojini Naidu, Durga Bai Deshmukh, Lado Rani Zutzi and Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay. The Salt March of 1930 (*Dandi Satyagraha*) resonated across class caste and gender lines, mobilizing thousands of women across the country to break the restrictive salt laws which barred Indians from producing salt even for personal use, and imposed taxes on salt bought from British producers who monopolized the sector. In his book *Discovery of India,* Jawaharlal Nehru remarks that when the male leaders of the freedom struggle were arrested, women took up the mantle of leadership (Nehru, 1946).

Some feminist scholars have critiqued the narratives around womanhood of this period. For instance, Anjum (2000) notes that Gandhi's call for women's participation in the non-violent *satyagraha*[55] was based on women's 'greater ability to suffer pain' (p. 112). Gandhi (1921) had stated, "to me the female sex is not the weaker sex. It is the nobler of the two; for it is even today the embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge." (as cited in Anjum, 2000 p. 113). Similar language was used frequently in anti-colonial literature of the time. Some have therefore argued that although this period marked the formal entry of women into the political sphere, the dominant narrative of the freedom movement reinforced certain essentialized notions on women, mainly emanating from upper-caste Hindu imaginings (Kapur, 2012).

Early post-independence period (1947 to 1974)

The reform movements and women's direct contribution to nation-building in the preceding periods assured that newly independent India had women's suffrage and equality enshrined in the constitution. Therefore, there was no suffrage struggle in India, as there was in other parts of the world. The constitutional recognition of gender equality was a great achievement- one that is absent in other nations, including that of older constitutions such as the United States (Mazumdar, 1994). The Indian constitution was shaped by the drafting committee of the

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[55] Satyagraha refers to the mode of protest Gandhi devised during his time in South Africa, and later when he entered the anti-colonial struggle in India. The literal meaning of Satyagraha is 'the desire for truth' or 'holding on to truth'. Satyagraha involves recognising injustice and adopting non-violent mode of protest against it, to convince the opponents of the injustice. It is based on harmony rather than hatred/division.

constituent assembly, chaired by Dalit scholar and anti-caste leader, B.R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar's perspectives of women's rights challenged the dominant upper-caste conceptualization of womanhood and assured anti-discriminatory and remedial procedures for Dalits. Thenceforth, women's movements and feminists have heavily relied upon the constitution and in particular, the fundamental rights enshrined in Part 3 of the Indian constitution to make the case for change.

Immediately after independence, India was in a battered state, after two centuries of colonial economic exploitation and its geopolitical aftereffects such as partition, and wars. The partition was a period of unprecedented violence and women were often at the receiving end of it. While much has been written about the victimization of women, some feminist scholars have paid attention to women's agency during the period of the partition (see, for instance, Butalia, 1993; Roy, 2014).

Apart from the drafting of an activist constitution, note-worthy progress was made on the legislative front on issues surrounding marriage, divorce and succession, such as the marriage act of 1954 and the dowry prohibition act of 1961. While from a legislative perspective these are important milestones but at the ground level, implementation of many of these legal frameworks was sketchy. As discussed in Chapter one, government policy surrounding women's issues bore patronising language and the material conditions of women remained the same and, in many cases, deteriorated especially in the background of economic crises of the 60s and 70s (Pande, 2018). So while *de jure*, by the constitution, women achieved a position of equality, *de facto*, at the ground level, the conceptualization of womanhood and gendered power relations remained largely unchanged. Kapur (2012) notes "Equality [at a legal level] proved unable to displace this ideological construction of women within the private sphere as dutiful wives and mothers" (p.5).

The 'Towards Equality' Report and its aftermath (1974- 1990)

The 'Towards Equality' report by the Committee on the Status of Indian women (which I have introduced in Chapter one), was a watershed moment in women's history of India. Many regard this period as the beginning of the feminist movement (as opposed to the women's movement) in India (Pande, 2018; Kapur, 2012). The report, described by Tharu and Lalita (1991) as an indictment of the nation's failure in keeping up its constitutional

commitments to women, showed the abysmal progress (for example, in political participation, economic status), and in some cases regression (for example, increasing incidence of dowry and surrounding violence) of the conditions and status of women in India (Pande, 2018). The report notes that many issues which had gained momentum during the freedom struggle had become neglected in the first two decades post-independence (Mazumdar, 1994). The period after the publication of the report saw a revival of the women's movement in India. Women's welfare organizations sprung up in different parts of the country and the government, whose social policy was hitherto mostly focused in the area of general poverty alleviation, took cognisance of the complex issues surrounding women owing to gender (example, son preference, reproductive rights, education and so on). There was a recognition that gender socialization from childhood had a big impact on inequality between men and women and the authors of the study sought an overhaul in the education system, from school level. Women's studies departments and research centres were instituted in universities and think tanks. Veena Mazumdar (1994), one of the main authors of the report wrote:

> After the First National Conference on Women's Studies, in Bombay in 1981, a group of practitioners in India defined women's studies as the pursuit of a more comprehensive, critical and balanced understanding of social reality. Its essential components include (i) women's contribution to the social process; (ii) women's perception of their own lives; (iii) roots and structures of inequality that lead to the marginalisation, invisibility and exclusion of women from the scope, approaches and conceptual frameworks of most intellectual enquiry and social action. Women's studies should, thus, not be narrowly defined as studies about women or information about women but viewed as a critical instrument for social and academic development. (p. 45)

In this era, women's movements demanded better policies in areas of sexual and reproductive health, contraception, dowry prohibition[56], women's income and employment. The authors of the report also critiqued the western development model which was being promoted by global developmental organizations, as it focused on the urban middle class, leaving out a vast majority of women in India. Mazumdar (1994) notes:

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[56] Noting its failure to curb the practice of dowry and the violence emanating from it, women's groups campaigned for amendments to be made the dowry prohibition act of 1961. The parliament passed an amended law in the mid-80s (more discussion on dowry later in this chapter)

During the 1950s and 1960s United States social science put forth a 'modernization' theory as the solution to the ills of the Third World. Here social analysis was premised on a simple dichotomy: between "traditional" and "non-traditional" societies. Traditional societies were rural, stratified, and "backward," while non-traditional societies were urban, dynamic, and progressive. There was a linear path from traditional to non-traditional societies, the catalyst being modernization. The modernizing agents were identified as an educated middle class and improved communication and methods of governance. The benefits of growth, it was claimed, would "filter" down to the poorer classes. This crude analysis, of course, reflected the goals of Western nations at the time of the cold war, in which modernization was seen as an antidote to social revolution. (p.45)

Among the critics of this development-model were feminists who found parallels between this model and 'development' and the colonial governance of the British Raj, both of which were rooted in capitalism which reinforced gendered divisions in labour, culture and the larger society, rather than critically overhauling it. Many scholars rooted in the anti-colonial movement saw this push towards a middle-class urban led development as a new form of colonization. Despite this caution and criticism, India, in the face of an unprecedented economic crisis, at the behest of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, adopted neoliberal structural reform in the 1990s, as part of a deal to receive loans (see discussion in Prologue and Chapter One).

Gender, sexuality, caste and feminism in the period of economic liberalization (1990-present)

The late 80s and 90s witnessed the rise of caste politics in India, for example through the Mandal commission report in 1990 and the rise of the political parties such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (formed in 1984) in the Hindi heartland. The discussion on caste-based oppression and the double oppression of Dalit women destabilized the concept of 'woman' as an already constituted subject to be mobilized for political activism (Menon, 2009). Additionally, the AIDS epidemic had, to some extent de-stigmatized discussions around sexuality in general, and also around non-(hetero)normative sexualities in public debates, scholarly discussions and research. Along with this, the opening up of the Indian broadcasting space to private and foreign media channels gave greater visibility to queer politics. Although, historically there is evidence for non-heterosexual and gender non-binary expression across various periods and communities in India (see Vanita & Kidwai, 2000), the

Victorian legal framework under which India has been operating since the mid-1800s had criminalized queer existence. The greater visibility of non-heteronormative sexualities demanded a rethinking on the part of the women's activism in India, which largely assumed heteronormativity. The queer movement also gave greater visibility to postmodern theorisations of gender, which broadened the scope of the conceptualization of gender and womanhood in India.

A significant discussion during this period has been the issue of reserved seats for women in the parliament. This follows the passing of 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian constitution which stipulated that one-third of local government (panchayats' and municipalities') seats be reserved for women. While some feminists have hailed this a great step forward for women's rights (see for instance Pande, 2018), others, who approached the issue with a more intersectional lens have been sceptical of this measure, pointing out that a 33% reservation for women would likely lead to the replacement of Dalit and lower-caste male leaders with upper-caste female leaders (Menon, 2008). In 2009, the proportion of seats reserved for women in local government bodies was increased from one third to half (Buch, 2009). However, the women's reservation bill for parliament seats remains in limbo.

From a legal perspective, this period saw many wins for the queer-feminist movement. The strengthening of the queer movement in this era led to significant milestones such as the decriminalization of non-penile-vaginal sexual intercourse (thereby decriminalizing homosexuality) in 2018. This was achieved through a long battle, both in public discourse and in the judiciary which culminated in the Supreme Court of India invalidating clauses of section 377 of the Indian Penal Code which criminalized homosexuality. Trans rights, from a legal perspective, also broadened with a landmark judgement from the Supreme Court in 2014, which formally recognized a third gender and upheld the right of citizens to self-identify their gender. The court directed both state and national governments to legislate on it (Bhattacharya, 2019). The Transgender Persons (protection of rights) Bill passed by the parliament in 2019, however, was widely criticised by the trans community for ignoring the experiences and needs of the trans community and reversing much of the progress made through the Supreme Court judgement, such as the right to self-identification of gender. Transgender rights activists have gone as far as calling the bill as a "murder of gender justice" in India (Banu, 2019 as cited in Lalwani, 2019 para. 4).

The rise of neoliberalism was felt in the social services sector. There has been an *NGO-ization*[57] of social services, and a focus on 'empowerment' in terms of entrepreneurship through policies such as providing micro-credits to rural women (Sharma, 2008). Neoliberal policies have had detrimental effects in the educational sector in the last decade. The Narendra Modi government, for example, announced funding cuts for women's studies centres across the country (Pande, 2018). This trend, however, is not restricted to India alone and is visible in many parts of the world, where neoliberal undervaluation of arts and humanities has resulted in cutting support for arts and humanities departments, and a greater focus on STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) subjects along with business and management studies (Shumway, 2017; Watts, 2017; Pande, 2018).

Another area of concern is the declining sex ratio in India. In India, sex ratio is defined as the number of females to 1000 males (Kumar, 2014). Despite the legal, constitutional and policy efforts made since the beginning of the national movement, in recent decades, the sex ratio of India has become increasingly skewed in favour of males. This is particularly visible in the

Sex Ratio (0-6 Years) for India
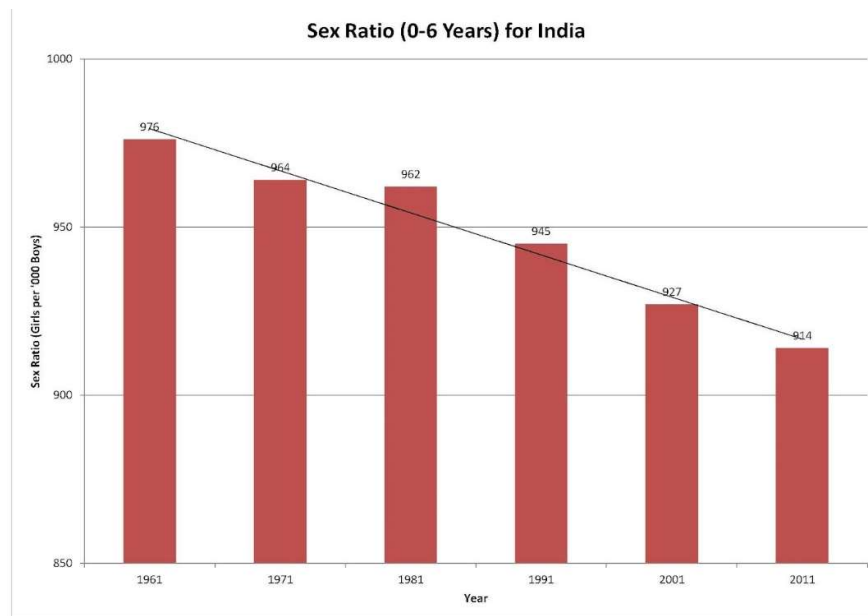
zero to six age range. Apart from social inequality, dowry, patrilineality and crime against women, a major reason for this skewed sex ratio is the widespread availability of technology

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[57] *NGO-ization* refers to the expanding role of NGOs (Non-Government Organizations) and Community Organizations under neoliberalism. NGOs and Community organizations are contracted by the government or funded through charities/businesses to deliver social services that hitherto were the state's responsibility to provide (for example: housing/shelters, skills training, sexual and reproductive health awareness and services, information dissemination).

for sex-selective abortion (Menon, 2009). Although sex-selective abortion is banned in India, the demand for sex-selection especially in the Hindi heartland has led to the growth of clinics that provide this service at accessible rates. The decline in sex ratio, however, is not uniform. Southern states and North Eastern states have more favourable sex ratios. While the adult sex ratio at the national level was 944 females to 1000 males in the most recent census, in the state of Haryana it was 877. The state of Kerala had the highest sex ratio at 1084, and Tamil Nadu, where this research is located recorded a sex ratio of 995 females to 1000 males (Census of India, 2011).

The 'New Indian Woman'

The term 'new Indian woman', distinct from the generic 'third world woman', emerged in the last decade of the 20th century, gaining prominence in the 21st century. Prominent feminist writers and postcolonial scholars have discussed the rapidly changing representations of the Indian woman and how this is linked to societal changes following the period of economic restructuring and resultant cultural shifts towards consumerism and individualism (Sunder Rajan, 1993; Fernandes, 2000; Oza, 2001; 2006; Thapan, 2001; 2004; 2009; Lau, 2006). The image of the 'new Indian woman' is derived primarily from urban middle-class career-women (Sunder Rajan, 1993, Lau, 2006). As discussed above, the positioning of the 'new Indian woman' is ambiguous and hotly contested, often placed somewhere between dichotomous constructs of local vs global, traditional vs modern and past vs present (Fernandes, 2000; Thapan 2004, Oza 2006, Daya, 2009). This image is visibly shaped through media including women's magazines (Oza, 2006; Thapan, 2004), television and advertising (Sunder Rajan, 1993, Oza, 2006).

Media language and imagery construct the 'new' Indian woman as trendy, fashion-conscious and attractive, and simultaneously market savvy, making rational consumer choices that benefit her career and family. Sunder Rajan (1993) argues that mainstream discourses on the 'new Indian woman' individualize women's liberation, thereby distancing it from women's movements. Women's emancipation, in a context of neoliberalism, is achieved through the benevolent forces of capitalism (becoming formal members of the economy), rather than through feminist thought and praxis. At the same time, these discourses glamourize women's

domestic role as the primary caretakers and trivialize 'harmful' social practices such as dowry (see Sunder Rajan, 1993, p.130).

Lau (2006) suggests that the educated, urban and middle class 'new Indian woman' occupies a "double-edged positionality, having to negotiate societal roles and places, within and without the family and home" (p. 159). Being part of the formal economy and family involves constant negotiation and often, compromise. Lau contends that the glamourized version of 'liberation' which comes as part of the new Indian women is increasingly being recognized for its double burdening of women, having to be involved in both income generation and household labour (Lau, 2006). Krishnan (2014) further notes that an important theme in the conceptualization of the 'new Indian woman' is middle-class respectability.

Body Politics

> Bodies are powerful symbols and sources of social power and privilege on one hand and subordination and oppression on the other. (Waylen, Celis, Kantola, & Weldon, 2013, p.1)

Body politics refers to the scholarly and activist work that engages with the body as a central site of social and political articulation, policy and law. From a post-enlightenment European liberal perspective, all bodies are, in theory, considered equal, so the question of how bodies are political is often not obvious from within the dominant episteme. However, bodies are not biological givens without value. The meanings (and discourses) surrounding particular bodies become sources of oppression and/or power for those embodied within them (Harcourt, 2016). Bodies shape social experience (Grosz, 1994). Not all bodies have been considered acceptable in positions of power (for example, thinking of slavery, apartheid and caste segregation). Not all bodies have been understood as being aesthetically pleasing or acceptable to be represented in visual media (for example, the dominance of people with lighter skin in the media). Certain bodies are controlled through policy, law and social stigma (debates around abortion, women's 'modesty', marital rape). Certain bodies are more susceptible to state violence (for example, police brutality against African Americans, indigenous protestors).

Body politics has been an area of increased interest in the last three decades, especially thinking about racialized, sexualized and othered bodies (Littlewood, 2004). The framework

of body politics is utilized by feminists looking at sexual harassment, rape, abortion, beauty ideals and so on. Questions of the embodied experiences of women have been taken up by scholars in various parts of the world, for example, Meenakshi Thapan (2009) investigated embodiment, womanhood and identity in neoliberal India. Wendy Harcourt (2013) looks at the implications of body politics in the international development sector. Navarro-Tejero (2019) undertakes an analysis of literature around the Indo-Pak partition from the framework of body politics, in relation to the portrayal of atrocities against women within such literature.

Within the Indian context, discussions about public safety for women, rape sexuality, women's access to public spaces come under the framework of body politics. Many of the public movements discussed over the past two decades, such as the Indian chapter of the *SlutWalk*, the *Pink Chaddi* [58]campaign, the protests that erupted after the Delhi gang rape, incidents of moral policing and the Kiss of Love campaign, the 'Break the Curfew' movement of women in hostels in India- are all expressions of body politics.

The *SlutWalk*, the *Pink Chaddi* campaign, the Break the Curfew movement and the *Nirbhaya* movement- had a strong emphasis on women's freedom of movement and expression (Kapur, 2012). Although this is a right all citizens are constitutionally eligible to exercise, women are effectively denied it. *The Kiss of Love* movement was around sexual agency, and so was the movement against section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (which criminalized homosexuality). In this thesis, the discussions on beauty, safety and sexuality fall under the ambit of body politics.

Gender in migration scholarship

Migration, like many other social phenomena, is gendered. Yet historically, studies on migration have been androcentric. The case of migration studies in India is no different. Meenakshi Thapan (2006), in her introduction to a series on gender and migration in Asia points out that "most studies on migration do not give due importance to women migrants as they are not conceived as equal actors worthy of being accounted for" (p. 9). She argues that acknowledging the differential experiences of women migrants is a crucial step in understanding the complexity of migration. Along similar lines, Bhatt (2009) states that in

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[58] The Pink Chaddi campaign was initiated by a group of women in response to the Mangalore Pub attack by Sri Ram Sene. It involved women sending pink panties to the offices of the leader of the Hindu Right Wing organization. A discussion on this has been presented in Chapter one.

migration literature, "issues pertaining to gender were overlooked, because migration tended to be viewed as chiefly a male movement, with women either residual in the process, or dependent followers" (p.87). Bhatt (2009) argues that women's experiences of migration need to be given more attention as they are starkly different from those of men. According to the International Organisation for Migration (n.d.), women, especially rural women face more challenges than other groups both in the source region[59] and at their destination. Factors in the source region such as intra-household gender relations and hierarchies have limiting effects on women's migration. Women may lack resources to migrate even from economically well-off rural families, as in many communities they may have limited access to finances, and other economic resources such as land and property. Additionally, women are often not the sole decision-makers even for their migration. Family involvement in the case of women's migration can be much higher than with male migration. Furthermore, class, education, economic background, religion and caste influence a woman's ability to migrate (International Organisation for Migration (IOM), 2010). While many male migrants suffer discrimination, the experiences of female migrants, Gaetano and Jack (2004) argue, can be much worse, given rampant gender bias, sexual abuse and exploitation. According to Rita Afsar (2011) gender is the most important form of social differentiation that affects migration. She proposes that an intersectional approach be used in the study of migration, as women migrants are often at the overlapping margins of various oppressive social constructs such as gender, class, race and caste among others (Afsar, 2011)

While discussions on the challenges of internal migrant women are important, the resultant positive outcomes also need to be accounted for. Hugo (2000, p.299) argues that migration for employment itself, regardless of which sector they are employed in, can be an "empowering experience" for women since they move away from situations where they were under traditional patriarchal authority to situations in which they can exercise greater 'autonomy' over their own lives. This is reiterated by Sen (2001, p.100), who points out how a resultant enhancement of women's agency can contribute substantially to the lives of all people –men as well as women, children as well as adults. Gaetano and Jacka (2004) further show how women migrants that return to the countryside act as agents of change challenging patriarchal culture in rural China, by bettering their standing in the family and society as contributors to the family income.

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[59] Source region here refers to the place of origin or native place of migrants.

The recognition of gender as an important aspect in migration studies began in the 1970s and 1980s, with feminist and postmodernist contributions in the social sciences (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003, Boyd et al, 2003). In her seminal work "Gender and Immigration" (2003), Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo analyses academic work on women in the context of migration. She identifies three stages in the process of incorporating gender in migration studies. The first stage (1970s and early 1980s) is termed as the one where the main strategy, as in many other disciplines of that period, was to "add women and stir". Androcentrism in the literature was compensated by adding a chapter or two about women, or adding a non-male category in statistics. While this was useful in quantitative studies, such as those on wages of migrants, it was proven inadequate in qualitative work. Another trend within this phase was to have women-only studies which, Hondagneu-Sotelo argues, often led to marginalized sub-fields within migration literature that was easy to overlook.

The second stage (1980s and 1990s) saw a transition from thinking of women merely as a separate group to framing gender as a social construct. The advent of theorizing on intersectionality shaped the latter part of this stage. One of the major fallouts of this stage, according to Hondagneu-Sotelo, was that analyses of gender were largely limited to family and immediate community members. This failed to acknowledge the gendered nature of macro-structures, like the job market, which reinforce patriarchal gender norms by segregating the labour force into separate niches in accordance with prevailing gender expectations, for example, favouring women for care-giving roles like nursing, and domestic help. Hondagneu-Sotelo (2003) identifies a third stage starting from the turn of the new millenium. In this stage, gender is theorized within a wider framework - considering macro, meso and micro level influences on gender such as labour market, legislation, religion, ethnicity, sexuality and so on.

Many feminist scholars of migration conceptualize migration not only as a gendered process, but also one that influences gender or is gendering. The understanding of migration as a process that is not only influenced by gender constructions in the source and destination regions, but also one that may lead to reimagining gender, is at the core of this project. The importance of this understanding is highlighted by many scholars (Szczepaniková, 2006; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003; Agrawal, 2006).

From the next section, I present a discussion on key literatures in the areas of my analytical chapters (Chapters five till eight). I have provided important insights and debates from various scholarly works in the topic area. There literatures cover published work from multiple disciplines including anthropology, geography, sociology, social work and history. I have covered work from a range of methods and theoretical frameworks, to acknowledge the body of work in the respective areas. I begin with a discussion on street harassment.

'Street harassment' and safety in the city

The prevalence of street harassment carried out by men against women is a universal phenomenon across patriarchal societies (Bowman, 1993; Laniya, 2005; Logan, 2015; Vera-Gray, 2016; Biglarbegi, 2018). Street harassment became a key topic of inquiry for scholars in the 1980s, when it was identified as part of the larger grid of violence against women (see Hanmer & Saunders, 1984). Yet, despite this early recognition, the extent of research in this area remains limited (Peoples, 2011; Logan, 2015; Natarajan, 2016; Vera-Gray, 2016). Instead, there has been a greater focus on other forms of sexual violence, such as intimate partner violence and workplace sexual harassment (Logan, 2015). Elsewhere in the literature, 'terminological difficulties' or terminological ambiguity is identified as one of the main reasons for this academic oversight (Vera-Gray, 2016, p.9). Within the Indian context, the lack of terminological clarity is evident in the use of multiple terms, such as the legal term 'eve teasing' (Natarajan, 2016), public sexual harassment (Talboys et al, 2017), street harassment (Barucha and Khatri, 2018) and so on. Other reasons for the oversight include the normalization (Bowman, 1993) and trivialization (Turkheimer, 1997) of street harassment, which renders it an expected part of daily life, and therefore invisible. However, since the Delhi gang rape of 2012, there has been an increased interest both in academic and public spheres on the topic of street harassment in India

In this thesis, I have chosen to use the term 'street harassment' to indicate various forms of intrusions women face while out and about in the public spaces of Chennai for two reasons. Firstly, it is the most common term used in literature on the topic from around the world (Vera-Gray, 2016), and therefore this study can be located more easily as part of a more identifiable body of literature. Secondly, the more prominent legal term within Indian formal discourse, 'eve teasing', has been problematized by scholars and activists. The term 'eve

teasing', according to Gangoli (2007) has its roots in the biblical character Eve, who is constructed as a temptress of Adam, leading him on to the path of sin. This term, therefore, indicts women as responsible for the harassment committed against them. Additionally, the term 'tease' erodes the seriousness of the issue, trivializing and normalizing it (Gangoli, 2007; Rajendran, 2016).

Conceptualizing street harassment: Discussions on space and gender

The conceptualization of space by human geographers provides a framework to deepen the understanding of street harassment. Scholars such as Paul (2011), Spain (2014) and Beebeejaun (2017) have investigated the ways that women's presence in public spaces often invokes responses and reactions that are quite different to those received by men, for example, unsolicited leering, commenting[60], and touching. The main argument put forward by these feminist geographers is that in the production of 'public space', women are often left out. While Spain's (2014) work has focused on the historical exclusion and regulation of women in the city spaces of the United States, Paul (2011) and Beebeejaun (2017) indicate that this is also the case in the cities of Kolkata (India) and London (U.K.) respectively.

There is also literature that focuses on the safety and comfort of women in Indian cities (see Talboys et al, 2017; Kapur, 2014; Sur, 2014; Vishwanath & Mehrotra, 2007; Phadke, 2005). Phadke (2005), for example, discusses how women in Mumbai negotiate the risk of street harassment by devising strategies "to produce safety for themselves" (p.43). These strategies varied according to the woman's social location defined by class, caste, religion, neighbourhood and so on. Women with private vehicles, for instance, had different strategies to those that did not. While Phadke (2005) observed that urban spaces, like Mumbai, provided many women with a "nuanced but nonetheless tangible sense of freedom and space" (p.43), the responsibility for the "production of safety" (p.41) largely rested on the shoulders of women themselves. Negotiating risk by devising everyday strategies is also common in other parts of India. Women users of buses in Kolkata tried to limit their use of space by shrinking themselves as much as possible to avoid groping hands (Sur, 2014). In Delhi, Vishwanath and Mehrotra (2007) found that women saw themselves as less legitimate users

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[60] I use the term 'commenting' here to indicate the unsolicited comments women garner when they are present in public spaces like streets. In some literature, it is termed as 'street remarks' and often 'cat-calling'.

of public space than men, as they often required justification for being in public spaces. Citing Andrew's (2000) findings, they argued that women's behaviours such as moving out of men's way, taking up less space and averting one's gaze symbolize the way that men have a greater claim to public space than women (Vishwanath and Mehrotra, 2007). Their study found that women avoided spaces traditionally considered masculine, such as roadside *dhabas*[61], liquor shops, street corners and taxi stands. Women who did enter such spaces often did so accompanied by men. They also noted how time was an important factor in women's access to public spaces. Spaces like Delhi parks that are considered safe for women and children during the day, became dangerous for them during the night (Vishwanath & Mehrotra, 2007). Kapur (2014) observed that "the sheer exhaustion and frustration that women […] have felt in response to being ogled, pawed and groped from the moment they step into the public space" (p.9) was reflected in two major women-led protests that occurred in this decade: the slut walks[62] organized in major Indian cities and the nation-wide movement that followed the 2012 Delhi gang rape.

Central to many of these scholarly works is Lefebvre's (1991) theorisation of the social production of space. Following Lefebvre, many contemporary human geographers (see Purcell, 2002; Fenster, 2005; Paul, 2011; Beebeejaun, 2016) frame space as a dynamic entity whose production is shaped by power relations such as gender, class and in India's case, caste, among others. This is compatible with a poststructuralist perspective, which views social relations, behaviours and the consequent organization of space constituted in language and discourse. In her paper mapping the gendered fear of crime and safety in Kolkata, India, Tanushree Paul states that, "societal practices of domination and subordination are governed by relations of power and manifest discernibly in spatial structures and forms" (2011, p.413). Thus, normalized power relations shape the conceptualization of space and regulate who can and cannot claim legitimate access to it (Vishwanath & Mehrotra, 2007). Furthermore, the meaning of space changes with time, place, gender and culture. Lefebvrian scholars such as Purcell (2002) and Beebeejaun (2017) argue that the production of public space has historically failed to include certain groups, such as women. In other words, the

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[61] Dhabas are small eateries that usually serve popular local food. Usually they are located on the side of popular roads or busy intersections.
[62] In solidarity with the Toronto slut walk in 2011, slut walks were organized in major Indian cities. See Kapur (2012, p.1).

conceptualization of 'the public' historically did not account for women's presence and needs in most societies.

Along similar lines, Purcell (2002) discusses how marginalized groups have had to (and continue to) fight for their right to public spaces. Women's movements, among others, raise the issue of being excluded from the hetero-patriarchal and capitalist construction of public space. Beebeejaun (2013) suggests that the exclusion of women from public spaces is related to the patriarchal construction of morality. Groups that are excluded, such as women, are often considered as an inherent threat to public morality, or as having the potential to be so. In her historical examination of American cities, Spain (2014) highlights how women, at the turn of the nineteenth century, were not expected to appear in public unaccompanied, as they ran the risk of being mistaken as prostitutes or sexually available, and seeking to tempt 'honourable', and 'decent men', thereby disrupting public morality. Kapur (2014) suggests that the association between women's sexuality and public morality lingers in India as a result of the colonial experience, as well as Indian women's "chastity, purity and self-sacrifice" (p.10) being exalted as important values during the anti-colonial movement. Women's entry into cities has been facilitated by the creation of segregated spaces such as 'Ladies' compartments' in trains, special reserved seats in buses and residential women's hostels. These segregated spaces provide a sense of relative safety and belonging for women within them and have been implemented in cities more as an afterthought through policy and legislation, often demanded by women's movements. However, they do not function as a solution to the ubiquitous problem of street harassment.

Intersectional insights on street harassment

Scholars highlight the importance of paying attention to intersecting marginalities in understanding street harassment. For instance, Phadke (2005) discusses how women's experiences of street harassment, and the strategies employed to minimize them, varied depending on their social location. Upper class and upper middle-class women in Mumbai are able to avoid street harassment by moving in private vehicles and socializing in more expensive spaces, where private security systems, guards and bouncers are in place., Sur (2014) conducted a study of 50 women in Kolkata, with similar findings. She found that 55 percent of her participants who used public transportation avoided wearing western clothes to avoid harassment. Such concerns about dressing were absent among those with access to

private transportation. Similarly, Vera-Gray (2016) notes the overlapping of race and gender, as a consequence of which Black women in USA have a different experience of street harassment compared to their White counterparts.

The practice of dowry in India

In recent decades dowry has become a commonplace practice across India, with the amounts exchanged witnessing significant inflation (Anderson, 2003; Srinivasan, 2005; Banerjee, 2013). Significantly, studies show that dowry is practiced more visibly among the middle and upper classes (Borah, 2008; Munshi, 2017). This is despite the unanimous rejection of dowry by all formal institutions in the nation such as the executive, the parliament, law and order institutions, the judiciary, the media and the academy. The trend connecting higher education levels with higher dowries has been discussed by many scholars, including most recently, the statistician Soumyanetra Munshi (2017). He frames the increased value of dowry transactions corresponding to increased level of education among men as a conundrum (Munshi, 2017, p.35). The juxtaposition of formal discourses that portray dowry in terms of a social evil, and its unabated celebration in upper echelons of society does appear to be a conundrum to many activists and scholars.

What is Dowry?

From an economic point of view, dowry can be defined as a transfer of money or property or other valuable gifts from a woman's natal family to the woman, her husband or his family that happens in association with marriage (Agarwal, 1994). However, Srinivasan (2005) highlights the importance of understanding the significance of dowry beyond its economic dimensions. Activists, journalists, feminists, politicians and other prominent stakeholders in the public sphere view dowry as a social evil (Shenk, 2007; Banerjee, 2014). This is similar to the ethnocentric view of cultural practices in British colonies where dowry, for example, was described as a backward system practised by the Hindus in the subcontinent (Oldenburg, 2002). Many Marxists view dowry as a regressive economic system and many feminists view it as a manifestation of patriarchal gender discrimination (Oldenburg, 2002). Srinivasan (2005) links dowry to the concept of Brahmanical patriarchy (see Chakravarti, 1993) in which control of women's sexuality is central to the maintenance of the caste system and Brahmin supremacy. Under such a system, Srinivasan (2005) states that, "a desirable dowry

is the price parents pay to ensure that daughters are married before they become a disgrace to the family" (p.596).

The disparate ways of understanding dowry are summarized into two categories by Arunachalam & Logan (2016). Firstly, the view of dowry as a 'premortem bequest'- a share of the family property given to a daughter at the time of marriage. Given that marriage in India is usually patrilocal[63], the wedding ceremony marks the departure of the daughter from the natal to the conjugal family. This is not merely a geographic transfer. As with traditional marital rituals in many patrilineal societies, in most communities in India, a woman, once married, *de facto* and *de jure*[64] becomes part of her husband's family. It also follows that culturally, in upper-caste Hindu families, daughters could not claim an equal share of parental property, which was passed on to sons[65]. Therefore, dowry can be viewed as a functional mechanism by which a daughter's share of her natal family's wealth is transferred. This wealth was directed to ensure the wellbeing of the daughter and her future children in the conjugal family, as well as to give her status and respect (Shenk, 2007). The second, is framing dowry as a price paid for the groom or 'groom-price'. This is based on the pattern linking the higher status (social, economic, cultural) of the groom with higher amounts of dowry (Arunachalam & Logan, 2016). The 'better'[66] the groom a family seeks, the higher the price they would need to pay. However, whether dowry is understood as a pre-marital bequest or a groom-price, the central objective seems to be the same - ensuring the wellbeing of daughters.

Goody (1973) and Srinivasan (2005) reject the view that dowry is a 'groom-price', often understood as the opposite of 'bride-price'. They argue that, if dowry were to be defined as a groom price, there should be a bidirectional flow, similar to bride price, where the 'price' (money, gifts) and bride go in opposite directions. In dowry, however, both the 'price' as well as the bride go in the direction of the groom or the groom's family, with the bride's family effectively at loss - both materially and with respect to kinship. Tambiah (1973) defines dowry in relation to the Sanskrit term *Sthreedhan* from the *Dharmasastras*[67] which relates to

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[63] Where a woman moves to her husband's family upon marriage.
[64] Both formally, under law, and well as culturally, the husband, and by extension, his family, become more significant kin for a woman.
[65] The Hindu succession act of 1956, formally recognized daughters as equal share-holders of parental property
[66] 'Better' is used to signify higher status- social or economic or both.
[67] Ancient Hindu text, from about 1000 BC, that describes the codes for living-laws and responsibilities for families, kings etc.

the concept of women's wealth, given as gifts at the time of marriage by kin and community members. He, therefore, terms dowry as money and items of value over which women had complete dominion and independent ownership (Tambiah, 1973).

However, in 1989, he presented a revision to his ideas. According to a critique by Bell (2008), Tambiah "admitted", on the basis of more recent ethnographic work, that women had a limited amount of control over their dowries, which were usually seized by their fathers-in-law. Even gifts such as sarees were often redirected towards the husband's sisters (Tambiah, 1989 as cited in Bell, 2008). Oldenburg (2002) also complicates simplistic approaches to defining dowry, arguing that it needs to be viewed as a dynamic entity located somewhere between the "progressive" concept of *Sthreedhan* and the opposite extreme: a social evil that prompts gendered violence (p.12).

An historical perspective on dowry in India: Complicating the 'social evil' narrative

Munshi (2017) notes that according to the Rig Veda[68] gender relations were more egalitarian in the early Vedic period[69], with both men and women having the choice to marry a person of their liking. There are no records of dowry being practiced during that time. The earliest reference to dowry, in the form of gifts to the bride, is from about the 8th century B.C. Munshi (2017) mentions the possible link between the advent of arranged marriages and the beginnings of the practice of dowry.

In the discussion about the origins of dowry, the contribution by Veena Talwar Oldenburg is significant. Oldenburg (2002) argues that a majority of the discourse surrounding dowry in India lacks a historical perspective. Instead, most scholarly and activist work focuses on the current manifestations of the practice and how it is linked to various practices of gendered violence such as female foeticide, infanticide, domestic violence and dowry death. She suggests that in the absence of a critical historical view, these studies in effect take for granted the imperial narrative on dowry. British colonial records identify dowry as a social evil that had its roots in the patriarchal culture of upper-caste Hindus in Northern India. They identified it as the prime cause for female infanticide that was happening in Punjab.

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[68] Oldest Hindu text, written in the early vedic age. Hymns from the Rigveda are still chanted in rituals and ceremonies.
[69] Early vedic period spans from around 1500 B.C. to 1100 B.C.

Oldenburg challenges this narrative citing that infanticide was not limited to the communities that practiced dowry. There were, for example, incidences of female infanticide in communities that practiced bride price. The roots of daughter aversion lay elsewhere, she argues, and perhaps could be connected to historical factors such as frequent wars. Dowry, Oldenburg (2002) claims, was never a 'demand', as it is often seen today. Rather, it constituted voluntary gifts from not only the bride's immediate family but also extended kin as well as friends and community members. The dowry gifts were not purchased at the time of the wedding, rather, accumulated over time, and it was a reciprocal communitarian practice. Shenk (2007) also argues that dowry in North India was linked to the virilocality of marriage in those contexts - where the bride moved to a different village, farther away from her conjugal village than was normal in other parts of India[70], where the practice of dowry did not exist. Dowry, therefore, was a functional transaction to ensure the wellbeing of the daughter who was leaving, and whom the natal family members would no longer be seeing. In nineteenth century Punjab, women had at least partial control over the dowry, and it acted as a safety net for the woman and her children in case of adversity. Narayan (1993), for example, notes that before modernization and commercialization, dowry was limited to items functional to the bride such as cooking vessels, clothes and jewellery which the bride had relative control over. Oldenburg (2002) goes as far as saying that "dowry is one of the few ingenious, women-centric institutions in an overwhelmingly patriarchal society" (p.14).

Oldenburg (2002) also investigates the influence of imperial administration and land laws on the practice of dowry. Her research suggests that while the practice of dowry was highlighted as a social evil, providing moral justification for the British East India Company's 'civilizing mission' in the subcontinent, the systems introduced to ameliorate these 'evils' might have caused an aggravation of gendered violence. The introduction of land revenues led to chronic indebtedness among the farmers of Punjab and the commercialization of land as a transferable property had various ramifications. For example, it masculinized the economy as only men were entitled to property, thus formalizing the gender divide. Formal masculinization of the economy led to a situation where women were officially removed from property rights, which otherwise belonged collectively to the patrilineal family shared by all members of the family (including wives).

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[70] Such as the southern regions, where alliances within extended kin was common.

The perspective of dowry as a pro-woman tradition was discussed earlier by Kishwar (1989), and more recently by Shenk (2007). Some scholars, including Srinivasan (2005) and Bell (2008) are critical of this perspective. They argue that dowry historically was a systemic strategy to exclude daughters from any claim to the most valuable asset of their natal family- arable land, thereby preserving the wealth and status of the patriarchal and patrilineal family system. However, it is possible to argue that in comparison with other societies where patrilineality was the norm, the tradition of dowry, at least in the form observed in pre- colonial times, was a useful support and security for daughters who otherwise effectively inherited nothing from their natal wealth.

The persistence of dowry in India

While the practice of dowry gradually vanished in other societies upon modernization, it persists in India. In the societies where dowry declined upon modernization, Anderson (2003) notes that feudal stratification got dismantled with industrialization and the spread of wealth across the population occurred. This was the case in the Sung dynasty in China as well as in Europe. In India, however, social status and economic strength remain separate as a result of the caste-based stratification (as opposed to wealth based stratification). Even though caste and class have more or less overlapped throughout history, top castes such as *Brahmins*, have often been regarded as socially higher than *Kshatriyas* as well as other prosperous upper and middle castes. This fundamental difference is an indication as to why dowry persists in the subcontinent. Hypergamy, therefore, remains one of the effective ways for social mobility, and hypergamous alliances usually involve the exchange of dowry. While hypergamy is desirable, the opposite, hypogamy[71] is considered a taboo. Therefore, brides' families strive to ensure that the groom is at the minimum of the same status and caste. Owing to the complex stratification of Indian society, eligible males are highly in demand, creating opportunity and justification for the practice of dowry. In line with these arguments, Munshi (2017) suggests that the main cause for the entrenchment of dowry is the continued acceptance of arranged marriage as the proper and legitimate way of matrimony in most of India. When arranged marriage is the norm, there is relatively less certainty regarding the nature of the groom, his family, compatibility and so on. In such a scenario, other factors which are more visible, such as family status and level of education are given careful

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[71] Hypogamy refers to marrying someone of lower social status/economic status or both.

consideration. Munshi (2017) argues that it is these considerations within the arranged marriage system that perpetuate the practice of dowry and which catalysed its evolution into a demand-based ritual rather than a voluntary one.

Banerjee (2013) supports Anderson's (2003) position regarding dowry as a method to gain social status and mobility. She cites work by scholars including Shenk (2007) who also point out how the opposition towards dowry, despite the legal and political frameworks, remains sporadic and limited to a minority of middle and upper-class feminist circles in urban areas. The implementation of the Dowry (Prohibition) act, 1961 remains highly ineffective as neither party usually reports the demand and receipt of dowry to the authorities. One reason for this could be related to the criminalization of both demanding and giving of dowry in the original Act of 1961. Reporting dowry blackmail and demands, therefore, became difficult in the post-wedding phase, as the bride's family would also face incrimination (Shenk, 2007). Another main reason for the persistence of dowry is the rise of consumerist culture in India in the wake of liberalization-privatization-globalization. Banerjee (2014) highlights the cyclical nature of giving and receiving dowry which effectively feeds into the continuation of the system. For instance, families that have sons and daughters expect the sons to 'bring' dowry to the family, which will compensate for the loss they incur through their own daughters' marriages.

Marriage, love and premarital sex in contemporary India

Contrary to Western classical theorizations of modernity that predicted an inevitable disintegration of arranged marriage with industrialization (see Goode, 1963; Inkeles & Smith, 1974), arranged marriage is still practiced widely in contemporary India (Netting, 2010, Bowman & Dollahite, 2013). While marriages arranged by families are dominant across the country, the practice is not monolithic. It varies geographically, culturally and temporally. For instance, in arranged marriages, even where most of the rituals and practices remain unchanged, there is an increased acceptance for the bride and groom's personal compatibility (Fuller and Narasimhan, 2008; Dommaraju, 2016). Studies from across India also suggest a rise in the number of 'love marriages', wherein, the bride and groom find each other through romantic courtship (Baas, 2009; Allendorf, 2013; Chowdhry, 2007; Netting 2010). However, even in such cases, parental approval and involvement in the process of getting married are

invariably sought (Bass, 2009; Bowman & Dollahite, 2013; Dommaraju, 2016), except in cases where it the couple are certain that they will not receive parental support. In such circumstances, couples are likely to break up, or in rare occasions elope (Lukose, 2009).

Arranged marriage vs love marriage

In this section, I consider some of the salient features of, and distinctions between arranged marriage and love marriage from the literature. A dichotomous framing of arranged marriage and love marriage, as is seen in popular narratives does not provide a nuanced understanding of how marriage is practiced in India. According to Mody (2008), one of the central aspects of arranged marriage is the operation of 'social choice' (p.226), whereby, the bride/groom is selected through a process that incorporates views of members of the family and community. Marriage, in such cases, represents a social coming together of two groups of people who have (at least in theory) collectively decided to do so. Such unions instil a sense of participation in the larger community, as well as a sense of connection to the newly formed couple which extends to future generations born through them. Arranged marriage is thus seen to assure the continued acceptance and support from both families and the larger community. Here, social compatibility is an important determinant. In such unions, factors such as religion and caste are usually considered. Along with religion and caste, employment, educational qualifications and physical attributes such as skin tone are also considered (see Chapter six). As evidenced by recent studies, the bride and groom are increasingly involved in this process of making the choice (Fuller & Narasimham, 2008) and often can hold the veto especially in urban middle-class families (Sharangpani, 2010).

Following the argument that arranged marriage represents a 'social choice', Mody (2008) conceptualizes love marriage as the operation of 'individual choice' (p.226). The individuals who decide to marry do so without the mediation of their families. However, most couples who fall in love and wish to marry do seek approval of their families, often following the same rituals involved in arranged marriages in the process. Mody (2008) contends that love marriage presents a disruption to the 'motor of kinship in India' by two mechanisms: through the operation of 'autonomous choice' and disruption of caste (p.226). The framing of 'autonomous choice' in western framings of love has been problematized in deconstructive analyses of marriage in the West, as that there is a recognition of the limitations of 'free' or 'autonomous' choice, as choices are constructed/constrained by social contexts (Braun,

2009). Similarly, the problematization of 'choice' as exclusive to 'love marriage' in India is also visible in the works of Pande (2015) and Sharangpani (2010), who present the perspective of young women who prefer arranged marriages and challenge the notion of 'choice' in love. Arranged marriage operates within a framework where generally many variables are controlled, making it possible to exercise more 'choice'. Furthermore, love marriage need not necessarily mean the disruption of caste. In many cases, as observed in the West, love happens between people who belong to the same or similar socio-economic locations.

This advantage of arranged marriage is demonstrated in the preference of young people for arranged marriages over love marriages. A 2013 survey conducted among 1000 young people (between the ages of 18 and 35 years) in Indian cities found that 74% preferred arranged marriage (Dholakia, 2015; "Indians swear by arranged marriage", 2013). There is also a rise of online matchmaking services provided by portals such as *BharatMatrimony.com* and *Shaadi.com*. Increasingly grooms and brides are starting profiles on these platforms for themselves, thereby becoming the primary agents within arranged marriage systems. These online matchmaking portals allow users to indicate their preferences- including religion, caste, age, employment, educational background, as well as physical preferences such as skin colour, height, and weight. Online matchmaking portals encourage users to indicate which of the preferences are non-negotiable, and which ones among them are negotiable and use algorithms to make matches from among their members. Prospective brides and grooms, therefore, are able to exercise 'control' and attempt to find a match from within a pool of candidates who possess the qualities they desire. This, in contrast with love marriage, presents more certainty and conscious control.

'Fairness' and beauty

The beauty ideals in contemporary India are dominated by a preference for light or 'fair' skin. Scholars argue that this obsession with fair skin as the foundational beauty ideal intersects with caste, class, gender, and colonization (Hussein, 2010; Nadeem, 2014; Parameswaran & Cordoza, 2009; Runkle, 2004). The debates around its origin, therefore, are complex and inconclusive. Some literature points to the caste system as the root cause of this colour preference in the sub-continent (Shevde, 2008). This argument, however, has been complicated by others who identify the significance of race and colonial discourses on

colourism. For example, Srinivas (1998) and Nadeem (2014) argue that the internal differences of the subcontinent, such as religion and caste, were more ambiguous until the waves of invasions from outside in and thereafter, with the advent of European colonization with its hierarchy of race and civilization. The diverse and ambiguous divisions in India, Nadeem (2014) argues, began to be more defined and solidified with the various powers that ruled over significant parts of India – from Dutch, the Portuguese, the Mughals, the French, and – most significantly – the British. Hussein (2010) emphasises these foreign influences, rejecting the usage of the term 'colourism' in favour of 'intra-group racism.' This, she argues, is to specifically acknowledge the significance of the colonial concept of race on present-day discrimination in the sub-continent. Calling it 'colourism' diminishes the impact the construction of race has on the phenomenon (Husain, 2010).

However, the term 'intra-group racism' does not capture the full story of skin colour preference in India. While the influence of colonization and the postcolonial reassertion of the West (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997) exerts significant influence on Indian people, internal racial differences do not occur prominently[72] in public discourses. Therefore, while I would like to include the significant argument focusing on the racist-colonial project raised by Hussein (2010), I do not use the term 'intra-group racism' in this thesis. Instead, I suggest that the ambit of the term 'colourism' be expanded to include the effects of racial discourses. 'Colourism' is a more flexible term that can be understood to include preference for light skin originating from the constructions of caste and race.

The preference for light skin has been identified as part of a larger phenomenon termed 'caucasianization' of beauty which involves the 'internationalization' of beauty standards in India (Picton, 2013). By this Picton (2013) refers to the power and influence of western aesthetics in shaping the 'gold standard' of international fashion and beauty. Similar findings were made in earlier works by scholars such as Runkle (2004) and Oza (2006) who investigated beauty standards promoted by 'Femina,' a popular women's magazine that runs the 'Miss India' contest. Oza (2006) quoted organisers of the pageant, who mentioned that

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[72] Recently, a politician of the Bharatiya Janata Party in a television debate surrounding racist attacks against Nigerian youth near Delhi suggested that Indians could not be considered racist because of the inclusion of southern India in the nation. This remark stirred a very unusual debate on race in India, with some activists in south India pointing out how British colonizers considered all Indians as Black, with references to Indians as 'niggers' common in British accounts. See 'We accept South Indians' (2017) for the statement made by the politician.

they were no longer looking for a 'Miss India', but for a 'Miss World' – an 'international' beauty. This was someone who could represent India and be accepted on the world stage as a beauty queen. These studies, notably, were undertaken after the remarkable success of the Miss India contestants on the world stage in the 1990s and early 2000s, with back-to-back victories at the Miss World and Miss Universe competitions[73]. Runkle's (2004) ethnographic study of the grooming process for Miss India also reveals how the contestants had to undergo elaborate dermatological treatments to make their skin lighter. Thapan (2006) relates this dominance of Western standards in the fashion and beauty industry to the idea of 'recolonization' which I have discussed earlier in this chapter.

Another important aspect surrounding the preference for light skin is the construction of 'purity and pollution'. The dichotomous construction of 'purity and pollution' is at the core of both racial and caste hierarchies. Picton (2013) demonstrated this through his study of advertisements during colonial times. The popular campaign for the soap brand 'Pears' depicted a white child washing a black child with the product, turning him white in the process and muddying the water that was used to wash him. This advertisement associates 'purity' with White bodies, and the 'White man's burden' of 'cleansing' the 'impure' dark-skinned peoples of the world (Picton, 2013). Light skin or whiteness, according to this narrative, stands for purity and goodness. Blackness, in contrast, represents the polar opposite – portrayed as impure, both in the physical sense and with respect to (a lack of) culture. Fanon (1952) noted that colonisation and its ensuing violence – both physical and structural – resulted in a situation where subject populations felt inferior in their own skin. He termed this colonial strategy the 'epidermal schema' (Fanon, 1952, p. 112), which results in non-White peoples being in conflict with their own skin, competing among each other to gain acceptance in a West-dominated world.

The discourses of purity and pollution that appear in relation with caste inform practices such as untouchability. The 'upper-castes' are generally associated with lighter skin, whereas the Dalits or 'lower' castes are generally associated with darker skin. Occupational division and

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[73] From the beginning of the 90's, Indian participants achieved remarkable success in global beauty pageants. In 1992 and 1993 India won the runner up positions in Miss Universe pageant. In 1994, the *Femina* miss India won both the Miss world and the Miss Universe pageants. In 1997 and 1999 Indian contestants won the miss world competitions. In 2000, Indian women won Miss World, Miss Universe and Miss Asia Pacific pageants. Scholars have observed that the unprecedented success in international pageants that happened alongside economic liberalization in India was perhaps not a coincidence. They served the function of providing a gateway to international fashion and for cosmetic brands to enter Indian markets (Parameswaran, 2005)

hierarchy (Varnashrama Dharma) among castes also follows this oppositional construct of pollution and purity. An example of this is the case of manual scavengers – communities belonging to Dalit sub-castes that are expected to manually collect and dispose of human excrement from 'upper-caste' homes. The word *varna* (caste) itself translates to 'colour'. Here, it is important to note that those deemed by birth to carry out undesirable labour such as manual scavenging are generally associated with darker skin tones[74].

Nadeem (2014) argues that in the Indian context the desire to become lighter is not merely a preference, rather it represents the 'anxiety' to become the privileged 'other'. The desirability of the 'other', she argues, is dependent on the dominant power relations in society, which are again, connected with caste, class, and privilege. In other words, becoming lighter appears to be a legitimate way of accessing privilege and acceptance. Advertisements for skin-lightening products targeted at women[75] in the mainstream media, especially television, leverage this common aspiration to sell their products, and in the process, reproduce it. Parameswaran and Cordoza (2009) identified three key themes that recur in the advertisements. The first and perhaps most crucial theme is that of *transformation*. Through the advertisements, companies promise a transformation from the dull existence of a dark person to a life full of confidence, opportunities, and success for the newly 'lightened' person. The second area of focus is *scientific authority*. All the products use some sort of science to sell their formula. Parameswaran and Cordoza (2009) also recognised the increased interest in Ayurvedic[76] and natural formulae. The third aspect is around *heterosexual romance*. The advertisements often emphasise the possibility of securing a good marriage/relationship through a transformation of skin colour. While advertisements re-produce and re-entrench ideals around beauty, they cannot be considered responsible for the creation of colourism. The origins of these phenomena are from within history and society – a reflection of the culture of the bearers of power and privilege – be it imperialists or so-called upper-castes who hold disproportionate access to social, cultural, economic, and symbolic capital, dominating and dictating most realms of 'desirability.'

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[74] It should be added here that the Indian constitution and parliament have outlawed these activities through the institution of fundamental rights and through passing specific laws targeting caste violence and systemic and structural biases. However, the efficacy of these measures is up for debate. The weight of caste is still apparent in the subcontinent.

[75] In recent years many brands have been foraying into the market with skin lighteners for men.

[76] Related to Ayurveda, a system of medicine that has its historic origins in the Indian subcontinent.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed a range of literatures relevant to my thesis that investigates the perspectives and experiences of young women who have migrated to Chennai (from other regions of Tamil Nadu and neighbouring states), where they live in hostels while they study and/or work. In addition to discussing relevant scholarship on internal migration, I have foregrounded the focus of the analytic chapters of this thesis. This has enabled detailed attention to the scholarly debates around issues/practices central to the lives on my participants (that I explore in chapters 5 to 8). In the next chapter, I discuss the methodology I employed in order to gain insights into this transitory period in the lives of young migrant women.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The aim of this research was to investigate the lived experiences and perspectives of young women in Chennai on issues of contemporary relevance in their lives and to the larger society. Young women migrating to Indian cities for work or study form an important part of India's post-liberalization story. Yet, this is a group whose perspectives have been largely overlooked in academic scholarship and public discourse. Their lives are the active sites of negotiation of the larger socio-economic and cultural tensions India is witnessing today. This chapter presents a discussion of the research methodology, including the theoretical approach that informs this thesis and the principle method employed – ethnography. In the following chapter, I outline the specific research strategies I used.

Theoretical approach

In this section, I discuss the theoretical approaches employed in this thesis. The main theoretical traditions that frame this thesis are feminist poststructuralism and postcolonial theory. Ontologically, therefore, this study falls under the postmodernist tradition which rejects the objectivist assumption of a fixed reality external to one's context and interactions with the outside world (Ponterotto, 2005, Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Scotland, 2012). For feminist poststructuralism, I have, in particular, utilized insights from scholars such as Chris Weedon (1987) and Nicola Gavey (1989; 2011) who demonstrate how this theoretical approach is suited for feminist scholars who seek to account for complexity and contradiction in women's experience and perspectives.

For a postcolonial framework, I utilize the seminal works of Indian and Indian diaspora feminist scholars such as Chandra Mohanty (1988), Kumkum Sangari and Sudhesh Vaid (1990), Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1993) and Meenakshi Thapan (2001; 2004). In particular, I focus on the concept of 'recolonization', articulated by Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty (1997) and later utilized by scholars such as Thapan (2001; 2004; 2009), which I introduced in Chapters 1 and 2. I then discuss some of the key aspects of postcolonial theory, in particular, the material and discursive legacy of colonization, and the

process of 'recolonization' which is ongoing in the context of intensifying neoliberalism. I also consider neoliberalism in the global south and some feminist critiques.

Feminist Poststructuralism

> It is in language that our subjectivity, as well as social organizations, are defined, contested and constructed (Weiner, 1994, p.99)

Embedded within postmodern schools of thinking, poststructuralism, like structuralism recognises language[77] as the foundational aspect in the construction of the world, and one's positionality within it (Barrett, 2005; Mascia-Lees & Black, 2016). However, it challenges the structuralist perspective on language as fixed and universal in its basic structure. For poststructuralists, language (and meaning) is created contextually and is therefore open to change. Epistemologically, feminist poststructuralism rejects the possibility of objectivity and absolute truth (Gavey, 1989). Knowledge is understood as socially constructed through situated human interpretation (Weedon, 1987; Gavey, 1989). Knowledge, therefore, is not a set of static universal truths, rather, it is "transient and inherently unstable" (Gavey, 1989 p. 462). Researchers adopting a poststructuralist approach do not position their research as discovering or finding 'the truth'. Rather, they are aware that what they find is partial and context specific - situated within a particular time, space and socio-cultural location (Wright, 2003).

According to Joan W. Scott (1988), poststructuralism provides "a way of analysing constructions of meaning and relationships of power that called unitary, universal categories into question and historicized concepts otherwise treated as natural (such as man/woman) or absolute (such as equality or justice)" (pp. 33-34). In other words, poststructuralism enables the deconstruction of knowledge that is taken for granted as 'common sense' or 'normal'. In this approach, language is understood as a productive system through which power is distributed socially and materially in any given time and place.

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[77] By language, here I refer to not just words, vocabulary or grammar, but beyond that, the larger meaning-constituting system. This includes both verbal and non-verbal modes of creating meaning which construct people's understandings of the world, the self and their place/position within the world (see Scott, 1988). Within poststructuralism, language is viewed a constitutive process.

In her seminal work on the subject, Chris Weedon(1987) describes feminist poststructuralism as "a mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change" (pp. 40-41). The foundations of feminist poststructuralism lie in 20th century French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault's theorization of discourse, subjectivity and power (Foucault, 1972; Weedon, 1987; Gavey, 1989; MacConnell, Aston, Randel & Zwaagstra, 2013).

Discourse, Subjectivity and Power

The Foucauldian conceptualization of discourse refers to the systems of meaning or knowledge that constitute people's understanding of themselves and the world around them. A discourse can be described as an established or institutionalized way of thinking, talking, writing etc., which sets parameters for what is acceptable and what is not. Discourses are specific to time and place. Burman (1994) defines discourses as "socially organized frameworks of meaning that define categories and specify domains of what can be said and done" (p.2). Discourse is thus not only about what can be said and thought; it is also about who holds authority to say it, and when (Foucault, 1972). In a feminist poststructuralist approach, language and discourse are central to the reproduction and transformation of power relations along many different dimensions (of class, culture, gender, sexuality, disability and age, etc.).

Discourses are not only produced in written text and spoken language but also in social practices. The foundational institutions of human societies, such as marriage, the family, education, law and the state are constructed and shaped through discourses. In any given context, "the parameters of truth, morality, legitimacy and meaning are created through discourse" (Pitsoe & Letseka, 2013, p. 24). In other words, morality and the limits of acceptable speech, thought and action are formulated through discourse and these 'limits' may be different for different groups of people. For example, the prevailing norms of sexuality within urban Indian culture are not uniform across gender, sexual orientation and so on.

In a feminist poststructuralist approach, discourses shape not only one's understanding of the world, but also the understanding of oneself and one's position with respect to the world. At

any given point, multiple, competing discourses exist offering individuals subject positions through which they make sense of their behaviour and identity. The positioning of identity as fluid and in process is an important distinction between poststructuralist and modernist schools of thought. In a poststructuralist understanding, selfhood does not arise from an independent, fixed essence, rather "we speak ourselves into existence within the terms of available discourses" (Davies, 2000a, p. 55). Poststructuralism, therefore offers the scope to understand not only oppressive discourses, but also the ways in which individuals, or in the case of this thesis, young women Indian negotiate the existing possibilities in carving (dynamic) positions for themselves. Weedon (1987) states:

> Although the subject in poststructuralism is socially constructed in discursive practices, she nonetheless exists as a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices. She is also a subject able to reflect upon the discursive relations which constitute her and the society in which she lives, and able to choose from the options available. (p.125)

For example, one may consider the meanings around work in a neoliberal capitalist society. People are expected to 'contribute to society' by becoming employees or workers. Those who are unable to do so are portrayed as lazy, immoral or undeserving within the dominant neoliberal discourse. These meanings also influence the sense of self of people outside formal work. However, many actively seek and adopt counter-discourses to resist such understandings. For example, political critiques of neoliberalism, discourses of intrinsic, universal human dignity or of the value of unpaid domestic work. Counter-discourses offer individuals subject positions with which to resist dominant mainstream discourses. This understanding of the self- as dynamic – as negotiating available subject positions – as agentic – resisting, complying and often doing both simultaneously (complexity and contradiction) - is one of the key factors that make poststructuralism attractive for research for feminists.

The possibility of resistance is informed by Foucault's (1978) theorization of power, for he argues that where there is power, there is resistance. For Foucault, power is not a tangible entity that is uniform or centralized. Rather it is everywhere, working in grids, threads, capillaries and networks. Crucially power is not held, it is exercised. Thus, it operates in every social relation at a micro-level, although there are points of intensity, and points of resistance:

> Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations. (Foucault, 1978, p. 94)

Resistance for Foucault, therefore, is an inherent feature of power itself. Paetcher (2001) suggests that the "salience of resistance in Foucault's conceptualization of power allows us both to retain a place for human agency with respect to power relations, and to see how the deconstruction of discourses is an important aspect of and precursor to the construction of resistant counter-discourses" (p.5). While individuals are constituted by available discourses, they are also able to constitute themselves through them (Gavey, 1989). Individuals therefore negotiate subject positions within available discourses to constitute themselves and their understanding of the world, often drawing from contradictory discourses in different contexts. So while oppressive knowledge systems are accounted for, feminist poststructuralism provides analytical space to identify agency and resistance within them (Gavey, 1989).

Why Feminist Poststructuralism?

To understand why women and other oppressed groups "tolerate" social relations which subordinate their interests to those of men, a theory is required which can analyse the construction of the dominant social system, the meanings and values which guarantee or contest them (Weedon, 1987, p.12). Simultaneously the theory must also address individual consciousness. In other words, feminists require a theory that addresses both social organization (structure) and subjectivity (agency). Feminist poststructuralism propounds the primacy of language in the processes that construct social structures, and the primacy of language in the exercise of power at an individual and well as institutional level.

Weedon (1987) discusses how, inherently, any feminist approach bases itself on certain theoretical assumptions whether it is explicitly stated or not. For example, liberal feminists base their critique of patriarchy on the narrative of individualism and self-determination and its contradictions with cultural expectations on women. Radical feminists, on the other hand, base their praxis on an essentialized view of gender and shared experiences of 'women' emanating from biological sex. Socialist feminists connect women's struggles to other forms

of oppression embedded in capitalism, such as economic and racial marginalization, viewing them as interconnected and therefore, part of the feminist project. Weedon (1987) argues that while these feminisms all critique patriarchal institutions, for example, the conventional western family, they do not discuss how women become willing participants and perpetrators of such systems. Feminist poststructuralism emphasizes the necessity for feminists to have the analytical tools to understand the socio-cultural processes through which dominant gender relations, for instance, are not only reproduced but also challenged by women.

Neoliberalism and womanhood

> [N]eoliberalism (…) has become a catch-all for a multitude of things – a 'grab-bag', as Stiglitz evocatively calls it. For many, it is synonymous with a set of economic policy prescriptions associated with the 'Washington Consensus'; for others, it evokes something much more diffuse and all encompassing, a socioeconomic system in its own right. (Cornwall, Gideon & Wilson, 2008, p. 1)

From a governance perspective neoliberalism can be understood as the reforms or policies emanating from the Washington consensus[78] which facilitate the easier flow of capital across and within national boundaries. This includes lower taxes, lower interest rates and fewer government regulations over capital inflow, outflow and operation. Additionally, neoliberalism promotes privatization of public assets and disinvestment of governments from the market. These policies are accompanied by a simultaneous retreat from social welfare provision (Harvey, 2005). While the social and economic policies are tangible reflections of it, neoliberalism is more than a set of policies. It should be understood as a larger political philosophy rooted in individualism (Watts, 2017). Some of the key features of neoliberal thinking are the centrality of personal responsibility, competition; the idea of autonomous choice; striving for personal success and self-service/self-interest as the foundations of progress and a 'free society' (Brown, 2003; Harvey, 2005; Boaz, 2015).

Neoliberalism espouses personal freedom from conservative dogma, moralistic strictures as well as 'liberal paternalism', in exchange for personal responsibility (Bay-Cheng, 2015). However, scholars have argued that the ideology of personal responsibility itself has taken

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[78] Washington Consensus refers to a policy package containing ten specific policy prescriptions designed to reform and 'develop' the economies of nations in the tricontinental (Asia, Africa, Latin America) region, that were experiencing crises. The ten-policy package was agreed upon by Washington-based institutions such as the World Bank, IMF and the US treasury department (see Williamson, 2009).

the form of a moralistic stricture, for example, understanding all the eventualities people face in life as consequences of their own actions/choices (Bay-Cheng, 2015). Not only does this philosophy decontextualize the human condition, many of the existing dogmas/morals and power relations such as gendered power relations (for example, the gendered division of labour, the sexual double standard and transphobia), racial discrimination, class and ableism not only continue but in many cases get further entrenched, under neoliberalism (Cornwall, Gideon & Wilson, 2008; Bay-Cheng, 2015).

Understanding the gendered implications of neoliberalism has been a topic of great interest for feminists both in the global south and in the global north (Wilson, Loh & Purewal, 2018). One of the main issues of concern for feminists is the co-option of feminist language into the neoliberal discourse by governments, global development agencies and private companies (Eisenstein, 2005; Fraser, 2009; Yu, 2018). Scholars worry that the incorporation of feminist language within neoliberal discourse has led to the legitimization of a system that fosters inequality and capital accumulation (Eisenstein, 2005; Yu, 2018). Despite the implosion of neoliberalism on the economic front during the 2007-2008 global economic recession, at the discursive level, neoliberal ideas remain unshaken. From a Foucauldian perspective, this is due to the fact that neoliberal logic has become so normalized that it has become part of 'common sense' (Puri, 2016).

Neoliberalism in many developing nations in the world, as in India, is associated with the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) pushed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, in exchange for loans and assistance (Rose & Sparr, 1995). Rose and Sparr (1998) have noted that in Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria, Turkey and the Philippines, the withdrawal of the state from social welfare programs along with the increased emphasis on 'efficiency' and dismantling of labour rights (informalization of the jobs) meant the economy relied more so on women's unpaid labour, in looking after their families- the old, the young and those in the working age- to make up for the loss of other support mechanisms which were made available through the state and formal employment. In many places, such as the Philippines, subsistence farming was replaced by larger industrial farming of export-crops, leading to the loss of land and means of subsistence through farming. The number of landless agricultural workers surged and in general there is a trend towards the feminization of poverty (Rose and Sparr, 1995). This observation is also made by Wilson, Loh and Purewal (2018) in their study of neoliberalism and gender in the context of India. Although neoliberalism espouses

entrepreneurship and self-development/self - interest, simultaneously it demands more unpaid/altruistic labour such as volunteering, charity and care work which often women are expected to shoulder. While for women who had access to higher education, jobs in the service sector became reachable, the condition of poor women became more precarious under neoliberalising economies in the global south.

Eisenstein (2005; 2010) warns about the 'seduction' neoliberalism holds for a lot of feminists, whose concern is women moving outside the domestic sphere and into the public sphere, as workers. Within such a framework, neoliberalism appears to be a pro-feminist force for 'empowering' women to make 'autonomous choices'. One of the main critiques of this position is the reproduction of patriarchal gender relations in the neoliberal economy: women as workers in sweatshops under terrible conditions, no workers' rights, and no possibility for unionization. This is, it's argued, not a sign of progress, but rather forming the "docile" workforce for profiteering global corporations (Eisenstein, 2015, para 3). Mohanty (2013) argues that feminism and women's movements globally have been largely neutralized under neoliberalism, and reduced to "a privatized politics of representation, disconnected from systematic critique and materialist histories of colonialism, capitalism and heteropatriarchy" (p.968).

Another critique is around the 'rhetoric of choice' within neoliberal discourses, which is often held up as an example of how neoliberalism is 'liberating' for women. Braun (2009) argues that the neo-liberal turn emphasizes "the rational agentic subject – an almost hyper-responsible self – who makes individualised choices, removed from any contextual constraints, structural or otherwise, free from the influence of cultural norms and expectations" (Braun, 2009, p.236). Braun critiques the construction of the 'freely choosing' neoliberal subject and argues that we cannot freely choose because our identities and even our desires are produced in historically and culturally specific systems of power and knowledge. Thus, what is individually seen, known, experienced and desired is culturally produced. Braun asks:

> The question is how real or viable *all* the options can be, when societal norms and expectations effectively mandate one course of action over another, the choice is the 'norm'. In the case of choices towards a norm, how can we theorize the decision taken as an individual choice? (2009, p. 236).

In chapters 7 and 8, I use Braun's argument to explore how the 'rhetoric of choice' potentially informs young Indian women's beauty practices and understandings of/decisions relating to marriage.

Ethnography and Discourse

In the past three decades many scholars have articulated the scope and potential of combining ethnographic and discourse analytical methodologies for qualitative research (see for instance Macgilchrist & van Hout, 2011). This period also coincides with the rise of critical ethnography, that is, the application of critical theory to ethnographic study. According to Gardner and Martin-Jones (2012), this in turn led many ethnographers to adopting epistemological and theoretical frameworks of poststructuralism, including the Foucauldian conceptualization of discourse. Macgilchrist & van Hout (2011) suggest that applying Foucauldian discourse analytic methodologies to ethnographic data provides insights into multiple competing value systems and corresponding narratives that exist within the context that the ethnographic research takes place. This allows researchers to account for the complexity within the lives of interlocutors. The Foucauldian conceptualization of discourse has been utilized in multiple ethnographic studies and theoretical discussions (see Lee, 2017; Barron & Kothoff, 2002; Curtis, 1999; Gardner & Martin-Jones, 2012). In this thesis, a feminist poststructuralist approach informs the ethnographic method used. This enables analytic attention to the interplay of discourses which shape the talk, experiences and actions of young Indian women who were my research participants.

Postcolonial Theory

Like poststructuralism, postcolonialism is a major critical discourse within the social sciences and humanities (Go, 2013). Postcolonialism, like other schools of thought falling broadly within the postmodernist tradition, challenges the post- 'enlightenment' European episteme and its claims to objective truth and knowledge, highlighting, for instance, Eurocentric bias in institutionalized western knowledge and unbalanced power relations between imperial nations and former colonies. The term postcolonialism does not imply that colonialism has ended. Rather, it accounts for the neocoloniality of the contemporary world (Huggan, 1997).

The political, cultural and economic systems around the world continue to be dominated by the west, even after the end of what is considered the era of formal colonialism, in the latter half of the 20th century (Young, 2001). This continued, and arguably intensifying dominance of western systems (in the era of neoliberalism) makes a postcolonial approach relevant. A central analytic focus of this thesis is the dynamic construction of womanhood in the Indian context. Historically, colonial and anticolonial discourses played a significant role in the conceptualization of womanhood in India. As indicated in chapters 1 and 2, contemporary neoliberal discourses of womanhood in India, according to many scholars (Sunder Rajan & Park, 2005; Ghosh, 2018), once again resemble colonial ones, with a dominant binaristic world view which dichotomises 'Indian' vs 'western', 'old' vs 'new', 'traditional' vs 'modern'. Postcolonialism challenges this binary, and therefore, is an important theoretical and political framework informing this thesis.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon (2004) discusses how colonialism does not end when the colonizing administration withdraws from a territory and a nation formally attains 'independence'. Colonialism continues in many ways after that. To understand this, one must go beyond the dominant understanding of colonialism as merely invading a territory. Colonialism is multidimensional. Apart from territorial invasion, it includes civilizational conquest and economic overthrow and control. It has lasting effects on the macro-structures of society as well as psychology of both the colonizing and the colonized (Fanon, 2004). Postcolonial thought strives to identify and challenge the political, cultural, linguistic and economic legacy of European colonialism around the world today. Therefore, many scholars across disciplines such as literature, sociology, anthropology and economics utilize principles of postcolonialism in their analyses (Bailey, 2011). While Gayathri Spivak (1985) and Edward Said (1978) have focused on deconstructive analysis of language and literature, scholars such as Jason Hickel (2017) are interested in the application of postcolonialism in global economics, whereas Frantz Fanon (1951) and Ashis Nandy (1983) analysed the legacy of colonization from a psychological perspective. Go (2013) discusses the multi-disciplinary potential of postcolonial thinking, noting its links with political and economic theories such as Wallerstein's world system theory as well as its significant contributions in other areas of social science:

The structures targeted by postcolonial theory are economic and political structures, which is where postcolonial theory shares ground with Marxist theories of dependency and the world-system. But one of postcolonial theory's distinct contributions is to emphasize cultural, ideological, epistemic, or even psychological structures. (Go, 2013, p.29)

Defining postcolonial theory

Fundamentally postcolonial theory addresses the dominance of Western colonial systems in the contemporary world, particularly the ethnocentric European claims to objectivism and universal truth. From the perspective of history, a postcolonial critique reconsiders the dominant narrative, paying attention to alternative narratives spoken from the perspective of those at the receiving end of colonization (Rukundwa & Van Aarde, 2007). Additionally, postcolonialism addresses the contemporary social and cultural impact of colonialism (Young, 2001; Rukundwa & Van Aarde, 2007). According to Lunga (2008):

> Postcolonial theory represents a complex field of study, encompassing an array of matters that include issues such as identity, gender, race, racism, and ethnicity. (…) It focuses on knowledge systems underpinning colonialism, neocolonialism, and various forms of oppression and exploitation present today. In addition, postcolonial theory challenges epistemic violence; that is, it questions the undervaluing, destruction, and appropriation of colonized people's knowledge and ways of knowing, including the colonizer's use of that knowledge against them to serve the colonizer's interests. Postcolonial theory, therefore, offers a critique of imperial knowledge systems and languages and how they are circulated and legitimated and how they serve imperial interests. (p. 193)

Postcolonialism draws attention to the continued dominance of western discourses and systematic marginalization of non-western philosophies, sciences, languages, religions and ways of life. Many would argue that it is not simply marginalization that occurred. Post-enlightenment western discourses actively discredited and invalidated non-western epistemologies. This is what Lunga (2008) refers to as 'epistemic violence' in the above quote. This idea of epistemic violence was used by Spivak (1985), alluding to the silencing of colonized women in western representations.

The politics of postcolonialism

One of the criticisms of postcolonial thinking is that it is focused on colonialism- 'a thing of the past'- thereby privileging the colonial. Postcolonial scholars, however, clarify that their work does not privilege colonialism (see Young, 2001). Rather, they are interested in colonialism only insofar as it connects to inequalities and injustices that happen today, which emanate from it. Additionally, postcolonialism is founded in the spirit of the tricontinental[79] anticolonial struggles of the 20th century, which are also rooted in a critique of colonialism, and global capitalism that was part of it (Young, 2001).

Unlike terms such as imperialism and neo-colonialism which confront and scrutinize the processes of colonialism, postcolonialism, along with critiquing the lasting effects of colonization, indicates a commitment to a politics of change (Young, 2001). Therefore, postcolonialism, like Marxism and feminism imbibes the activist objective of changing the unequal status quo. Young (2001) states:

> Postcolonialism designates the perspective of tricontinental theories which analyse the material and epistemological conditions of post coloniality and seek to combat the continuing, often covert operation of an imperialist system of economic, political and cultural domination. The global situation of social injustice demands postcolonial critique from its victims, not from the position of its perpetrators. (p. 58)

Politically, 'postcolonial' is often linked to anti-capitalist movements. This follows the spirit of anti-colonial movements (and consequent post-colonial[80] states) which identified capitalism as one of the core foundations of colonization and therefore tended towards adopting economic and political systems that were anticapitalistic in nature. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening up of a controlled market capitalism in China, newly independent states had little option but to join the global capitalist order once again, coerced/forced by global institutions (such as IMF and World Bank) that further the interests of powerful neocolonial states. Many scholars see this as a form of continued

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[79] The term tricontinental refers to Asia, Africa and South America, three continents which were at the receiving end of colonial expansion. This term is often used by leftist scholars and activists who critique commonly used terms such as 'third world' and 'global south'.

[80] I would like to make the distinction between the terms postcolonial and post-colonial. While the former refers to the critical discourses that identify and address the legacy of colonization across various fields, post-colonial, the hyphenated form, refers to nation states that have formally achieved 'independence' from colonial powers (Jaber, 1998). Postcolonial scholars, however, do point out the continued economic domination of post-colonial nations.

colonization (Young, 2001). Postcolonial feminists have identified this resurgence of the west through neoliberalism and global 'free markets' as recolonization (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997).

Critiquing Binarism

This thesis is informed by the postcolonial critique of binarism. Many dominant discourses within the post-enlightenment European episteme viewed the world in terms of binaries. Said's Orientalism (1978) illuminates the binarism existing in colonial discourse and discusses how this has contributed to constructing the identity of 'the West' itself. This occurs through the discursive construction of non-European cultures, nations and peoples as 'savage' and 'unenlightened', and European cultures and peoples as civilized and enlightened. Poststructuralist feminists critique and destabilize the binarization of gender: as man-woman; rational-emotional; culture-nature. Similarly postcolonial scholars seek to disrupt the binaristic view of the world, for example, as West- East, corresponding to modern-primitive; civilized-savage; developed-underdeveloped; good-evil; white-black; human-bestial; beautiful-ugly (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2013). This binaristic perspective, apart from contributing to epistemic violence through invalidation of non-western perspectives, also serves as a justification of colonial violence and exploitation. Binaristic discourse fails to account for diversity and complexity. Postcolonial theory addresses this through highlighting interstitial spaces that are invisibilized (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2013). Binaristic colonial discourses contributed to the dehumanization and eroticisation of colonized people.

Postcolonial feminism

Postcolonial feminism emerged as a critical discourse within feminist and postcolonial literature in the 1980s. Scholars such as Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Mohanty, Audre Lorde, bell hooks and Abu Lughod challenged firstly, the invisibilization of experiences and perspectives of formerly colonized women within the feminist movement; secondly, the monolithic representation of third world women as 'oppressed' within dominant western feminist discourses and thirdly, the unbalanced power relation which existed between western feminist scholars who 'studied' and 'spoke for' formerly colonized women. In 'Under western eyes', for instance, Mohanty (1988) investigated "latent ethnocentrism in particular feminist

writings on women in the third world" (p. 353). Postcolonial feminist discourse prominently critiques the binaristic understandings of the world.

Defining postcolonial feminism

While postcolonialism aims at identifying and addressing the legacy of colonization across various fields, postcolonial feminism emerged to address the colonial legacy that exists within feminist discourses. Postcolonial feminists critique the essentializing narratives on cultures and peoples within the tricontinental regions, as well as those colonized within settler colonies such as United States, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. Postcolonial feminism problematizes constructions of womanhood as universal, citing the vast differences in experiences of women depending class, culture, ethnicity, sexuality, ability and geographic locations. Resisting the idea that women in the third world are universally oppressed, postcolonial feminists illuminate the strategies and methods that women in various cultures employ to resist oppression and maximize their potential within the given contexts (Kandiyoti, 1988). Postcolonial feminism addresses the 'epistemic violence'involved in the silencing of subaltern women within dominant discourses and advocates for theoretical and methodological frameworks which account for the complex cultural, social, political and economic contexts that shape their everyday lives of women (Spivak, 1985; 1988; Abu-Lughod, 1990).

Postcolonial feminist scholarship approaches categories such as gender, class, caste and sexuality as mutually connected and overlapping, rather than as distinct universals (Anthias & Yuval Davis, 2005; Sa'ar, 2005). This comes from the understanding that, while for many years these were seen separate from each other, these categories intersect, becoming constitutive of each other, and therefore are not separable (Anthias, 1998).

Mohanty (1988) presents three analytical presuppositions of certain western discourse which postcolonial feminism strives to address. These three points highlight the key analytical bases of postcolonial feminism. The first is the assumption of 'Third World' women as a "coherent group with identical interests, experiences, and goals prior to their entry in the socio-political and historical field" (Mohanty, 1988, p.121). Such an assumption places third world women outside social relations, rather than being constituted through social processes. The socio-economic, religious and family structures of non-western societies are analysed

ethnocentrically, projecting the image of women in the third world as backward, oppressed and without agency. By the construction of third world woman as 'the other', colonial discourses conceptualize the west as the polar opposite; 'liberated', 'open-minded' and 'autonomous'. Postcolonial feminist scholarship strives to address this, by focussing on the complex social processes that constitute non-western women within their diverse contexts.

The second criticism concerns the overarching framing within certain western feminist writings which imply men are the oppressors of women universally. This understanding of power is, according to Mohanty (1988) inadequate, as it fails to account for the historical role women and non-men have played in many societies and denies agency. It also fails to account multiple overlapping socio-economic conditions, and the solidarity that exists between men and women, against for example, colonial exploitation. Mohanty (1988) suggests that a Foucauldian framing of power might be more suitable to account for women's agency in various contexts.

The third critique is methodological. Mohanty (1988) argues that the above epistemic framing of the 'third world woman' also reflects in methodology. Through an analysis of examples of feminist writings on women in the non-west, Mohanty (1988) suggests that many are oriented towards finding proof of women's 'powerlessness' and victimization within third world contexts. The orientation is therefore to reinforce the narratives of the already constituted third world woman. This hinders the possibility of representing the complexity of the conditions in the third world.

Why postcolonial feminism?

Postcolonial feminism destabilizes the binaries of western women vs third world women as well as the binary conceptualisation of men vs women, oppressor vs oppressed. While identifying oppressive structures, postcolonial feminism also accounts for innovative strategies women adopt to resist oppressive structures. Feminism, therefore, is not understood as a singular narrative based on post-enlightenment values of 'individualism' and 'autonomy', rather it is seen in a range of strategies employed to resist gender-based limitations within given contexts. Postcolonial feminism also pays attention to imperialism and neo-colonialism and their effects on the everyday lives of women in the so called third world. In the context of intensifying neoliberalism in India as well as the continued

dominance of the figure of the 'oppressed third world woman' in media narratives of the West, postcolonial feminism is a framework that is influential in the conceptualization, approach and analysis used in this thesis.

Ethnography

> [Ethnography] is a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents and of richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing at least partly in its own terms the irreducibility of human experience. […] The understanding and representation of experience are then quite central, both empirically and theoretically (Willis & Trondman, 2000, p. 394).

As indicated in the quote above, ethnography involves interaction with research participants[81] within their cultural contexts over a period of time. Ethnographic research is inductive and iterative (O'Reilly, 2008). This means that researchers enter the field without any prior hypotheses, and the methods and strategies are subject to change as the research is underway. A reflexive account of the processes of moulding and remoulding of research strategies is part of the methodology (Murchison, 2010). Ethnography usually has two stages: fieldwork and post fieldwork writing up. The range of research strategies involved in ethnography include immersion in the field site, building rapport with research participants, participant observation, interviews, field notes, reflections on positionality and representation. The specific methods I employed in this thesis are discussed in detail in the following chapter.

Ethnography at home: Studying one's own society

Effectively, this is an anthropological study of the here and now. The 'here and now' in this instance is not to be understood simply as reference to the methodology of being spatially and temporally immersed within the field of study as classical anthropologists viewed it, but also to indicate my status as an insider studying her own society (Das, 1995; Srinivas, 1998). As I have discussed earlier in this thesis, I belong to a similar socio-economic location as my participants. We had shared characteristics such as gender, culture, class and generation. I was therefore mostly an insider in my field site:

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[81] Various terms are in use to refer to research participants. These include informants, collaborators and interlocutors.

Insiders studying their own cultures offer new angles of vision and depths of understanding. Their accounts are empowered and restricted in unique ways. […] Ideological shifts, rule changes and historical pressures have begun to reposition anthropology with respect to its 'objects' of study. Anthropology no longer speaks with automatic authority for others defined as unable to speak for themselves (Clifford, 1986, pp. 9-10).

Ethnographies located within social/cultural anthropology must acknowledge the colonial history and origins of the discipline (Srinivas, 1998; Das, 1995; Murchison, 2010). While the colonial system provided political and economic support for early anthropological studies, the theories of biological and cultural evolution originating in 19th century Europe provided the epistemological underpinnings of the discipline (Murchison, 2010). The objectivist language used, and resultant meanings created, presupposed the superiority of the colonizers (Srinivas, 1998). For this reason, Srinivas (1998) observes that during the early stages of the discipline people from colonies who received education in the West were reluctant to train in the discipline. Additionally, anthropology in the West was characterized as the study of 'primitives', 'pre-literates' (Nadel, 2004) and the evolutionary cousins of humans such as apes (Srinivas, 1998). This reputation of anthropology made the discipline rather difficult for native scholars who were increasingly influenced by an anti-colonial spirit and pride for their own histories and cultures (Srinivas, 1998).

The anti-colonial revolutions that took place in European colonies across the world led to the waning of the era of classical anthropology which was primarily concerned with the study of 'primitives' (Bennet, 1998). After World War II, and the success of anticolonial struggles, the economic and political conditions had changed, making it more difficult for Western anthropologists to continue their project of studying 'primitives' in exotic lands (Srinivas, 1998). A greater number of scholars started to employ anthropological research methods within their own societies or regions. The homecoming of anthropology, in the latter half of the 20th century, was dubbed 'the repatriation of anthropology' by Marcus and Fischer (1999). However, even as anthropologists returned home for their studies, they looked for the remnants of 'tradition' and difference within them (Das, 1995). For example, studying rural communities of witchcraft and urban-based anthropologists studying 'peasants' in the countryside (Messerschmidt, 1981; Koentjaraningrat, 1982).

Thereafter, social anthropologists described their discipline as the study of the 'Other'. The study of the 'Other', they argue, leads to a greater understanding of the Self (Beattie, 1963; Srinivas, 1998). But how does one study the 'Other'? The methodology devised was one of intimacy- of the 'here and now'- by which they meant being immersed in the field of the 'Other' (Auge, 1992, p.16). Das, however, highlights a paradox within this methodological framework:

> This mode of producing knowledge through the experience of intimacy had a unique intellectual object- the exotic Other. This exotic Other was not encountered accidentally, it was sought out as the opposite of the Self. Hence, anthropological knowledge became a map of difference, of alterity. The Trobriands exemplified a society that did not acknowledge or were ignorant of, paternity; the Hindus exemplified hierarchy; the Nuer exemplified the principles of segmentary opposition in feud; the Azande showed the 'rationality' of the so-called irrational practices, such as witchcraft (1995, p.3).

Under the objectivist epistemology of classical anthropology (Scotland, 2012), the 'Other' was invariably perceived as inferior to that of the 'Self'. Furthermore, classical anthropologists often assumed that the individuals or communities they studied represented their culture in totality (Saran, 1962; Das 1995). It was in this context that scholars within postcolonial and postmodern epistemologies started raising the question of the Selfhood of the 'Other' that is created through the Western anthropological process (Das, 1995). What does production of anthropological knowledge do to the identity of those who are being subjected to the anthropological gaze/being written about? There is invariably a creation of a stark power divide. Postcolonial scholars and feminists have been interested in minimizing the power imbalance between the researcher and the researched, which has led to the call for greater reflexivity in regard to the researcher's positionality and the representation of her collaborators[82] (Abu-Lughod, 2000; Manning, 2016). To achieve this, Das suggests employing a greater focus on representing, in ethnographic texts, the participants' voices rather than the anthropologist's gaze:

> The anthropologist must appear not in the role of an observer, but that of a hearer, and the subject must correspondingly appear in the role of the speaker. By this means, the

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[82] The term collaborators refers to participants. Some scholars also use the term 'interlocutors'. These terms have been used interchangeably here.

subject is transformed from the third person to the first person, her relation being mediated now, through the voice, with a second person (1995, p.18).

The technique of 'voice' is more effectively achieved when one studies one's own society. The anthropologist can focus more on her role of hearing when she is not being drawn into the fascination of observing the 'exotic Other'. Anthropologist Messerschmidt underlines these advantages of studying one's own society:

> While I have gained essential and invaluable insight into cultural processes in fieldwork *There* [away from one's own society], I have also come to appreciate how fully I am able to understand what goes on in the society (or more precisely those microcultural systems) in which I am genuine rather than a would-be participant. Only *Here* [at 'home', within one's society] I feel, do I observe, participate and write under conditions in which I am most likely to understand what is going on, with humour, nuance, double entendre, conflicting explanations, and so forth all apt to go noticed rather than unnoticed (1981, p.265).

Apart from the advantage of being able to pick-up many nuances, Messerchmidt (1981) discusses how participants, when they belonged to his own society, were more likely to ask questions around how the information provided would be used, than when he studied people from a different culture. The closeness and sense of being a member of their own society, he argues, empowered participants to have a more effective say in the way in which they were represented in the study. These advantages of doing anthropology at home also make it more conducive for the application of the technique of 'voice' (Das, 1995).

Contemporaneity in anthropology

> [T]he best ethnography also recognizes and records how experience is entrained in the flow of contemporary history, large and small, partly caught up in its movement, partly itself creatively helping to maintain it, enacting the uncertainty of the eddies and gathering flows dryly recorded from the outside as "structures" and "trends" (Willis & Trondman, 2000, p. 395).

Scholars have suggested various ways in which to extend anthropological research and writing. Marcus (1986) suggested a mixed-genre text style-weaving history, socio-political events and media discussions within the anthropological text as a method to indicate the complexity of the context being studied, and to avoid arriving at sweeping generalizations

based on the studied micro-community. Basham (1978) illustrated the need for anthropologists to transcend the tendency to focus on participant interviews and observation, and to inculcate skills of social historians and analysts of current events. Following Auge (1992), Das (1995) emphasizes the need for contemporaneity in anthropology. Auge and Harris (1979) also suggest that anthropology has to look at contemporary life; the condition of 'hypermodernity', where space and time do not hold the same meanings they did during the stage of classical anthropology, when territories and cultures were considered to be well-defined, bounded by space and time. Space and time are now fused together, throughout the world (through global capital). The local and the 'global' are now often enmeshed together unrecognizably, affecting the everyday lives of people in all parts of the world. Auge (1979) represented this state of hypermodernity through the metaphor of an international air traveller who can use his [sic] American Express card globally, accessing the same lifestyle regardless of geographic location- and to whom physical territory is less defined- except for when there are announcements in the airplane. Das (1995), on the other hand, represents it through the example of the Bhopal gas tragedy of 1984. This demonstrated how the lives of the people in a relatively small city in India were changed dramatically because of the mismanagement of a global company, Union Carbide, that had set up a factory next door to them. This illustrates how the local and global are enmeshed together in space and time. This approach to anthropological study has informed the approach used in this thesis.

The 'discourse of familiarity'

In 'Locating ethnography' (2000) postcolonial feminist ethnographer Abu-Lughod argues that within the everyday life scenario people counter social-scientific essentializations through what she calls 'the discourse of familiarity'. By this, Abu-Lughod refers to the manner in which people interact with close friends and family every day. In such everyday scenarios, the subjects around us- our friends and family- are not essentialized. Rather, we are aware of their complexities, emotions, contradictions and so on. Thus, she proposes building a discourse of familiarity within ethnography as a method to challenge essentialism and present the "contestatory nature of discourses and social life within all communities" (p. 263). I worked to towards developing familiarity with my participants in my fieldwork so that I would be aware of the ambiguities and complexities in their lives. I got to know them well as hostel-mates and often as friends as we shared various aspects of our everyday lives, for

example, eating, socializing and just 'hanging out' together. My position as outsider/ researcher was frequently minimalised as the participants and I became immersed in the rhythms of daily life in the hostel. This was aided significantly by my insider position as an Indian woman of a similar age living in the hostel. The familiarity and intimacy I developed with my participants helped me to avoid essentializing and/or over-generalizing about their lives during my fieldwork and in my analysis of the ethnographic data.

A note on reflexivity

An ethnography that is critical of the philosophy of objectivism cannot but be reflexive in nature. The researcher locating herself within the research is a crucial aspect of knowledge creation in contemporary anthropology (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2011). Reflexivity became a norm in ethnographic research in the last decades of the 20th century. Some scholars have dubbed the turn towards reflexivity as "the observation of participation" that must go hand-in-hand with participant observation (Tedlock, 1991; Dewalt & Dewalt, 2011). Employing reflexivity acknowledges the fact that the researcher is not a neutral, objective observer, as was presumed in classical anthropological texts. Instead, it illustrates the positionality, circumstances and vulnerability of the researcher (Behar, 1996). Through this process, readers are empowered with more transparent information regarding the socio-cultural location of the researcher and how this might impact on the knowledge that is co-constructed by the researcher and participants in the field (Hamilton, 1998; Herbert, 2014). Here Hamilton articulates the function of reflexivity:

> The truths and realities on which I must rely take shape in the spaces between observer and observed, […] between writer and reader. The ethnographic information I collected is a social construct; as an actor, as well as an observer, I participated in the creation of that information. I have placed myself in this book's narrative action and have described relationships with informants and institutional affiliations that limit the field of action I was able to encompass (1998, p. 33).

In this thesis, I have attempted to apply the principle of reflexivity throughout. The *Prologue* of this thesis, for instance, is a reflection on my positionality and journey towards this thesis.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I introduced the theoretical approaches of feminist poststructuralism and postcolonialism, and the ethnographic method employed in this thesis. I also discussed the rationale behind utilizing these approaches in the conceptualization and analysis of this thesis. In the following chapter I will discuss the research strategies adopted to gather, collate, categorize and analyse the data for this thesis.

Chapter 4
Research Methods

Introduction

Research is a process of knowledge production comprising strategies and techniques for gathering, analysing and interpreting data or information. Being a qualitative research project, I have utilized field notes, interviewing and participant observation as my main methods for data collection. For analysis I have employed a thematic approach. In this chapter I discuss in detail the specific research methods employed in this thesis, and my experience implementing them, beginning with a discussion on fieldwork and my entering the field.

Fieldwork

Fieldwork is a crucial stage in the anthropological research process; one that distinguishes it from other social sciences (Amit, 2003). Collection of primary data is done during the field work stage of an anthropological project (O'Reilly, 2008). Here, I will present a discussion of the strategies I employed during the fieldwork stage and the various challenges I faced.

I received ethics approval for this project from the Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury in 2015 (see appendix 3). Following this, I went to Chennai to start my fieldwork. This was carried out in two stages lasting 5 months at a time across two years. The first phase started in late January 2015 and lasted until the end of June 2015. The second stage began in February 2016, lasting through until early July, 2016.

*Table 3.1: Summary of fieldwork phase one
and phase two timeline*

Fieldwork Phase-1	
20th of January 2015	Commencement of fieldwork: fieldnotes begin
20th- 27th January 2015	Search for the primary field site (Women's hostel):
28th of January 2015	Moved to Carmel Hostel (field site): formal conversations with the warden; informal conversations begin, with room mate and other residents in the hostel
February 2015	Field immersion; building rapport with participants; recruiting participants directly, and through word of mouth
March 2015	Interviews commence.
June 30th 2015	End of field work

Fieldwork Phase-2	
15th February 2016	Commencement of field work phase two. Fieldnotes begin.
22rd February 2016	Secured a room at Carmel Hostel
23rd February onwards	Getting back in touch with old participants. Arranging follow up interviews to fill gaps in data, addition of four new participants
July 5th 2016	End of field work

The initial days of my fieldwork involved looking for a suitable hostel to live in and conduct the study. Once I found the hostel, I lived there for 5 months, from January 2015 until June 2015. There were two main reasons for having two phases of fieldwork roughly 6-7 months apart. Firstly, I wanted to account for the liminality of the life-stage of my young female participants (Krishnan, 2015; Lukose, 2009). Many young women in India move to larger cities and live in hostels semi-permanently. This is usually after reaching adulthood and before marriage. As this is a time of transition and adaptation, the lives of young women can often change drastically in a short period of time. Doing my fieldwork across two years was

designed to enable me to capture the impermanence of my participants' lives during this period. The rationale was that I could commence the process and then remove myself from the field so that I could reflect on any challenges I faced and the research strategies I used. Having two field trips gave me the opportunity to deepen my learning process, and also gave me the opportunity to fill any potential gaps in the data that I collected from the first trip. Effectively the two-phase fieldwork gave me the opportunity to deepen my methodological insight, improve my ethnographic technique and gather more data that spoke to the changing lives of my participants.

Introduction to the field
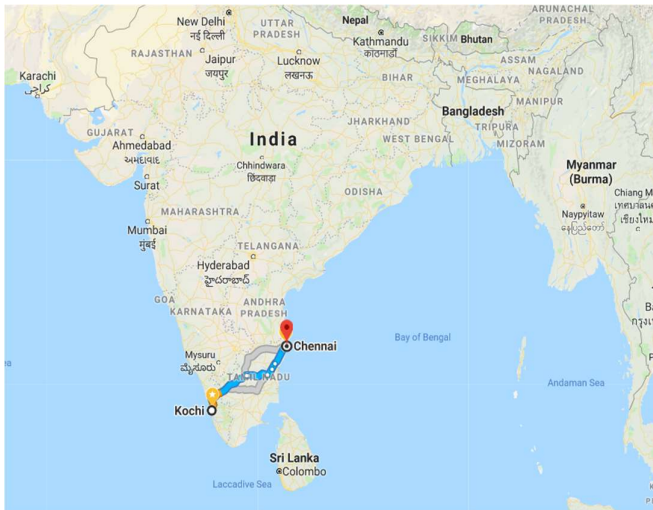
Fig 3.1: Journey from Kochi to Chennai (Google maps, 2018)

I arrived in Chennai to commence my fieldwork in January 2015. It is an overnight train from my home-city (Kochi) to Chennai. I prefer trains to buses, as they are cheaper and more comfortable. Like many women whom I interviewed throughout my fieldwork, I always chose the upper berth in a sleeper compartment when I travelled a long distance alone. During my first journey, as the dawn broke, I awoke to the chilly air of the south Deccan peninsula in January. I was glad to have taken my long shawl which covered my feet and toes. Outside, the landscape, architecture and vegetation had changed dramatically since the previous evening. Ancient rocks of the Eastern Ghats[83] made their appearance intermittently. More of earth was in sight, and less of the green- a clear indication that we had entered the rain-shadow region[84] of peninsular India.

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[83] A discontinuous mountain range along the eastern coastline of peninsular India.

[84] The leeward side of a prominent mountain range (in this case, the Western Ghats). The windward side receives higher precipitation.

I had lived in Chennai before - for my Master's studies and for some time thereafter, in the years 2011 till 2013, and was excited to be back. But the excitement was laced with a considerable amount of nervousness. Nervousness about my how my research would pan out. Once at the railway station, I opted to take an autorickshaw to my friend's place, where I had planned to stay until I found a hostel to move into. My friend, who is a graphic designer, was away on a work assignment at that time. I stayed at his place with his mother and wife. January in Chennai is pleasant. Mornings are chilly and afternoons are comfortably hot. It would then chill down rapidly, presenting Chennai residents with pleasant evenings to relax in the many parks and beaches in and around the behemoth city and its suburbia.
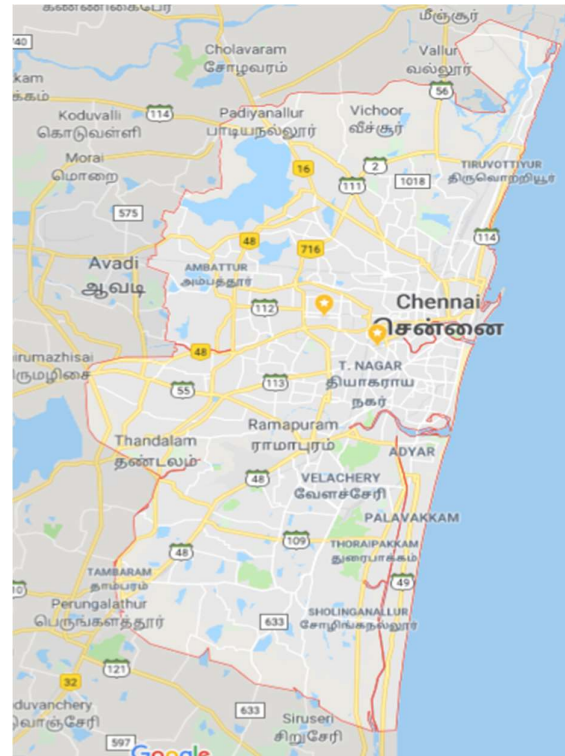
Fig 3.2: Map of Chennai city (Google maps, 2019)

Women's hostels in urban India

The origin of women's hostels in India can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Melkote & Tharu, 1983). The establishment of women's hostels was one of the outcomes of social reform movements which aimed at uplifting the position of women and girls. During the colonial period, hostels in Indian cities were set up by trusts or by religious reform movements such as Brahma Samaj and Ramakrishna Mission (Melkote & Tharu, 1983). Additionally, Christian missionaries and organizations played an important role in setting up women's hostels across the country[85]. The objective was to provide an alternative to the family home for women who wished to pursue higher education, work and engage in activities outside their familial roles. In 1972, the government of India started the 'working women's hostel scheme' through which hostels were set up across different cities, towns and

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[85] For example, the Young Women's Christian Association's (YWCA) working women's hostels across India. YWCA started operations in India in the year 1896.

rural areas where opportunities for women's employment existed. The Narendra Modi government revamped the scheme during their last tenure (2014-2019), expanding its scope and budget. The aim of the scheme is "to promote availability of safe and conveniently located accommodation for working women" (Ministry for Women and Child Development, 2017). Although the scheme was envisaged primarily to cater to the needs of working women, it was later opened to women seeking higher education. The Ministry for Women and Child Development (2017) introduces the working women's hostel scheme as follows:

> With the progressive change in the socio-economic fabric of the country, more and more women are leaving their homes in search of employment in big cities as well as urban and rural industrial clusters. One of the main difficulties faced by such women is lack of safe and conveniently located accommodation. The Government of India being concerned about the difficulties faced by such working women, introduced a scheme in 1972-73 of grant-in-aid for construction of new/expansion of existing buildings for providing hostel facilities to working women in cities, smaller towns and also in rural areas where employment opportunities for women exist.

Women's hostels are predominantly occupied by young women in the age range of 18 to 35 years (Gibbons-Trikha, 2003; Pothukuchi, 2003; Ministry for Women and Child Development, 2017). A majority of these women are not yet married. A small minority are separated, divorced or widowed. Gibbons-Trikha argues that the period living in a hostel represents the stage of 'status passage' (as theorized by Glaser and Straus, 1971), immediately after attaining adulthood and before entering marital life. Being a hostel resident, therefore, is not considered as a long-term identity. It is a temporary stage. The 'impermanence' (Gibbons-Trikha, 2003 p.74) of hostel living is institutionalized through the short-term contracts residents are given. Residents are expected to move to the next stage of their life and are always aware of the temporality of their status as a hosteller[86]. Even the government working women's hostel scheme only provides support for a period of 3 years.

Women's hostels as an extension of the patriarchal family

Women's hostels often operate as an extension of the patriarchal family. Pothukuchi (2003) notes that women moving into hostels are often accompanied by close male kin (fathers,

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[86] The terms 'hostel residents' and 'hostellers' are used interchangeably throughout this thesis.

brothers), and are expected to provide details of a local guardian approved by the family at the time of securing admission. Additionally, discussions about the amenities, rules and fees are done with the mediation of close kin rather than directly to the prospective residents (Pothukuchi, 2003). By imposing rules such as curfew times and restrictions on the type of clothing permissible, along with the provision of round the clock monitoring and security, hostels effectively act as an instrument for maintaining control over women in the city. The institution of women's hostels across the country, therefore, was a mechanism intended to maintain, rather than challenge the status quo.

In 'International notes: An investigative analysis of Working Women's hostels in India' , Melkote & Tharu (1983) presented a strong critique of the way in which hostels in various parts of the country exercised control over women, while simultaneously failing to maintain standards in the provision of basic amenities such as water, food, adequate space and sufficient freedom. They argued that hostels effectively functioned as instruments to legitimize and perpetuate patriarchal controls outside the family. The paper investigated protests happening around women's hostels at the time (early 1980s). In most cases, residents were agitating against the contemptuous attitudes and tyrannical control hostel managements exercised over residents, using the threat of arbitrary eviction. The authors also described how managements used patriarchal language as a strategy of control, for example, calling residents 'prostitutes' when they arrived after the gates were closed (p.140) or threatening them on the premise that they knew about their sexual past.

The on-site hostel management, often headed by a warden, plays a central role in maintaining the patriarchal social order. Gibbons-Trikha (2003), for example, suggests that the warden takes up the role of the parent, ensuring that the women remain suitable for marriage. This point is reiterated by Krishnan (2016) who observed that the primary responsibility of the hostel is to return the young women to their family as they arrived - 'sexually untouched' (p.70). Studying the situation that existed across various hostels where protests were taking place, Melkote and Tharu state:

> […] it is social and physical security that the working women's hostels are supposed to provide. What a hostel resident pays for, therefore, is not really food and board but the respectability the institution provides her. A good hostel is not so much one where the living conditions are good, but one that is impeccably respectable. Once this

protection is provided, the hostel management assumes that the residents will have to put up with whatever physical conditions that exist there (1983, p.169).

A significant role that women's hostels play in Indian cities is the maintenance of the patriarchal status quo even when women are geographically separated from the primary site of patriarchy: the family. Melkote and Tharu (1983) claim that the failure of hostels in challenging the patriarchal status quo emanates from the nature of the movements that led to their institution. The women's movements during the colonial period, they argue, had a rights-based approach, focusing on securing legal rights for women such as the abolition of Sati, equal access to education, widow remarriage rights and so on. They were not based on an ideological overhaul of patriarchy. Hostels were set up to assure that women could access opportunities outside their domestic roles within patriarchal constraints. While they did represent an incremental change, they were carefully set up in ways that did not challenge the larger social order and position of men (in relation to women) in Indian society. Hostels, therefore, can be understood as instruments of 'public patriarchy', as theorized by Walby (1990).

Hostels as sites of disruption

While the above discussion highlights the characteristics of women's hostels that are designed to maintain patriarchal control over women, hostels have also been sites of disruption and change. In recent years, women's hostels have become sites of revolutionary change. As indicated in the previous section, throughout their history across India, there are many instances when residents of hostels rose in protest. A campaign called #BreaktheCurfew that began in early 2015 has been gathering momentum in many parts of India. #BreaktheCurfew was started by women students of the College of Engineering, Trivandrum, citing the discriminatory curfew policy in the women's hostel on campus (Praveen, 2015). While the men's hostel was open until 9.30 p.m., women had a curfew time of 6.30 p.m. The leaders of the movement argued that the curfew contradicted its stated purpose of assuring safety, as women had nowhere to go when they arrived after the curfew time due to unforeseen circumstances. They also argued that the curfew was adversely affecting their academic work, as they were unable to access the library and laboratory facilities, both of which remained open until 9 p.m. The protest gained national attention and

similar protests took place in other women's hostels across the country[87]. In February 2019, the Kerala state government intervened, following a two-day protest led by the students outside the hostel. The government directed the college to extend the curfew time to 9.30 p.m. the same time at which the men's hostel gates closed. In the month that followed (March 2019), the High Court of Kerala, responding to a petition filed by protesting students of Kerala Varma College, Thrissur, ruled that hostels may not have rules that discriminate against women and curtail their fundamental rights. This is an excerpt from the judgement:

> It appears that the moral choice of the management is attempted to be imposed upon the Boarders. The moral paternalism is something to be frowned upon. A girl is having equal freedom similar to a boy. There are no similar restrictions in the boy's hostel (Justice Muhamed Mustaq, as quoted in Kini, 2019).

While these are examples of visible disruption to the controls placed on women by hostels, scholars note that hostels continue to be sites where everyday negotiation and contestations of formal and informal rules and norms occur (Lukose, 2009; Krishnan, 2015).

Exploring women's hostels in the Chennai

The search for a hostel for my study commenced on the same day I arrived. The main criteria

Fig 3.3 Room in a women's hostel in T. Nagar, Chennai

I applied in the process was to make sure that there were sufficient residents in the hostel (50 or more) and that it was centrally located, close to the city's traditional CBD, as many of the businesses and institutions of higher education were located in this area. I revisited one of the hostels I had stayed at during an earlier stint in Chennai, on the first day. It was run by a Punjabi women's trust. The security guard at the gate hadn't changed since the time I was there in 2012. There was however, no room for me at this time. In any case, I was not quite sure if I wanted to live there again. I needed a fresh start. During my

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[87] For instance, the *Pinjra Thod* (Break the cage) movement in Delhi and many parts of India. See Lochan (2019);

time in that hostel, I had stayed in a large dorm with nine other girls who were undergraduate students at the time. As I stood in front of the hostel, remembered how there was a protest led by residents there, against the irregular water supply. I had then stayed aloof, as I had experienced such irregularities before and had got used to them. Chennai's water supply is becoming a bigger issue as each year passes by.

In the following days, I visited many hostels which I tried to find through multiple sources - on popular business advertising websites such as *Sulekha* and *Just Dial* and through my friends who lived in the city. I also explored some areas by foot, occasionally asking locals whether there were hostels around.

The living conditions of many of the women's hostels I visited was less than desirable. While I had always lived in modest accommodations (I lived in cheap women's hostels in Chennai, as a student in 2011 and 2012), I was not prepared for the rooms and facilities (or lack of them) that I came across in some of the hostels. Furthermore, I was surprised by the fact that the monthly rent at these hostels were usually higher than the ones I had stayed in. The existence of over-crowded and poorly ventilated hostels is testimony to the high demand for women's accommodation in Chennai, and the increasing number of women moving to the city seeking work and higher studies opportunities (see Kandavel, 2018). But how did these hostels operate under such conditions? Scholars like Krishnan (2016) and Melkote and Tharu (1983) argue that the main function of hostels is not to provide good quality services and facilities for a reasonable rent, rather, to assure that women remained 'pure' and 'untouched' - as they were when they first arrived. Once security and reputation were guaranteed, the other factors could be overlooked, without many consequences. The threat of arbitrary eviction and lack of affordable options for single women often dissuaded the residents from protesting (Krishnan, 2016; Pothukuchi, 2003; Melkote & Tharu 1983).

Fig 3.4 Room in a women's hostel in Anna Nagar, Chennai. Notice the congestion. There were no windows in this room.

A recurring issue I came across in hostels was overcrowding. Often, the rooms lacked storage facilities too, which exacerbated the situation of clutter and overcrowding. Quite a few rooms I saw had little or no ventilation and, in many cases, no natural light. I was offered a single room in a hostel, but it had no windows to the outside and no access to natural light (see figure 3.5). These spaces did not seem conducive for mental wellbeing, and safety, such as fire hazards. Upon reflection, I realized that I had not considered my own wellbeing as a factor in the selection of my field site. Additionally, the hostels I visited in the first three days were smaller, with a capacity of 20-35 women at a time, which was not ideal for the process of recruiting participants.

After three days of exploration, I was starting to feel dejected. Staying with my friend's mother was not helping my fieldwork preparation either. She would ask me every day if I had read the Bible before I went to bed, warning me of Christ's impending return. She urged me to download a bible application on my phone. When I got back from my daily exploring, she would also try to involve me in her quarrels with her daughter-in-law. These quarrels, in particular, became an uncomfortable situation for me, although the food she provided me with love and generosity was exceptionally good. I decided to leave, in the interests of progressing my research. The difficulty

Fig 3.5: Single room in another women's hostel in Anna Nagar, Chennai. There was no natural light in this room. The window opened to a closed off space with another multi-storey building inches away from it.

involved in such a move was that most of my friends had, by then, moved out of the city[88]. The impact of witnessing the conditions in the hostels I had explored, along with the rather uncomfortable situation with my friend's mother made me perplexed. I carefully considered my other options. I remembered an acquaintance, Danny, whom I had I met through a close friend a couple of years ago. He had been flatting with some co-students in an area of the city

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[88] This is a trend increasingly seen among contemporary Indian youth employed in the metros. Not only do they migrate to the city, they are often mobile between cities, once established in their careers. I observed this trend among my participants as well. While a majority of my participants stayed on in Chennai, there were three that moved to other cities like Bangalore and Hyderabad, prominent service industry hubs in India.

not far from my location. I decided to contact him, via my friend. Luckily enough for me, one of Danny's flat mates had been away, visiting his family in a neighboring state, and his space was temporarily available. I met Danny at his flat on the same day and discussed the situation. This flat, which four men in their mid-20s had rented was not in the best condition, but offered me more privacy and peace of mind, both of which seemed crucial at that point of time. I moved my luggage to their flat the following morning and continued my quest for a suitable hostel to conduct my study. It had become clear to me by that point that it was not sufficient to find just 'any place' with a large pool of potential respondents; I had to find a place where I could live comfortably. Additionally, due to funding constraints, I had to ensure that it was cheap.

On my fifth day in Chennai, I was chatting with a woman on a public bus. She was from my city in Kerala, and described her hostel to me, saying that her hostel probably had room for me. I decided to go and have a look at the hostel the following day. When I arrived, the warden was not there. The assistant warden told me that she wasn't sure if there was a vacancy for me, advising me to talk to the warden instead. I had a quick look around the hostel and was convinced that it was the best among the ten hostels I had seen. Not only did it seem more livable in terms of space and natural light, it had more than 100 residents who were in tertiary study or employment. The rent was affordable. This is the hostel I eventually chose for my fieldwork.

Before I proceed to the next section where I discuss the hostel in more detail, I would like to summarize the main issues I encountered in the ten hostels I had seen in my exploration stage. First, overcrowding. This was perhaps the most visible problem for most (eight out of ten) of the hostels I had visited. In a city of 7 million, space is a precious resource. For private women's hostels, providing residents with the comfort of space did not seem like a priority. Space was over-used to a point where clutter had become the norm. Bunk beds and communal toilets were used to maximize the utility of limited space. I had, at an early stage, considered taking a room that offered free Wi-Fi as part of the rent package. They had a 'four-sharing' room, where only one bed was occupied, which was the best option available to me at the time. The bunk beds were arranged so close to each other in a tiny room, perhaps suitable for one or two people. The space between the bunk beds was a narrow strip wide enough for one person to stand up in, at a time.

Second, lack of ventilation and natural light. Many hostels seemed to have de-prioritized facilities essential for wellbeing such as ventilation and natural light. Having a window to an open space was a rare luxury to come by. To avoid the clutter and overcrowding, I had inquired for single rooms. I saw two single rooms, both of which did not provide ventilation, despite the significantly higher rent they charged. Neither had access to sunlight. Third, architectural flaws. Eight out of the ten women's hostels I visited were in buildings whose structure was not suited for the purpose they were serving. They were set up in buildings that were clearly not originally planned as hostels. Often hostels were set up inside residential apartment buildings, taking up one or two of the floors. This is different to the traditional hostels in the Indian cities that were designed for the purpose. The unregulated expansion of hostels in makeshift buildings not suited for the purpose is also an outcome shaped by neoliberalism. One of the hostels I visited was set up in a large independent villa in an expensive residential neighbourhood. Common spaces in such residential buildings, such as dining spaces, were partitioned using screens made of light material such as plywood. Such use of space meant that many 'rooms' were created in spaces that did not have access to the in-built windows and ventilation. These buildings posed multiple safety issues such as fire hazards.

Entering the field site: Observing the physicality of the space, its social dimensions and commencing participant observation

Fig 3.6: My room in Carmel Hostel. Notice the natural light and the green outside

The ethnographic fieldwork for this thesis was conducted primarily in a women's hostel in Chennai, India. The women's hostel, which I shall call Carmel, was located centrally in the city near several reputed tertiary education institutions and not far from its traditional commercial centres. As discussed above, I zeroed down on Carmel after exploring many other hostels in and around the central city area. It was only on my second visit to Carmel that I was able to talk to the warden about my project and secure a space. I was able to establish trust and goodwill with the warden following our first meeting. There was only one space available at the time. A 'double-sharing' room with a

bunk bed. The hostel had two buildings, called 'old block' and 'new block'. The older building (old block), where the warden's office was located, was hidden away from the road, while the newer one (new block) was adjacent to the busy road, and a short walk (about a minute) away from the old block. The old block had slightly cheaper rent than the new block[89] and seemed to have a larger proportion of working women than the newer block, which was dominated by tertiary students belonging to a nearby professional college. On both occasions, I stayed in the old block. The hostel belonged to a Catholic congregation that had a presence across many parts of India and was run by nuns who belonged to that congregation. The warden, Sister Nirmala (a pseudonym), was accommodating to my needs as a researcher. She read through the information sheet (see appendix 1), and provided me with the option of short term stay (less than a year), without the usual time-bound contract and advance payment.

The main difference I had noticed between Carmel Hostel and the other hostels I had seen was the fact that Carmel's buildings were designed specifically to serve the needs of a large hostel. It was among the older hostels in the city that were built decades ago in a traditional style to cater for (mainly) unmarried women working or studying in the city in the stage before married life. Many of the other hostels I visited were clearly born out of the growing need for space to accommodate single women, who are largely considered unsuited to non-hostel renting and housing in the city by their families and society at large, especially when they first arrive in the city.

Fig 3.7: Typical lunch at the hostel. Rice and vegetables. Non-vegetarian food was available twice or thrice a week.

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[89] The rent at Carmel Hostel was the lowest among those I visited in my exploratory stage

The old block (where my room was located) had spacious corridors, communal spaces and relatively large rooms. As mentioned earlier, the old block was hidden from the busy central road, at the end of a small pathway that led to the hostel and an adjacent apartment complex. Walking up the path, one could see a spacious patio furnished with a coffee table and outdoor plastic chairs, where at most times during the day, one would encounter a few young women relaxing, reading the day's newspapers or engaging in conversation. During my second fieldtrip, state elections were nearing, and many young women engaged in political discussions in the patio. The leading dailies in both English and Tamil were available on the coffee table for anyone to read. The warden's office was visible from the patio. The building itself had three floors and a large terrace on the third floor. The first and second floor had twelve rooms each, the most common of them being four-sharing rooms. Larger rooms were shared by six people and there were four rooms in both floors that were rented out on a two-

Fig 3.8: The patio stocked with newspapers and outdoor chairs.

sharing basis. On the top floor there were fewer rooms. A couple of four-sharing rooms, a couple of two sharing rooms and a large, eight-sharing room. The rest of the area on the top floor was a dedicated social space, and a space to lay out laundry. Food, as in other hostels was provided by the management, the expenses of which were included in the rent. My rent was Rupees 4500 (NZD 100) per month inclusive of all expenses: power, boarding and food.

Breakfast, lunch and dinner were provided every day, and coffee/tea or plain milk were available twice a day.

During my stay there, the warden asked me a few times whether I was satisfied with the food quality/taste. To me the food was satisfactory. In fact, I enjoyed the food quite a bit. Most residents, however, complained about the food. For many this was their first hostel experience, and hostel food rarely matches up to the quality and taste of home-made food. Additionally, the repetitiveness of the menu perhaps made it less satisfying to residents who have been there for a significant period. Many would get food from outside a few times a week. There were many food options around the hostel which catered to all budgets. In my experience (I have lived in several hostels since my high-school days) however, expression of dissatisfaction about the food was a pattern seen in every hostel I've lived in.

Breakfast and lunch were prepared by hostel staff early in the morning (from about 5 a.m.) during weekdays. Since all residents were either working or studying, lunch had to be available before they left for work. Residents would pack their metallic or Tupperware lunch boxes at breakfast time. Dinner was the main meal during the week, and was served every night from about 7 p.m. There were no restrictions on the amount of rice and curry (usually *sambar*, *rasam* or *kaarakulambu*) you could take. However, special items like fried vegetables, fried fish, chicken and eggs were restricted to one serving. A bell would ring to indicate that dinner was ready. Residents came according to their convenience, although the food usually ran out by about half past eight. During my first field trip, the gate would shut at 9 p.m. ('curfew' time), which was revised and advanced to 8.30 p.m. during the second field trip[90]. Thus residents who returned to the hostel closer to the curfew time often risked missing dinner.

Participant Observation

The term 'participant observation' was coined by Malinowski in the 1920s, and refers to the method of data collection within ethnography wherein the researcher takes part in the everyday activities of her participants, gathering information from within the context (Given, 2008). According to O'Reilly (2008), "participant observation is the main method of ethnography and involves taking part as a member of a community while making mental and then written, theoretically informed observations" (p. 150). Within the various strategies of participant observation, I adopted the 'observer as participant' strategy for this thesis (Gold, 1957). With this strategy, the observer is also a participant of the social and physical context of the research site, not a detached and removed observer.

I was warmly welcomed to the hostel community by my roommate Asha (all participants were given pseudonyms). On the very day I arrived, she insisted that I join her for dinner. Dinnertime was very lively. The dining hall (mess hall) was located on the ground floor (floor one), and would be full during weeknights, with about 40 to 50 residents eating there at

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[90] During the first fieldtrip the curfew was 9 p.m.

a time, sometimes leading to a lack of space. Many residents took the food up to their rooms and ate it there. Some came a bit later. Dinner was the main occasion for socializing. Women would engage in discussions on topics ranging from celebrity gossip, relationships and everyday happenings in their lives to feminism and politics. On most days, the TV would be going in the dining hall, usually playing a Tamil music TV station. The videos that appeared on TV were often conversation starters.

I had placed on the notice board a hand-written note about my research and informed the staff about it, to gather participants and interest. Dinnertime and other social occasions in communal spaces were sites where participant

Fig 3.9: Dining hall in Carmel Hostel

recruitment and later, observation was carried out. A couple of months into the fieldwork, I would go on shopping trips, to restaurants and for other outings with hostel residents who had become research participant. Interactions with the staff, and the staff-resident relationships also gave me some background data that was useful for the thesis.

Fieldnotes

An important tool in the process of participant observation is the recording of fieldnotes. Fieldnotes form a crucial part of ethnographic data collection (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). I employed this method extensively in the research for this thesis. While some scholars argue that fieldnotes are meant exclusively for the reference of the researcher (Shwandt, 1997), an increasing number of ethnographers use them as data that can be reproduced in the final research text (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995; O'Reilly, 2008). Fieldnotes play multiple functions. They are the starting point of the data analysis and reflexivity (Given, 2008). For the reader, they can be helpful to understand the researcher's positionality and experience. O'Reilly (2008) argues that it is important to record one's observations during the first encounter in the field. According to Fetterman (1998), fieldnotes

are of two kinds: observations and speculative reflections. Here, I present excerpts from my earliest fieldnotes. While the first two are more of observations, the third one is predominantly a speculative reflection, although all three have a mix of both elements.

27/01/2015

Seeking access to the hostel

I met the warden of Carmel Hostel, Sister Nirmala [a Catholic nun] at around 3pm today in her office. Hearing my name, she asked me if I was Catholic. I, of course, could not mention that I was irreligious. I discussed with her the rich and ancient history of Catholicism in my home state, Kerala. Later in the conversation, I also discussed my view that the Catholic church often wanders away from the teachings and values of Jesus, which she agreed to. I believe the theological conversations helped in building trust and convincing her to let me stay.

28/01/2015

First day at the hostel

I arrived with my luggage at about 10am. The assistant warden gave me the key to the room and indicated that my roommate had gone to her college and would be back in the afternoon. The hostel staff, like the warden are very kind and welcoming towards me. They helped me with my big suitcase. As I walked into my room, I saw branded shoes neatly arranged on the floor and branded cosmetics in the cupboard. My first impressions of my roommate were being formed in my 'meaning-making-machine'. She belongs to an (upper?) middle class family. She is brand conscious. Perhaps class conscious too? I hardly ever buy branded products.

Upon her arrival from college we engaged in a conversation to get to know each other. Asha is from the southern part of Tamil Nadu and is studying engineering, in the field of Information Technology. The conversation, however continued for a long while- to about two hours (if not more), wandering into the realm of our worldviews, feminism and religion. She is fascinated by my research topic and keen to know about my politics. We seem to have bonded instantly. During dinner time she was eager to "show-off" her "new room-mate from New Zealand" to all her friends in the hostel. I have only been in New Zealand for a few months, yet I am already experiencing the operation of the symbolic capital achieved through being associated with a nation

that has benefited from colonization (the colonial habitus!). This 'othering' of me is worrisome, however, and goes against my conviction of being able to relate with my participants as one of them. But I think it has a few advantages too. My 'exotic' status seems to have roused curiosity among many residents of the hostel, which perhaps would make it easier to spread word about my research and seek participants.

07/02/2015

Reflections on the first two weeks

Within the first few hours of moving here and over dinner sessions, I have noticed a divide in the hostel. The university students flock together, mingling mostly amongst themselves, while the working women formed their own smaller groups. This division, however, isn't clear cut. There are crossovers. But it does appear to be a larger pattern. An obvious factor in this would be the age group, but age itself is a contentious factor, as there are many post graduate students and some PhDs. There seems to be other differences. A large proportion of the students appear to be more Westernized (often identified with term 'urbane'), many of whom wear short shorts, sleeveless tops, and trendy haircuts. Perhaps it is the cosmopolitan nature of college in Chennai that drives this difference? The working women appear more 'traditional', usually wearing long, colourful cotton nighties, loose, cotton pyjama sets and kurta-churidars[91]. Many of them have moved to Chennai after their studies. I can see a difference in the range of gadgets they use too. Going by the 'things'- their material belongings - it seems many students are from more economically better-off backgrounds than the working women, although all belong to what would be considered 'middle-class' within the Indian context.

By virtue of my status as a University student, and because I have been introduced to the hostel community via my student-room-mate, I am categorized as belonging to the first group. This is limiting, as I seek research participants from both groups. Unlike my experience in other hostels during the exploratory stage, the working women here do not seem enthusiastic to come and talk to me, and I consider this to be as a result of the sheer number of women here, and the apparent lack of interaction between college-goers and working women. Smaller hostels perhaps encouraged more

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[91] A traditional South Asian apparel consisting of a long top worn along with full-length bottoms and a shawl.

interaction. I contemplated changing the hostel because of this, but now I have decided to stay. Such a division perhaps speaks of something that is important to understand. Or maybe it doesn't. But I don't know what challenge awaits me elsewhere, so I shall take up this one.

As demonstrated in these excerpts, the fieldnotes are reflexive accounts that record my observations in the field site. They also discuss the ethical dilemmas and challenges I confronted during the fieldwork. For instance, in the first excerpt I discus how I was unable to reveal to the warden that I was irreligious, although the community I come from is Catholic. Similar circumstances have been discussed by many ethnographers, some of whom have expressed discomfort over having to hide aspects of their identity (for example, sexual orientation, faith) to gain access to the field (see Wolf 1996a, Edelman, 1995). However, in my case, this was not a unique experience. Having faced bullying in school for not being religious, I had become aware of the negative connotations atheism and agnosticism invoked among deeply religious communities and institutions. It was not an option for me to be honest in that situation.

Getting (to know) participants: the value of building friendships

The participants were all young women who had moved to Chennai from villages or smaller towns in and around Tamil Nadu. All participants were in the age range of 19 to 29 years, with the average age being 23 years. There were very few women above the age of 27 in the hostel, as most women get married in their mid to late twenties. There were two 'categories' among my participants. Firstly, students (fourteen in number), engaged in tertiary education. Secondly, working women (fifteen in number). My participants were never married, with one exception. Satya revealed to me on the last day of the fieldwork that she was a divorcee, but did not want others to know about this as she feared stigma.

As far as economic background goes, all participants fell under the broad categorization of middle-class in the Indian context, although the economic situation in their families varied greatly. The students in the hostel (who had moved to Chennai for higher studies as opposed to employment) were being supported by their families, and were from relatively better off families than the working women, a majority of whom had to earmark a significant share of their income to support their support their families. Many of the working women had done

their education in smaller cities and towns close to their family homes, thereafter moving to Chennai for work.

Of the 29 women, 15 were Hindu (51.7%), 13 were Christian (44.8%) and 1 was Muslim (3.5%). The religious composition of Tamil Nadu, on the other hand is 87.6 % Hindu, 6.1 % Christian and 5.8% Muslim (Census of India, 2011). The hostel being run by a Catholic management perhaps explains the disproportionate representation of Christians in among its residents. However, it is important to note that five participants (17.2%) were from outside Tamil Nadu. As far as Caste composition went, a majority (16 participants, 55.1%) belonged to Other Backward Castes. Five (5 participants, 17.2%) idenitified as being from the Scheduled Castes and eight (8 participants, 27.5%) were from the Forward Castes[92].

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[92] Other Backward Caste: refers to an official categorisation of a range of caste groups identified by the government of India as being socially and educationally disadvantaged. OBC omprises of certain minority groups and some caste groups in the lower and mid-level of the *varna* system (caste hierarchy).
Scheduled Caste: refers to the constitutional category recongising marginalized communities at the lowest level in the caste hierarchy, otherwise called Dalits.
Forward caste: refers to higher caste groups who are generally socially and economically advantaged groups in the Indian society.

Table 3.2: Participant information

Participant Pseudonym	Age 2015/2016	Occupation	Migrated from
Aiswarya	22/23	Employed: Office Administrator	Southern Tamil Nadu
Alisha	20/21	Student: Media studies	East coast of Tamil Nadu
Ammu*	25	Employed: Data analyst	Outside Tamil Nadu: a southern Indian state
Anila**	27	Employed: Media Professional	Central Tamil Nadu
Christina**	26	Employed: Government of India	Outside Tamil Nadu: Eastern state
Daya	22/23	Student: Journalism	Central Tamil Nadu
Geetika	25/26	Employed: Office administrator	Tamil Nadu-Kerala border region
Indrani	22/23	Employed: Data analyst	Southern Tamil Nadu
Jennifer	22/23	Student: English Literature	Outside Tamil Nadu: a southern Indian state
Jomol	19/20	Student: Physics	East coast of Tamil Nadu
Kala	21/22	Student: Computer Science	Northern Tamil Nadu
Kavitha**	26	Employed: Call centre/customer care	Southern Tamil Nadu
Mahadevi**	29	Employed: Office administrator	Central Tamil Nadu
Malavika	22	Student: Information Technology	Northern Tamil Nadu
Nandini	26/27	Employed: teacher	South central Tamil Nadu
Nasreen	19/20	Student: Computer Science	Southern Tamil Nadu
Nimmy	20/21	Student: Computer Science	Central Tamil Nadu
Nisha*	21	Student: History	Outside Tamil Nadu: a central Indian state.
Nithya**	24	Employed: Call centre/customer care	Southern Tamil Nadu
Prabha	24/25	Employed: Social Worker	Southern Tamil Nadu

Priyachelvi	23/24	Employed: Office Administrator	Southern Tamil Nadu
Rambha**	23	Employed: Marketing	Southern Tamil Nadu
Ramola	22/23	Student: Chemistry	Outside Tamil Nadu: a central Indian state
Rema	25/26	Employed: Software engineer	Central Tamil Nadu
Rosie	20/21	Student: Computer Science	Southern Tamil Nadu
Samantha*	21	Student: History	Tamil Nadu-Kerala border region.
Satya*	27	Employed: Lecturer (temporary)	South-western Tamil Nadu
Sithara	24	Student: IT	Northern Tamil Nadu
Sonu**	21/22	Student: English literature	Western Tamil Nadu
*new participants from the 2016 field trip ** I was unable to reconnect with these participants in 2016			

I recruited participants directly through interactions in common areas such as the dining hall, laundry space and patio. From the day I arrived, I engaged in socializing, and trying to get to know as many residents as possible. During the process of socializing, I would let them know about my role as a researcher in the hostel.

My general approach was to get to know my participants informally before talking about the possibility of an interview. This strategy was guided by the work of Tillman-Healy (2003) who argues that establishing an informal relationship with the research participants is an effective way to reduce hierarchies between the researcher and the researched. Citing its usefulness as an ethnographic method for researchers grounded in postmodernist philosophies, Tillman-Healy (2003) introduced the term 'friendship as a method'. Tillman-Healy (2003) also discusses how friendship cannot be forced. In my experience, it was not only desirable to build friendships in the field, it was also inevitable. Not doing so would have been very difficult.

During the initial weeks, there seemed to be a flurry of interest in my project. Many residents were curious and wanted to know more about me and the project. However, in the first few weeks, I did not feel in the right mind-set to start interviewing. I wanted time to get used to the hostel and prepare myself mentally for interviews. I was nervous about my lack of

experience as an ethnographer and spent time reading about interviewing and participated in online PhD forums. By March 2015, I felt ready to interview people, but I was confronted by the realization that the initial curiosity and aura around 'a girl from New Zealand doing research about young women in Chennai' had waned. As a result, I was met with reluctance and/or indifference from many hostel residents.

All potential participants were given the information sheet (appendix one) and had the opportunity to ask any questions they had about the interviews. What helped me through this situation was the friendships I had built in the one month that I had been there. I realized that the indifference came from those with whom I had not yet formed a bond. My new friends were eager to be part of the project. Additionally, some outside my newly created friend circle, like Geetika, Malavika and Sonu, approached me after hearing about the project from their friends or roommates. This was heartening for me. Thus, the friendship approach was very helpful. Once some of the hostel residents agreed to be interviewed, they were given the consent form (see appendix 2) and we discussed each point. I talked about the steps I'd taken to ensure that their rights and privacy were respected. For example, pseudonyms have been used for all participants and administrative staff at the hostel (as well as the hostel name itself). Any identifiable details have been removed and non-essential details have been altered. Photographs have been taken in ways that obscure those in them, and faces, where they have appeared even partially, have been obscured. All recordings and photographs were stored in a private hard drive stored in a locked cabinet and backed up on the University of Canterbury server. I also indicated that all data would be destroyed ten years after the start of the project (that is, 2025). After signing the consent forms (which were stored in a locked cabinet at the hostel and then a locked filing cabinet once I was back in Christchurch), I organised the time and place of the interviews with participants.

Interviews

> An ethnographic interview is like an in-depth conversation that takes place within the context of reciprocal relationships, established over time, based on familiarity and trust (O'Reilly, 2008, p.125).

Ethnographic researchers often utilise semi-structured and/or unstructured one-to-one interviews to capture the complexity and nuances of participants' positions (Given, 2008).

While semi-structured interviews can be more organised as they follow a discussion or question guide (to varying degrees), unstructured interviews are non-directive and are more like conversations (in which the researcher has topics but not specific questions). The focus of both styles is to provide enough flexibility and opportunity for the research participant to be able to articulate their experiences and perspectives (Bryman, 2004). While I used both unstructured and semi-structured interviewing, I favoured the latter. While both disrupted the power imbalance between myself as researcher and the participants, enabling flexibility and the participants being able to determine the direction of the interviews, semi-structured interviews allowed me to pursue the topics I considered relevant to the research. However, there were particular situations where an unstructured interviewing style was utilized. For instance, in some cases, participants sought me out to discuss something they had on their minds. These interviews thus occurred more spontaneously than the semi-structured interviews.

Before entering the field site, I had prepared a list of topics that I wanted to investigate based on my research question. I hoped to find twenty to twenty-five participants to interview in 2015 and hopefully again in 2016. During the research proposal stage, I had planned to travel with participants to their family homes to include insights from there, but this plan had to be dropped, as it was logistically, time-wise and funding-wise not viable. Eventually, my participant number was twenty-nine (see table above), and the number of interviews done was twenty-four during the first field trip and sixteen during the second (see below).

The interview topics and questions were informed by the literature I had engaged with, my own experiences of living in hostels, my participant observation, issues that were raised in earlier interviews, and my activist interests (feminist groups and queer rights activism in university and outside). The proliferation of dowry-related crime, sexual harassment and the 'sexual double standard', hetero-patriarchal laws and gendered social norms were among the topics that were discussed and debated within activist groups I was (some of which I still am) a part of. In the wake of the 2012 Delhi gang rape, we spoke against the formal and informal restrictions that effectively nullified women's right to freedom of movement (guaranteed under article 19 of the Indian constitution), thus giving legitimacy to violence against those who transgress such norms. Apart from introductory questions about the reasons participants moved to Chennai, the topics I prepared for my interviews included the following: first impressions of the hostel and living in Chennai; description of work or study; relationships,

for example, with family and friends at home, others in the hostel (including administrators), work colleagues or student peers and/or romantic relationships; travel/commuting in the city; social lives in the city; plans for the future (e.g. career, marriage, other); perspectives on or potentially experiences of gendered practices (for example, clothing practices, dowry, son preference, violence, other).

My first interview was held in March 2015 with Kavitha (27) and Nithya (24), who both worked at an insurance company's call centre. They were cousins and roommates in a two-sharing room. The interview consisted of open-ended questions which I had refined from my original topic list during my first weeks at Carmel Hostel. It was a joint interview, which sometimes took the form of a discussion between the three of us. Kavitha and Nithya also requested that the interview not be audio-recorded. I therefore took extensive notes during the interview. Having to take notes was a difficult task, especially when the conversation took the form of a discussion between the three of us. This prompted me to try and arrange one-to-one interviews wherever possible. However, the group discussion quality of the interview had its advantages. Kavitha and Nithya were very comfortable and animated. After the interview I wrote an account of the interview using the notes I'd taken while my memory was still fresh.

The following interviews were all one-to-one. The participants generally chose the venue – often their rooms – and directed the flow of the conversation. Apart from that of Kavitha and Nithya, my interview with Mahadevi was also unrecorded, as per her directions. All other interviews were recorded using a voice recorder. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 100 minutes in length.

On some occasions, interviewing was challenging. Usually those were the ones where the length was shorter than 40 minutes (three interviews). Take the case of Sonu (21). During the first month in the hostel she was eager to participate and would knock on my room's door to ask about my progress and when she would be interviewed. On the interview day itself, however, she was very brief with her talk. I was unable to open up a naturally flowing discussion, so I decided to ask about the topics I had prepared. To a few of the questions I raised, her answer was that she had never thought about that issue, and therefore did not have an opinion. This would bring the discussion to an abrupt end, forcing me to move on to another topic rather awkwardly. Sonu's interview was in the beginning stages of the fieldwork. Thereafter, I tried to make my questions more open ended.

Most interviews were in English and often a mix of English and Tamil[93]. A few participants preferred to speak in Tamil alone, and one participant spoke in Malayalam[94]. I transcribed all interviews myself and did the required translation to English.

Field trip phase II

I returned to Chennai for my second field trip equipped with more skills, confidence and with a two-fold agenda: to catch up with participants from the first phase, and to fill-in the gaps in the data that I had collected in 2015. Many things had changed since the first trip. Asha, my roommate, along with a majority of the students had moved to (were moved to) the 'new block' in the hostel. The only vacancy that was available for me was in a four-sharing room. It was difficult to contact some of the participants from the previous field trip who had moved on in their lives. Prabha (25), whom I was able to contact via social media, had moved to a city in western India with her new husband, and she was expecting a baby. Some others, such as Kavitha and Nithya had left the hostel and I was unable to find their contact details. Nandini (27), although at the hostel, was busy with her new social media project after work and therefore was not available for a follow up interview. Daya (23) had begun her M.Phil. degree part time, while she was doing an internship as a content writer. She had moved to a new hostel, and I was able to catch up with her for an interview at a café. Ramola (23) had just finished her Master's degree and was preparing to vacate the hostel after living there for five years. She was moving to another big city in south India. Geetika (26) who had sworn not to get married, had fallen in love and was planning to get married and move out in a few months. In total, I was able to interview only twelve of the twenty-five participants from my first trip. Considering this, and the fact that there was some new interest in my project, I included four more participants in the research. The rapid change that occurred within the span of 6 to 7 months speaks to the liminality of the 'hostel phase' of these young women's life.

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[93] Tamil is the most widely spoken language in Tamil Nadu, the state where Chennai is located, and of which Chennai is the capital city.
[94] Malayalam is the most widely spoken language in Kerala, a neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu.

Photography and 'live online fieldnotes'

While the 'hegemony of text' still exists within ethnography and anthropology, technological advancement (especially with portable shooting equipment) has led to the rise in the use of photography and videography among researchers (O'Reilly, 2008). This rise is not simply in the number of visual ethnographies, but also that of 'regular' ethnographies that incorporate photographs (Pink, 2007).

I have used photographic images in most of the chapters of this thesis. During my fieldwork, I joined a private online forum for post-graduate ethnographers where the use of photography was a hot topic. One of the discussed strategies on the forum was to take at least one photograph in the field every day the researcher was present there. The rationale was that this image would add more detail to the day's recorded fieldnotes and provide a visual reference, more detail and consequently, better memory retention. Such images could also be used in the final report or thesis. I followed the 'rule' of 'at least one image a day' religiously. I used two devices to take photographs: my phone camera and a point and shoot digital camera. Most of the photos I took during my fieldtrip were taken using my phone-camera.

Another method that was being discussed on the forum was 'live online fieldnotes', whereby the researcher takes photographs of something she perceives as important for the study on her mobile device connected to the internet and uploads it live to a private blog or to the cloud. I also used this method, uploading and arranging my images on my (private) google drive storage with notes attached. The advantages of this were many. Apart from the obvious ones presented by the ability to record and jot details instantaneously, live uploading also ensured a time stamp which was useful when trying to make sense of my fieldnotes. Additionally, I could access the photographs and notes from any device which eliminated the possibility of losing notes (which is a concern with physical notes). One of the main concerns I took into account in implementing these strategies was security. I ensured that my google drive was protected with a two-factor authentication system[95].

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[95] A two factor authentication system requires anyone trying to access the account to provide not only the password, but also another detail- which should be a security question, secondary email verification or a -one time password authentication which is done through the account holder's personal phone.

Following the methodological innovations suggested by Marcus (1986), Willis & Trondman (2000) and others, to achieve contemporaneity in anthropology I adopted the strategy of collecting and interweaving my analysis with not only my personal reflections but also current affairs and trends in popular culture. For instance, in Chapter 7, I use film posters that were advertised at the time of my research, as a way of contextualising the topic of a preference for lighter skin colour, particularly for women. This method of interweaving primary data with surrounding events allows the research to be more clearly grounded and connected with the larger socio-economic, political and cultural dynamics of the particular context.

Analytic method: Thematic analysis

Data analysis within ethnography is often called "the messy business" of deriving meaning from the vast amount of data collected during the fieldwork process (O'Reilly, 2008 p. 15). I approached this process utilizing the principles of thematic analysis developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006). They argue it is used to "identify patterns across the dataset in relation to the research question […] although what interpretations are made of those patterns, are left to the researcher. This is because the techniques are separate from the theoretical orientation of the research." (Braun and Clarke, 2014 pp. 1-2). The flexibility of this analytic method enabled me to conduct a thematic analysis informed by a feminist poststructuralist theoretical approach. This involved a discourse oriented analytic approach in which I focused on participants' talk about their lives in order to understand how they discursively construct aspects of their gendered experiences as young women living in a particular socio-cultural context in a city in India. Hammersley, for example, considers how discourse analytic approaches can be used in ethnography, in particular to "generate data about the discursive resources or practices by which people construct social phenomena" (2005, p. 10).

With respect to my analytic process, I first familiarized myself with the data through transcription and reading through all the transcripts and fieldnotes several times. My photographs were also invaluable in aiding this process. This was followed by coding the transcripts and fieldnotes and collating the codes into themes. After reviewing and refining

these I identified four substantial thematic categories which are the focus of the following four analytic chapters: 'street harassment', dowry, marriage, and beauty practices. Within these, I focus on the ways in which participants make sense of, and negotiate, competing discourses of traditional Indian femininity and those that constitute the 'new Indian woman'. For example, traditional discourses of Indian womanhood inform participants' understandings of and practices related to dowry and marriage. While many participants framed these practices as desirable, they simultaneously acknowledged what was problematic and/or debated about them (see chapters five and six). For chapter seven, the theme of 'fair and lovely?' came directly from my photographic collection of the 'beauty products' in participants' rooms. These featured an array of skin lightening products, one of which was labelled 'Fair and Lovely'. The analysis in this chapter is therefore based more on my participant observation, photographs, and film posters we saw each day, and less so on interviews. The first substantive chapter (chapter 4), is based on a theme discussed in many informal contexts in and around the hostel, as well as in interviews. The broad theme I originally identified was 'safety in the city', however, I refined this to 'street harassment'. This enabled a more focused analysis of a gendered phenomenon experienced by most participants as they travelled around the city. In the following chapter, I explore participants', often ambiguous and contradictory, talk about 'street harassment' with respect to how this often regulates their movements and, for some, women's responsibility in provoking and/or avoiding such harassment.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the research methods employed in this thesis were explored in detail. Strategies ues used such as field notes, interviews, participant observation and thematic analysis were discussed. Importantly, I presented a reflexive account on my field work experience based on my data and anthropological notes. This account provides the reader with background information about the field site and my experiences and reflections as a researcher entering it. The following chapters present my data and findings organized into four chapters each covering an important theme emerging from the research.

Chapter 5

"Baby, will you come with me?" Young women's narratives of street harassment and safety in and around Chennai

One evening in May 2014, I boarded a private bus for an overnight journey to Chennai from Kochi. I had to travel by bus as I was unable to procure a train ticket, which is my preferred mode of travel. I secured a window seat as the journey started. It wasn't long before I noticed there were only three other passengers in the bus, who were getting off one by one. Within a couple of hours, there were just two of us: myself and another woman. I asked the other woman where she was travelling to, hoping that she would be there for the entire journey to Chennai. She, however, was getting off at Palakkad, which was a city we were fast approaching. Dusk hadn't fallen by that stage. I hoped with all my heart that somebody would get on the bus so I would no longer be alone. Minutes felt like hours. The night had fallen. Nobody got on the bus. I sat frozen, trying to ward off my darkest fears. Thoughts and images kept pouring in and the more I tried to avoid them, the stronger they got. The Delhi gang rape of 2012 was vivid in my memory.

It was just me, the driver and the cleaner in a private bus in the middle of the night. I yearned to see lights. There were none. The highway was long, lonely and dark. It was a moonless night. No one would hear me even if I screamed at the top of my voice. Getting off was also not an option. We were in the middle of nowhere, on the long highway to Chennai. I couldn't hold back my tears as I watched the shadows of the driver and cleaner through the faint curtain that separated us. I was about to scream when the bus stopped and one of the two approached me.

"Madam, have some food" he said in Tamil politely. "We will transfer you to another bus. There is no point going all the way to Chennai with just one passenger."
They arranged for another bus while I ate at the tiny highway eatery they had stopped at, amid curious stares. One of the people working in the eatery was a woman who appeared to be around my mother's age. Her presence was a relief. Shortly after, the

driver stopped another bus, which was almost full. As the driver and cleaner directed
me into the new vehicle, my heart was brimming with respect and gratitude.
I would think about this traumatic journey for many days to come. I realized that the
goodwill I felt for the driver and cleaner was not merely because they treated me
humanely. I was grateful for not being raped.

In recent times, street harassment in India has gained greater attention in media and public discourses (see Simon-Kumar, 2014; Natarajan, 2016). While it is difficult to get accurate national and regional statistics on street harassment, surveys with large sample sizes paint a grim picture. According to a 2016 report by Action Aid UK[96], 79% of women in India had experienced street harassment in some form. 80% of the respondents of a study by Madan & Nalla (2016) reported that they had experienced street harassment while waiting for buses. As discussed in Chapter one, the Delhi gang rape of 2012 marked a turning point in the conversation around street harassment in India (Raj & McDougal, 2014), leading to widespread debate and increased awareness about the issue. Jyoti Singh, a 23-year old medical student, accompanied by a male friend, was returning home from a cinema when she was beaten, tortured and gang raped by five men in a moving bus. Singh and her friend were the only passengers in the bus when the incident happened. She had bravely fought back while being attacked. The Indian media christened her 'Nirbhaya' (the fearless one). Jyoti Singh later died of the injuries sustained from the attack. This event led to mass protests, with thousands of women and men, predominantly young people, taking to streets across the country demanding safety for women in public spaces (Khan, 2016). The nation-wide upheaval resulted in the appointment of a high-level commission to investigate sexual violence in India and recommend legal and policy changes (Simon-Kumar, 2014).

Defining Street Harassment

In Chapter two, the ambiguity in terminology of street harassment was discussed. Here, I present a discussion on the lack of conceptual clarity on street harassment. This is demonstrated in the diverse frameworks that researchers have employed to define it. Bowman (1991) views street harassment as a process through which women are excluded from public life. Street harassment discourages women's free movement and therefore, Bowman (1991)

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[96] As cited in Times of India (79% of women in India faced public harassment, 2016).

defines it as a process of "informal ghettoization of women" (p.512). Gardner (1995), who conducted extensive empirical studies, defines 'public harassment' in terms of a 'continuum' (p.4), which aligns with Kelley's (1987) sexual violence continuum. Public harassment, according to Gardner, includes behaviour that can range from minor disruptions to the customary civility between strangers in public to violent assault, rape and murder. Laniya (2005), on the other hand, defines street harassment simply as "unsolicited verbal and/or non-verbal acts of a male stranger towards a female, solely on the basis of her sex, in a public place" (p.100).

In defining street harassment, Peoples (2008) raises the need for differentiating it from other forms of sexual harassment, such as workplace harassment and domestic sexual violence. The main distinctions that have been identified by Peoples (2008) are the following. Firstly, street harassment happens in public spaces, often in the presence, and in full view of other people, while other forms of sexual violence often occur in more private spaces. Secondly, street harassment is carried out by strangers, who may soon disappear into the crowd, or walk away. This makes it difficult for those affected to report such incidents and name the perpetrator, whereas sexual harassment occurs from people known to the victim. Lastly, sexual harassment is understood in terms of verbal and physical intrusions of sexual nature, but street harassment can include acts such as suggestive staring (Peoples, 2008). While these points raised by Peoples (2008) are useful in understanding the nature of street harassment, I suggest that they are not enough to distinguish street harassment as a separate category outside the larger conceptualization of sexual violence. I shall present my argument by addressing each of the three distinctions raised by Peoples (2008). Firstly, for instance, workplace sexual harassment is not always carried out privately. It can, and often does occur in the full view and with the knowledge of others in the workplace. Secondly, although the perpetrator is identifiable, there are factors, such as the power differential between the perpetrator and victim, that exist in workplace harassment, which makes it difficult for women to report such events. Lastly, uncomfortable and suggestive staring can also occur in domestic and workplace settings. Therefore, while acknowledging its particular features, I argue that street harassment should be located within the larger matrix of sexual violence, and not outside of it.

From a feminist poststructuralist perspective, street harassment, like other forms of sexual harassment is a manifestation of power relations that are constituted through dominant

gendered discourses. In Tamil Nadu, as is in the case of many other states in India, street harassment is represented in dominant discourses as a normalized and even expected behaviour on the part of men.

Entering shared spaces in the city

One of the important aspects of life in a city is the daily commute. As workers or students, the residents in Carmel Hostel had to travel in the city every day, for work, study and leisure activities. The hostel, as discussed in chapter one, is located in a convenient part of Chennai close to all forms of transportation. While some residents had their workplace or educational institution at a walking distance from the hostel, others relied upon public transportation, for example buses, auto-rickshaws[97], share autos[98] and the city trains. About eight residents[99] owned motorcycles (mopeds), two of whom were my research participants. The few girls that went out at night over weekends often did so with friends who had private transportation, or hired share-taxi services like *Uber* and *Ola*.

Fig. 4.1: 'Share-auto', a popular public transport option in Chennai city

The most common forms of street harassment experienced by my participants included unsolicited sexual attention in the forms of leering, commenting and physical contact from men.

Fig.4.2: Older model of a 'share-auto' in Chennai city

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[97] 'Auto-rickshaws' or 'autos' in short, are 3-wheeler taxiing motor vehicles famously called 'tuk tuks' some parts of the world.

[98] Share autos are traditionally larger autorikshaws shared between many passengers. Share autos stop at designated locations in the city, similar to buses. They are slightly more expensive than buses, but offer more comfort and more frequent stops.

[99] I could count eight motor scooters parked outside the hostel building, in the hostel premises on most evenings. Participants who used scooters indicated that they felt safe and comfortable commuting to work/study. For instance, Daya (22) who used her moped for transportation viewed Chennai as a safe city. She said she felt "absolutely safe" in Chennai, and that she had never faced street harassment. She indicated that she tried to avoid public transportation as much as possible, and completely avoided it after 9pm.

Commenting and leering were common occurrences when residents of Carmel Hostel commuted for work and study. Those men who passed comments were either spending their leisure time on the streets or passing by in private vehicles such as motorbikes and cars. Sometimes commenting occurred from public transportation vehicles such as auto-rickshaws.

These practices have been represented frequently in popular culture as an acceptable and expected practice for men (see Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2003; Nakassis, 2013; Krishnan, 2015). Through the normalization of leering and commenting, women are subjected to a constant, controlling male gaze. Touching and groping, although common, happened less frequently than leering and commenting. Other forms of physical contact included men brushing themselves against women and purposeful colliding into women. Several participants indicated it was primarily 'older' men that engaged in practices of physical contact:

Geetika: It can be difficult in crowded buses, trains and roads. When it is very crowded, men sometimes purposefully come and collide on to you, for no reason. Mostly [pause] we can leave out younger men of our age, 20-30. They are usually okay. It is the older men who engage in perverted things like colliding, touching and that sort of thing, men who are 40-45-50. Even those who are very old. I don't have any idea why older men behave like this.

Geetika's (25) sense of safety in public varied, depending upon certain ambient aspects such as crowdedness. She pointed out how some men utilized crowdedness as an excuse for colliding into women or 'accidentally' touching them. Her frustration in regards with harassment in the form of physical contact is also reflected in this account. She does not accept men's justification of such behaviour as accidental but rather describes it as 'purposeful' or deliberate. Jomol (19) also talks about street harassment, such as touching, primarily by 'older men'. She indicates how neither mode of transport nor location (small town or city) has any effect on the frequency of such practices:

Jomol: Everything happens actually- even in small-town buses, there are people putting hands on women passengers' breasts and bums. This I have seen both in my hometown and here. Not just in Chennai, even in small-town buses, there are people putting hands on women passengers' breasts and bums. And

	this putting hands on our body parts- I have experienced here- in share-autos. Wherever they get chances, men do these things- no matter where it is- city or village. They just need the right circumstance to make it happen (laughs).
Josephine:	Why do you think this happens?
Jomol:	Whenever I ask this question, the answer people provide is merely that it is men's nature. Especially older men do these things more often. In their 40s 50s and all. The man in the share auto- he was in his 50s I am sure. You know. I was trying to sit, and he was trying to brush his elbow on my breasts. My sister has seen so many things [pause] like [pause] a guy was masturbating in a city bus [laughs]. There were plenty of people in the bus. My sister and her friend were sitting, and he was standing. After a while she felt something liquid-ish on her shoulder, she turned around to see this man doing this […] he was made to leave the bus- he was very drunk.
Josephine:	So places that are crowded are prone to this sort of behaviour?
Jomol:	Not only crowded. The first incident I mentioned happened when there was no one around[100].
Josephine:	True- in both cases- too crowded or too empty, it is a bit dangerous.
Jomol:	I can't say it is dangerous- they just do it. We can't categorize places as safe or dangerous. It can happen anywhere, anytime. I find even in the safest place, things are happening […] women have to be cautious, no matter where they are, sadly. You can't trust people. Only after the Delhi rape case came to light, rape thing became such a big issue in India. Before that, it was happening, but the publicity and importance this rape case got made it a crime in the spotlight. Only when someone in the family is affected do we take notice. People are many a time insensitive to news. That's a problem. Even girls, if something like [pause] if I say something happened to me, they will be like, 'Oh, such things happen'. That's it. Only when it happens to them do they understand its gravity.

Jomol argued that harassment could happen under most circumstances, in both public and private spaces across geographic locations, pointing at the universality of sexual violence

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[100] Earlier in the conversation she mentioned being cornered and groped by an older man when she had entered his shop to take refuge from the rain. She way only 17 when this happened, and was new in the city.

against women. Later in the conversation she talked about the harassment she faced in the house of her relative who was her 'local guardian' in the city. Jomol's assertion that risk of harassment is not limited to a particular time or space (public or private) alludes to research done by scholars who draw attention to the fact that mainstream discourses on safety disproportionally focus on stranger violence in public spaces, invisibilizing the (often greater) danger within private spaces (see for instance, Sur, 2012). Significantly, she mentions that people say, in response to her experiences of harassment that it is "men's nature" and that "things happen", which indicates firstly, the normalization of street harassment, and the reproduction of these norms through women's talk on the issue.

As with Geetika's narration, Jomol also suggests that crowds do not necessarily protect a woman from being touched or even masturbated on (Jomol's sister). Thus, a woman in public is never 'safe' from street harassment as it can occur anywhere. This ambiguity, coupled by the constant awareness of harassment as described by Jomol is a manifestation of 'rape culture' which is sustained, in part, by the taken-for-granted features of everyday heterosexuality that normalise male sexual aggression and female sexual passivity (Gavey, 2005). Here Martha McCaughey elaborates:

> Rape culture depends upon the construction of women as a category of persons desirable to men, unable to resist men's attacks, and therefore available as objects with which men can satisfy a variety of desires, including the desire to prove their manhood. [...] [Rape culture] lived out by women and men, is not just a psychological, attitudinal or ideological matter. It's a material reality. Gender is no less bodily or material because it is discursive or textual. *Social institutions seep into our bones*. The standards of gender operate through meaning systems which themselves operate through the lived body (emphasis added) (1997, p. 38).

It is this construction of gendered social relations which provides the context which supports street harassment (and other sexual violence against women). For example, discourses about masculinity and femininity get played out through actions that are constructed as 'natural', and therefore expected. Both Geetika and Jomol reflect on why street harassment of women by men occurs. While Geetika says she simply doesn't understand why it happens, Jomol indicates that she has thought about and discussed this with others. She draws on popular

essentialist discourses which frame such practices as being a result of 'men's nature'. This works to locate men as 'naturally' sexually predatory and aggressive and as somehow out of control of their sexual 'urges'. Gavey (1989) argues that dominant discourses appeal to 'common sense' by appearing to portray the 'natural' 'truth' rather than socially constructed meanings. In the construction of masculinity (articulated in the extracts above), street harassment is an inevitable and natural occurrence. The onus of avoiding sexual harassment, thus, falls on women's shoulders. Such a system of knowledge (in this case, taken as 'common sense') provides grounds for victim blaming.

Most participants indicated that commenting was more likely to happen when they passed by groups of young men 'hanging out' on street corners, bus stops or less crowded alleyways. Nakassis (2013) argues that this kind of behaviour from groups of young men is part of masculine youth culture in which young men 'show style' in order to establish their position in a peer group. The activities that marked 'showing style' are usually those that transgressed the 'normal' value system of the adult society, such as openly smoking, drinking, leering and commenting (Nakassis, 2013). The-is points to a contrast between younger men and older men's practices of street harassment. Young men find camaraderie engaging in harassing practices such as commenting while in groups, and they are not ashamed about it. As Nakasis (2013) notes, it is culturally sanctioned, and therefore, an expected aspect of young men's behaviour. On the other hand, older people are expected to be respectable and well-mannered within Tamil culture. This perhaps one way of explaining why street harassment practices conducted by older men (as in the extracts above) appear to be 'accidental' or more covert.

Commenting happened in various forms, for example, making noises to capture the attention of women, and then making gestures and facial expressions such as winking and air-kissing[101]. I personally experienced this mostly from passing vehicles, when I walked the streets by the hostel sometimes by myself and often accompanied by other hostel residents. Participants mentioned that men made comments that were lewd and sexualizing. For instance, Geetika told me that the most common phrases used for commenting were '*figure'* or '*semma figure'* and '*semma piece'* which crudely translates to 'nice figure' and 'nice piece'. These terms are not uncommon in movies, songs and casual language among young people. The use of the term 'piece' to refer to a woman demonstrates how, in everyday slang,

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[101] The term 'air kissing' is used here to denote the making of a gesture of kissing, without physical contact.

that women are constructed as passive objects. Catherine's roommates, who overheard our conversation, agreed that the terms '*figure*' and '*piece*' were used often. They responded with their own experience. One roommate said the following:

Roommate: I once got called a 'flat screen'. They [boys] didn't shout it out, but they were talking among themselves and laughing, and I could hear them as I passed by. They were referring to my then-flatter chest! [laughs, and others join in laughter]

The sharing of relatable experiences in the environment of the hostel room allowed women to reflect on them from a safe distance. Laughter, in this context, performed the function of lightening the sombre atmosphere, creating a comfortable ambience which enabled opening up and discussing experiences. The effect of laughter in invoking a feeling of empathy and camaraderie is discussed by Chubin (2014) where she refers to a similar context of friends sharing experiences of street harassment. The mood in the hostel room (above) was one of shared catharsis and camaraderie. However, this changed as Geetika reflected on their laughter:

Geetika: We are laughing now, but it's such an unpleasant thing to face, and we face it all the time! When we are walking through the road, some men pass comments from their motorbikes or cars "Hi baby, do you wanna come with me?" Sometimes they follow us for a bit. I don't know how to explain this sort of behaviour […].if there are enough numbers of people in the streets, then it seems less dangerous, but if there is no one on the street and somebody is following me, I feel very scared and helpless. "Hi baby…." comments happen in the morning and night. At night it's scarier, but it happens all the time.

Geetika's response to the conversation provides significant insights on the lasting impact of street harassment. Street harassment plays a central role in creating fear among woman users of public spaces. "If there is no one on the street and somebody is following me, I feel very scared and helpless" Geetika says. Many studies identify the prevalence of the fear of sexual violence and ultimately, the fear of rape as very common among women who access public spaces (see Beebeejaun, 2016; Spain, 2014; Marcus, 1992).

In the opening anecdote of this chapter, I describe how the fear of rape pushed me into a state of anxious paranoia when I was the lone passenger in a private bus journey. Daphne Spain (2014) argues that it is not public spaces themselves that induce fear among women. Rather, it is the fear of sexual violence and ultimately, the prospect of being raped that induces fear. The fear of rape by a stranger is at the "top of the fear hierarchy" (Spain, 2014, p. 588). Both the commission of rape and the constant threat to do so result in women's mobility and access to public spaces being regulated and even curtailed. Here again, as Jomol noted, it is not the spaces themselves that are dangerous, but the discursive construction of the spaces, and the 'natural' behaviour of those who can legitimately occupy them (men) that creates a feeling of danger among women entering them.

Additionally, in relation with the discussion in Geetika's room, it is important to note that the experience of fear in public spaces has been discussed extensively elsewhere in feminist literature, around discussions on 'rape culture'. For instance, Marcus (1992) observes that the "language of rape solicits women to position themselves as endangered, violable and fearful and invites men to position themselves as legitimately violent and entitled to women's sexual services" (p. 390). It is this language or 'gendered grammar of violence' which, Marcus argues, constructs "women as the objects of men's violence and the subjects of fear" (1992, p. 390). Gavey (2005) also argues that the various forms of street harassment women face buttress the construction of men as by nature, sexually virile and women as sexually passive and vulnerable, thus, functioning as the 'cultural scaffolding' of rape culture.

Strategies employed to negotiate/manage everyday street harassment

As discussed above, mainstream discourses on safety overwhelmingly placed the onus of safety on potential victims (Corteen, 2002; Phadke, 2005). Additionally, discourses of masculine sexuality normalize sexual aggression. Minimizing the possibility of harassment, therefore, falls to women in general, and in the particular case of my study, the residents of Carmel Hostel. They were conscious of the presence of men and their scrutiny each time they left the hostel. The seemingly ever-present male surveillance led them to adopt strategies to try to avoid or minimize such responses from men on the streets. Avoiding eye-contact by averting their gaze was one of the most common strategies the participants adopted when they were in public. Vishwanath & Mehrotra (2007) have identified this as a common strategy practiced by women in Delhi.

Women are encouraged, through dress codes, and constant self- awareness and control, to try to avoid attention from and confrontation with men who assume the right to space and movement. Seeking assurance from hostel mates about clothing is another practice that was common. "Is this dress too tight?" "Does this look vulgar" were common questions I came across while in the hostel. Even within the hostel premises, there were informal rules that restricted women's clothing styles in common areas that were in public view. The warden once personally advised me not to wear sleeveless tops and shorts to the dining hall, as the dining hall was visible to workers in the neighbouring construction site. She said that it was for "my own good" and the "reputation of the hostel". The responses to these rules were diverse, a few disrupted them outright (for example Nimmy, aged 21), while some were in support of them (Kavitha, 26; Nandini, 27; Rema, 25). Many residents negotiated them, for instance, by wearing scarves and/or shawls over sleeveless tops when the entered spaces the warden frequented (Rosie, 20; Rambha, 23; Ramola, 22; Daya 23). During my fieldtrip, residents did report having encountered "comments" from men at the construction site next door when they went to the washing area outside the dining hall. Malavika (22), for instance, upon hearing comments from the workers asked me if her dress was "vulgar looking".

Limiting the amount of space one occupied, by restricting movement and body posture was a common strategy found in the literature, as well as among the hostel residents. In Sur's (2014) study on women in Kolkata, she found that "women tried to occupy the least possible space to avoid groping hands" (p.217). This works to reproduce the expectation that women take up less public. Thus, by adopting non-threatening body language and moving out of the way of men, women regulate their own behaviours and reproduce the spaces as 'masculine' (Purcell, 2002, Beebeejaun, 2017).

In the previous section, I mentioned the 'ladies' compartments' in trains. Like most hostel residents, Nandini (26) preferred ladies-only compartments to general compartments whenever she used the local trains. She mentioned that it was something she did to avoid being stared at while travelling to and from work. Nandini worked at a university about 35 kilometres away from the hostel. Among the participants, she had the longest commute. Her workplace, however, was accessible by local trains (MRTS trains) from Chennai to neighbouring regions and suburbs. One of the major train stations was a 12 minute walk away from the hostel. Nandini's commute involved walking to the train station, the train ride of

about 45 minutes, and thereafter, walking to the campus which was located right opposite the destination stop. During the interview I asked her about her commute. In particular, we discussed questions of safety and comfort faced during her long commute every day:

Nandini: Actually, the area over here - the walk from here to the train station- is not that safe. People go in bikes, they stare at us, sometimes they stop. They even pass dirty comments. So we have to just shut our ears and keep moving. When we are rushing to work, what else can we do? People stare at us as if we are something else.

Josephine: And once you are inside the train?

Nandini: Inside the train I get into the ladies' compartment so I'm kind of comfortable. In the general compartment, you have all the eyes looking at you. You don't feel comfortable. They don't look at you. They stare at you.

Josephine: Is it important for public transport facilities to have separate spaces for women?

Nandini: Definitely yes. I wouldn't call ladies' compartment the safest place- theft happens there also. But at least you can breathe in peace. In the other compartments we can't even breathe properly.

The language Nandini used alludes to the severity of the discomfort she experienced due to men's behaviour. Her comment that she can "breathe in peace", speaks to the anxiety she experiences in mixed gender spaces. She indicates that these compartments are not 'safe' in the sense of possible theft, but this is preferable to the discomfort of mixed carriages where she "can't breathe properly". While ladies' compartments offer some breathing space for women, they also, however, speak to the expectation and even inevitability of street harassment by men. Nandini, in a similar way to the participants in Vishwanath & Mehrotra's (2007) study on women in Delhi, walks with her destination clearly in mind. Despite having a valid 'justification' for moving through public spaces (see Vishwanath & Mehrotra, 2007; and discussion in Chapter two), in this case, going to work, Nandini had to employ a set of strategies to do so. Nandini's wording "when we are rushing to work, what can we do?" indicated the sense of helplessness, and lack of options to deal with street harassment other than to "[…] shut our ears and keep moving".

Indrani (23) also spoke of male harassment when she walked through the city streets, as well as observing the harassment of other women in share autos. Her commute involved a short walk to the 'share-auto'[102] stop and a twelve to fifteen-minute share auto ride in heavy traffic to work. In this extract, she discusses her strategies for dealing with, and trying to avoid, harassment:

Indrani: When I walk by the road, men stare and sometimes pass comments.

Josephine: What kind of comments?

Indrani: Like 'Baby!' 'Hey baby, where are you going?' 'Come with me!!'

Josephine: How do you respond in such situations?

Indrani: I just ignore them, and keep walking, making sure not to make eye contact-
              looking straight ahead.

Josephine: Talk about the share-auto rides. Do you feel comfortable and safe in them?

Indrani: Yes, most of the time. Share autos are more comfortable and convenient than
              buses, although they are slightly dearer. However, I once witnessed a man
              touching a co-passenger inappropriately- a woman sitting next to him, inside a
              share auto. Since then, I avoid entering share autos when all the passengers
              inside are male. I check if there are other women in it or catch the next one. It
              usually works, because there are plenty of share autos in the route to my
              office. I also try to sit next to women and do my best to avoid sitting on a side
              with men alone.

Indrani's commuting experiences and coping strategies are, in many ways, similar to those of Nandini. Indrani also averts her gaze and walks at a fast pace when she encounters men who are leering and commenting. While she uses share autos, which have both male and female passengers, she avoids those with all male passengers in order to reduce the possibility of getting unsolicited attention from men. It is also notable that the strategies Indrani employed were not static. They changed with circumstance and experience. Witnessing a woman being groped in a share auto prompted her to avoid entering share autos in the absence of female co-passengers.

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[102] See fig. 4.1 and 4.2

The ubiquity of experiences of sexual harassment from men explains the demand for, and popularity of segregated spaces such as 'ladies' compartments' in local trains. In recent times, women-only alternatives to public transportation, such as pink taxis and pink auto-rickshaws (for example, see In-seo, 2017) have been introduced in many parts of the country. Although these schemes are introduced as solutions to the issue of street harassment by local authorities and governments, they do not amount to more than patch-work reprieves to a serious problem that continues to engulf public spaces. If anything, by limiting women's safety to specific zones, the introduction of various women-only public transportation schemes only works to perpetuate the production of gendered spaces.

One of the phrases used in commenting – "hey baby" – is mentioned by both Geetika and Indrani. The phrase alludes to the sexualization and infantilization of young women who enter the public arena. Such comments reproduce gendered power relations in public spaces, making women feel out of place and/or at risk on the street (see Beebeejaun, 2016). Thus, both Geetika and Indrani's avoidance strategies also work to support existing gendered power relations in public spaces. The harassment they face can also be understood in terms of the failure to include women in the conceptualization of public spaces (Spain, 2014). As women increasingly access public spaces for work, study and leisure, they are expected to do so by conforming to dominant norms of femininity in which they take up less space, are less visible and occupy only particular spaces (like Ladies' carriages). This lays the responsibility for their safety on women and reproduces the 'cultural scaffolding of rape' (Gavey, 2005).

Complexity and contradiction in women's talk about, and responses to, street harassment

In this section, I analyse some of the exchanges that occurred between the hostel residents, and in one case, with a participant's family member, within the larger context of normalized street harassment and 'rape culture'. I observed that in many cases, self-regulatory regimes are reproduced and furthered through interactions between women. By the term 'self-regulatory regimes' I refer to discursive practices that women adopt in the effort to avoid sexual harassment. For example, dressing 'modestly' and not giving eye- contact. In this section I consider the reflections of one participant, Rosie, about two incidents in which she and a friend were 'cat-called' by groups of young men, as well as her mother's response to her narrative.

The following extract is an incident that happened to Rosie (20) as she walked through her college campus with Nasreen (20). Nasreen and Rosie responded differently to the presence of a group of young men:

Rosie: I was walking with Nasreen through the campus. We were approaching the men's hostel. It was an intensely sunny day, so I decided to open my umbrella. I asked Nasreen if she'd like to join me in the shade of the umbrella. She said no and warned me that the boys would think I was showing off if I opened the umbrella. I felt it was also a way to avoid seeing the guys there, and it was such a hot day- I wanted to be comfortable. She was walking a few meters ahead of me. I could hear men making some sounds to capture our attention from the balconies. When I opened the umbrella, I heard one of them shout "look at her [pause] she is neither fair nor beautiful, and she is opening the umbrella while the fair and beautiful girl is walking in front with no umbrella". I stopped walking and looked at them for a moment. Then all of them started laughing together. And Nasreen laughed too. I know I shouldn't be taking seriously what those terrible boys were saying, but it affected me, *akka*[103]. It really affected me.

A striking aspect within this narration was the level of awareness both women had about the presence and gaze of men as they approached the men's hostel. Neither of them was, at the outset, looking directly to see if there were men present. Nevertheless, they knew that men would be on the balcony, watching them. Rosie felt the need to open her umbrella to be comfortable on an intensely sunny afternoon. The umbrella, to her, also presented an opportunity to avoid seeing the staring male students who were likely to be looking down at them from their hostel balconies. In contrast, Nasreen declined the shade of the umbrella despite it being an intensely sunny day and warned Rosie that the men present would probably respond negatively to her act of opening the umbrella. From the perspective of the men, the umbrella perhaps presented a disruption to their entitlement to freely view and evaluate Rosie.

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[103] Tamil for 'big sister', commonly used a mark of respect for unrelated women who are elder to you.

As Nasreen had warned, the men did respond to Rosie's act of opening the umbrella. Their comments drew on, and reproduced discourses of feminine attractiveness in India (see Chapter eight for a more detailed discussion). The association of fairness (light skin colour) with beauty was used by the men to distinguish between and rate the two women. They shamed Rosie by suggesting that opening the umbrella was unnecessary, as she had no beauty to be protected from the sun. Her companion, in their words, was beautiful and light skinned, and did not bother about the sun, thereby being humble, and not 'showing off' as Nasreen had worded it. The men located Rosie outside the ideal of feminine beauty. They praised her lighter-skinned companion on two counts. Firstly, for possessing the ideal standard of beauty and secondly for not disrupting their gaze.

Rosie, thereafter, reacted by pausing and looking directly at them – offering a challenge of sorts. The men, however, took that opportunity to further humiliate her through group-laughter. The last part of the excerpt reveals the 'affect[104]' everyday harassment has on some women. The fact that her companion and friend joined their side and laughed exacerbated the emotional 'affect' for Rosie. This framing of affect can be found in the work of scholars such as Sara Ahmed (2014). According to Ahmed, emotions shape our relationships with people, places and the self. Feelings of affect are constituted through, and within social contexts. That is, emotions are constituted by, and in turn help constitute social relations. Although it is outside the scope of the chapter to present a deeper discussion on affect, the insights are useful in understanding sexual harassment, both its normalization, and its impact. In addition to their impact on the social realm, emotions play an important role in the production of space (Ahmed, 2014). Indian Feminist geographer Tanushree Paul (2011), for instance, argues that women's sense of alienation in public spaces arise from emotions such as fear of harassment. Spaces get demarcated as 'masculine' and 'unsafe for women' through discursive processes, and are buttressed through affective experiences of women in those spaces.

In Rosie's narrative, the exact emotion she felt is not clear. However, she describes the situation as 'really affect[ing]' her. This was in response to the comment and laughter from the men and also Nasreen's laughter (seemingly *with* the men and *at* her). Later on in the same conversation Rosie mentioned how it wasn't the first time such an incident had

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[104] By the term 'affect' I refer to the recent theorizations on emotional affect by scholars such as Ben Anderson (2014) and Sara Ahmed (2014).

happened to her. A similar event took place when she was travelling in a public bus with another friend of hers, Angitha (21). Angitha's response, however, was different to that of Nasreen:

Rosie: This kind of thing has happened to me before as well. When I was with Angitha […] We both were standing in the bus and this guy was sitting on a women's seat[105]. He got up to free up the seat for us. We sat down, and he was like, "you look so beautiful" and she [Angitha] blushed. And he said, "Girls like you should never hang out with girls like her. Look at her. She is so ugly. You don't hang out with her". And Angitha got angry. She was like, "you are not here to judge who is beautiful and who is not. You mind your own business". Angitha was very supportive. Unlike Nasreen. Nasreen [pauses] she took their side and laughed with the boys.

In the two instances narrated by Rosie, there are similarities in the language used by men. They 'complimented' or rated Rosie's companions by comparing their looks. Rosie was deemed 'neither fair nor beautiful' and 'ugly' in contrast to her 'beautiful' companions. These responses show complexity in women's responses to harassment. The responses of Rosie's companions were also different and produced different emotional responses from her. Ahmed (2014) argues that, "emotions involve different movements towards and away from others, such that they shape the contours of social as well as bodily space" (p. 209). Therefore, emotions aren't just felt 'in' bodies but also influence the relationship of bodies with others. In Rosie's case, these two events moved her away from Nasreen (for her laughing *with* the men) and towards Angitha (for verbally supporting her *against* the men). They also supported and challenged (respectively) gendered discourses of attractiveness, space, and masculine entitlement (to space and to comment on women's bodies).

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[105] Women's seat refers to a seat reserved for women. In many states of India, including Tamil Nadu (the field site), state and local governments had implemented rules that stipulated a certain number of seats in buses to be reserved to women. These policies/legislations were conceived with women's safety and comfort in mind. Men sitting in women's reserved seats are legally obliged to give up the seats for women.

Later in that conversation, Rosie mentioned how her mother had reacted to this incident upon sharing it with her over a phone call. At first, Rosie's mother provided her with support. However, as the conversation continued, her response changed:

Rosie: I told this to my mother, and she said, "you are always beautiful to me" and all that. That was fine. But later she was like, "if she is so beautiful, then why did you go with her? Maybe you should walk alone". And I was like, "maa" [pause] and she was like, "maybe try going in another route from tomorrow". And I was like, "why the hell should I take another route? That is the only route to come to the hostel". […] And she was like, "yeah Rosie. But if you are going to get upset, then what will I say. Either you ignore it, or you completely avoid it".

Rosie's mother's response to her daughter is indicative of the ambivalence in women's responses to street harassment. Rosie's state of emotional distress seems to influence her mother's changing stance. Her mother suggests that Rosie change her behaviour (stop walking with your beautiful friend or take a different route) to avoid street harassment. Here, her mother acknowledges the inevitability of street harassment and Rosie's responsibility in trying to avoid it. As seen in the section on strategies participants' employ, the main way to deal with harassment is by avoiding situations where it could possibly occur. However, Rosie's frustration is not only because avoidance is not realistic or even possible, but potentially because her mother reproduced the narrative of the men that harassed her, that is, as less 'beautiful' than her companions.

The three incidents discussed in this section highlight complexity and contradiction in women's responses to rating/commenting. In certain instances, some women seem to enjoy the rating, and in others, the same women reject it. Women are also seen openly resisting men's aggressive practices in public spaces. In Nasreen's case, she strategically alters her behaviour in response to possible harassment and later seems to enjoy the appreciation she receives for her behaviour. In Angitha's case, while initially she "blushes", seemingly accepting the compliment, she rejects the man's comment about Rosie. Rosie's mother, while initially being affirmative/supportive of her daughter's position and behaviour, later contradicts this and advises her to avoid such situations, rather than expressing resistance. This contradiction indicates engagement with, and negotiation of, competing discourses on

male aggression and harassment and women's responses. Rosie's challenge to the men harassing her (looking directly up at them) and her mentioning that she was 'aware' that she shouldn't be taking the opinion of street harassers seriously, highlight her rejection of dominant discourses which naturalize and normalize such practices. Yet, she is nonetheless 'affected' which shows the weight of these dominant discourses.

The incidents discussed in this chapter illustrate that public spaces, even those that are supposed to be inclusive, such as campus spaces, are gendered in ways that privilege men's access to public space and women's bodies. One consequence is the curtailing women's mobility as a justification for 'safety'. They also indicate that responsibility for safety and avoiding such practices, lies with women. However, as my example with the hostel warden, and Rosie's narratives indicate, the regulation of women's bodies (with respect to clothing, appearance and spatial movements) is also reproduced by female friends, administrators and family members. This is a theme I pursue in more detail in subsequent chapters.

Conclusion

Young women are aware of the risk of street harassment that could happen anywhere and at any time. The frequency and normalization of street harassment has led to a sense of inevitability which is visible in participants' narratives. Harassment is not limited to public spaces in the city, it can happen in women's workspaces and campuses as well. In response to the hostile environment, women enact various strategies- often changing with time and place- to minimize the harassment, but with seemingly minimal effect. Segregated spaces such as ladies' compartments in trains provide women with a 'breathing space', but effectively re-entrench women's exclusion from 'general' public spaces. Nevertheless, participants are acutely aware of, and self-regulate their behaviour and appearance in public (masculine) spaces.

Chapter 6

"This is the way things are": Young women negotiate dowry practices

Introduction

> *"Three daughters?" A well-meaning woman asked my mother. "Yes", my mother replied. "At least you are well-off. What if this happened to a poor family?" the woman sighed. I was a child when I overheard this conversation. By my teenage years, I had got used to people's genuine sympathy for my parents' 'misfortune' of having three girl children. For detractors (gossip and rivalry were rife in the extended family situation we were embedded in), it was my parents' 'misdeeds', such as lack of religiosity that brought this 'bad fate' upon them. Dowry was a norm in the environment where I grew up. Families would negotiate dowry at the time of fixing a marriage. This was common for my cousins too. In fact, dowry was one of the most significant factors in the arrangement of marriage. It could make or break deals. It was uncritically depicted in the cinema and popular culture I grew up with. 'Tragic' stories where the protagonist has two or three, in some cases four sisters[106]who are an expensive burden to the family (the more sisters, the greater the tragedy, and the sisters are depicted as having little agency). I developed a deep aversion towards dowry, as a result of these experiences.*

Since colonial times, dowry has been portrayed as a social evil that resulted in impoverishment and daughter aversion (Oldernburg, 2002). In 1961, the Indian parliament passed the Dowry (Prohibition) Act[107] to ban the demanding, giving or receiving of dowry. Recognizing the loopholes in the legislation, dowry laws were strengthened through amendments in the 1980s. Notwithstanding the laws, dowry, a practice that was prominent among upper-caste Hindus, has not only continued unabated but spread geographically and across caste and religious lines (Srinivasan, 2005; Borah, 2008).

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[106] See for example films such as *Sallapam* (1996) *Ee Puzhayum Kadannu* (1996)
[107] Dowry (Prohibition) Act, No. 28 of 1961, India Code (1961).

The practice of dowry has now attained a pan-Indian status, barring regions in North Eastern India where many communities do not follow it[108] (Ladusingh & Singh, 2006). In other parts of the world where dowry was practiced, industrialization and 'modernization'[109] caused the gradual decline of this tradition (Anderson, 2003). This has not been the case in South Asia, and particularly in India, where, from being a symbolic gesture among upper-caste Hindus in parts of India (Anderson, 2003; Srinivasan, 2005) dowry has grown in prominence in modern times, attaining a near-universal status. The practice of dowry evolved with the commercialization of land and the rise of consumerism (Mankekar, 1999). Opposition to the practice and its violent manifestations became a rallying point for the women's movement in India in the 1980s (Majumdar, 2005; Shenk, 2007; Alfano, 2017). However, both the practice and the violence associated with it has not stopped. The recorded number of dowry-deaths increased steadily over time, peaking in the current decade. In 2013, the recorded number of dowry-deaths was equivalent to one every hour (Goel, 2016).

Though young women are at the centre of dowry transactions, there is a dearth of studies that explore their perspectives on dowry. The extensive literature on dowry (see Chapter two) considers the economics of dowry, dowry as a public health issue, dowry in relation to socio-economic status, reasons for the origins and persistence of dowry. This gap in the literature is perhaps due to the notion that young women (the brides themselves) have little agency regarding dowry across its various stages, such as negotiating the transaction as well as post-wedding demands. In the rapidly changing social landscape of India, insights from the very women who are at the centre of dowry transactions are vital for a comprehensive understanding of this persistent social practice. As the number of women migrating to cities seeking better opportunities is rapidly on the rise, it is essential to understand their views and experiences around the practice of dowry. The participants of this project found themselves at the crossroads of life – a liminal stage- between becoming a young adult and the 'inevitable' stage of marriage, when dowry discussions are usually made.

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[108] North Eastern states of India are predominantly tribal societies. Although Christianity has spread throughout the region as a result of more than 200 years of missionary work, they retain most of their traditional ways. Many of the tribes in the region retain their matriarchal and matrilineal clan structures (Hussein, 2011).
[109] Using the term within single quotes to acknowledge the academic critiques of the term.

Dowry in Tamil Nadu

The widespread practice of dowry in Tamil Nadu is a relatively recent phenomenon. Before independence, it was restricted to certain upper-caste Hindu communities (Rao, 1993; Srinivasan, 2005; Diamond-Smith, Luke and McGarvey, 2008). Rao (1993) argues that the practice of dowry was non-existent a few generations ago. Instead, most communities practiced bride-price or a mutual exchange of gifts. Srinivasan (2005) conducted ethnographic and statistical studies on the origins of dowry in Tamil Nadu and its contemporary prevalence. According to her findings, the practice of dowry became visibly prominent within many middle and non-dominant caste groups only in the past three decades. For example, in the traditionally landless Vanniyar community this practice took root only in the early 1990s. Many of the older women Srinivasan (2005) interviewed indicate how the practice was symbolic or virtually absent during their time.

The origin of the custom seems to coincide with the changes in Indian society following colonization, and later, post-independence changes. One of the recurring arguments in the literature surrounds the processes of modernization. As Oldenburg's (2002) work highlights, the practice of dowry and its manifestations as gendered violence got worse in the wake of colonial laws that commercialized land leading to a formalization of the masculine nature of the economy, rendering women even more significantly marginalized (see discussion in Chapter two). Srinivasan (2005) who investigated the practice specifically within the context of Tamil Nadu traces a connection between the process of agricultural modernization, also known as the 'Green Revolution'[110] and the practice of dowry. The Green Revolution, which led to an exponential rise in agricultural productivity drastically altered the lifestyle of farmers in Tamil Nadu. One of the prominent changes that happened was around the role of women in the agricultural economy. Most landed farmers (both small and big) no longer needed female labour in their fields as they could now afford to hire labourers. This resulted in a devaluation of women's contribution along with a masculinization of the agricultural economy, which flowed on from the improvement in the economic condition of many

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[110] The green revolution refers to the rapid increase in agricultural output witnessed in certain parts of India where the Intensive Agriculture District (Development) program was implemented from the year 1960 (Chakravarti, 1973). The methods used to achieve this increased output included the usage of High Yielding Varieties of seeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides along with efficient irrigation techniques and increased mechanization.

farmers (Srinivasan, 2005; Srinivasan and Bedi, 2007).

A significant proportion of Tamil Nadu's farmers were lifted to a middle-class status through the green revolution. Scholars (Srinivasan, 2005; Diamond-Smith, Luke & McGarvey, 2008) observe that the economically mobile middle and lower-caste communities in Tamil Nadu started adopting upper-caste traditions (such as dowry) so as to establish an improved social status corresponding to their economic status. This process in which upwardly mobile middle and lower-caste groups mimic the traditions of upper-caste communities to achieve higher social status has been theorized earlier by Srinivas (1955), who termed it 'sanskritization'. Once accessible, the construction of a 'respectable lifestyle' (which corresponded to the lifestyle and traditions of upper-castes) got adopted by the lower-caste communities to access social acceptance. Some scholars have argued that this tendency to mimic upper-caste communities is one of the factors that led to the spread of dowry in Tamil Nadu (Diamond-Smith, Luke & McGarvey, 2008).

Anthropologist Srinivas' (1984) points to the processes of colonial modernization as the main cause for the spread of dowry in South India. English education, new cities, bureaucracy and jobs associated with it created a previously non-existent status asymmetry even within the privileged upper-caste communities. Larger sums of dowry, therefore, acted as a 'compensation' for hypergamous[111] marriages. Men employed in the formal sector and urban-based bureaucracies were highly in demand, given the change in the economy and the collapse of traditional industries and pursuits. Dowry, therefore, gained popularity as a practical means to improve social status (Srinivas, 1984).

Contradictory discourses on dowry

As mentioned above, British colonial discourses portrayed dowry as a 'social evil' that led to daughter aversion and domestic violence (Oldenburg, 2002). Postcolonial scholars have complicated essentialist narratives of dowry, with multidimensional approaches, presenting historical, functional, and communitarian perspectives (see Chapter two). Post-independence, the Indian state has formalized the 'social evil' discourse on dowry by enacting laws to ban it. At an institutional level, there is recognition of the connection between dowry and domestic

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[111] Refers to marrying somebody of a higher status- socially/economically or both.

violence, reflected in the provisions of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005). However, there are stark contradictions in the formal/legal/institutional discourses and how dowry is perceived and practiced in the ground level. For instance, Diamond-Smith et al (2008) argue that at the community level, dowry has become inseparable to the social construction of status. The portrayal of dowry in popular media- television and cinema is often more in line with discourses at the communitarian level. Many motion pictures and television soap operas depict dowry as a 'normal' practice or inevitable (Kapur, 2009), however, there are instances of glorification of men who refuse to accept dowry[112].

Despite the contradictory nature of these dominant discourses, they seem to co-exist without much clash. That is, the 'social evil' discourse from formal institutions such as the government, law and news media exists relatively comfortably against a background of normalization of dowry in popular media and everyday life. For example, Shenk (2007) argues that by and large formal resistance to the practice is currently limited to educated urban feminist groups.

In the following sections, I present my participants' experiences and perspectives on dowry. I employ the 'discourse of familiarity' method (Abu-Lughod, 2000) in presenting my participants' views in this chapter. Before presenting an excerpt, I begin with a brief discussion of their socio-economic location and family to build familiarity with the participant. This enables a situated understanding of their perspectives.

The normalization of dowry

On a hot summer evening during my first field trip, I met Indrani (23) for our scheduled interview on the terrace of the hostel, one of the favourite haunts of hostel residents after sundown. It was dark, but for the dim moonlight through a thin veil of clouds. She described the details of her sister's forthcoming wedding. Indrani had moved to Chennai for her higher studies and got a modestly paying job (INR 13000/ NZD 250 per month) as a junior data analyst after completing her undergraduate degree. Although her salary was modest, she did not have dependent family members back home, so she was better off than many others in the hostel. She, like some of my other participants, enjoyed city life more than living with her

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[112] For instance, in the popular south Indian soap operas such as *Sitakalyanam* (2018- present).

family in the village. She was the younger of two sisters. During our conversation, among other things we discussed her sister's wedding which was coming up in a few months. I asked her about the expenses involved, for her family:

Indrani: Overall, the costs for the wedding will add up to 21 lakhs[113]

Josephine: Is dowry involved?

Indrani: Yes. The groom's family was very demanding. When they came to talk about the arrangements to my family, dowry was mentioned, as is the custom. My father had earmarked 40 sovereigns of gold and 3 lakh[114] rupees for her dowry. However, because this was a good alliance, we decided to be flexible. They demanded 6 lakh[115] rupees in cash. We tried to bring it down through negotiation, and an amount of 5 lakhs was eventually agreed upon.

Josephine: So why did your family agree to get your sister married to a family that demanded such a high amount?

Indrani: This is not uncommon. If the groom is rich or has a good job, then the dowry is very high. We were kind of expecting this.

Josephine: How did you feel about this?

Indrani: What is the point in feeling anything? This is the way things are.

Indrani's resigned acceptance regarding the negotiations that went into the arrangement of her sister's wedding was notable. The practice of dowry is thus positioned as normal and inevitable – as just the 'way things are'. Indrani's sister's alliance can be characterized as hypergamous, as the groom was highly educated and held a well-paid job. The attitude of his family was justified by his superior standing in society. According to Munshi (2017), within an arranged marriage set-up, such requests from the groom's family become commonplace or even expected, as was the case with Indrani. Here it is also important to consider the explanation for conceding to the groom's family's demands. Shenk (2007), for example, argues that to address the issue of dowry, the positive motivations behind dowry need to be acknowledged. Given that families find themselves embedded in a normalized culture of

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[113]'Lakh' is the Indian term for the numerical figure 'one hundred thousand'. 21 Lakhs therefore amounts to 2.1 million rupees, which amounts to slightly about 45,000 NZ$ (calculation method: 1NZ$ approximately equals 45 INR).

[114] 3 lakhs amount to about 6,600NZ$.
[115] 6 lakhs amounts to about 13,100 NZ$.

dowry, families often strive to ensure, as much as possible, that their daughters would be safe and respected in the conjugal home by providing her with a generous dowry.

As higher dowries represent the competing demand for a groom of high socioeconomic status (Srinivas, 1984), families like Indrani's are willing to pay more than they had earmarked for the dowry. In the case of Indrani's sister, the groom's family were confident in their demand for dowry, signalling their position of advantage. However, their willingness to reduce the demand by 100,000 Rupees implies that they were also in favour of the alliance[116].

I met with Rema (26) for our catch-up interview in her 'two-sharing' room when she arrived back from work one evening. Her roommate Rani was not there at the time of the interview, so it was more comfortable to talk. Since my first field visit, she had switched to a new job with a better profile and salary package (~INR 26,000/ NZD 500 per month). Rema and most working women in the hostel sent a lion's share of their incomes back home to their parents- in Rema's case her father, leaving only a small portion for the hostel fees as well as other personal expenses in the city. She, therefore, had been significantly contributing to the savings for her own wedding and dowry throughout the years that she had been working in the city (nearly 4 years). Her older sister had gotten married the previous year, and now it was her turn. According to her parents, it was high time for her to get married:

Josephine: Are your family members looking for marriage alliances?

Rema: Yeah searching, but no one that we all like so far. We have registered in the church matrimonial service.

Josephine: You are Catholics. Does caste matter?

Rema: Yes, we belong to the forward caste, *Vellalar*. We have to find someone within that caste who is also in the Catholic church

Josephine: So that will be difficult?

Rema: Yes, it is, especially because the groom should also have a good job.

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[116] Additionally, the total wedding expenditure, is a significant factor to be considered. Here, for instance, it was expected to exceed the dowry amount by many times. Borker et al. (2017) consider the astronomical amounts parents had to spend to hold a socially acceptable wedding, arguing for the need to add these expenses to the economic analysis of dowry. A recent documentary on dowry by Al Jazeera (101 East, 2017) shows how the lavishness of the ceremony (or the lack of it) can have an effect on the marital relationship. In many cases, husbands and their families harass women if they are not satisfied with the scale and grandeur of a wedding. The cumulative expenses of the wedding ceremony and dowry render many families significantly poorer after the marriage ceremonies of their daughters (Anderson, 2003).

Josephine:	What about dowry?
Rema:	Dowry is a problem. Depending on the party, they are asking. If they are in a good position, they asking high. Like 50 sovereigns[117] of gold. If they are just middle class, then it is less.
Josephine:	Fifty sovereigns[118] of gold?!
Rema:	Why? Don't you have this in your community? You look like you're from a family that gives like 100 sovereigns! [laughs]
Josephine:	Have any prospective grooms come home to see you? And what happened?
Rema:	Yeah. Some have come. But [pause] height problem.
Josephine:	Height problem?
Rema:	[laughs] This is another problem for me.

While Rema seemed to accept the inevitability of dowry, she, unlike Indrani was not uncritically resigned of the practice. She describes dowry as 'a problem'. The view that dowry is a 'problem' was not rare, even among those that accepted the inevitability of it. In particular, it is the high cost of dowry, corresponding to the status of the prospective groom, that made it problematic for Rema. Having a well-paying job does not excuse her from the tradition of dowry.

Prospective grooms going to 'see' a woman and her family before an alliance is fixed is customary in most parts of India. The prospective groom, along with his family, visits the bride at her natal home. The tradition of *ponnu paakkal* (seeing the prospective bride) is integral to arranged marriages in India. Even when the marriage is not 'arranged', and the bride and groom find each other outside the framework of parental involvement, the tradition of *ponnu paakkal* is followed in some form. This is an opportunity for the groom's family to get acquainted with the prospective bride's family and gauge their compatibility. This is also an opportunity to meet the prospective bride in person. Rema described how her height had become an issue for the families visiting with a prospective alliance. At 5 foot 8 inches, Rema was much taller than the average Tamil woman. In addition to her socio-economic location within the class-caste-religion matrix of Tamil society, (Catholic, Vellalar, looking for someone with a 'good job') Rema's height complicated her prospects of finding a suitable

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[117] One sovereign is about 8 grams of gold.

[118] 50 sovereigns would amount to 400 grams of gold.

groom even further. Some scholars have noted that the complex stratification of the Indian society with caste endogamy increases the demand for eligible grooms, thereby entrenching the practice of dowry in India (see Anderson, 2003).

Another important aspect of this conversation surrounds class. Rema's remark regarding how much she thinks my community might be used to giving as dowry signifies the link between dowry and the perceived economic class. My position as an Indian student in a Western university implied that I belonged to a certain class, which would imply a higher dowry within the Indian context. Munshi (2017) discusses the 'conundrum' that exists in contemporary India- that of the correlation between higher levels of education and higher rates of dowry. Additionally, families showcase their success and prosperity through lavish weddings and dowries (Arunachalam & Logan, 2016; Diamond-Smith, Luke & McGarvey, 2008).

Jomol (20), a final year undergraduate science student from the East coast of Tamil Nadu, invited me to her two-sharing room for interviews during both my fieldwork phases. She had not thought about her own marriage, as she did not think there was a need for taking that step in the near future. She discussed dowry in two contexts. Firstly, in the context of our discussion on son preference. Jomol, like many other participants, believed that dowry was one of the reasons for son preference in the Indian society. Secondly, in response to my direct question regarding the practice of dowry in her family:

Josephine: Is dowry practiced in your family? If so, how?
Jomol: Um, if I think of the recent marriage function of my cousin- yes, it is
                practiced. It is like a deal made between two families, you know [pause] most
                of the girls' families look for a guy who is well educated, earning, within their
                own religion and caste. Okay? So when they find such a guy [pause] they are
                willing to pay a dowry that is the custom, to ensure that the alliance is sealed.

Jomol's understanding of the practice of dowry is in some ways similar to that of both Indrani and Rema. She thinks of it as the 'custom' and something that is 'normal' or expected. An important pattern that emerges from these conversations is the perceived function of dowry in procuring a 'good alliance'- a groom who is 'educated' and with financial security and from one's own religion and caste (Shenk, 2007; Dalmia and Lawrence, 2005). Jomol's narration

along with that of some others also provides a possible explanation for the relationship between education and dowry (Munshi, 2017). Since education is near-universally associated with better qualities, values and morality, more educated men are in higher demand and therefore can command higher dowries within the arranged marriage system. Here again, the multidimensional stratification of Indian society along the lines of religion and caste is visible, along with the sense that endogamy is the default, or arguably a foundational aspect of marriage in contemporary India. The involvement of the parents and extended family in all processes around marriage entrenches endogamy and dowry (Munshi, 2017).

In the discussion about caste endogamy, the conceptualization of women's sexuality emanating from upper-caste texts and traditions are enlightening. Historian Uma Chakravarthi (1993) theorizes this in her seminal essay on 'Brahmanical patriarchy', in which she discusses the historical discourses that glorify upper-caste women's chastity as a virtue and condemns any transgression to endogamy. Such a construction of virtue related to the control of women's sexuality within endogamous marriage, she argues, is a foundational mechanism through which the caste system is maintained (Chakravarti, 1993). Furthermore, in many parts of India, caste-groups form the foundation for communitarian networking and social and political mobilization, making it imperative to marry within those loyalties.

Dowry and divorce

Marriage is socially constructed as 'eternal' or permanent within Indian cultural discourses. Consequently, there is an expectation of permanence of the relationship at the time of the dowry exchange. At present, there is a rise in the rates of divorce in India. However, unlike other regions in Asia where non-marriage and divorce are becoming increasingly normalized, it is still not common enough in India to be a 'normalized' aspect of life. Marriage is in India is near-universal, heteronormative, caste-endogamous and involves the extended families of those getting married (Dommaraju, 2016, p. 195). In this context, when divorces do happen, they disrupt the cultural expectations of the family and community, creating new challenges. Among my participants, two had close relatives who were divorced, and one was a divorcee herself. Here I present narratives on dowry that relate to divorce.

Nasreen's (20) view on dowry was informed by her cousin's experience. She was the only Muslim woman among my participants. The fact that dowry is prevalent in minority communities such as Catholics and Muslims is significant as it shows how widespread the practice has become (see Waheed, 2009). Nasreen's cousin's wedding was a 'grand' affair, which cost millions of rupees (both for the ceremony and the dowry):

Nasreen: My cousin got divorced within two months, after the grand ceremony.

Josephine: Did your family get the dowry amount back?

Nasreen: Most of it. But it was such a huge loss for our family, as we spent so much money on the wedding, which all went to waste.

Josephine: How is she (your cousin) doing now?

Nasreen: She got re-married. This time the wedding was less extravagant, but we still had to give a dowry.

While Nasreen and her family did resent the fact that they suffered a significant financial loss by virtue of her cousin's dowry and wedding ceremony, they still paid another dowry for her second marriage. However, the family did not have another extravagant ceremony. Among my participants, Nasreen and Celine had sisters who went through divorces shortly after getting married. Despite the rising number of divorces in India, there has been little scholarly interest so far in investigating its effects on the perceptions and practice of dowry (Dommaraju, 2016).

Sithara's (24)'s sister was separated and amid a court-dispute to settle the divorce. Her family was trying to retrieve the amount they had lost, paying her dowry. When I asked her if there would be a dowry for her, she replied, "of course, it's a sign of parents' love for their daughter". Celine had a fiancé and was planning to get married the next year. "It won't be like giving dowry because his family demanded it, but even otherwise my parents will give me a dowry".

Sithara articulates dowry as a "gift" and a symbol of her "parents' love". Despite her family going through a difficult situation trying to retrieve their money from her sister's wedding, the practice of dowry is not viewed in a negative light. She, however, makes the distinction between dowry given as per demand and dowry given as a symbol of parents' love. The

meaning of dowry to women like Sithara is much more complex than what is contained in the "social evil" discourse.

Satya (26) was herself a divorcee, although she had not revealed this to other hostel residents, for fear of the stigma associated with divorce. She mentioned that her father had to pay a hefty dowry because she was dark-skinned. They were not able to retrieve all the money paid out in dowry.

Embracing the practice of dowry

Nimmy (21) came across as a 'westernized' young woman. One of our first conversations was around her resentment towards the strict college dress codes. She expressed her disapproval of her classmates and others who judged her because her purple bra-strap was showing one day. She had a cosmopolitan background. Her mother was from Sri Lanka and her father was from Tamil Nadu. She had an older sister who was married. During our interview, we discussed her position on dowry:

Nimmy: Girls should totally be open to dowry from parents
Josephine: Why?
Nimmy: It's good to bring some money when you are starting a new family. What if the dude you get married to is a bit useless.
Josephine: [laughs]
Nimmy: Yeah. This happened to my sister. She got married and had a child. The husband wasn't much of an earner. His business failed. My sister then used her gold and dowry money to start a business and now they are fine.
Josephine: I see.
Nimmy: Yeah. I'll be very happy to be married with a bunch of dowry.

Nimmy has a positive outlook towards dowry, a useful reserve of wealth, in case her husband turned out to be "a bit useless". Her position, like others, is informed by her sister's experience. The dowry her sister received became a crucial instrument in turning around the family's situation in the face of challenges such as a new-born and a business failure. This aligns with the argument put forward by Tambiah (1973) and Oldenburg (2002) - the idea of

dowry as *sthreedhan* or women's wealth. Oldenburg (2002) suggests that dowry (in the context of 19th century Punjab) was among the few ingenious women-centric institutions in a masculine society. Shenk (2007) also outlines this functional aspect of dowry- brides' families view dowry as a positive investment towards their daughter's future.

Dowry vs higher education

While Nimmy seemed unconcerned about her family providing a dowry for her, other participants were aware of the financial strain this would put on their parents. In some situations, funding the dowry was privileged over other expenses, as with Rosie (20) who wanted to pursue a master's degree in business management or human resources. The tuition fees for such professional courses were substantial and her family was unable to fund it in addition to the dowry. Being from a modest economic background, she was limited by her circumstances. Furthermore, Rosie's parents saw Rosie's undergraduate study as a means to an end – securing a 'good' husband. I talked to Rosie's mother when she visited the hostel and her response to my comment that Rosie was struggling with her course highlighted this:

Perazhagi: Whether she likes it or not is not important. She needs to complete the course, that's all. Then she can get a good husband. Our neighbour's daughter, for instance, was doing medicine. She hated it - used to cry every day about it. But once she graduated she got a very good alliance. Her husband earns a six-digit salary in Dubai and she is living happily.

Perazhagi's main concern as understood from this conversation is her daughter's marital future- to get a good husband with a high paying job. The education is therefore not about what women might desire or aspire to. Within a system where marriage is a universal expectation (see chapter seven), and dowry is normalized, parents often make financial decisions carefully, considering their daughters' impending marriage. Rosie had earlier mentioned how she was inclined to take a different course which was longer and more expensive. Her extended family objected to this citing the reason that she was a girl, going to another family- and it was wiser to save money for a dowry than spend it on education, which would eventually not benefit her natal family, and leave them financially compromised when the time came for dowry.

Resisting dowry

While the majority of participants either accepted or supported the practice of dowry, a few were more critical. Mahadevi (29) was one of them. From a lower-middle-class background, she had come to Chennai following an experience of workplace harassment in her own small-town where she was working. Her boss was making inappropriate advances and she had no support mechanisms, as she was living with her elderly father. They, therefore, decided that she move to Chennai and send a resignation, without giving details of her whereabouts. Her mother had died a few years earlier, an event that affected her deeply. She fondly recalled how she handed over the entire amount of her first salary to her mother. At the time of the interview, she was working as an office administrator at a private company in Chennai:

Mahadevi: There is no way I will give dowry.

Josephine: Why?

Mahadevi: It's totally unnecessary and unfair. A woman is an asset, not a liability to come with compensation. I work and earn my money.

Josephine: But will your family be supportive of your stand?

Mahadevi: Yes, my sister got married without a dowry. I will do the same.

Mahadevi's position emphasises women's value and work. Here, dowry is framed as a compensatory payment for the exchange of a woman from her natal family to her conjugal family. This critique of dowry as compensating for the transfer of a 'burden' is noticeable in feminist discourses on dowry (for example, see Srinivasan, 2005). Like most other women, Mahadevi's sister's experience informed her position on dowry. She was confident that she would be able to defy the norm because her sister already did so. Mahadevi's assertion that she works and earns money draws from neoliberal capitalist discourses that attach human value to participation/earning wages in the neoliberal economy.

Ammu (25) had moved to Chennai when she got a job at a data analysis company in Chennai. She was an electrical engineer, but could not find a job in her field of training, and therefore shifted over to Information Technology (IT). Her salary was modest (INR 15,000/NZD290 per month), yet she sent the whole amount back home so that her family could pay off their home loan. Here is an excerpt from our conversation:

Ammu:	My parents say, at the time of marriage, you and your husband are coming together to become one family. At that time, we will not give any dowry, but as a present, we will give you a diamond necklace.
Josephine:	So you don't want to take your parents' cash as dowry?
Ammu:	Neither will I accept it nor will they give it.
Josephine:	You mean to say you will not marry a man who demands dowry? Most of the time they demand it, whether we like it or not- don't they?
Ammu:	True. My mother said, one necklace, one diamond necklace, a small bangle on your hand and a ring. We will not give you anything more than this. If you need anything additional, you can earn it yourself, by working. This house has been built for you. Due to our economic circumstances, we are unable to pay for this house. So you have to pay up the loan for this house. When you reach a good position in your life and want to bring your friends over, you may feel bad about the size and condition of your house. That is why we built this bigger house. For you.

Ammu's family's financial crisis was exacerbated by her little sister's health. She had a health condition that rendered her bed-ridden. Her mother, therefore, spent most of her time caring for Ammu's sister. In Ammu's case, dowry was approached differently because of these circumstances. The family had decided that their house would pass on to her which, they believed, would counter the demands for a hefty dowry. However, plans for a wedding were not actively being entertained at that stage, as she was focused on working and paying back the home loan. Ammu's family were, therefore, negotiating the societal expectations and their available resources to accommodate for their unique circumstances. They belonged to and took pride in their 'upper-caste' heritage. They were Syrian Catholics who generally believe themselves to be caste Hindus, such as Brahmins who were converted to Christianity directly by Saint Thomas[119]. Her parents were clear that she had to marry someone from the same group.

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[119] Saint Thomas is an apostle of Christ (one of the twelve) who is believed to have travelled to South India in 52 AD, and thereafter lived in the region until his death in Mylapore, Chennai.

Here, Ammu's move to Chennai was in the interest of her family, whom she was supporting with her salary. Her case reveals how families work around social expectations to survive within the communitarian set-up. Ammu's sister's life expectancy was low, owing to her health condition. In building a large new house, Ammu's parents had a justification for their inability to provide a dowry. The fact that she did not have a male sibling simplified her claim (as heir) to parental property.

Geetika (25), who worked as an administrator at a private hospital, was against the idea of marriage itself. During my first field trip, she had told me that she was not interested in getting married and that she would resist the family pressure to do so. It was therefore imperative for her to leave home and be independent of her parents. She rarely visited home, although there was daily phone contact. She preferred living by herself in the city. During my second field visit, however, she told me that she had fallen in love with a man she met at a work conference and that they had decided to get married. This excerpt about dowry is from our first interview in 2015:

Josephine:	What do you think about dowry, Geetika?
Geetika:	I think dowry began as a system to ensure the safety and well-being of a woman in the husband's home. If the family is wealthy, there is no harm in giving that. What will families that don't have money do? How it is becoming now- demanding lakhs of rupees, car and so on, is disgusting. I don't like it. Are girls like goods to trade with? Is marriage a business? I just don't like that.

Geetika draws from familiar feminist discourses that critique dowry, and the commercial nature of it. She is particularly critical of the pressure being placed on poor households to meet with dowry demands, and of increasing costs/demands for dowry. But unlike Mahadevi who is unequivocally against dowry, Geetika's position shows some ambivalence. Instead of dismissing the practice altogether, Geetika recognizes the possible good intentions behind the origins of such a practice. It is functional given it potentially ensures the safety and wellbeing of daughters who are leaving their natal homes permanently (Shenk, 2007). At the same time, she is wary of the social pressure on all families to give dowry and how girls are positioned as 'goods to trade' with the increasing commercialization of dowry. Geetika draws from multiple discourses on dowry, some aspects from traditional understandings as 'streedhan' and others from anti-dowry discourses, which conceptualize dowry as a social evil.

One day in 2016 (during my second fieldtrip) Geetika was feeling very ill, and I accompanied her to the nearby clinic. I met her fiancé, Dhanush there. Thereafter, I met the pair together on other occasions outside the hostel. On one occasion, I asked Dhanush about dowry. Geetika showed discomfort at the mention of dowry:

Geetika: He is not interested in dowry

Dhanush: I will not demand any dowry. Getting her family to agree to this inter-caste marriage itself was quite a feat. But I will accept any gifts that they may want to give us.

The dynamic between Geetika and Dhanush here is interesting. While Geetika makes a snappy, dismissive response, implying Dhanush was against the practice, Dhanush himself had a more nuanced response. He complicates Geetika's framing of him by indicating that he was not averse to getting 'gifts' from Geetika's family, although he would not 'demand' a dowry, being grateful that their wedding was approved.

He also points to the difficulty of getting family support for their inter-caste marriage. Inter-caste marriages are usually frowned upon by communities as they represent a break to the "motor of kinship in India" (Mody, 2008, p. 226). One's caste community represents the basic support structure within the Indian society and caste endogamy is essential to maintaining community support. By marrying a man of a lower-caste, Geetika is breaking this well-entrenched social structure. Therefore, Dhanush was not in a position to demand a dowry. His willingness to accept gifts, however, demonstrates the difference in their positions on dowry.

The term 'gift' appears quite frequently in discussions about dowry. Earlier Sithara had mentioned dowry was a gift from her parents, a symbol of their love. It can be argued that the transformation of dowry to 'gift' is an increasingly popular discursive strategy to distance oneself from the practice of dowry, which is, in formal discourses constructed as a social evil, while continuing on with the practice in a new form. Daya (23), a journalism Masters' student, also mentioned the term during my second interview with her. She was opposed to the practice of dowry, although she was certain that she could not convince her joint family to do away with the practice. Her father, she said, would certainly "gift" her a hefty amount of

dowry. He was an important figure in the community, being the president of the local Lions' Club chapter and actively involved in issues of local importance. A lavish wedding and big display of dowry 'gifts' were integral aspects of asserting one's socio-economic status (Diamond-Smith, Luke & McGarvey, 2008). She could not possibly convince him to oppose/avoid 'gifting her' dowry, as it was a matter of status and prestige. Daya said to me that the practice was 'wrong' and like a few others, she said it needed to be 'banned'. This highlights her lack of awareness of laws which do prohibit dowry. Here she draws from the discourse of dowry as a social evil.

A summary of key observations

Most of the working women I interviewed indicated that they contributed to their family income and savings, thus contributing to the family savings towards dowry. Working women who were in the know of their families' financial constraints such as Rema, Mahadevi, Kavitha, Nithya and Ammu indicated greater consciousness and critique of the financial burden of the practice. For students whom I interviewed, such as Rosie, dowry sometimes played a critical role, as many of them were dependent on their parents' limited resources for their educational aspirations. In such cases, the looming expenses around dowry and a lavish wedding seemed to overshadow their aspirations for further study, given that most professional qualifications are expensive[120]. For Indian men, more investment in education usually meant more dowry for them, therefore more incentive to facilitate their education.

For those like Nimmy's sister, where dowry played an important role in getting her new family back to a place of financial stability, dowry appeared to play an important functional role. For others, like Sithara, dowry was a gift of love from parents.

Dowry seems important even in marriages where there is minimal status asymmetry (such as the case of Rema). Finding a 'good' husband within the bride's specific caste and religion along with the additional variables around appearance[121] was difficult. This increased the demand for grooms that fit these categories. In such cases, dowry seemed to become an inevitable exchange to compete for a suitable husband in a complexly stratified society.

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[120] Unless admission is secured through highly competitive entrance exams that allocate candidates to government institutions.
[121] Such as skin colour, ability, height, body type etc.

The patrilineal and patrilocal nature of society is a forceful driver for dowry. Sons, traditionally and socially, are viewed as more legitimate heirs of parents' property than daughters, necessitating dowry as a form of premortem bequest. Here, again, social traditions precede formal laws, such as the equal right to property for sons and daughters.

The young women whom I interviewed had a range of views on dowry, drawing from their experiences and various discourses. The diversity of views expressed around the topic of dowry are an indication of complex negotiations, drawing in from the discursive milieu young women find themselves in 21st century urban India. While Nimmy, an outwardly 'westernized' woman, was enthusiastic about the future prospect of her parents' dowry at her wedding, others, like Mahadevi, from a lower middleclass background rejected it, describing it as an anti-woman practice and anchoring herself in the narrative of value in work. The meanings of dowry the participants drew upon reflect the meanings recognized in the body of scholarly literature around dowry, which I have discussed in Chapter two and at the start of this thesis. The practice of dowry and the way in which it is understood by young women cannot be understood exclusively through any one of the dominant narratives of the practice (for example, the 'oppressive social evil' narrative or the 'functional mechanism for the status & wellbeing' narrative). A more complex approach is necessary in understanding the practice and addressing the negative consequences arising from it.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented an introductory discussion on dowry, particularly in relation to its origins and growth in Tamil Nadu, where the research was located. I then presented the selected excerpts from women's talk on dowry, highlighting the multiple, often contradictory, ways in which young women think about the practice of dowry in contemporary India. The legal status of dowry did not figure as a concern among my participants, which points to the ineffectiveness of the legal discourses surrounding the practice of dowry when it is culturally sanctioned. Unlike the formal and legal narratives on dowry, which constitute it as a social evil, the views and experiences surrounding the meaning and purpose of dowry from my participants were nuanced. Although some rejected it outright, overall, there was an overwhelming acceptance of the practice highlighting that this hitherto non-existent tradition has now become deeply entrenched in the diverse communities of southern India.

Chapter 7

Love, marriage and pre-marital sex

Josephine:	You are in a good position now-as a software engineer- and making a better salary than before. What is your next plan?
Rema:	Marriage. [laughs out loud] What else? My parents have started looking for alliances
Josephine:	So it will be an arranged marriage. No love?
Rema:	No! No! [laughs again]
Josephine:	Ah. When do your parents want you to get married?
Rema:	This year.
Josephine:	This year?
Rema:	Ya. My elder sister got married last year. So, they want me to get married this year.

In most of India's cultural discourses, marriage marks the principal transition in a woman's life, traditionally understood as the transition from being a *kumari* (an unmarried virgin girl) to becoming a *sumangali* (married woman, with good fortune) (Lukose, 2009; Sharangpani, 2010). This also follows a close guarding of sexuality, and the "proscription of sexuality to within marriage", especially for women (Dommaraju, 2016, p. 4). George (2002) argues that despite changing ideas around it, "the institutional importance of marriage in India cannot be overestimated" (p.208). There is a near-universal expectation of marriage, and being unmarried is considered a sign of misfortune, especially for women. Consequently, there is considerable pressure on young women to marry.

As young adults, most residents of Carmel Hostel were in the stage of life where the question of marriage was being seriously considered both by the women themselves and/or their families. Many residents were involved in romantic relationships which they hoped would be approved of by their parents. Others talked about how their parents were looking for a suitable groom for them, from a similar or better socio-economic background. All participants said that their parents preferred arranged marriage to love marriage. The hostel was a site where various discourses on marriage, romance and pre-marital sex were discussed and negotiated. In this chapter I explore the experiences and perspectives of my participants on love, marriage and premarital sex. This chapter has been divided into two parts. In the first

presents an analysis of my participants' talk on marriage. In the second part, I discuss views on premarital sex and virginity.

Discourses on marriage in India

The colonial narrative of marriage in India as universally forced and patrilineal was perhaps a deliberate generalization, which lead to the invisibilization of multiple traditions and practices that existed outside the upper-caste elite, and even among them (Mani, 1989 as cited in Mukhopadhyay, 2012; Rao, 2015). Historically, the practice of arranged marriage was most prominent in north Indian upper-caste communities, more than others (Allendorf & Pandian, 2016). In many communities across the region, different practices existed (Bowman and Dollahite, 2013), such as polyandry[122], courtship-based marriage[123], cross-kin marriage[124], widow remarriage and so on within which varying levels of 'choice' of bride and groom were considered. The normalization of lavishly arranged marriages, as seen in upper-caste or Brahmanical traditions, is a more recent phenomenon. This has been aided by the commercialization of the economy, greater economic mobility for those in lower-castes and a corresponding aspiration to achieve social respectability as upper-caste communities (also known as the process of sanskritization) (Rao, 2015), comparable to the processes that led to the spread of dowry (as discussed in Chapter two and Chapter six). With the spread of British education and popular culture, courtship and 'love' in marriage was increasingly understood as a Western way of life, which stood in opposition to the supposedly pan Indian tradition of arranged marriage. In post-independent India, right-wing Hindu nationalist discourses have also portrayed arranged marriage as an inherent aspect of Indian culture, setting it in contrast with love marriage in a dichotomous fashion (Mukhopadhyay, 2012).

The overly simplistic, binaristic framing of the Indian marriage system is challenged by scholars of marriage and kinship in India. Scholars who employ postcolonial and

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[122] For instance, Nair community in Kerala, a state in south India, was matrilineal and practiced polyandry until the mid 20th century (see Unni, 1958). Also, Khasis of Meghalaya, a state in North Eastern India are traditionally matrilineal, although their traditional way of life is under pressure from institutionalized patriarchy in the form of modern political and legal systems (see Nongbri, 2000).

[123] Practices such as 'Gandharva vivaha' are mentioned in the Hindu scriptures, poetry and across various branches of literature. (see Orsini, 2006).

[124] Cross kin marriages were very common in Tamil Nadu and parts of south India until mid to late 20th century, and is still practiced in lower socio-economic strata (Rao, 2015). Cross kin marriages can be between maternal uncle and niece, cousins and distant relatives. They are instituted to assure the compatibility and wellbeing of the bride and greater familial support in matters related to resource sharing and reproductive support child rearing (Rao, 2015).

poststructuralist approaches often begin their discussion on arranged marriage in India with a clarification of how arranged marriage is understood through Eurocentric discourses (see Pande, 2015; Bowman & Dollagite, 2013). Pande (2015), for instance, argues that the understanding of arranged marriage in South Asia as monolithic, patriarchal and oppressive is part of a hegemonic colonial narrative that justified the processes of colonization as a benevolent strategy to liberate the oppressed 'third world woman' (p. 173). She urges the reader to differentiate between the terms 'arranged marriage' and 'forced marriage', as the two are often conflated in western narratives. While forced marriages are often arranged, all arranged marriages are not forced, and increasingly, the personal compatibility of the bride and groom is a crucial factor in decision making (Netting, 2010). Mukta Sharangpani's (2010) findings support Pande's (2015) argument. In her study on arranged marriages in Mumbai, she notes that "contrary to popularly held notions of arranged marriage as obligatory, restrictive or even oppressive, many young women perceive the system of arranged marriage as emancipatory and empowering" (p.254). Sharangpani's (2010) research suggests that in places where young women had the opportunity to find their own match, some still turned to arranged marriage and parental support in partner selection. The reason for this, she argues, is the fact that arranged marriage offered young women certain advantages that love marriage did not. Significantly, within the arranged marriage system, women were able to mandate or demand certain qualifications from potential partners. Parents look for a groom from within a pool of potential candidates who has 'desirable' qualities - such as a particular educational level, socio-economic status and similar caste, cultural and religious backgrounds. Increasingly, the selection also happens in consultation with the bride and groom (Bass, 2009; Sharangpani, 2010). Falling in love, as indicated by responses in Sharangpani's (2010) study, involves much less choice, and often occurs within circumstances one has little control over. Additionally, scholars have noted that levels of 'marital satisfaction' in arranged and non-arranged marriages are similar (Myers, Madathil, & Tingle, 2005 as cited in Bowman & Dollahite, 2013 p. 208).

Complicating the love/arranged marriage binary

Many of the participants in Carmel Hostel challenged the dichotomous construction of arranged and love marriage practices, indicating that they did not have a preference between the two. Most respondents, however, mentioned that their own marriage would likely be

arranged, as they valued their family's satisfaction, support and wellbeing. When arranged marriages came up in the discussions, unlike the dominant portrayals in Western discourses, they were never described as 'forced marriages'. The common understanding among those I spoke to was that their own preference would be given due consideration during the process of groom selection. Often, prospective marriage partners were able to get to know each other more during the time between the *ponnu paakkal* [125] ritual and the fixing of the marriage. The period between engagement ceremony and wedding was also a time to communicate, and to go for outings with the fiancé.

Anila (27) and Jomol (20) indicated that they had no preference between love marriage and arranged marriage. Anila, a media professional, did not have a romantic relationship at the time of the interview and her parents were looking for a groom:

Josephine: What about your case, are they [Anila's parents] looking for a groom?

Anila: Yeah. I don't have anybody, so when the right time and person comes, I will go by it.

Josephine: What's your view on the debate love marriage vs arranged marriage?

Anila: I am open to either [pause] but I don't have anyone [pause] I won't go by either/or. See it depends. Some people might find the right person and want to get married, that's fine. For others, parents might be able to help, and that's fine too. It depends on the circumstance and the people. It doesn't matter which way it happens.

Josephine: Arranged marriage is a good back up?

Anila: I think for a marriage to work it's a person's decision. I don't think this love marriage/arranged marriage makes any difference. I really think love is a very overrated concept which is sold in movies and everything.

Josephine: You don't believe in this movie kind of love thing?

Anila: No [laughs]. I think I am past that stage.

Anila resists the categorization of marriage into the binary of arranged and love marriage, as did the participants in the research by Sharangpani (2010) and Pande, (2015). Instead, she

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[125]*Ponnu paakkal* refers to the ritual of 'seeing the girl' (the potential bride) at her family. It is an integral part of arranging a marriage in many parts of India. See discussion on *ponnu paakkal* in Chapter five.

framed a marital relationship as something to be built with conscious effort on the part of the partners, regardless of the mode in which the marriage took place. This lack of concern over how she finds her husband is informed by her critique of discourses on 'romantic love'. She sees this as "over-rated", particularly as it is represented in popular culture. It is interesting to contrast Anila's view with the popular celebration of romance as a prerequisite to modern marriage in western narratives. At 27 years of age, Anila says she is "over it", dubbing romantic love as childish, and a 'passing phase' that younger people go through. A marital relationship, to her, was more serious, an adult-commitment that required decisiveness and conscious effort from those involved in it. Anila's talk destabilizes the dichotomous construction of love marriage and arranged marriage; and the colonial understanding of arranged marriage as universally oppressive, rendering women without agency.

Jomol (21) also did not have a clear preference between love marriage and arranged marriage. Her family had not been seriously considering her marriage, as she was still finishing her undergraduate studies:

Jomol: I don't mind love marriage- because it is a person's wish to marry. They have a right to choose a person for their lifetime.

Josephine: What about arranged marriage?

Jomol: It's fine too, but it shouldn't be forced- the opinion of the bride and groom should be taken into account.

Josephine: Are religion and caste important?

Jomol: My family won't be comfortable if love outside my religion and caste happens, but they won't completely reject it. There have been inter-religion and inter-caste marriages in my family. One of my uncles married a Muslim woman, and they practice their religions separately. She follows Islam and he follows Christianity and their son married a Hindu girl. So, the thing is that we should not be concerned about others. Most of the families, even if they find out that the person is good and understanding and everything, they care more about what the society will speak about them- how would their relatives accept this relationship and so on. They don't give as much priority about their son's or daughter's feelings. Every decision parents make, they take into consideration how the society and extended relatives will see it. The priority should be given to their sons' and daughters' feelings.

Jomol makes a distinction between arranged marriages and forced marriages. She clarifies that arranged marriages are "fine" as long as the "opinions" of the bride and groom are given "priority". This position – in which there is personal compatibility between the bride and groom in arranged marriages – is becoming increasingly common in India (see Fuller & Narasimham, 2008; Dommaraju, 2016). In Jomol's view, a bride and groom should have their say, and preferably, their views should be given precedence over other considerations such as the potential judgement and the views of the extended family. This position not only indicates some differences between arranged marriage and forced marriage, but also shows why assuming arranged marriage and love marriage is a binary is too simplistic. Jomol's talk indicates how neoliberal notions of 'choice' operate around marriage. She frames those entering a love marriage as having a 'right to choose'. This draws on second wave feminist and neoliberal discourses in which the 'freedom' or the 'right' to choose are central. However, Jomol is unable to hold onto the notion of a 'right' to choose in the context of an arranged marriage. She resolves this in two ways: by saying that an arrange marriage *should* not be forced and that the participants *should* have their 'opinions' taken into account. She then highlights the significance of discourses of religion and caste which structure/inform arranged marriage (in her family context). In one sense she critiques parents' focus on broader societal discourses in which they ignore participants' wishes. Her final comment that parents 'should' give 'priority' to the feelings of the bride and groom thus seems more like a remote possibility than an expectation in her own context.

A relevant theme related to marriage is the significance of support from family and community, both before and after marriage. For most participants, the acceptance and continuing support from their natal families were important considerations in marriage that shaped their expectations about their own future marriages. Daya (23), for instance, would have preferred a love marriage, but would accept her family's expectation of an arranged marriage, as her family's happiness and support were important aspects of her life:

Daya: I think love marriage is absolutely better.
Josephine: Do you want to eventually get married in a love marriage?
Daya: Ya, but unfortunately my family will not let me get married in a love marriage.
             And I have no one! [laughs] But in any case, my parents will not allow me to.
Josephine: You are sure?

Daya: One hundred percent sure. So far nobody in my family has done love marriage. Only arranged marriage. So I'm sure. I also saw their reaction to my cousin sister[126] simply saying 'no' to marriage. They were so dramatic, assuming she had somebody in her life [pauses] Maybe-maybe if the guy is well settled, and everything matches. But still, I feel they will not accept. So I have to go for arranged marriage. And for me my parents' happiness is important too, you see.

Josephine: But you personally prefer love marriage and in the next generation, you will let your kids?

Daya: Yes. Of course. I would obviously like to save some money through love marriage [of my kids]- we won't have to go through rituals and dowry negotiations. They can just register it at a government office!

Like Anila and Jomol, Daya's parents expected to arrange their daughter's marriage. Although Daya personally preferred love marriage, she was aware of her family's expectations. She belonged to a joint family where decisions were taken collectively by her parents and other elders such as uncles, aunts and her grandmother. She mentioned that her grandmother had the final say on major decisions. The experience of her cousin in regard to marriage was a clear indication of her family's attitude towards love marriage. The only faint possibility of her family accepting a 'love marriage' was if 'everything', by which she meant religion, caste, horoscope, economic status, matched as expected in an arranged marriage, which was unlikely. Significantly, she mentions that her family's happiness was important to her. This is an important aspect of understanding women's agency and choice in South Asian societies where wellbeing and happiness are often conceptualized/understood as a collective feeling rather than that of individuals in isolation. A woman's natal family, for instance, plays important ritualistic roles around reproduction. For the smooth functioning of rituals, marriage has to happen with the support and blessings of both families. Marriage, in most parts of India can thus be understood as a process through which families came together in profound ways (Bowman and Dollohite, 2013).

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[126] Cousin sister is a commonly used term in Indian English that refers to a female cousin.

Daya indicates that she would happily allow her own children to marry someone they chose themselves, citing the advantage of savings. Arranged marriages were expected to be organized lavishly and involved dowry, which according to Daya could be avoided in a love marriage. Daya later shared with me a meme regarding marriage criteria 'abroad' and in India through Facebook:

Fig. 6.1: Meme shared by Daya on marriage
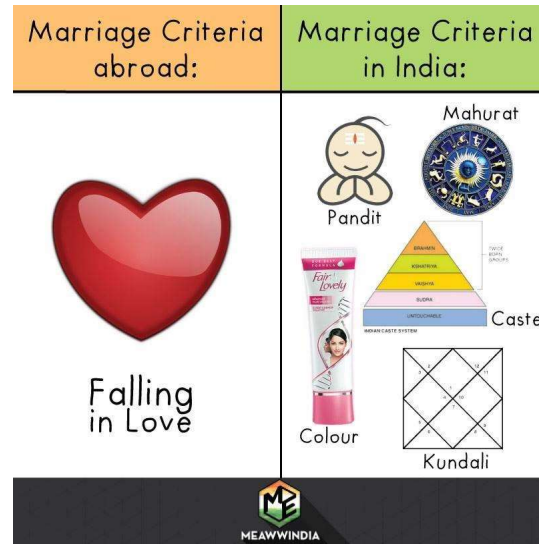
The meme[127] (see fig 6.1) draws on and reinforces the simplistic dichotomy of Indian vs Western. The meme highlights the range of 'criteria' which are potentially taken into account the common practices around marriage in India (right hand side of the image), which include skin colour, horoscope, auspicious time and caste. On the other hand, marriage in the 'abroad' context is portrayed as simple, and potentially more desirable. This conceptualization is reminiscent of colonial discourses and indicates the continued currency (or a resurgence? See discussion on recolonization, Chapter one) of such a world view in India. Through intensifying neoliberalism, this worldview has been reinforced (see 'recolonization', Chapter one). The narrative of freely/naturally falling in love (as is seen in the meme) is generally understood as being the more appropriate mode of marriage as partners are not constrained by broader discourses of religion, caste etc. Daya's sharing of the meme thus works as a critique of arranged marriage and a valuing of western discourses of romantic love. This meme reproduces contemporary critiques of arranged marriage. Simultaneously, it reflects an idealistic, uncritical position on the value of a love marriage, which is also reinforced through multiple dominant discourses.

Rosie's (20) family had been very clear that they wanted her to have an arranged marriage. Her own parents, however, were in a 'love marriage', outside of caste boundaries, with her mother being a Dalit[128] and her father from a mid-level caste:

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[127] Explanation of non-English terms in the meme.
Mahurat: auspicious time
Pandit: Hindu priest
Kundali: Horoscope
[128] Lowest rank in the caste system. Outside, and below the four defined caste positions.

Josephine: Your parents saw what life is, breaking the caste system when they got married. Do you want to challenge it too?

Rosie: If I get married to a guy in another caste, will caste end? Will problems get solved? It won't. Even Periyar[129] couldn't solve caste in Tamil Nadu. How can I? My child has to go through the same that I went through. My mom [pause] none of my relatives included my mother in any of the functions. I don't want to go through the same, *akka* basically. I don't want to marry outside my caste. My marriage must be arranged. I don't want to suffer like my mom.

Josephine: So do you think you will go back to your hometown and live in your community?

Rosie: What to do, these people are never going to change.

Josephine: Can you try to escape from there, when you hate it so much? Try to find a job here after study, or somewhere else, and a guy who works there- live your life away from the community.

Rosie: These people will come there *akka*. And for that, the guy has to be really strong *akka*. Let me tell you a story. A relative of mine got married to a Hindu guy [Rosie belonged to a Christian family]. That guy is not strong enough. He refused to take the expense for her delivery itself *akka*! And she had a baby, a daughter. He is not giving her enough money. And what will her parents do? It was her decision to get married to this guy. What can we do? And her parents are really old. There's nothing much she can do, *akka*. Her delivery was caesarean. It cost about 1-1.5 lakhs. And the guy paid nothing. And she had to beg, coming back to her family 'please please please'. And do you know what the extended family said? They said "it was your decision. It was your decision to get married to this guy outside our community". If it was a decent arranged marriage, they would have helped her.

Josephine: What is the solution for this Rosie?

Rosie: I find no solution. These people are gonna be like this. No change at all. Maybe after a generation maybe.

Josephine: For your children? Will you allow them to marry whoever they want?

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[129] Periyar E. V. Ramaswamy was a prominent anti-caste leader who played an influential role in the social and political landscape in Tamil Nadu

Rosie: Of course, I will. What to say, if this caste system is not prevailing so much at that time. If it is still there, then

Josephine: You'll be like your parents?

Rosie: Ya *akka* [pause] you should have seen it. I saw my mother suffering. I was witnessing it as I grew up. If you fall in love and marry against the community's wishes, you become 'characterless' *akka*, they judge you. They judge my mother- like she fell in love and got married *akka*- and they judge the same about me also *akka*.

Josephine: What is wrong? How can they say that?

Rosie: I don't know. They just say that. You know what? People used to tell me like, "your mum's is a love marriage. Like she fell in love, and she got married like that- you are also like that- her daughter will be the same". You know how bad that is. It has torn me apart many times. It's so bad *akka* [pause] I don't want to talk about it. It's good that you didn't have these issues in your life [pause] but I had it.

Rosie's experience of growing up with parents who had chosen a love marriage has had a significant impact on her, particularly her choice to have a caste-matched arranged marriage. The social exclusion and suffering Rosie's mother experienced for her violation of communitarian rules impacted significantly on the way Rosie thinks about marriage. Rosie's parents' experience of love marriage supports Mody's (2008) theorization of 'love marriage' as a disruption to the Indian kinship system. Mody's work highlights "the contradiction between the legitimacy of love-marriage as endowed by law, and its illegitimacy in the context of society" (p.224). It is the response of family and community in which love marriage is rejected, and those who practise it are ostracised, which determines Rosie's decision (not the law). This is similar to the legal discourse on dowry compared to its prevalence in society (see Chapter six). For Rosie, the advantages of having a community-accepted arranged marriage far outweigh the prospect of marrying someone she fell in love with. In a close-knit communitarian society, continuing acceptance and support from family is a crucial aspect of happiness (as indicated in Daya's case) and the quality of life. Families provided social support in times of crises and need, as Rosie demonstrated through the example of a relative. However, this also highlights how love marriages are regulated through extended family practices of neglect and disavowal.

Another crucial insight from Rosie's narrative is the weight and prevalence of the caste system in rural Tamil Nadu, and the role the arranged marriage system plays in maintaining it (see the discussion on 'Brahmanical patriarchy' later in this chapter). In Rosie's mother's context, women's sexuality/romance (like Rosie's mother) outside the framework of arranged marriage was understood as being shameful and morally reprehensible, leading to ostracization, especially since it happened outside the boundaries of caste.

Ramola (23) provides further insight into some of the reasons why many women in the hostel preferred arranged marriage. Although she personally expected to get married to her boyfriend, she indicates her preference for an arranged marriage. Ramola talks about her family's values, history and track record around love marriage to arrive at an understanding of what may lie ahead of her in the future:

Ramola: Both have positives and negatives. Love- you know the person- you know their temperament. You decide you go accordingly […] Till you are married it's one story. After marriage, it's another story. In arranged marriage, you have the entire family's support. In love marriage often you are on your own. In love marriage, people know each other so well that they take each other for granted. The respect is lost. I'm not saying that this doesn't happen in arranged marriage. But divorce rate in love marriage higher than divorce in arranged marriage.

Josephine: A marriage should be permanent?

Ramola: Yes, a marriage should be permanent. Unless and until you reach a point where you are completely convinced there is no way forward, you have to stay on. Breaking up on silly matters is stupid. They should keep working on the relationship and try to make it work.

Josephine: Personally what do you prefer, love marriage or arranged marriage?

Ramola: Personally I prefer arranged marriage. Because I think arranged marriage is full of excitement. You don't know the guy well. You get to know the guy, you start falling in love. I'm not saying all arranged marriages are successful. In some cases, they don't fall in love. But in arranged marriages where they do fall in love, it is very wonderful. I would prefer arranged marriage.

Josephine: But you have a boyfriend?

Ramola: Yeah.

Josephine: And your family is okay with it?

Ramola: Yeah they know about him.

Josephine: So it will be love-plus-arranged marriage? What do you think about it?

Ramola: It works, yeah it works

Josephine: Do you plan to get married to him?

Ramola: Obviously, if everything works out, yes. Obviously.

Josephine: What about the question of dowry and caste? What would that look like if you married him?

Ramola: Yes, dowry will be there. You might have heard about their caste. He is a [names a forward caste]. Basically, dowry is a pride thing. So they have to get it. […] See, the thing is his father did a love marriage, I believe, so maybe we will be able to negotiate and get him to agree without it [dowry]. I am hoping that dowry will not be a problem. As far as caste goes, although not the same, both of us are from upper-caste groups, so that shouldn't be a problem.

Ramola believes that arranged marriage holds more excitement and adventure, and that arranged marriages where the bride and groom eventually fall in love with each other is preferable. In comparison, love marriage presents the possibility of disenchantment through long familiarity, and the prospect of taking each other for granted and not having the support of family and community. Ramola draws a contrast between 'Western culture' and 'Indian culture' with respect to divorce rates. In the West, where love marriages dominate, divorce rates are higher. This is framed as problematic by Ramola, particularly divorce based on 'silly matters', as she sees marriage as something 'permanent'. Like some others (see Daya), Ramola also uses the Indian vs West dichotomy, but more in line with Hindu right wing discourse which portrays 'Indian ways' (for example, arranged marriage) as being better.

It is intriguing that while Ramola indicates that she prefers an arranged marriage, she plans to marry her boyfriend. This would thus be a blending of love and arranged marriage, as Ramola's parents know her boyfriend and appear to approve of him. For Ramola, the fact that she and her boyfriend are of the same caste, may make this love marriage acceptable to her parents. Ramola, and other participants' narratives, highlight that we need to understand women's positions on marriage in a more complex way. Women are neither absolutely complicit nor completely in opposition to social expectations of 'proper' marriage (Sharangpani 2010).

The above analysis provides an insight into the range of positions that exist among women living in Carmel Hostel on the topic of marriage. The respondents largely challenged the binary, oppositional framing of 'arranged marriage' vs 'love marriage', often perceived as equivalent to 'tradition' vs 'modernity'. Thapan (2004) suggests that the dichotomous construction of tradition and modernity itself is a colonial construct that deliberately dismisses diverse local traditions, generalizing them as all backward, and Indian women as oppressed. Many women strategically opt for arranged marriage, as they see it as an opportunity to maximize prospective wellbeing and satisfaction for themselves and their families, and to ensure continued support from family and community. Many participants view happiness as collective. Women value their parents' wellbeing and ongoing participation and support from the community. Arranged marriage is therefore a site utilized by women to advance their interests, by negotiating their changing position and agency within the Indian kinship system (Sharangpani 2010).

Premarital Sex and Virginity: Virginity as capital?

> One afternoon in April 2016, in the midst of my second field trip, Nimmy (20) and Rosie (21) invited me to their room in the hostel's new block. As I entered the room, I was pleasantly surprised. The girls had organized a cake for my birthday. Apart from Rosie and Nimmy, Nasreen (20) and Jincy (20) were also there. I blew the candles and cut the cake while they all sang happy birthday. As I shared the cake with the girls, Nimmy came to me and said 'I wish you the best'. After a pause she continued, this time softly 'and may you have plenty of great orgasms this year!' After a moment of surprised silence, we shared a giggle.

Unlike marriage, sexual activity outside marriage is a topic that is not discussed as much in India's public discourse. The topic, for a long time was considered taboo, even more so for women, whose sexuality was (and continues to be) attached to the honour of the family and caste group. Since the 1980s, however, an increased interest in scholarship around sexuality was visible, due to the spread of HIV and AIDS (Subaiya, 2008). Yet the focus was on understanding 'sex' from a biomedical perspective rather than a social and cultural perspective.

Since the advent of the neoliberal period and satellite television, more open discussion on sex was beginning to happen, especially among the already established middle classes in urban settings who were eager to catch up with the globalized culture (Oza, 2006 p.32). Newly established English periodicals such as *Outlook*, published cover stories on sex, outside the framework of marriage, for example its 1997 October cover entitled '*Kama Chaos: In the age of glitzy media, money and emancipation, promiscuity loses its stigma*. Oza (2006) however makes a distinction between the existing middle class, (who were the primary target audience of the emerging conversations about pre-marital and extra-marital sex) and the newly emergent middle class in the post-liberalization context. I locate most participants in this study as being part of the new/emergent middle class. According to Santhya and Zavier (2014) "marriage still marks the onset of sexual activity for a majority of young women in India. However, there is growing evidence for the premarital onset of sexual activity" (p.30). Majumdar (2018) also acknowledges the increased incidence of premarital sex in India and notes that despite the increase, it is still not 'widespread'. There is, Subaiya (2008) argues, a significant gap within the literature in the area of sexual activity outside of marriage.

In many parts of India, sex outside marriage is still largely under-discussed, and is closely related to the construction and regulation of women's sexuality. In her essay 'Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy' (1993), Uma Chakravarti presents the historical context in which the sexual control of women became institutionalized in India. She presents the argument that the institution of the caste system greatly contributed to the construction of sexual norms in contemporary India. With the advent of agricultural settlements, upper-caste groups systematically extracted the labour of the so-called lower-caste people, leading to a situation where upper-caste women became redundant to the process of food production. This marked a radical change in women's position in the upper-caste society. Controlling upper-caste women's sexuality became a necessity not just for ritual purity and the preservation of caste hierarchy, but also to ensure continued dominance over the land. Important Hindu texts such as *Manu Smriti* and *Sathapatha Brahmana* thereafter show a clear pattern of demonizing women's sexuality and glorifying chastity. The persistence of the caste hierarchy in contemporary India informs and reproduces the value placed on chastity for women, resulting in strict controls on women's sexuality (Srinivasan, 2005; Chakravarti, 1993). With widespread Sanskritization, especially in post-independence India, this control of female sexuality has spread across caste, class, religious and geographic lines. Chakravarti (1993)

coined the term 'Brahmanical patriarchy' to indicate the specific form of patriarchy that is visible in contemporary India. This term has recently come to prominence in public debate and social media spaces with the resurgence of anti-caste politics, especially in response to the strengthening of right-wing groups since the victory of Bharatiya Janata Party in the 2014 general elections. Brahmanical patriarchy represents "the need for effective sexual control over [upper-caste] women to maintain not only patrilineal succession but also caste purity, the institution unique to Hindu society" (Chakravarti, 1993 p.579).

With respect to the specific context of Tamil Nadu, Tamil literature and popular culture glorify women's sexual 'purity', placing it on a pedestal. The works of prominent writers glorify chastity. In some of the popular Tamil myths, chaste women were portrayed as having mystical powers capable of cursing Gods (Chokkanathan, 2012). The prominence of the construction of *pattini* (chaste woman) in Tamil culture (Mahalingam, 2007) is also an important factor driving up the value of sexual 'purity' and 'innocence'.

Additionally, the concept *karppu*[130], indicating feminine chastity and modesty, is central to the conceptualization of women's sexuality in Tamil Nadu (Raman, 2000; Srinivasan, 2005; Rogers, 2008; Krishnan, 2015). Raman (2000) discussed how many Tamil anti-colonial thinkers and writers (for example Subramania Bharati), even while promoting widow re-marriage and girls' education, held nostalgic views on chastity and its connection to self-sacrifice and strength. They often viewed *karppu* to be having ancient, Dravidian[131] origins (Raman, 2000). The construction of *karppu* played an influential role in the shaping of women's boundaries and 'appropriate' behaviour. It needs to be noted here that a large number of the reformist movements were led by upper-caste Hindu scholars and writers who didn't necessarily have a strong caste-based critique. However, anti-caste activist E. V. Ramaswamy Naikker, popularly known as Periyar, also a prominent anti-colonial leader, critiqued the concept of *karppu*, recognising its role in the maintenance of the caste system.

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[130] The literal translation of *karppu* is chastity.

[131] 'Dravidian' refers to the ancient culture, language and ethnicities of the Indian peninsula, pre-dating the Vedic civilization. Tamil, the largest spoken among Dravidian languages, is among the oldest languages in the world. During the Sangam era (200 BC – 500 A.D.) classical literature flourished in the Tamil language. Some of the epics from that age are centred around the strength of a chaste women for example, Silapathikaaram by Elangoadikal is centred around Kannagi, a woman who derives her strength from her chastity (Raman, 2000).

Therefore, cultural, literary and religious discourses all contribute to the hyper-valuation of sexual 'purity' of women within the Tamil context. As unmarried recent woman migrants to the city, the residents of Carmel Hostel encountered many competing discourses about sexuality in their everyday lives. They held a range of perspectives on virginity and premarital sex, some that reproduced, and others that disrupted 'traditional' discourses.

'Sex talk' in the hostel

Talking about sex openly, as Nimmy does in the opening excerpt of this section, was not common in the hostel during my time there. However, within private settings such as rooms, women sometimes felt more comfortable to open up on topics considered taboo or inappropriate. Roommates who shared the same compact space often built close friendships and trust over time, making rooms more likely sites for 'sex talk'. Over my two field trips, I had built a good relationship with Rosie, Nimmy and their roommates, who had organized the birthday cake, and we had had conversations about sex on previous occasions. In the hostel, and among friends, however, Nimmy and Rosie had a 'reputation' for knowing and talking about sex far more openly than others, and they often faced a backlash for it. Once, they mentioned to me how their roommates Nasreen and Jincy, were very curious about sex but often feigned 'innocence' when the topic was being discussed. The following conversation happened on another occasion when I was alone with Nimmy and Rosie:

Nimmy: They [Nasreen, Jincy and others] often ask us [herself and Rosie] about sex. And then when we talk about it, they make gestures like closing their ears or saying things like "ewww, gross". We get annoyed. They make us talk about it, and when we do, they paint us in a negative light and act all innocent, as if they have never heard of these things before. Nasreen studied biology as an elective subject in high school. How can one be 20 years old and be hearing basic things about sex for the first time? Especially in the age of the internet? Everything is available there. I'm sure that they would have looked things up when they were curious.

As evident here, Nimmy was dismayed by the reactions she received when she talked to her friends about sex, upon their request. Her use of the word 'innocent' derives from the construction of female sexuality in relation to morality, and in some religious cases, the

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construction of 'sin'. When girls gain sexual knowledge and/or experience, they 'lose' their 'innocence'. Nimmy's comment highlights the way a 'good'/'bad' girl binary is reproduced here. She and Rosie are 'painted in a negative light' ('bad') because they have and are willing to share sexual knowledge. The 'others', while seeking out such knowledge, claim a lack of knowledge and thus innocence ('good').

I did observe other instances in which this binaristic framing was used. In chapter eight, I discuss a situation in which Indrani commented that Rosie's weight-gain was a result of her desire for sex and watching too much porn (see chapter 8). This was an attempt to publicly shame Rosie (who talked openly about sex) and constitute her as a 'bad girl' with her weight-gain framed as a punishment of sorts for her sexual desire and knowledgeability. It thus highlights one of the ways in which the 'good/bad girl' binary is used by participants in the hostel context to regulate feminine sexuality.

Claiming sexual ignorance therefore represented a strategic advantage with respect to one's reputation at the hostel, that is, a form of symbolic capital. This also extended to participants remaining silent about any (pre-marital) sexual activity. Subaiya's (2008) literature review also highlights how Indian women often do not open up about their sexual awareness and experience, even under conditions of anonymity, due to strong social stigma. Joshi et al.'s (2004) study in rural Gujarat, had a similar finding. While the male respondents talked of the sexual availability of young women in their village, the female respondents overwhelmingly denied having premarital sexual experiences.

A majority of the participants in my study mentioned virginity during the interviews. They discussed their understandings and perspectives on virginity, and in particular, the importance of being a virgin until marriage. For most participants, this was considered essential, however, a considerable number believed that sex with the man they would marry, prior to the wedding, was acceptable. The remaining participants held the view that it was not important to remain a virgin until marriage. Notably, all discussions from my interviews were heteronormative in nature, with no mention of non-heteronormative sexual expressions, and with 'sex' generally referring to penile-vaginal penetration.

The topic of virginity came up in my conversation with Nandini when we were discussing the societal double standard regarding the consumption of alcohol. Within Tamil society, alcohol

consumption is considered a taboo for women and is often conflated with a moral failure on the part of women who drink. Nandini believed that women should be free to do whatever they wanted to, as long as they had 'limits'. In this extract, she relates alcohol consumption with loss of virginity:

Nandini: I am completely fine with [drinking alcohol]. Even I like to do it, provided you have your limits. A girl can't just have full drinks and lose their virginity over that. There should be able to put a full stop to everything. Go have dance, have drinks, have fun, mingle with people, socialize. Do all that, but [long pause]

Josephine: Do you think that there is an undue advantage to men? They can do what they want, but women can't?

Nandini: It's not like women can't, okay, it's all in your mind-set. Though you are boozed out, it's all in your hands. If you have proper control over yourself, that's all that counts. You need to maintain your honour as a woman under any circumstance. There is no point crying over spilt milk.

For Nandini, the responsibility of protecting a woman's virginity is placed on the woman herself. Firstly, she mentions that women should have control over themselves even while drunk. Having 'full drinks' could lead to the loss of virginity, through the loss of self (sexual) control. Women always have to maintain 'proper control', she states. Nandini thus positions women as responsible for their sexual activity, or lack thereof, with no acknowledgement of the contribution of male partners and gendered power relations (for example, possibilities of coercion or even rape). In this framing, women who are unable to 'control' themselves with respect to alcohol consumption, sexual activity and possibly sexual desire (although that is not explicit), are to blame. Nandini locates virginity within the framework of women's honour and describes preserving it as crucial with constant vigilance on the part of women. The idea that women's bodies are 'repositories of honour' is a common one in Tamil society (Mahalingam, 2007), and across India (Chakravarti, 1993).

During my interview with Jomol, I directly asked her about virginity. She began by saying that it was a personal choice. For her, virginity was important, but she argued that women should be able to decide for themselves on whether to retain their virginity or not:

Jomol: It's up to the girl to stay a virgin or not. If you ask me, according to my culture it is wrong. According to my moral values, it is wrong. But then a person has […] a right to decide what they want. So, I don't mind that.

Josephine: But for you personally, it is important for yourself.

Jomol: Yes, for me, yeah, cos my moral values and things don't allow that, and I am attached to that, I can't reject it.

Josephine: It seems for men it is not applicable at all though, in society.

Jomol: Yeah. Nobody asks a guy if he is a virgin. Even if a girl is seeing some guy, the first thing a guy asks is "are you a virgin"? How many women ask the same to a man, even if it is for a marriage alliance? How many parents ask their sons, "are you a virgin?" Every mom [pause], most moms at least are very concerned that their daughters must be virgins until marriage.

Josephine: For you, it is important that your partner should also be a virgin?

Jomol: Of course, it is not about the sex of the person. It's an important value for me- and I expect my partner to share it.

Jomol makes a clear distinction between her individual values and those of others. She says that others had the right to act according to their own 'moral values'. On the one hand, Jomol acknowledges that virginity is a cultural norm, which she supports, while on the other hand, allowing for women's agency to 'choose' otherwise. She also expresses dismay at the sexual double standard that was visible in her culture. For example, she questions why families focused singularly on the virginity of daughters, and not so much on that of sons. Here she draws from feminist discourses on virginity. Jomol expected her future partner to share her views on this topic, as she believed it was equally applicable for men and women.

"It's okay if you marry the same guy": Reaching a middle-ground on pre-marital sex

Daya (22) talked about virginity in relation with one's age at the time of marriage. According to feminist scholars such as Chakravarti (1993), the pressure on women to get married early derives historically from the construction of women's sexuality as risky, or 'dangerous' (p.579) in relation to the preservation of the caste structure. This anxiety, related to women's sexuality, used to be more prevalent among Brahmins and the upper-castes, but

has since spread across caste barriers, especially among those who aspire to achieve upward social mobility (Still, 2011). Marrying early effectively absolves parents of the responsibility of closely guarding their daughters' 'purity'. In the following extract, Daya discusses how she negotiated to delay the age at which she should marry:

Daya: My parents wanted me to get married right after my undergraduate degree and started looking for boys. But I was like, not now, I want to do my masters and somehow got them convinced. In my family, 20-22 is the right age for marriage for girls.

Josephine: Why do they think that?

Daya: Maybe because they are afraid that at an older age, like 23-24, they will get destroyed or they will get into unnecessary things, something bad will happen to them.

Josephine: What do you mean by 'destroyed'? In cinema they use terms like 'destroyed' and 'spoiled' in relation to virginity.

Daya: Yes, I feel yes. I feel yes. It is related to virginity. My *cousin sister*, when she was 21, they tried to force her to get married. They said like there was this good guy, he was highly qualified and was from a good family. She was stubborn. She said no, 'I don't wanna get married. I wanna study and find work'. But they started to get suspicious. Like they had doubts that she was in love with someone, as she was very stubborn. They asked her, "are you with a guy, are you in love with someone, like what is your problem?" I know, we are so close, that she has no one. But they decided that she had some boyfriend and all.

Josephine: Do you believe that virginity is important?

Daya: I guess, yes, it is important. I feel it is against our culture. [pause] And also I feel if a girl is comfortable with a guy, then she can have sex. I feel that.

Josephine: What do you mean by 'comfortable'. Is it related to trust?

Daya: Yeah, yeah. If the girl is sure-okay. Like, if she is sure that he is the perfect man for me, and we will get married soon, then okay. With that, she can. There's nothing wrong with that. But they shouldn't feel that enjoyment means having sex, and they shouldn't just go and have sex with anyone. And this is applicable for men too. If he really thinks he is going to get married to

	that girl, then yes, he can go ahead and have it with her. Like if he feels committed to getting married to her. But otherwise no.
Josephine:	But there is a double standard, that men can have sex and feel proud of it, but not for women.
Daya:	I don't see why guys should feel proud of not being a virgin. It is equal for both men and women. Both have equal right for enjoyment. In recent times this trend has come up, I think, where men are saying they are proud, and all. I think virginity is important for men as well. Men and women have equal responsibility in this matter.

Daya, not unlike Nandini, holds the position that one should avoid equating sex with pleasure, which would lead to having sex with multiple partners. This view reflects the continued influence of discourses that equate women's sexual pleasure with moral degeneration. Notably, like Nandini, Daya used a negative term ('destroyed') to indicate the loss of virginity. The loss of virginity before marriage in the accounts of both Daya and Nandini is described in terms of a tragedy by the use of terms such as 'destroyed' and 'crying over spilt milk'. Here the women are reproducing dominant discourses of feminine sexuality that stigmatize women's sexual desire and expression. However, unlike Nandini and in line with Jomol's statement on equality, Daya places equal responsibility for the maintenance of virginity on men.

Daya's exception to the rule of maintaining virginity observably came as an afterthought. It is notable that after a pause, Daya makes the exception that engaging in premarital sex with a trustworthy partner was acceptable if they were sure to get married. Ramola, who had a boyfriend and was sexually active with him, was Daya's closest friend. Lifestyles of close friends often were influential in changing views on premarital sex. As Thapan (2006) argues, the 'new Indian woman' should not be understood through the dichotomies of tradition vs modernity, but rather, seen independently in the fluid nature of gender and identity, defined and redefined through everyday experiences.

A similar view was expressed by Indrani (23), who had a boyfriend she got intimate with but claimed to have not had sex with. She said, "having sex with a guy other than your future husband is like cheating your future husband". For her, virginity was not important so long as

the person a woman loses virginity with would be her future husband. This was an increasingly common view, especially among women who were in romantic relationships.

Resisting the dominant construction of virginity

Ramola (23) was open to the idea of premarital sex. During my second interview with her in 2016, we discussed virginity and pre-marital sex. She viewed sex as a 'natural extension' of love and had had sex with her boyfriend:

Ramola: Sex, [pause] it is a natural extension of a relationship. I'm not telling to get fucked up everywhere. But if you are in love with someone and if is working out. Marriage is just a tagline. The same level can be reached before that as well. This hype around virginity is nothing. Virginity is not an issue. It should not be an issue.

Josephine: But it is considered to be a big issue by many.

Ramola: Because we are misled. Maybe it's because we don't know our limits. Maybe it's because we will take too much freedom until something bad happens. Like you might get pregnant. So if you are able to limit yourself, it's not an issue. And stay safe.

According to Ramola, the 'hype' around virginity was misplaced. She was of the view that having sex when in a romantic relationship was 'natural'. However, she mentions that it was not the same as getting 'fucked up a lot', but rather when in a romantic relationship and when things were 'working out'. Later, when I mentioned that virginity was indeed considered highly valued by many, Ramola she speculates that the control around pre-marital sex could be because 'we will take too much freedom'. In saying this, Ramola reproduces the notion that women's sexuality needs to be controlled. Ramola's perspective, although accepting of pre-marital sex, doesn't go as far as accepting casual sex. The prerequisite for sex, according to Ramola, was not marriage. Rather, it was being in love. Women must also 'limit themselves' and 'be safe'.

Nimmy and Rosie rejected the popular glorification of virginity. They were open to exploring casual sex outside romantic relationships. During my first field trip, Rosie said that although

she was a virgin, she was keen to try casual sex. Nimmy, at the time, was sexually active with her boyfriend. During my second field trip, Rosie talked to me about a casual relationship she had had with a classmate of hers. They would meet at his flat and engage in oral sex. After a few such encounters, they ended their relationship. One day Rosie narrated a conversation between herself and Nimmy around virginity:

Rosie: There's this guy, *akka*, we started contacting each other, and then it became texting in WhatsApp all the time. He was my senior in college and had got a project in America and was messaging me every day from there.

Josephine: How's that going?

Rosie: He was really interested in sexting, and I played along. One day he asked me if I was a virgin, claiming that he was a virgin [laughs]. I was shocked. This guy who was always interested in sexting now wants me to be a virgin? I told this to Nimmy. She was like, why don't we ask him this- what is the purpose of being a virgin? Do you want to be put in a glass box inside a church and worshipped? [laughs]

Here, Rosie expresses surprise in the contradictory views held by the man she was talking with. On the one hand, the man was 'sexting' with her regularly, and on the other hand, he expected her to hold values such as *karppu*. She found his claim of being a virgin ludicrous. Nimmy's response to the situation is also noteworthy. She uses humour to respond to the situation, poking fun at the construction of virginity as holy and sacred in Christianity. Rosie and Nimmy challenge the cultural discourses that glorified virginity.

At the beginning of the chapter, I had mentioned that the discussions on pre-marital sex during interviews were largely heteronormative. The weight of heteronormativity was felt by those who transgressed it. Nimmy, in a casual conversation mentioned that she was also attracted to women, and that once, someone in the hostel "accused" her of being a lesbian. While her gut reaction at the time was to say "no", she added "in my mind I said [pause] I am not a lesbian, I am bisexual".

Conclusion

In this chapter, it is possible to see the everyday negotiations of young women on issues around the conceptualization of marriage and sexuality amid the discursive milieu that exists on these topics in 21st century India. Take the case of Rosie, for instance. She had ruled out the possibility of a 'love marriage' in her life, and instead opted for a family-arranged marriage that would comply with the requirements (caste, class, education) of her community. From a colonial perspective, an Indian woman who gets an arranged marriage is considered to be 'oppressed' and without agency. However, when looking at her rationale, one can see it is a well-thought-out, agentic position that weighed the pros and cons of each option. And in the discussion on pre-marital sex, she is among those who rejected the hegemonic conceptualization of virginity, and had engaged in casual sexual experiences.

Women strategically deployed concepts from various discourses, to justify/arrive at their positions. Many women have reached the position that premarital sex is acceptable if one marries the same person. This seems to be a middle-ground position which carefully balances existing contradictory discourses on virginity, sexuality, marriage and romantic love, and is a major pattern emerging from this thematic discussion on marriage and pre-marital sex. It also acknowledges emerging avenues of sexual expression (through new technologies), such as sexting.

The positions articulated by the participants about marriage, virginity and premarital sex in this chapter were very diverse. They drew on a range of 'traditional' and 'modern' discourses about gender, sexuality and marriage, and negotiated these in often ambiguous and complex ways. For example: love marriages are ideal but participants would have an arranged marriage; arranged marriages were more 'exciting' than love marriages; love marriages were ideal but making one's parents happy by having an arranged marriage was more important; love (or western) marriages are transitory and arranged marriages are permanent; and love marriages produce suffering that arranged marriages avoid. Rather than being 'victims' of traditional practices over which they had little control, or simply rejecting traditional practices such as arranged marriages, participants took account of and negotiated with public debates, western critiques of arranged marriages, Indian critiques of western 'love marriages', their own positions of gender, class, caste, and religion within their extended families and communities, the experiences of other family members, and their own preferences and those

of their families. Participants produced thoughtful and practical strategies which highlighted their agency and participation in decision making around marriage. The value and practicality of traditional practices of arranged marriage are utilised in ways that indicate 'new' ways of thinking about marriage which disrupt binaries of traditional femininity/womanhood and modern femininity/womanhood in the contemporary Indian context.

Participants' talk on virginity and sex before marriage (more 'taboo' topics as I indicated above), emphasised that the decision to remain a virgin or not was one a woman should make. This acknowledgement of women's sexual agency and right to choose often sat alongside an acceptance of traditional discourses in which women are required to be virgins until marriage. Jomol's comment, which I reproduce here, articulates how she acknowledges both positions while also stating her own, "It's up to the girl to stay a virgin or not. If you ask me, according to my culture it is wrong. According to my moral values, it is wrong. But then a person has […] a right to decide what they want". Those participants who 'decided' that virginity was not for them (for a range of reasons), nonetheless drew on discourses which emphasized women's sexual agency while simultaneously positioning women as responsible for the potential consequences of these [sexual] 'freedoms' (Jomol), for example, getting pregnant, having unsafe sex, or having 'something bad' happen (Daya). This demonstrates the ways in which women's sexuality continues to be a highly contested and regulated site for these participants in contemporary India.

Chapter 8

'Fair and lovely'? Negotiating Indian beauty norms

> *My parents have different skin tones. My mother is lighter skinned than my father. Among their three children, I am the youngest, and the darkest. There was a running joke-theory among some in my extended family to explain my 'misfortune'. I cannot recall how this story came to be, and who came up with it. It however, got repeated time and again on many occasions as I grew up. It goes like this: "How come the youngest is so dark? Well, the mother gave most of her 'colour[132]' to her first-born. She had a little less to give to her second. By the time it was the turn of the youngest, there was none left."*

During a dinner conversation on a winter evening in Christchurch shortly after I returned from my first field trip in Chennai, a Chinese post graduate colleague of mine said to me, "As a child, I thought Indians were White people until I met them in real life. Why is everyone in Bollywood so pale?" Growing up in India I was also puzzled by this and wondered why there was little positive representation of people (and more so of women) with darker skin tones. This pattern, I later observed, went beyond India. Film industries in many parts of the world have a similar tendency. In Hollywood, it was, in recent years, highlighted by the #OscarsSoWhite controversy[133] . Even so, it is difficult not to get overwhelmed by India's "fairness fetish" (Nadeem, 2014, p.225). This fairness fetish dominates the imagery and language in popular culture, media (see Shevde, 2008; Parameshwaram & Cordoza, 2009), and matrimonial advertisements (Philips, 2004), thus working to constitute the subjectivities of young Indian women in their everyday lives. According to Nadeem, "'fairness' is a key modality through which exclusion operates in globalizing India" (2009, p.225). The residents of Carmel Hostel were embedded in this (oppressive) construction that not only excluded, but also devalued those that possessed 'dark skin'. The most important marker of beauty that emerges from the analysis of my fieldwork data is that of 'achieving' a lighter skin tone or 'fairness'. All the participants – regardless of the shade of their skin colour – aspired to 'fairness.'

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[132] 'Colour' in this context refers to lightness/fair skin.
[133] #OscarsSoWhite is a movement that began on Twitter, highlighting the underrepresentation of people of colour and lack of diversity in the Academy award (Oscar award) nominees and jury. It was started in 2015 by activist April Reign. Following this controversy, the Oscar award jury was diversified to include more women and people of colour. Reforms took place in the judgement criteria as well (see Reign, 2018).

As discussed earlier this thesis (see Chapter two), in the Indian context the desire to become lighter is not simply a cosmetic fad (like tanning in the West), rather, it represents the aspiration to become the desirable 'Other', who is more visible in positions of power and, who enjoys privilege through dominant power relations in society such as caste, class and race (Nadeem, 2014). In neoliberal India, advertisements for fairness products construct the notion that becoming lighter is a legitimate way of accessing materiel and cultural privilege (Parameshwaram & Cordoza, 2009; Picton, 2013). Nadeem writes:

> The desire for fairness is ultimately a desire for distinction: a wish to be numbered among the privileged and the worldly and not the common and the ordinary. On its own, it is hardly pernicious. But viewed as a thread in the dense weave of cultural, political, and economic life, its meaning is quite complex and consequential (2014, p. 225)

The construction of whiteness/lightness as 'superior' and 'desirable' in India is the result of centuries of colonialism (along with the narrative of racial superiority/racial hierarchy) and the caste system (the prevalent association between caste and skin colour). It is in this context that the international beauty industry entered the Indian market. Global capital, buttressed by the neoliberal emphasis on individualism, in which individuals 'choose' to act in ways that would enable them to 'succeed', saw opportunities for marketing skin lightening products in India. While reproducing a preference for 'light' over 'dark' skin through advertising (often deploying influential movie stars), the producers of fairness products assert that consumers are making free, individual cosmetic choices (Nadeem, 2014)[134]. This neoliberal framing of individualism and 'freedom of choice' for consumers ignores/negates the role of cosmetic companies in drawing on and reproducing 'colour bias'. Women, in particular, are the targets of such marketing as 'feminine beauty' is associated with lightness/whiteness in the Indian context. Neoliberal discourses not only challenge the positioning of women as 'victims' of

[134] At the time of making thesis amendments, activism against skin lightening products in India has reached a crescendo in the context of the George Floyd killing and the Black Lives Matter movement. Two petitions signed by thousands of Indians urged Unilever to stop production of Fair & Lovely, the most popular skin lightening product in India. One of the petitions stated that the product had "built upon, perpetuated and benefited from internalised racism and promotes anti-blackness sentiments" (Jones, 2020 para. 4). The second petition critiques the message the product sends "that there is something wrong with our colour, that we have to be light in order to feel beautiful. In order to feel worthy." (Jones, 2020, para 5). In this context, Unilever made an announcement that it would rename its products.

media marketing 'messages' but frame them as 'freely choosing agents' who know what they want and need in order to 'empower' themselves (that is, lighter skin). Beauty industries are thus positioned as simply giving women what they want. Many feminists have critiqued the way in which this 'rhetoric of choice' is used to support/reproduce problematic body practices, for example, buying products to deal with bodily distress caused by 'dark' skin, rather than attending to how the ideal of 'light skin' is constituted and the structural and societal factors which bring people to the choices they make (see Braun, 2009: Gill, 2007 and 2008; Nadeem, 2014).

It is within this context that I present a discussion on beauty ideals of young women who were residents of Carmel Hostel. I consider the talk, observations, and beauty practices of the research participants. In particular, I explore the ways in which 'lighter' skin colour is privileged as more desirable and how participants both reproduce and contest this construction. The discussion here delves into the obsessive aspiration for lighter skin, its gendered dimensions, and its reflection in online spaces.

Hostel residents' use of cosmetic products

> "[…] the scores of skin-lightening cosmetics that are being sold in globalizing India regurgitate colourism's historical hierarchies of gender, race, class and caste simultaneously as they claim to liberate Indian women from the confining constraints of the very same hierarchies" (Parameshwaram & Cordoza, 2009, p.263).

The very day I arrived at the hostel, I noticed the cosmetics carefully arranged in the rooms I visited. Skin-lightening products were among the most common cosmetic products used by hostel residents. Walking around the hostel after dinner, one could observe many women relaxing or working – engrossed in their smartphones or laptops or doing university work – with face packs applied. Nasreen, for instance, would apply a turmeric face pack every night to treat her acne marks and lighten her skin. I found myself joining in the ritual after the first couple of weeks and it created a sense of camaraderie. I bought an Ayurveda-based brand 'Banjara's Papaya and *Multani mitti*[135] face pack sachets' and would apply these a few times a week together with my new friends in the hostel. When I left the hostel after my first field

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[135] Multani mitti literally translates to mud from Multan, a city in Pakistan which is renowned for its clay which is believed to have beneficial effects for the skin.

trip, I gave the remaining sachets to Ragini, who, when I returned the following year, fondly recounted how she enjoyed them.

During my second field trip, I made a photographic series to document the cosmetic products used by my participants. I was able to photograph the cosmetics used by ten of my participants, four of which have been included in the chapter (see Figures 7.1 to 7.5 below).

Fig. 7.1. Cosmetics arranged in a participant's room in the hostel. Note the fairness products among them. Source: author's fieldwork photographs, 2016

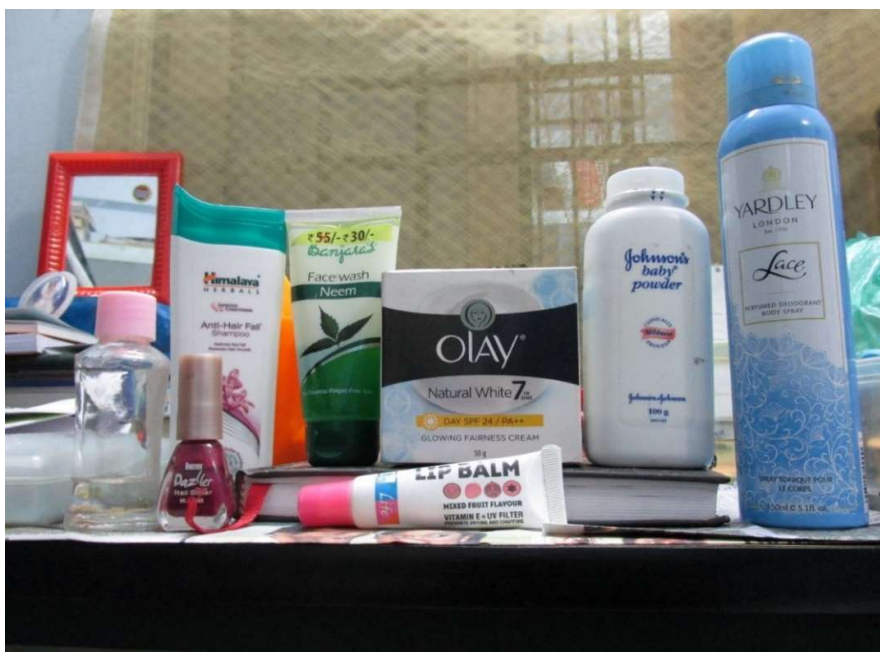*Fig. 7.2. Cosmetics of a participant arranged in her room.*

Fig. 7.3. Cosmetics of a participant arranged in her room.

Fig. 7.4: Cosmetics of a participant arranged in her room.

*Fig. 7.5: Enlarged image of a skin lightening product from one of the
collections. Note the product name 'Perfect radiance. Intense
whitening'*

In eight out of the ten cosmetic collections I photographed, at least one skin lightening
product was present. The word 'white' appears in seven out of the eight collections. The
other word that was prevalent in relation to light skin is 'fairness'. The terms associated with
'white' and 'fair' that appeared on the packaging of these products are also of interest here:
'healthy white', 'perfect radiance', 'white beauty', 'fair and lovely, 'natural white', 'extra
whitening', 'white glow', 'intense whitening' and 'natural glow'. The products all assert that
achieving whiteness is desirable and achievable through biomedicalized interventions on the
skin of Indian women, a majority of whom are brown (Mire, 2016).

'Transformation' from darker skin to lighter skin is one of the central themes within fairness
product marketing discourse (Parameshwaram & Cordoza, 2009). Advertisements use the
familiar idiom of metamorphosis, similar to the 'ugly duckling' story or the caterpillar
becoming a butterfly, in their advertising (Nadeem, 2014). Fairness products, furthermore,
also construct the sense of 'scientific authority' for their formulae, with imagery and signifers
of Western medical science and increasingly Indian medical science, Ayurveda
(Parameshawaram & Cordoza, 2009).

One product is branded as 'extra whitening' through 'cell repair'. Here darkness is
constructed as broken or an undesirable condition that needs to be 'repaired' (again,

suggesting that their product is a biomedical intervention to 'cure' darkness) to reveal whiteness, which is the desirable and 'healthy' state. The proliferation of the positive terms associated with 'white' reproduce the primacy of whiteness within discourses of beauty in India.

These cosmetic products, often produced by corporations headquartered in former colonial powers[136], are an example of commodity racism[137] (Osuri, 2008). Whiteness has become a transnational symbol of beauty- something that is universally desirable (Osuri, 2008). The disproportionate capital, influence and reach of aesthetics constructed and curated in the cultural centres that benefited from colonial systems, such as Los Angeles, New York, London, Paris (as opposed to Beijing, Mumbai or Lagos) add to the universal appeal for white skin[138], and is a dimension of recolonization (Mohanty & Alexander, 1997). In the contemporary era of globalization and neoliberalism, the availability of technologies such as social media have not led to greater parity between cultures, rather, cultures that benefit from the "postcolonial habitus"- that is accumulated social, economic and cultural capitals through colonization – have reasserted themselves with the aid of these new channels of communication and capital flow (Thapan, 2004, p.412).

Beauty and the City

From the interviews and conversations with my participants, a particular pattern of beauty and grooming regimes emerged. Whereas, in the smaller towns and villages, beauty standards became important around the central theme of marriage and finding a good alliance that would assure security in life (Philips, 2004), the importance of appearance seemed much greater in Chennai – at the workplace or college, for job interviews, and even during the more casual occasions of spending time with friends in public spaces such as the beaches, malls, and so on in the city. For example, Satya (26) who had recently moved to Chennai upon

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[136] For example, Unilever, a British- Dutch brand is the biggest beauty and FMCG conglomerate in the Indian market, who produce the most popular cosmetic product 'fair & lovely' is headquartered in London. L'Oréal, another top player in the market it headquarters in Paris.

[137] Commodity racism is a term first introduced by Anne McClintock in 1995, who argued that since the beginning of the 19th century, racism has been commodified, a prime example being slavery. Racism can be seen reproduced in the branding and marketing of various commodities- sex tourism, sports and even fast moving consumer goods (Chin, 2015), for example 'imperial leather'

[138] Akala (2018), for instance, speaks about how Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie are considered universal sex symbols, and not Chinese superstars. He urges readers to contemplate the possible reasons why non-white people are not regarded as universally appealing.

securing a temporary lecturer's position in prestigious college, talked about the pressures of living in the city which she did not experience before. She was not interested in fashion and make-up, and it did not matter much in her life until her move to the city:

Satya: I have never even shaped my eyebrows till now. I don't wear makeup, and just wear normal sarees and blouses. After coming here, this seems to be an issue. I always feel my students are judging me for my looks and fashion sense. I feel discriminated due to my dark skin colour. I sometimes feel like an outsider here.

In an increasingly globalizing Indian metropolis, makeup, grooming and 'appropriate' fashion are, in many contexts, expected. Satya's experience highlights how the pressure from the ever-present visuals around beauty and, in particular, how her own students 'judge' her results in a sense of alienation for her non-conformity. She also feels pressured to conform to the norms of beauty and grooming culture as her skin colour and non-normative style of self-presentation render her feeling like an 'outsider'. This highlights how 'conformity toward the norm' (Braun, 2009) works not just through beauty industries but also through people who have taken up the beauty norms reproduced through advertising.

Living in the hostel also exposed hostel residents to a host of cosmetic products and grooming regimes through friends and peers. The shared nature of the hostel space is also crucial here; the hostel offered no single-occupancy rooms. The most common type of room was a 'four-sharing' room. Sharing of intimate spaces meant sharing of routines and beauty and fashion practices. The fact that roommates knew each other intimately had both advantages and pressures. The pressure of grooming and beauty regimens was one of them. Nasreen, for instance, told me that she pressured her parents to buy her more clothes because "everyone in the hostel wear trendy clothes." This again highlights how young women take up particular discourses about beauty and reproduce these through sharing hostel spaces. In such spaces it become difficult to *not* conform to the norm, because doing so brings with it various consequences.

Who is the fairest of them all?

It was a pleasant evening during the initial days of my first field trip. Sonu (21), a master's student in English, often came to my room to hang out. On this day, she stood near me as I worked on my laptop, inspecting her face closely in the mirror mounted on the wall of my room:

Sonu: *Akka*, what is my skin colour?
             [I looked up from my laptop.]
Josephine: Brown.
Sonu: And yours?
Josephine: Brown
Sonu: Both of us are the same colour?
             [there was a tinge of annoyance in in Sonu's voice]
Josephine: Yes. I'm just a bit darker than you. [after a pause, noticing Sonu's unease] I'm proud that I am dark.
Sonu: Yeah *akka*, you are attractive. So it's okay.

In this exchange, Sonu seemed annoyed when I indicated that we both shared the same skin colour of brown. On reflection I wonder if she expected me to say that she was 'fair' or 'fairer than me'. My saying that both of us were 'brown' irked her. Here, one is reminded of the normalized discourses that construct 'darkness' as undesirable and unworthy. Drawing from the language of resistance, I then suggested that I am proud, being dark-skinned. Here, her expression of annoyance eased, evident from the relaxing of her face. The discourse of resistance, although marginal, is not unfamiliar, especially within the cultural space of Tamil Nadu, where an influential social reformer like Periyar[139] fought against casteism and colourism through the *Self-Respect Movement*. Sonu, however, added that I could afford to be proud because she viewed me as attractive, suggesting, perhaps that attractiveness compensated for my shortcoming as a dark-skinned person. Additionally, it is interesting to note that 'attractiveness' was important, but not more important than 'fairness'. Beauty is conceptualized as multi-faceted by Sonu, but fairness seemed to take primacy.

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[139] E.V. Ramaswamy, commonly referred to as *Periyar* was a revolutionary anti-caste and anti-colonial leader who played a significant role in shaping post-independence politics in Tamil Nadu. He started the highly influential radical social reform campaign called the *Self Respect Movement.*

Fairness and femininity

On a warm February morning, Ragini (22), Priyachelvi (24) and Aiswarya (23) (all working women) were sitting by the main entrance to the hostel. They were all from the same region southern Tamil Nadu, and were close friends. Aiswarya had a tube of *Fair & Lovely* with her and they were discussing using it when I walked towards them:

Josephine: Why do you use *Fair & Lovely*, Aiswarya? You are already lovely and beautiful.

Aiswarya: I have been using this continuously for a long time. Now how will I stop? Do you think I am beautiful?

Josephine: Yes, you are. You don't have to become "fair" for that. Dark is beautiful.

Aiswarya: Dark is beautiful?

Josephine: Yes.

After this, I recited the lines of a famous Tamil movie-song that translates literally to "Black is the complexion I love."[140] Everyone laughed.

Ragini: But that is for men!! Not for us!!

[The other two agreed]

In this excerpt, one can identify Aiswarya's anxiety or distress related to her skin colour (Nadeem, 2014: Braun, 2009), and her desire to become lighter skinned. She worries that if she stops using *Fair & Lovely* she could become darker than she is or perhaps revert to an earlier state which she perceives as being darker, so she continues to use it. Her usage of *Fair & Lovely* adopts the advertising message: not only does one have to use it, one must use it continuously for the gradual changes to occur week after week.

The excerpt also indicates the gendered conceptualization of beauty among Ragini, Aiswarya and Priyachelvi. Like most other aspects of subjectivity, understandings and lived

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[140] This song was part of the movie *Vettrikodi kattu*, released in the year 2000, and became very popular. See this link to a YouTube video of the song: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cj2XKo7zodA

experiences around colourism are also gendered. Discourses on beauty affect women and men in varying degrees. The gendered nature of colourism has been identified by many scholars (see Philips, 2004; Falconer & Neville, 2000).

Critical race scholars from the USA, Falconer and Neville (2000), similarly discuss the gendered nature of beauty standards that affect African Americans. In an analysis of magazines published in the USA featuring Black models, Keenan (1996) indicates that out of the Black models featured, female models were much lighter-skinned than male models. As part of my research for a paper from my data on colourism (see Varghese, 2017), I investigated the official posters of twelve Tamil films released in the month of June 2016. A similar pattern was identified in Tamil cinema posters that I researched. Nine of the twelve movie posters featured female lead characters who had lighter skin tones than the male leads. Of the three films that did not follow the trend, two were female-centric films with no male actors on the posters and one featured an all-male cast (see fig 7.6).

Fig.7. 6: Poster of Tamil movie 'Oru Naal Kuthu'. Source: IMDB, 2016

The gendered construction of beauty in cinema and other popular discourses wields significant influence on the daily lives of women (Parameswaran, 2015). Black feminists such as Hill (2002) and Hunter (2002) highlight a similar pattern in the USA. Dark women face a greater degree of discrimination, both in the public spheres of work and employment, and in the private spheres of relationships, marriage, and family, in the United States.

Satya (26) whose skin colour was darker than most residents at Carmel Hostel opened up to

me about her failed marriage the day before I left the hostel after my second field trip:

Satya: So you are leaving tomorrow?

Josephine: Yes.

Satya: And going back to New Zealand?

Josephine: Yes.

Satya: And you will not come back to stay here?

Josephine: No.

Satya: In that case, I want to share my experience with you.

Satya began by saying that she had not previously opened up about her past to me as she felt vulnerable and wanted to ensure that no one else in the hostel came to know about it. She then told me that she had previously been in a marriage and now was a divorcee. She was mistreated by her ex-husband for being 'too dark' and 'too thin.' Her ex-husband sometimes called her a 'trans-woman' as she was not 'womanly enough.' He was not interested in having sex with her, "I suspect he was gay or impotent. At one point, he had told his family that I was a trans-woman and I had to prove to them otherwise by revealing to his mother when I got my period."

Darker skin tone was regarded as a disadvantage within the arranged marriage system, which her father had to pay a large dowry in compensation. Despite this, she was abused in her husband's home. The strong association of dark skin with masculinity (or its disassociation with femininity) is striking here. Her ex-husband's accusation of her being a transwoman, highlights dominant discourses of deep transphobia and strong aversion towards dark skin. To fail to conform to the construction of ideal beauty as fair, is regulated/punished by Satya's ex-husband comments and eventual divorce. Her 'choice' to not use beauty products (she mentions only shaping her eyebrows in the extract above), demonstrates how it is only 'choice towards the norm' which brings potential acceptance. Other options, such as 'choosing' not to use lightening beauty products can bring condemnation (from Satya's husband and students). Satya's experience demonstrates that the notion that women *should* strive to improve/beautify themselves in line with dominant discourses of beauty/light skin colour is not an 'individual choice' but a cultural imperative (Braun, 2009).

Like Satya, Prabha indicated that she had also been at the receiving end of skin colour discrimination. To demonstrate the deeply entrenched nature of light-skin preference, Prabha described to me an incident that occurred at her workplace:

Prabha: Day before yesterday in my office there was a child and I was asking her which among us do you like the most. We are like [pause] eight or nine or ten of us in the office. One person in my office has very fair skin. She has good features with a round face and all. Almost instantaneously the little girl said that she liked that woman – the woman with the light skin. The second thing she said is that she resembled a doll. So for her, being fair and being pretty is what beauty means.

Josephine: So for her, being fair is equal to being beautiful?

Prabha: Yeah. Fair and lean. That is what is inculcated from a very young age. Boys, from childhood, talk to fair girls. They don't talk to girls who are dark, like me, or girls who are not pleasing. So when they grow up, that becomes a stable factor. But real beauty lies in character and behaviour.

Prabha's account of the incident demonstrates both the ubiquity of the 'fairness as beauty' discourse for women, as well as her critique. She shows that for the young girl in her story, "being fair and being pretty is what beauty means". Prabha points to one of the ways in which this gendered construction of beauty occurs in childhood, with boys being 'inculcated' to only 'talk to fair girls". She goes on to critique this association of beauty withy physical appearance by drawing on the inner/outer beauty binary which positions character and behaviours as 'real beauty'. However, in an 'image culture' where 'image is everything' (see discussion on colourism in the age of social media below), this discourse is increasingly being challenged. Similar comments that drew from the "inner beauty" narrative were made by other participants during interviews. Kavitha (27) and Nithya (24) suggested that external beauty was not as important as "character". According to Indrani (22) "beauty lies in personality". However, she added that she the discrimination dark-skinned people faced "is real".

Colourism in the age of social media

There is increasing interest in the changing social and cultural practices in the age of the internet (See Shah & Tewari, 2016; Sur, 2017). Sassen (2002) proposes the theory of 'embeddedness' for sociological analyses of digital activity. For Sassen (2002), the 'virtual' world is not separate from the 'real' world, rather it is embedded in it. Therefore, social and cultural discourses are reproduced in virtual spaces as a result of embeddedness. Sur (2017) traces the proliferation of beauty blogs and the construction of femininity within them. Women are depicted as "heterosexual desiring subjects with independence and choice" (p. 278). Sur finds that there is an increasing "obsession" with physical appearance and an urge to conform to socially constructed ideas of beauty. In this section, I present some of insights about beauty practices of my participants in digital spaces.

Samantha (21) had over 1500 followers on Facebook and about 2000 followers on Instagram. The photos she uploaded would usually garner about 400 'likes.' "Add me on Facebook" she said, a few days after we met. Her profile had plenty of photographs, predominantly selfies. All the photographs were heavily edited or 'filtered.' Samantha was very light skinned in comparison with most of the hostel residents, yet she used lightening filters in every photo before they got uploaded. Within the hostel, especially among the students living there, popularity on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram was a mark of success. During my second field trip, I noticed more of my participants taking part in social media. There was a universal acceptance of the usage of filters and editing. It did not matter how much one edited a picture as long as it got plenty of 'likes' and 'comments'. It appeared as though the virtual avatar of a person was becoming so significant that it overshadowed the offline self – thus creating an enhanced identity and acceptance for those popular in social media, both online and offline.

Mahadevi (29) was among those who would visit Rosie's (20) room for photographs to be taken. Rosie owned an iPhone with a good filter app for her camera. One afternoon, Mahadevi wanted photographs to be taken for her long-distance boyfriend, and I joined them. Rosie took a number of photos and they sat together to choose the best filter. She took a few of me as well. After the photo session, she opened the Instagram application on her phone and showed me an image of Kala (21) in her feed. Kala looked considerably lighter in the

photo. "I took this picture and edited it for her. If it wasn't for those edits, she wouldn't have got so many likes!" she said, giggling.

 The discursive construction of light skin as desirable had transpired even more intensely on to virtual spaces. On Instagram or Facebook, the 'transformation' that cosmetic products promised (Parameswaram and Cordoza, 2009) was more practical and effective, with the help of easy-to-use filters and editing software. Additionally, filters are cheaper and more effective than the plethora of fairness products available in the market.

All events – major or minor – from going to the mall, beach or parties to university and workplace events were photographed and shared on social media such as Facebook and Instagram by an increasing number of hostel residents. Even moments inside the hostel were shared. Along with lightening filters, camera angles were also chosen with care, clicking multiple times to get the most 'flattering' image of the face and body. In this process, they attempted to hide what they considered undesirable, for instance, 'fat.'

When group selfies (*groupfies*) were taken, it was common for discussion to ensue. If someone felt they did not look good in a particular photo, they would urge that the photo not be uploaded. Often others in the group would try to allay their worries by reassuring them "no, you look good!". Nisha (20) once pointed out:

Nisha: It is very important to look good in photographs. More people see you on
                Instagram and Facebook than in real life.

This distinction between real and online life and the privileging of the online images indicates the significance of online acceptance by others (in the form of likes). Nisha justifies this by explaining that 'more people see you' online. This does beg the question of what might happen in 'real life' when one's photo-shopped image meets one 'real' image in a face to face situation. This was not explored by participants.

Other beauty ideals

While the aspiration for lighter skin seemed to be ever-present in the hostel environment, some other beauty markers also became evident in the course of my stay there. Prominent

among them were 'straight and silky' hair and a 'feminine' body, as briefly mentioned in the section about Satya.

During my second field trip, I noticed an increase in the number of hair straighteners being used secretly in the hostel rooms (electronic devices other than phones and laptops were not allowed, to limit power consumption). This can be related to the 'caucasianization' or 'internationalisation' of beauty ideals in India, especially with the influx of discourses on beauty from the West after economic liberalisation and globalisation (see Thapan, 2004; Runkle, 2004, Oza 2006; Picton, 2013), constituting what Alexander and Mohanty (1997) described as 'recolonization'.

Many residents disliked the idea of a size zero body, preferring fuller bodies. At the same time, being overweight was not seen as desirable by many, as is evident from the following account.

Rosie (21) had gained some weight since my previous field visit. Being very close with Indrani (23), Rosie confided a lot of personal information to her. One day at dinnertime in the hostel mess hall, Rosie complained about how she had been gaining weight despite her intake remaining more or less constant. Indrani proposed a 'theory' to explain this. Knowing Rosie's curiosity and desire for sex and her habit of watching porn, Indrani declared that it was her sex drive that caused her weight gain:

Indrani: Women who have a lot of desire for sex gain weight easy.
              [Everyone laughed, and Rosie looked visibly embarrassed.]
Rosie: But I don't … you are the one that has a boyfriend. I have no one!
Indrani: But I don't have an obsessive desire and curiosity for sex like you.

Indrani was confident while saying this. She had a thin frame herself, which served as a testimony to her 'theory.' While the theory was not acceptable for Rosie, it highlights a few interesting ideas. It derives from discourses that connect morality to women's body and sexuality (see discussion on *karppu* in Chapter seven). There is also the undesirability of a 'fat' body and its connection to immoral behaviour. As seen in many discourses (colonial discourses, children's literature and so on) unacceptable or undesirable appearance (such as dark skin and fat) is linked with 'bad' character/morals. The body is not just a symbol of superficial merit (or the lack of it) but also, deeper than that, it seemed to represent morality.

This also relates to feminist discussions on 'deviant bodies' (for example, see Evans, 2006) and female fat bodies (see Murray, 2008; Saguy, 2012). Evans (2006), for instance, critiques the positivist claim of the separation of the body and mind – of looking at bodies as merely a container of the mind. Evans highlights feminist arguments that critically look at how everyday experiences and perceptions of morality, especially within patriarchy, are embodied and shaped around bodies, and more so for female bodies.

A few months later, Rosie spoke of Indrani's weight-gain theory in a dismissive manner. She indicated that it was not the theory itself or her weight gain that affected her. What had affected her was the breach of trust and the possible judgements on her character other people would have made following this. But she had come to terms with it. She said, "Either I can be myself and learn to ignore judgements or try to change my personality and still possibly be judged. I chose the former."

Conclusion

The ideal of fair skin dominated beauty practices in the hostel. Skin lightening products marketed by international conglomerates such as Unilever were part of the everyday routine of residents of Carmel Hostel. The preference for light skin is also manifested in the online activity of young women, who can achieve the 'transformation' with the use of filters and editing software. Many participants had faced discriminatory experiences by virtue of having 'dark' skin. Thus, young women whose appearance deviated from the norm (through skin colour, weight or presentation) often faced judgement and consequently alienation. This often worked to encourage conformity toward the norm of light skin colour. For those who 'chose' to, for example, *not* use lightening products often experienced severe consequences, such as being divorced in Satya's case. This highlights how a choice towards the norm of light skin for women, is not really a 'choice' but increasingly a cultural imperative.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

This doctoral research delved into the everyday lives of 29 young women in a hostel in Chennai, in the context of rapid socio-economic change happening in the third decade of post-liberalization India. In particular, it has examined the participants' perspectives and experiences around four issues of contemporary relevance: safety and street harassment; dowry; relationships, sex and marriage; and practices and ideals of beauty. The main agenda of this thesis has been to understand the complex negotiations that women undertake in their daily lives recognizing their location within competing discourses such as the dominant understandings of womanhood emanating from the anticolonial struggle, which are circulated in law, policy and governance; western knowledge systems which place women with respect to a binary construction of oppressed vs liberated; neoliberal discourses of individualism and 'free choice'; and local conceptualizations of womanhood (in Tamil Nadu), which are represented in literature and cinema; and various popular feminist discourses.

I adopted a feminist poststructuralist approach (Weedon, 1987; Gavey, 1989;) which rejects objectivist absolutisms and instead understands 'reality' as constituted through language and discursive practices. I have strived to preserve the plurality of the realities of my participants and to not hijack their voices. I employed ethnographic methods such as the technique of voice rather than gaze, proposed by Veena Das (1995) and the building of a discourse of familiarity as suggested by Lila Abu-Lughod (2000). The overall methodology employed is ethnography, within which I locate my study as an 'ethnography at home' (Srinivas, 1998; Das, 1995) both in terms of the location and in terms of the demographics of the participants (middle class, university educated, young, rural-to-urban migrant women from southern India). In this chapter, I bring together the key observations and present the overall analytical insights from this thesis. I begin with an overview of the main arguments presented in chapters five to eight.

Chapter five, (*"Baby will you come with me": Young women's narratives about street harassment in and around Chennai).* Feminist scholars have located street harassment as part of a normalized 'rape culture' in which women are constituted as vulnerable, passive and

fearful. This was certainly how my participants (and I) experienced being in public spaces where men were present. This chapter analyzed the ways in which women understood and experienced street harassment. All participants either witnessed and/or experienced street harassment frequently in the course of their everyday lives. While most were critical of the ubiquity and normalcy of men's harassment and aggression, this was often framed in terms of essentialist discourses which positioned such practices as 'natural'. Participants' everyday lives were thus understood in terms of risk (Beck, 1992) and they developed various strategies to try to avoid men's harassment. These included using women-only transport, not entering public transport when men were present, walking with others, dressing modestly, and avoiding eye contact with men. These were primarily about avoidance rather than confrontation or challenge. Participants understood/positioned themselves as potential victims and, in part, responsible for the harassment. They were also positioned by and positioned themselves within discourses in which they were "the objects of men's violence and the subjects of fear" (Marcus, 1992 p. 390). While participants were aware of the activism against rape culture in India[141], which Gupta (2016) frames as being informed by neoliberalism and affirming the agency of Indian women to transform their urban environments, for the most part, they reproduced discourses of feminine passivity in relation to masculine aggression. This also highlights both the prevalence and entrenchment of male harassment and violence against women which results in participants' generally feeling constrained and powerless.

Chapter six ("*This is the way things are": Young women negotiate dowry practices*)
My participants' understandings about and experiences of dowry were wide-ranging. These included acceptance ("this is how things are"), reluctant acceptance ("it is a problem, but"), enthusiasm ("I will be happy to get"), resistance ("are women commodities?") and outright rejection ("there is no way"). While some participants indicated that dowry was an inevitable evil, others saw it as a means to secure a 'good husband'. A few participants viewed it as a 'gift' that symbolized parents' love. Many were of the view that dowry-related to 'status'. Within the neoliberal context, there is a visible growth in dowry expenses and commercialization. In parallel, women's participation in the neoliberal economy has meant more women financially contributing to their own dowry payments. Furthermore, the

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[141] Prominently, the *Nirbhaya Movement* following the 2012 Delhi Gang Rape, and various women's resistance campaigns against 'moral policing' (see discussion in chapter 1).

anticipation of dowry expenses have sometimes hindered young women's (neoliberal) aspirations (Rosie's aspiration to do a Master's in Business Studies).

The focus of **chapter seven** (*Love, Marriage and premarital sex*) was on marriage and virginity. Many participants indicated that they did not have a preference between the arranged marriage and love marriage, which challenges simplistic dichotomization of the two (as bad vs good; oppressive vs liberating; forced vs free choice). Some mentioned that both had "positives and negatives" (Ramola). Only one participant (Daya) had a clear preference for love marriage but indicated that she would accept her parents' preference since she valued their ongoing happiness and support. Many women strategically chose arranged marriage over love marriage. While all participants' parents preferred them to be married in an arranged manner, none indicated that their arranged marriage would be forced.

The acceptance of arranged marriage by many participants was informed by critiques of western constructions of romantic love and the individualism of this practice, that is, two people alone together deciding their future. In contrast, arranged marriages which involved the family, extended family and community, were framed as investments in the couple's future. The acceptance and support of the extended family ensured a range of support systems (from housing to finance) for the couple and their children. One could thus argue that the participants were 'savvy' cultural negotiators whose acceptance of arranged marriage is based on a calculation of the security it will provide against the idealism of 'romantic love'.

Participants drew from, and negotiated with, various discourses on virginity (for example, chastity/ *karppu* and monogamy/ *pattini* vs women's right to pleasure/sex etc.). Whereas marriage was openly discussed, discussions on sex were not common in Carmel Hostel. Those who spoke openly about sex risked their reputation. Therefore, being a virgin, pretending to be so, and even implying virginity through an image of sexual innocence held some advantage (symbolic capital). On virginity, there was also a range of views among my participants. Some said that virginity was important, and reproduced certain cultural narratives, by describing losing it in, familiar, negative terms ("gone bad"; "destroyed"; "no point crying over spilt milk"). Some women negotiated middle-ground positions like: premarital sex was acceptable if one was sure to get married to the same man. A few resisted traditional positions on virginity, drawing from feminist discourses of women as agentic and sexually desiring subjects. Overall, this demonstrates the reproduction of traditional

discourses of women's sexuality which are informed by the good/bad, virgin/whore binary with its association of virginity with innocence, purity and a woman's 'good reputation'. However, participants were not necessarily 'passive' in their acceptance of virginity as desirable. For many participants, virginity was capital which maintained their 'reputation' and the possibility of a 'good' marriage. In a context where marriage is normative for women, being strategic about one's (sexual) reputation and marriage options (chapter 7) works to ensure possibilities which can serve their future security.

In the last substantive chapter (**chapter eight**: '*Fair & Lovely': Negotiating Indian beauty norms in neoliberal times*') an expected finding was the overwhelming preference for lighter skin. This was articulated through the cosmetic products used; the talk about skin colour; and the use of skin-lightening filters online. Colonial, caste and media/advertising narratives dominated the knowledge around beauty. Although Tamil Nadu has a history of challenging both casteism and colourism (*Periyar*'s Self-Respect Movement, for instance), such activist discourses seem to be side-lined/overshadowed. The neoliberal re-entrenchment of normative beauty ideals (by global cosmetic conglomerates) has contributed to the dominance of the fair-skin beauty ideal, and side-lining of positions of resistance. Mere association with darker skin was perceived negatively. Many participants had faced discrimination and sometimes abuse in their lifetime due to their skin tone. Some who presented in non-normative ways (fashion, body-weight, skin colour) experienced judgement from others, which resulted in them feeling alienated, and sometimes pressured to conform. Thus, young women whose appearance deviated from the norm (through skin colour, weight or presentation) often faced judgement and consequently alienation. This often worked to encourage conformity toward the norm of light skin colour. Those who 'chose' to, for example, *not* use creams/makeup to lighten their skin, faced severe consequences. This highlights how a choice towards the norm of light skin for women, is not really a 'choice' but increasingly a cultural imperative.

Neoliberalism, Womanhood and Recolonization

Indrani: I wanted to be an independent woman, a woman who could pay for her bills, a woman who could run her own life and that's the woman I became.

Historically located in the third decade of neoliberalism in India, this thesis contributes to the understanding of womanhood in a neoliberal framework. The increased migration of women

to urban centres (such as the participants in this research) is, to a great extent, influenced by the concentration of global capital in service sector industries of India's big cities (Dutta & Shaw, 2019). The materialisms of neoliberalism (physical shifting of location, for instance) are governed by neoliberal knowledge systems (for example, women's active participation in wage labour). Neoliberal privileging of concepts such as independence and individualism is gaining traction in India, and among my participants (for example, as reflected in Indrani's excerpt above, and in the opening quote of this thesis by Ramola), who are part of the generational cohort known as 'liberalization's children[142]'. Although many argue that the philosophical shift towards neoliberalism is happening often at the expense of approaches that are centred around collective rights which dominated India's socio-political imagination in the pre-liberalization era, the participants' perspectives and experiences of aspects of their everyday lives, such as street harassment, sexuality and beauty practices, demonstrate complexity and contradiction (drawing from and negotiating with multiple discourses to form hybrid positions). It is crucial to note, here, that the participants in this thesis are part of the section of India's population who are able to access some of the benefits of India's unequal growth story (sometimes described as 'jobless growth'), which has impacted differently on poorer communities at the intersection of multiple marginalities (such as caste, class, gender and lack of access to basic services) in both rural and urban areas.

My participants drew from 'traditional' discourses of femininity as well as neoliberal discourses which advocate individualism and 'free choice' in constituting themselves as young women in contemporary India. While neoliberal discourses often gain mileage by drawing from feminism (Eisenstein, 2005; Gupta, 2016), this thesis demonstrates that neoliberalism supports and reproduces many limiting/problematic gendered practices and knowledge systems, for example, the inflation of dowry expenses and the commercialization of light-skin preference. In this context, global cosmetic conglomerates have deployed the rhetoric of choice to justify their reproduction of light-skin preference through their products. Most conglomerates enjoying the largest share in the Indian skin lightening market are located in former colonial nations, such as The United Kingdom (Unilever) and France (Loreal). This is symbolic of the process of recolonization occurring through neoliberalism (see Alexander & Mohanty, 1997).

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[142] Those born around the time the process of neoliberalism started in India (Lukose, 2009).

Many of the young women in this study have achieved 'independence' and financial success (as with Indrani, above). At the same time, they frequently experience a range of masculine aggression which continues to be widespread in contemporary India and regulates their modes of dress and movement. While practices of dowry and arranged marriage also continue in India, participants have often negotiated these in ways that they see will work for their future security. Thus, these cannot be simply be understood as 'oppressive' traditional practices as they are often negotiated to produce 'new' possibilities for doing young Indian femininity. However, as demonstrated, significant broader, structural gendered power relations simultaneously work to reproduce and limit changing discourses and practices of femininity.

Limitations of the thesis and recommendations for future research:

In this section, I reflect upon the limitations of this thesis and provide recommendations for future research in this area.

Selection of sample, and site: Women's hostels in urban India are carefully regulated spaces that reproduce an institutionalized/normative construction of womanhood in India (see Chapters one and four), and are generally catered towards achieving/maintaining middle class respectability (see Krishnan, 2015). The negotiations of womanhood by the residents of Carmel Hostel were perhaps limited by this setting, and my findings do largely reflect cis-gendered hetero-normative narratives of Indian womanhood. Researching communities who are currently situated outside the imaginings of middle-class respectability (for example, rural farm workers or the urban poor), would enable exploration of other experiences of/ways of doing gender in neoliberal India.

Reflecting upon some research methods: Some of the most nuanced excerpts around womanhood in this thesis came from conversations which happened in groups within shared spaces. Upon reflection, for future research, I would consider exploring the value that focus group-type settings for data collection could bring to researching this topic, along with participant observation and interviewing.

Fast changing discourses on gender in India: The data of this thesis is from 2015 and 2016. Political, legal and activist discourses in India have since changed dramatically. The debates around the criminalization of *Triple Talaq*[143], women's entry to Sabarimala Temple[144], gendered Islamophobia (for instance, reflected in *Love Jihad*[145] narrative, which has intensified in recent years), incidents gendered caste violence[146] and Shaheen Bagh protests[147] have all instigated public debate and activism around gender and womanhood in India. This indicates that more research is needed to explore the ways in which the fast-changing context (with respect to gender and sexual politics) is potentially impacting the discourses around and experiences of womanhood, gender and sexuality in India. Another area that is emerging as an important site for research around Indian womanhood, is online spaces and social media where competing discourses are hotly debated, and feminist activism is on the rise.

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[143] The Supreme Court of India judgement, and subsequent parliament act which criminalized instant divorce, or *Triple Talaq* which was legal under Muslim personal law in India (see Gupta, Gokariksel & Smith, 2020)
[144] The Supreme Court of India, in 2018 ruled that the prohibition of women's entry to a Hindu pilgrim centre, Sabarimala, was discriminatory and unconstitutional (see Kumari, 2019)
[145] Love Jihad is an Islamophobic narrative promoted by right wing Hindu groups alleging that there is a intentional campaign among Muslim men to seduce Hindu women for the purpose of conversion to Islam (see Strohl, 2019)
[146] For example, the Hathras gang rape and murder case, where a Dalit woman was gangraped and murdered by upper-caste (Thakur) men in the village of Hathras in Uttar Pradesh (see Munusamy, 2020).
[147] Women-led protests against Modi government's Citizenship Amendment Act (see Roy, 2020)

Appendices

Appendix 1 Ethics Approval
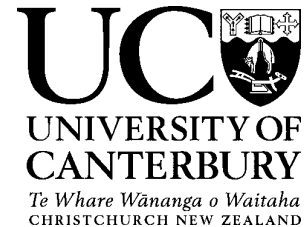
HUMAN ETHICS COMMITTEE

Secretary, Lynda Griffioen
Email: human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz

Ref: HEC 2015/03

16 February 2015

Josephine
Varghese
Department of
Anthropology
UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

Dear Josephine

The Human Ethics Committee advises that your research proposal "Urbanisation, cultural change and gender roles in India: a case study of working women in the city of Chennai" has been considered and approved.

Please note that this approval is subject to the incorporation of the amendments you have provided in your email of 14 February 2015.

Best wishes for

your project.

Yours sincerely

Lindsey MacDonald

Chair

University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee

F   E   S

Appendix 2: Information sheet

Information Sheet

Urbanisation, cultural change and gender in India: A case study of young women in the city of Chennai

You are invited to participate in a research project that tries to understand the experiences and perspectives of migrant women in India. This research will try to contribute in the effort of understanding a rapidly urbanising India from the perspective of young women who migrate on their own.

As a participant in this project you will take part in an audio-taped interview approximately 60 to 90 minutes in length. You may choose not to be audio-taped, in which case notes will be taken throughout the interview. The interview will be semi-structured with general questions on your experiences and perspectives on contemporary topics of relevance, and your everyday life in the city. Participation is entirely voluntary, so you have the right to withdraw from the project up to two months after your interview (after this period, extracting your data from the research becomes problematic). If you do decide to withdraw, there will be no penalty and all information gathered will be destroyed.

You will not be identified in the research report. Pseudonyms will be used and all identifying information will be removed. To safeguard your privacy, all information collected will be stored securely. This study may result in articles or additional publications. At the conclusion of the project, you will be offered a summary of the research. Please note that PhD theses are public documents.

This project is being carried out as part of an Anthropology Doctoral thesis at the University of Canterbury under the supervision of Dr Aditya Malik and Dr Patrick McAllister (for contact details see below). The University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee has reviewed and approved this project.

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Appendix 3: Consent form

Josephine Varghese
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Phone: 02108477618, +918089100829

CONSENT FORM

Urbanisation, cultural change and gender in India: A case study of young women in the city of Chennai

I have read and understood the information sheet describing the above-named research. I have also been given the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand what is required of me as a participant and that I may withdraw from the project up until two months after the interview without penalty.

I am aware that the interview will be audio-recorded.

I understand that my identity will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used to maintain anonymity in published reports. If photos have been offered to the researcher, I understand that they may be used in the project.

I understand that all data collected for this research will be stored in locked facilities, within a locked room, and/or password protected if in electronic form. All data will be destroyed after ten years.

I understand that I will receive a transcript of the interview and will be given two weeks to request changes.

I am aware that I can contact Josephine Varghese (the researcher), Dr Aditya Malik (supervisor), or Dr Patrick McAllister (co-supervisor) for further information.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee. As a result, participants can contact the Chair, University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee if they have any complaints.

Name:………………………………………………………….......
Signature:………………………………………………………………..
Date:……………………………………………………………….
Email address:………………………………………………………
Postal Address:………………………………………………………

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