

Marriage Norms, Choice and Aspirations of Rural Women

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Marriage by choice is increasingly being cognised as a category between arranged marriage and love marriage without the constraint of caste. Based on an ethnographic fieldwork in a village in Allahabad district, this paper explores the aspirations of women and young girls to changes in marriage practices. It seeks to understand how patriarchy, customs and traditions operate in the form of social disciplines that constrain women's lives and how women perceive these social disciplines and attempt to carve out spaces of freedom. Most women and young girls however seek to access greater freedom in life through education and a move into urban areas while leaving the parental responsibility of arranging marriages intact.

Modernity for rural women is the possibility of aspirations for change in their private lives more than in the public life. State supported transformative agendas of modernity focus more on the public sphere and in changing subjectivities in the public life of rural women as citizens, workers, rights-bearing individuals, subject and agents of participatory development and political processes. Modern law and legislation on marriages recognise free choice marriage but the weight of custom and tradition associated with the reproduction of the caste system works severely against it. Yet, the conditions of modernity such as law and rights, changes in the political economy and the emergence of urban cultures at marked variance from rural cultures have no doubt a bearing on the possibility of aspirations for change in the private lives. It is the private life, the sphere of intimacy and emotion that rural women aspire most to offer better and more choices. But such aspirations remain for many a subversive and hidden desire as indicated in the analysis of folk songs and it is against the grain of the social customs, practices and disciplines of rural life [Chowdhry 2007].

Anti-colonial nationalist modernity demarcated two realms – the domestic and the public realm. Partha Chatterjee (1994) has argued that it was in the public realm of material life that anti-colonial modernity desired to effect changes through reason and science and this was a realm open to both men and women to participate to bring those desired changes. The domestic sphere was the realm of intimacy, emotion and religious faith that was to be defended from modernity and it was left to the women to protect that realm. Notwithstanding criticisms from feminist scholars who do not agree to this sharp distinction between the private and public realms, and have indeed, shown that colonial rule was marked by many legal and juridical interventions in the sphere of marriage, it is clear that the project of modernity followed an uneven path of progress not only across the rural/urban, caste or gender divide, but between the private and public realms as well.

In the contemporary post-colonial situation, many rural women in north India aspire for an alternate modernity recasting their subjectivity in the direction of choice and freedom in their emotional life, although caste endogamy and village exogamy still remain, and are likely to remain so into the indefinite future, the dominant constitutive features of rural matrimonial alliances. Marriage and kinship rules in regions and among various castes specify marriage within endogamous caste groups as the norm with many other restrictions and taboos overlaid such as prohibition of marriages within the same or other prohibited 'gotra/got'

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(clan/lineages) within a caste group called 'biradari', and of village exogamy [Chowdhry 2004 and 2007; Uberoi 1994]. Any transgression of the norm is perceived as a violation of customarily delineated social disciplines that are constitutive features of caste socialisation [Dube 1996; Chowdhry 2007]. In examining the implications of the metaphor of the seed and earth in biological reproduction in various cultures, Dube (1986) has highlighted its importance in the boundary maintenance of different castes and its role in the assignment of patrilineal descent with the attendant implications on the control over women's sexuality, property and rights. In parts of Rajasthan, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh particularly, these marriage prohibitory rules are sometimes interwoven with an enlarged notion of incest taboo based on notions of fictive kinship [Raheja 1988; Lambert 1997] and village brotherhood known as 'bhaichara' that results in punitive measures for transgressions like social ostracism and expulsion of family and kin from the village, sometimes even resulting in honour killings that are not found elsewhere [Chowdhry 2004]. Kinship and marriage rules, caste and class boundaries, multiple and intersecting patriarchies that regulate forms of desire are thus organised into strategies and tactical positions constituting social disciplines, which by regulating everyday social interactions are as much instrumentalities of self construction as they are of caste and class socialisation.

The majority of women in rural north India still abide by these social norms and acquiesce to the social disciplines of village life. For the few who select their own spouses overlooking these norms, what are called "love marriages", the change in the marriage practice reflects the aspirations for change by these women who have to negotiate between freedom and choice, social disciplines, patriarchal securities and domination, honour and shame, tradition and intergenerational mobility. Based on ethnographic fieldwork among women of different castes of Lahoarpur village in Allahabad district, this paper explores how women abide by the social disciplines or negotiate to create more spaces of freedom and choice both for themselves, and as an intergenerational strategy towards greater freedom and mobility. It presents women's narratives of marriage practices and their desires to map a trajectory of an alternative modernity for rural women that encompasses their private realm as well.

1 Social Evils in Marriage Practices

Numerous cases are reported in the newspapers of young couples in love who have eloped or married against the wishes of the family and village society either being killed or committing suicide because these are considered as illicit inter-caste unions. Mody (2003) in her article in *The Hindu* dated November 2, writes: "The murders of young women and men, who have married by choice or across caste barriers, often go unnoticed. There are no names, not even statistics. Many are not investigated because the community closes ranks, apparently making it impossible to find out what really happened". Although eastern Uttar Pradesh does not record as many killings, abduction and rape of minor rural girls happen quite frequently. Informal discussions with knowledgeable lawyers handling cases of abduction indicate that it is quite common in eastern Uttar Pradesh. It is difficult

to obtain consolidated statistics either of the abduction and rape of minor rural girls or the instances of young women eloping with their lovers who often are pursued relentlessly or ostracised. Often the cases of young women asserting their choice of partners are also charged as cases of abduction. Mody (2003) has observed that women's groups have reported that agents of the state like the police and the courts abet in this kind of patriarchal-feudal repression.

Caste Endogamy: Inter-caste marriages are not encouraged here as elsewhere [Chowdhry 2007], and the lives of young rural girls are governed by strict social disciplines of the village that monitor inter-caste interactions among the young of various castes. For the individual, these social disciplines operate at the level of caste socialisation, which produces a 'doxic' submission to the social order of arranged marriages following principles of village exogamy and caste endogamy. Chowdhry (2007) has also observed based on her fieldwork in Haryana that ironically while the youth breach the norm of caste endogamy, they are also the ones who seriously denounce intercaste marriages and appear more as complicitors rather than rebels of the social norms. Beneath the caste tension and violence in the villages lies much libidinal politics. Forbidden love attracts wrath and vengeance because it tries to break barriers that maintain the separation and hierarchies of caste. Inter-caste marriages more than any other blur the boundaries of caste and shake its foundations, for the reproduction of the caste system requires the maintenance of these boundaries.

A greater understanding of the feudal shaping of patriarchal values is necessary to unravel the particularities of this process as a regional phenomenon as undertaken by Chowdhry (2007), even as a more general exploration of patriarchal norms and dominance would throw greater light on intergenerational tensions and young women's subordination. Mody (2003) observes of the bizarre notion of "honour" or 'izzat', "It depends rather heavily on a code of conduct for women. Modesty, obedience, duty define good conduct. A woman's failure to live within the prescribed code results in loss of honour to her family. Exercising choice and breaching the caste barrier are extreme violations of the code and apparently are good grounds for murder or at a minimum, the forcible dissolution of marriage". There is indeed much anthropological literature on the notion of honour or "izzat" in rural north India that govern social and sexual relations and that distinguishes between the intertwined "biradari" honour and village honour, sometimes known as "gaon ki nak" (the village nose) or 'aika' (village unity), that rests solely on the behaviour of women [Lambert 1997; Chowdhry 2004 and 2007].

Bought Brides: Despite strict enforcement of cultural norms to protect the honour, feudal oppression and patriarchal values allow men to treat women and girls as sexual objects devoid of any will. Young girls are sometimes forced into an inappropriate sexual match as a way to redeem parents from debt. But selling daughters is just not restricted to children. Nor is this exactly what is customarily called "bride price" that may have over time transformed into the dowry. The phenomenon refers to one in which when a family for some reason cannot get a bride for their

boy, they actually buy a bride from a poorer family that is in dire poverty. This is referred to as “bought brides” [Jeffery and Jeffery 1996: 76]. Blanchet (2005) has highlighted the sale of Bangladeshi girls as wives to men in Uttar Pradesh (UP). Even in eastern UP and Bihar this kind of transaction does exist. Some ‘pasi’ (a scheduled caste) women in Lahoopur village near Allahabad revealed this to me during the fieldwork. Although people are aware of such anomalous matches, they remain quite inflexible of conventional marriage norms and rarely seem to negotiate or seize the interstices of flexibility and freedom. They abide rigidly to marriage norms that entail normalising caste and class boundaries through social disciplines in everyday conduct.

2 The Study Village and the Sample

Through interviews with a cross-section of women and girls in Lahoopur village, we construct women’s narratives of their views on marriage by choice and traditional social norms. The analysis gives a revealing picture of their experience of lived constraints and their aspirations, which though common to all women are still, marked by differences of caste and class.

Lahoopur village situated a kilometre in the interior from the Hanuman Ganj Bazaar on the GT road connecting Allahabad to Varanasi is inhabited mainly by kurmi singraur, the landowning other backward caste (OBC) of the village, although the average size of the holding is only about two hectares or so. It needs to be noted that in the state of UP, the kurmis along with three other backward castes, viz, the yadavs, lodhas and gujars benefited from the first wave of land reforms in the 1950s that conferred ownership rights on erstwhile tenants through the zamindari abolition laws. These four backward castes that had controlled only 6 per cent of zamindari rights came later to control about 20 per cent of the land [Jain 1996]. While there are other castes too in Lahoopur, they are neither numerically nor economically as dominant as the kurmi singraur. The few scheduled caste (namely pasai) families work on the fields of the landowning groups and live apart from the rest, although in proximity.

The women of Lahoopur could thus be grouped as follows. Women of well-off landowning kurmi caste who do not work in the fields but do household work as well as cattle tending. Most of the households except among the very poor pasai own at least one milch buffalo and so tending cattle is an important component of women’s work. Some women of kurmi households who are not that well-off do assist in the field work along with their husbands which is mostly in the nature of cutting and gathering the straw and bringing it from the field to their homes for the cattle. Women of other service castes such as vishwakarma or gupta do work from their homes like carpentry and some are just homemakers. Pasai and khatik women who are dalits work as field labourers for kurmi landowners for kind wages whenever work is available either in this village or the adjoining villages. Some Muslim women engaged in home-based work like beedi rolling or tailoring. Unlike a few men, no woman goes out to work in the bazaar area or to the city of Allahabad. However, the proximity to the city has made life an integral part of their imagined mobilities to a better and freer.

The ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the village comprised mainly individual interviews in family/household setting

that meant that other female members around also partook of the discussions with the exception of two interviews done in the field by the roadside, as well as unstructured, spontaneous and informal group discussions in neighbourhoods, where a good number of a single caste, either the kurmis or the dalits assembled together. Our informants in such a setting could not be purposively or randomly selected but was left largely to the voluntary initiatives of women and girls. As a matter of fact there was much enthusiasm and eagerness to participate and talk to me and my assistant, although the same cannot be said of the discussion with the dalit group who felt disappointed (and some left the discussion rather abruptly) that we had nothing tangible to provide them or even an honorarium for their interview. In the following we present women’s narratives by caste groups as it highlights the caste-wise differences in attitudes, opportunities and constraints that women and young girls face.

Kurmi Women’s Narratives

Narratives of kurmi women and girls were collected from four situational contexts. As is customary, outsiders from the village especially for such purposes as interviews are advised to approach the village elders, for their reference elicits greater cooperation. The village pradhan, a Muslim woman, elected on the reserved seat was first approached and interviewed but she lived in the bazaar area outside the village. In the village, the zilla parishad member was clearly the dominant family with their big pucca construction house in the village centre and surrounded by three or four smaller pucca houses. This cluster of houses are the well-off kurmi households in which the women do not work in the fields although one family woman, out of the three families of well-off kurmis of this cluster whom we interviewed was living as a nucleated but joint household in a big house in which three brothers and their families lived in separate portions of the house. Some of the women in this household did field work during the peak season. This was a household that had once seen better times and now lives in strained economic conditions. Another adjacent kurmi neighbourhood, where the families were not that well-off as indicated by smaller non-pucca houses, and where the women did much field work and cattle tending participated in a focus group discussion that combined within it interviews of individual women who either spoke up on their own or were coaxed to do so both by the group and by the interviewers. This was a large group of nearly 20 women, old and young, as well as girls. The third set of interviews was conducted in another part of the village in which a young kurmi woman seated outside her house cleaning mustard seeds showed an interest to participate. While she and her daughter were interviewed, her two kurmi neighbours joined in and gave their interviews as well. One well-off kurmi woman was interviewed at the field site, for although she was well-off, as indicated by their landholding size, she being much older was accustomed to certain amount of field work, mainly bundling and carrying the straw. The cross-section of kurmi women whom we interviewed thus covers both the well-off and the not so well-off ones and included both old, middle-aged and young married women, young unmarried women, married

daughters and daughters-in-law of the village and a few young boys who were onlookers.

Women from Well-off Families: Tara and Shivkali belong to the dominant kurmi household that also appeared to command a lot of respect in the village residing in the big house in the village centre. Tara is 40 years old and the wife of the zilla parishad member from the village, who in his conversations with us indicated the kind of social change he has witnessed in the village over the years. But his notion of the village is exclusive of the pasai settlement, although the pasis themselves were inclined to participate in the interview only after we had indicated to them that we had taken the permission of the zilla parishad member. The most remarkable change according to him was that the literacy and educational levels of females have made quantum jumps in every age-generational cohort, that at present most kurmi households send their girls to school at least till school completion. Such varying levels of literacy and education across generations was evident in his own household. All of Tara's children reside and study in Allahabad city, where one of her sisters-in-law lives. She does not work in the fields but does the household work. She got married when she was 19 years old and had married according to her parents' wishes. She says that nobody in her family has ever married against their parents' wish. As her children are too young, she says, she has not thought about their marriage yet, but if they like to marry by choice she would think about it then but the final decision would rest with her husband. She admits that marriage in her community has become quite expensive as groom's parents ask for too much dowry but she has never heard of dowry deaths in this village. She feels that with the passage of time girls are becoming independent and the outlook of the villagers towards girls has changed because everyone is getting educated. People no longer can suppress girls as they used to, now they can decide for themselves and take their own decisions.

Shivkali is Tara's mother-in-law. She got married when she was barely five years old and says that she is taking 'ghoonghat' (the Hindu mode of veiling in this region) since she was young. She is past 70 years and still feels shy and takes a long ghoonghat when any stranger visits her house. Although she expects her daughter-in-law to cover her head in front of men and strangers, her ghoonghat is not as long as that of her mother-in-law. Chowdhry (1993) argues that ghoonghat in Haryana is central to 'dehati' (rural) culture and that it effects a most cogent control over women in terms of her interactions and behaviour in the private and public realms. It is, therefore, an indicator of patriarchal control as much as it is a symbol of dehati culture. If the same is true for Lahoorpur village then we can suppose that Tara experiences lesser patriarchal control than what her mother-in-law experienced and the patriarchal values she has internalised. Shivkali too feels that as people are getting educated they are marrying by choice as their expectations have increased and they also want a well-educated life partner who can converse freely with people.

As we talk to Shivkali and Tara, Manju their young neighbour walks freely in and out, at times participating and at times joking in the conversation. Manju is the only daughter of another

well-off kurmi family who lives in an adjacent one storied pucca house. Manju is 24 years old and has done her graduation in science from Allahabad University. She says she is looking for a job and does not want to marry till she is financially independent. She gets irritated when villagers interfere in each other's life. She says she is free to choose her husband but she wants to marry according to her parent's choice as she is not confident of her choice, but she wants to meet the boy before marrying. But the intergenerational differences in the outlook towards marriage may constrain and determine her destiny. Her grandmother would like Manju to marry someone who has lots of land and stays in a village, whereas she wants to marry a city lad. Her grandmother and her mother oppose love marriages and feel that children should marry according to their parents' choice and in the same caste. Manju says that people in her community are marrying by choice and people are also accepting them happily.

For women like Tara, Manju, Shivkali and others, marriage by choice means marrying someone of the same or acceptable caste but one in which the person who is marrying rather than his/her parents make the choice of the partner. This is not quite the same as inter-caste love marriages.

Among the kurmi, it was observed that despite the mothers' overriding concern about the welfare of their daughters, they are not free to adopt a liberal attitude or encourage their daughters in matters concerning marriage as it rests largely with the man and the elders of the family's kin group. Phulabo Singh, whose family too is at the centre of the village was, it appears, relatively well-off in earlier times than at present. They too own land as well as a tractor and some buffaloes. Phulabo Singh, feels if her daughter ever want to marry by choice she would agree to it only if the boy is of the same caste. If her daughter ever wants to marry according to her choice in a different caste, then she would talk to her and make her change her decision. But if she will still insist on marrying him then she will talk to her relatives and do whatever they suggest. Phulabo is indeed aware of how social change has caused flexibility in the caste groupings for marriage. She notes that kurmi singraur now have started marrying their children into other castes such as sachan, patel and chandel (i.e., hypergamous marriages) but not to other inferior castes like yadav, bhartiya (scs), or the higher castes like varma, shukla meaning the brahmins. Phulabo Singh's husband is a graduate of Allahabad University, who regrets even now that he is not in any "service" job, wants to marry his daughters to boys living in village because he feels that his daughters will not be able to adapt to the ways of town. Clearly, Phulabo Singh appears as a mother with very little voice in her family matters. Just as we were taking leave of her, she called us back and told in a low tone that she does not want anything for herself but prays everyday that her daughters get educated and become financially independent and lead a more comfortable and easy life than her.

Viewing societal changes through Savita's eyes is insightful. She is another kurmi woman of Lahoorpur village, over 70 years of age from a prosperous household owning 100 bigha land and other assets. She was working along with her husband in their field, setting the straw properly to be bundled when we interviewed her. Savita says that during her time girls were married to

people who had lots of land and property. Servicemen were not preferred. It was believed then that only those men do service work who are poor and do not have enough land. That is why nobody was permitted to study and do a job. Now she says, times have changed and the overwhelming majority of the younger generation are studying and looking for a job. She says now young people do not want to stay in village. Boys who are not studying are the ones who want to settle in villages and look after the crops and fields, whereas those who are studying want to move out of the village and do a job. She also admits that life in the village is quite difficult as compared to towns. At her younger son's marriage the bride's father provided her son a job in exchange of his daughter. She admits that among the thakur, dowry is prevalent and a marriage is quite expensive. Many of the kurmis, especially the well-off ones identified themselves as thakurs in their conversations, a sign of aspiration of upward caste mobility.

Savita got married when she was barely 12 or 13 years old but 'gauna' took place after she was 18 or 19 years old. Being a conservative family she had to follow strict rules and norms set up by the elders. Women were not allowed to dine with their husbands or talk to them in front of elders. They were also not allowed to wash their hair in front of their husbands (they used to wash their hair in the open because there were no bathrooms then) and she herself has followed them all till date. She considers that marrying the children is the sole right of the parents and the children should not go against their parents' wish. She admits that girls in her community have restricted freedom and they can never marry by choice. They are also not allowed to do a job as the villagers jeer that the parents are eating with their daughters' income.

By urban standards of living, none of these well-off kurmi households are on a comparable level. Only the zilla parishad member's household had furniture like sofa set and dining table and the furniture was also not in the women's wing of the house, suggesting that only male members and his city guests used them just as we too had been given the reception there. But the household itself functioned in a very rustic mode with a few buffaloes in the front yard of the house. Aspiring for urban mobility and an urban lifestyle for their daughters was therefore not surprising. They have also realised that such aspirations can be actualised only by educating the girls. As a consequence, there appears to be an intergenerational slackening of patriarchal controls.

Not-so-well-off Kurmis: Among the not-so-well-off kurmis, the aspiration for urban mobility also requires that the young girls themselves show active agency as is evident from Seema's narration in the focus group discussion. Seema is clearly the brightest and most articulate, perhaps even a role model for many young girls in her community. Being a daughter of the village she was not expected to veil her head like the other married woman and was visiting her natal home on account of her father's recent death when he was struck by a lightning. She is 23 years old and had done her graduation from a college in Allahabad by commuting everyday from the village to the city, and is now pursuing her

postgraduation from Kanpur University as a private candidate. She studied medieval history, politics and Hindi for her graduation.¹ She is married and stays in Delhi with her husband. She says that her family would have opposed strongly, especially her grandmother, if she would have wanted to marry someone of her choice. So she happily agreed to marry by her parents' choice. While she always wanted to get a job first and marry afterwards, her parents did not agree to it and she had to marry. These days young men who have jobs in urban areas and marrying a girl from a village want the girl to be a graduate. And just about every young girl in the village dreams of such an urban lad. Seema says that if someone marries by choice then she/he loses all the relatives and he/she is left all alone as both the families disown them. People are against love marriages or inter-caste marriages to such an extent that the whole community boycotts the family, where any such case is held. Due to societal pressures one is not able to converse his/her feelings and agrees to marry according to their parents' choice. Also she says men are not that reliable and they make false promises and that is why girls stay away from all these things. She notes cases when the girls took poison and died when their boyfriends did not marry them. She says that generally kurmi parents of the village fix their daughter's marriage after seeing the property and lands of the prospective groom.

Anuradha and her mother Manorati are from a not-so-well-off kurmis whom we interviewed along with the Anuradha's friend Priyanka. Anuradha is pursuing her degree in arts and seems to think that girls have become independent and are taking their own decisions. While she says that her parents would not mind her marrying someone of her choice if the boy is of the same caste, she will have no guts to say "no" if her parents bring any marriage proposal. She wants to marry someone who is from a village, but has a service job in the town. Her neighbour and friend Priyanka who is 14 years old also wants to marry a person who has a permanent service job and lots of land in the village. She feels that a girl should be financially independent and only then marry and that she should not be dependent on her husband for everything. She wants to marry in a household that has no purdah system. She is confident that her parents would bring nice proposals for her. She feels that one should marry according to their parents' choice only because no parent would throw their daughters in the pond "talaab main nahin phekenge". Priyanka is in high school and wants to graduate from Allahabad University. Anuradha's mother Manorati, an attractive woman in her early 30s, is clearly disgusted with village life, especially her frequent quarrels with her mother-in-law over sharing of household and cattle-tending work. She wants to marry her daughters in town because she feels that in a village a woman has to lead a very difficult life. She says that if a girl has an affair then she is called 'awara'. She admits that today girls are marrying according to their choice and parents are also open-minded, in the sense that they are also taking their daughter's opinion before marrying them. But at the time of her marriage, the girl's opinion was not taken. Manorati feels that television has a huge impact on younger generation, which is visible in their clothes and body language.

Being from the not-so-well-off kurmi households and yet being influenced by social changes affecting their caste, many kurmi mothers think of daughters' education and sons' marriages in more instrumental ways than those from the well-off kurmi families. One such mother, Kusum says she is educating her daughters so that when they get a job, they could help her financially. She says that nowadays people ask huge amount of dowry and that is why people prefer having fewer children. She, however, thinks that marriage is essential and everybody should marry. She observes that it will take a long time to change people's perspectives on love marriages and even then people will not marry their children to the harijans. Another kurmi mother, Sushila Devi, has three schoolgoing sons. Her husband has a medical store and 20 bigha land. Although she herself never went to school because she never liked studying, she wants well-educated daughters-in-law. She says that she will not let her sons marry according to their choice. Uma is from a slightly financially well-off kurmi family. She says that she would not ask for dowry in her son's marriage, but confesses that deep down in her heart she wishes that the bride's parents on their own accord give a handsome dowry.

The views of the kurmi women suggest that this is a caste group in transition. Over time there is the possibility that women of this caste group would grant more freedom to the young girls as even now the mothers yearn for a better future for their daughters, to be away from the village and acquire greater education. But for the moment the younger generation of women would prefer the securities of abiding by traditional social norms than face risks in their personal lives. Many of the young girls are hoping to move out of the village to towns after marriage. What is very clear from both the young and the old is that they now cognise a category of intra-caste "marriage by choice" that is betwixt the "arranged marriage" and "love matches unconstrained by caste".

4 Narratives of Women of Other Castes

Unlike the kurmis and the dalits of the village whose settlements are marked and identifiable, the households of the other castes in the village are dispersed. Walking through the village, we asked women seated in front of their homes if they were non-kurmis and if they would be interested to be interviewed. We were able to identify two such families, one of the gupta (vaishya) caste, and another of the viswakarma caste. Let us now examine their narratives to note the differences between the kurmis and the non-kurmis. These two families do not own or work any agricultural land, although they own their houses; the gupras have a small pucca house and the viswakarma family have a non-pucca tiled house, both ancestral properties.

Gupta Caste: Shyam Dulari Gupta is 40 years old and is living in her husband's ancestral home. Her father-in-law was an oil-monger who used to sell oil in the village, in exchange of mustard seeds. Their family business ended after his death and her husband worked as a plumber for some years. They have no land from where they could earn any income and have only one earning member who manages to earn a few hundred rupees a month.

A mother of six children, she wants her youngest daughter to do a job and stand on her own legs but regrets that the atmosphere of the village is not conducive for girls in the village to move freely. So she could not send her to continue her studies after high school but has encouraged her do some professional courses like painting and tailoring. She had married her elder daughter when they were facing financial problems and as they had no money to give dowry, they had to marry her to a casual labourer who remains unemployed most of the time. She still regrets about that. As she married her elder daughter in a hurry when she was only 18, she has decided to marry her second daughter after the age of 20. But she says that times have changed and people ask for an unreasonable amount of dowry. She observes, "These days men who have good jobs do not demand much in comparison to those who do not do anything". She agrees that society is male-dominated and though she is permitted to give her views and suggestions, they are not given much importance in her household. On marrying her daughter to someone of her choice, she says that she will only agree if the boy is of the same caste and has a "service" job, implying permanent salaried employment. Rita, her younger daughter says that, if she marries outside her caste then people will say that the girl is not under her parent's control or the girl is shameless, as she has no consideration about her parent's reputation. She admits that the social norms of the village have not permitted the girls to take decisions for themselves. Her family has however given her the freedom that she could easily confide in them if she ever wants to marry someone of her choice. If her parents will not agree to it, she will leave the person and marry whomever her parents wants her to.

Vishwakarma Caste: Gulabkali Vishwakarma is a 50-year-old mother who has been quite successful in marrying her three daughters to perfect grooms whom she says "goolar ke phool". One of her sons works in Mumbai in a private company and sends money regularly. Her sons also help pursue their family business, i.e., making furniture and accessories needed in a marriage ceremony. Gulabkali's husband works in Grameen Bank in Rai Bareilly and comes home only on weekends. Gulabkali confesses that her mother was not at all happy with the idea of her marrying a man who was dark but her father forced her to marry him. She is elated at the fact that the proposal for her daughters had come from the groom's side only and she did not find any difficulty in searching for them or marrying her daughters, as there were no dowry demands then. She herself is against dowry and says that she did not take anything in her son's marriage; instead she had spent lavishly on the marriage. Now Gulabkali is facing problems in fixing the marriage of her younger daughter as people are asking for unreasonable dowries. She says that she will not marry her daughter in a hurry, but will wait until she finds a handsome and understanding groom for her daughter. She has educated her daughters well up to high school level and feels that a girl should marry only after she is financially independent. On their freedom to choose their life partner, she says that if her daughter likes to marry according to her choice then she will not have any problem if the boy is of the same caste and

has a permanent job. She feels that girls should never do anything which would spoil their parent's reputation. She says that if her daughter elopes with someone and marries him and does not come back then she will have no problem. But if she comes back then she will kill her, for after committing such heinous crime, she will not make her daughter's pickle and keep her in the jar ('achar banake seeshi main nahin rakhenge'). She says that her eyes have been damaged twice due to smoke from mud 'chulha' (stove) but she is not able to buy a cooking gas for herself as the cylinder is very expensive and she still has the responsibility of settling the youngest daughter. Vandana, Gulabkali's youngest daughter, has studied till high school in the village only. She has never been to the nearby town of Allahabad. She too like the other young girls wants to marry someone who has a family in village but stays in city, and have a permanent job. She also wants her mother to give her a cooking gas at marriage because she does not like cooking on the mud chulha. She admits that her parents have given her enough liberty and she can easily confide in them if she ever likes someone.

From these narratives, it appears that non-kurmi mothers are not only prepared to grant more freedom to their daughters, they would also like them to be economically independent. But the constraints they experience is not merely on account of poor economic circumstances but the social constraints by way of upper caste intimidation does not allow them to go far in granting more liberty to their daughters thereby restricting their opportunities. That both the mothers, the gupta and the viswakarma families, highlighted the not so conducive atmosphere in the village indicates that societal pressures and constraints at the village level affect women and girls of different castes differently.

5 Narratives of Muslim Women

Lahoorpur village has very few Muslim households within the village as the village just adjoining is predominantly of Muslims and dalits. The few Muslim households also reside outside the village in a mohalla in the bazaar area on Hanuman Ganj that for panchayat jurisdictional purposes is part of Lahoorpur village. The present 'pradhan' of the village is a Muslim woman elected on a reserved seat whom we first approached to seek permission to do the village fieldwork. This also gave us an opportunity to interview her in her household set-up. Another elderly Muslim whom we interviewed was a chance encounter as she was resting by the wayside and seemed eager to talk to us from whom we obtained the most fascinating life story.

Ansari-Muslim: Shaheen, the village pradhan, is ansari-Muslim by caste and has been married since 18 years. Her husband owns a footwear store in the bazaar area and it is at his instigation that she stood for the election and won the panchayat seat. She is a clear example of a proxy pradhan whose husband acts on her behalf. She is 35 years old and the mother of four children. One of her relatives had fixed her marriage. Shaheen says she did not even see her husband before marrying. She observes that ansari-Muslims do not marry outside their caste, and if someone marries outside their caste then he/she is socially boycotted by the villagers of the same caste. Shaheen says that people have married by

choice outside their caste but they have converted themselves to Islam before marrying. She observed that girls in her community are not allowed to move freely. They stay at home and do household work, and they also have to follow rigid 'purdah' system. She says that children are defying their parents and marrying on their own because they are inspired by television. She does not let her children watch tv. Rashid and Rizwan, her nephews studying in high school who when questioned about their freedom to choose their spouse, confide that they have freedom up to certain limits. They say if they ever want to marry by choice outside their caste, they will negotiate with their parents and they are confident that their parents would agree to it. And they quickly add that should their parents not agree they would only abide by their parents' advice. Although dowry is not prevalent in their community, the girls' parents themselves give everything like furniture, electrical gadgets, utensils, etc. Shaheen earns about Rs 500 a month rolling beedis. Just adjoining her house is a tailoring class, teaching Muslim girls of the mohalla who seemed shy to answer our questions but determined to make a livelihood.

Muslim Sheikh: Johra is a 70-year old Muslim Sheikh and still has a glitter in her eyes when she tells us of her earlier days. She had a small family of three children, two daughters and a son. Her husband used to earn enough by printing sarees and she led a happy life. Though she had 12 children, unfortunately nine of them died due to some ailment and only three survived. By their meagre saving Johra and her husband also managed to construct a house. All her children are educated till high school. Johra says that her husband used to love his daughters more than his son. He used to fulfil all their demands. Soon her sunny days ended and their life changed when her elder daughter when she was barely 18 years old eloped and married her real uncle who was then already married. For four years they looked for their daughter but got no news of her. Johra's husband lost his mental balance and died. Johra says that her daughter was very innocent and simple but the villagers coaxed and helped her to run away. She says that if she would have known about her daughter's intention, she would have married her to him, rather than eloping. She married her younger daughter at a very young age of 13 years to a distant relative, scared that she too would follow her sister's footsteps. Johra says that in her community one can marry in a family, a married man with a family, but 'nikah' takes place with the parents' consent only. She says that times have changed and children prefer to marry by choice only, as they do not like the proposals brought by their parents. She says, in her community too people have started taking dowry though 'meher' is compulsory in the marriage. She herself had given dowry in her younger daughter's marriage. Now she is a frail and poor widow living on alms.

These narratives of Muslim women suggest that they lead more circumscribed lives with greater social and family disciplines. The fear that mothers in the village express of the moral climate not being conducive and of their daughters coming under bad influence is borne out by the fact that village members themselves could guide the girls in immoral ways contrary to the social disciplines. Social disciplines regulating interactions and family discipline

by way of constant moral policing is the reality of the lived constraints of young Muslim girls. Although the women are coaxed to access opportunities for political positions, the women do not show the enthusiasm for girl's education as a way of mobility to urban lifestyles in the way the Hindu women and girls in the village did. For a person holding a political post, Shaheen was too reticent in the interview and had to be coaxed to answer our questions even in the presence of her husband.

6 Dalit Women's Narratives

The dalit settlement in the village has a separate access path from the road leading to the village and they all seemed to use only this separate path, although their huts adjoin or abut some of the kurmi houses. The 'anganwadi' worker who is a kurmi woman with a postgraduate degree lives close to the dalit settlement and relates to them well. It was in front of her house that we had the group discussion of dalit women. As the dalits are well aware of their growing political clout in the state's politics they expected that we would help them to leverage some gains. A pasai family that got a small plot of land allotted under some family planning beneficiary scheme in the earlier stint of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) rule in the state was now facing threat of eviction by the kurmis in the village as they were seen to be occupying land of prime value near the bazaar area and they requested our help to approach the district magistrate. Much to our disappointment the group discussion wound up after a short while as they lost

interest when there were no immediate benefits in sight for them. As can be noted, the women's narratives describe more than merely their problems arising out of their poverty condition.

Shanno is a 30-year old pasai woman. Both her husband and she work on other's fields and manage to earn Rs 500-600 per month. Her husband gets 3-4 kg wheat or any grain everyday for working 10 hours a day. Shanno works day and night to make both ends meet but still cannot provide her children with two meals, education and clothes. She has three sons and also had a daughter who died after a month of her birth. She was married when she was 20 years old. Her father had fixed the marriage. She is happy with her marriage and feels that her husband is quite understanding and caring. The only reason for her discontentment is that she is not able to build a house. She lives on rent in a small hut made of mud and straw. She is against love marriages and says that one should marry according to her parents' choice and children who marry against their parents' wish are disloyal. Shanno told us that when a poor dalit is not able to find a bride they would buy one from an even poorer family from Bihar or elsewhere, clearly indicating that single-ness for both men and women is an unviable survival option for the poor dalits.

Geeta is another 30-year old poor pasai woman who makes bricks with her husband and gets three kg wheat for 10 hours work and her husband gets Rs 50 per day. She has three sons and one daughter. Being poor, she sends her children to government

school though, according to her, no teaching takes place in government schools. She says that if her children are educated and will want to marry by choice she will have no problem in marrying to whom they have chosen, although she married according to her parents' choice.

Shanti is a 'khatik', another dalit caste. She does not remember her age but it seems as if she is past 80. The hut is in a guava orchard as her son has taken it on lease and gives Rs 14,000 every year to the owner. They have no permanent dwelling and keep wandering from place to place. Shanti has four sons and three daughters. Her husband died 20 years ago. She married her youngest daughter to a dumb man two years ago because she did not have enough to give dowry in her marriage. She regrets that she has spoiled her daughter Gudiya's life. Gudiya has never been to school and deeply regrets it now. Her husband is a labourer and earns Rs 40 a day. Gudiya has a three-month old daughter and she says that she will educate her daughter so that she becomes financially independent. Gudiya's husband beats her and does not give her food, but she cannot leave him as she has nowhere to go. She says that if her mother would have had money, her life would have been different. She thinks that a girl is born only to face miseries and serve the males.

Clearly dalit women seem to think that only by moving out of poverty and acquiring education it is possible to have more freedom in their personal lives.

7 Tradition and Marriage by Choice

Ethnographic research in this village has revealed that across caste groups young girls and women still preferred the marriage to be arranged by parents. Both parents and daughters felt it was the moral obligation and duty of the parents to do so. Women felt that dowry demands have increased across the board and that over time it has become more difficult for them to find suitable matches for their daughters. Although over the years, girls have become more educated and do generally have higher educational attainments than women of the older generation, it has not changed marriage practices or made them economically independent. What in fact it has surely done is to let women give freedom to their daughters and sons "up to a certain limit" as most put it. They also felt the need to consider the opinions of their daughters in the choice of the partner and in some cases made them rethink the kind of relationships they would maintain with their daughters-in-law. But women overwhelmingly felt that the husbands would have the final say in the choice of their children's spouse. Almost all of the mothers hoped that their daughters' lives would be better than theirs and that they would not be burdened with the rigours of toil that a village life ordained. Mothers who on account of poverty could only settle their daughters with poor matches, felt overwhelmingly guilty doing so.

Jeffery and Jeffery (1996) observe of rural Bijnor, which is probably true of most rural north India. They note, "settling children in marriage was an important parental obligation. It should not and could not be left to the children themselves. Indeed, in rural Bijnor, it was inappropriate for the bride and

the groom either to be asked their opinion or to speak up during the marriage negotiations. Parents with adolescent children would be roundly criticised if they failed to execute their duties in a timely and careful fashion. But doing so often seemed a heavy responsibility. There would be urgency but also fear that excessive haste could result in mistakes, especially during the delicate negotiations when arranging a marriage with virtual strangers" (p 98).

Both among Muslims and Hindus the increase in dowry and other expectations have caused problems of finding grooms. Bringing up daughters so that they do not go astray and finding a suitable match for them are indeed a big burden for parents. What is interesting to note is that the women are in fact aware of the problem but do not seem to think of ways of circumventing the problems as when they say that "times are bad" or "the moral climate" is not conducive. If by empowerment we understand autonomy, the ability to assert and exercise choice, the ability to understand social-structural constraints and yet not feel compelled to be constrained by them but to think of ways of exercising freedom and living life freely, then it is clear that for these women who understand the issues, the domain of freedom needs to be enlarged both socially, and psychologically. This requires cognisance of their perceptions of how social disciplines shape their lives.

8 Perceptions of Social Disciplines

For the women of Lahoopur, the reproduction of the caste-gender system means the internalisation of the social disciplines of village life of which veiling or taking the *ghoonghat* is an essential aspect [Chowdhry 1993]. Married women are expected to wear the end of the saree as a veil to cover their heads and faces and the modes of veiling differ according to the nature of the encounter with the "other". In general, the greater the perception of the person as a stranger, the more fully they are expected to cover their head and face. Unmarried girls are socialised to take on the veil when they get married and move to their in-laws' village. A few women whom we met did not take on the veil who when asked reported that they were visiting their parental home in the village, what is referred as '*maika*' and hence enjoyed a reprieve from veiling that they otherwise observe in their marital villages. Let us now see how women and young girls of Lahoopur perceive the social disciplines that bind them in the reproduction of the caste-gender system.

Shaheen, the Muslim woman and village *pradhan*, attends only few gram panchayat meetings. She says that if her presence in the meeting is required, only then she goes for the meeting. According to her, girls in her community are not allowed to move freely. Shaheen's case illustrates how her community's curtailment of girls' freedom to move freely continues in their adult life even when they hold an elected public office.

Younger women of the well-off kurmi households perceive the social disciplines as an imposition that is still difficult for them to shake off, despite the social changes affecting their caste and class. Tara, the wife of the zilla parishad member says her husband gets angry when she does not take '*ghoonghat*' when they go for an outing. She would like her daughter to marry

in the city as there is no purdah system in cities. Tara pointed out the discrimination she suffers as her sisters-in-law in Allahabad wear salwar suits while she cannot wear it in the village. If given a chance she would also like to live in Allahabad. Shivkali, her mother-in-law, feels that girls should necessarily cover their heads in front of their elders to show them respect and also to save themselves from “evil” men. She says one should also cover the head while cooking in order to prevent hair from falling into the food. She gets offended when her daughter-in-law does not cover her head while performing household chores. Tara says that initially she found great difficulty in covering her head but now she has become accustomed to it. Manju’s parents have not imposed any restrictions on her she says and she is free to go anywhere and wear anything. She admits however that other girls of the village are not free as she is and they have many restrictions imposed upon them. One of her friends Renu Singh is never allowed to step out of her house besides going to her college. She has never seen or been to her fields. Although she has done her graduation in arts, she is not allowed to look for a job. Manju’s family has a house in Allahabad also but she stays in the village with her parents as they do not want her to stay in the city.

Unlike Manju’s parents, Seema’s parents are not that well-off and have much less land, though belonging to the kurmi family. She says her husband is very supportive and she admits that she is freer in her husband’s house than in her parent’s house. She says that in Delhi she wears salwar suits and jeans and her husband does not object to it. With education, urban living and freedom comes the confidence that was so apparent in her for she clearly dominated the focus group meeting.

Wadley (2000) has argued that the body is the locus of social control and “female bodies are impressed with prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire and femininity”. In opposing veiling, young girls are resisting the selfhood imposed upon them through social disciplines exercised over their bodies. Rather, they, as Wadley (2007) suggests, want to use clothing as a marker of identity, in which they would control their bodies through their choice of clothing as markers of self-identity.

Anuradha, a young kurmi girl from a not so well-off family, complains that in the village a girl does not enjoy her childhood; instead she is forced to do all the household work and attend to her younger brother and sister. She laments that girls are not able to enjoy their life as boys do. Boys can roam freely and do whatever they want in comparison to girls who have so many restrictions. She told us that all her friends including her have been cooking since they were seven years old.

Mothers feel that if their daughters were to be educated and become financially independent then they would as a consequence be able to access freedom in their lives, which would make their lives immensely better than theirs and most women want that for their daughters. While for the women of the dominant kurmi singraur caste it was matter of changing their attitudes, for the women of the other castes in the village sending their daughters for higher studies or for a job is a social challenge, as the atmosphere of the village is not conducive for girls in the village to move freely. Young girls like Vandana Vishwakarma

feels that one should not stay in the village as there are no opportunities for one’s growth.

There is a clear-cut boundary among different castes in the village. While on social events like marriages they visit each other’s house, only men of both the communities eat together in each other’s place. It is the tradition that women of different castes do not dine together. Priyanka, a 14-year old kurmi girl, makes astute observations of village social relations. She says that in the village there is a rigid system of caste groupism. Different castes stay together. People of low castes do not mix freely with the people of high castes. So people of different castes cannot even think of marrying each other. She also feels that a girl should be financially independent and then marry.

Women take the ghonghat before family and village elders even when personal and social relations are otherwise friction-ridden. Even as Gulabkali Vishwakarma was telling me of how and why she and her husband had severed all relations with her father-in-law on account of property dispute, her daughter announced in whispering tone that her father-in-law was going to pass by from the adjacent house. Gulabkali immediately took on the ends of her saree and covered her head. This is the behaviour of a woman nearly 60 years of age. In Lahoopur village, even dalits practise veiling. Sumitra, a married pasi woman, says that it is compulsory to take ghonghat in front of elders, even among the dalits, whether they feel free or not, though she does not do so in her maternal house. The fact that a married woman exercises the privilege of the village daughter and removes the veil while visiting the natal village, which she would otherwise have kept on, is itself an indication of her longing to get rid of it, an imposition that she dislikes.

Sushila Devi, a kurmi mother of three schoolgoing sons, reflects on the kind of relations she would maintain with her future daughters-in-law. She opposes purdah system and says that she would ask her daughters-in-law to cover their head only in front of their father-in-law. She would try to have friendly relations with them and would not mind if they wear salwar suits. She says though, that they have to work hard in the fields. Her father-in-law never lets her take rest, and if she does not work he asks her to go back to her maika or her maternal house. She notes that daughters-in-law are freer than daughters. They can move about freely and can talk to anybody because they have their husband’s support whereas daughters have restrictions on their movement and on conversing with strangers. She feels that a girl leads a more comfortable and unrestricted life in her husband’s house as compared to her parent’s house.

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Jeffery and Jeffery (1996) note on the nature of family discipline embedded in early socialisation in the villages they studied.

Throughout a girl's childhood, her parents would prepare her for her inevitable marriage.... She would learn to be circumspect in how she dressed and taught to cover her head to signal her bashfulness [sharm] and respect for her seniors. Her compliance was likely to be fragile, however, and it would have to be constantly constructed and enforced through her elders' strenuous discipline. ...Through constant reiterations about the demeanour of women who had been married into her natal village, through watching how young married women conducted themselves, she would come to understand the difference between being a "daughter of the village" and a "bride of the village" (pp 6-7).

9 Rethinking Rural Women's Modernity

The ethnographic findings suggest that rural women perceive modernity in terms of freedom of choice in their private life. The expression of that freedom is perceived at the moment as the overcoming of constraints in their mobility, freedom to take up jobs, freedom in choice and style of clothing and freedom to marry by choice, although mostly within the caste group. For the older women and mothers, such modernity is cherished and desired for their daughters, in terms of a freer life in urban settings without much of a change in their own lifestyles in the villages.

The paradox of a freer life for daughters with those of their prospective daughters-in-law who are to marry into the villages was apparent. Not many were ready to articulate about choices and freedom for them except just one woman who said she would maintain a better relation with her daughter-in-law than what perhaps she had received as one. Many of the younger mothers complained of receiving severe treatment from the mother-in-law or father-in-law, especially regarding their expectations of work. Even so, all of them did expect their prospective daughters-in-law to do hard work as was required in the village setting. Even the young high school boys, some of whom we interviewed, wanted their wives to take on the veil, wear sarees rather than salwar suits, and abide by the social disciplines of the village. To our surprise though, we did find a number of married women, both young and middle-aged, wear lipstick during the day even when they were engaged in home-based tasks like cleaning mustard seeds, which has now become an everyday cosmetic

wear like puffing their faces with talcum powder. This suggests that while social disciplines have remained the same, the social norms and expectations of femininity and beauty have changed. By and large though the women are tied down to a drudgery and routine of housework and tending to cattle.

Contrary to the general expectation, rural women do not perceive modernity in terms of becoming rights-bearing citizen, participating in decision-making in the panchayats or SHGs or having a voice in development planning at the village. But they do perceive modernity in terms of overcoming feudal-patriarchal mindsets that restrict their freedom in their private lives and decision-making in their households. For the very poor dalit women, such freedom in their personal lives though important and much desired was also accompanied with the expectation of state measures to mitigate their poverty and of the efforts to overcome caste dominance. It is for the very poor rural women that modernity in the public sphere such as state's development measures and affirmative actions was a necessary condition but even for them modernity in the private sphere of a more equal treatment in their intimate relations was important. It was their general feeling that such freedom could be more easily accessible in the urban environment than in the village setting.

Modernity is generally understood to entail the following changes in the realms of polity, society, economy and the self. In the realm of polity, the modern state unlike pre-modern states effects a contract between the ruler and the governed that confers on those governed certain rights as citizens within the framework of a nation state. In the sphere of society, the nature of social relations governed by customs and traditions are gradually displaced and disembedded into more contractual relations and many thinkers view "society" itself as a construction of modernity that displaced the earlier notion of community. Economic relations are similarly transformed into more and more of market relations. By effecting all these changes, modernity also reconstructs "personhood" and we witness the emergence of "individuals" exercising free will and reason. In the above analysis of women's aspirations and marriage norms, we witness the attempts to reconstruct women's personhood whereby women seek to exercise free will overcoming the binds of custom and tradition.

NOTE

- 1 The popularity of such subjects among the youth in the village clearly suggests the need for ways of promoting both science and vocational education among them.

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