'Mr and Mrs Kakar display an encyclopedic and deep understanding of the Indian social reality, their "way of looking at things" is surpassed by none'—*Far Eastern Economic Review*

'This incisive book . . . succeeds in great measure in understanding and explaining the Indian character'—*Deccan Herald*

'Both intellectually rigorous and sensitive, Sudhir Kakar is a reliable guide to how Indians today experience their identity, their sexuality, their conflict between tradition and modernity'—*Le Monde*, France

'A very readable and richly nuanced book which seeks to uncover the common identity of 'The Indians' in their historical continuity, homogeneity and civilizational uniqueness'—*Neue Zuricher Zeitung*, Switzerland

'The fascinating portrait of the society and culture of a country that will play an ever more important role in world politics in the future'—*Die Zeit*, Germany

THE INDIANS

Portrait of a People

SUDHIR KAKAR
KATHARINA KAKAR

PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS
Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi 110 017, India
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Group (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, Block D, Rosebank Office Park, 181 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parktown North, Johannesburg 2193, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published in Viking by Penguin Books India 2007
Published by Penguin Book 2009

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

ISBN 9780143066637

This edition is for sale in the Indian Subcontinent only

Typeset in Sabon Roman by SÜRYA, New Delhi
Printed at Repro India Ltd., Navi Mumbai

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Our book is about Indian identity. It is about 'Indian-ness', the cultural part of the mind that informs the activities and concerns of the daily life of a vast number of Indians as it guides them through the journey of life. The attitude towards superiors and subordinates, the choice of food conducive to health and vitality, the web of duties and obligations in family life are all as much influenced by the cultural part of the mind as are ideas on the proper relationship between the sexes, or on the ideal relationship with god. Of course, in an individual Indian the civilizational heritage may be modified and overlaid by the specific cultures of his family, caste, class or ethnic group. Yet an underlying sense of Indian identity continues to persist, even into the third or fourth generation in the Indian diasporas around the world—and not only when they gather for a Diwali celebration or to watch a Bollywood movie.

Identity is not a role, or a succession of roles, with which it is often confused. It is not a garment that can be put on or taken off according to the weather outside; it is not 'fluid', but marked by a sense of continuity and sameness irrespective of where the person finds himself during the course of his life. A man's identity—of which the culture that he has grown up in is a vital part—is what makes him recognize himself and *be*

recognized by the people who constitute his world. It is not something he has chosen, but something that has seized him. It can hurt, be cursed or bemoaned but cannot be discarded, though it can always be concealed from others or, more tragic, from one's own self.

The cultural part of our personal identity, modern neuroscience tell us, is wired into our brains. The culture in which an infant grows up constitutes the software of the brain, much of which is already in place by the end of childhood. Not that the brain, a social and cultural organ as much as a biological one, does not keep changing with interactions with the environment in later life. Like the proverbial river one never steps into twice, one also never uses the same brain twice. Even if our genetic endowment were to determine fifty per cent of our psyche and early childhood experiences another thirty per cent, there is still a remaining twenty per cent that changes through the rest of our lives. Yet, as the neurologist and philosopher Gerhard Roth observes, 'Irrespective of its genetic endowment, a human baby growing up in Africa, Europe or Japan will become an African, a European or a Japanese. And once someone has grown up in a particular culture and, let us say, is twenty years old, he will never acquire a full understanding of other cultures since the brain has passed through the narrow bottleneck of "culturalization".'[1] In other words, the possibilities of 'fluid' and changing identities in adulthood are rather limited and, moreover, rarely touch the deeper layers of the psyche. So, in a sense, we are Spanish or Korean—or Indian—much before we make the choice or identify this as an essential part of our identity.

We are well aware that at first glance the notion of a singular Indian-ness may seem far-fetched. How can anyone generalize about a country of a billion people—Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Jains—speaking fourteen major languages and with pronounced regional differences? How can

one postulate anything in common between a people divided not only by social class but also by India's signature system of caste, and with an ethnic diversity characteristic more of past empires than of modern nation states? Yet from ancient times, European, Chinese and Arab travellers have identified common features among India's peoples. They have borne witness to an underlying unity in apparent diversity, a unity often ignored or unseen in recent times because our modern eyes are more attuned to spotting divergence than resemblance. Thus in 300 BC, Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador to Chandragupta Maurya's court, remarked on what one would today call the Indian preoccupation with spirituality:

> Death is with them a frequent subject of discourse. They regard this life as, so to speak, the time when the child within the womb becomes mature, and death as a birth into a real and happy life for the votaries of philosophy. On this account they undergo much discipline as a preparation for death. They consider nothing that befalls men as either good or bad, to suppose otherwise being a dream-like illusion, else how could some be affected with sorrow and others with pleasure by the very same things, and how could the same things affect the same individuals at different times with these opposite emotions?[2]

In more recent times, India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, wrote in his *The Discovery of India*:

> The unity of India was no longer merely an intellectual conception for me; it was an emotional experience which overpowered me... It was absurd, of course, to think of India or any country as a kind of anthropomorphic entity. I did not do so... Yet I think with a long cultural background and a common outlook on life develops a spirit that is peculiar to it and that is impressed on all its children, however much they may differ among themselves.[3]

This 'spirit of India' is not something ethereal, inhabiting the rarefied atmosphere of religion, aesthetics and philosophy, but is captured, for instance, in animal fables from the *Panchatantra* or tales from the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* that adults tell children all over the country. It shines through Indian musical forms but is also found in mundane matters of personal hygiene such as the cleaning of the rectal orifice with water and the fingers of the left hand, or in such humble objects as the tongue scraper, a curved strip of copper (or silver in the case of the wealthy) used to remove the white film that coats the tongue.

Indian-ness, then, is about similarities produced by an overarching Indic, pre-eminently Hindu civilization that has contributed the lion's share to what we would call the 'cultural gene pool' of India's peoples. In other words, Hindu culture patterns—which are the focus of this book—have played a very major role in the construction of Indian-ness, although we would hesitate to go as far as the acerbic critic of Hindu ethos, the writer Nirad C. Chaudhuri, who maintained that the history of India for the last thousand years has been shaped by the Hindu character and that he felt 'equally certain that it will remain so and shape the form of everything that is being undertaken for and in the country.'[4] Here we can mention only some of the key building blocks of Indian-ness, which we will elaborate upon in this book: an ideology of family and other crucial relationships that derives from the institution of the joint family; a view of social relations profoundly influenced by the institution of caste; an image of the human body and bodily processes that is based on the medical system of Ayurveda; and a cultural imagination teeming with shared myths and legends, especially from the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, that underscore a 'romantic' vision of human life and a relativist, context-dependent way of thinking.

We do not mean to imply that Indian identity is a fixed

constant, unchanging through the march of history. Indic civilization has remained in constant ferment through the processes of assimilation, transformation, re-assertion and re-creation that happened in the wake of its encounters with other civilizations and cultural forces, such as those that came with the advent of Islam in medieval times and European colonialism in the more recent past. Virtually no part of Indic civilization has remained unaffected by these encounters, be it classical music, architecture, 'traditional' Indian cuisine or Bollywood musical scores. Indic civilization has not so much absorbed as translated foreign cultural forces into its own idiom, unmindful or even oddly proud of all that is lost in translation. The contemporary buffeting of this civilization by a West-centric globalization is only the latest in a long line of invigorating cultural encounters that can be called 'clashes' only from the shortest of time frames and narrowest of perspectives. Indic civilization, as separate from though related to Hinduism as a religion, is thus the common patrimony of all Indians, irrespective of their professed faith.

Indians, then, share a family resemblance in the sense that there is a distinctive Indian stamp on certain universal experiences which we shall discuss in this book: growing up male or female, sex and marriage, behaviour at work, status and discrimination, the body in illness and health, religious life and, finally, ethnic conflict. In a contentious Indian polity, where various groups clamour for recognition of their differences, the awareness of a common Indian-ness, the sense of 'unity within diversity', is often absent. Like the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges' remark on the absence of camels in the Quran because they were not exotic enough to the Arabs to merit attention, the camel of Indian-ness is invisible to or taken for granted by most Indians. Their 'family' resemblance begins to stand out in sharp relief only when it is compared to the profiles of peoples of other major civilizations or cultural

clusters. A man who is an 'Amritsari' in Punjab, for instance, is a Punjabi in the rest of India but an Indian in Europe; in the latter case, the 'outer circle' of his identity—his Indian-ness—becomes central to his self-definition and his recognition by others.[5] This is why in spite of persistent academic disapproval, people (including academics in their unguarded moments) continue to speak of 'the Indians'—as they do of 'the Chinese', 'the Europeans' or 'the Americans'—as a necessary and legitimate short cut to a more complex reality.

Our aim in this book is to present a composite portrait in which Indians will recognize themselves and be recognized by others. This recognition cannot have a uniform quality even while we seek to identify the commonalities that underlie what the anthropologist Robin Fox calls the 'dazzle' of surface differences. We suspect that Hindus belonging to the upper and middle castes will see a picture in which they will find many features that are intimately familiar. Others at the margins of Hindu society (such as the dalits and tribals, or the Christians and Muslims) will spot only fleeting resemblances. Even in the case of Hindus, who constitute over eighty per cent of India's population, the portrait is not a photograph. But neither is it a cubist representation à la Picasso where the subject is barely recognizable. Our effort is more akin to the psychological studies of such expressionist painters as Max Beckman and Oskar Kokoschka or, nearer to our times, the portraits of Lucien Freud that use realism to explore psychological depth.

We are also aware that what we are attempting here is an unfashionable 'big picture', a 'grand narrative' that may be regarded with reflexive hostility by many who profess the postmodernist credo. Yes, there *is* a speculative quality in this exercise of settling on certain patterns of Indian-ness as central. Yet without the big picture—whatever its flaws of inexactness—the smaller, local pictures, however accurate, will be myopic, a mystifying jumble of trees without the pattern of the forest.

THE HIERARCHICAL MAN

In an article titled 'Where rank alone matters', the well-known Indian journalist Sunanda K. Datta-Ray writes that the gratification of 300 million middle-class consumers, the 'new brahmins', does not lie in their being consumers in a global marketplace but in being 'somebody' in a profoundly hierarchical society.[1] Retired judges, ex-ambassadors and other sundry officials of the Indian state who are no longer in service are never caught without calling cards prominently displaying who they once were. India is not a country for the anonymous, he concludes. You must be *somebody* to survive with dignity, since rank is the only substitute for money. He could have added that India also provides by far the largest number of aspirants for the Guinness Book of Records. The Indian ingenuity in finding ever new fields for setting records (and we are not talking about the well-known ones for the longest fingernails or the largest moustache) is remarkable, amusing, and oddly touching. Commercially astute British and American publishers of biographical dictionaries and compendia of 'Who's Who'—a lucrative branch of vanity publishing—have discovered that India provides the biggest market for people wanting to be included in such publications which are then prominently displayed in the living room of their homes.

The need to be noticed, to stand out from an anonymous mass, is, of course, not uniquely Indian but a part of the narcissistic heritage of all human beings. What makes this phenomenon particularly ubiquitous—and poignant—in India is that a person's self-worth is almost exclusively determined by the rank he (alone or as part of a family) occupies in the profoundly hierarchical nature of Indian society. If the perception of another person has first to do with gender ('Is this individual male or female?'), followed by age ('Is he/she young or old?') and by other such markers of identity, then in India the determination of relative rank ('Is this person superior or inferior to me?') remains very near the top of subconscious questions evoked in an interpersonal encounter. Indians are perhaps the world's most undemocratic people, living in the world's largest and most plural democracy.

The deeply internalized hierarchical principle, the lens through which men and women in India view their social world, has its origins in the earliest years of a child's life in the family. Indeed, a grasp of the psychological dynamics of family life is vital not only for understanding Indian behaviour towards authority but also in a wide variety of other social situations.

THE WEB OF FAMILY LIFE

The Indian family: large and noisy, with parents and children, uncles, aunts and sometimes cousins, presided over by benevolent grandparents, all of them living together under a single roof. There are intrigues and secret liaisons, fierce loving and jealous rages. Its members often squabble among themselves but remain, in most cases, intensely loyal to each other and always present a united front to the outside world. The Indian family—animated with such a powerful sense of life that a separation from it leaves one with a perpetual sense of exile.

This is the 'joint' family of Bollywood movies which, social scientists tell us, has never been a universal norm. It is also untrue that the large joint family is found more often in

villages than in cities; studies tell us that it is more common in urban areas, as also among the upper landholding castes, than in the lower castes of rural India. Economic reasons, especially the high cost of urban living space, are certainly a reason why the joint family survives. Contemporary nostalgia at the supposed withering away of the Indian family with the increasing pace of modernization could well be misplaced; the prevalence of joint families may be increasing rather than declining.[2] It is important to note that irrespective of demographic changes and the desire of many modern middle-class couples to escape the tensions of a large family and live on their own, the joint family remains the most desirable form of family organization and has a *psychic reality* independent of its actual occurrence.[3]

What is this 'joint' family that is so much a feature of an Indian's inner landscape, even in places and social strata where it is not the dominant form of family organization any more?[4] As an ideal type, a joint family is one in which brothers remain together after marriage and bring their wives into the parental household. It is governed by the ideals of fraternal loyalty and filial obedience which stipulate common residence and common economic, social and ritual activities. In addition to this core group, there may be others who are either permanent or temporary residents in the household: widowed or abandoned sisters and aunts, or distant male relatives, euphemistically called 'uncles', who have no other family to turn to. In practice, of course, brothers and their families may not share a common kitchen or may live in adjacent houses rather than in a single residence, or a brother may have migrated to the city in search of economic opportunity. Yet even in cases of many families that appear 'nuclear' in the sense that they are composed of parents and their unmarried children, a social and psychological 'jointness' continues to operate. When a brother moves to the city, for instance, his wife and children

frequently continue to live with the village family while he himself remits his share to the family income; or, if he takes his family with him, they return 'home' as often as they can. Even in the upper and upper-middle classes, it is the psychic reality of the joint family which makes them take it for granted that they can visit and live for weeks, if not months, with their adult married children who are working in distant parts of the country or even outside India.

The point we wish to make here is that most Indians spend the formative years of their life in family settings that approximate to the joint rather than the nuclear type. Even grown children who nominally live alone or in a nuclear family make long and frequent visits to members of the joint family. Not only do families get together to celebrate festivals, but people also prefer to go on vacations or on religious pilgrimage in the company of other family members. The ideals of fraternal solidarity and filial devotion are so strong that a constant effort is made to preserve the characteristic 'jointness' at the very least in its social sense. Anyone who has been surprised at the heavy traffic in an Indian city on a late Sunday morning only needs to remember that many of the men, women and children, dressed in their best clothes and precariously perched on scooters, or crammed into buses and small Maruti cars, are on their way to visit family members living in other parts of the city.

In part, the demography of childhood in India reflects Indian marriage patterns. Leaving aside the urban middle and upper classes where the marriageable age has been increasing, most couples marry in adolescence when they have neither the economic nor the psychological resources to set up an independent household. Separation from the joint family, if and when it does take place, comes later, when their own children are well into the middle years of childhood. Thus it is not surprising that uncles, aunts and cousins, not to mention

grandparents, figure prominently in the childhood recollections of most Indians. They occupy a much greater space in the inner world of Indians than is the case with Europeans and Americans growing up in nuclear families where it is only the mother and the father (and perhaps also the siblings) who cast such a long shadow on their emotional lives.

More than any other factor, then—the recent high rate of economic growth, the improvement in the status of previously oppressed sections of society and even the strength of religious belief—it is the *family*, and the role family obligations play in the life of an Indian, which is the glue that holds Indian society together. Of course, the flip side of the coin is—and there is always a flip side—that this focus on the family as the exclusive source of satisfaction of *all* one's needs also reflects a continuing lack of faith in almost every other institution of society. The result of this is often extreme divisiveness, a lack of commitment to anyone or anything outside one's immediate family.

In a country without large government programmes of social security, unemployment compensation and old age benefits, the family must give temporary relief when a man loses work, a young mother is ill or monsoon floods destroy the harvest. If we exclude the rising middle class and the very small upper-class elite, it is the family that provides the only life insurance most Indians have. Naturally, then, in the imagination of most Indians a man's worth and, indeed, his identity are inextricable from the reputation of his family. How a man lives and what he does are rarely seen as a product of individual effort or aspiration, but are interpreted in the light of his family's circumstances and standing in the wider society. Individual success or failure makes sense only in a family context. 'How can a son of family X behave like this!' is as much an expression of contempt as 'How could he not turn out well? After all he is the son of family Y!' is a sign of approval.

Psychologically, an individual derives much of his self-esteem from myths that ascribe to his family some kind of distinction or prominence in the past or exaggerate its importance in the present. His closest ties, often including even friendships, will not be outside but within the family. As a Hindu proverb puts it, 'A mustard seed of relationship is worth a cartload of friendship.' These special relationships within the extended family are a major source of support needed to go through life and constant affirmation of a person's identity.

It is not as if family interactions and obligations have been static. Hindu nationalist writings and some women's magazines are full of alarmist stuff about the Indian family being under attack by forces of Western modernization. Many of the changes have to do with the rise of individualism and the role of women in urban areas, to which we will come back later. Family obligations too are changing. Thirty years ago it was taken for granted that a man would look after a cousin or a nephew if he came and stayed with him for many years of schooling which was not available in his home town or village. Most middle-class families will now hesitate to put themselves out to the same extent. Yet, while there has certainly been a contraction of family obligations, they have not disappeared; one may not feel as obliged to look after a distant aunt but there is no question of not looking after the emotional, social and financial needs of an aged parent. All in all, the Indian family remains distinctive (and distinctly conservative) in its views on marriage, parenthood and the web of mutual responsibilities and obligations within wider ties of kinship.[5]

Unshakeable solidarity between brothers as one of the highest ideals of family life can lead to consequences that may appear odd to a 'modern sensibility' which looks upon the husband–wife couple as the fulcrum of family life. For instance, a man will often tolerate the adulterous relations of his wife with his brother—in the upper classes, mostly by feigning ignorance; the poorer sections of society dispense even with this fig leaf. Thus a cook from the hill state of Uttaranchal once came to his employer asking for leave to go to his village since his wife had just given birth to a son.

'But how can your wife bear a son when you have not been to your village in the last one year?' asked the employer.

'How does that matter?' replied the man. 'My brother is there.'

This may seem like an extreme example, but only because it was explicitly stated. The situation itself is not as uncommon as we would suppose. For a time in Indian social history, the erotic importance of the husband's younger brother—in the sense that he would or could have sexual relations with his elder brother's widow—was officially recognized in the custom of *niyoga*. The custom goes back thousands of years to the sacred Rig Veda, where a man, identified by the commentators as the brother-in-law, is described as extending his hand in promised marriage to a widow inclined to share her husband's funeral pyre.

Though the custom gradually fell into disuse, especially with the prohibition of widow remarriage (it still survives in some communities), the psychological core of niyoga, namely the mutual awareness of a married woman and her younger brother-in-law as potential or actual sexual partners, is very much alive. In psychotherapy practice, middle-class women who are on terms of sexual intimacy with a brother-in-law rarely express any feelings of guilt. Their distress is occasioned more by his leaving home or his impending marriage, which the woman perceives as the end of her sensual and emotional life.

INDIAN CULTURE AND AUTHORITY

An Indian's sense of his relative familial and social position is so internalized that he qualifies, in Louis Dumont's phrase, as

the original *homo hierarchicus*.[6] The internalization of hierarchy coincides with the acquisition of language. There are six basic nursery sounds, a universal baby language used by infants all over the world with only slight variation from one society to another.[7] These 'words' are repeated combinations of the vowel sound 'ah' preceded by different consonants—'dada', 'mama', 'baba', 'nana', 'papa' and 'tata'. Infants repeat these or other closely related sounds over and over, in response to their own babbling and to their parents' modified imitations of their baby sounds. In most Western countries, only a few of these repetitive sounds, for example, 'mama', 'dada' or 'papa', are recognized and repeated by the parents and thus reinforced in the infant. In India, on the contrary, just about *all* of these closely related sounds are repeated and reinforced since each one is a name for various elder kin in the family whom a child must learn to identify with the position that he or she occupies in the family hierarchy. Thus, for example, in Punjabi, *ma* is mother, *mama* is mother's brother, *dada* is father's father, *nana* is mother's father, *chacha* is father's younger brother, *taya* is father's elder brother, *masi* is mother's sister, and so on.

This transformation of basic baby language into names for kinship relations within the extended family is characteristic of all Indian languages. It not only symbolizes the child's manifold relationships with a range of potentially nurturing figures in the older generation but also emphasizes the importance of the child's familiarity with the hierarchy of the family organization. Indians must learn to adapt to the personalities and moods of many authority figures besides their parents quite early in life. Whether the highly developed antenna that makes an Indian almost anticipate the wishes of a superior and adjust his behaviour accordingly should be called 'flexibility' or 'a lack of a firm sense of self' is a cultural value judgement we are unwilling to make. The fact remains that such early experiences in an extended family and the child's early knowledge of when

to retreat, when to cajole and when to be stubborn in order to get what he wants also make an Indian a formidable negotiator in later business dealings.

Regardless of personal talents or achievements, or of changes in the circumstances of his own or others' lives, an Indian's relative position in the hierarchy of the family, his obligations to those 'above' him and his expectations of those 'below' him, are immutable and lifelong. Already in childhood he begins to learn that he must look after the welfare of those subordinate to him in the family hierarchy so that they do not suffer either through their own misjudgement or at the hands of outsiders, and that he is reciprocally entitled to their obedience and respect.

Since young people in Indian families generally receive a good deal of attention and nurturance from the older generation and maintenance of family integrity is valued higher than an unfolding of individual capacities, a young Indian neither seeks a radical demarcation from the generation of his parents nor feels compelled to overthrow their authority in order to 'live life on my own terms'. This is in stark contrast to the West where 'generational conflict' is not only expected but considered necessary for the renewal of a society's institutions and, moreover, is considered (we believe erroneously) to be a universally valid psychological truth. In India, it is not the rupture but the *stretching* of traditional values that becomes a means for the young person to realize his dreams for life. It is telling that in spite of their fascination with sport and cinema stars, and the omnipresence of these celebrities in advertising, the primary role models for a large majority of Indian youth are from the family, most often a parent.

In spite of rapid social changes in the last decades, an Indian continues to be part of a hierarchically ordered and, above all, stable network of relationships throughout the course of his life. This complex, relationship-based pattern of

behaviour also manifests itself in work situations. Although intellectually the Indian professional or bureaucrat may agree with his Western counterpart that, for instance, the criterion for appointment or promotion to a particular job must be objective, a decision based solely on the demands of the task and 'merits of the case', emotionally he must still struggle against the cultural conviction that his relationship to the individual under consideration (if there is one) is the singlemost important factor in his decision. And among the vast majority of traditional-minded countrymen—whether it be a trader bending the law to facilitate the business transaction of a fellow caste member, or an industrialist employing an insufficiently qualified but distantly related job applicant as a manager, or the clerk in the municipal office accepting bribes in order to put an orphaned niece through school—dishonesty, nepotism and corruption are merely abstract concepts. These negative constructions are irrelevant to the Indian experience, which, from childhood on, nurtures one, and only one, standard of responsible adult conduct—namely, an individual's lifelong obligation to his kith and kin. Guilt and its attendant anxiety are aroused only when individual actions go against the principle of primacy of relationships, not when 'foreign', different ethical standards of honesty, equity and justice are breached.

Although family relationships are hierarchical in structure, the mode of relationship is characterized by an almost maternal behaviour on the part of the superior, by filial respect and compliance on the part of the subordinate and by a mutual sense of highly personal attachment. We meet this kind of a superior—king, father, guru—in school textbooks where, in stories depicting authority situations, the ideal leader is a kind of benevolent patriarch who acts in a nurturing way so that his followers either anticipate his wishes or accept them without questioning.[8] He receives compliance by taking care of his

people's needs, by providing the emotional rewards of approval, praise and affection, or by arousing guilt. High-handed attempts to regulate behaviour through threat or punishment, rejection or humiliation, lead less to open defiance than to devious evasion on the part of the subordinate.

Another legacy of Indian childhood in superior-subordinate or leader-follower relations is the idealization of the former. The need to bestow *maana* on our superiors and leaders in order to partake of this magical power ourselves is an unconscious attempt to restore the narcissistic perfection of infancy: 'You are perfect and I am a part of you.' This is of course a universal tendency, but in India, the automatic reverence for superiors is a widespread psychological fact. Leaders at every level of society, but particularly the patriarchal elders of the extended family and caste groups, as also religious and spiritual leaders, take on an emotional importance independent of any realistic evaluation of their performance, let alone an acknowledgement of their all too human weaknesses. Charisma, then, plays an unusually significant role among Indians and is a vital constituent of effective leadership in institutions.[9] In contrast to most people in the West, Indians are generally more prone to revere than admire.

It is not as if Indians are not sceptical of authority figures. Indeed, their cynicism towards leaders, especially political leaders, is often extreme. It is only that when an Indian *grants* authority to a leader, his critical faculties disappear in the waves of credulity that wash over him. The granting of authority is involuntary in the case of family and caste leadership during childhood. It may be voluntary—to gurus of various hues, for instance—in situations of acute personal crisis or distress, the reason why, for example, healers of the most varied kind flourish in the country. The effectiveness of these healers may be less because of their particular healing regimens and more due to the unconscious vital forces that the healer's charisma mobilizes in the patient in service of a cure.

Do these patterns of family life, especially those connected with the hierarchical ordering of relationships, extend beyond the home into other institutions like university departments, offices, political parties and the bureaucracy? The evidence suggests that they do. Authority relations in the Indian family provide a template for the functioning of most modern business, educational, political and scientific organizations.

First, there is a strong preference for an authoritative, even autocratic (but not authoritarian) leader who is strict, demanding but also caring and nurturing—very much like the *karta*, the paternalistic head of the extended family. The organizational psychologist Jai Sinha has called this type of leader the 'nurturant-task' leader who is strict in getting the task accomplished and tries to dominate the activities of his subordinates.[10] He is, however, not authoritarian but nurturing in the sense of being a benevolent guide to his subordinates and someone who takes a personal interest in their well-being and growth.

Among the subordinates, on the other hand, there is a complementary tendency to idealize the leader and look upon him as a repository of all virtues, an almost superhuman figure deserving of their faith and respect. Even in the upper echelons of modern business organizations, among senior managers with exposure to Western business education and practices, the influence of Indian culture on their perception of top leadership has not disappeared. The CEO of a modern company here is the recipient of far greater idealization than is usually the case in the West.[11] This is a potential strength of Indian organizations and has many advantages, such as a greater *esprit de corps* in senior management and a higher degree of loyalty and commitment to the organization. It can also lead to a work ethic and performance that is much more than what a leader might reasonably expect in most European and North American organizations. Yet idealization, that great construct

of human imagination which allows one to conceive with the conviction of a known fact a more perfect and valuable reality than what exists, can also distort the perception of leadership. The Indian leader is thus often deprived of critical feedback from the senior people of his organization that could help him develop more effective leadership practices.

Since Indian institutions are markedly hierarchical, collaborative teamwork across levels of status and power proves to be difficult. Decisions tend to be pushed upwards and the top leadership must often intervene in organizational processes. More than in most Western cultures, the legacy of Indian family and childhood ensures that the quality of leadership becomes pivotal for the success or failure of an institution.

The difficulty in working in teams is compounded by the cultural obstacles to giving or receiving negative feedback. With the preservation of relationships as the primary principle governing their actions in interpersonal situations, Indians find it difficult to say a frank 'No' to requests they are unable or unwilling to grant. The refusal has then to be interpreted from the words in which the rejection is couched ('Let's see' or 'It's difficult but I will try', and so on), and from the tentative tone of voice and cautious body language. One has to exercise the same kind of judgement when asking for directions on an Indian street. The man who might not have an idea of the right directions but nonetheless proceeds to guide you to your destination is not only saving face by not admitting to his ignorance but also hesitates to introduce any negative vibes in the fleeting relationship that has just come into being.

The absence of a democratic mode of functioning in Indian institutions is not resented as long as those in leadership positions develop a close personal relationship with the led. In fact, effective leaders in India, both in the workplace and in the political arena, place great emphasis on the building and

cultivating of relationships. This, as we have seen above, is consistent with an Indian's experience from his earliest years where he has learnt that the core of any social relationship—in family, caste, school or at work—is caring and mutual involvement. What he should be sensitive to (and concerned with) are not only the goals of work that are external to the relationship but the relationship itself, the unfolding of emotional affinity.

As in the extended family, where favouritism has to be avoided to maintain harmony (for example, in the ideology of a joint family a father should not be seen as favouring his own son above the sons of his brothers), people in Indian organizations develop almost paranoid abilities in detecting signs of a leader's favouritism toward selected subordinates. Not that they are particularly troubled by nepotism—as long as *they* are the intended beneficiaries. Most accept that people in authority will make a distinction between their 'own people' and those who are not in the same privileged position. They have a sneaking sympathy for a senior politician's incredulous reaction to a journalist who questioned the appointment of the politician's son to a high post within his party: 'Who else will I appoint? *Your* son?' If there is one 'ism' that governs Indian society and its institutions, it is familyism.

Given the strong need for nearness to the superior, to be considered 'his man', what is galling for an Indian is being excluded—or the feeling of being excluded—from a charmed circle that enjoys the superior's favour. The result of this, almost always, is a good deal of hidden anger and passive aggressive behaviour. Effective leaders in Indian institutions are thus constantly on their guard against any impression of favouritism, because it can cause serious damage to the morale of the institution.

Some of the values that govern Indian institutional and work life have been empirically demonstrated by the GLOBE (Global

Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness) research project, which surveyed over 17,000 middle managers in various industries in sixty-two societies.[12] In this project, the sixty-two countries were grouped into ten cultural clusters: Latin Europe, Germanic Europe, Anglo Europe, Nordic Europe, Eastern Europe, Latin America, Confucian Asia, Anglo (outside Europe), Sub-Saharan Africa, Southern Asia and Middle East.

If one looks at South Asia, where India is by far the largest country, this cultural cluster stands out prominently in three of the nine dimensions of the study. South Asia has the greatest *power distance*, that is, the degree to which the culture's people are separated by power, authority and prestige.[13] In other words, the difference in status between the chief executive and the office peon, the *raja* and the *runk*, is at its maximum in this region (the least is in Nordic Europe, that is, Scandinavia). Irrespective of his educational status and more than in any other culture in the world, an Indian is a *homo hierarchicus*. This is the case even when the modern Indian manager—usually middle-class, college-educated—wishes that it was not so and, as we shall see below, consciously aspires to a reduction in the power distance.

The second dimension on which South Asia stands out in the international comparison is *humane orientation*, that is, the degree to which people are caring, altruistic, generous and kind. (The lowest here is Germanic Europe. Closely related to humane orientation, although as its opposite, is assertiveness, the degree to which the culture's people are assertive, confrontational and aggressive. Here, next only to Scandinavia, South Asia is the least assertive culture; Germanic Europe and Eastern Europe, in that order, are the most aggressive and confrontational.) Combining humane orientation with a high power distance produces the kind of Indian leader we have discussed earlier: authoritative but not autocratic, sometimes despotic perhaps, but generally benevolent.

South Asia also scores the highest on *in-group collectivism*, that is, the degree to which people feel loyalty toward such small groups as their family or circle of friends (Scandinavia, followed by Germanic Europe and North America, scores the least). We have seen that the habit of solidarity with the family group and later with members of one's caste is inculcated in early childhood and is regarded as one of the highest values guiding individual lives. This solidarity has the many economic advantages of informal networks that are based on trust rather than contractual obligations. We have already talked of the high *esprit de corps* when people working in an organization regard themselves as a 'band of brothers' and idealize the leader-father. The danger, of course, is of 'in-groupism', which makes collaboration with other, 'out' groups in large organizations difficult, if not impossible.

This snapshot of Indian leadership practices says little about the changes taking place in modern urban families which will invariably have an impact on Indian institutions. The GLOBE study confirms that what younger managers in India most dearly wish for is a reduction in the power distance between the leader and the led.[14] We believe that leadership on this dimension is indeed in a state of transition. It is not a coincidence that the desired reduction in psychological distance between the leader and the led is congruent with the changes taking place in the father–son relationship in the middle-class family. Let us elaborate.

In traditional India, the father entered his son's life in a big way only in the later years of the boy's childhood. In the early and middle years, the relationship between the two was (and in large parts of the country continues to be) marked by formality and perfunctory daily social contact.[15] In older autobiographical accounts, fathers, whether strict or indulgent, cold or affectionate, are invariably portrayed as distant. The father's guiding voice, a prime element in a man's sense of

identity, was diffused among the voices of many older male family members and his individual paternity muffled.

The reasons for a traditional father not taking a demonstratively active role in the upbringing of his son are not difficult to fathom. A traditional father operates under the logic of the joint family. This demands that in order to prevent the building up of nuclear cells within the family that can destroy its cohesion, a father be restrained in the presence of his own child and divide his interest and support equally among his own and his brothers' children. Moreover, as we shall see later in the chapter on sexuality, many a young father was embarrassed to hold his infant child in front of older family members since this fruit of his loins was clear evidence of activity in that particular region.

The second ideology impinging on traditional fathers in India (and in common with other patriarchal societies) is of a gender-based dichotomy in parenting roles and obligations. That is, decided notions of things that men do in the household and others that they don't. Playing with or taking care of their infants is not what fathers do, their major role lies in the disciplining of the child. As a North Indian proverb, addressed to men, pithily puts it: 'Treat a son like a king for the first five years, like a slave for the next ten and like a friend thereafter.'

Of course, behind the requisite façade of aloofness and impartiality, a traditional Indian father may be struggling to express his love for his son. Fatherly love is no less strong in India than in other societies. Even in ancient religious and literary texts, a son is not only instrumental in the fulfilment of a sacred duty but has often been portrayed as a source of intense emotional gratification.[16] Older autobiographical accounts often depict the Indian father as a sensitive man and charged with feelings for his son which he does not openly reveal. Thus in *Autobiography of a Yogi*, Yogananda describes meeting his father after a long separation: 'Father embraced

me warmly as I entered our Gurupur home. "You have come," he said tenderly. Two large tears dropped from his eyes. Outwardly undemonstrative, he had never before shown me these external signs of affection. Outwardly the grave father, inwardly he possessed the melting heart of a mother.'[17]

One of the more striking changes associated with modernity and the rise of an urban middle class is the active involvement of fathers in bringing up their infant and little children.[18] Given the intensity and ambivalence of the mother–son connection in the Indian setting, the need for the father's physical touch and guiding voice, his support and often unconscious encouragement for the son's separation from his mother has always been pressing. Modern, generally urban and educated, fathers have begun to provide this early emotional access to the son, not only attenuating the overheated quality of the mother–son bond, but also laying the foundations for a less hierarchical and closer father–son relationship. The early experience of having fathers who are no longer distant and forbidding figures, who are available to both sons and daughters, often as playmates, will, inevitably, change notions of the desirable power distance in institutions and the expectations that young Indians will have of their leaders.

THE INNER EXPERIENCE OF CASTE

Second only to the family as a pervasive social dimension of Indian identity is the institution of caste. Although the usage of the term 'caste' is problematic (it derives from the Portuguese *casta*—'race', 'descent'), the term has entered English and other European languages as an expression for the horizontal segmentation of Indian society. Actually, the term 'caste' refers to not one but two institutions: *varna* and *jaati*. Varna (literally, 'colour') is the ancient division of Hindu society into the priest (brahmin), warrior (*kshatriya*), tradesman (*vaishya*) and servant (*shudra*) classes—in that order of ranking—which is encountered in the Vedas and other founding texts of Hinduism. This four-fold classification is still used to locate a person in the wider social space, as when political commentators speak of mobilizing the brahmin, vaishya or the backward castes (as the shudras are now called) to vote in a state election.

However, caste today almost always refers to jaati, which is caste in all the immediacy of daily social relations and occupational specialization. The jaati system is made up of more than three thousand castes. The hierarchical order of these castes is not static but changes from village to village and from one region to another, although one of the brahmin

castes will almost always be at the top of the pecking order. Here, we will talk of caste only in the sense of jaati.

Essentially, jaati is a social group to which an individual belongs by birth. And although this is now rapidly changing, a jaati member would usually follow his caste's traditional occupation. His marriage partner even today, in nine cases out of ten, will belong either to his own caste or to the sub-caste group from which he is permitted to choose a spouse. It isn't surprising, then, that besides hierarchy, the restriction of the marriage partner to one's own caste is the second pillar of the caste system. Except in 'modern' Indians, a person's closest friendships too are with members of his own caste. His relations with members of other castes are more formal, governed as they are by unwritten codes prescribing and proscribing relationships between castes.

Although families of a particular caste may live together in the same village, the caste itself extends beyond the confines of any single village. A large, prominent caste may have millions of members and extend over considerable geographical territory, making it a very desirable group for politicians for the purpose of electoral mobilization. In fact, in militantly heightening caste identities Indian democracy may be the third, new pillar, after endogamy and hierarchy, which props up the institution of caste.

Just as the family is the primary foil for a child's budding sense of identity, caste is the next circle in his widening social radius. The caste's values, beliefs, prejudices and injunctions, as well as its distortions of reality, become part of the individual's mind and contents of his conscience. It is his internalized caste norms that define 'right action' or *dharma* for the individual, make him feel good and loved when he lives up to these norms, and anxious and guilty when he transgresses them.

Since an individual's anxiety may also reflect the latent

concerns of his group, knowledge of an Indian's caste, its aspirations and apprehensions, enriches the understanding of his identity formation. For instance, a person's violent outrage provoked by an ostensibly minor slight may not only be the result of an individual problem in 'managing aggression', it may also have its source in a historical resentment shared by his caste as a whole and passed down from generation to generation as part of his caste identity.

If marriage and kinship are its body, then hierarchy is the soul of caste. The ranking of a caste in the social order, and thus the capital of narcissism available to a person for belonging to a particular caste, is generally according to the criteria of purity vs pollution.[1] A caste is ranked high if its way of life is judged to be pure, and low if it is considered to be relatively polluted. A brahmin is the purest (although there will be gradations of purity in the many brahmin castes) and an untouchable, the dalit (literally, 'oppressed'), the most polluted. Although the rankings in between these extremes in a particular village may be bitterly contested, with a caste claiming a purer way of life than what has been ascribed to it, it is generally agreed that purity and pollution are determined by the caste's way of life, in which its diet (for instance, whether vegetarian or meat-eating) and its traditional occupation are the most important elements. Occupations that put the person in touch with death or with bodily substances (the sweeper, the washerman, the barber, the tanner, the cobbler) are considered the most polluted.

The preoccupation of the caste system with high and low has been associated with suffering and humiliation for several millions through the centuries. As the Marathi poet Govindraj puts it, Hindu society is made up of men 'who bow their heads to the kicks from above and who simultaneously give a kick below, never thinking to resist the one or refrain from the other.'[2] The hierarchy is so fine tuned that even a low caste will

always find another caste that is inferior to it, thus mitigating some of the narcissistic injury suffered by it at being seen as inferior. Thus, for instance, 'among those lowest scavenging sections which remove night soil there is still a distinction: those who serve in private houses consider themselves higher than those who clean public latrines.'[3]

Caste hierarchy and its associated discrimination are not solely Hindu phenomena. Dumont has noted that no religious movement in India that has opposed caste has ever been successful in the long run.[4] Although not as widespread or harsh as in Hinduism, the hierarchical principle embodied in the caste system has also put its stamp on the social practices of other religions such as Islam, Christianity and Sikhism which have greater claims to egalitarianism. For instance, in the state of Goa, the term 'brahmin Catholic' is commonly used for a person of high status in the Christian community. To give another example, 'noble' (*ashraf*) Muslims, descended from Turks, Arabs and Persians who settled in India during the eight hundred years of Muslim suzerainty, look down upon and discriminate against the vast majority of their 'base' (*ajlaf*) coreligionists whose forefathers were low-caste indigenous converts. Even lower than the ajlaf are the *arzal*, the Muslim counterparts of the untouchables of Hindu society.

One of the major reasons for very few upper-caste Hindus converting to Islam or Christianity over centuries of Muslim and British rule has to do with the strength of their caste identities. In spite of the absence of any prohibition on changing one's religious faith, and the well-known Hindu respect for all manner of theological currents and openness to a wide variety of spiritual beliefs, it was the prospect of being together with untouchable converts in the same congregation that acted as a powerful deterrent to conversion. In contrast, a large number of untouchables converted to Islam, Christianity and, since the 1950s (with the sensational conversion of the dalit leader B.R. Ambedkar), to Buddhism in order to escape the discriminatory practices of the caste system.

DIRT AND DISCRIMINATION

A cardinal feature of caste which makes the caste experience different from that of growing up in a clan or a tribe is the phenomenon of untouchability.

The 150 million untouchables, the dalits, of India comprise a number of 'impure' castes which occupy the lowest rungs in the hierarchy of Hindu society. Earlier—and in many parts of rural India even today—the visceral withdrawal bordering on revulsion at a dalit's approach was so strong that the dalits were denied access to temples, thoroughfares and other public spaces. Their housing was segregated, their children not allowed to attend the common village school and their women forbidden to draw water from the public well lest the drinking water become contaminated.

The degradation of a vast number of other human beings to an extent that members of higher castes in parts of rural India recoil not only from their touch but even from their shadow continues to be a matter of great shame for many Indians. Mahatma Gandhi regarded untouchability as the biggest blot on Hindu society and passionately fought for its eradication the whole of his adult life. In a letter to a correspondent who had talked of upper-caste intolerance of the untouchables, he writes: 'I abhor with my whole soul the system which has reduced a large number of Hindus to a level less than that of beasts. The vexed problem would be solved if the poor *panchama* [literally, 'fifth', that is, below the fourth caste of shudra in the varna classification], not to use the word 'untouchable', was allowed to mind his own business. Unfortunately, he has no mind or business he can call his own. Has a beast any mind or business but that of his master? Has a panchama a place he can call his own? He may not walk on

the very roads he cleans and pays for by the sweat of his brow. He may not even dress as the others do...It is an abuse of language to say we Hindus extend any toleration towards our panchama brothers. We have degraded them and then have the audacity to use their very degradation against their rise.'[5]

Vigorous social and political movements in the last century, as also the process of urbanization, have considerably mitigated the horrors of untouchability. But they have by no means disappeared. In its issue of 19 September 2005, the news magazine *India Today* carried a report from a village in Orissa where, for the first time, a dalit girl had been admitted to college for higher education. When the eighteen-year-old girl rode a bicycle to college, the upper-caste-dominated village threatened the dalits with social boycott if she did not walk to college instead. According to custom, dalits in this village can only walk barefoot. They are not allowed to take wedding processions through the village or cremate the dead in the common cremation ground. If they are invited to upper-caste weddings, it is only to wash the feet of the wedding guests.

Modern egalitarian ideologies have indeed led to a questioning of the hierarchical principle among sections of society, especially in the lower castes. But these ideologies have not quite succeeded in breaking hierarchy's tenacious hold on the Indian mind. What the egalitarian ideology has undoubtedly accomplished is to increase the hypocrisy, the gulf between private disparagement and a politically correct public stance towards the dalits.

We have already mentioned that most anthropological scholars of Hindu society agree that 'pollution' or 'impurity' is the central organizing principle of the caste system and, hence, also of untouchability. What are the *psychological* roots of a tradition that so demeans and degrades so many Indians? In the only serious psychological study of untouchability, the eminent folklorist Alan Dundes has postulated that in the

Hindu mind, the untouchable is intimately associated with faeces, and the Hindu horror of faeces, instilled by the culture's toilet training, is the 'cause' for the persistence of untouchability.[6] Although we agree with Dundes' exposition on the importance of dirt as the primary psychological moment in the phenomenon of untouchability, we are sceptical about the (Freudian) responsibility of toilet training for this state of affairs. There is no parallel in India, for instance, to the Western scatological fixations in speech. Equivalents of '*Merde*!', 'Shit!', '*Scheisse*!' are not common expressions of frustration in any Indian language; nor is there any counterpart to 'Asshole!' or '*Arschloch*!' as a familiar term of abuse that gives vent to infantile rage—Indians prefer various incestuous possibilities instead. In other words, it is not in India but in European and Anglo-American speech that one hears the long-postponed vengeance of a child forced to control its bowels.

Our own explanation, diverging from Dundes in some respects, would go something like this: translated into the language of psychological experience, to be pure is to be clean while to be polluted is to be dirty. For the upper-caste child, a dalit is a member of a group that is permanently and irrevocably dirty. The child's knowledge is not anthropological or religious-textual but a *knowledge-feeling* that is pre-verbal and has, so to speak, entered the child's very bones. Many a time while growing up, the child has sensed the sudden kinesthetic tension in the body of his mother, father, aunt, uncle, when a dalit has come too near. He has registered their expressions of disgust, unconsciously mimicking them in his own face and body at any threatened contact with an untouchable. Given the child's propensity to place himself at the centre of all experience, he effortlessly links the family's disapproval and revulsion toward the untouchable to those times when he has been an 'untouchable' himself, that is, the times when he has been the subject of unruly tantrums,

uncontrollable urges relating to food and, above all, when he has been filthily, gloriously dirty.

All young children, everywhere in the world, try to disown their 'bad', socially disapproved dirtiness by projecting it outside. It is first projected on to animals and later to other people and groups of people—'reservoirs', as the psychoanalyst Vamik Volkan calls them.[7] These reservoirs are available to the child as a pre-selection by his own caste group. Since ages, the untouchables have been the selected reservoir of dirtiness for the upper-caste child, just as Muslims were and still are for Hindus (and vice versa). It is significant that Gandhi recollects his mother telling him when he was a child that the shortest cut to purification after touching an untouchable was to cancel the touch by an even dirtier one—by touching a Muslim.[8]

Viewing an antagonistic group as dirty, and thus subhuman, whereas one's own cleanliness is not only humanely civilized but next to godliness, is commonplace in ethnic conflict. 'Dirty nigger' and 'dirty Jew' are well-known epithets in the United States. The Chinese regard Tibetans as unwashed and perpetually stinking of yak butter, while Jewish children in Israel are brought up to regard Arabs as dirty. In the Rwandan radio broadcasts inciting the Hutus to massacre the Tutsis, the latter were consistently called rats and cockroaches, creatures associated with dirt and underground sewers, vermin that needed to be exterminated.

As the psychoanalyst Lawrence Kubie has pointed out in a classic paper, there exists in all of us, as a legacy from our early childhood, an unconscious image 'of the body as a kind of animated, mobile dirt factory exuding filth at every aperture.'[9] The disavowal of this 'dirt fantasy' can take many forms, and it is interesting to see how it operates in different cultures. There is relative unconcern in India with public hawking, belching and farting, or bringing one's hand in direct contact with faecal matter when washing one's anus (with the left

hand) after defecation. In contrast, in the West there are strong taboos around bodily apertures, around noises or smells that emanate from an aperture and may draw attention to the opening and thus to the dirt factory humming behind it. The idea of spitting publicly or going to the lavatory without the protection of toilet paper will fill a Westerner with visceral disgust. Indians, on the other hand, find Western cleanliness regimens equally disgusting. There is an amusing anecdote about the well-known classical singer Siddheswari Devi of Benares who, accompanied by her daughter Pappo, went to England on a month-long concert tour. Her student and biographer, Sheila Dhar, was surprised to see her back in Benares within a week of her departure. On being asked the reason for her precipitate return, Siddheswari Devi exploded, 'Such dirty people! I will never go to Vilayat [specifically England, but a generic term for Europe] again.'

She then proceeded to elaborate:

> We were given a room upstairs in the house of a mean-faced English witch. After my journey, I naturally wanted a bath. We hardly recognized the bathroom because it had carpets on the floor! I suspected right away that these people cannot be very serious about washing themselves if they could have carpets in their bathroom. There was no brass *lota* (mug) no wooden *patta* (low seat) to sit on and scrape one's heels clean. Nothing. Just flowered carpets. Along one wall there was a long white coffin-like tub which Pappo said one could fill with water and treat like a bucket. She said she would pour the water over me with a plastic mug she found in the room. But where was I to sit? What on earth do these people do themselves, I wondered. Pappo informed me that they simply sat in the tub and splashed their own dirt on themselves and called that a bath!

Siddheswari Devi tells her daughter to roll up the carpet so that she can use the wooden boards underneath as a seat and

asks her daughter to pour water over her. There are loud screams from below as the water from the singer's bath drips into their English host's fish stew.

The next morning when Siddeshwari Devi wants to use the lavatory and doesn't find a water mug, she is shocked. 'Don't they need water to clean themselves afterwards?' she asks her daughter. No, replies the daughter and shows her a roll of paper. 'This is what they use to clean themselves with.'

> I could not believe it. I asked her to swear that that was all they used, and she did. Something happened to me from that moment onwards. I felt so faint and couldn't even breathe properly...I ordered Pappo to go down and brave the witch's wrath and boldly ask for a second mug because I insist on it...the witch came bounding up the stairs to see for herself what was required...What did we want a second one for? Pappo explained as best as she could. We clean ourselves with water and our hands and the mug has to be different from the one we use for the body bath afterwards. The witch was trying to take in what Pappo was telling her but just could not believe that anyone could use their hands to clean themselves even with the aid of water. When light dawned at last, it was the witch's turn to feel faint and sick. She collapsed on a chair in shock. All I wanted was to go home as fast I could.[10]

In India, this 'dirty fantasy' is generally dealt with by projecting the unconscious image of the mobile dirt factory, of the wild animal rutting in the squalor of its own excrement, onto a group of 'outsiders': the untouchables. The brahmin can only be pure because the dalit is polluted.[11] A pure body must not come in contact with impure substances; the pure avoid impure foods such as (in large parts of the country) meat, impure professions and activities such as those of the cobbler and sweeper, and even contact with people who are looked down upon as impure.

Whereas in the West there is much effort expended in masking the dirty *inside*, in India it is directed towards shifting the dirt *outside*. We see the reflection of this psychological predilection in the immaculate cleanliness inside Indian homes and the garbage dumped outside into public spaces. As has been perceptively remarked by many before us, Indians are a very clean people who live in a filthy country.

The animated family discussions around bowel movements (pushing the faeces outside) before the start of the day have struck many Western observers of the Indian scene as obsessive. The Indian preoccupation, though, is not with faeces alone but a whole chain of substances in which faeces is only the last link. In Freudian terms (and in the words of the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott), what is operating here, in the Indian mind, is a basic 'oral fantasy' that goes something like this: 'When hungry I think of food, when I eat I think of taking food in. I think of what I like to keep inside and I think of what I want to be rid of and I think of getting rid of it.'[12] The primary elements contributing to a dirty inside are the consumption of 'dirty' food and the retention of the 'dirty' part—'what I want to be rid of'—in the transformations of food, that is, faeces. (We will come back to the traditional ideology of food and what constitutes bad or 'dirty' food—food that lowers human consciousness—in the chapter on health.) It is no wonder that the largest set of prohibitions in interactions between castes have to do with food, and the first thing any caste attempting to raise its status does is to publicly announce a change in its food habits.

In large part, then, the equation of untouchables with dirt has to do with their consumption of 'dirty' foods, including the leftovers of higher castes that have been polluted by spittle, another product of the dirt factory that is the body. Accepting food or water from an untouchable was—and among many Indians, still remains—the surest way of losing one's caste status. For centuries, the preferred story used by Hindu

reformers fighting the evil of untouchability is of the god-king Rama accepting berries from the hands of an untouchable tribal woman, Shabari.

Since the presence of faeces in the body is the second major definer of a dirty inside, there is a powerful psychological association between untouchability and faeces even when the taboo around body openings does not exist in India as in the West. The link is corroborated in the outer world by the fact that some untouchable castes have been traditional sweepers of latrines, carrying buckets of night soil on their heads.

A relatively neglected aspect of the psychological sources of untouchability is the visual aspect of dirt, its darkness as compared to the light hue of cleanliness. In the universal 'dirt fantasy', dark is dirtier (and more sinister) than fair. Generally speaking, a brahmin will be fairer than the untouchable who will tend to have the darkest complexion among all the castes. The equation of dirt with dark colour is well known to any upper-caste Indian child, especially a girl, who has been told by her mother to rub her skin every day with a mixture of dough and cream and who is convinced that the thin dark slivers sloughing off her face or arms are concrete proof of her skin becoming lighter.

Evidence of the pan-Indian preference for fair skin and a denigration bordering on scorn for the dark-skinned is all around us. Whereas in the West anti-wrinkle creams and other products against ageing are a gold mine for pharmaceutical companies, in India, especially among the middle class, products that promise a whitening of the skin chalk up record profits. Television commercials for 'Fair and Lovely' cream for women and, more recently, 'Fair and Handsome' for men; the natural equation of light skin with nobility, beauty and high birth in proverbs, tales and legends; matrimonials in newspapers and on Internet websites specifying 'fair' brides—all these are accepted as being in the natural order of things. 'Black is

beautiful!' is not a slogan that will catch on in India anytime in the near future. Fair skin, then, is eminently touchable, desirable, whereas dark skin is an outer manifestation of inner dirtiness and remains 'untouchable'.

This brings us to the case of the fair-skinned foreigner and the ambivalence with which he is often regarded. On the one hand, he is a consumer of dirty, forbidden foods, especially beef, which pushes him towards the untouchable spectrum in the caste hierarchy. And, indeed, as we shall see in the chapter on health, very traditional brahmin households will still not let a foreigner enter or even come anywhere near their kitchen. On the other hand, the fair skin of the foreigner negates the presumption of dirt and untouchability. The psychological association of fair skin with everything 'clean', 'regal' and 'desirable', together with memories of being ruled by fair-skinned invaders and the presumption of wealth associated with fair-skinned visitors, makes most Indians fawn over the *goras* ('whites'). A dark-skinned African, on the other hand, will often be an object of condescension, even ridicule. Little wonder that many a gora leading an anonymous, run-of-the-mill life in his own country feels like a special 'somebody' in India, the admiring gazes and flattering tones of voice constantly feeding his self-esteem, his narcissism.

Coming back to the connection between the 'dirty' (and necessarily 'dark') and discrimination, we will end this section with a story. Tales and legends play a crucial role in introducing a child to his society, and the tale of the crow and the sparrow, told in many regions of India with but slight variations, conveys the culture's view of untouchability to the growing child in a narrative rather than a discursive form. In his book *Two Tales of Crow and Sparrow*, Alan Dundes relates a version of the tale from the state of Maharashtra.[13]

> There was a crow who wanted to eat a sparrow's nestlings.
> He once went to her house and asked for the desired feast.

The sparrow was shrewd and knew that she was unable to give an open fight to her stronger opponent. She thought for a while and said meekly to the crow, 'Oh crow! You can surely eat my babies if you want. But there is one condition. You know that you are a mahar, an untouchable, and I am a brahmin, so please do not touch my babies as you are. You must wash yourself, beak and all, and then eat them up.'

'So be it,' said the crow and went to the river. As he was about to take a dip in the water, the river said, 'Oh crow, you are a mahar, so do not enter my water.'

'Oh river, I have to bathe in the river and then go and eat the sparrow's nestlings.'

'In that case, bring a pot and take water in it.'

The crow then went to a potter and said, 'Oh potter, give me a pot. With the pot I bring water. With the water I bathe. After bathing I eat the sparrow's nestlings.'

'In that case,' said the potter, 'you have to get me earth; because all the pots that are here are broken.'

The crow then went to the earth and started digging the earth with his beak and he was not able to do much digging. So he went to the deer and begged for its horn. The deer said that if the crow could arrange a fight with a dog, then only would its horn be broken. The crow went to a dog and begged him to fight with the deer and thus help him get the horn, so that he could dig the earth and thus get a pot made by the potter and then having washed himself, he could feast on the sparrow's nestlings. The dog consented to fight but said, 'Oh crow! I need an iron ball to throw at the deer. So get it for me.' The crow then went to the ironsmith and begged for the ball. The smith made a ball in the fire and gave it to the crow. The crow held the hot burning ball in his beak and was burnt to death. The sparrow was thus spared her young ones.

To a child listening to the tale, the message on the nature of the untouchable is clear. The (untouchable) crow is black, and has a beak that forages in symbolic equivalents of faeces,

refuse and garbage. (A crow is also inauspicious in the sense that in the popular mind it is a bird associated with death[14]—to dream of a crow is a sign of approaching death—and this may well be included in some versions of the story.) Naturally, then, for its presumption of going to dine on the upper-caste sparrow, the crow is fittingly punished.

These are some of the essentials of untouchability that enter into the cultural part of the growing child's mind as an underlying 'truth' of the social world in which he will live and die.

Caste, or rather what has been called 'the evil of the caste system', has been under persistent attack by Hindu reformers—chief among them, Mahatma Gandhi—for more than a century. In fact, what is now considered news is not that someone attacks the institution of caste but that someone dares to publicly defend it. The reformist attack on the religious and moral foundations of caste and the onslaught of the state on its legal pretensions has certainly weakened the hold of certain aspects of caste on the mind at least of middle-class urban Indians. The well-known sociologist André Béteille attests to this change when he writes: 'The doctor in his office, the lawyer in his chambers, the civil servant or even the clerk in his office is no longer bound by the moral authority of his caste or sub-caste in the way in which the brahmin, the rajput, the *nai* (barber) or the *dhobi* (washerman) was in the traditional village. The emancipation of the individual from the demands of the caste and sub-caste has been a complex and long-drawn process that is by no means complete yet...What is clear, however, is that increasing numbers of professionals, civil servants, managers and others feel free to repudiate such moral claims as may be made on them in the name of the caste to which they happen to belong...it is in this sense that the middle-class Indian's orientations to caste and to his family are

quite different. He cannot repudiate his obligations to his family even when he finds them irksome; nothing is easier for him than to repudiate the demands of his caste if he finds them inconvenient.'[15]

Yet, even for the urban middle-class Indian there are some demands of his caste identity that lie under the surface of consciousness and thus are less susceptible to conscious examination and eventual repudiation. The occupation prescribed for his caste is the most easily rejected; what middle-class parents are most passionate about is their children's admission to those schools, colleges and professional institutions that are perceived as gateways to successful careers in the modern economy. Caste also now plays a decreasing role in middle-class friendships, and inter-caste marriages, though still rare, have begun to register on the Indian mental screen. But the hierarchical thinking associated with caste continues to remain influential in the middle-class psyche. As does the specific fantasy that associates the untouchable with the dark consumer of dirty foods.

INDIAN WOMEN: TRADITIONAL AND MODERN

India was and continues to be a patriarchal society, with the general subordination of women and their disempowerment that patriarchy normally entails. To view Indian women solely through the lens of patriarchy, therefore, is to see the resemblance—in fact only superficial—to women in other patriarchal societies. But the image in such a case is always fuzzy and indistinct. Once we use the zoom lens of Indic culture (and its contemporary ferment), however, the picture becomes more focussed and nuanced as unexpected details emerge. The similarities to women in other patriarchal societies do not disappear but become balanced, and, in parts of the picture, overwhelmed by the differences. Thus, for example, in India, caste almost always trumps gender in the sense that a brahmin woman will have higher status than a low-caste man.[1] Or, to take another example, the powerful role played by mother-goddesses in the Indian cultural imagination—and by mothers in the inner worlds of their sons—imbues male dominance with the emotional colours of fear, awe, longing, surrender, and so on.

The interplay of universal patriarchal values, Indic culture and historical change in the wake of India's encounter with the

West is most clearly seen in the case of the modern, urban Indian woman. The emergence of a sizeable middle class in the last few decades, pan-Indian in character, though overwhelmingly urban, is widely regarded—with optimism by the 'modernizers' and disdain by the 'traditionalists'—as the most important development in the ongoing transformation of Indian society. Not that this middle class is exactly the same all over the country, especially in the context of women. In the South, for instance, wives participate more in their husband's lives than in the North. But overall, the similarities between middle-class men and women across the country are greater than the differences based on caste, language or region. And within this expanding middle class, it is the woman who is at the centre of changes taking place in contemporary Indian society.

Caught in the cross-fire of ideologies that seek to defend the traditional vision of Indian womanhood and those that seek to free her from the inequities of religiously sanctioned patriarchies, the modern Indian woman is engaged in a struggle between two opposing forces in her psyche as she seeks to reconcile traditional ideals with modern aspirations. To her strident critics from either the far left or right of the political spectrum she may well answer with these lines by the German poet Goethe:

> Your spirit only seeks a single quest
> So never learns to know its brother
> Two souls, alas, dwell in my breast
> And one would gladly sunder from the other.

A DAUGHTER IS BORN

To appreciate the magnitude of change that has taken place in the psyche of the educated, middle-class Indian woman, let us consider the culture's marked preference for a son, a preference which has scarred the psyche of generations of women.

The inner experience of being a girl, to sense that perhaps with your birth you have brought less joy to those you love, to feel that sinking of the heart when adult eyes glow at the sight of your baby brother while they dim as they regard you, can easily become a fundamental crisis at the beginning of a little girl's identity development. The crisis, generally silent, is given rare eloquent voice in the fictionalized reminiscences of the Hindi writer Mrinal Pande who describes the reactions of her fictional counterpart, the seven-year-old Tinu, at the birth of a brother after three daughters have been born to the parents.

> An aunt comes in with a gleaming bowl of special broth for Mother that smells of fennel and coriander and ghee. Little slivers of chopped almonds and pistachios swim on the surface like tiny sail-boats. Mother smiles and says she doesn't feel like drinking the heavy stuff. 'Drink it up, drink it all up,' says Grandmother coming into the room and bending to pick up my younger sister. 'You will be breast-feeding a son this time.' Mother elevates herself on one elbow. I nudge against her so some of the vile liquid spills. I expect to be yelled at, to have my shoulder firmly grabbed and be propelled out of the room for bad behaviour. But nothing of that sort happens. People can't stop smiling with pleasure today.
>
> 'This is my Laxmi [goddess of good luck] daughter,' says Grandmother, squeezing my baby sister against her ample breasts. 'She has brought a brother on her back.' Everyone smiles some more...
>
> 'You too have a brother now,' everyone tells us happily. 'He'll protect you and carry on your father's name.'
>
> Dinu [her sister] and I giggle at the thought of the little bundle protecting us. The elders' joy is infectious...
>
> 'I'm glad it's all over now,' mother tells her mother. 'No more ordeals like this for me,' she says, and lies down, content as a cat.

'Shoo now,' Grandmother says to us, not unkindly, 'let your mother rest.'

We are almost at the door when mother asks us anxiously if we have eaten. Her eyes are brown and deep and they are saying, Never mind. I'll love you all the same. Dinu and I smile and speak together: 'Yes we have.'

Though the truth is, we have not.[2]

The preference for sons is as old as Indian society itself. Vedic verses pray that sons will be followed by still more male offspring, never by females. A prayer in the Atharva Veda even adds a touch of malice: 'The birth of a girl, grant it elsewhere, here grant a son.' As the Indologist A.A. MacDonnel observes, 'Indeed daughters are conspicuous in the Rig Veda by their absence. We meet in hymns with prayers for sons and grandsons, male offspring, male descendants and male issue and occasionally for wives but never daughters. Even forgiveness is asked for ourselves and grandsons, but no blessing is ever prayed for a daughter.'[3]

At the birth of a son drums are beaten in some parts of the country, conch-shells blown in others and the midwife paid lavishly, while no such spontaneous rejoicing accompanies the birth of a daughter. Women's folk songs reveal the painful awareness of this discrepancy, at birth, between the celebration of sons and the mere tolerance of daughters. Thus, in a North Indian song the women complain:

Listen O Sukhma, what a tradition has started!
Drums are played upon the birth of a boy,
But at my birth only a brass plate was beaten.

And in Maharashtra, the girl, comparing herself to a white sweet-scented jasmine (*jai*) and the boy to a big, strong-smelling thorny leaf (*kevada*) plaintively asks: 'Did anyone notice the sweet fragrance of a jai? The hefty kevada however has filled the whole street with its strong scent.' A contemporary

proverb from Bengal at the opposite end of the country expresses the culturally sanctioned preference more bluntly: 'Even the piss of a son brings money; let the daughter go to hell.'

Of course, the preference for the birth of a son although widespread is not uniform. But the exceptions generally only prove the rule: in some families, the first-born girl, though not as welcome as a son, may still be regarded by parents as a harbinger of good luck, or the birth of a girl after a succession of sons in a daughterless family will almost certainly be celebrated (the birth of a second or third daughter, however, tends to be an unhappy event for the family). Only in parts of the country—the North East and the south-western states—which have a history of matrilineal systems of female inheritance and post-marriage residence in the woman's house is the birth of a girl a consistently welcome event. But even these patterns are rapidly changing in the direction of the ones prevailing in the rest of the country.

Besides the universal patriarchal preoccupation with the family name being carried forward through the male line, there are ritual and economic reasons for the strong preference for male offspring. The presence of a son is necessary for the proper performance of many sacraments among the Hindus, especially those carried out following the death of parents for the well-being of their souls. Economically, a daughter is looked upon as an unmitigated expense, someone who will never contribute to the family income and who, upon marriage, will take away a considerable part of her family's fortune as her dowry. In case of a poor family, the parents may be pushed deep into debt in order to provide for a daughter's marriage. The *Aitareya Brahmana* (like other ancient texts) probably refers as much as anything else to the economic facts of life when it states flatly that a daughter is a source of misery while a son is the saviour of the family.

As the wildly skewed sex-ratios in Punjab, Haryana and Delhi, hinting at widespread female foeticide, show, economic prosperity and the rise of a sizeable middle class in these North Indian states have failed to dent the traditional preference for a son. What is encouraging, though, are signs that whatever their initial disappointment after the birth of a daughter, parents in middle-class families may have begun to take equal pleasure in their male and female offspring, at least as long as they are infants.[4] In their interactions with the baby, they do not show a preference for boys over girls, irrespective of whether they are engaging with the baby through caregiving activities or through play. The discrimination, when it takes place, begins later.

DISCRIMINATION AND THE MAIDEN

As she grows up, the girl child sees the preference for a son translated into a differential treatment received by girls in the family. In Mrinal Pande's fictionalized reminiscences, on a visit to her maternal grandmother who lives with her son's family, the four-year-old Tinu is immediately aware of the difference between her and her male cousin Anu who is of the same age. Whether it is in the making of coloured paper buntings for a wedding where Anu takes the best twigs, leaving rotten, damp ones for Tinu and her sister, or the small peacock made of gold thread which the sisters discover but are forced to cede to their cousin under intense pressure from the adults, including their own mother, it is evident to little Tinu that as the son's son Anu cannot imagine anyone refusing him anything for long.

On a visit to the parental home of her *mami* (mother's brother's wife), Tinu listens to her mami's father muttering, 'Too many girls! Too many girls in all the nice houses!' as he feeds a slice of mango or a toffee to one of his grandsons. Back in Tinu's own family, if there are any complaints from the

tutor about the girls' lack of concentration, the older women smile and say something about girls eventually needing skills only to roll chapattis and boil dal and rice. The grandmother's old female servant, while locking up the family's pet bitch for the night, says this is how she wants all girls to be: behind closed gates and asleep after dark. Even Tinu's mother is not completely immune from the traditional ideology in relation to the girl child: 'When Dinu and I laugh too much, Mother gets angry and says we will now weep. Girls should not laugh too much, she says grumpily. Dinu and I giggle inside our quilts, and then we put pretend-tears on our cheeks with our spit to ward off bad luck.'[5]

The traditional discrimination against the girl child is reflected in various statistics of which the worst is her *absence*, by the millions, in the latest census figures. Together with untouchability, the selective abortion of the female foetus and female infanticide, often by the midwife, who is paid by the family to snuff out the life of a baby girl at birth, are perhaps the greatest blots of shame on Indian society. Statistics tell us that there is a higher rate of female infant mortality; girl infants are breast-fed less frequently, for shorter durations and over shorter periods than boys; they are given lower quality food, made to work longer hours than boys and have lesser access to schooling and health care.[6]

These, then, are the objective facts of discrimination against daughters in traditional India. But what is the subjective reality? How is a factual discrimination viewed by the girls themselves? We know that what is psychologically significant is not what has happened to us but what we *believe* occurred. The fictions we tell ourselves about our past and our lives are indispensable to keep at bay the truth that may shock us out of our ever-precarious sense of well-being and self-worth. A comprehensive study of the girl child, resulting from a survey conducted among girls between the ages of seven and eighteen

in six hundred rural and urban households in eight Indian states, reminds us of the gulf that often exists between objective facts and their subjective perception.[7] If the question is raised whether an Indian girl *feels* discriminated against and treated unfairly in relation to her brother, then the answer is not as clear-cut as in little Tinu's account, or as the statistics would have us believe. In the *conscious* perception of Indian girls, cutting across income, educational and regional divides, the answer to the question of gender-based discrimination is in fact more no than yes. In the study, the girls do not report differences between girls and boys with respect to health care or food (even if girls often eat last, with their mothers). Girls do not discern differences in rewards and punishments meted out to boys and girls. And as far as education is concerned, over seventy per cent of the girls—with the percentage becoming much higher in the states of Kerala and Maharashtra—believe the acquisition of literacy equally important for both boys and girls.

The main reason for the subjective perception of girls diverging from objective realities is that the cultural preference for sons and the discrimination against daughters captured in statistics (or in a creative writer's easier access to buried childhood memories) does not directly impinge upon the psyche of an Indian girl. The patriarchal stance towards the girl child is mediated and strained through the filter of the family. In other words, for the wider culture's devaluation of women to be translated into a pervasive sense of worthlessness or bitterness in individual women, the behaviour and attitudes of parents and close older relatives towards the infant girls in their midst—the actualities of family life, that is—must be fully consistent with this female depreciation. In the childhood memoirs of many women there is often one or more caretaker—an older relative—whose attitude towards and interactions with the little girl run contrary to the dictates of patriarchy.

Also, the internalization of low self-esteem presupposes that girls and women in Indian households have no sphere of their own. That they have no independent livelihood and activity, no area of family and community responsibility and control. That they have no living space, apart from that of men, within which to manifest those aspects of feminine identity that derive from intimacy and collaboration with other women. The fact, however, is that all these circumstances do exist in traditional India, mitigating the discriminations and inequities of patriarchal attitudes and institutions.

From anthropological accounts and other sources, we know of the affection and often compassionate attention bestowed by mothers on their daughters throughout their lives.[8] 'I turn the stone flour mill with the swiftness of a running deer; that is because my arms are strong with the mother's milk I drank.' This and other similar couplets sung by women all over India bear witness to the daughter's memory of her mother's affection for her and to the self-esteem and strength of will this has generated in turn.

In addition to her mother's empathic connection with her, as an Indian girl grows up, her relationships with others within the extended family contain the possibility of diluting the resentment she may harbour against her brothers. Among the many adults who comprise the joint family there is usually one adult who gives a little girl the kind of admiration and the sense of being singled out as special that a male child more often receives. And of course when a girl is the *only* daughter, such chances are increased immeasurably. Thus in folk tales, however many sons a couple may have, there is often one daughter in their midst who is the parents' favourite.

In Tinu's case, besides the gift of a rich inner life and the resources of a poetic imagination, it is her emotional access to her father that enables her to deal with the discrimination in a creative way without becoming embittered.

> If no one is going to pay attention to me, then I want to be able to float free, grubby and uncombed in the large, lonely and bare rooms where I can dance with shadows after Dinu and Mother have taken off for Grandmother's crowded and noisy house...
>
> I love being left behind.
>
> Once they have turned the corner, I rush in, knowing that now the house will be all mine. Now I can sing, I can laugh, I can pull faces in the mirror, and dig for worms in the garden. I can also have Father all to myself when he comes home for lunch. I can spin tales to entertain him while he is eating, and he will nod good-naturedly, overlooking the spills I cause in my excitement.
>
> But it is not easy to be left behind...[9]

In traditional India, every female is born into a well-defined community of women within her particular family. Although by no means does it resound with solidarity and goodwill, the existence of this exclusive sphere of femininity and domesticity gives a woman a tangible opportunity to be productive and lively. Getting along with other women in this sphere, learning the mandatory skills of householding, cooking and childcare, establishing her place in this primary world—these relationships and tasks constitute the dailiness of traditional girlhood in India. Moreover, when necessary, other women in the family—her mother, aunts, sisters, sisters-in-law—are not only an Indian girl's teachers and models but her allies against the discriminations and inequities of the patriarchal values of the outside world. Often enough, in the 'underground' of female culture, as reflected in ballads, wedding songs and jokes, women do indeed react against the discrimination of their wider culture by portraying men as vain, faithless and infantile.[10] 'Do not call a snake "helpless", or a husband "mine",' lament the women in Maharashtra; 'A husband so long as he is in bed, Yama [god of death] when he gets up,' say Telugu wives; and women in Karnataka mock, 'Peacock before marriage, a lion at the time of engagement and a sheep after marriage.'

And finally, the young girl has before her the examples of older women, mothers all, who are respected and powerful in family affairs. The much-maligned Hindu law giver Manu is only a qualified misogynist. His infamous pronouncements against women are limited to *younger* women: 'The teacher is ten times more venerable than the sub-teacher, the father a hundred times more than the teacher, but the mother is a thousand times more than the father.'[11]

All these factors help to mitigate the damage done to a girl's self-esteem when she discovers that in the eyes of her culture and society she is considered inferior to a boy.

Leaving aside the objective facts of discrimination against daughters in middle-class families, which are almost certainly less than in traditional India, subjectively many of these girls are convinced that their parents consider them as equal to their brothers. In fact, standing the gender discrimination paradigm on its head is a study of one hundred and thirty school boys and ninety school girls from the city of Pune which reports that girls perceive themselves to be *more* accepted by both parents than do boys.[12] And what does one make of another study that tells us that educated middle-class Indian women report both parents as more 'caring', that is, affectionate, empathic and close, than do comparable women in the United States?[13] In short, as a middle-class girl grows up, her experience of gender-based discrimination in her family is substantially less than the developmental fate of her traditional counterpart.

The difference between the urban middle-class girl and the traditional rural girl is most pronounced in the area of education. For although the idea of some school education for girls has gained wide acceptance all over the country, middle-class parents even welcome *higher* education for their daughters which, they believe, is necessary for the girl so that she can achieve a measure of autonomy. University education will enable the daughter to contribute to the family income after

marriage and also make her capable of standing on her own feet if, unfortunately, the marriage breaks up, a possibility that has recently dawned on the middle-class horizon.[14] The daughter is thus encouraged to work hard at her studies, her academic achievements greeted with parental pride and pleasure, while her involvement in domestic chores, although still more than that of her brother, is often minor as compared to the lot of her rural sister.

ENTERING PUBERTY

Late childhood marks the beginning of an Indian girl's deliberate training in how to be a good woman, and hence the conscious inculcation of culturally designated feminine roles. This is true of all girls, although in the new middle class the break between early and late childhood is not so sharp and traditional feminine values are leavened with modern imports.

Like her traditional counterpart, the middle-class Indian girl entering puberty learns that the 'virtues' of womanhood which will take her through life are submission and docility in the home of her husband, and that the primary goal of her life is to please her future husband and parents-in-law. This learning, however, is now being subverted by a middle-class modernity that is pushing the girl toward educational achievement, equality and relative independence. The message from her parents is mixed. Obedience and conformity, selflessness and self-denial are still the ideals of womanhood and a good woman does not 'create waves' or 'rock the boat'. Middle-class parents, however, also encourage and take pride in the academic success of their daughter. Their aspirations for an occupational career for her, though more ambiguous than for a son, are not completely absent. The parents' cherished goal for the daughter, however, remains a 'good' marriage; her education should help the girl to find a well-educated,

economically well-off man from a respectable family. Which is not to say that this is always the case. But if a girl pursues education solely and determinedly for a career, it is usually when a strong and self-reliant adult member of her immediate family has empowered her through approval or encouragement. Clinical experience and group discussions with middle-class women suggest that in families where mothers are not career women, a daughter looks up to and identifies with the father as the representative of the modern, external world. *His* is the decisive voice in influencing her career choice and legitimizing her intellectual aspirations.

The faltering in self-esteem of Indian girls during the years of early puberty is intimately related to the fact that at precisely this developmental moment, a time of hormonal changes and emotional volatility, her training in service and self-denial in preparation for her imminent roles of daughter-in-law and wife is stepped up. In order to maintain her family's love and approval—the narcissistic supplies necessary for firm self-esteem—the girl tends to conform, and even over-conform, to the prescriptions and expectations of those around her.

Puberty is also the period when the differential treatment of girls cannot be masked. Besides the training to be a good wife and daughter-in-law, a major difference in the bringing up of sons and daughters is in the restrictions placed on the girl's freedom of movement. Whether strictly enforced or relatively lenient, the restrictions transcend rural–urban, traditional–modern and other demographic differences. In traditional India, girls are not allowed to play with boys and are confined to the company of their own sex. There are many prohibitions with regard to the kind of clothes they may wear. A girl is permitted fewer recreational activities which involve going out of the house such as visiting friends, going to the market or to the cinema, and which may bring her in contact with a member of the opposite sex.

Puberty rites in many parts of the country emphasize the fact of the girl's body 'flowering' or 'ripening' into womanhood and thus being ready to fulfil what the culture regards as the chief tasks of a woman's life cycle—procreation and motherhood. The girl's sexual maturity is welcomed as a vital step on the road to becoming a woman whose fertility would be a credit to the family. Yet, the same puberty is also feared because of the inherent danger of wantonness and sexual abandon which can deeply dishonour and shame her family and the community. The girl has to be protected—from herself as much from men—in the highly vulnerable period between puberty and marriage, a period to be kept as short as possible. This protection mainly translates itself into the culture's efforts at moulding the ways the girl carries herself and in placing restrictions on her encounters with men. For instance, it is expected from the girl that she never take long 'masculine' strides but short, soft, barely audible steps, which are also forced upon her by the sari or the half sari she now has to wear. Traditionally, all actions that could even hint at sexual abandon—personified by the prostitute, the dancing-girl or the courtesan—such as the bold gaze or the loud laugh, the chewing of betel leaf (*paan*) which tints the mouth red, leaning against a pillar or wall or standing in the doorway meet with undisguised family disapproval.[15]

This applies more now to rural and small-town communities in India. The restrictions placed on the way an urban middle-class girl comports herself are more relaxed. But they are by no means absent. The average college girl in Delhi, for instance, dressed in jeans or even short skirts, will perhaps smile at the antics of a boy playing the clown to attract her attention but will hesitate to break into loud laughter. At some level, she is still aware of traditional folk 'wisdom' pertaining to male–female interactions in this period of her life which she has absorbed from the family and community in the process of

growing up and which, for instance, holds that boys believe '*Jo hansi, woh phansi*' ('If a girl laughs, she is already in the net').

The restrictions, enforced by the women of the family, by mothers and grandmothers, are not presented to the girl as punitive measures but as the reality of the world in which she will live. The curbs on her freedom are the way things 'naturally' are, and to which the girl, any 'good girl', must comply for her own protection and the good name of the family. The message transmitted to the girl is that it is *she* who is responsible for maintaining a distance from boys and men, thereby protecting her 'purity' which is also the honour (*izzat*) of the whole family. She is made to understand, undermining a sense of female agency, that young women are weak and vulnerable, unable to resist determined male advances or the promptings of their own sexual nature.

Even middle-class girls are not overly rebellious or critical of the restrictions on their free association with boys. Although overwhelmingly in favour of co-education, the majority of college girls, at least in small towns and cities, would like their interaction with boys to be limited to educational activities and not extend to a more personal association, and certainly not to 'dating' in the Western sense.

Within this atmosphere of general avoidance of close contact with men, there is one poignant fact: the little time a daughter spends with her father. In traditional India, less than half the families (almost two-thirds in Bihar, Orissa and Uttar Pradesh) eat together at meal time, almost the only time a girl may have with her father. Although the contact between father and daughter is greater in urban, middle-class families, it is still generally limited. The absent father, without a share in the activities of his daughter, indeed 'reflects one of the great tragedies of Indian family life.'[16]

We do not mean to over-emphasize the bleakness of puberty in the life cycle of a traditional Indian girl. One

compensation of this period is an increase in culturally sanctioned maternal indulgence, paradoxically at the same time when the mother is also the chief agent in the family's efforts in moulding the girl according to the dictates of tradition. Considered as a guest in her 'natal' family, the girl is often treated with the solicitous concern accorded to a welcome outsider who, all too soon, will marry and leave her mother for good. Mindful of her daughter's fate, the mother re-experiences the emotional conflicts her own separation once aroused, and this in turn tends to increase her indulgence and solicitude toward her daughter. As we have noted above, daughterhood in India is not without its rewards precisely because the conditions of young womanhood are normally so forbidding. Little wonder that for an Indian girl rebellion against the constraints of impinging womanhood, with all its circumscription of identity, becomes near impossible. She internalizes the specific ideals of womanhood and monitors her behaviour carefully in order to guarantee her mother's love and approval, upon which she is more than ever dependent as she makes ready to leave home. The irony of an Indian girl's coming of age is that to be a good woman and a felicitous bride she must be more than ever the perfect daughter.

MARRIAGE: IS LOVE NECESSARY?

In traditional India, the marriage of a daughter is a trying time for the whole family and often overwhelming for the young girl. Consider this: in northern India, given the rules that a marriage should be within the same caste or a group of sub-castes but exclude partners from the extended kinship group (which practically eliminates all eligible males of the village), it is likely that a girl will marry a stranger from a place far away from the one in which she has spent her childhood. More important, she may have little say in the choice of her partner, and this is a pan-Indian phenomenon.

As we shall see later, modern Indian girls also prefer arranged marriages, though their sense of their own agency in the arranging of the marriage is greater. Whereas considerations of caste and family status, followed by the earning power of the boy are dominant in the arrangement of traditional marriages, education and the 'personality' of the groom—apart, of course, from the social and monetary status of the groom's family—are now the more important considerations for the new middle class. And it is in this class that the girl's opinion is not only sought but actively solicited. Often enough, she has a de facto power of veto on any marriage alliance proposed on her behalf. Paradoxically, because of the spread of the global consumer culture in which the Indian middle class is an enthusiastic participant, the amount of cash and material goods expected as dowry by the groom are today far greater than the more modest expectation of giving and taking in traditional Hindu marriages.

In spite of her inner ideals and conscious resolutions to be a good wife and an exemplary daughter-in-law, a bride comes into her husband's family with heightened anxiety and feelings of loss. There is a wariness bordering on antagonism toward her mother-in-law who has usurped the place of her own sorely missed and needed mother. There is a mixture of shy anticipation and resentment towards her husband's sisters and young female relatives who are presuming to replace the sisters and cousins and friends at home. And then there are the ambivalent feelings of hope and fear towards the usually unknown man who is now her husband and claims her intimacy.

Further, in the social hierarchy of her new family, the bride normally occupies a low rank. Obedience and compliance with the wishes of the mother-in-law are expected as a matter of course. Any mistakes or omissions on her part are liable to incur sarcastic references to her abilities, her looks or her

upbringing in her mother's home. The bride's situation is not quite so bad in middle-class marriages. Marrying late, typically in her early twenties, the middle-class woman no longer enters her husband's family as a submissive daughter-in-law. Because of her education and maturity, she begins to play a significant role in her husband's family affairs from the very outset. The middle-class woman's potential for individual self-assertion in her marriage and the new family has, however, clearly defined limits which come from her traditional 'markings', etched deep into her mind during the process of growing up. She, too, believes that getting along in her husband's family and earning the good opinion of his family members, including the traditionally reviled and feared mother-in-law, are important obligations—even when these entail a measure of self-sacrifice and self-denial.

Here, it helps that an Indian girl is prepared or at least sufficiently warned about what to expect before she actually departs for her husband's home. Guidance by the mother and other female relatives on what awaits her in her new home—stories, proverbs, songs, information gleaned from newly married friends who come back home on visits—have more or less prepared her for the harshness of the transition. If married very young, the bride's initiation into her new life is gradual, interspersed by visits to her parents' home where much of her accumulated loneliness and resentment can be relieved by the indulgent love showered on her. Even in the husband's home, the young wife's isolation is relieved by relationships of informal familiarity that she might form with certain younger members of the new family, and especially with other fellow-sufferers—the daughters-in-law of the house.

We need to add that although the clichéd relationship between an overweening mother-in-law and a silently suffering daughter-in-law is a bitter reality for many young women, the changes that are taking place in the power structure of the

educated middle class have made many a mother-in-law view herself as a loser across the board. She feels bitter and shortchanged that although she suffered under the whims and moods of older family members when she was a young bride, now, when it is her turn to reap the fruits of being the family matriarch, she can neither take the respect of her better educated daughter-in-law or the loyalty of her son for granted.

Although the cruel mother-in-law and the suffering daughter-in-law (including the eventual triumph of the younger woman over her older antagonist) is the staple of many women's songs, folk tales and of widely watched TV soaps, it is rarely recognized that the reviled mother-in-law is but an agent of the Indian family. Given the organizing principle of the traditional Indian family, in which the parent–son and filial bonds are more central than the husband–wife tie (that is considered the fulcrum of the modern Western family), the new bride constitutes a very real threat to the unity of the larger family. Abundantly aware of the power of sex to overthrow religiously sanctioned family values and long established social norms, the family is concerned that the young wife may cause her husband to neglect his duties as a son, as a brother, a nephew, an uncle; that he will transfer his loyalty and affection to her rather than remaining truly a son of the house.

These are not either/or choices; however, custom, tradition and the interests of the family demand that in the realignment of roles and relationships initiated by the son's marriage, the couple not take centre stage, at least not in the early years of marriage. Signs of developing attachment and tenderness between husband and wife are carefully monitored and their development discouraged. Oblique hints about 'youthful infatuation', or outright shaming virtually guarantee that the young husband and wife do not publicly express affection for each other; and they are effectively alone together only for

very brief periods during the night. The much-maligned mother-in-law, besides (or even because of) being animated by her own possessiveness in relation to her son, is no more than the family's designated agent preventing the build-up of a 'foreign' cell in the family body.

One would expect the transition of marriage to be easier for women in South India with its tradition of cross-cousin and uncle–niece marriages which ensure that women are not married to complete strangers and do not have to settle down far from their parental homes. Marriages should be even easier for women in places like Kerala with its history of matrilineal families in sections of its population. The 'higher' status of women, however, does not seem to relieve the stresses and strains of marriage for the young girl to any appreciable degree: Kerala, for instance, reports high levels of dowry-related deaths among women, while Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum), the state's capital, ranks among the highest in the prevalence of domestic violence in Indian cities.[17] High levels of literacy and participation in employed work, greater freedom and decision-making authority, as in the case of women in Tamil Nadu, are not enough to overthrow the weight of cultural norms governing the role and behaviour expected of a newly married woman.[18]

We have said that the commonly shared, pan-Indian notion of marriage is not of a relationship between two individuals but an alliance between two families or, more, between two clans. The choice of the partner, then, is not individual but arranged by the family. Although, as we've seen, in more modern families young people have the right of veto on their parents' choice of the partner, even here there is a subtle gender discrimination; the consultations with the daughter are often more perfunctory than those with the son.

Arranged marriages are not only a pan-Indian norm, cutting across the divides of education, social class, religion

and region, they are also rarely seen as an imposition by the young people concerned, who overwhelmingly prefer them to the kind of love marriages typical of contemporary Western societies. The preference is partly based on the young person's acceptance of the cultural definition of marriage as a family rather than an individual affair, where harmony and shared values that come from a common background are more important than individual fascination.

Love marriages also have a bad press in India in the sense that they are reputed to turn out to be generally unhappy. This reputation is more than just rumour or prejudice, not because of the love between the young people that initiated the marriage but because of the social attitudes that put the marriage under enormous pressure. Thus, for instance, a study of men and women of different castes from fifteen villages in Tamil Nadu reveals that only five out of the seventy women had made marriages that were not arranged. None of the five had parental support for the wedding; they had to elope and get married in a temple. The author writes, 'All but one of the five women now regret their decision. The opposition from the husbands' parents has made their lives miserable. Their husbands have not been able to break away from their parents because of financial constraints, and the woman having come "empty-handed" [with no gold or cash as is usual in a traditional wedding], and not having any support from her natal family, has only exacerbated matters.'[19]

Perhaps the greatest attraction of an arranged marriage is the fact that it takes away the young person's anxiety around finding a mate. Whether you are plain or good-looking, fat or thin, you can be sure that a suitable mate will be found for you. Although physical beauty is important for the Indian girl, it does not command the same premium in the selection of a partner as it does in Western societies. In India, the beauty industry can certainly dip into the woman's latent desire to be

beautiful, a desire which may have been pent up in traditional India for a long time and has now begun to find a voice. It cannot, however, as it does in the West, mobilize the woman's fear of never finding a mate merely because she has not done enough to enhance her looks.

The consensus in favour of arranged marriage through the centuries is truly astonishing; in fact, the only ancient Hindu text that considers the love marriage as the highest form of marriage is the revolutionary *Kamasutra*. What, then, of Bollywood movies where love marriage reigns and is depicted as the only road to happiness?[20]

Now love and the lyrical impulse of its narration are indeed universal, one of the few constants left in a world that makes a fetish of cultural relativism. Erotic passion, with love's tender discoveries, sudden torments and consuming desires, is one of the last bastions of our common humanity. Indians, too, are enamoured of the love story, of (Bollywood) tales about young lovers who are believed to express the purest of romantic sentiments. In India, as in most other cultures through history, the love story has never been a reflection but a subverter of the accepted mores prescribing the relations between the sexes.[21] The pleasure we take in this subversion is one of the many enduring fascinations of the love story which is a vehicle for the vicarious satisfaction of our hidden desires and obscure longings.

The love story, whether in movies or fiction, is the dream of capturing love's freshness and spontaneity free of all social restrictions and internal inhibitions and of becoming one with the beloved while overwhelming the forces that would dampen desire and the urge to merge. In a society that is deeply hierarchical, with caste and class barriers which are not easy to cross even by the god of love Kama, the dream is of love unimpeded by the shackles of family obligations and duties toward the old and all the other keepers of society's traditions.

Bollywood movies are thus not a guide to Indian marriage but a doorway into the universal dream of love; what they offer are not role models for the young but romantic nostalgia for the freshness of love's vision to men and women of all ages.

What happens to love in an arranged marriage? Is it fated to remain a dream, an unslaked thirst? Must it be completely submerged in the arranged marriage's ideal of safety? An arranged marriage does not quite obliterate the allure of the dream of love, although it must be admitted that it mutes the dream's vivid colours. Studies show that in the case of poor women in traditional India, the expectations from a potential husband are pretty basic: 'He should not drink or beat me, and support me and the family'.[22] Women belonging to higher strata may have additional expectations, namely that the husband be educated, have a salaried employment and be 'modern' in the sense of not unduly restricting the freedom of his wife. In the upper classes, where the expectations are even greater, young women still do not enter marriage with as high hopes as in the West. The woman does not expect, as is often the case in Western societies, that the partner will satisfy *all* her emotional needs and longings, that her husband will not only be an adult sexual man but also a father, mother, a little baby boy and a twin brother (and vice versa in the case of a man). Her demands on the husband, mostly unconscious, to fulfil these multiple roles—rather than their being spread over the larger family as in India—can certainly be a source of disquiet in Western marriages.

Yet even in India, in-depth interviews with women from the poorest slums reveal that their dream of love, of integrating tenderness with eroticism, mutual respect with caring, has not disappeared.[23] Its location, though, is not the same as in the West. Love is not looked for *before* marriage but ideally arises in the *jodi* (couple) that comes into existence *after* marriage.

The squalor of slum life does nothing to dim the luminosity

of the women's romantic longing to experience the husband's love. On the contrary, the abysmal material conditions and the struggle against poverty arouses their 'sense of life according to love'—to quote the poet Philip Larkin—to its fullest wakefulness. The dream of the transforming power of love, of what the woman might have been if she were well and truly loved, is tenaciously clung to amidst (and perhaps because of) all the suffering and pathos of her existence.

The central image of this dream is the couple or jodi. The couple, of course, exerts a universally powerful pull on the human imagination, given our deeply buried wish to be seen by the spouse as god might have done—that is, with absolute love and total understanding. It is telling that in spite of the social consensus in favour of the joint family and widespread praise of its virtues, the couple continues to remain a lodestar in the cultural imagination of Indian women. Iconically represented as the *mithuna* (sexual intercourse) couple in medieval temple sculptures, its highest manifestation is *ardhanarishwara*—the Lord who is half woman, a visualization of the jodi as a single two-person entity. This is the cultural ideal which makes a Hindu invoke a deity not on its own but as a couple: Sitarama and not Sita and Rama, Radhakrishna and not Radha and Krishna.

The persistence and importance of the jodi for the woman's sense of identity helps us comprehend better why many women, in spite of their economic independence, choose to suffer humiliation rather than leave an oppressive husband; why some women, in times of extreme marital stress and burning rage towards the spouse, exercise the option of suicide rather than separation. It is the persistence of this ideal which explains why a woman, from any class, is apt to deny the presence of marital problems, such as a husband's alcohol abuse and violence, in order to hold aloft the portrait of a happy couple. To confess to an unhappy marriage is not only

to reconcile one's self to the loss of a cherished personal goal but also betray a powerful cultural ideal.

The profound yearning of a wife, as a woman, for intimacy with the husband—as a man—is an overwhelming issue in fiction and in the lives of middle-class patients seen in psychotherapy. Connecting the various stages of a woman's adulthood, from an expectant bride to a more sober grandmother, the intense wish to create a two-person universe with the husband where each finally 'recognizes' the other, is never far from her consciousness. It is a beacon of hope amidst the toil, drudgery, fights, disappointments and occasional joys of her stormy existence within the extended family. The dream of finding love in marriage is tenaciously clung to through the suffering and pathos of her existence as a young bride. This love is a quieter affair, without the delicious delirium that can mark the periods of courtship and the beginning of a marriage in the West; its feeling-tone is of contented togetherness rather than ecstasy. In other words, the dream of love remains necessary for marriage. The difference is that in Indian marriages this love has a different quality; it is less romantically or erotically imperious and does not have to prefigure marriage but can waft in gently afterwards, sometimes years later, when the couple is well into adulthood.

There are, of course, objective conditions for the likelihood of the couple falling in love after marriage. Arranged marriages work best, and perhaps *can* only work, if the sexes are kept apart in youth and if marriages are early, before young men and women have had an opportunity to compare a range of potential partners. Except for a minuscule upper class, these conditions hold substantially true for the rest of Indian society. The hormonal pressure created by enforced celibacy during youth and a lack of experience with the opposite sex ensure that the young person is biologically and emotionally primed to fall in love if the marriage partner is even reasonably satisfactory.

THE HOME AND THE WORLD

Urban, upper-caste, educated women began working outside the home in any significant number only after the 1940s. Earlier, it would have been unthinkable for a girl from a respectable family to enter the labour market and look for work. This process of middle-class women working for pay has accelerated since the 1970s, chiefly due to two reasons: One, the change in the traditional view about the education of a daughter which now encourages higher education for girls and thus makes their participation in socially respectable work possible; and two, the growing financial needs of middle-class families, partly due to their higher consumption aspirations.

Most educated middle-class women work in lower- or middle-level white-collar jobs as clerks, secretaries, telephone operators or at better paid jobs in the mushrooming call centres. Those who are professionally qualified are found in the fields of school and college teaching, medicine and research. In the last decade, a small but significant number of middle-class women have branched out from what were long considered suitable occupations for women to enter the fields of advertising, computer software, corporate management, or to set up as small-scale entrepreneurs. Most of these women however show a much greater investment in their career than is usually the case with a majority of middle-class working women.

Women who are working or have worked for remuneration in the past, feel that as compared to their mothers, their higher education and professional qualifications have had a definite influence on increasing their social status and self-esteem. For women who continue to work, their contentment with the freedom of movement and a measure of independence provided by the job is palpable. Even the non-working middle-class woman exudes a greater self-confidence than her mother's generation. She believes she has a higher degree of control over her own destiny since her education will enable her to enter the labour market should the need ever arise. Having a job is not as important to her self-esteem as the fact that she is qualified to hold one.

As one would expect, the middle-class woman's interest in wider social, cultural and political concerns—fostered through the watching of TV, reading of magazines and, to a lesser extent, of newspapers—is much more than that of the traditional woman. On the other hand, though, the middle-class woman is lonelier than her traditional counterpart. The latter's immersion in joint family life and in well-marked sectors of domestic, social and ritual activities carried out in communities of women had absorbed her energy and fulfilled most of her needs for friendship and intimacy. The modern middle-class woman's bonds with the family—her own and that of her husband's—are weaker, her friendships intermittent and her social circle narrower. The missing intimacy in her life is increasingly demanded from, and with some luck provided by, her husband.

Tradition continues its hold on the middle-class woman's mind in that she views domestic and maternal obligations as central to her identity. This is true of the housewife as much as of the high-profile career woman. Traditional norms which demand that a woman's first commitment be to her children and the second to her husband, do not seem to be influenced by a woman's educational or occupational status. Working wives who express satisfaction with their career still rank the raising of children as the highest goal of a woman's life. Here a decided lag between the values of middle-class husbands and wives is apparent. In a fifteen-year-old study carried out in Bangalore, most wives ranked the traditional purposes of marriage—children, love and affection, fulfilment of the husband's sexual needs (rather than her own)—very high. The husbands, on the other hand, ranked the goals of a supposedly more modern marriage—comfortable life, companionship and

fulfilment of individual sexual needs—higher than their wives.[24] Perhaps with the exception of upper-middle-class women, our impression is that what Indian women consciously want from marriage—as contrasted to their more subterranean wishes around the jodi—has not changed to any marked degree.

In some ways, the middle-class woman, whether she is working or not, is even more child centered than her traditional counterpart. For instance, she has taken on the primary responsibility for the education of her young children and plays a key role in arranging the children's recreational activities, areas which used to be earlier in the domain of the husband and elder male members of the joint family. The life of the non-working woman seems to be wholly organized around her children's needs, the rhythm of her day determined by their various activities. The achievements of the children, especially educational, are her biggest source of satisfaction and validation as a woman. Irrespective of whether she is working or not, the middle-class woman's maternal role is not an imposition but freely and joyfully chosen; motherhood remains the acme of a fulfilled life.

This, then, is the modern Indian woman: in a white cotton sari at one moment, carrying out an age-old ritual with an attention to detail that both absorbs and animates her, and in a pair of blue jeans at another time, sprawled on a sofa in front of the television watching a soap on family intrigues with an intense interest that lights up her entire face. Hers is the driving force in the changes taking place in the Indian family, an institution that is inherently conservative and changes at a much slower pace than the political, economic and other institutions of society. Slowly but surely the middle-class woman is pushing the family towards a greater acknowledgement, grudging or otherwise, of the importance (if not yet the primacy) of the marital bond. A greater individuation of the child will be an inevitable consequence of this *psychological*

nuclearization within the joint family, as also a boost in the pleasures and sorrows of individuality.

However, the coming centrality of the couple in Indian family life, already visible in the upper middle class, is also bound to be a source of strain on the modern marriage. As the psychoanalyst Otto Kernberg has pointed out, the paradox of the couple is that its intimacy is necessarily in opposition to the larger group and yet it needs this group for its survival.[25] It is only in opposition to the conventional morality of the family, its ideological ritualization of commitment to the joint family and family tradition, that a couple establishes its identity and begins its journey as a couple. A couple's intimacy is implicitly rebellious and defiant, it not only attracts sanctions from those who see themselves as representatives of the family order but also arouses guilt in the couple's constituents—the husband and/or the wife. The option of erasing the boundary with the family, re-embracing its ideological underpinnings and dissolving into the larger group to end the disquiet caused by the sanctions and the guilt, thus always remains tempting in the life of the couple. This is especially so with a couple which has already allowed a breaching of this boundary because of its children, since many Indian couples proceed on the unconscious assumption that parental functions should replace sexual ones once a child is born.

Some upper-middle-class couples seek a solution by cutting themselves off completely from the joint family. Here the danger is that the inevitable upsurges of aggression in the couple's relationship will have no other outlet and can cause serious damage to the marriage. The larger family mitigates the effects of aggression either by some of its members serving as the objects of its discharge or by providing the stage where the husband and wife can be aggressive towards each other in the relative safety of an intimate audience.

Moreover, living in close quarters with other couples in a

large family, with at least a pre-conscious awareness of their sexual lives (and observing its signs on the faces and bodies), is a constant source of excitement that can help in maintaining the couple's erotic life. The extended Indian family is not only a system of duties and obligations but also a highly charged field of eroticism. The danger, of course, is that one or the other family member—a sister-in-law, a brother-in-law, a cousin, a niece, a nephew—may come to constitute a sexual temptation that cannot be resisted by the man or the woman, thus destroying the couple's intimacy. But then, such danger is even greater in the social network of friends and colleagues that has begun to replace the family in the life of many middle-class couples. Especially since the tolerance for such lapses is generally less than if they had taken place within the family.

These are the inevitable pressures and challenges of our changing world. Only the future will tell whether the Indian woman's long cherished wish to constitute a 'two-person universe' with her husband will not degenerate (as it has done in some Western marriages that have become fortresses which shut out all other relationships) into a mutual ego boosting, a joint self-centeredness, a *folie à deux* of a special kind.

SEXUALITY

There are very few aspects of Indic civilization where the disjunction between its 'classical' and 'modern' ages is as striking as in the area of sexuality. Compared to the conservative sexual attitudes and oppressive mores of today, the stance of ancient Hindus towards the erotic and sensual life, at least as it comes to us in literary and scholarly texts, as also in temple sculptures, seems to belong to another galaxy. The terrain of ancient Indian sexuality is home to a siren's song to which most contemporary Indians continue to shut their ears.

SEX IN ANCIENT INDIA

No discussion of Indian sexuality, ancient or modern, can begin without a respectful nod, or rather a bow, towards the *Kamasutra* which has been pivotal in forming the rest of the world's ideas on Indian sexuality. People who find it difficult to name one Sanskrit book, or are not even aware of the existence of Sanskrit as the classical language of ancient India, have no trouble in identifying the *Kamasutra*. The name alone conjures up 'titillating visions of erotic frescos in which regal maharajas with outsized genitals cavort with naked bejewelled nymphs in positions exotic enough to slip the discs of a yoga master.'[1]