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Family, self, and feminist negotiations in South Delhi, India

OTSO "LOTTI" HARJU

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Political Daughters

Family, self, and feminist negotiations in South Delhi, India

Otso “Lotti” Harju

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Pre-examiners

Associate Professor Sneha Krishnan, University of Oxford, UK

Dr. Henrike Donner, Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

Custos

Professor Marjut Jyrkinen, University of Helsinki

Supervisors

Professor Elina Oinas, University of Helsinki

Professor Emeritus Tuija Pulkkinen, University of Helsinki

Professor Marjut Jyrkinen, University of Helsinki

Opponent

Associate Professor Sneha Krishnan, University of Oxford, UK

ORCID-id of author: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3686-1027

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Abstract

Set in a middle- to upper-class, 'upper'-caste context in South Delhi, India, the ethnographic thesis explores how young, unmarried, and self-identifyingly feminist women living apart from their natal families—located elsewhere in India—(re)negotiate parental relationships of gendered control and care through their use of feminism as an interpretive device. Focusing on the women's journeys to Delhi, on forms of feminist homemaking in the capital, and on ways of imagining familial futures, the thesis analyzes how feminism is employed and constructed in relation to family, and how ideas of self, family, and daughterhood are negotiated through such feminist engagements. Set against a backdrop of multiple and often conflicting political discourses in Delhi over the years 2016-2020, the work studies the participants' 20s in the Indian capital as a kind of queer temporality, where feminist possibilities can be created and potentially sustained.

The thesis draws on Indian family scholarship, work on relational constructions of selfhood, decolonial discussions of care, and the extensive sociologies of gender, class, and caste in India. The ethnographically informed methodology is based on an extended engagement with the setting in Delhi and Indian feminist spaces both off- and online. The main empirical data was gathered through repeated in-depth interviews with a core group of 10 participants, selected through active sampling and interviewed multiple times over a period of at least one year. This material was supplemented with notes from participant observation in the larger social setting. Furthermore, the work treats the then-contemporary Indian feminist culture, feminist scholarship, and pop-feminist literature as material forming the discursive framework of the study.

The thesis contributes to understandings of relational sense- and self-making, as well as gendered agency and feminist activism in emotionally and materially complex family situations. It shows how multiple selfhood—understandable as a 'feminist' and a 'family' self—is relationally co-created in the familial negotiations over control, individuality, belonging, and care. The work analyses the creation of complex agency in a situation where possibilities for criticism and change are understood by the participants to be simultaneously created, supported, and severely constrained by family systems that function within structures of gender, class, and caste. It explores the creation of feminist subjecthood in a situation where multiple and seemingly contradictory positions and actions can be explained as 'the feminist thing to do.' The work also draws attention to a gap in feminist studies of family, where control of adult daughters remains under-theorized. Similarly, in research on gendered violence and feminist social movements, unmarried adult daughters have rarely been studied. The omission of the natal family highlights the difficulty of creating collective feminist vocabularies or belongings around the privatized topic of adult child-parental relations. Keywords: *family*, *daughters*, *Delhi*, *feminism*, *selfhood*

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Chapter One: Introduction–Families, feminisms, and selves

This ethnographic thesis studies how young women, privileged in terms of class and caste, and living independently in South Delhi, India, make sense of and (re)create themselves in relation to their parents, negotiations around familial control, and engagements of care. Through looking at narratives of sense-making among a core group of 10 participants, the thesis studies how understandings of selfhood are produced and reshaped in such negotiations of family relationships.

Set in a context of multiple urban feminisms in India in the years 2016-2020, the work is specifically interested in how the participating women—then aged 20 to 28—employ feminism in relation to their natal family. It looks at how they use and create what they understand as feminism to make sense of and shape family expectations and control; how they narrate themselves as feminists in familial contestations or conflicts; and the ways in which feminisms are or are not seen as able to deal with the affective, class- and caste-coded tensions between parents and adult daughters.

Importantly, the participants' parents and extended families live elsewhere in India, yet maintain a strong (mental, long-distance, mediated) presence in the lives of their daughters in Delhi. The work explores the potential freedoms arising from the situation, the difficulties of living alone, as well as the need to control what information flows back to the family. In the study, the various combinations of distance, presence, and strategies of separation are approached as particularly meaningful for a study of gendered agency and the multiplicities and tensions of selfhood, noted in earlier work on gender and sexuality in urban India (e.g. Thapan 2009, 2019; Srivastava 2010; Kumar 2014). I am interested in the ways in which the creation of a 'personal' sphere of life in Delhi, while keeping up relations with the family elsewhere in India, comes to shape the participants' constructions of selfhood, feminism, and family.

While distance is crucial, so is location. In addition to the participants and their families, Delhi—and especially the part referred to as South Delhi—is the third main character in the study. I analyze it as a space of both gendered possibility and stress, from which negotiations of family take place. In the moral

imaginaries of India, the affluent parts of the capital (cf. Bernroider 2018; Bhandari 2019) have been portrayed as a space of gendered possibility—different from the "Hindi-hinterland" of the surrounding states. If the latter is imagined as "the stuff of bourgeois nightmares," "over-determined in the middle-class imagination by [their] entrenched feudalism, skewed sex ratios, and brutal honor killings" (Anwer and Marwah 2020, 1171) or as the "comic, quirky, underdeveloped [...] the underbelly trapped in a time warp" (Kumar 2018, 83), South Delhi has been equated with modernity, with "the city's most 'liberal' landscape [...] offering a degree of relaxation of gender norms that more rigidly govern the rest of the city" (Bernroider 2018, 762). This thesis, then, explores how such understandings of location affect the participants' narrations of gender, selfhood, family, and feminism.

Being the capital, the Delhi of the time of the study was at the center of national politics, movements, and media visibility. During the late 2010s, the city saw waves of large-scale, (in)famous student-focused movements, asserments and protests such as the JNU events (cf. JNU Teachers' Association 2017), *Pinjra Tod* (see below; cf. Zahan 2020; Lochan 2019; Gawali 2019) and the sit-in protest that was named after its epicenter, *Shaheen Bagh* (cf. Mustafa 2020; Ali 2023; Chopra and Sanyal 2023; Edwards et al. 2024). The movements all began at Delhi universities but grew to become nationally significant signs of the times, arguably creating kinds of "generational communities" (Martelli and Garalyté 2019). It was a disturbing but also exciting place and time, which came to an abrupt end at the beginning of the Covid-19 lockdowns (cf. Mander et al 2022; Singh et al. 2024). While this is not a study of social movements, the personal time of the participants should be understood as connected to the social time around them.

In many ways, this is a study of migration. Like so many other young women in Delhi (e.g. Zahan 2020), the participants are migrants. In the context of the participants', living independently from one's family is difficult to justify as long as one lives in the same city; participants had found legitimate reasons for living alone by moving to the capital for studies and/or work. Often, the move away happened early, perhaps via a college hostel at age 17-18. By their early 20s, the participants had all come to Delhi. Coming to this city does not appear coincidental but is to be understood as part of what can be called an Indian "migration circuit" (cf. Ahmed et al. 2003), where the places to study and work in social sciences or the larger social sector are concentrated in the capital and center of power (cf. Dutta and Shaw 2019 on middle-class Indian women's migration).

At the same time, Delhi is also (in)famously exhausting and potentially dangerous for young, single women—even privileged ones. Beyond the heat, noise, and pollution of the city, well-known discourses of gendered fears (e.g. Iyer 2019; Pilot and Prabhu 2012) shape the urban encounter, as can counter-hegemonic

discourses on gendered "loitering" and feminist joy (Phadke et al 2011). This, in turn, comes to affect the relation to the family home. While the family narratives in this thesis very much happen *in* and *from* Delhi, the study also focuses around the multi-scalarity of home (Blunt and Dowling 2022): life in Delhi is connected to other homes across India through personal histories and familial relations, to circulating discourses of gender, family, and kin—and forward in time toward the hopes and anxieties around family expectations in the future.

Through looking at how notions of self, daughterhood, and family are made and remade, this is also a study of the uses and limitations of feminism. By feminism, I mean the numerous discourses, texts, traditions, social movements, caste- and class-related contestations, friendships and friend groups, self-identifications, and ways of being in the world that are referred to or explained by the interviewees *as being feminist*—everything that feminism *becomes* in trying to address questions of family. Feminism is, then, not treated as a "proper object" (Butler 1994; Haraway 1997; Ahmed 2006) of study, but as what arises from the interviews, observations, and informal discussions held within the empirical field. Drawing on David Valentine's writing around the development of the political category of transgender, I here employ feminist "*as a category of knowing* rather than a simple description of a group of people" (2007, 232, emphasis in original). I am interested in how such feminisms shape the ways in which the participants understand themselves as daughters, their families as families, and how daughter–family relations shape what the participants see as 'the feminist thing to do.'

Thinking about migration and gender, I am interested in the non-normative—queer—possibilities the participants come to attach to being in the city (Geist 2014; Dave 2012; Kumar 2024; Aizura 2012). For unmarried twentysomething-year-old women with money for space and relative privacy, Delhi can be approached as a queer spatiotemporality, something holding the potential to temporarily twist or even more permanently derail heteronormative family scripts (cf. Baas 2018; Gorman-Murray 2007, 2009). I see the fragile queerness of the time and space as underscored by the fact that both the September 2018 Supreme Court judgment decriminalizing homosexual acts and the passing of the 2019 Transgender Rights Bill[1] took place in Delhi during the period of study.

This is also a queer study in the very concrete sense of the participants' expressions of gender and sexuality. While half of the participants characterized themselves as queer in terms of sexuality or/and gendered senses of self, I here approach queerness not (simply) as an *identity* but as any number of practices

[1] The bill, itself criticized, was amended in highly negative ways in March 2026, effectively erasing most forms of transness as categories of legal protection, as well as potentially outlawing several forms of support and care (cf. Upreti 2026).

that are out of line with heteropatriarchal normality—'queer' as something one does. For example, in the context of 'decent' women in Delhi, all explicit sexual desire or activity can be understood as functioning on a spectrum of queerness, since "women's sexuality [is] presumed to be non-existent by the patriarchal order" (Bhattacharya 2014, 108; cf. Bose 2017)[2]. While unmarried, casual (hetero)sexual relationships are common in the setting of the study, these too can be understood as existing on a scale of family-related '(in)appropriateness' in terms of visibility, class, caste, and religion (cf. Bhandari 2017b)—with what is outside of the norm being understandable as queer. Of course, such generalized queerness of all explicit sexuality does not erase the important differences between more or less stigmatized (and more or less visible) sexual or gendered expressions and the practical consequences of these in a city like Delhi (e.g. Kanchan 2024). As has been noted, "there is a dearth of literature in the domain of LGBTQ studies in India" (Achar and Gopal 2023, 160-161), in a setting where "natal families in India frequently pose safety concerns to their queer members" (Babu and Blount-Hill 2025, 2)—this study contributes to these topics in its own small way.

Looking at the ways in which the participants engage in queer-er or more feminist practices of homemaking in the city—blending relationships of solidarity, friendship, and sexual intimacy—I am seeking "an expansion of the horizons of urban geography to the intimate spaces of the home" (Datta 2016, 324). In looking at what is hidden from the surrounding society and from the participants' families elsewhere, I'm also interested in the ways in which individualized and normative stories about coming (or not coming) out of so-called closets (cf. Achar and Gopal 2023) play out, are criticized, or become reformulated.

The metaphor of the closet is useful here for thinking about things beyond the realm of sexuality, describing anything situationally non-normative that is kept hidden and separated from the participants' families. I am interested in the ways in which participants organize their lives and selves in terms of multiplicity and opacity/transparency—not approaching the two as an either/or, but as something to be understood together. Also, rather than positing an idea of individual versus relational selves, I approach such discussions with an understanding of all selves as relationally constituted (Roseneil and Ketokivi 2016; Thapan 2019, 2009), but in ways that constitute the particularity of their settings. Drawing on e.g. Sasha Roseneil and Kaisa Ketokivi, I am then interested in how "people's lives and relations are intertwined through wider chains of interdependencies, which are

[2] Anthropologist Sarah Lamb makes a similar remark about how single, never-married (straight, cis) women over 35 can be read as "offering what could be considered a queer critique" of Indian systems of sexuality and family (2022, 6): "A queer stance stems not from any particular or necessary gender or sexual identity, but rather from a position of externality to heteronormativity" (ibid., 10).

*not informativ*e about society but themselves *are society in that setting*" (2016, 150, emphasis in original).

Indian gender scholar Meenakshi Thapan notes that what we think of as individuals, "clearly do not constitute singular, isolated and fixed identities but are multiply constituted with contradictory and often conflicting subjectivities" (2009, 3). In her study of "educationally advantaged" adolescent Indian women, Thapan notes that "[t]he emergence of multiple selves is clearly evident in [the participants'] construction of self *in relation to the family and peer group*" (ibid., 31, emphasis mine; cf. Nakassis 2014 for a related insight about young Indian masculinity). Similarly, cultural scholar Akshaya Kumar notes that what one easily thinks of as "the subject" is "often inhabiting multiple locales" (2014, 185). Sociologist Sanjay Srivastava, importantly, argues that the gendered selves he researched in Delhi are "split" or "multiple" and that this should not be seen as a passive product of confusing social times and demands, but as "an aspect of active *self-making*" (2010, 836, emphasis in original). Family relationships are then not a background context to what happens in Delhi but form the processes in which selves are made. In this study, I am interested in how such self-making happens in relation to the two worlds (the family, Delhi) that the women inhabit, and what 'realness'/authenticity, moral-feminist value, and level of identification the different aspects of these selfhoods are given.

Earlier Indian scholarship on the multiplicity of selfhood has argued that being very different things—inhabiting very different and contradictory selves—might not be seen as "conflict ridden" by people experiencing it (Kumar 2014, 185). Rather, Kumar, for instance, argues that "[g]iven the caste-, class-, gender- and religion-based positioning of the self in the contemporary environment, negotiation between social conditions and narrative schemes [come to] breach and shift identificatory orbits" (ibid.). The shift in orbits means that the need for conflict does not necessarily arise. Similarly, Srivastava argues that splitting is not always experienced by the split-ee as something negative—on the contrary, "the *pleasures of fragmentation*" (2010, 837, emphasis mine) form an important part of people's lives and self-understandings. For Srivastava, men in his study are comfortable with or actively enjoy living in worlds that can be seen as, on the surface of things, incommensurable (e.g. ascetic-consumerist capitalist, right-wing macho-queer erotic, etc.). Srivastava's "contemporary male subjectivity can be constructed as spread over all of them; a bit here and a bit there, but able to encompass—consume—the *multiplicity* of spaces on offer" (ibid., 849, emphasis in original). Such split subjects do not, then, necessarily in any way desire unified or ethically coherent selves.

Taking seriously that ideas of selfhood are created situationally, this study takes an interest in how such multiplicity is experienced in a self-reflexive,

feminist setting. Can fragmentation—like for Srivastava's right-wing men—still be something conflict-free or even pleasurable, or do the discourses around daughterhood and feminisms in the late 2010s shape a different and more conflicted multiplicity?

I approach the possibilities of parallel self-constructions, like the possibilities of political imagination (see further below), as centrally influenced by social and material circumstances such as gender, class, caste, and the normative power of natal family systems. If life away from the family can be understood as having a potential to disrupt or at least interrupt (hetero)normative life paths (Baas 2018) and perhaps give rise to new ways of thinking and creating the self, there arew also many possible limitations to this. Earlier scholarship on queer-er spaces in Delhi (Geist 2014; Dave 2012) has noted the sense of impermanence haunting them, limiting the creation of stable counterpublics (cf. Dey 2022) or counter-imaginaries to the natal or conjugal family. Earlier research has also noted the active work *against* stable counter-imaginaries performed by what has been called an ideology of familialization (Chakrabarti 2024) in middle-class India—a tendency (somewhat akin to homonormativity) that allows for partial, domesticated resistance in order to keep subjects and aspirations within the family fold. Subsequently, I approach the unmarried 20s of the participants' lives as a liminal and potentially transgressive time yet pay attention to its uncertain outcomes.

To summarize, in this thesis, I aim to answer the following research questions:

How are selfhoods or selves (re)constructed in the participants' family narratives and gendered negotiations with their parents? How are 'different' selves demarcated, what hierarchies are created, and how are multiplicities of selfhoods experienced?

What role does feminism play in the participants' self-narrations and the sense-making of family issues in the past, the now, and in imagined futures? As both structurally constrained and privileged women, what does feminism entail or demand in relation to family relationships and obligations?

1.1. Methods, women, class, and caste

This work is based on a long-term ethnographic field engagement with the setting of Delhi. It draws upon traditions of feminist ethnography in both Indian and other contexts (e.g. Skeggs 1997; Krishnan 2016, 2018, 2021; Bhandari 2017a, 2017b, 2020, 2023; Belliappa 2013; Ray and Qayum 2009; Lukose 2009), Indian

feminist scholarship on family, gender, and caste (e.g. Thapan 2009, 2019; Srivastava 2010, 2022; Kumar 2011; Paik 2022; Sarkar 2001; Kumar and Bakshi 2022), discussions of relationality and feminist care (e.g. Roseneil and Ketokivi 2016; Sharangpani 2018; Roshanravan 2019; Lugones 2003; Nash 2011), queer and trans analyses of the development of categories of knowing and of political action both in India and elsewhere (e.g. Valentine 2007; Khanna 2009; Dave 2012; Dutta and Roy 2014; Ray 2000; Bose 2017), and discussions of queer migrations and temporalities (e.g. Gorman-Murray 2007, 2009; Baas 2018). Understanding the productive and controlling aspects of affect—and the senses of belonging produced through them—is also central (e.g. Ahmed 2004a; Cvetkovich 2003).

As is typical for this kind of feminist, ethnographic work, the empirical material centers on a small group of people. I draw on interviews conducted over one or several years with a core group of 10 participants. The interviewees were known to me from before and were asked by me personally to consider participating in this work, on the basis of fitting the profile of young middle-to upper-class women who had migrated to Delhi. The request was made first informally and then in writing, with a research plan attached, in order for the participants to be able to give informed consent. Each participant was interviewed two to four times and given the possibility to comment on transcripts of previous interviews in between. Individual interviews were from one to three hours long. Most were done in 2018, with some follow-up interviews and discussions in 2019 and in pre-pandemic 2020[3]. Further, a small number of preliminary interviews were conducted with some participants in late 2016 and 2017.

Beyond the interview data, very much is built on shared life and participant observation. Interviews and informal discussions with the core participants were supplemented through participation in a larger group ($n \approx 50$) of young middle- and upper-class feminists in Delhi and online over the same period. Beyond this, the thesis makes use relevant material (e.g. public social media posts, blog entries, essays, feminist books, scholarship, and other commentary) produced by members of what I see as a wider, related, English-language, feminist social scene located across metropolitan India but converging online. Beyond what is defined as *the* data, it is worth noting that the more intangible understandings and friendships acquired over the many years I have spent interacting with feminist settings in Delhi, Hyderabad, and Bangalore over the past decade and a half have shaped the information and understandings of this thesis. I will explore the methodology more closely in the next chapter.

[3] While my thoughts have undoubtedly also been shaped by the time after the pandemic, this is explicitly a study of a world that existed before Covid-19 and the social and political changes that have occurred since then. The work is, in that sense, history.

As a feminist ethnographer, drawing on work that conceptualizes selfhood as multiple and constituted through everyday relational life, I also "seek to understand women's embodiment and identity in their everyday lives, and [view]local knowledge(s) and practice(s) as sites of power and resistance" (Thapan 2009, 2). Women speak, Thapan argues, "with a complexity located in the multiplicities of economic deprivation, caste, familial and gender relations. This multiplicity is importantly located in the physical and social conditions of everyday life that women experience" (ibid.). As urban scholar Craig Gurney has argued, "[i]t is not the task of the ethnographer to generate research with validity for a wider universe, but to construct an internally coherent case study that discovers the variables that have explanatory value in specific cultural contexts" (1997, 366). I offer that here for the case of relatively privileged feminist negotiations of family.

Importantly, this is not a study of what "Indian" (middle- to upper-class, 'upper'-caste) families or daughterhood is "really" like. Rather than taking "Indian families" as a given object (cf. Srivastava 2022), I am interested in how the production of ideas/assumptions like "Indian" affect these daughters' negotiations of family, including how such shorthand terms come to be used by them in their sense-making. I treat the natal family not as a culturally given intimate background, but as an active field of power where actors struggle for legitimacy and recognition from unequal positions (Bourdieu 1990, 1999; Atkinson 2014; Blunt and Dowling 2022), and where ideas of normative and good "Indian" families, women, and daughters are created. Thinking about family in this way helps make sense of why certain demands can feel natural and why some conversations seemingly 'cannot' happen.

While often using the shorthand expression of "the women" when referring to the participants in this study, I mean people who are made into and who, to various degrees, perform and identify themselves as women, or with specific female-coded social roles, such as daughters of their parents. In terms of identity, at the time of the research, the participants expressed an understanding of themselves as more or less cis (i.e. non-trans) women, inhabiting various levels of femininity or masculinity, or femme- or butchness. At the same time, queerness in terms of both sexuality and gender was often referred to and lived out in both the interview material and my observations, and many of the participants expressed being genderqueer while at the same time continuing to refer to themselves as "women." The aim of the study is never to naturalize "woman" or to leave it as an unmarked category but to understand something of how such objects/categories are made in the presentation of them (Valentine 2007; Harju 2021). This work is interested particularly in addressing some of the ways in which womanhood,

femaleness, and daughterhood are made, challenged and/or reinforced in familial tensions and the feminist imaginaries around them.

I have already mentioned class and caste numerous times. By the phrase "young and relatively privileged," I am referring to women in their 20s who, despite experiencing marginalization globally by virtue of their gender, racialization, and possibly nationality, occupy different positions within the context of India. The participants are all primarily English-speaking[4] and have graduated with degrees in social sciences, humanities, or law from top Indian universities—often from specific, renowned colleges that are notoriously difficult to get into[5]. Many have further research degrees from top universities in India and abroad, usually paid for (at least to an extent) by their families. All of the women come from backgrounds with college-educated and working parents, including (at least some of the time) their mothers. In terms of their age, having finished their college degrees, living independently in the city (i.e. not with family or in a university hostel), and in paid employment or post-graduate studies, the participants are arguably 'adult' (cf. Jeffrey 2010; Krishnan 2016; Nakassis 2014). Nevertheless, what 'adulthood' means or should mean remains one of the questions throughout this work.

Many scholars of South Asian womanhoods argue that, being unmarried, the participants' "social age" (Srinivasan 2014, 239) comes to still primarily be constituted as that of a daughter of their parents (cf. Ahmed-Ghosh 2004; Hunjan and Towson 2007). While in India, the "median age for marriage [was] 19.2 years in the year 2019–21" (Singh et al. 2023, abstract), being unmarried in one's 20s is the norm in the social setting of this research (Bhandari 2017a). For people in class positions similar to the participants, the pressure to settle down into hetero-, class- and caste-normative marriage is said to become acute when they reach age 30 (e.g. Lamb 2022). In India, marriage arguably "functions de facto as an initiation into adulthood and actualizes the transition into entirely new social

[4] One's command of English is arguably one of the main markers of available opportunities in contemporary India (LaDousa 2014). While up to an estimated 10% of Indians speak English as their first, second, or third language, there are significant differences and inequalities within this. People, such as the participants, who speak and write impeccable English—and who speak, read, and write it better than they do any other Indian language—are a small minority. This has political implications: In India, Kumar argues, social groups use different languages for political action (Kumar 2018). English, not to mention academic-feminist English, is not the language for political action for most people.

[5] Prestigious Delhi University colleges such as Miranda House, St. Stephens, Indraprashtra or Lady Shri Ram are extremely hard to get into, requiring almost 100% scores on entrance and/or matriculation exams. Graduates from such and similar colleges across metropolitan India are heavily overrepresented in the setting of this study, as they are in the upper layers of Indian society in general. In my experience, the relatively limited network of top social science/humanities colleges and universities across India creates the somewhat eerie sensation that everyone knows everyone despite the vastness of the Indian population.

roles" (Titzmann 2017, 2); these roles are pushed ahead or disavowed by the participants.

This not-yet-adult nature of the 20s—a liminal zone of sorts, socially, but also a time of potential and potentially queer(er) freedom, self-creation, and power associated with youth (cf. Panchanadeswaran et al. 2024; Prasad 2022; Gilbertson 2023)—is central for this study. While young unmarried womanhood (with all of its 'biological' and sexual implications) comes with a space for exploration, it also means being insistently placed within conservative scripts of vulnerability and the need for protection until the 'safety' of marriage (e.g. Lochan 2019) peddled by family and society at large.

The interviewees work in what can be called progressive jobs in sectors such as research, education, development, journalism, or law. All of the participants encounter questions of social justice, gender, and feminism in the course of their work. While white-collar jobs such as these are difficult to access, they are not necessarily particularly high-paying. This financial situation has implications for family relationships that will be explored in later chapters of this work. In thinking about this, I then approach the family both as an affective structure and through its material consequences (Blunt and Dowling 2022; Bourdieu 1999). While percentual estimates are difficult to make because of the lack of reliable statistics, the women are, simply in terms of their own income, comfortably within the top 10% of the Indian population at the time of the study (Azim Premji University 2025). If accounting for parental and generational wealth, the percentile would be significantly smaller (cf. Jodhka and Naudet 2019).

As wealth seems to accumulate almost logarithmically among the upper classes (with 0.1% of the population being almost infinitely richer than the 1%, and so on), it is still important to note the relativeness of things (cf. Bhandari 2019, 2023 on ultra-rich women in Delhi): there are considerable class differences within the group of women in this study, which makes exact demarcations difficult. The somewhat awkward term "middle- to upper class" used in my descriptions is a product of this. Some participants come from what can be called wealth on a global scale, while others' capital is significantly more modest and to a large extent intangible: social, cultural, and based on (caste) networks. Most commonly, the participants described their family experiences as "middle" or "upper-middle" class, not "upper" class. As has been noted, describing oneself as middle class is usual in India regardless of one's actual economic status (Baviskar and Ray 2011; Venkataramakrishnan 2015). What is interesting to me, sociologically, is the way in which certain English-language feminist ways of living in Delhi in the late 2010s seems to bring people together across a relatively large class divide (from middle class to very upper class) but a relatively small caste divide.

Classic ethnography about social structures and capital in India notes how the appearance of a single person's or family's status can change if viewed in relation to their kin networks (Mines 1994). Much of this has to do with caste. In a setting where "caste privileges and oppressions define relationships among women" (Gopal 2012, 224), the interviewees are positioned as what are called 'upper', or 'forward'[6] caste despite their different religious (non-)affiliations (cf. e.g. Rege 2006, 2013; Chakravarti 1993; Dutt 2019 on gender and caste in general). Most of the people in the larger setting and among the interviewees are (technically) Hindu. Of those considered Hindu, Brahmins are significantly overrepresented. Others are from Kshatriya or dominant Vaisha castes. Mainland Indian Christians —mostly Brahmins—and Muslims of 'higher' caste[7] backgrounds are not uncommon in the setting, albeit inhabiting very different places in the current political climate.

This follows a trend: within the gatekept social setting of academic-feminist Delhi, in which the study takes place, so-called 'upper' castes are noted to be highly overrepresented (cf. Patil 2023; Sabharwal et al. 2020; Thomas 2020; Dutt 2019; P. Rao 2018; Kisana and Hole 2023; Sen 2024). As I will elaborate on throughout the work, this is a very *savarna*[8] environment, where the non-presence of Dalit-Bahujan—lowered or oppressed caste, majority—voices is, then, not an accident as much as a structural outcome.

In the interviews and other discussions, the participants often reflected on their discomfort around their social status and what they saw as their class and caste "privilege" compared to other women (cf. Harju 2026). The women in this study consider themselves politically progressive or radical and come to speak in terms of an intersectionally feminist politics. They also express having the capital and knowhow to engage critically with their own positionalities, privileges, and constraints—often including the parenting they have had. Living in Delhi, one can also not help but be aware of the surrounding inequality despite the best 'clean up'

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[6] As some locally dominant castes are not 'upper' caste, the two are not the same. In this work, I prefer "'upper' caste" as a description.

[7] Even more so than mainland (South) Indian Christians (e.g. Mosse 2012), the mapping of caste among South Asian Muslims is subject to complex debates (e.g. Levesque and Niazi 2023; Ansari 2023; Ahmad 2003; Hussain 2020; Ali 2002). Despite the many debates about inequality between different Indian Muslims, all are—especially so in the current political climate—differently marginalized.

[8] While savarna literally means a person belonging to one of the four *varnas* or overarching (very rough) caste categories—i.e. people who are not Dalit ('outcaste') or Adivasi (indigenous or 'tribal') —the term is used in popular parlance to mean people with a certain 'upper caste' characteristics, to do with taste, education, aspirations and politics (see e.g. Kisana 2025).

efforts of city planners, upper-class "residents' welfare associations" and the like (Ghertner 2015; Srivastava 2015)[9].

1.2. Faithful witnessing or covert complicity

My interest in the topic at hand arose from an observation that feminism in Delhi in the late 2010s seemed to mean very different things. Different modes of being and doing could be explained by various actors as being 'the feminist thing to do,' sometimes very contradictorily. As a result, the answers feminism could or would offer to adult daughters negotiating their family and its affective entanglements of love, care, violence and control (Ahmed et al. 2003; Ahmed 2004a) also seemed multiple and conflicting. In particular, 'the feminist thing to do' in relation to a family issue seemed to change depending on how the issue was perceived in relation to levels of individuality or collectivity. Responses seemed to differ depending on if one was thinking about it in relation to a) oneself, b) one's family or kin, and c) larger structures of inequality in which a relatively privileged daughter appeared to be benefiting from the (active or passive) maintenance of the familial structures. At the same time, increasingly visible anti-caste feminisms of the time period—connected to discourses around privilege and accountability globally (e.g. Lukose 2018)—seemed to demand a kind of ethical clarity about political and moral culpability, a position that seemed render continuing to benefit from 'upper'-caste family networks unethical for someone professing feminist leanings.

Within the relationally and politically charged and reflexive context in which this study is set, it did then not seem possible to make sense of daughters' feminist struggles with their family simply in terms of a 'liberal' (for lack of a better word) attempt at making life livable for any one daughter. What was good for a singular woman might be harmful to (members) of a family that one, despite everything, loved, and with whom one wanted to keep some kind of peace. Furthermore, daughters' struggles also seemed impossible to understood simply in terms of an ethics of care that would prioritize the family, as not opposing the latter on several issues of gendered concern would mean negative consequences not just for the daughter, but mean contributing to unfair structures of caste- and class-coded inequality. What was one to do?

Similiar tensions can be found within the available theory. Much of the feminist discussion about gendered agency (see below) has been about how to make sense of the singular woman or of abstract feminist principles in relation to

[9] With enough money, one can, as Bhandari notes. The elite married Delhi women in her study "are confronted with the deep schisms of inequality only in a few spaces" during their transitions from one privatized space to another, for example when having to see beggars "at traffic light junctions" (Bhandari 2023, 44). The women in my study are not of a comparable class/lifestyle.

the family networks women are embedded in, and what political conclusions to draw from this. Feminists of color and others with post- or decolonial leanings have emphasized the need to understand parents and family networks as in themselves compromised actors, whose attempts at parenting should not be seen through individualist scales of black and white (e.g. Roshanravan 2019; Haritaworn 2015). Such viewpoints stress the need to stay engaged as a feminist across generations, refusing to treat family members as disposable even in difficult situations, and underscoring the importance of different vocabularies or the emotional capital available (e.g. Pawar 2010; Duttchoudhury and Hartman 2015).

Scholars like American-South Asian Shireen Roshanravan—drawing on Maria Lugones' (2003) work on coalitional feminist politics—emphasize how different actors and generations can also resist in ways that are not automatically understandable to each other. A similar notion is present in many older Indian feminists' autobiographical narratives on (their) mothers (see chapter 7), as well as in Black feminisms that emphasize alternative or clandestine forms of resistance, unintelligible to dominant knowledge systems (Pitts 2016; Nash 2011). Seeing different traditions as building upon different histories of relationality, Jennifer Nash (2011) has underscored that not all feminist ways of thinking about politics aim to organize in ways centered around individual identity claims that would require acting according to abstracted 'rules.' Rather, they may organize around ideas of love, duty, and care—indicating a much larger tolerance for ambivalence and incommensurability.

In her South Asian-diasporic context, Roshanravan, using Lugones' terminology, writes about this as the need to *witness* South Asian parents *faithfully*, working away from "the assumption that all who are being oppressed ←→ resisting will be semiotically transparent to each other" (Roshanravan 2019, 105). She argues that through "[s]uspending assumptions of semiotic transparency between the resistant codes of our elders and of our own, we can realize that the communicative efforts between us may carry more meaning than the content of what is actually said" (ibid.). In such discourses of faithful witnessing, agency is exercised within/by staying in (even difficult) relationships, not outside of or through breaking with them (cf. Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000). In such a view, daughters not being able or even willing to fundamentally change or break with their parents does not make them failed political subjects. Rather, one might encourage responding to elders' "patriarchal collaborations" (Roshanravan 2019, 111) not with an arguably 'Western'-individualistic search for a fundamental change or a clean break, but as a "self in community" (ibid., 108). Here, attempting feminist love for the parents can be seen as a radical, even decolonizing act.

Scholars like Roshanravan (2019), Mihirini Sirisena (2024) in Sri Lanka, and Huang Shuzhen and Daniel Brouwer (2018) in the context of China, can be understood as emphasizing ways in which women and gender or sexually non-conforming (e.g. queer) children find ways to "disagree [with], not disrupt" (Sirisena 2024) family expectations. Such disagreement is not oriented toward radical change risking rupture (cf. Thapan 2025), but toward maintaining relational continuity through incremental, and what can be understood as 'strategic,' shifts and mutual learning. To what extent such disagreement can make space for a structural critique of class and caste remains a live question.

Interestingly, perhaps especially North America-based scholarship posits such faithful witnessing as a decolonizing act that works against what are seen as 'Western'/white ideas about individuality over community, a need for a morally coherent or singular selfhood, and an imperative to not live in the proverbial closet. Yet, within India, the idea of having or agreeing to hide your feminist beliefs from your family has been criticized from multiple angles (e.g. Kisana 2025; Chakrabarti 2024; Phadke 2015).

Importantly, in the context of 'upper'-caste, class-privileged India, not upsetting the family also means staying in relationships that can be understood as problematic for a larger feminist cause, with daughters becoming complicit in the maintenance of violent systems of caste, class, and gender. In such a view, staying cannot *only* be understood as an act of family-oriented feminist care but also needs to be viewed in relation to securing certain privileges and respectability for oneself within a system of what is called brahminical patriarchy (e.g. Arya 2020a; cf Paik 2018). An emphasis on "witnessing faithfully" can sit uneasily alongside anti-caste feminist critiques that frame the family and its affective regimes of care and love as crucial for the reproduction of inequality and domination. Caste-critical Indian sociology argues that "[b]rahminical caste structures dictate and shape all contemporary political, legal, social, cultural, and economic violence in India" (Upadhyay 2020, 465), which—importantly—would mean that any talk of "decolonisation without debrahminisation reproduces the logic of caste within the emancipatory vocabulary of decoloniality" ([Uthara] Geetha 2025, 308).

Feminist scholar V. Geetha has noted that the "crucial role that the household plays" in creating and upholding social inequality in all its intersecting forms is "yet to be appraised with the seriousness and criticality it deserves" (Geetha 2018, 96). My own ethnography aims to stay with the ethical questions generated by conflicting discourses of individual agency, relational care, and accountability toward larger, unjust social worlds. The aim is not to resolve the tension for the participants nor to judge what should be done, but to look at the ways in which the women inhabit spaces in which personal ambitions, care, critique, and complicity

coexist, and where neither independence nor attachment appears as fully adequate.

1.3. Growing up, growing apolitical?

This work emphasizes not just the spatialized but the temporal nature of feminist practices. Empirically, it represents an interesting moment in the participants' lives, where they are in the process of moving from college life to employment or postgraduate studies, both of which come to mean considerably more privatized, 'adult' ways of being. As we shall see (chapters 6 and 9), this has implications for the kinds of feminisms and the forms of family negotiation available.

I am in dialogue with narratives around Indian 'family values,' "middle-class moralities" (Säävälä 2010; cf Kapur 2014; Phadke 2005a; Radhakrishnan 2011; Belliappa 2013), and questions regarding the character of "the new Indian middle-class woman" (on the term cf. e.g. Lau 2006; Dhawan 2010). Again, it is important to note that what is called middle class in this context has little to do with a median income group. Academic work can be read both for its empirical content (what it says about the world) and for the discourse(s) it is itself part of creating or reinforcing. As Chandra Mohanty wrote, "scholarly practices (reading, writing, critiquing, etc.) are inscribed in relations of power—relations that they counter, resist, or even perhaps implicitly support" (Mohanty 2003, 19 [1984]). Subsequently, the extensive academic literature on middle-class, caste-privileged Indian women can be seen as not just describing but also constucting a normative female subject.

For the purposes of this thesis, it is particularly interesting to note that the subject of such research emerges as not politically vocal[10], largely polite or subdued in her discussions and criticism of national politics, caste-patriarchy, capitalism, and particularly of intimate family structures interconnected with these. Although the woman is 'new' in a number of senses—ranging from employment to sexual lifestyles—she thus remains 'old' in relation to structural inertia. In terms of e.g. caste, a rhetoric of merit and individuality appears to dominate middle-class visions: women in earlier studies might support a careerist rhetoric of empowerment but remain skeptical about more transformative visions of feminism and rather choose to find ways to make exceptions work. While feminist researchers articulate reflexive analyses and criticisms of their subjects (e.g. Baviskar and Ray 2011; Ray and Qayum 2009; Krishnan 2016, 2018, 2021; Kumar 2011), participants of earlier studies do not routinely do so themselves.

[10] Indian elite studies have (unsurprisingly) also noted that there is a "marked absence of discussions on inequality and social justice" (Bhandari 2023, 44) in the social circles of upper-class Indians.

While constituting what I see as the mainstream of middle- to upper-class gender research, this is of course not the whole picture. Sociologist Simin Fadaee (2014) provides an important source on what she calls an Indian urban middle-class "activist milieu" in India, where participants *do* articulate a critique of (their) class privilege. At the same time, the reading can be criticized for being too lenient in terms of addressing (or being able to note) the apparent silence around ('upper') caste in the observed milieu.

A larger break from the scholarship on apolitical middle-class women is the work done on Pinjra Tod, the Delhi-centered young, mainly middle-class and arguably savarna feminist movement (cf. Lama and Maharaj 2019) aiming to "break the cage"—i.e. fight the gendered moral policing at Delhi universities and associated hostels or "PGs" (private, gender-segregated hostels) in pre-pandemic Delhi.

Pinjra Tod is also perhaps the closest one comes to a feminist movement aimed at changing aspects of middle-class, caste-coded parental control of daughters in India (see the section on non-emergence below). It is also a crucial time marker in the setting of this work. Some of the participants in my study had been enthusiastic members of the movement, which also became something of a darling of feminist scholarship around that time (cf. S. Roy 2016; Gawali 2019; Lochan 2019; Gupta 2020; Zahan 2020)—perhaps precisely because the 'good' young middle-class woman appeared here as an outward-oriented, vocally angry and highly charged political subject. Paridhi Gupta's (2020) work is particularly meaningful in the way it stresses the ways in which the participants of Pinjra Tod created an "alternative imagination of womanhood," (ibid, 86) where the young middle-class women identified themselves as active and independent political subjects, not as good daughters in need of protection.

Thinking about the Pinjra Tod mo(ve)ment is also important for the theoretical framing of this study since (college) hostels and PGs in India have been expected (by university institutions and by the parents of college students) not merely to educate or to house students but, in many ways, to *parent* them. The institutions do so through a vocabulary that is strikingly similar to that of the natal home: protection, danger, sexual morality, and the family's assumed good name (see chapter 3). In 2015, a Delhi university gender studies students' group pamphlet called this the "landlord-parent nexus" (GSG-DU 2015, 19), surveilling particularly single women. Such a connection between the university, the hostels/ PGs and the parents, a statement by the Pinjra Tod-movement argued, went against a central motivation for why women applied to universities in the first place:

> "For many of us, integral to our desire and experience of coming to the university, is also the desire to experience relative autonomy and

> freedom from claustrophobic regimes of surveillance and control within our homes and societies." (Pinjra Tod 2015)

As the movement noted, a "locking up" of young adult women in hostels and university campuses could not happen without a connection to the parents, with the university extending the parental logic that the women—despite being legally adults—were nevertheless primarily daughters of their respective families. In an interview with the then popular online platform *Youth Ki Awaaz*, members of the movement explained

> "[N]ow that we [young women] are a significant section of the university, how are we treated? We are not treated as adults, we are constantly infantilized. The University acts like a khap panchayat [village council], telling you where to go, when to go. They say, 'we are responsible to your parents,' but shouldn't it be responsible to our constitutional rights? Our parents might want all kinds of things, they might say, '*second year bahut padhai ho gaya, nikal ke le jate hain tumko, shaadi karwa dete hai (You have studied enough till your second year, it's time to get you married).*' Parents might want only a certain kind of girl to come out of the University, who can be sold in the marriage market. The University saying it's accountable to our parents has to be strongly countered. The University has to treat us as young adult women, who decide for themselves who to marry, who to vote for, whether you can drive etc." (Kalita and Vikram Singh in Saxena 2015, translation from Hindi and italics in original)

Interestingly, this passage seems to confirm common parental fears that daughters go to Delhi to get educated and forget their 'family' values (see chapters 3 and 6). For the women of the movement, the logic implied in the above quote is that challenging the parents *directly* is impossible or politically useless (as parents seem to be immune to their daughters' constitutional rights), formal institutions like central state universities could be challenged to uphold basic civil liberties.

While a individual woman's family might then be constructed as beyond direct (legal) advocacy, the collective and very visible action of Pinjra Tod creates a different mode of engagement with family-origin gendered (un)freedom than that of privatized "faithful witnessing" (Roshanravan 2019), discussed in the section above. The point of the comparison is not to create a moralistic division into (more or less) feminist or non-feminist modes of action, or divide people into good and failed political subjects—rather, I understand the negotiator and the protestor as two feminist modes, characters engaging with the structure of family/ institutional control. In looking at a time and a place (Delhi, late 2010s) where both of these show up—sometimes for the very same women—I am interested in the ways in which different types of feminist praxis can or cannot be imagined and sustained.

1.4. Families of adult children as a feminist (research) issue

While parental control over daughters can be seen as central to the larger reproduction of gender, caste, and class in a given society (e.g. Geetha 2018; Bourdieu 1999), the issue does—interestingly—not seem to arise on the level of social movements, education, or agitation beyond the indirect criticism formulated by and through Pinjra Tod. I see this discrepancy as creating an interesting setting for a discussion of what can become a feminist issue in a given time and space. In other words: the study of feminist self-making in this work also sheds light on how the limits of feminist advocacy are shaped—what can or cannot emerge politically.

Indian sociologist and feminist scholar Raka Ray's study on "the political and cultural circumstances [...] under which groups of women organize to create and sustain movements to fight for their rights and their self-worth" (Ray 2000, 3) argues that these are shaped differently in different places depending on the sociopolitical climate. Ray argues that different cities with different histories within the 'same' national context typically produce different women's or feminist movements, with "fundamentally different" (ibid.) understandings of what counts as important and what strategies to use for achieving agreed-upon goals (cf. John 2005). In Ray's reading, a "political culture becomes both a constraint and an enabler of movements" (2000, 8). Similarly, in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's thinking "it is only in specific historical contexts that resistance becomes political in the sense that it begins to aim not only to oppose a specific instance of domination but to put an end to the entire structure of subordination itself" (Smith 1998, 19; cf. Laclau and Mouffe 1985). In the case of family, affective politics—i.e. "how bodies are organized around intensities, longings, desires, temporalities, repulsions, curiosities, fatigues, optimism" (Nash 2011, 3)—can be understood as playing a central role in the production of "political movements (or sometimes inertias)" (ibid.).

Etnographers like Ray show further that even on a city level, movements and ideas are never monolithic: political cultures, within any feminist field, can be described as "[a] contested terrain, with insiders and outsiders, dominant and subordinate, countercultural and oppositional forms" (Ray 2000, 8). The different forms within a field interact in ways that can be both limiting and tactically allied. Ray argues that "[t]he dominant discourse within a political culture defines what politics is, who legitimate actors are, and what can or cannot be put on the political agenda" (ibid., 8-9). Thinking with this, against a background status of Indian families as arguably "too sacrosanct to touch" (Nisha 2005), one can see family normativity and the subduing effects of familialization (Chakrabarti 2024)

as important contributors to the non-emergence of parental control as a collective feminist issue.

Queer and trans studies help us conceptualize the possibilities of emergence further. Such scholarship often pays close attention to the ways in which having words becomes ways of knowing (and understanding the self), belonging, and creating resistance—enabling certain forms of advocacy while potentially closing down others (Valentine 2007; cf. Dutta and Roy 2014). Thinking with this, parental control of adult daughters might in the context of this study be too privatized, amorphous, or vague to be able to be articulated in a politically efficient way—in a way that would move it from mere descriptions of "domination" to one challenging the "entire structure of subordination" (Smith 1998, 19; cf. chapter 3). Parental interference and control can here be productively analyzed in relation to other 'mundane' forms of gendered power and violence. For example, 20 years ago, Akshay Khanna argued that "[t]he subtle and 'everyday' processes through which we are gendered and sexualized normatively simply cannot be the basis of a 'movement'" (Khanna 2005, 98). Similarly, Naisargi Dave (2012) has documented the specific "emergence" in the 1990s of lesbians and lesbianism as organizing personal-political identities in India and Delhi, specifically–something that, in Dave's analysis, appeared impossible to articulate before that.

Later, Khanna also wrote about a context where he could see the "emergence of 'sexuality' as a legitimate cause for a movement," "an aspect of personhood," and "a political object" (Khanna 2016, 7). This is a product of conscious effort: in Khanna's view, one of the functions of queer studies is to identify new possibilities for understanding something as political (Khanna in Saresma et al. 2018). Khanna terms this ability to see "elements that were not earlier visible to traditional forms of analyses of politics" as "unruly politics" (2016, 43), a useful term when thinking about the family debates described in this thesis. For Khanna, too, such ability does not arise out of nowhere, but should be understood in relation to the discursive and material conditions available. This raises the question: if (homo)sexuality did "emerge" (Dave 2012; Khanna 2016) as a legitimate feminist cause, could the reproduction of gender, class, and caste in the parental control of daughters emerge as a public feminist cause in a similar way?

Since questions of family control are connected to caste and class, they cannot be portrayed as a common 'women's' issue, complicating the emergence of any singular 'women's' movement (see chapter 6). Anti-caste scholarship generally argues that what becomes recognizable as a political/feminist issue in India is generally shaped by savarna visibility and credibility. That is to say, urban, 'upper'-caste concerns circulate easily, while other experiences remain structurally illegible or are pushed to the margins (e.g. Bansode 2022; Mullick

2022; Siddharth 2022; P. Subramanian 2019). In a context where even the obvious megastructure of caste and the shapes of caste privilege emerge as topics of 'upper'-caste movements very late (Kumar and Datta 2024), forming a movement around an acknowledgement that actively destabilizes inherited privileges seems difficult.

Furthermore, as ethnographer Teresa Robinson argues in her work set in Pune, "the priority [of the family] is to preserve relationships" which often mean sthat "it is extremely difficult to give or receive negative feedback" (Robinson 2014, 131; chapter 3). If children's "respect is expressed through obedience" (Venkatamarani-Kothari 2007, 16), it means that expressing criticism or divulging problems to outsiders (even researchers) can be seen as a betrayal (ibid.) or "stigma" (Hunjan and Towson 2007, 59; chapter 2). If "feminist activists are seen as destroyers of the 'family', a label that is true to the extent that they advocate the creation of alternatives to it" (Ray 2000, 130), can a movement that is so clearly against the family (and thus, against belonging) survive? Can it offer a meaningful alternative sense of belonging? In whose interest would this be?

There are thus many good explanations for why parental control has not been on a popular feminist agenda. Less clear are the reasons for the limited research interest. In thinking about this non-emergence, one can compare it to the related questions of domestic violence and sexual abuse in the home—both of which can be seen as having achieved at least a *certain* legitimacy as feminist concerns, despite the threat they pose to the 'sanctity' of the family (cf. Bhattacharya 2004; Ahmed-Ghosh 2004; Venkatamarani-Kothari 2007; Bhandari 2020[11]; Mehrotra 2025). As "the recognition of violence as a social issue is governed by the public/ private dichotomy" and "[a] particular behaviour may get criminalised if it takes place in the public realm but an interrogation of the same behaviour in the private realm would be seen as an interference with the autonomy of the family" (Nisha 2005, 71-2), the process has not been straightforward here either, but has come as a result of (intra-)feminist struggle.

Comparing spousal violence/control to parental violence/control then reveals a hierarchy between different categories within what can be, by and large, subsumed under the moniker of 'home.' Scholars of home Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling (2022) note that home—as a whole—is structurally political yet culturally imagined as pre-political. The role of feminist scholarship, then, has been to be "alert to the processes of oppression and resistance embedded in ideas and processes of home" (ibid., 28). Yet, within these "most private and personal parts of family life" (Ray 2000, 130), there are further hierarchies of what receives

[11] There are multiple levels of legitimacy here, too. Bhandari notes that intimate partner violence against unmarried women has received less attention in India than against married women, perhaps because "it is seen as a product of the woman's own misdoings [...] of inappropriately utilising her freedoms" (2020, 17).

attention.

In terms of research, women who stay in abusive partnerships (and how to stop this) has received attention not just from feminists but from fields as far off as public health (e.g. Mahapatro and Singh 2019). In comparison, natal family violence and adult daughters 'staying with' difficult or abusive parents does not appear as a topic of interest outside scattered discussions in fields like psychology, medicine and educational studies. Often, the medical or psychological work is focused on sexual abuse, and would benefit from a feminist nuancing emphasizing connections between the normative and what is considered outside of it: taking into account the spectrum of everyday "routine violence" (Pandey 2005) of families would seem particularly important. Thinking with Lisa Blackman's articulation of "ordinary suffering" (Blackman 2015), one can understand much of daughter-parent conflict as an example of non-spectacular, routine control or governance. The lack of research interest in parental conflict also accentuates its mundaneness.

Yet, in general, violence against children (adult or not) has been commented on much less by Indian academic feminists than spousal violence—'domestic violence' still mainly refers to violence against wives, such as marital rape or dowry violence (Bhattacharya 2004; Grover 2009). This focus on marriage as the center of the abuse of women arguably again makes the natal family seem less problematic. A significant exception to the silences around natal family violence seems to be incestuous sexual abuse of children and minors, which is sometimes taken up as a feminist issue (e.g. Sharangpani 2018; Poore 2007). Even here, scholars like Nisha (2005) have argued that groups highlighting the prevalence of incest in Indian families have received considerable backlash, also from other feminist groups.

Literature on marital violence does partly touch upon the issue of parental control, but usually just as a background to the more specific issue of the text. For example, Bhandari and Titzmann, in a special issue on "family realities in South Asia" note that "[w]hilst family is seen to provide a sense of unity to individuals and the nation, it is also [...] an important site of oppression, and of socialization of conformist gender roles" (Bhandari and Titzmann 2017, 4). In another passing remark, sociologist Priyanka Sharma writes about the "emotional abuse" of Indian women: "Parents are the unchallenged stakeholders in the lives of girls," she writes (Sharma 2016, 134). In the process "of socialising the girls in compliance of 'culture' and 'religion' [parents] introduce themselves in girls' lives as passive abusers. [This] includes restricting a girl's movements in the name of protection, denigration of her self-confidence, intimidation to follow the social and gender specific norms, discrimination and rejection, etc." (ibid.). The text, however, then swiftly moves on to discuss spousal violence.

When feminist scholar Deepti Mehrotra notes that Delhi women's popular movements in the late 1970s and early 80s "took the lid off the family" (Mehrotra 2025, 38), this refers to spousal and in-law violence—relatively little then seems to have changed over the decades. While parental control echoes in the background of spousal and in-law tensions (e.g. through parents encouraging daughters to stay in unhappy marriages), parents' role in sustaining the violence is not addressed head-on. The difficulties related to leaving abusive in-laws calls attention to another important fact: natal families are even harder to divorce, so to speak, than husbands. This has been partly noted by Mukta Sharangpani who, in writing about sibling sexual abuse in India, argues that while separation from an abusive husband is hard but possible, "[d]ivorcing a brother, a parent-surrogate, is unthinkable. Retaining old bonds is crucial. [...] [P]eace must be made at any cost" (Sharangpani 2018, 544). If a brother is, in Sharangpani's language, a "parent-surrogate," a parent is then—a parent.

Finally, thinking about emergence, it is important to also note the different levels involved. Something being seen as a feminist issue—in research or in public movements—should not be confused with it being problematized as such by society at large. We again see this in relation to spousal and in-law violence: domestic violence scholars like Huma Ahmed-Ghosh (2004) argue that while the phenomenon exists everywhere, "what is unusual [in India] is the resistance to its elimination by society at large and society's lack of recognition of it as a serious issue" (Ahmed-Ghosh 2004, 95). Yet the topic shows that different forms of familial control can, even if slowly, emerge as political issues—meaning that the same could happen for adult child-parent relations, at least in theory.

1.5. Daughterhood—consenting but resenting it?

From what has been said, one can note that daughter–parent negotiations around gender should not be approached as happening only within the nuclear family, nor should they be expected to be simply antagonistic in any clear-cut way. Structural allegiances, difficult silences, and the need to keep up larger appearances and protect the family from "what people might say" (the now almost-parodic Hindi saying *log kya kahenge*?) creates the background against which the narrations of this study's participants take place. While my research focuses on the participants' relations with, particularly, their mothers and fathers, the daugters' nuclear families are embedded in larger kinship networks and communities others including "current and past family friends, frequent visitors to the house, distant cousins, and houseguests who may or may not be biologically related or even closely connected to the family" (Poore 2007, 107). All of these might feel like they have a say in how particular daughters should behave. Demands, as we will see,

can also pull one in different directions. For the participants of this study, due to their social standing, familial expectations might include not just traditional ideas of marriage or motherhood but, typically, also high educational achievement and the "opportunity to pursue their interests and self-defined career goals" (Thapan 2009, 27). Typically, the latter is also the daughters' fundamental interest.

"[I]ntergenerational interests" (Larsen 2011, 30) in middle- and upper-class families mean that parents and daughters share an investment in the latter's economic and social security (e.g. Clark 2016; Dickey 2010; Kisana and Arora 2023). As Mattias Larsen notes, Indian parents have both their daughters' well-being and "their own security in old age and the best ways to assure it" (2011, 30) in mind when coercing or persuading their daughters into certain educational or career trajectories (cf. Kapur 2014). Kamalini Ramdas, looking at Indian women in Singapore, calls this a "biopolitics of the family" where love is co-opted into an "intergenerational logic of payback linking most adult children and their elderly parents" (2015, 255-6). Beyond direct economic safety, many 'upper'-caste communities are focused on (the right kind of) women's education also as a way to maintain or increase family standing, respectability, or prestige: antropologist Henrike Donner (2008) notes that middle-class Bengali 'upper'-caste parents stress about the education of their daughters from the moment they are born.

A substantial body of earlier research shows that young women in settings similar the one in this study should not be understood as somehow simply controlled or 'oppressed' by their parents, but as benefitting from very substantial economic, social and other support. Often, middle-to-upper class Indian parents have invested enormously in their daughters and can take great pride in the desires and achievements of the latter—particularly if those more or less align with what is socially seen as smart or admirable. The investments also come with consequences beyond what natal families can control: while supporting e.g. the daughters' education or professional ambitions may benefit the parents and the family, it might also have unintended consequences for the daughters' agency and possible feminist reflexivity. As Alice Clark notes in her ethnography on Indian daughters, "a young woman might be conscientized; maybe more than her supporters ever intended" (Clark 2016, 168).

In relation to such "intergenerational interests" (Larsen 2011) or tactical child-parent "alliances" (Dickey 2010), I again see it as important to defer ethical judgment about their meaning in terms of practical, intersectionally understood feminist politics. While the goals of feminist research differ from the goals of other feminist praxis, scholarship can still (perhaps unintendedly) lean toward a narrative where women engaged in a "patriarchal bargain" (Kandiyoti 1988) become morally understood as doing the *best* they can within a limited field. This best–while ostensibly not being a moral term–can come to appear as one.

Thinking about the familial negotiations of class- and caste-wise privileged women such as the ones encountered in this dissertation, it is obviously important to stress the tightly structured and complex affective field constraining their possibilities, but also important to abstain from romanticizing women's agency as somehow *necessarily* feminist. Thinking with Beverley Skeggs (1997) and Sneha Krishnan (2016), feminist ethnography should not only look at the parts of research subjects that might fit one's own wishes—one needs to aim to see all of it. As an ethnographer of gender, it is also worth thinking with Cherríe Moraga, who argued that groups focused on seeing themselves as oppressed can be so caught up in the "righteous [...] criticism" of "dominant" (Moraga 1986, 180) outsiders, that it is felt that there is no space to talk about the issues within one's 'own' culture or group. In the context of this study, what this means is also taking young middle- to upper-class, 'upper'-caste women seriously as beneficiaries of and people potentially invested in the maintenance of family systems of oppression that also, to an greater or lesser extent, harm them. Subsequently, the frequent use of the word "daughters" across this study does two things: it brings out the participants' social age, but also calls attention to the social construction of as well as the forms capital associated with daughterhood in contemporary middle-class, 'upper'-caste India. To what extent individual women or even collectives of young, big-city feminists have the power to shape their positions within such a field (Atkinson 2014) or "sex-gender-caste complex" (Paik 2022, 441) remains an open question, but any answer should pay attention to the multiplicity of the situation.

Generally, questions of complex agency abound in feminist scholarship, also in Indian contexts (e.g. Sangari 1993; Osella and Osella 1998; Lukose 2009; Chowdhury 2016; Narayanan 2016). My work contributes to questions of agency and consent, and through these, to questions of what selfhood(s) entail in ambiguous settings of oppression, resistance, and collusion. As Elora Halim Chowdhury writes, "[w]omen's agency has to be weighed through this contradictory aspect within patriarchies and can be both complicit and transgressive" (Chowdhury 2016, 171).

In other words, feminist research shows how young women do not simply submit to the expectations placed on them but instead bend, strategize, and rework these demands in order to secure smaller and/or bigger freedoms, preserve (certain) family relationships, or pursue desires that go beyond normative scripts (cf. Sirisena 2024; Krishnan 2016, 2018, 2022; Patel 2017; Iyer 2019; Lukose 2009). In a way, women's agency can be understood not as "direct resistance but rather as 'the attempt to lead an ordinary life within a framework of violence'" (Datta 2016, 329). Yet one woman's agentic "ordinary life" might also mean less agency for others. There are multiple striking examples of this. In one, Atreyee Sen (2007) has documented right-wing activist women's role in the 1992

Bombay anti-Muslim communal violence. Elsewhere, the role of 'upper'-caste women in the anti-reservation agitation of the 1990s (e.g. Arya 2020b) has been underscored. In both cases, although differently, women used their social role of 'deserving-to-be-protected', socially sanctioned 'women' as a way of supporting their demands. Arguably, much of agency falls somewhere on a less spectacular grayscale of (simultaneous) resistance and collusion (Lugones 2003)—akin to what Lauren Berlant has called "lateral agency" (Berlant 2007). The meaningful yet often structurally ineffective nature of women's agency can also be understood through the concept of consent—it is murky. On an individual level, this murkiness can be hard to deal with: classic Indian feminist scholar Kumkum Sangari (1993) noted that "[f]or women, even within consensual contractual situations, consent can still breed resentment" (paraphrased in Chowdhury 2016, 171).

In such a reading, even consenting to patriarchy or class/caste dominance does not mean approving of or identifying with it. For example, one might consent to playing a 'good girl' in front of relatives, without actively subscribing to the ideology behind it—perhaps similarly to the way one can consent to working even in a job one hates. Of course, this also means that *not* liking something does not necessarily translate into actively not consenting to it. As Sangari stresses, "[w]omen's agency [is] a contextual question [in which] there are dangers even in modest generalisation. Nor is any generalisation feasible about Indian women" (1993, 867). Gendered consent, for Sangari, must then be analyzed in very specific situations. As an example of this, speaking specifically about agency in family relations, Chowdhury argues that Indian women's care for "tyrannical" relatives or in-laws can take the form of a "complicitous and resentful agency" (2016, 171; cf. Roseneil and Ketokivi 2016).

In thinking about agency and the related ethical multiplicity, the Hindi term *jugaad* (cf. e.g. Jeffrey 2009) can be helpful. Jugaad, here, refers to a common political-practical bricolage in India, an improvised getting along or a hustling of sorts, where people in less-than-ideal, informal, and often politically confusing and sensitive settings find creative solutions for getting on or ahead. Like anthropologist Craig Jeffrey, I aim to pay attention to the "moral ambivalence" (2009, 204) of jugaad-ing your way forward often expressed by those engaged in it. In Jeffrey's study, jugaadi (those who do jugaad) might wish to be able to do things without such ambivalence, in a more straightforward way, but that opportunities to do so are few. At the same time, Jeffrey observes that the people inside of systems of jugaad create a shared sense of belonging, finding support in the shared experience. An expression like gendered jugaad offers a useful conceptual parallel for thinking about the dynamics and the family-related labor that daughters like the ones studied here are engaged in.

1.6. Outline of the chapters

The rest of this thesis consists of eight topically arranged chapters, followed by a concluding discussion. In the next chapter, I will look more closely at the methods as well as the positionalities involved in the research. I will also explore further the meanings of affect and affective structures (e.g. Ahmed 2004; Hemmings 2011; Cvetkovich et al. 2023) in understanding the difficulty of daughters' negotiations of family. The chapter also introduces some of the voices of the participants, which will become louder as we go along.

Chapter 3 looks at the construction of so-called 'Indian family values' and their connection to the nexus of gender, caste, and class. I look at how assumptions of daughterhood, respectability politics and ideas of generalizable Indian parents are co-created in both popular culture and academic research. In relation to the participants' narratives, I look at how what is seen as normal and "Indian" is employed by them in making sense of their particular families. The chapter also discusses further what has in this introduction been noted as a growing caste-critical feminism and sociology in the setting and time of the study—one urging 'upper'-caste families to turn the critical gaze onto themselves.

Chapter 4 dives into narratives of family histories and the homes inhabited by the participants before coming to Delhi. It looks at the participants' senses of identity and belonging, gendered family expectations, and ways in which they understand their own movement with reference to family trajectories of migration, class, and caste. Looking at how the women understand their early engagements with feminism, we also see glimpses of important "renegade predecessors" (Elliott 2005).

Chapter 5 looks at the crucial movement out of the family. It discusses narratives of feminist awakening, college peers and curricula that made an impact, and the sometimes revelatory encounter with Delhi. Beyond that, the chapter looks at the building of feminist solidarities and activities of non-familial homemaking in the city—the new kinds of homing attempts the participants made in Delhi and how this comes to affect ideas of identity and belonging.

Chapter 6 continues the theme of Delhi, creating a more nuanced picture of feminist growth, joy, and solidaric friendship seen in the previous chapter. Here feminism is described as becoming "grainier," or more complex and contradictory, where the continued negotiations with a difficult city, parents' fears, and intra-feminist hierarchies makes for more difficult or nuanced questions. Importantly, the chapter also asks what happens when the women start moving from feminism as a collective, college- or movement-based doing to something that exists in a more professionalized and privatized sphere.

Chapters 7 and 8 look closely at narratives around mothers and fathers. I discuss the academic and popular narratives shaping the ways in which feminists

can be taught to understand their mothers—and the lack of similarly definite stories around fathers—comparing these to the interview narratives. The chapters analyze the participants' ways of making sense of their parents—with the latter appearing in turns as violent and abusive, as an inspiration, as victims trapped in webs of power, as often deeply loved, and as sometimes in need of their daughters' protection. The stories provide a crucial understanding into the double nature of control and care that shape the participants' feminist negotiations of family and future.

Chapter 9 looks toward what appears to be in store for the participants' in the years ahead, from the dual place of both possibility and worry the emerges in the material across the earlier chapters. Imagining what things might be like with parents in the future, the chapter looks at participants' desires to be known or remain unknown by their parents, at questions of multiple selfhoods and the possible need to close gaps between them, and at the prevalent desires to offer care. Returning to the earlier question of feminism as labor and employment, the chapter asks if the participants see it as their job to change their parents, whether their energies are better spent elsewhere, and how to stay true to what one hopes to believe in through it all.

In the concluding chapter, I discuss what has emerged, looking back at the analytic journey of the thesis through the lens of the research questions outlined in this introduction.

Chapter Two: Emotional ethnography

"The reason why I *exist* today is because of patriarchy," Astha said. She meant it literally. Her mother had been married at 22, had had her firstborn at 23, and, when she got pregnant again the next year, did not want to keep the child: "When my mom found out that she was pregnant with me, she went to the clinic to get an abortion. And my dad came back from work and my grandparents back home told him 'She found out that she got pregnant, so she's gone to the clinic to get an abortion.'" According to Astha, her father rushed to the clinic and "convinced" her mother to reconsider. It feels like a profound story, I said. Astha replied:

> "Yeah, but it's crazy sometimes. Like, my mom only recently told me that this happened. But I now understand this so much better because of it. Because I feel like… you know, she's had a tough life, man. Like, honestly… I mean I obviously cannot excuse all of her abusive behavior, just because she's had a terrible life, but I can understand it better. Like, of course it'll be hard to bring up children that you never wanted to have in the first place, right?"

In conversations about the family, Astha often ended her statements with "right?", as if asking for reassurance. It must be very common that women have children they do not really have a choice in, I said. Her mother, Astha repeated, "had terrible struggles in life," things she herself could not "even imagine." In her early twenties herself, Astha said her mother was around age five when she was "given away" by her birth parents to a childless couple they knew. Growing up, Astha's mother was still made to stay in touch with her biological parents and sibling, left to wonder what she had done to deserve the abandonment.

Illustrating how "individual life trajectories are meaningful in the context of the other lives with whom they are linked" (Smart 2007, 44) and how relational selfhood is shaped in an active sense-making (Thapan 2019), Astha suggested that her own feelings of being expendable were part of an intergenerational, female trauma. The father appears as embodying a dual force in the story, with patriarchy representing both the structural preference for male children and the reason why the individual father's opinion nevertheless comes to outweigh the mother's desire for an abortion. Ultimately, both come to be tied into the larger family—represented by Ashta's paternal grandparents who used to live with them—that

functions as the arbitrator of tradition. This short vignette touches upon a number of the topics we will encounter in the chapters that follow.

As in the narrative above, emotions are central to this study. Emotions, here, are not (only) internal states but relational, circulating, and structuring forces that connect or bind e.g. daughters to their families (e.g. Ahmed 2004; Hemmings 2011). Emotions are analytically important: stories are shaped as much by emotions as by their narrative form, and what becomes or can be understood as a political question is shaped by affect (e.g. Cvetkovich et al. 2023; Åhäll 2018). Indian scholarship has already stressed "that *emotions matter* in shaping individual and social motivations," yet noted that writing on Indian "emotional histories" remains limited (Chatterjee et al. 2017, 539, emphasis in original). Contributing to this, I am interested in the everyday emotions and being-with the family that shape senses of selfhood; in how affect[12] binds subjects to structures they may also very much critique (Thapan 2019, 2009, 2003).

Narratives such as Astha's do not simply recount or transmit experience but organize it, positioning the speakers in relation to their families and social expectations, as well as to me as the listener-researcher. Drawing on e.g. Schultermandl et al. (2022) on narrative as worldmaking, I treat these accounts as co-produced encounters in which emotional and narrative labor is shared, though never evenly (which does not mean that the participants necessarily always do most of it). Rather than imposing coherence, I focus on the charged and sometimes contradictory positions through which the participants aim to make themselves understood within their possibilities and constraints.

That emotions are important in a study such as this is not a surprise—"[f]amily relationships are nothing if not permeated with every imaginable kind of feeling" (Smart 2007, 84). To me, it remains an open question whether we even can (or are socially *allowed* to) conceptualize "family" in non- or at least less emotional ways or if that would remove something essential about the very meaning of the term. The emotional complexity of family as a topic can be seen to arise from the affects and power relations present, the ways in which "values such as equality, respect and dignity may find their least purchase in families" (ibid., 135). Indian popular culture and family narratives (chapter 3) also constantly remind us of the supposedly all-encompassing importance of family, and the complicated and in many ways traumatic relationships that are thought to follow from that.

Many, if not most, of the prominent emotions expressed by the participants were highly charged, often melancholically so. Sadness, mourning, guilt, indebtedness, shame, and confusion showed up a lot in the interviews. Active or outward-focused emotions like frustration, anger, and distaste were also in the

[12] I am using affect here closer to the way Ahmed (e.g. 2004b) does, not aiming for a clear-cut pre/post-processed division into affect and emotion.

mix. Other times, participants expressed an irreverent humor stemming from how absurd things were felt to be. Relatedly, the interviews included significant amounts of laughter, even during otherwise difficult conversations. Care, sweetness, tenderness, and what could be expressed as love were highly present. This tenderness could also result in a flip of the larger, usual emotional register of parent-child relations: parents could momentarily be looked back (or perhaps 'down') at with a sort of protective care, whatever troubles existed. Yet even such feelings of tenderness, love and care were often tied back to ongoing feelings of guilt in a kind of circular motion.

Thinking with Sara Ahmed's (2004a, 2004b) writing on love and hate, we can see the entangled emotions circulating within familial relationships as part of what holds the family together: guilt can be understood as attachment, shame as a recognition of expectations, and anger as something inside of the idea of love. This seemed to hold both ways: not only could much of what the parents frame as love be expressed in a language of guilt-infused control, but the daughters' expressions of love could, in return, often be infected by a feeling of guilt, of not being enough, or of hurting the parents. For example, Tara said:

> "I know—with all the bitterness aside—I really love my parents. I can't *stand* them being sad or inflicting sadness on them. I *do*, but then I feel *guilty* and then I become sad. So it's like a vicious cycle, that way."

As will become clear as we move through the chapters of this thesis, it was Tara's life and politics in Delhi that kept disappointing her parents. Even while saying she believed in what she did and stood for, the subsequent conflict of love or allegiance and guilt was nevertheless difficult. Fights and negotiations with parents were affective precicely because of the presence of mutual care, with kinship appearing here as inherently contradictory and perhaps even inherently violent. Another participant, Aashi, noted this explicitly: "when you care about the person you're fighting [with]", "it's no longer a fight of ideals, it's literally you're fighting the person now. Or that's what that person is feeling, even though you're not feeling that, they are."

Feminisms, as we shall return to across the thesis, come to leave their own mark on this affetively entangled research setting, with multiple outcomes. Sometimes, the participants' feminism comes to heighten conflicts and a sense of disappointment, while other times coming to offer some comfort through structural readings or "sociologizations" (as one interviewee called it) that place the family within larger structures.

2.1. Entanglements and trauma

As noted in the introduction, the intertwining of family and the reproduction of caste and class inequality makes the issue of feminist women's parental relationships something that goes beyond immediate family impacts. In a caste-critical reading, attachment to family cannot be understood solely as private feelings of love and care, nor as a indivually focused gendered conflict, but is also to be refracted through questions of how obligation and allegiance interact with privilege and access to various forms of capital. Kinship is then not just about care and control but also about complicity. If intimacy itself comes to be recognized as implicated in structures of inequality, feelings of love, belonging and allegiance might become entangled with discomfort, shame, and failure.

Taking emotions seriously and not "view[ing] the body *as* text" (Howson 2005, 1, emphasis in original) are also important considering the trauma and various forms of abuse that were—in those words—commonly spoken about in the participants' descriptions of family life. Drawing on Ann Cvetkovich, I here think of trauma in a larger feminist sense, beyond diagnosis (Cvetkovich 2003; Cvetkovich et al. 2023). Thus, 'negative' emotions can be read as the political effects of power structures, such as—in this case—of intersectionally understood gender and family. In practical terms, none of the interviewees expressed having had an easy time with their parents and families, and multiple forms of violence were a recurring theme in their stories. Most of the women were or had been in therapy, through which they aimed to deal with family issues. Beyond what was legible (by the participants or others) as trauma, violence or harm can be understood as something ambient, having the character of being in the air (Cvetkovich 2003). Again noting Blackman's (2015) work on "ordinary suffering", we can reframe parental control and interference as routine, normalized, made ordinary—with medically understood trauma as part of the "cost" (ibid.) of living within it.

Echoing what was said about affect in general, above, Cvetkovich (2003; Cvetkovich et al. 2023) argues that emotional narratives of family can be understood as cultural archives and part of political life. At the same time, it is important to note that this is not a study that aims to document, 'prove,' or solve the traumatic family-related events described by the participants. Rather, as I see it, understanding neediness, vulnerability (Sayer 2011), and traumatization is central for attempts at understanding the possibility of feminist engagements in and with the family, both individually and as a potential collective. Despite its individually felt nature, trauma then needs to be understood, through feminist scholarship, as a structural and collective issue (e.g. Ruíz 2024; Pain 2022). Trauma is collective, intergenerational, and historical (e.g. Kelly et al 2020;

Ahammed 2019) and daughterhood can thus be—among other things—understood as a traumatic category.

Beyond the epistemological and political questions related to emotions, taking them seriously is also methodologically crucial in a study like this: guilt, shame, and vulnerability or fragility shape what can or will be said. These are, again, not private issues: the popular power of *log kya kahenge?* (what will people say?)—built on the class and caste-based paradigms of respectability I will return to in the next chapter—makes it probable that speaking 'openly' about one's family will feel bad. As the family home has been understood as a spatial mechanism that produces privatization (Blunt and Dowling 2022), participants were likely to worry about how parents would feel if they knew what was being said about them. As one participant expressed it, the classed and caste-based gendered moralities of the home meant that there was an idea "that having trouble with your parents is related to poverty and immorality." "Airing your dirty laundry" even in a research situation might appear uncouth, even if making things anonymous helped. Meera said:

> "When I'm talking about these things I'm like 'Okay am I being ungrateful. Does that make me a really ungrateful child?' I think one of the reasons I'm able to say all these things is because this is gonna be like—my *name* is not gonna be anywhere on it."

Other participants worried about coming across as "a really ugly person," wondering what I, the researcher, would think of them. Some explicitly chose not to share the "sometimes *really* ugly things" they could say to their parents. Other thoughts, desires, or responses to familial control could be hard or awkward for the participants to articulate on the grounds that they could appear to challenge some of the feminist credentials they wanted to uphold. At the same time, feminism was also felt to allowe one to change the meaning of speaking out about family secrets, reframing it as an ethhical and "healthy" thing. Feminism could create space for potentially even enjoying the clandestine, somewhat transgressive nature of speaking on tape about your parent(s). Participant Lily said she did not feel like she was letting feminism "down by shit-talking my parents because there's another [feminist] tribe standing on the wings going like 'Yay! Shitting on your dad is a great way to be a feminist!'" In telling their family stories with an attention to the multiple emotions involved, I understand the participants as creating themselves as consciously feminist subjects, perhaps becoming parts of gendered emotional communities of people with similar experiences.

2.2. On the participants and interviews

As mentioned in the introduction, the selection of participants strove to identify women that fit a particular (age, work, educational, caste, migratory) background, defined in advance. Yet, the profile itself was not picked at random: rather than setting out to find people like this, what is sociologically interesting is that this profile corresponded to most people I had gotten to know in Delhi across the extended time I had spent on and off in the city before the research began.

That my Delhi friends and acquaintances constituted a relatively homogeneous group was noteworthy, and on further inquiry, most of my friends' friends also seemed to fit a similar profile. Friend groups, then, showed themselves to be far from random, but rather reflecting shared class-caste backgrounds, academic training, or perhaps political leanings—in many wasy paralleling the caste and relative class homogeneity of the families discussed in this work. Yet, as I will discuss in the last section of this chapter, rough structural descriptions can also hide not just the large variation within constructs like 'middle class,' but also other intimate yet important dynamics between individual people. In terms of ethnographic ethics, methodology, and understanding the plurality of what becomes reified as research encounters, the latter also matter (e.g. Boyce and Dasgupta 2020).

While the interviewees have a lot in common structurally, there is then significant variation too, some of which was noted in the introduction and which will become clearer throughout this work. An obvious difference lies in the participants' geographical and related 'cultural' and linguistic[13] backgrounds. While someone's family was from the Himalayan foothills in the north, another's was from Kerala in the south; someone was from western Maharashtra and someone else from Kolkata in the east. Taken together, the women's backgrounds covered much of the Indian 'mainland.'[14] The long cultural and linguistic distances travelled by many of the participants—despite ostensibly being in the same country—highlights the migratory and somewhat diasporic context of this work.

The metropolitan-smaller town spectrum of participant backgrounds is wide. While none of them were from villages, some were from smaller regional towns, some from bigger 'B-tier' cities, some from eastern or southern metropolises—and one was from Mumbai, considered more metropolitan than Delhi. Moving should then not be automatically understood as somehow moving 'up' from the periphery

[13] While all of the participants are primarily English-speaking, it is common in India to refer to the family or regional language as one's "mother tongue," regardless of the level of command one has of it. One can refer to a language one cannot, for example, read or write as one's mother tongue.

[14] Women from the states in northeastern India were not actively excluded (and do in fact constitute a significant minority within the relevant feminist setting in Delhi) but did, for various reasons, not become part of the sample.

to the center. While the city and its feminist opportunities (chapters 5, 6 and 9) appear crucial for the lives of the participants, I do not simply see the city as facilitating the conversations on its own. Rather, the partial freedom and opportunities of the capital arise in combination with the fact that Delhi is where the family is *not*. If the women's families had been in Delhi, the daughters would likely have been residing with them, which would have meant a very different kind of life. At the same time, I do not assume Delhi to constitute any necessary "rupture" (cf. Thapan 2025) from the family, rather approching it as a space in which normative temporalities and relational expectations could perhaps be bent, partially avoided or suspended—allowing for the building of alternative forms of selfhood, intimacy, and everyday life (cf. Gorman-Murray 2007, 2009).

I have strived to enhance the participants' anonymity through the use of multiple pseudonyms. While I use various personal names when referring to the participants in order to facilitate the flow of the text, these should not be seen to necessarily correspond to, so to speak, whole individuals. Interviewees can have been divided up into different pseudonyms in different parts of the work. While a part of the ethnographic charm for the reader definitely lies in the feeling of getting close to 'real' people in the text, one needs to remember that it is the topics, tendencies, and events that are being studied and not individual people.

The interviews were conducted in English. The monograph form of this study was chosen to give more space for interview excerpts to illustrate the reflexivity, humor, brazenness, sweetness, and informality (Robinson 2014) within what were often serious and emotionally charged discussions. The quotes represent an effort to transcribe spoken language, without worrying too much about grammar. At the same time, in the transcriptions, I have not aimed for a discourse analysis-level of 'accuracy' when it comes to the intonations and pauses present in actual speech. I separately try to illustrate and describe the mood of what is being said in the text around the quotes. In the transcriptions, a long dash (—) denotes an infliction or a quick jump between unfinished sentences. Three dots (...) denotes a longer pause or trailing off. *Italics* means emphasis added by the interviewee. Brackets ([ ]) mean that whatever is written inside the brackets has been added by me for clarity.

My goal was to interview each participant three times, over the space of a year, and divide the discussions into themes given to the participants in advance. Interviewees were also, in most cases, provided the basic interview questions beforehand to give them a chance to prepare (they sometimes did but, more often, did not). Additional questions were added during the actual interviews. In my plan, the final meeting would aim to focus on meta-discussions, reflecting on the process of being interviewed about family, and being interviewed by someone you know. Unfortunately, not all participants were able to provide all the interviews

but still wanted to participate. In such cases, I tried other methods of making space for a reflective wrap-up (e.g. video and phone interviews after the physical fieldwork had ended). Other participants also ended up being interviewed more than three times.

Most in-person interviews were conducted at the home of the participant, usually on weekday nights. Sometimes, an interviewee preferred to talk at my house, because they felt more comfortable or less overheard (for example by flatmates) there. Often, an interview would be followed by a voluntary sharing of a take-away meal, paid for by me, that was to serve as a space to debrief and decompress, off the record. One participant specifically wanted to do the interviews during weekends, in the daytime, in cafés, because she felt that the somewhat more formal setting helped her get some needed distance from the topics at hand and from me, her friend-turned-interviewer. Because of the backgrounds of the participants, many of the participants had themselves conducted research interviews (ans/or in some cases, journalistic ones), which meant that they were in many ways familiar with the process, and often happy to poke fun at it.

Importantly, I did not at any point of the study interview the women's families, nor were the latter in any way aware of their daughters' participation (unless, of course, a participant had wanted to tell them without telling me, which it was within their power to do). In most cases, because of the physical distance, the families of the participants were also wholly unknown to me. There were two reasons for not including parents' perspectives in any way. First, there is still a dearth of unmarried daughters' perspectives on natal family dynamics in the sociological literature on India. The second and obvious reason is safety: speaking in a recognizable manner could bring severe repercussions for the speaker from their family and possibly elsewhere, and the material would look totally different[15]. In such a case, the work could not have been done in a meaningful way.

It is also telling that I had never met any of the parents, even in cases where I had known the daughters for years and the parents maintained a large presence in their childs' life. While this lack of knowledge stems partly from the parents living elsewhere in India, I also read it as me not being seen as someone people would take to meet their parents, for whatever reasons. I was not alone in this: in general, most participants did not introduce their friends or even long-term partners to their parents (see chapter 6). Some friends stated wanting to "spare me the drama" by not making me a part of their family dynamics. In terms of

[15] In the political context of the study, one also needs to appreciate the point that ideas of speaking-as-agency are "embedded in neo-liberal assumptions that individuals who speak hard truths will be protected by international and national institutions devoted to democracy, freedom of speech and human rights" (Parpart 2009, 15; cf. Harju 2023).

conducting the research at hand, this might not have been a bad thing. Donner, working on India, has argued that, "contrary to anthropological lore," being a structural outsider, i.e. having "no relatives in the city" and not being able to "acquire an insider knowledge of family life by other means, made many women feel at ease" with her (2008, 21). In a similar fashion, while my relationship with the participants aimed to give as much of an insider perspective as possible, my outsiderness in relation to their family networks might have helped create a certain safety. As I did and do not know the families, I also hopefully had less power to misuse the information given to me. The stories that interviewees shared with me might also have felt less directly linked (and thus less hurtful) to real family members close to them as I could not, for example, connect a face to the information provided.

2.3. Friends as research subjects

Terminology becomes difficult in a research design like this. I alternate between "the interviewees", "the participants," or "the women" when referring to the people at the core of this study. Yet, as I have already noted, what all of the participants had in common is that they were my friends. It was as friends that I primarily knew and/or know them—meaning that I care(d) for them deeply and I know that many of them care(d) for me.

Moreover, Delhi was not just an anthropological 'field' for me, but a city where I—in a different way—feel I somehow came to grow up. In 2013, I was doing an master's-level exchange at the University of Hyderabad, one that would become a defining factor for my subsequent life. Then, in 2014, I was in Delhi by a turn of events and asked a friend of mine from Hyderabad if she could help me meet people in the city. In a show of the power of feminist networks, a young woman, then living with her family in Gurgaon (a suburb of Delhi), offered me a room in her house. Her mother watched a baking show with me and asked no questions about what I was doing there. About a week later, I moved to the flat of a person living in an urban village in South Delhi, a place my new friend in Gurgaon felt I would "probably like" (cf. Kumar 2024; Dattatreyan 2020; Rai 2023, on South Delhi urban villages). To me, coming from faraway Finland, the city seemed full of feminists, movements, houseparties, bookstores, and bars for many budgets. Much of this positive feeling had to do with the fact that people quickly seemed to accept me as a part of their lives and households, mainly because common friends had vouched for me. Structural reasons related to class, caste, and whiteness definitely played a role, the detailed analysis of which would be a good topic for another study (but see below).

Without these friendships built over what (in a person's 20s) felt like long periods of time, and the social 'vouching for' that came with them, this research would not have been possible. Building trust also meant a kind of accountability within a feminist network. This was what made participant Khushi compare me favorably to "some random journalist" who recently had wanted to talk to her about something, a request she saw as ill-informed and potentially predatory (cf. Living Smile Vidya and Semmalar 2018). To the other interviewer she had reacted "like '*No*... *No*. Go do your research some other way!'"

The process of fieldwork can itself be highly emotional, as the research is (usually) meaningful and stressful for the person(s) carrying it out. Ethnographic handbooks or even existing ethnographies rarely prepare researchers for the many negative or positive emotions involved (but see e.g. Bochner and Ellis 2016; Davis and Craven 2016; Anand 2011 for useful snippets). Things become even more complicated when the work setting is also, in many ways, your home (or where you wish your home to be). At the time of the interviews, I had known some of the participants for four-five-six years, while I had met others more recently. Researching the family dynamics of people ranging from acquaintances to close friends meant that a number of sensitive and complex emotions had to be navigated—the research and the friendship could come into conflict.

The friend-researcher double relationship meant not only that circumstances in our non-research relationship could affect how the interviews turned out, but also that the interviews could affect our friendships. It also meant that certain desires or loyalties could come into conflict: in some cases, a participant would touch upon an interesting but possibly unsettling topic, in which case a decision whether or not to pursue it had to be made. While the researcher as friend would perhaps want to take it slow and mainly comfort, or agree with, the person speaking, the interviewer might feel greedy and want to offer a productive challenge. A participant might also tell me things inside of an interview that they would perhaps not otherwise bring up, and vice versa, there could be certain things that the friend-me knew that a participant would prefer the researcher-me not to know.

Keeping two such selves separate is, of course, impossible, although efforts can be made. I tried to keep the conversations sociological, so to speak, yet in some moments, the conversations felt (in both good and bad ways) like therapy sessions. My guiding thought was not to probe the interviewees, and certainly not to fish for disturbing data, but to analyze what would come up if given plenty of associative freedom. In certain cases, this might have led to the omission of relevant things, but it helped the space remain safer and more guided by the interviewees' desires around their understandings of self and selves. In relation to the family, I feel this was largely the right thing to do, although I retrospectively

feel that I could and should have pushed participants harder in discussions related to caste privilege.

The research encounters emerged as, in many ways, dialogues shaped by the interviewees' understandings of my questions. Answers were, as the reader will be able to tell from the quotes, self-reflexive. Showing their understanding of ethics and power in ethnographic situations, the participants talked about various pitfalls and reflected on the ways in which they modified their presence accordingly. They also showed an understanding of the emotionally complicated position I had put myself in. Maya, an old friend and a gender scholar herself, said she knew how the "informal talks, conversations, hangouts" outside of the research setting came to "meddle with your head" even if they would not be used as source material: "As a researcher it's easy to tell ourselves that 'no I can really distinguish and define,' but the unconscious really works in a very weird way, and it can't separate a lot of things. You can't." This, along with her desire to keep her own head straight, was why she wanted to "be a little bit more [...] responsible about this" and keep the interview situations relatively formal.

As has been noted, "conducting research is work, and no matter how charming or skilled the interviewer, being interviewed is work" (Grace 2013, 12). The topic of the interviews required dwelling on emotional and potentially traumatic subjects that some of the participants would perhaps otherwise have preferred to avoid. Maya, again, said she would usually only share things when she needed to vent, meaning that the research encounter could be understood as intrusive and instrumental:

> Maya: I'm an introvert in that sense. I'm only sharing all of this because...
> Lotti: I'm forcing you
> Maya: Yes! [laughs]
> Lotti: I'm so sorry
> Maya: *No*. I've built this kind of comfortable zone with you, so it's *fine*. But apart from that, even with friends, I don't really open up about the most... uhm... intimate of details.

As a result, Maya also wanted to postpone some of her normal interactions with me outside the research until the interviews were done, so that what happened in private would not affect my reading of her interviews. At the end of the fieldwork, I asked what would have been different if the interviews had not happened. "Maybe," she said, "I would have been more drunk with you":

> "If I get drunk, I just start saying any kind of random shit that comes to my head. But maybe because we're doing this, I've kind of maintained a little bit of a boundary. Because in my head, like I said, I *do* know that when a person is doing research, even though the interviews are

> separate and personal discussions are separate, you do end up thinking about everything together. And I didn't really want to influence anything from my *drunken talk* into this."

In telling me how she does not want to say things, she also hints at what she wants to say. This makes explicit otherwise often ignored levels of negotiation—the statement draws attention to (hidden) work happening in interview-based research. Maya knows how far-reaching the readings of interviews and observations can be—how sociologists write stories based on what, at the end of the day, are just fragments of life, no matter how 'in depth' they are. What she is saying is that if she's going to be made into research on the basis of some conversations, she at least wants to tell a sober, fully consensual, and hopefully meaningful story.

I asked Maya if she was afraid she would say things she would not want me to know:

> "No, you would be *allowed* to know those things. It's just that I wouldn't be… I wouldn't be like… taking too many pauses to think if it's actually the right thing that I'm saying or if it's just a *stupidly* fleeting emotion. Because if this research wasn't involved, I'd probably be telling you these things in a more… *fucked up* way. Like instead of sitting in the morning and drinking this [coffee] I'd probably be crying over a drink and maybe shouting these things. Because more than an interview, it would have been like a *rant* on my part. Like, you know, 'Fuck, this is happening!' And it becomes more like—like at that point I'd be maybe seeking some emotional support or—because why else would I tell you that story?"

The interviewee here contrasts the "*stupidly* fleeting" with the thought-through; not necessarily as an epistemological hierarchy but as two 'true' versions of herself, of which she sees the latter to be more suited for this research. She says she is constantly taking pauses, "reflecting" on her story as she is telling it as well as in between the interviews. She is aware of this not being an informal meeting, nor a support group:

> "If I'm telling [about my family] with a purpose, then I'm not looking for emotional support. I'm more like giving you a piece of information. And at that point I don't—because I don't want any emotional support back, I probably don't see any necessity for that random… emotion in there."

As Maya had been interviewed several times before by me, for a couple of different projects, she was also in a position to know what to expect. Part of why she agreed to participate in the interviews was, I am sure, a certain desire to be 'nice' to me, and she said part of the reason for agreeing was that "I trust you."

2.4. Participants' pushbacks

Several other participants also expressed having "a sort of responsibility," "as a *respondent*", to give me "the best information, or in this case analysis, that I have." Jyoti said that "because this is personal" and she "might never do this again," she "should use this opportunity [...] to tell the best story. The [...] most thought-through story." Most participants did not feel that they would (or should) get anything specific (beyond a sense of having done well) in return from the interviews. Lily, laughingly, felt there was something "vaguely comforting about the way becoming a part of research was "'my life made serious'"—it was "nice to think about—from the perspective of 'Yay I'm a human being! But I'm also a case study!'" Vishakha felt there might also be something in it for her, that the work might capture something of the times that she might otherwise forget:

> "There's one reason also why I agreed to be a part of this. Which is that I want to read your thesis 20 years from now and really see, you know, what was that and what is now. It will be an interesting comparison, if I'm alive then."

Through such articulation, participants asserted some of their agency in the research meetings, and in a way that echo ideas about storytelling as a passing on of one's existence (Cavarero 2000). It is important to note that not everyone involved articulated their boundary-making so explicitly. Furthermore, not everyone seemed to experience the interviews as particularly tiring, despite their emotional content.

Illustrating the spectrum of interview experiences, Lily mockingly imitated me when I asked if she felt burdened by having to come talk to me: "'Oh my god it's so much responsibility!' No, it's *not*." Giving a reminder of how researchers might overestimate their importance, Lily said: "I just come here sometimes to talk." For me, she said, this project was my "*life*." She did not really think about the research outside of our meetings. She also did not feel she had to represent anyone, "speaking on behalf of XYZ, therefore [needing] to be in a particular way." This meant that, unlike when speaking publicly, she felt freer to half-articulate or be ethically complex.

Participants like Lily also had no qualms about spending their personal time with me, going for drinks or dancing, watching movies, walking the dog, or hanging out on their living room floor generally bitching about life. While I never actively mentioned the interviews outside of the interview settings, some participants did bring them up—even sometimes mentioning them to other friends present, which felt deeply uncomfortable to me. In a feminist setting like this, the separation of worlds was also complicated by the fact that so-called

'normal' conversations would not be that different from those recorded: one would spend time talking about politics, parents, family, and so on, anyway.

Much meta-work will have existed beyond what was made visible to me. As e.g. Carol D'Arcangelis has argued, critical methodology has to engage in much more nuanced ways with the "micro-workings of power" (2018, 350) present in the research settings in order to avoid reinforcing the hierarchies one was supposed to critique (cf. Narayan 1998). While some of the participants told me about some of their interview-related reflections explicitly, others might have preferred to keep their reflections to themselves, asserting their agency that way. That several of the participants were apparently talking quite freely can be interpreted as a sign of strong agency and relative comfort in the interview setting and, to an extent, in life more generally (cf. Parpart 2009). Jane Parpart sees the idea of speaking out as paradigmatic in a certain kind of feminist thinking about women's agency. Yet silence, as Parpart and others also note, is also a form of agency. For example, "[s]ilences and what [is] left unsaid" are for participants "ways to redress the imbalance between [the researcher's]—often intrusive—presence in their homes and [the participant's] commitment to the 'work' [the two] were doing" (Donner 2008, 20).

The agency of *not* doing something can be seen in the ways most of the respondents refused my attempts at creating further mechanisms of feedback. For example, most of the participants did not have the time or interest to comment on transcripts of earlier interviews, even when given the chance. I also offered several of the key participants a later opportunity to share reflections about the interviews, in speech or writing—notes that could be included verbatim in my work if they so desired. No-one felt this was an interesting idea. Thus, while I would often have wanted even more feedback about my work from the participants, this seemed to be felt more as a chore than a democratizing tool. Most often the refusal was a soft let-down, performed through simply not returning to the topic. Some participants, like Jyoti, explicitly refused, saying that analysis was my privilege and my burden. What I *could* do in order to be a more ethical researcher, Jyoti argued, was to encourage her (and the others) to challenge me in various ways both during and after the research: "'Objectivity,'" she quoted a source she said she could not remember, is:

> "'the right of the [research] subject to *object* to what you have said [about them]'. So that means that you say it back to them, you say it directly to them, and you also say it in a form in which they completely understand what it is and what it implies. And then you give them *every right* to disagree with you, on the conclusions you've drawn on their lives or on what they have said. And *that's* sort of the standard of fairness."

It's a "bloody difficult" standard, she said, but "a proper one."

The friend-researcher relationship also came with emotional tensions for me. Ethnographic literature has spoken more about researchers' feelings of animosity or fear in relation to participants (e.g. Anand 2011; Perrone 2010), than about care and the associated longing to be cared for in research situations (but see Pearce 2020). The nature of the interviews meant that I sometimes got to know significantly more about the interviewee than they knew of me. This created a kind of simulation of intimacy, where one party encouraged the other to share, without sharing back as much—clashing with the 'normal' rules of reciprocity in friendship. As Donner notes, "the ethnographic practice itself presents a violation of close or intimate relationships" (2008, 19). This sometimes made me feel drained. Some of the participants also expressed having thought about this discrepancy. I asked Jyoti, whom I had also interviewed for another project earlier, how it feels to be researched:

> "It's interesting because I feel like I've been in this situation a lot with you [laughs]. And also I was thinking, one of the times we met as friends I was thinking 'I know so little about [Lotti] [...]'. So one time when we were speaking and I actually heard more about *your* [family] life, I was surprised about how little I knew. Because the level of intimacy I felt was not actually commensurate with how much I knew about you. And... it's—I think it's a tribute to how well you do interviews that I've felt like a two-way bonding was happening, although I was doing all the talking. [laughs] Which is strange, especially because, as a woman and as a person, one thing I tend to do is to make other people talk so that they feel comfortable with me. So I'm usually not that comfortable with talking to other people [...] It's unusual for me to be the person doing all the talking. And not even realizing that that's happening."

The quote, in a way, flattered my researcher ego: Jyoti expressed positive surprise about how comfortable she had felt. Yet, as a person, it made me long for the research period to be finished, so that I—hopefully—would be able to move toward a more equal interaction.

2.5. Whiteness and gender

Positioning oneself can be understood as an attempt at a certain humility, which means taking responsibility for the work one does and learning from the (good-faith) criticism one gets. It also means being honest about the fact that academic research is, among other things, also (hopefully paid) labor that comes with its own structural limitations. Ethical research can then be seen as an ongoing

process that continues from before any work is planned into the afterlives of publications.

In all of its smog and violence (chapter 6), the city of Delhi has, for me, been a place to which I have by now felt deeply connected for more than a decade. Already by the time the fieldwork for this thesis was carried out, the place felt like a home, a place I hoped to one day be able to move to more permanently—a place of tenative and risking-to-be-fleeting queered migration. In this sense, there is *something* similar in my experience of the city with those narrated by the women I interviewed. At the same time, my relationship to the city is also shaped by my whiteness and the privileges of it, and—in a very different and often paranoid way—the ability to pass as a cis man if I so chose.

Somewhat strikingly, discussions around ethnographers' whiteness (e.g. Lundström 2010; Gallagher 2000) are almost totally absent in the field of South Asian studies, despite the large number of white scholars working in/on India. While reflexivity is generally lauded as a virtue, especially in feminist ethnography, whiteness seems to not have registered as a concept or analytic tool. In fact, the racialized positionality of white scholars in India is most often simply not mentioned. If references to related forms of power are made, it is circumscribed in vague terms like 'Western.' Yet, as in the case of this study, whiteness informs my movements in Delhi; the space of Delhi constructs me as white in a very different way from when I am in, say, Helsinki. In the context of Delhi, it means being something out of place, a foreigner, a curiosity, but in a way that affords you special treatment.

Almost always, being read as a white outsider allows me access and 'getting away with' a number of things; it often offers me safety and goodwill[16]. As white people are regularly seen as visitors or expats (and not the 'bad' kind of immigrants), I am usually welcomed or at least not seen as a threat. For example: while looking for a flat to share with an Indian cis woman could be hard because of the assumedly "mixed" genders, the fact that I was white possibly alleviated (specific) landlords' anxieties. The available research on severe anti-Blackness and other racism in Delhi accentuates the power whiteness has in the Indian context (e.g. Verma 2023; Rai 2023 on spatialized race in Delhi).

Whiteness, then, shows itself as a privileged out-of-placeness or assumption of benign temporary status in the city. Whiteness, importantly, is also almost always read as a class marker—being white in Delhi means being seen as rich (which one probably is compared to the city's poor, although one might be poor in

[16] To claim to not know better can sometimes be a powerful tool, not just in terms of foreignness. For example Krishnan, writing about relatively privileged young women in South India, notes that to "appear to relinquish agency is often a means [...] to engage in transgressive practices [...] to claim to have been misinformed by someone, or simply to appear too naïve to have known better" (2016, 74).

comparison to the many actually rich, US dollar multimillionaires and billionaires in the city; cf. Bhandari 2019; Dasgupta 2014). In light of this, one can make connections between whiteness and classed performance. Male-presenting Indian cinema scholar Kumar's description of an experience at a working-class cinema in Delhi feels very relatable to me as a white person in similar spaces:

> "[W]hile I joined the queue for men, my friend was asked to go through the 'women's queue' in which she was the only one. I was taken aback when I was asked by the men in my queue to go through the other entrance. One after another, several of them suggested so. When I refused, they asked me to go to the front of that very queue so I could enter comfortably without having to wait with them. The baseline for both suggestions was the same. As I clearly did not look their kind, I was generously granted the right to escape the ordeal which would be routine discomfort for them, the underlying assumption being that I would not be used to it." (Kumar 2014, 188)

As part of normalizing the analysis of whiteness in India-based ethnographies, I tried to bring up racialized dynamics in the interviews in relatively light ways that I hoped would encourage the participants to discuss it with me without fear of me becoming defensive. Several of the participants seemed comfortable making (gentle) fun of me. Darsha expressed great joy in teasing me about my whiteness and making fun of herself for making fun of it. This became something of a bonding experience. Thinking about what made us become close friends, Darsha said it might have been "your acceptance of the fact that you're a white person? [laughs] [...] I mean I don't have to *bring these out* to you, right?" Darsha also laughed that since being white "*automatically* also means you have lesser brains," it made such "self-awareness" even more impressive. Another recurring joke of hers was to claim that I personally had a lot of (looted, colonial) money (which she would be happy to spend), and to refer to all white people as "American":

> "No no I *do* judge you because you're a white person [laughs]. You bloody Americans! But... Oh my god that was recorded! [both laugh] What was I saying? Absolutely politically incorrect."

Interactions such as these served to address the topic in a playful way. Releasing pressure, they could perhaps open up possibilities of deeper discussion about race and racism in the future. At the same time, they called attention to the very real structural differences between us and particularly to the fact that a white person doing a PhD on India was a cliché. While many of the people in these circles in Delhi had gone to prestigious universities in the 'West' (more prestigious than anything I dreamt about going to), an inequality still existed in the research topics and the directions of flows of knowledge. Darsha said she had seen "that gaze

happen a lot. It's really humiliating to be looked at in that way." One "of the reasons we're *friends*" was that she did not feel this with me.

Jyoti also noted this, saying that "Indian people abroad do PhDs on Indian people. That's about how academics are structured, and who gets to be an authority on what." Because of all the anthropologists that have worked on India, Jyoti felt that Indian people were almost "conditioned to being the people *at this end* of the microscope. Where we'll be asked about our cultural practices that are interesting." While Jyoti laughed at the silly "what is your national costume?"-type questions she felt white people were asking, the largely unidirectional flow of research could also be seen to have other, less obvious consequences for her understanding and knowledge of the world: "It's almost like you [white people] *have* no cultural practices, I wouldn't even know what to ask you," "I would never think of asking you what—like 'what is your traditional dress?' Because I just assume you don't have one." Indians then, she said, are "used to being the sort of 'interesting ones,' in quotes."

As I *look* different from the interviewees in terms of racialization and—in a different sense—gendered performance, it forces the research to explicitly address things that might otherwise be left unsaid. As I have discussed elsewhere (Harju 2021), researchers who in a way *pass* as similar-seeming (to outsiders) as the people being researched might not feel forced to elaborate on their positionality to the same extent. This comes with the risk of slipping into a role of 'natural' insiderness or embodied knowing.

I write the word look in italics because of the particular relevance first impressions have in the case of research like this. Stereotypical assumptions made about the research/researcher on the basis of looks bring out interesting epistemic points. This is most visible in the case of gender—perhaps the positionality we are the quickest to judge on the basis of appearances, something we have only limited power over. Trans scholar Z. Nicolazzo notes that "the notion of bodily autonomy as a singular, personal construct may be a fiction," meaning that "[m]y body is not wholly my own" (Nicolazzo 2023, 28). Trans scholar Aaron Devor (2006) further notes that even people working around questions of gender can be quick to judge epistemologies (what someone can or should know) on the basis of looks. As someone inhabiting multiple, queered genderings over the course of this study, I have felt how regularly to look is assumed to be. "Don't you think the participating women might feel uncomfortable talking to you because you're a man?", someone once asked me at a gender studies workshop. What a surprise it must be for them to find out that I "am," in fact, not "a man," whatever that means (cf. Stryker 2008; Lugones 2020). Moreover, the statement seems strange in the context of contemporary gender studies. Perhaps it is the topic of parental negotiations that makes one think along certain lines: there seems to be something about

researching particularly “daughters” and “mothers” that puts us back into a gynocentric time where gender can appear an unproblematic category of knowledge.

Yet, in our everyday lives most of us—including myself—function largely according to the principle of to look is to be, even when we know that it is neither sociologically true or politically correct. In this work, I have tried to show my own humility in relation to this: the setting in Delhi is extremely binary even when the more trans- or decolonially informed theory is not. Judgments about, for example, safety or whom to trust are made, every second, on the basis of physically imagined categories and visual cues of ‘man’ and ‘woman.’ Sometimes, these decisions can determine whether one lives or dies (cf. Lodhia 2015). In a hostile and often wildly sexist climate like Delhi, non-normatively gendered people make similar image-based judgments all the time. It is something of a conundrum. Yet, the nuanced and often sensitively reflexive interview settings allowed for openings in which to think about gender and shared experiences beyond simple binaries; I see this as another strength of ethnography as a method.

2.6. Similarity and agency

While stressing the central ways in which the participants and I are differently located, it is also important to note the many ways in which personal/ethical similarities are created and discussed in the interviews. Here, one needs to zoom in, so to speak, to many of the other things—what we often dismissively call the ‘personal’—happening in the research relationships. For example, two participants mentioned how our affective similarities in sharing a deep sense of guilt in relation to our families was a possible reason for us getting along so well. Other similarities that came up related to ongoing financial precarity, mental health issues, and surviving in the confusing structures of power in academic work.

The women also often talked about themselves in ways that would be strikingly similar to ways in which I myself would talk, using similar cultural references. I see this as a product of not just my years in Delhi, but something produced by the globalized, time- and age-specific circulation of popular discourses around family, gender, class, race, caste, and more. “I live in a bubble,” one of the participants said—mine and the participants’ “bubbles” would often come to overlap even with us occupying different positions within them. In terms of methodological capital (Gallagher 2000), I do not think friendship and intimacy in any way erase power imbalances, but they can potentially make space for a frankness around them (cf. Disha 2023). Friendship, care and love—and the risk of being ‘called out’—in the research setting can also serve as a strong personal motivation for the researcher to do better.

The way things become a bubble could also be noted in how close the setting of this study in Delhi was to academic South Asia circuits internationally. In many of the conference and workshop rooms that I have spoken about this work during the years spent making it, women of Indian backgrounds have commented on how familiar many of the things the participants were saying sounded to them. In a couple of cases, people told me it sounded like I was talking about *them*. The step from Europe to Delhi was suddenly very small, perhaps illustrating the ways in which "all cities [can be understood] as connected to a world of cities" (Zahan 2020, 47). I see this as a strength of this work: because of what has been called a "sacred divide" (Wacquant 1989, 2) separating sociologists from those being studied, it is rare that people like the ones that academic scholars are writing and talking about actually get to sit in the rooms in which they are being talked about.

As the interviewees themselves were all well-versed in the language of social sciences, they also often provided an analysis and feminist commentary of what they were saying, in real time during the interview. The material, then, has often already gone through a kind of sociologization. What we encounter here is a setting that often seems to keep asking itself: 'seen from this and this angle, how do I look?' and then answers itself back with yet another view. To me, this experience is both humbling and exhilarating, pushing me to think further about the possibilities, meanings, and divisions of labor present in empirical research. It is the analysis of analysis, then, that becomes the topic of the research.

While the shared sociological languages bring a lot to the analytic depth of this work, the assumed overlap of moral positions in feminist circles in which the participants and I moved also affected how the interviews were shaped. The idea of a shared moral space meant that the participants also knew that self-identification *as feminist* was something that also described me. This meant that some of the ethical squeezes they could find themselves in in relation to what the right thing to do regarding one's parents was could also trouble me, even if my background was different. Whatever questions of right and wrong praxis that were being posed by the women to themselves were also indirectly posed to me. The sense of a shared ethical space also allowed for discussions about the complexities of building trust beyond simple structural markers.

"There's *so much* to be said for [...] the infinity of variables that go into constituting a human being," Shriya said. By this she meant that feminist "discourse," even when being explicitly intersectional, usually only paid attention to a limited number of variables, often depending on what was popular at a given moment. This, she felt, could strip actual interactions of their humanity:

> "And, like, if we think about you and me, I feel so much of how we *actually* interact is about the dynamics of our particular friendship and our personalities—which has to do with what kind of people we are,

> how confident we are, how loud, and what we've done together before. It's got to do with what kind of networks we have in this city, what kind of negotiation power do we have in this city. And like if one would *really* want to make a structural analysis of us, you need to take into account so many variables. So many more than you might think."

Trust had to be built in more coalitional and active ways, she felt, not on presumptions of (dis)similarity:

> "The goal here was never to able to flatline everyone into a single, uniform sense of 'Now that everything is correct, we can finally get about to relating to each other in a non-problematic way.' It's not gonna happen, and it shouldn't be the point!"

Participants like Shriya, then, did not refute the power of structures and inequalities in the research setting, but noted that there were a lot more interesting nuances than what reductions to structural markers would allow.

Other interviewees also approached the research setting as one of multiple and evolving power relations, some potentially extractive and others less negative. Some seemed amused by my (white) anxiety about somehow "harming" the participants through my research. "I mean, come on," one of the women said: "You're dealing with feminists, I'm sure they have agency." Furthermore, in the case of interviewees from wealthy families, it was not altogether clear that classed differences would somehow 'favor' me. Aditi, laughing, rebuked my worries about the nature of transnational research as being informed by what could ultimately be understood as a patronizing form of racism:

> "Indian privileged is plenty privileged. So I don't have a problem with saying no to you and throwing you out of my house. [...] I think this idea of 'powerless native' might be going a bit far."

At the same time, I do not mean to romanticize the position of the women as somehow purely agentic. There is plenty of power I, the researcher, have over the presentation given here. There are also important differences in the positionalities of the interviewees. Aditi was a wealthy, globally elite-educated Brahmin woman from a family of (in her own description) "industrialists" and community elders. Women in her family occupied leading roles. Unlike many of the others, she had a lot to fall back on. She was also an excellent storyteller with a very thought-through narrative of herself, which she seemed to be happy to tell me—saying she was very used to "psychoanalyzing" herself and her family. Others again appeared more emotionally vulnerable in our meetings, perhaps running a greater risk of getting hurt.

2.7. On remembering

On Aditi's sofa, next to the large terrace, I noticed how different the apartment was from her last one, in one of Delhi's urban villages. Laughing, she said her parents considered her old neighborhood "*insurmountably* terrible," lacking the "visible class markers" they would expect. The new place was alright for them; her sister had even come for a visit.

During the fieldwork, I made floor-plan sketches of the participants' apartments I spent time in order to remember them, as people kept moving (see chapter 6). In the interviews, the topic of how memory was shaped would reoccur. Stories were told with varying levels of confidence or coherence, sometimes hesitant or jumpy, sometimes sounding very thought-through. Often, stories explicitly looked back at previous ways of narrating the self, tracing an evolution of thoughts, sometimes criticizing a self-developmentalism that would make one think one had become somehow "better" in a linear way.

Ethnography can try to capture nuance, multiplicity, and "movement, not necessarily wrought by external forces but as an inherent, quotidian, destructive and productive characteristic of time" (Singh 2008, 261). Any 'certainty' felt at the time of the interviews was ephemeral: none of the characters, selves, or presentations of this study exist any longer in the way they did before the Covid-19 pandemic, except perhaps in the author's mind and, in fragments, in this text.

Anthropologist Bhrigupati Singh argues that time is especially important to an ethnographer: "As a mode of investigation, ethnography has a distinctively high stake in the existence, or loss, or chaotic plenitude, of an empirical present, a moment" (Singh 2008, 261). Singh's point is that time can be thought of as both the ever-flowing everyday and as *moments* that have a huge impact on what information is passed on to the ethnographer: "A different decade, another year, or even simply another day, might have yielded a very different view" (ibid, 263). As in the case of Singh's study, those moments are often long gone by the time texts are published.

At the beginning of this chapter, we read Astha's story about patriarchy: both almost making her not exist (the sex-selective abortion) and then saving her life (through the father's and grandparents' decision to stop her mother from getting an abortion). While the tone was different from Astha's, much of Aditi's story was similar: an almost-abortion had affected her own gendered experiences, her relation to her family, and had in some sense also come to shape her thoughts about feminism. She mused on this remembering, commenting on several questions surrounding narrative, self, and research:

> "We remember, somehow, what made an impact on you. Which changed your life. I have this… I'm acknowledged, universally, to have a

> bad memory. So the things that I *do* remember, I feel quite convinced about, because my memory is sort of self-selecting. And I have this memory, that my sister was actually contradicting. She doesn't think this ever happened. And neither of us wants to bring it up with our parents to ask. But… *my* memory is of when I was very small, my parents telling this story of how when they looked at the ultrasound they thought I was going to be a boy. And, well, sex selection was not yet illegal. And they were convinced that I was going to be a boy and then I popped out and I wasn't."

The parents were not happy about it, Aditi said:

> "And *as* a kid, I perceived that this story was told with a certain disappointment. And that, subsequently, many years later, when I discovered that my mother had had an abortion of a child who came after me. Because it was a girl. And that's something we somehow universally decree as really really wrong. It convinced me that that earlier recollection was true. It reinforced that memory of mine. My sister says that never happened. My sister says I was never… that I was always, 100% biologically girl, expectation-wise as well. Except that that memory or imagining has a very strong basis to how I subsequently saw myself. So, it's the origin point of a story that's stuck with me for what, 25 years. That I wasn't really, conventionally, supposed to be a girl. And that the fact that I was a girl, in whatever sense of that word, was a *disappointing thing*. And that I felt, through my childhood and my adolescence, that I had to somehow *make up for it*."

In this story she comments on (self-)misogyny as a culturally or socially transmitted internalization, in ways reminiscent of Julia Serano's (2007) analysis. Aditi repeats that she cannot be sure if this story is "true" or not, contrasting it with how her sister remembers things, but notes that the impact on her parental relationship is there regardless: "I don't know if my parents ever saw a fuzzy ultrasound, but does it matter? […] For many years I looked very harshly at my parents, because of this."

Ethnographers see stories not just as description of 'how one is' but as how the teller wants themselves to be (Cortazzi 2001). In Astha's and Aditi's case, the stories of "growing up unwanted" (Srinivasan 2014) become models through which their own journeys are then made sense of. Sharada Srinivasan writes that "in a context of extreme gender discrimination, children are not only acutely aware of the differential treatment meted out to them, but also question the moral rightness that there are different entitlements for girls and boys, even though they may later go on to accept what parents and other adults do" (ibid., 238). Despite being at the other Indian extreme in terms of class, caste, and geographical

location than Srinivasan's sample, Astha and Aditi express a similar awareness and indignation.

The participants are also aware of the contingency of their remembering. Khushi, like Aditi, commented on memory: "These are the things that just get stuck in your head and you keep thinking about that, even though they don't really matter, but by the fact that you *remember* it, you know it matters." The participants would repeatedly stress that whatever they said was *their* memories about how they understood their gendering, not the only possible story of their family backgrounds. As e.g. Carol Smart (2007) writes, the strength of biography lies in the way it emphasizes the separate experiences of family members—Lily also said that she and her sister were very close, but that their memories of their experiences growing up felt "almost" like having had "different parents."

In this chapter, I have outlined the ideas informing the emotionally attuned, relational, and narrative-focused ethnographic approach that shapes my research. I have discussed the participant selection and the dynamics between interviewees and myself in greater detail. I treat the stories as relationally produced (both in relation to the narrators' families and in relation to me), emotionally or affectively dense stories of self-understanding. I noted how vulnerability, uncertainty, and socially positioned trauma comes to affect what is said and how, and how the particular emotional registers present in the interview situations themselves further shape the results. I have stressed both the structural differences and the more intimate similarities between the participants and myself, and shown how the research participants asserted their agency in both explicit and implicit ways.

In the next chapter, I will look at how so-called family values are articulated, defended, and contested both in popular culture and in India-related research.

Chapter Three: ‘Family values’

“So, whose demons are we really talking about?”, Meera asked rhetorically. During a work stint in rural North India, she had felt that working-class women would sing about sex, make jokes about killing their mothers-in-law, and carry their bodies in ways that would seem somewhat “scandalizing” to “urban” “middle-class” observers like Meera. What we, in the research interview, might think of as the normative family, gender, and sexuality would not present the whole picture of actual families—the demons were middle-class and ‘upper’-caste, she implied.

As feminist scholarship has been at pains to demonstrate, woman is not a universal category. Thinking with calls to debrahmanize decolonization, one can argue that gender is not a national category either, at least not in India (Patil 2013[17]). The same goes for family. Within this, some family normativities carry a lot more weight than others: Dalit-Bahujan, working-class, and trans and queer formations are not given the same legitimacy as class- and caste-privileged mainstreams (e.g. Agrawal 2024).

Certain notions of “Indian families” also show up a lot more than others in Indian and diasporic popular culture: Google “Indian parents” and you’ll find a large number of jokes made by people of South Asian heritage about what are seen as the typical traits of their families. Among the clichés are never-ending high expectations regarding educational or professional success, strict gender norms, constant reminders to get married—and expectations of loyalty toward parents, in-laws, and elders in general. In making sure such demands are met, various techniques of coercion, shame, and abuse are to be used: sometimes one gets smacked with a *chappal*, but mostly allegiance is to be achieved through emotional blackmail and accusations of ingratitude. Meanwhile, expressions of positive emotions or pride about one’s children are to be reserved for (bragging to) outsiders, not for the ears of the children themselves. Jokes such as these often make it clear they are to be understood to be said with love, emphasizing a genuine gratitude and tenderness toward parents—despite it all.

[17] Patil (2013) uses the expression “brahmanic-gendered” for the subject of a lot of sociologies about “Indian women.”

Family, the way it is treated in this thesis, is "a form of ideology rather than a descriptive concept" (Smart 2007, 27, paraphrasing Barrett and McIntosh 1982). The previous chapter noted how natural-sounding words like 'love' can be analyzed as structuring forces that create group identification, coherence, and loyalty, as well as legitimizing the use of force (Ahmed 2003; Nash 2011). Empirically, scholars like Robinson (2014) demonstrate specifically how Indian parental control of adult children is often framed as care, deeply entwined with worrying and incessant checks to see whether a child is okay. In the language of feminist scholarship, the strategies of moral and affective governance that such parents employ (e.g. Ahmed 2004a; Haritaworn 2015; Babu and Joseph 2025) create both immaterial and spatial disciplinary regimes that shape what can be done and where (e.g. Phadke et al 2011; Krishnan 2021; Gupta 2020).

To grasp the affective and feminist issues related to negotiations of family, one needs an understanding of popular caste- and class-coded family constructions in India. In this chapter, I will look at constructions of the ideological "Indian" family across research interviews, in recent scholarship, as well as in Indian popular culture and litterature. I see this kind of blending of sources as typical for my method and meaningful for the ambitions of this thesis.

Images matter here not so much because they necessarily describe (all, most) real-world families accurately, but because they form part of the narratives or folk vocabularies through which lives such as those of the women studied in this thesis are made sense of both by themselves and by the society around them. Popular narratives also affect how scholars (me) approach issues. In theoretical terms, they can be seen as the imaginaries of family or imaginative geographies of home (Blunt and Dowling 2022) with which we work. Narratives can achieve a discursive power that stabilizes specific imaginaries of family while sidelining others.

This could be seen in the interviews and other fieldwork settings in Delhi, where young feminist women would draw on popular scripts of difficult parents, often half-jokingly, to describe their own situations. A sentence like "my mother would beat the shit out of me" could be said between women without anyone batting an eye, since it was understood to be normal, seen through a shared interpretative shorthand as "typically Indian." The generalization would be repeated to me in interviews. The following dialogue with Shriya illustrates this:

> Shriya: So I had an effectively normal childhood, for most Indian kids.
> Lotti: What does that mean?
> Shriya: In the sense that all Indian parents are abusive as shit.

The deliberately sweeping expression, said with a kind of humor, captures the assumed taken-for-grantedness of certain forms of control.

Before the kind of meme culture popular at the time of the study, a long legacy of other representations had been building similar views of the family. The widely known 'truth' of difficult families has been reflected in any number of e.g. TV or movie representations of the fictionalized struggles of everyday middle-class life.

The impact of such representations was also stressed by the participants. Neha laughed that "the only way the Indian community empathizes is when there's a film. Which is very melodramatic! It's the only way they understand." Commonly, Indian TV series break with a "fantasmic communitarian universe" (Ghosh 2012, 432)—where families would get along—instead showing a "deeply conflicted [...] space" (ibid., 433). The latter is presented as more true to life. Indian media scholar Shohini Ghosh calls this a "dystopic universe where the imagined notion of 'Indian family values' lies defeated" in front of "oppressive hierarchies" and the "domestic violence" of actual family praxis (ibid.).

At the same time as control is highlighted in popular narratives, the importance of emotional loyalty toward the family, despite it all, has also been repeated at least since Amitabh Bachchan's iconic 1975 line "*Mere paas maa hai*" (I have [my] mother) from the movie *Deewar* (Chopra 1975). Pritha Chakrabarti (2024) argues that there exists an overarching ideology of familialization in India, which functions to keep specifically upper-caste 'good' daughters and sons within the family fold. Chakrabarti's point is that familialization—which she sees as a class- and caste-privileging ideology—functions to *conditionally* allow for specific forms of (what looks like) resistance or alterity to exist within the family fold, in order to dissuade children from identifying with other forms of social organizing or support networks, which could have radical consequences for the primacy of the family (and caste and class) system. The point of familialization, Chakrabarti argues, is to make the natal/marital family and kin appear as the only (legitimate) form of community-building and last line of support.

While familialization includes larger kin-building, it should be understood as centered on generational (parent-child) relationships of teaching and respect that continue regardless of the age of the subjects. Up until more recent times, this could arguably be seen in the way "couples do not kiss in Hindi cinema because it would grant primacy to the sexual or conjugal relationship, thus undermining the authority of the extended familial or social relationships over the individual" (Prasad 1998, paraphrased in Kapur 2014, 74).

To a white person writing about India, the prevalence of Indian family stereotypes poses a question about reinforcing potentially othering narratives. One needs to acknowledge how the story can be read against a long history of orientalism that claims e.g. individualism or equality as somehow 'Western' values while reading India as relational, collectivist, and communal. One needs to be wary of how morally transparent selves can then also become positioned as

'Western' while making 'Indian' selves conflicted. White, middle-class scholarship and e.g. queer popular culture have also been criticized for the apparent assumption that the well-being of the assumed-to-be-distinct individual is more important than that of the assumed-to-be-separate collective (e.g. Roshanravan 2019; hooks 2000b; Duttchoudhury and Hartman 2015). A singular focus on individualism can be seen as particularly problematic or colonial insofar as it portrays an imagined scale and progression of morality or development (cf. Narayan 1998). The idea that brown women could flourish if weren't for family repression easily becomes an orientalist trope (Spivak 1988; Mohanty 2003).

Rather than positing what I see as a false dichotomy between colonially constructed categories, I read all subjectivity as relationally constituted through ongoing relations across multiple (and different) contexts (cf. Roseneil and Ketokivi 2016). If selves are relationally built, they are therefore inherently multiple, with a very true possiblity for conflict. I also do not read relationality as an alternative to (individual) agency or autonomy but rather think of relationality as the condition under which agency itself becomes possible (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000). At the same time, following Thapan (2009, 2019), relational formations should not be understood as uniform or harmonious, but will be shaped by hierarchy, contradiction, and the unequal structures of power within which they will be formed. The ethnographers' task is, then, is to examine how different relational configurations produce different and unequally valued selves (cf. Skeggs 1994). Logics of familialization aim to produce *certain* kinds of relational selves—this does not mean that less or non-familialized selves are not relational.

Like Srivastava (2022) or Ramdas (2015), I am not interested in the "Indian family" as something given but as something that emerges as a discourse with a given explanatory power in a setting. What is important to note is that the use of "Indian" generalizations is not a performance for the foreign ethnographer; generalizations happen not just during research interviews but in any number of casual conversations between people in a setting.

In the previous chapter, I noted the creation of what can be called emotional communities through talking about family issues. I understand the use of generalization as having an important comparative and solidaric function: participants mirror and compare themselves to other young women 'like' them. Sometimes such stories entail an element of humorous exasperation, with comedy serving as an outlet for the felt ridiculousness of it all. For example, a woman in this setting told a story about another young Delhi-based woman she knew. In the story, the parents of said woman lived in the southern city of Chennai. The woman's father—a medical doctor—was complaining about losing customers because of the unmarried status of the daughter who lived across the country.

How could he be a dependable doctor if he was unable to "to get his daughter married"? The story was comical, but also understood as something to be taken verbatim: the lifestyle and moral/political choices of the daughter could have materially negative consequences for her parents and the extended family, even from such a distance.

While I understand the use of "Indian" as contributing to a construct rather than reflecting a given general truth, this does not mean that the participants' analysis of their own families as complex, controlling, and often violent should be seen as untruthful. The participants move within, and narrate themselves through, a world in which they and/or their friends commonly "live in fear" of their parents (as one participant said), and in which being a daughter often means a calibration of what will or will not provoke sanctions.

3.1. Constructions of daughterhood

"[F]eminists underline that home is a key site in the oppression of women," Blunt and Dowling (2006, 15) write. As I will discuss in more detail in the next section, the scholarship on (class- and caste-coded) Indian family relations also underlines what can be called oppressive or at least highly unequal relationships between parents and children, including (unmarried) adult ones. Those seen as women (or female children) are particularly vulnerable. Daughterhood can be called an intergenerational process, created in relation to older generations' narratives, expectations, and anxieties. In this light, most of the family descriptions contained in this thesis do not come to seem particularly unusual.

Despite a kind of shared, almost banal recognition of parental attempts at control as an issue deeply connected to not just personal agency but the reproduction of gender, class, and caste in India, a lack of scholarship and systematic theorization has been noted (Geetha 2018). The participants regularly approached their own situations in terms of imperatives of privatization, an affective structure that made it difficult to speak (cf. Schultermandel at al 2022; Bradford and Sartwell 1997). Darsha described being taught that "good families" kept their issues private, and that "dirty laundry" should not be "aired" outside the home. She expressed repeatedly hearing this when her parents were fighting. Even at the time of the interviews, after living alone for several years, the call to keep family matters private felt powerful enough to make it "sting" when she brought things up. Going against the norm of not talking about things would risk tearing things apart—Darsha said she might never have met people who would be able to speak openly about "what their family has done and *still* maintain a sort of talking relationship." Similarly, Jyoti felt her family had "a value about… criticizing but not really judging." This meant that while "the fault[s] of your family are going to

be *abundantly* evident to you [...] you cannot hold that as evidence for making a judgment about them."

In cases of a breakdown of family relationships, the desire not to keep in touch could be from either or both sides (see chapter 8). Yet, the right to be upset was not seen to be equal; parents were felt to follow different rules than adult children. If, as Astha said, parents were to be "god's representative on earth," it meant that they were allowed to "be awful to you as parents" while "you're never supposed to tell them that they're being awful parents." Astha felt that what parents talked about as "respect" was, in practice, "about hierarchy" and not about mutual recognition; you were "never going to be equal to your parents." Within such a system, simply pointing out that there was something worth pointing out could be seen as offensive: "'Disrespecting' your parents is when you don't allow them to disrespect you," said another interviewee. Parents would feel that questioning the "authority that [they] generally feel that they are" would be deeply unsettling.

I read such an affective structure of hierarchical privatization as also contributing to the invisibilizing of daughterhood and daughters in the extant Indian feminist scholarship on gendered family tensions. While *mother*hood and the ways in which "the glorification of [it] in India coexists with the subjugation of [actual] mothers" (Sarkar 2020, 3) have received a lot of attention in feminist scholarship (see chapter 7), *daughter*hood is rarely the primary analytic site. This can be seen as reinforcing a model of mater-normativity (to appropriate a term from Nandy 2017), where some family members are deemed more important (for feminism) than others. In such a model, reminiscent of the idea of the feminist "matrophor" (Henry 2004), older generations are coded as more important than the younger generations and knowledge is imagined as being passed down but not passed back up. If Indian "mothers are worshipped as goddesses, considered sacred as nature and nation, praised as the source of care, love, and emotion-building for their children" (Bhaumik and Sahu 2021, 66) and daughters are mainly expected to grow up to one day become such mothers themselves, this generational, caste-entangled reverence can also be understood as reflected in relation to the status given to academic/feminist foremothers (cf. M. Rao 2018).

To combat this somewhat transitional role usually given to daughters, daughterhood was in the thesis fieldwork made into a key site of feminist analysis. I often asked the interviewees directly what they thought daughterhood meant. For Maria, daughterhood was "like... uhm, *accepting* that kind of subordination. Because I know that from both ends, I'm at a disadvantage." By "both ends," she meant her gender and social age. Noting the same, Astha said daughterhood meant that "you have the variable of behaving like a 'good girl,' but you also have the variable of behaving like a 'good child' [...] So, you know, you're *made* to feel small. You're made to feel like your opinions don't have value." Darsha responded

to the question with humor, referencing a popular Bollywood movie from a few years before:

> "You've not watched the movie Piku? Or have you? It's that one with Deepika [Padukone] and Amitabh [Bachchan], and he's that annoying father who stays with Deepika and just like *ruins* her life. Uh-huh? You sense where I'm going with that? [laughs] Yeah, okay so I'll tell you what daughterhood means!"

In the movie Piku (Sircar 2015), set largely in the CR Park neighborhood of South Delhi, the titular character, a young, Bengali Brahmin (like Darsha), a successful architect, lives with her hypochondriac father, who is openly casteist, classist, and generally annoying. Like many other Indian movies about upper-middle-class savarna families, the film is perhaps meant to be a heartfelt story about coming to terms with where one comes from, despite the difficulties and the obstinacy and sense of entitlement of the parents. As Darsha made clear, it could also be read as a story about how the man-child-father "just like *ruins* [the daughter's] life." Her own father had also seen the movie, which had given him "bad ideas," Darsha laughed—now he "has full plans of becoming that sort of hypochondriac" and living with her in his old age.

Darsha, in her early 20s during the interview, circled back to narrate what she saw as the more conventional script in which being a daughter meant studying, getting married, and becoming "somebody else's"—that is, belonging to a husband's family. This is the classic tale of the daughter being a 'guest' in her parental home. Carolyn Elliott has noted how women's stories of their natal families can take on an almost furtive character within a "normative view of Indian family life as patrilineal and patrilocal" (2005, 10). Darsha saw her own role (and that of Piku) as closer to what is classically assigned to sons in "good" families, including the expectation that she will take care of her father. In Darsha's view, this "dutiful daughter" position gave her a certain legitimacy among people in her hometown. There, she said, people never understood her desire to not get married and to make her own money: "'What's wrong with marriage?'" they would ask. When she told them "No I really want to earn and then I want to take care of my father and live with him," her ideas became "quite acceptable": "Suddenly that gives a lot more leverage." People would see her as a "'dutiful daughter. She loves her father.'"

3.2. Indian family studies

In order to give a fuller picture of the understandings of daughterhood, I here look at Indian scholarship and feminist literature on middle-class savarna families. The material can be divided into the purely academic and into texts stemming from a

more (auto)biographical feminist space. The division is, however, often not all that clear in practice, as much writing on women and family in India has been produced by academic feminists using a more narrative or dialogue-like tone (e.g. Bhattacharya 2006; Raja and Souter 2010). Daughterhood is also touched upon in other, not necessarily particularly feminist, disciplines, such as Indian studies of education or psychiatric medicine. Further discussions can also be found in less empirical disciplines such as literary theory and psycho- or cultural analysis. Taken together, these bodies of litterature also do their part in shaping discourse and how one is able to imagine 'reality' in the field of family politics.

Reading the scholarship, one notices the difficulty of keeping apart the idea of 'the Indian family' as a construction—a result of discourses and certain relational engagements, not a reflection of the diversity of actual families—and 'the Indian family' as an assumed-to-exist entity that entails certain kinds of relations or selves. The warning given by Srivastava is ever-pertinent: against any idea of an "Indian family," he writes, there is, "of course" "no 'typical' family (or woman)." "At best," he states, "we might be able to delineate a broad cultural habitus [...] or an 'assemblage'" (Srivastava 2007, 261). In practice, I see the available family-related scholarship as risking slipping into operating as if "the Indian family" was a given object.

For example, in feminist scholar Jasodhara Bagchi's posthumous book *Interrogating Motherhood* (2017), the foreword states: "Of particular relevance for India is the family—immediate and extended—with its hold over loyalties of members, an economy in transition to capitalism, a deeply hierarchic society stratified by class and caste, and persistent conflicts over religion, language, ethnicity, and other differences" (Krishnaraj 2017, ix). The family, then, is said to hold power over class, caste, and culture—touching everyone regardless of stark structural differences. Similarly, well-known cultural analyst Sudhir Kakar stresses the idea of India as a particularly "relational" society. In terms of gender, Kakar argues that an Indian woman's identity is traditionally defined "by her relationships to others," particularly "intimate people," i.e. family (2001, 7). Psychoanalytically, this is said to mean that being alone—isolated from the family, that is—would be psychologically devastating for an individual (ibid., 35). Elsewhere, psychiatric studies also stress that society in India "values interdependence, [an] authoritative-submissive relation between parents and children with defined, rigid roles for each family member" (Shah et al 2016, 25). Here, objects like "family," "India," and "woman" again become sneakily stabilized, removed from their processes of becoming.

My point is not to challenge an overall relational construction of selves or the value of interdependence as empirical facts in given situations—this thesis contributes to such views—but to keep reminding us that the idea of 'India' (as

generalized from certain kinds of middle-class, 'upper'-caste examples) comes after the fact, not that 'India' produces certain kinds of relations. While it is easy enough to agree with classic sociologist André Bétteile's sweeping statement that "[t]he family has been and continues to be one of the strongest institutions of Indian society, in all regions, among all communities and in all social classes", it is the "very great range of variation" one really needs to pay attention to (Bétteile 1993, 440). I here agree with scholar of Indian masculinity Joseph Alter, who, like Thapan (2009) and Srivastava (2010), questions whether a contained self "in an autobiographical and psychological sense" should be "regarded as a singular, holistic determinator of social facts" (Alter 2011, 58). What this means is also that "family" is and should not be treated as the reason for everything, or something that is similarly experienced across both individual and structural variation.

Indian family scholarship also zooms in on the practical consequences of family relationality, particularly for women. Bhandari and Titzmann, in a special issue on "family realities in South Asia" note that "[w]hilst family is seen to provide a sense of unity to individuals and the [Indian] nation, it is also [...] an important site of oppression, and of socialization of conformist gender roles" (Bhandari and Titzmann 2017, 4). Jyotsna Belliappa (2013) writes of the emotional allegiance created, particularly in girl children, by their parents' perceived sacrifices—as they enter the job market, they often do so as a form of giving back to their parents (sometimes literally). Feminist scholars have also argued that not just individual parents but (English-language) media and national politics also tout Indian middle-class children as the glory of the family, caste, class, and country, representing a kind of Christ complex (Kumar 2011). These expectations placed on progeny can be read as emphasizing conformism and familializing logics.

Understanding the constructed nature of family means understanding inequalities and hierarchies constructed both around and within it. Caste pretentions are seen as a central mechanism through which outsiders to the normative family and the women in it can be constructed (e.g. Chakravarti 2018). The production of good 'upper'-caste family women is understood to require the othering and stigmatization of those women seen as 'lower' caste (e.g. Arya 2020a, 2020b; Gupta 2016). In other words, caste "compartment[alizes] the rights and dignity to each caste in an unequal and graded manner", with women of each caste having "less individual rights" (Arya 2020a, xi) than men of that caste. Scholars like Shailaja Paik argue for the need to understand "sex-gender-caste [as a] complex" (2022, 7) that is "circular" and "relational" in nature (ibid., 22), where the status of the 'upper' castes enables the construction of particularly Dalits as "*ashlil*" (vulgar, indecent), which in turn aids them in the accumulation of privilege and capital, "further consolidat[ing] their high-castedness" (ibid., 2022,

68). Thapan also notes that particular forms of "[f]emininity, as that 'way of being' which bestows status, respectability and recognition" (2009, 11) are something that different women have very different possibilities of embodying, depending on their social position. This is reminiscent of Skeggs (1997) who, famously, argues that so-called correct femininity should in certain contexts be understood not (simply) as a limitation but a potential form of (masculine-relational) capital, possibly convertible into more stable forms.

Inside of what is understood as a caste patriarchy, different men and women in the family inhabit different roles in the upholding of it, roles that also change with age and marital status (e.g. Lamb 2000, 2022). While gendered youth can also be a position that lets you get away with things (e.g. Gilbertson 2023)—and is approached from that angle too in this work—scholarship generally argues that the "ethos of maintaining 'family harmony' and absolute 'obedience to elderly' are [generally] used to suppress the younger members" (Chadda and Deb 2013, 302). For example, a study on reasons for staying in the queer closet in India notes that fears of "disrupting" the family "traditions" are a major component of not wanting or daring to discuss topics of tension with the parents (Achar and Gopal 2023, 169).

In its extreme forms, the idea of obedience shows up in the (few) existing larger-scale social studies of various forms of child abuse in India, which note widespread but mainly silenced mental, physical, and/or sexual violence against or abuse of children by family members (e.g. Choudhry et al. 2018; Carson et al 2013; Kulkarni and Raje 2015; Nigam and Soperna 2017; Virani 2000). Family control (not just explicit abuse) has also been briefly touched upon in Indian psychiatric work: the result of maintaining family harmony is (arguably) that among the younger generations "[t]he resentment, however, passive and silent it may be, simmers [and] often manifests as psychiatric disorders" (Chadda and Deb 2013, 302). Psychological research specifically states that gendered expectations and family control have a serious impact on women's mental health, being a major factor behind depression and (attempted) suicide (e.g. Bhattacharya et al 2019; Ram et al. 2014; Nair et al 2015; Sharma et al 2013; Davar 1999).

Scholarship on social mobility (e.g. Vaid 2018) and reproduction of caste-class capital in educational institutions or the job market (e.g. Gopal 2012) also point at the crucial role of the family and household in perpetuating social inequality. Yet, to the best of my knowledge, no larger-scale empirical work addresses the question of macro-level social reproduction directly from the affective angle of family loyalty and obedience (cf. Bourdieu 1999, Atkinson 2014 on the family as a structural field). The potential economic, social, and emotional losses connected to alienating the family can be understood as a complex sociological-psychological nexus keeping people in place, which warrants further scholarship.

3.3. Risk and control

While daughters inhabit a lower position within family hierarchies, their behavior can be "central to the family's status" (Hunjan and Towson 2007, 61). Arguably, "[t]wo broad distinctions in the definition of the status of women can be made: status derived from autonomy, power, and control over resources and status derived from prestige, respect, and honor" (Ahmed-Ghosh 2004, 112). Ahmed-Ghosh sees "the former construct [as] the privilege of a small minority of women" (ibid.). In the latter, "caste-ridden" and "closed" community systems, the status of women is not simply a matter for the women (a 'personal' matter) but one affecting the entire family, as it is in their actions that "the family invests their *izzat* (honor and prestige)" (ibid., italics in original). The focus on honor and respectability can override the well-being and "*actual safety*" (Phadke et al. 2011, 29, emphasis in original) of daughters in more or less shocking or mundane ways. Unmarried women of peak reproductive age can be understood as of particular concern to families and normative society, as "honour—for losing or preserving—is located in the[ir] body" (Menon and Bhasin 1998, 58). In a study on Indian women's singlehood, Sarah Lamb notes that dishonor like "sexual impropriety" is "socially contagious" and can quickly spread across families (Lamb 2022, 113).

Daughterhood, in the sense discussed here, can then be understood as beginning with puberty and remaining particularly dangerous until contained "through heteropatriarchal endogamy" (Upadhyay 2020, 466; cf. Grover 2009 on post-marriage daughters' relations with natal families). What this also means is that heteronormative, caste-appropriate marriage can not simply be a personal thing—regardless of how it is experienced by those in it—but means "following the rules set and accepted by the wider society" (Donner 2008, 65), or what has been called "caste-based, cis-male ownership of female bodies" (Subramanian 2019, 57-8). Without the institution of endogamy, caste could also not survive in its current form (Ambedkar 2010; Tambe 2019; Kumar and Bakshi 2022; Disha 2023; Srivastava and Willoughby 2023; Gautam 2025)[18].

Risk connects back to the notion of inwardness (keeping away from the outside world) as central to the construction of 'upper'-caste womanhood (Gupta 2016). Inwardness, as has been discussed in earlier literature on e.g. employment and domesticity in India, is created in contrast to what is seen as the outward-facing

[18] As has been noted, endogamy should not be understood as a closed or absolute system but something that evolves and takes new forms across time, adding to its longevity. Despite the non-absolute nature of endogamy, what is striking is that—in the light of the best available data—only about 5-6% of all Indian marriages were outside of the *jati* or subcaste in 2011, with the situation not being different in cities (Ray et al. 2020). As the question is specifically about *jati,* one can more or less safely assume that most "intercaste" marriages, too, are between e.g. different but, in terms of status, similar caste (e.g. different Brahmins) and not between people of markedly different caste status. Data on the latter does not seem to exist.

nature of working class life (Ray and Qayum 2009). In the traditional sense, this could mean literally staying inside the home and being unaware of paid employment and other matters of the outside world. In the 'modern' context of this thesis, inwardness relates to parental ideas about how (adult) daughters should conduct themselves in and outside the family home, what kinds of employment are considered suitable for women like them, as well as the imperative to keep family issues private.

Talk about 'family' can in a way be crystallized as talk about what women should or should not do, specifically in terms of sex (cf. Phadke 2005a; Bose 2017; Krishnan 2021). Anthropologist Gayatri Reddy notes that "[m]ost accounts of honor [in South Asia] [...] emphasize the regulation of female sexuality; that is, the analysis is located squarely within the framework of sexual control and gender relations" (Reddy 2005, 41). Yet, izzat should be read more broadly than simply sexually; it is also about things such as displaying the right behavior, "such as graciousness, generosity, and evenness of temper" (ibid., 42). In Reddy's study, "the concept of izzat [...] has a moral valence that derives strength precisely from its diffusion beyond the axis of sex/gender to encompass a range of other hierarchical domains, including kinship, religion and class" (ibid., 43). The job of elders is to police this, as "[a] woman who exercises agency over herself [...] implies that her male guardians have been unable to control her behaviour and make decisions for her that best elevate their [the family's] status" (D'Lima et al. 2020, 24).

Popularly, married women are thought to have less power in their in-laws' home than with their natal kin. Yet, researchers have also noted how this can create another tendency to romanticize the parental home. Sharangpani notes how the women in her study spoke about "their beloved natal family (parents and siblings) [...] in stark contrast to the pain, suffering, and violence that marked life as a married woman. But upon deeper investigation, their coming of age narratives revealed childhood experiences of physical, sexual, and emotional violence inflicted by [family members and family friends] that took place within the boundaries of their natal homes" (2018, 536).

Thinking along Bourdieusian (1990, 1999) lines of the family as a field, we can also note examples from previous literature that show how the larger system of control is not automatically made weaker by changes in one axis of dependence, such as making money or being highly educated. For example, Clark (2016) looks at first-generation career women in urban India, paying attention to the tactics employed by the women in pursuing their ambitions. Despite the fact that the young women of Clark's study were often economically more 'successful' than their parents, the study notes that the need to keep the peace continued.

3.4. Creating spaces for speaking up

In the social context of the study—Delhi in the late 2010s—interesting popular-feminist attempts at formulating critiques of family loyalty came up. Books geared toward middle- to upper-class daughters could be seen as taking both a comforting and a consciousness-raising tone. Some, like *The Good Indian Girl* (Zaidi and Ravindra 2011), tackle these questions through humor. Others, like Deepa Narayan's *Chup* (2018) are angrier in tone. Here too, 'Indian' generalizability is central and made explicit; Narayan's aim is to "hold a mirror to *every* Indian woman" (emphasis mine), by which she means pointing out what she sees as women's internalization of the gendered policing that holds them in place. Narayan, writing popularly, is at liberty to make such a generalization. While this (perhaps financially pragmatic) insistence forecloses the possibility of a deeper caste or class analysis and again constructs a monolithic "India," I see the book as making an important contribution by stressing the analytic point–also made by me in this thesis–that affective regimes of care, control, guilt, and fear shape the reproduction of (quietly classed- and caste-coded) gender. The author writes:

> "Silence, however, is a female virtue. Girls are taught silence by appealing to one of the strongest values in Indian families – respect, especially for elders, particularly men. [...] As a noun, respect means admiration for someone's abilities, qualities or achievements. But [dictionary] definitions miss one aspect that is central to Indian thinking: status based on position in a hierarchy. This respect is expected; it is demanded. Demanding is an exercise of imposing one's will on another with the threat of punishment and withdrawal of benefits.
>
> The word respect has been hijacked in many homes. It has come to mean fear. It means control and obedience through threats, scolding, demeaning, punishing, followed by yelling or withering silence by loved authority figures in the guise of love." (Narayan 2018, 64-5)

Narayan argues that women have not been able to learn the constructive meaning of "argumentation" (ibid., 77): it "becomes synonymous with fighting, yelling, anger, hurting and the end of relationships and jobs" (ibid.). Women who argue with their families are bad women: "aggressive," "nagging," "vulgar," or "'whores'" (ibid., 79). Narayan also claims that little has changed with (what were then) teenagers and their parents, which means that girls are still taught to dowplay themselves and to please older family members. In a consciously provocative tone, Narayan writes that while "courage and strength" are something a lot of Indian women talk about having, it "mostly means the strength to cope with the ugliness

of what it means to be a woman" (ibid., 214). Centrally, the author comes to the conclusion that many of the women she spoke to, no matter how privileged, made it sound impossible to really say no to their parents, instead normalizing self-sacrifice and "compromise" (ibid.).

In relation to the possibility of the emergence of *collective* social movements analyzed in the introduction, Narayan makes the claim that relatively privileged women "intuitively" know that while they might be able to fight for other women's ("far away" "poor women") rights (e.g. through social movements or non-governmental organizations), it is too "disturb[ing to] the power balance" to fight for the same things in the own home (ibid., 188). In Narayan's view, when trying to do so, "the system fights back with all its might and the cost [...] falls on a single woman, a difficult price to bear alone" (ibid.). Going all the way at home will risk her "life and safety."

Narayan's aim is specifically popular, and thus stresses what she sees as the silenced negative side of families. Care and the support or privileges that come with not upsetting the families—issues that are much more prevalent across my study—are not the point of her book. Nevertheless, *Chup* as offers a meaningful dialogue with the interview material of this study.

As alluded to in the discussion about agency in the introduction, academic literature on intergenerational care, collaboration, and support (conscious and accidental) adds important nuancing and "faithful witnessing" (Roshanravan 2019, via Lugones) to arguments about the violence of families. A number of empirical accounts of contemporary Indian families with girls (adults or teenagers) stress the ways in which parents and their social, economic, and caste capital help "valued daughters" (Clark 2016) get ahead, or at least secure a comparatively advantageous position within restrictive structures (e.g. Subramanian 2019; Patel 2017; Braut and Schensul 2018; Larsen 2011; Gupta 2020; Radhakrishnan 2011). Daughters, in such work, appear as semi-independent actors with their (semi-)own ambitions, working both with and against parental, social reproduction-oriented strategies of moral and affective control.

While young women might prefer other tactics than fighting and argumentation, sources like Clark (2016) note active parent-daughter negotiations. Other scholars, like Krishnan (2017, 2018, 2022), focus more on the covert ways in which young women bend gendered rules in their own favor, not shying away from using any form of capital or privilege available to them. The feminist-scholarly point is to separate daughters *appearing* to do what their parents want from them actually doing so. Daughters are also not simply recipients of family normativity or of class and caste privilege but, like in Krishnan's work, come to understand and use their position–the different

resources available to them–in smaller and bigger ways that make certain forms of mobility or freedom (feel) possible. Similarly, much of Shilpa Phadke's work (e.g. Phadke et al. 2011; Phadke 2005a, 2005b, 2012) shows how class, caste, and the veil of 'respectable' femininity become active resources for urban women, used to manage risk and access desires and aspirations.

Thus, as Blackman (2015) has noted in the context of affect studies, taking vulnerability seriously should not mean flattening differences across structural locations. Many women, individually and collectively, benefit from and desire the upholding of (certain) structures of inequality. This becomes particularly important in a societal context where, as anti-caste scholar and polemicist Ravikant Kisana argues, the "individual is vulnerable, exposed and perennially under siege" and the "only insurance and assurance that an individual can somewhat legitimately summon is that of their kin, caste and community" (2025, 115). What this means is that creating a "meaningful separation" from the family "would come at the cost of losing [...] cultural vocabulary and access to the social caste network with all of its privileges" (ibid., 116).

3.5. National connections

Thus far in this chapter, I have analyzed the ways in which both popular and academic ideas about family, womanhood, and daughterhood form discursive and affective structures in relation to which the participants' negotiations of their position can be understood. Blunt and Dowling talk about the "multi-scalarity" (2022, 312) of home, pointing to ways in which particular power structures connect the intimate and embodied to households, neighborhoods, cities, nations, and transnational circuits. The construction of 'the Indian family' is then also tightly linked to framings of the nation. Family tensions around morality, hierarchy, and loyalty both echo and are amplified by wider nationalist projects that imagine ideal, caste-coded, middle-class citizens through idealized family roles. Daughterhood is, then, not only a position within the family but a national-cultural symbol: public discourse in India uses images of the (good) daughter to articulate ideas about a moral order, cultural authenticity, and national futures (e.g. Sarkar 2001; Manjrekar 2011; Babu and Joseph 2025).

As we have already seen, the embodied roles of 'good' womanhood idealize only certain daughters, wives, and mothers. Yamini Narayanan notes that "[w]ithin the norms of patriarchal Hindu ideologies, an ideal woman is an ideal wife. She was to live by the value of *pativrata*, or literally, husband-worship. Her roles outside her home could only be possible to the extent that her role as a *pativrata* is not compromised" (Narayanan 2016, 24, italics in original). Women like those seen in this study can thus be understood as an unresolved social

'problem' not only in the sense of being unmarried (and perhaps aiming to remain so) and sexually active, but—even worse—having feminist leanings. Progressive and politically vocal class- and caste-privileged women can be something of an anathema. In discourses generated across organized and informal formations of assertive right-wing ecosystems, feminism can appear as an alien force, whether this means a fad or youthful delusion, a 'Western' import, or something more insiduous (cf. Srilata 1998). Echoing globally circulating antifeminist discourses, feminism can be framed not merely as misaligned with family values but as a threat to the family itself, to 'Indian culture,' and to the imagined nation (cf. Devika and Ajay 2026).

In such a masculinist and often violently sexist worldview (e.g. Kinnvall 2019; Iyer 2019; Anand 2011), young feminists may be initially dismissed as frivolous 'girls' corrupted by liberal Delhi colleges and related sexual impropriety. Good girls from good families are expected to stay at home and avoid political (and/or sexual) activity (e.g. Manjrekar 2011; Krishnan 2021), as well as avoiding anything leaning too far to the left (cf. Kovacs 2004; Bacchetta 2004). If they insist and persist, if feminism turns too vocal and outward-oriented, such as in the case of the social movements noted in the introduction, young women can become something more serious than a nuisance: "anti-nationals," which is a label now routinely mobilized to delegitimize those seen as a threat.

Scholars have argued that "antifeminism in contemporary India [is] a foundational instrument of ideological consolidation" (Babu and Joseph 2025, 1; Sen and Jha 2025). In such a view, it is not only a matter of curtailing women's rights but part of a larger project of creating moral regimes that make intersectionally connected communities—Dalit, queer, trans, Adivasi—illegible within a normative nationalist vision. Much like a daughter who ruins her parents' izzat with her life choices, the feminist can be constructed as someone who disturbs the moral fabric of the nation (cf. Dave 2012). The resulting antifeminist ecosystem creates an atmosphere of intimidation, seen not just in online trolling or in the street violence women face, but in more institutionalized forms such as in the removal of "wrong" scholarship and the particular targeting of gender studies (cf. Phadke 2017). In such a view, the feminisms that should be permitted to survive are the ones made demure, fragmented, and free of subversive potential.

At the same time, drawing a parallel between homopopulism and the taming of dissidence through familialization, certain forms of non-intersectional gender rights can also be understood as beneficial for systems wanting to exclude radical-coded others. Niharika Banerjea (2023) suggests looking at the Indian political climate as a patchwork of homopopulism, which can include both anti-queer and selectively pro-queer strains, depending on the context. Selective incorporation

can be seen to follow similar patterns as elsewhere in the world, where certain 'good' queers or e.g. very specific forms of transfemininity can be folded into the mainstream (Upadhyay 2020; Das 2025), while others remain outside (Dutta 2023).

Politics and feminist possibilities exist in the times around them. Compared to the now (late 2026), the times before the Covid-19 pandemic can appear as politically hopeful. At many of the demonstrations that happened across the years of this study, the connections and tension between girl- or womanhood, family, youth, and larger politics were made explicit by the protestors. Slogans seen on banners and improvized pieces of cardboard included, for example, "We're here! We're queer! And our parents think we're studying." Or, at a 2019 protest: "My dad thinks I'm studying history. He doesn't know I'm busy making history."

3.6. Family as an epistemic (caste) issue

"Any community that makes it impossible or superhumanly difficult to speak about certain experiences may be epistemically dangerous to its members," Bradford and Sartwell argue (1997, 124). Feminist scholars have described the family as epistemically problematic—as a structure that shapes how subjects come to know, interpret, and imagine what is possible. Families create the "first, and often most important, communal contexts" within which people learn "how to know and act" (ibid., 125) so thoroughly that a non-familial knowing of the self seems almost unintelligible: "Knowing, like speech, like charity, begins at home" (ibid., 126).

In such a reading, family-knowing forms a background horizon that makes certain perceptions and judgments feel natural, even inevitable. Thinking further with Bourdieu (1990, 1999), we can say that loyalty, guilt, and silence, for example, all belong to the general habitus produced within such a family field. Similar to the discussion on the emergence of new politics we saw in the introduction, Bradford and Sartwell argue that "internalized oppression" (1997, 121) can only be made visible through the circulation of "new terms" (ibid.).

In the context of this study, new terms were arguably emerging in terms of an awareness of caste in progressive 'upper'-caste spaces such as academic-adjacent Delhi feminisms. While calling out caste in such spaces was nothing new (see Guru 2002; Pappu and Satyanarayana 2018; Kondaiah et al. 2018; Thomas 2020; Mathew and Lukose 2020; Kain 2024; Patil 2013, 2023 on caste (and other) inequalities in Indian academia), the urgency of caste had not necessarily registered among those privileged by it (e.g. Bakshi 2025). Fadaee (2014) seems to (inderectly) attest to a lack of self-reflection around caste privilege in what is termed a "critical activist milieu" in Delhi in the early 2010s—things appeared to

be changing toward the end of the decade (see chapter 6). Thinking with the idea of "unruly politics" (Khanna in Saresma et al. 2018) and the "dispersal of feminism" (Adkins 2004, 427), the discursive changes in the setting of this study appeared to be dragging previously 'unmarked', taken-as-neutral 'upper'-caste subjects into the purview of caste.

This emergence can be understood as happening particularly in the wake of the suicide or "institutional murder" of Dalit PhD scholar Rohith Vemula in Hyderabad in early 2016, which "sparked massive student agitation and widespread Dalit mobilization across the globe, as [Vemula] became an anti-caste icon across the subcontinent" (Leonard 2020, 519; see e.g. Mashaal 2016; Sukumar 2016; Matthew and Lukose 2020; mani 2022; Chakraborty 2025 on the many nuances and outcomes of the case). In the context of this study, this monumental (yet depressingly ordinary; cf Das 2023) event marking the need to talk about ('upper') caste became entangled in multiple interconnected discussions, that seemed to follow up on each other—caste seemed to suddenly be everwhere it had been previously been ignored. Other intense debates related to caste privilege during the time of this study included, for example, the 2017 Indian "feminist civil war" (Chadha 2017) around *The List of Sexual Harrassers in Academia* (see P. Rao 2018; Morais dos Santos Bruss 2019; Sen 2022; Subramanian and Sharma 2022; Phadke 2022; for discussions on this) and the criticism directed against having Arundhati Roy (well-known author of Brahmin background) write an introduction to the Navayana edition of B.R. Ambedkar's (2015 [1936]) classic *Annihilation of Caste* (cf. Ambedkar Age Collective 2016, in general, and Semmalar 2016, in particular, for the debate).

While caste is "built into the very nature of social encounters" (Geetha 2018, 93), caste-critical scholarship has noted what can be called a conscious unseeing or suppressing of analysis of 'upper'-casteness among both a savarna public and in social science studies penned by scholars of an 'upper'-caste background (Bagade et al 2023; Kisana and Hole 2023). Those coded as 'upper' caste would thus not discuss (their own) caste, making caste appear synonymous with Dalit or 'lower' caste. For example, Pushpesh Kumar and Sayantan Datta—in the context of queer and trans mobilization in India—note that "the arrival of caste as an important issue within queer and trans communities had to wait almost two and a half decades [from the 1990s]" (2024, 258). The authors argue that it did so not out of a newfound self-reflexiveness among the 'upper' castes, but only because Dalit trans voices kept pushing for it.

The late 2010s then appeares as a period of growth in popular anti-caste scholarship and popular feminisms, both off- and online. Formats included the academic (e.g. Yengde 2019), the autobiographical (Dutt 2019), and the popular (e.g. Dalit feminist influencers or long-gone meme pages such as *Savarna Rehab*,

Just Savarna Things, *Classroom memes starring Savarna teens*, *Badass Bahujan memes,* or B*ahujan memes for revolutionary teens*). Much of the latter happened ephemerally, in real time on social media, making this past almost impossible to reconstruct.

I read such debates as pushing growing and sometimes uncertain 'upper'-caste awareness of how "a feminist perspective that primarily privileges the experiences of upper(ed) caste (Savarna) women in conceptualising feminist resistance" is an "epistemic injustice" (Bakshi 2025, 1). Particularly meaningful for the topic of this thesis was the way in which many calls from non-savarna thinkers included a call to first and formost turn the 'upper'-caste gaze inward—to look at how caste(ism) continued in both old and new forms in the 'progressive' urban families, ostensibly disinvested from caste—"expos[ing] the structural complicity of savarna liberalism, academic tokenism, and disciplinary decorum in sustaining caste-patriarchal regimes" (Babu and Joseph 2025, 2).

Chapter Four: Stories of home

Scholars of home argue that "memories and experiences, and the life stories that describe them, are never solely personal" (Blunt and Dowling 2006, 33) but should be read in relation to their social contexts. In this vein, this chapter examines ways in which the participants understood the gendered cultures of their natal families, looking at how they read and positioned themselves in relation to wider kin and society around them.

The emotionally charged word 'home' can refer to a number of things, with overlapping levels of meaning (Blunt and Dowling 2022), one of them being a sense of felt background or (imagined) origin. In casual conversations as well as in the interviews, the women would refer to where their parents lived as "back home." While home, for the women studied here, was in practice in Delhi, home was then also somewhere else "extend[ing] far beyond a material dwelling" (Blunt and Dowling 2006, 13) into an "affective space, shaped by emotions and feelings of belonging" (ibid., 22).

As discussed in chapter 2, home and belonging are characterized by both control and care. "What is a home for a child but a field of rules?" Denis Wood and Robert Beck (1994, 1) ask. For women such as the participants, the parental home might not have represented a "haven" or "a space in which they can claim privacy and autonomy" (Blunt and Dowling 2006, 8). At the same time, it might be a place of support and represent a desire for identification. As Thapan (2003) has argued in the context of marriage, identifying with the family is not something simply imposed but functions as a source of value, self-worth and enjoyable social legitimacy, even as it coexists with constraint; agency and possibility, again, happen within relationships (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000). Daughters—even when minors—should also not be understood as without agency in the home. Instead of positing dichotomies, we can "reconsider the child as a liminal, ambiguous figure, one capable of both compliance with capital and collusion with chthonic revolutionary energies" (Bhattacharya 2017, 8). While Tithi Bhattacharya is talking specifically about childhood and capitalism, the ambiguity can also be related more generally to rules of class, gender, and caste.

As Soibam Haripriya writes in the introduction to an Indian anthology on homes and homing desires, the multiplicity of home gives it a haunting character:

> "A lack of home haunts us and therefore evokes nostalgia as well. This nostalgia is in spite of the fact that homes asphyxiate some of us, for whom the rules of belonging to a home-proper are stringent. This is true especially for those whose gender and sexuality exceed the rules of normativity [...] Home generates a desire for happiness or a desire for escape." (Haripriya 2022, 1-2)

Home connects both backwards and forwards in time. In reading my interviews, I am interested in how the women use narratives of family backgrounds to make sense of themselves today and in possible futures. Narrative is then an act of worldmaking (e.g. Schultermandel et al 2022), and the participants can be seen as trying to understand what the past had made possible, difficult, or obligatory for them. An act of locating oneself—of saying 'I am from there'—quickly opens up the question of what this 'from' actually means. As Blunt and Dowling put it, there is a "nexus between home, power and identity" (2022, 309). Being from somewhere is a loaded category; it carries expectations, hierarchies, loyalties, and forms of imagined lineages.

Beyond time, movement is central here. Queer studies, drawing on e.g. Valentine (2007), has "explore[d] the relationships between mobility, subjectivity and place that forge home" (Waitt and Gorman-Murray 2011, 1246). Scholars like Gordon Waitt and Andrew Gorman-Murray stress "the spatial and temporal tensions of home as a forged site constituted at the intersection of senses of placement and displacement" (ibid.). While this chapter looks back home, it is important to read it together with the stories of movement and (future) change present both in this chapter and the subsequent ones. Like Waitt and Gorman-Murray, I am critical of a "utopian view of home found in humanist geography as an anchor point of the self" (ibid., 1242). Rather, subjectivities should be understood as "being constituted through ongoing displacement and movement" (ibid.).

The next section of this chapter will focus on the participants' discussions around the idea of family identity. After that, I will focus on the women's ideas of gendered expectations in the family. I will then look at family histories of movement, both in terms of physical migration and movement across class or caste. Throughout the discussion, I am interested in how the interviewees understood these backgrounds in relation to their own feminist aspirations.

4.1. What's in a (family) identity?

In several interviews, a feeling of identities lying somewhere else than in family or kinships emerged. Despite what popular discourses and familializing pushes (previous chapter) can claim about unmarried women, being a daughter was not

necessarily among the main identities of the interviewees. Often, something more eclectic would appear, like when Astha said she was bad at introductions and did not have "one primary identity." After thinking for a while, she said she was "a feminist" and someone who studied gender and sexuality. The third thing on the list was being a queer woman. Beyond that, she said, "there are other parts of my identity that I don't mention, but that eventually sort of permeate." What she meant were her structural locations, the things that did not need to be said but that people would find out: "So, like, I am, I belong to this particular section of—upper caste, upper class—society in India." "How the identities then intersect" was how she thought of herself, she said.

After thinking a bit more, Astha noted that the distancing from family identity had been a conscious endeavor: "Whenever I think of my identity in terms of my family, mostly, in the past I've imagined it to be something that my family basically *stops* me from being." For her, family had "for the longest time" only been "thought of [...] as this negative relation. That 'I am this person because this happened to me, because this structure of the family did'", not as something that would enable her.

A sense of identity or belonging could be detached from the physical, meaning that mental and material separation from the family should be seen as different things. For participants like Astha, an intellectual/identitarian separation from the family did not necessarily translate into a real-life separation or a desire for such: while a mental or values-based separation was needed for the creation of a feminist self or a desired lifestyle, an actual separation could in fact threaten this (see chapter 9). Reversely, family identity could live on even when material connections were loosened.

The interviewees, in different ways, expressed that their families had *tried* to shape their sense of belonging. They had reacted differently to these attempts. For example, unlike Astha, Jyoti felt that her "family's done an excellent job of forging a family identity, that we're all branded with." She also reported emotionally investing in the family network and getting personal satisfaction from being close with her sister and her mother. While the family identity was something she desired, she also felt that it made her "a prime target [...] for emotional blackmail. Which comes out of how many things I feel I *owe*."

The responses showed how the participants' own ideas about identity could differ from what they thought their families felt. For example, Khushi spoke of attempts at forced belonging: "I don't have close relationships with anybody in my family. Some of them think I do, but I really don't." In her narrative, the extended family was exceedingly conservative, supporting arranged marriages and condoning patriarchal domestic violence. She said her own parents were "pretty fucking casteist," and that she had "fought [them] like a motherfucker" to get

where she was. In such a situation, she felt it was more strategic to allow the family to think that their close relationships were mutual.

While Khushi described herself as distant from her family, she saw that her relatives stressed an imperative to stick together. This can be noted in an interview snippet relating to an aunt, where constant fighting does not translate into (a desire for) distance among other members of the natal family:

> "[My aunt] is the one my family is closest to. Technically closest to, in terms of how much we meet etc. She's fucking crazy, everybody in my house knows this. She's legitimately crazy. It's madness. Everybody in my house hates her, but somehow we've always been close. I remember my childhood being this one big sword fight, everybody just fighting everybody and me being like 'What is happening!?'"

A lack of identification with the family also appeared more as alienation than as an actual separation in the interviews with Vishakha. In an earlier discussion, she had described multiple forms of violence perpetrated by different family members. I asked if this made her think of herself in opposition to them. "No," she said, "but I was always cursing the fact of 'Why me?', like 'Why the fuck me?', 'Why can't I have a normal family?'"

Ideas about identities also moved beyond the immediate family, to discussions about community, caste-culture, and geography. The family was usually placed within a larger setting, as when Aashi said "I'm a Baniya": "I mean I don't see myself as a Baniya, but that's what my lineage is and I have been grown in that environment." The personal disavowal of caste-culture is here mixed with an acceptance of it still having shaped one's life. Some participants could thus at the same time feel distant from their family and still feel strongly implicated or shaped by their particular cultural background/identity.

Various levels of generalization circulated. Typically, a rough sketch of "North" or "South India" would be used. Across my fieldwork, people regularly referred to themselves and others as "being" something/from somewhere in terms of a generalized cultural-linguistic-ethnic category: "I am Telugu," "They are Punjabi," etc. This sense of being "from" a generalizable somewhere could linger even when families had lived in other parts of the country for several generations. Thus, in the interviews, a third-generation resident of West Bengal spoke of the family being Malayali, from Kerala: "It's quite a strong feeling in our family." As another woman from a migrating family put it, such identity could persist "irrespective of never having lived there and not knowing the language very well, not knowing the cultural references." Again illustrating the multi-scalarity of home, terms like "ancestral village" were commonly used and carried a sense of belonging even when highly symbolic in practice.

Parents' family lines might not lead in the same directions, which could be a source of multiple identifications or family tensions for the participants. Maya, when asked about what her conflicts with the family were about, said "*all* of it" had to do with gender, yet she also added there was a lot of "*regionalism* involved" in how things played out: "Because my parents belong to these two different regions, and somehow my father thought lesser of my mother because of that."

While Aashi named herself as Baniya, caste could often remain implicit or hidden in these shorthand ways of speaking. Geography and caste are rarely separable, and the women expressed being aware of that. This was particularly strong in cases where a certain caste-culture held a nationally recognizable status. For example, the meaning of being Bengali can be understood as popularly dominated by what is Brahmin culture, and the meaning of being Marwari is largely dominated by Baniya-related imagery.

Family identity was, in the participants' stories, also expressed in multiple different ways beyond the idea of a geographic or cultural-linguistic background. These were made up from both material and mental attributes. Such attributes could be different for different families or sometimes also overlap in not always conflict-free ways. For example, a family could be felt to be established at a location and/or defined by migration. It could be seen as presenting itself as traditional in the extended sense and liberal in the nuclear sense. The family could be said to be "always fighting" but also seen to take pride in the loyalty its members felt to it.

4.2. "Liberal" identifications

The participants regularly compared their parents positively to extended kin networks—the latter were seen as more conservative and the parents (identifying) as (somewhat) more "liberal." Many gave examples of same-generation relatives and peers that had it significantly "worse" than themselves (see section below). What "liberal" was seen to mean in practice differed among families. The women were quick to contextualize, as when Tara explained: "Kolkata is not a big city like Delhi or Bombay, so… It's a little smaller-city, that way. And people are also not that bold there. Slowly they're becoming so, but when I was a kid, no. And I was in the suburbs."

Within that context, having male friends, despite attending a girls' school from fifth to 12th grade, made her "judged in the society." Parents' ideas about parenting were understood against that backdrop. The interviewees also felt that their parents had mixed feelings about their own perceived lenience. Some felt that their parents prided themselves on being liberal, while others felt that their

parents' feelings were a mix of anxiety and a gnawing sense that, perhaps, they should have been stricter.

Mothers and fathers were seen to have framed their liberal attitudes in terms of them "allowing" things other parents might not "allow," or something that the parents themselves had not been allowed: for example "allowing" the daughters to choose their own careers, move to another city for college, to go outside at night, "and stuff that my parents' generation wasn't allowed to do." For Jyoti, this meant things "[l]ike have male friends, stuff like that. I mean things that are *quite obviously* not so liberal in our generation. But they're measuring by their whatever 70s, 80s standard. And they consider themselves quite progressive by that standard."

Different participants had different ideas about how rebellious they had been while growing up, again reading this against whatever was considered rebellious in their context. Tara described herself as having had a certain "cultural exposure" that other girls around her lacked, which made her seem different. Growing up on "punk rock and metal," she had dressed in black and was a "shock" to people around her. Others felt they had been very quiet. Khushi said she was "never that rebellious, rebel child in those terms." Chuckling, she added, "whatever rebellion I had, I had it in private." Because of the way she hid the less normative parts of herself, she did not really see much of the conservative or hostile responses to gendered transgressions that she had seen more recently. Echoing this, Maria said: "I never caused trouble. [pause] Never. I was too obedient. Because I knew that obedience will get me love. So I stuck to the rules."

Discussions about obedience show the discourses of control and protection around 'good' middle-class daughters (e.g. Krishnan 2021). While daughters were encouraged in multiple ways (see section below), daughter-rearing was not usually framed as any kind of feminist parenting (Phadke 2013), even when families were in practice raising what were to become feminist daughters. Even families that were presented by the daughters as leftist were not described as particularly invested in any explicit feminism. For example, Tara said her family thought of itself as progressive, "but not in terms of gender":

> "Gender was not a parameter that was considered anywhere. Yes they believed in basic things like 'women have to be educated,' 'yeah you have to get a job'—but what kind of job? You shouldn't get a job in an ad agency or in journalism—I was told so many times not to go into journalism because it's not a safe profession. For women, you know? [...] What is a *safe* profession? Maybe become a professor or go to the banks. Or, I dunno, teach in a school. [...] it's a *limited* liberation that theirs is."

Previously not "considered anywhere," Tara saw gender emerge as an explicit talking point only in her generation, mainly through the feminist labor she had done. Tara read her own history as a version of what we saw earlier scholarship having identified as the tendency among parents to support (some of) their daughters' ambitions, not so much out of any explicit feminist commitment but since it could be status-enhancing (e.g. Clark 2016). In Tara's family, it was felt that women should get educated and work, partly to secure a better life for themselves and partly because that is what is appropriate for the family's (material or more often immaterial) caste-coded status. Only certain jobs (professor, teacher) were understood as 'respectable' for Bengali Brahmin women.

Tara had to fight to work as a journalist not just because it was seen as an insecure income but because it would possibly put her in contexts not seen as safe for a woman of her background. "I *also* don't think it's a very safe profession," Tara said, adding "but, why do women have to be in safe professions?" Others noted that distinctions existed even within professions—for Khushi's family, being a corporate lawyer would be infinitely more acceptable than being a criminal lawyer.

When Tara said her "communist" family was "always class conscious but not gender conscious," she was making a connection with a larger discussion about blind spots in leftist movements (cf. Ray 2000 about Kolkata and feminism): "That's the problem also in the communist party of India. There's no gender parity, and they have no idea—Rosa Luxembourg totally escaped them, okay?" At the same time, she felt that the language her family had provided her with could be used to speak back to them: "I can still tell [my father] that family is related to property and that's what Friedrich Engels said. I can have this argument with my father, though he would never be on my side."

Like Jyoti above, Tara here explained things in terms of different generational standards, seeing women as participating in patriarchy. For her, her "grandma was probably progressive in her thirties, okay? After that she just stayed in that state and never *grew* from that. That was the sad part." Previous generations of women were thus seen to not have developed a feminist vocabulary through which to interrogate their own positions. Tara can here be seen as connecting with a discourse of constant learning and re-evaluation as a prerequisite for meaningful feminist growth (see chapter 6).

Other interviewees questioned the meaningfulness of trying to understand one's family history through contemporary feminist ideas. Shriya said that doing so "gives people [...] an unreachable goal to reach up to and a really punitive sense of having to interrogate their lived experiences." In a way echoing Lugones' idea of the fluidity of resisting ↔ oppressing (Lugones 2003), Shriya said that looking at family backgrounds meant realizing that "people are gonna be doing stuff that

they don't structurally realize is fucked, because of them not being 'woke.' People are gonna be putting up with shit that they've gotten used to putting up with, and they're not gonna consider it 'putting up with shit,' they'll just consider it being part of *who they are*." In this reading, women's actions had to be understood as of their time, not from the perspective of what would be considered right and wrong today. These approaches would result in very different readings:

> "Like, if I were to go back in time and say that my great grandmother was just *oppressed*, by the fact of being a woman in the [19]20s, it would be *laughable*. And she would laugh me out of the house, and also be extremely insulted—it would be insulting to her to say that. Because she exercised an *enormous* amount of agency, to the point of controlling narratives and actions of people several generations down the line."

A few interviewees depicted their parents as using explicitly feminist language but questioned the validity of this. Astha said her parents "think they're extremely feminist," "think they're super educated and enlightened" because they "let" their daughter get educated, work, and play sports "to an extent." Yet, like in Tara's example above, Astha saw only certain forms of assertion being tolerated. She noted that her parents explicitly referred to "Indian culture": certain things were not to be done by "Indian" girls. Within such a culturalized framework, equality with boys in terms of e.g. sexuality or lifestyle would not be seen as feminist, but simply as inappropriate.

In terms of party-political backgrounds, the participants' families were described as ranging from communists to increasingly right-wing nationalists. While some households discussed (party) politics openly, others did not. Many of the women felt that they shared certain views with their parents, especially when it came to more general political questions not directly connected to the behavior of the daughters. Parents sharing some political ground with their daughters was seen as enabling, with people from more centrist or left-leaning families feeling this helped them assert themselves. Thinking somewhat similarly about a more abstracted social issue was seen as a possible opening for perhaps being able to think more similarly about something more personal, too.

Interestingly, some participants noted that fighting with their parents about politics generally could become a "stand in" for the familial gender politics that were not discussed: "Often politics was just the subject we held up because we couldn't talk about anything else—if we couldn't talk about anything remotely personal, because it became a fight," Jyoti said. She told a story about fighting with her father about whether Gandhi's underwear was made of *khadi*: "What was really happening at that time was that I was going through a crisis moment of whether to tell my parents that I was bisexual." The somewhat far-fetched

connection was whether one could see from the outside what was going on inside. In certain situations, family members might have understood what was really being spoken about, yet they chose to ignore it:

> "So someone would howl and someone would be like 'Why are you crying about the Congress losing the Rajasthani election?!' And the other person would be like 'You know I'm not crying about the Congress losing the election!!' And then that would be that. Nobody would ask what that person is actually crying about."

4.3. Good girl, from a good family

The participants understood their parents' attempts at controlling their daughters' choices in explicitly gendered and class- and caste-coded terms. Neha felt that "care" was "primarily about control," saying she had never seen any parents actually offer their children unconditional support when the child "does something wrong." Rather, she said, they would withdraw their support and say "we warned you." For Neha, this illustrated the "fundamental lack of respect" shown by parents.

The interviewees often used descriptions like "middle class" or "middle-class values" to make sense of their backgrounds—this was also done by participants who could elsewhere describe themselves as "upper class." In doing so, I again see the women positioning themselves according to a larger cultural phrasebook in India, using and reaffirming popular-sociological understandings. Meera said that "a lot of these issues stemmed from our parents' ideas of… a good middle-class upbringing," "patriarchal upbringing." Such a culture was felt to be taught "in very subtle ways," using standard euphemisms like "good girls," "good families," and worries about "character."

As we saw in chapter 3, the ostensibly 'Indian' idea of good girls from good families holds within it a number of caste- and class-related assumptions. These relate both to broader notions of how to be—such as femininity—and to particular aspects of it, such as appropriate education, employment, and marriage. In the interviews, discussions were said to relate to e.g. safety, how to dress, how to behave, how to sit, how to eat, and what skills to have. Illustrating the ways menstruation marked the beginning of being "a big girl," the time to not "laugh, talk or move too freely" (young Tamil woman quoted in Ram 2012, 99), parental expectations evolved as puberty hit. Shalini used school uniforms to explain the changing anxieties:

> "You'll see the basic morality problem when you see the evolution of the uniform, okay? The evolution is that till eighth grade, you get to wear frocks. Then when you go to ninth, you're hitting puberty. For sure,

> everyone. So then you're pushed—at least in my time, now everybody in that school wears a salwar kameez [kurta and trousers] from ninth onwards—but in my time it was nine to ten salwar kameez, and when you go to eleventh and twelfth you wear a sari."

Another example: Shalini was not taught to ride a bicycle because "what would a girl do cycling around?" For a middle-class girl who could take a rickshaw or be driven in a car, cycling invited attention from the "guys on the street." In a moral community where she was uncomfortable with the attempts at forcing her to be a girl, Shalini did not have many female friends because she "couldn't identify with them." Other participants' childhood narratives touched upon related needs to be feminine and "fair" (light-skinned). Aashi, who "used to play a lot in the sun" and was "very dark" as a child, noted that her "complexion was *always* a matter of discussion":

> "Everybody used to suggest what to do about it. My mother even hired a lady who would come *every week* to put some six hundred kinds of things on me, and be like 'We will make you fairer.' As if that would happen."

The interviewees analyzed caste- and class-coded gendering and sexuality in depth, highlighting the everyday homemaking practices that reproduce a social order (Blunt and Dowling 2022). Meera, for example, said there was a lot of moral policing about her body, dress, and movements, related to upper-caste notions of "carefully guarded purity," the purity "that the savarna carry." She saw her father commenting negatively on something she wore as "an indirect way of saying 'Are you selling your body? Are you a prostitute?'" This, she added, would of course only be an insult if you had a negative view of sex work and a moral imperative to ensure women were "*chaste*" or "*pure*." The notion of "'*normal dignified human beings* who have respect'" was then connected to caste and class-coded assumptions about what was "respectable."

The participants also saw themselves as both constrained and benefiting from caste politics and the "intersection of gender and class," as Jyoti put it. She saw her current interest in intersectional feminism as stemming from an early personal experience, saying that "the only time I've really stood up against sexual harassment" was:

> "the time when it was done by someone who's… class-disadvantaged with respect to me. So when I spoke up, I could be quite clear that really bad things are going to happen to them, as a result of my complaining. And it was that power that also allowed me to complain."

Jyoti contrasted this with experiences of sexual harassment by more powerful men in the family sphere, to whom she did not stand up: "I feel guilty about that.

Because… I used one kind of power against the other kind of power he was trying to use. And that's… I think I played the dirtier game."

Most participants' stories supported the notion that "home is a closet, a place where [children's] sexuality is actively opposed and denied by their parents" (Blunt and Dowling 2006, 114-115) for both queer and 'straight' sexuality. For example, Maya said that it had been harder for her mother to grapple with the "sexuality" part of her "bisexuality" than with the bi-ness. Nidhi, who was openly asexual, felt her father was relieved when she came out. While this would perhaps complicate his plans of getting her married, it meant the daughter would not be having sex with anyone at all. Importantly, things were not homogenous. Challenging any idea of a nationalized monoculture (cf. e.g. Lukose 2005), Lily said she wasn't "raised to be normatively acceptable. On the Indian scale." Rather, her parents "prided themselves on being liberal," which translated into an active encouragement to not be like others: "My mom used to tell us, growing up, 'don't get married, don't have kids. Go out and see as many boys as you want, have *lots* of boyfriends.'"

As we will see in chapters 7 and 8, this did not necessarily mean that the partipants' parents would be progressive in other ways. "Being liberal" can then be understood as a tool to assert the family's class positionality and 'modern' outlook. This was compounded by the national politics at play: Lily felt that her Christian-background family wanted to construct themselves as different from what they saw as the conservative mainstream. For Lily, this had later led to a feeling of needing to assert her "weirdness" being as "Indian" as possible, streching the meaning of the word (cf. Dave 2012). While recognizing that her experiences often felt different from those of others around her, she wanted to state that her experience, too, was a legitimate way of being "Indian."

Such broadening of the concept was, however, not easy. Neha said that the idea of "family values" as "Indian" was sold to the public through popular culture such as Karan Johar films, where "being Indian means being *supremely* aware of having a family and that you owe everything to your family." What this meant was that inappropriate behavior could translate into "you're not Indian." She saw this in her own family: according to their mother, Neha and her brother were queer because they were exposed to "Western" culture.

4.4. Femininity as struggle and opportunity

The participants expressed having struggled with expectations of femininity or with performing girl- or womanhood in expected ways. For some participants, having had discomforts around femininity was also understood as a precursor to later articulations of feminist discomfort. Not having wanted to be a girl was

something experienced both by the participants who had later become more genderqueer and by those who now saw themselves as more femme-coded.

Astha had been queer in terms of her gendered expression ever since she was a "kid": while her mother "always wanted [her] to be like a proper girl" in nice clothes, "I didn't want to." After a decade and a half of resisting such attempts, Astha said her mother was "still hoping some miracle will happen and I'll wake up and suddenly want to be the kind of girl I was always supposed to be." Again, things had been easier until her teenage years—Astha could play cricket outside until her mother started worrying about her getting "darker" as it would "'immediately destroy your future prospects of finding a husband.'" Before puberty, she could get away with dressing the way she wanted, being a "'tomboy.'" Later she was expected to "like, blossom into a woman."

Indian feminists have noted that male-assumed children are often treated differently than those seen as or made to be daughters (e.g. Bhattacharya 2004). The participants' narrations varied in relation to this. While those who had brothers felt they were raised in relatively equal ways, this did not mean a difference was not noted around them. Jyoti felt that part of wanting to be a boy came from "seeing how privileged you could be if you were male as opposed to female. How much more leeway you got, for everything." While she "didn't see that many boys on a regular basis, but I did see it in my dad! I did see it in whatever men I encountered [while growing up]."

Gendered expectations could be hard to pinpoint. Jyoti said neither she nor her sister were "socialized" early on to look like girls. Yet, she also saw that her sister was very athletic, which was "really upsetting" to her mother. Jyoti herself was not femme, either:

> "I was completely lacking in the desire for other forms of [feminine] performance. Like… I had short hair till I was 15-16 years old, and I was really happy with it. I didn't do any gender performance to speak of. And I was constantly being confused for a boy. Because there was nothing particularly feminine about the way I looked. And so they would write Mister on my tickets and things like that. It was a standing joke."

The centrality given to sons in families could show up in indirect ways. Several participants noted that it was a "very common dialogue" to hear fathers expressing that their daughters were "like a son" to them (cf. Donner 2015). Vishakha said this used to be considered high praise. Khushi had heard her father say this about her, noting it "comes from a place of affection." Interestingly, the pressure to become more feminine was felt to come particularly from mothers. While Neha said that the "outer world" did not have as much of an issue with her being "'like a boy'"—even seeing it as something potentially admirable—her mother had a

harder time with it. Echoing Julia Serano's (2007) ideas of the devaluation of femininity, Neha noted that when her queer brother came to show a more "feminine" gender expression, this did not get the "cultural sanction" that her tomboyishness had.

Expectations of femininity were seen to increase as one got closer to adulthood and so-called marriageable age. This also affected what attention one paid to the urgency to fight it. If sexualization-related rules had entered the women's lives in pre-teenhood, gendering and sexualization was felt to be at an all-time high at the time of the interviews. As Jyoti, in her mid-20s, put it:

> "I'm sort of at *peak* femaleness, like I'm embodying my gender as much as I ever will during my life cycle. Because my womb is waiting to be fertilized and… uhm my honor rescued."

"Peak femaleness" can be understood as peak regulation. Sociologically, it is then also not coincidental that Joyti described the turn toward feminist language corresponding to shifts in gendered/sexualized locations. While some of the women moved toward a more articulated genderqueerness or butchness as they grew older, others expressed becoming able to feel more comfortable with femininity or performing womanhood as they had had more space to do it in less forced-upon ways. In Jyoti's words:

> "Until my hormones came and I realized that this [boyishness] was not gonna get me laid [laughs], I didn't have a problem with it at all. In fact, if it could have gotten me laid I still would not have a problem with it. But in the years since I've discovered how… like how useful it is to have some form of feminine, strongly female gender performance. Like, bat your eyelids or whatever it is."

Joyti's expression of the possible joys of heterosexual attractiveness seem to echo Susan Stryker who, via Teresa de Lauretis, notes how "[s]ometimes womanhood is a binding-in-place that needs to be resisted and worked against, and sometimes […] women want womanhood to stick to them 'like a wet silk dress'" (Stryker 2008, 128). Others expressed continuing to struggle with feminine identifications, having been taught they represented something weak or "an oppressed class," as Tara put it.

4.5. Education and employment expectations

"India has changed, man. Not just [my] community. India has changed," Vishakha laughed. What she meant was that "'a good girl' now qualifies as someone who's got a good career and would be married and would have children." Having a good

career was the new part. If one still got married and had children, educational and professional ambitions were to be expected and supported.

Arguably, "[a]t the individual level, education is the most significant force enabling [Indian women] to fashion their own lives" (Elliott 2005, 14). Undoubtedly, education is also key factor in everything that happens in the context of this thesis. For the participants, much of the change that Vishakha referred to had already happened in an earlier generation—all of their mothers had been educated and had worked at some point in their lives. Yet, within that, large differences existed.

All of the participants' parents had supported their educational journeys, albeit in different ways. Most families had very high educational expectations or demands with regard to their daughters, and everyone was expected to have at least a college degree. In the participants' stories, families saw education as a tool for suitable independence, advancement, capital, prestige, marriage, and as a certain backup. In narratives of parents, education was not seen only in relation to the possibilities of economic gain or suitability, but also as important for the women's growth and as a provider of safety. Interestingly, the families' expectations regarding a career were not seen as being as high as those around education itself—the women did not feel they were expected to be financially (fully) independent since their parents and an imagined husband also existed as a financial backup.

Previous scholarship on India has noted how women and their parents engage in a dialogue or contestation around daughters' education (Clark 2016; Larsen 2011; Dickey 2010). While feminist views often frame education as enabling and agency-building, a more structurally pessimistic reading can frame it as a part of the "ethic of labor and a disciplined use of time" valued among Indian middle-class parents (Kapur 2014, 27). Historically, English-language education and white-collar work have been the means through which 'upper'-caste, middle-class families ensured their future (Sarkar 1997).

The participants emphasized that their choices in education were their own. Except for law, none of the fields the women had studied (i.e. journalism, sociology, development studies, gender, etc.) were understood by themselves as particularly "smart" decisions, careerwise. Thus, the women's educational choices can be understood as stemming from a position of relative freedom and privilege —an economic or mental safety to choose a social science or arts education. This echoes one young woman quoted by sociologist Smita Radhakrishnan: "If my mom was rich, I think I would have done English literature" (Radhakrishnan 2011, 109). Instead, this woman 'had' to do IT.

At the same time, the academic choices and possible careers of the women should be understood as very respectable in the 'upper'-caste context (Bakshi

2025). The parents' acceptance of their educational choices reflects this. When a Brahmin woman like Darsha was working as a teacher, she was at least the third generation of female teachers in her family. Thus, while medicine or engineering might have been "the standard that all middle-class kids are supposed to aspire to," as Neha said, social sciences and humanities were not beyond the pale for families like these. Really bad choices, Neha said, would mean things "like going into films," something "very upsetting" to people like her parents.

Descriptions of how much the family pressured them to pursue and excel in studies differed between the women, with some notable differences. For Aashi's North Indian business-minded family, women's higher education was not a priority or a worry, which was something she found unsettling:

> "I literally have a cousin who failed class ten and people said 'Yeah it's fine'. And I'm like 'This is the fucking 21st century, you can't be doing this shit now! You're living in a very urban area, in a Tier-II city, it's the capital of the fucking state, you don't have the small-town no-school excuses.'"

Aashi felt it was "really common" where she came from for young women and their parents to have "no ambition." While her own "mother was very clear that I should have a job," the general assumption was that a woman of her caste and class could always "bail" and be married to a well-off husband (cf. Gopal 2012). The ambition for someone like herself, then, was to escape that fate.

At the other end of the spectrum of expectations were Uma and Neha, who said that their fathers kept pushing them to do a PhD in their fields. This echoes Phadke's account of a young college student in Mumbai whose "'post-feminist'" (2015, 68) family expected both a PhD and marriage before age 30. Neha—whose mother was a college professor and father an engineer—said that when she wanted to study humanities, her father made her promise she would get a PhD, since he felt that lesser arts degrees "don't count for shit." No breaks in study were allowed. She felt the father "never asks me what I'm interested in" except to repeat that she must earn the doctorate. Similarly, Uma said her father felt that "'nobody cares about a master's degree anymore," that "'there's no *respect* for you if you're not a civil servant or a PhD-holder.'" "Maybe some people really care about it," Uma said.

Despite high educational expectations, Neha said her income was treated as secondary. While her father worried about how her brother was doing economically, "he never thinks about how I will survive through my paycheck." Neha again attributed this to her parents' "very middle-class" worldview. According to her, "middle-class dads never think that their daughters are going to be earners. They don't see you as running a household [financially]. They always

see you as part of it." The pressure to pursue a doctorate, then, was mainly about her father getting a "badge of honor, like 'I have a daughter that has a PhD.'"

A similar push toward studying was also repeated on other levels. The youngest participant, Meera, was working during the time of the interviews but said her parents wanted her to go straight for a master's degree. She had already "gotten into a reputable university" and her parents would support her so that she would not have to work while studying. While stressing the privilege of her situation, Meera also interpreted this 'altruism' as a type of control: "In my head I was clear, because I really wanted to earn first." "For once I wanted to *not* be financially dependent on them," she said.

In Neha's case, the idea of a necessary yet economically not-so-relevant PhD was made more curious by the fact that she was openly gay. While Neha said her mother still harbored dreams of getting her daughter married, her education now involved an economic aspect too, as her parents slowly worked toward the realization that their daughter's queerness would not pass: "Their idea is," Neha said, "'you can be gay, as long as you make sure you're doing really good at this other front.'" This was partly about respectability but also about economics, "because it's like tougher to live on a single paycheck," which was something Neha agreed with. For the parents, the idea of a financially committed queer partnership did not seem to be a serious option.

While Neha saw this husband-centric logic as a "very middle-class" or "Indian" thing (again saying her parents "conflate the two things"), something similar applied in relation to Aditi's upper-class situation. Aditi was a development sector researcher but hailed from a lineage where women had run family enterprises. Therefore, the expectation was "that everyone's going to be able to spend a certain amount, as soon as they start working." In comparison to this, her first salary of 25,000 rupees (approx. 300 euros) was "horrifying" to her family:

> "And they can't have me *appear* as though I earn as much as I earn. So when, for instance, we go to weddings—like last weekend—they supply my clothes because… in their opinion, what is decent to wear to a wedding is way, way out of my budget. So they're like 'That doesn't matter, we have the money. We will not allow you to look like a *bekaaree* [unemployed, layabout]."

Class here determines how much money should be spent. For "sensible," middle-class families like Neha's, this meant that one should not "splurge," and only "spend money on particular things that are decent and respectable." For rich people attending weddings of wealthy family friends, class-caste-family belonging needed to be shown more ostentatiously.

Yet, even in the case of Aditi, an impressive income was seen as optional since it could be rectified through the right husband. Her family had by then "decided

that I'm one of those people that don't work for money. In which case I'm a lost cause, uhm, and I must be married to someone who will make money." Aditi felt that having a class-appropriate education and job would have meant that her family "would have been so proud of me." Yet, making a comparison with a successful female cousin, making her own money, did not "let her off marrying someone rich, *either*. But it helps, it helps," Aditi said.

As I shall return to in chapters 6 and 9, the women struggled with this double bind. For those participants whose parents did not come from an non-governmental organization (NGO) or academic background, the fact that the daughters worked in relatively modestly paid jobs proved to their parents that these were a kind of feminized "hobby," suitable for a woman waiting to get married to the right man. Thus, by having exercised extensive agency and chosen the educations and jobs they wanted, the women inadvertently diminished their projected independence and competence in the eyes of their parents.

4.6. Marriage expectations

"So I'm 25 right," Aashi began. "My parents talk about marriage and stuff. They've been talking about [it] since I was in college":

> "They used this term 'We won't get you married'—as if they think they have like a [say in this]—but that's how they talk about it. So they'd say 'We won't get you married until you have a job, until you've settled down.' This has been very clear to them: I will study law, I will work, then I will go study more and after that is when I settle down or whatever that means."

This was the life course Aashi had negotiated with her parents. Marriage was still a vague threat on the horizon. Indian sociological literature on women states that "[m]arriage is [...] generally mandatory and inescapable" (Clark 2016, 160), a sentiment Aashi seemed to agree with:

> "That's the thing about how Rajasthan works. Like there's a constant thing of—even though a lot of women in my family were working—in order to make it you have to get married. Your value is strictly in terms of the kind of husband you can get."

While pre-marital dating is "increasingly acceptable among the urban middle and upper classes in India" (Titzmann 2017, 1), this is often expected to lead to marriage at some point. Unmarried "live-in relationships pose a far bigger threat [than dating] because they undermine the sanctity of the bond of matrimony" (ibid.). Against this, the desire to remain unmarried for as long as possible, perhaps forever—expressed by almost all of the participants—meant an uphill

battle. Shalini said she had "had so much trouble making my mom understand that I can't get married." This negatively impacted her love life because if she was "seeing someone steadily," her mother "would expect me to marry that person." Shalini, echoing Donner (2016), said this represented a limited change in people's worldviews:

> "Before, there was a time when women having romantic relationships—regardless if they got married or not—were seen as people with bad character. Women with loose morals. Now, it's come to the point that they want women to choose their own partners and have romantic relationships, but it should end up in *marriage*, eventually."

Not all participants' parents were currently putting pressure on them, yet they felt that relatives and seemingly everyone else in society expected them to get heterosexually married sometime around the stereotypically ideal age of 28 (see chapter 9). Further education such as a PhD or other definite goals (such as getting a certain job) worked as 'valid' reasons for postponing things, yet even those would not work forever. Jyoti, then 27, felt that "27 is quite early to think of settling down," it's "when I'm starting to *think* of it as feasible, personally." But for people like her parents, "most of their children are already married or about to be married. Like, I'm at the fag end of the marriageable age."

Most participants expressed strong criticism of marriage normativity and the marriages they had seen around them. Many also had personally negative experiences of heterosexual relationships, and marriage was seen as a potential trap. The fear is not unfounded: as Laksheeta Choudhary notes in a recent review of divorce in India, "[d]ecades of scholarship have documented how Indian women encounter systematic violence within marriage, including dowry-related harassment, domestic abuse, marital rape, coercive control, and emotional neglect" (Choudhary 2026, 38). Even women who had "had high levels of pre-marital agency [saw] their opportunities to exercise agency diminished after marriage" (Brault and Schensul 2018, 1060). Yet, Lamb (2022) has documented how the odds are also stacked against single Indian women, and Patricia Jeffrey remarks that marriage "remains the best chance of economic wellbeing" (2014, 179). For the participants, too, marriage could be alluring both in terms of a stable emotional partnership and for the financial reasons that their parents also considered.

Issues of queerness must then also be understood in relation to the expectation to marry in a context where gay marriage was (and is) neither legal nor socially acceptable. Neha's coming out as queer was a "huge deal" because it disrupted her parents' "preoccupation" with marriage. Echoing the findings of Achar and Gopal (2023), Neha said she knew people who had chosen not to transition or to come out as gay/trans to their parents because that was the "least" they could do to

alleviate their perceived indebtedness to their parents. Even for herself, coming out was a continuous process (Denes and Afifi 2014), where "even after four years, there are these phases that my mother gets into where she's just like 'You have to get married. I don't care if you're gay, straight, whatever, but a marriage has to happen.'" Neha said that her mother did not say things fully "seriously" but kept on some level hoping that her daughter was simply "confused." In her mother's marriage dreams, the future partner was not just assumed to be a cis man but someone from their "caste and class." "Maleness is just one part of it," Neha noted.

This illustrates how in this context, the choice of even heterosexual partnership, in practice, is not free (cf. Donner 2016; Disha 2023; Gautam 2025). Parul Bhandari states that "[a] central feature of these diverse local experiences of the variations of 'love' marriage is the continued importance of parental support and approval of the family" (2017a, para. 2). Even "love," then, is usually expected to be socially suitable—the participants expressed having become aware of this over time. Sometimes, their parents' concern about the appropriateness of unions had become apparent when someone in the family wanted to marry across caste lines. Khushi said her brother had recently married someone from another caste, while her parents "would have preferred someone from their own caste." Yet, she felt that "they've also evolved over the past fifteen-twenty years," largely because they had seen "how things go wrong in the family." Telling a story about her "pretty cousin, the younger one," Khushi explained:

> "She got married into another caste and it was really crazy. The mother was threatening everyone 'I will kill you, I will kill you,' my parents got threatened, it was just crazy. So they've been witnessing the absurdity of parents opposing inter-caste marriages. So it's not something that they would have as an idea but if someone wants it, it's fine."

In light of this, many of the participants' parents would also not be against arranging a marriage, if needed. In her parents' view, Neha said, arranged marriages are a "fool-proof way of ensuring a divorce never happens." Bhandari argues that contemporary urban Indian families often use "strategies of self-presentation" to appear "modern," for instance by avoiding explicit language of caste, community, or morality when speaking about what they see as suitable matches (Bhandari 2017a, para. 32). Like Neha's parents, they would instead deploy a "jargon of rationality" (ibid.) highlighting logistics or impracticalities related to improper matches, rather than normative claims. What seems to matter most in this marriage calculus is the management of classed risk: risk of downward mobility, risk of divorce, risk of social embarrassment (cf. Grover 2011).

Aditi said her "mother is quite strongly casteist" and "genuinely" believed in a sort of biological–moral difference between people. She did not shy away from admitting it:

> "The standard euphemism is 'good family,' uhm, which essentially means a very small group of very upper-caste families. Uhm, so she firmly believes that good blood, so to speak, tells or whatever they used to say a hundred years ago. So she very much believes that and makes no bones about it. Especially when she's around people from our community."

That her mother "makes no bones about it" implies that others in the community were not that different. Aditi was from a South Indian community whose perceived Brahmin roots were well known among its members: "The core of the community is a bunch of *very well-off* people, who are therefore obviously quite high caste. And *very* proud of it." Despite seeing themselves as having been Christian for millennia, new Dalit converts were kept separate from 'upper'-caste members. Again, Aditi said the latter was spoken of euphemistically: "they like to say it's 'personality', or something like that."

In their parents' assumptions about marriage, real or perceived risks of unmarried loneliness also played a part (cf. Lamb 2022). Noor, laughingly, noted that her parents:

> "worry that I'm gonna end up alone and lonely, and also bitter and angry. And that I would have alienated, uhm, people who might have otherwise helped me—or at least *alienated* people who my family really seems to like. But I don't seem to like them very much."

In a social context that privileges marriage and children, parents feared that their daughters would end up alone, without people to rely on in old age. The same argument was used in relation to staying close to the natal family (chapter 9). Maya noted how emotional it was for her to think about the pain her mother seemed to feel at the thought of her daughter not getting married. Maria felt that non-familialized constellations of care, such as feminist friendships (next chapter), were alien for women of older generations, who could only imagine safety through kinship and marriage:

> "I also think it is older women—in this case my mother and my aunts and my grandmother—being *fearful* because they don't *know* any other system. So me trying to disrupt the system *scares* them. Because… uhm… they also love me, so they feel like I'm really going to fall flat on my face. And that I'm going to end up doing things that are going to cause me harm."

4.7. Better or worse than others

Comparisons with others helped the participants contextualize the thought that "the rest of the world was perfect." At the same time, families could compare the women negatively to e.g. cousins seen as more normative. Khushi talked about her "*strikingly* beautiful," "very ladylike," and "upwardly mobile" cousins who "used to dress up really nice, talk to people, do the things women are supposed to do." Members of her family had tried "grooming" her to be more like them. "And that grooming hurt! Like I know all of those rules, I know all of those things, but it hurts that I had to learn that that young."

At the same time, the fact that one–as a relative–had both structural and emotional locations in common with members of the extended family could sometimes be used to the daughters' advantage. Darsha said her extended family "fights a lot," which she saw as a good thing in this context. People disagreeing with each other meant that there wasn't a singular view on gender that prevailed. "The last very strong patriarch was my grandfather," she said—after his death, the centralization of opinions on gender had fallen apart. This meant that "there's always going to be someone who's going to say 'cut the bullshit out,'" which had enabled Darsha to find some support for her own position.

In some sense, all of the participants tended to agree that they "had it better" than a lot of women around them growing up. Tara said she argued with her father about interpretations of Engels, "but most people don't have that space to argue." Recounting a friend being slut-shamed by their parents for wanting to take an overnight bus on her own, Meera said she had come to realize that many everyday things she has been "allowed to do" had been exceptional in comparison to the rules around her while growing up. Her uncle and his children lived upstairs from her, and she was "pretty close" to her cousins while growing up. Meera felt their father was "way tougher on them" than her own father was toward her. "Gender," she said, was for them "way way way" more definitive: "gender plays a huge role in how you grow up [...] and what your fate *is*, eventually." While female cousins faced "Brahmin expectations" regarding marriage, Meera's father had already "had those fights with his own family" and imposed fewer expectations on her.

Other stories of relative freedom were repeated across the interviews. Lily, speaking of what could reasonably be expected of "Indian parents," said that "so much of the feminist narrative is crafted by the West, it's really difficult to articulate it within a context of India." What she meant was that "it would be *impossible* for me to say like that I wasn't *super privileged*, in a feminist sense, in terms of the rights I had while growing up, as a girl."

Coming from a very different context than Lily, Tara also felt that, despite the "movement restrictions" and moral policing that impacted her even in her

undergraduate days in her home state, her life was not as limited as that of many others around her. For example, her parents were comfortable with her having male friends as a teenager, with boys visiting her at home, even being in her room: "Most of the other women would not have this sort of liberation at home." While appreciating their relative freedoms, several women also criticized the notion that one should somehow be grateful for "at least" having had it "better than what most people have."

Asked about the generalized gendered cultures in the extended families, the interviewees tended to agree that women in general were supposed to do everything in the household, "and don't complain about it, don't bitch about it. Run a house, manage all your emotional relationships without the male ever having any kind of emotional accountability or perform any emotional labor." However, this was noted to apply differently to different women. For example, several interviewees expressed having a much higher position of authority (or leniency shown toward them when causing "trouble") in relation to their parents compared to young women who married into the family.

Having daughters-in-law enter the family orbit could also bring out what felt like a new and unpleasant side in one's parents. Aashi said her mother, who had never policed her clothing at home to such an extent, now expected her brother's wife (the mother's daughter-in-law) to wear saris or to use a dupatta with her kurtas. She commented that her mother "gets really agitated" about this: "My parents are like 'It's fine if you're not married,' 'It's fine if you're a *daughter* of the household, it's not fine if you're married into it'" (see chapter 7). As Ahmed-Ghosh notes, "[c]onsent to patriarchal norms, caste, religion, and class is glorified and is reflected in the manner in which the woman is perceived by her marital family" (2004, 112). The new wife constituted a problema if she did not play the role correctly.

4.8. Family journeys of class and caste

Darsha explained:

> "If you see my family background—my family's had a case of moving outside their home. So we were in Jharkhand before this. And from a village in Jharkhand, they moved to—my grandfather moved to—a city in Jharkhand. From there, my father moved to a city in Bengal. From where I moved to… Delhi."

As I will look at in detail in the next two chapters, the participants were (choosing and/or 'forced' to be) highly mobile within India and, in some cases, across international circuits of migration, as well as part of globally circulating Anglophone feminist discourses (on the latter cf. Lukose 2018). In many ways, the

physical and mental mobility that the participants enjoyed was unprecedented in their families. Yet, as Darsha's comment illustrates, the women were not the first in their family to have moved and changed. Earlier migrations created an important background for the self-understandings of the interviewees.

As in Darsha's story, certain travel narratives centered on compounding physical movement across generations. While many of the participants explained their family histories being specifically tied to one particular place or city in India, others quickly brought up narratives of city- or metropolitan-focused moves: from the village to the town, to the metropolis. In other cases, ancestral movement across the country or across newly created national borders were said to be motivated by a search for business opportunities or forced by political violence and fear. Tara's grandparents had been Hindu "refugees from Bangladesh" who "obviously had to leave everything there" and "never ran after money" later either because of their leftist leanings. On the other hand, Aditi's family had moved from the south to the east in order to work. In other cases, movement was part of both maternal and paternal lines, across various states or back into colonial histories that were seen as murky even for older members of the family.

In the stories about family movements across distances, both the places of origin and new places of residence could become central for the families' identity-making in multi-scalar ways (Blunt and Dowling 2022). Someone would be from Mumbai, but also from Goa or Tamil Nadu. Sometimes the importance of the (imagined) place of origin would be heightened by the fact that the family was no longer there (and had perhaps not been there for generations). Aditi described this vividly:

> "You have this slightly NRI[19] sense of being much more Malayali than you might have felt if you lived there. And it was enhanced in our family especially because my grandfather, when he set up his 'dynasty' [slightly ironically] in Calcutta, he made it a focal point of Malayali culture."

Aditi said that when she was a child, her "grandfather set the tone for the house very strongly," "even though he's a very mild-mannered man, so not your image of a patriarch." In Kolkata in the early decades of independent India, this maternal grandfather was a kind of "big man" (Mines 1994), with a sense of *noblesse oblige* toward other (Christian) Malyalis. He, Aditi said, was a "sort of moral guiding light for the community" and set up "his own NGO [...] which is massive now."

Sometimes, movement to the city had happened later, instigated by the parents' ambitions or in relation to the children. Neha saw her path to gender studies in Delhi as having been indirectly enabled by her parents' support for her

[19] Non-residential Indian, the official term for Indian citizens or overseas citizen (OCI) card holders living elsewhere in the world.

brother's studies. "They realized that my brother was really smart," she said. "So they were like, 'we can't do that in this small place, we need to go to a bigger town.'" The family moved to a "smallish town" from an "even smaller place," the new town being the state capital. "So the move wasn't really for me, but I ended up benefiting from that, because eventually I got the same schooling as he did. Now I'm in Delhi because of that."

Such examples show that the women actively investigated and assembled family histories—asking parents and grandparents, piecing together names and places. They sometimes expressed a sense of pride or excitement about the stories they had uncovered. Not all of them were interested in genealogy, with some preferring to make their own meanings in the present and potential future (see chapter 9).

As a social scientist interested in constructions of class and caste, I was interesting in understanding how much thought the participants had put into their journeys. Several had clearly thought about it a lot, noting patterns of how their families described themselves in classed terms. As e.g. Mines (1994) argues, the apparent position of an individual or a family's status in India can drastically change if viewed in relation to their kin networks. This was particularly true for some of the participants: networks and larger families could potentially contain a wealth of opportunities beyond what was offered by the immediate family.

All of the class histories that were shared stressed upward mobility; family backgrounds were often reported to be more modest than what the daughters' own (relatively consumerist) lifestyles in Delhi suggested. Particularly, stories of the participants' parents' childhood and youth were seen as starkly different from the lives that the participants led in Delhi (cf. Kapur 2014 about generational attitudes to money). Several participants also seemed to derive a certain satisfaction from complex class histories—in perhaps 'being' somewhat different from what their then-present selves appeared like.

Class mobility was discussed differently in relation to the parents and grandparents. Parents' journeys were expressed in ways that felt very immediate and were often tinged with a sense of guilt and immediate care. When Aashi told the story of her parents as one of upward mobility, it was with a lot of gentleness:

> "Both my parents were working. They came from really—like, dad came from an extremely impoverished background. I do this thing—I poke a little sometimes, because they don't talk about their lives et cetera that much. Because it's very like—it hurts them, because times were really really difficult. My dad's dad died when [dad] was like a year old. There were like eleven brothers and sisters. So the older brothers were taking care of the younger ones. It was a very difficult time for dad. For mom, family-wise—my grandfather was alive and everything—but very

> impoverished. Everybody studied on scholarship. My mom *literally* had to fight her family to go to college."

For Aashi, the story was about how much easier she had it compared to her parents in terms of money and educational opportunities. This created a place of belonging in itself: "I feel rooted in that—I don't want to call it a struggle, but whatever this idea is, whatever they created for me—I feel rooted in that."

Stories about (great) grandparents were told in a somewhat different emotional register. Because of the distance of time, space, and affect, these histories could be approached with more curiosity and a sense of adventure (the current, relatively secure situation of the descendant/participant then functioning as a kind of guarantee of a happy ending). Generational contextualization also aimed to show that class journeys were not always linear movements 'upward.' Lily said her maternal great-grandfather was the married son of a "massive landowner who ran away with the cook" and was "kicked out" of the family. Subsequently, Lily said, her maternal family was "dirt poor." There are two important devices for narrating the self here: the 'radical' man who chose the cook and poverty, and his previous wife who "kept the house and the property," both appearing as important figures.

Lily's great-grandfather came to Bombay; both he and his new wife worked in low-paid service jobs, and their son—Lily's grandfather—worked the city's textile mills. Lily here connected herself with the lore of the biggest industrial-commercial city in India, the city of dreams, Raj Kapoor-style[20]. The description of her grandfather as a proud textile mill worker, can be read as reflecting the anxious, caste-related classed separation of manual labor from 'intellectual' labor in India:

> "But he's never been ashamed of it. He's always been quite proud of it, because he's been like 'From where I've come and I've taken my family to this place, and by the grace of god my children are all super successful.' Like class-successful."

The family's later "class-successful" reputation casts the previous hardship in a new light—giving the family story a kind of teleology.

Interestingly, losing land ownership appeared in another story too, under different circumstances. In Lily's story, the loss of property was tied to a romanticized, voluntary giving up of privileges and choosing love and labor; Aditi's story was about social reform hitting the land-owning classes. Identifying herself as a "social scientist," she grew up around her grandparents who built the

[20] In classic movies like Shree 420 (Kapoor 1955), Raj Kapoor portrays the stock character of a poor man with big dreams coming to the big city of Bombay/Mumbai.

current family fortune, and had thought about her economic history a lot. Speaking of her grandfather, she said:

> "He actually came from losing a lot of money. Like he came from a very landed family. Both my grandfathers came from families where they used to own a lot of agricultural land, but with the land ceiling acts being implemented in Kerala, they lost all of that. And… uhm, mostly they were not trained to do anything, they were just landowners. They had no skills. And then they had to go and get educated and make something of themselves. And they were the first generation to have to do that. So both my grandfathers, in that sense, are very much—I mean they're as self-made as an upper-caste person can be. But yeah, all of that is part of the sort of 'legacy' of the dynasty. [laughs slightly] That we come from people who made good for themselves."

In the 1950s and 60s, Kerala famously implemented larger-scale land reforms (e.g. N. Roy 2016), glimpsed here as "loss" from the perspective of a formerly "very landed" family. Aditi seemed to be poking gentle fun at the family's self-narrative, recognizing it as a part of "dynasty" building. Noting that the landed classes "had no skills" and were at a loss after the reforms, she describes how people like her grandfather(s) managed to "make good for themselves" by getting educated and bouncing back to a class position comparable to or even higher than what had been lost. The story is particularly interesting when read against Aditi's earlier comment about her mother feeling that you can tell "good blood"—the fact that the family lost its wealth but made it back in another way seems to be taken as proof that the privilege was ethical and just.

Aditi's quip above, "as self-made as an upper-caste person can be," keeps the connections of caste, land ownership, and future prospects in view. It shows the transformation of one form of capital to another ("they had to go and get educated") and how unequally such opportunities were/are divided ("as self-made as an upper-caste person can be"; cf. Jeffrey et al. 2011). The story underlines that the family's current wealth is based on older caste-aristocratic privilege, something that has, in the family's self-notion of "'legacy,'" been rearticulated as embodying a sort of entrepreneurial spirit. In Aditi's view, this allowed the family to not feel bad about their current class position:

> "They feel like they've earned their way out of being lower middle class. Which is of course not true if you're upper caste. Not true if you owned like a thousand acres of land in Kerala at some point. But in their lifetimes it's true."

Money—or the lack of it—functioned in other ways in other stories. For Shalini, part of her self-image rested on the sense that her parents never had much money to give her: "Because we came from a lower-middle class background and then

sort of went up a little on the economic ladder, I have always learned to stay within my economic limits." This informed her thinking in relation to future family relations (see chapter 9).

Caste appeared in most of the narratives but not as clearly analyzed as class—rather it came across as a background factor seen to enable classed events and generational improvement. For example, Aashi said:

> "So my parents basically built a life together. Everything, literally everything that they have and gave me, comes from them. No ancestral property, nothing. Caste privilege, of course, I acknowledge—because it took them one generation to escape that poverty, whereas it would have taken someone else way longer if they didn't have that particular privilege."

Caste was seen to interact with gender in different ways depending on the generation. In a Brahmin family like Meera's, women had been educated for a long time, but for different reasons. Her grandfather was "a *very strong* patriarch," whom she understood as mainly encouraging his own daughters' education in terms of securing caste-appropriate marriages for them. Yet, Meera said, "as his granddaughter, I reaped a lot of benefits." With granddaughters, she felt, "the purpose of education was just education" and her grandfather was genuinely "very proud" of her. Meera noted being surprised by this relatively progressive attitude "coming from somebody who lived in a village for a long, long time."

Sometimes, the nuclear families were seen as uninterested in caste, whereas extended families could take explicit pride in their lineage. Lily said she did not know much about what her grandmother's "class background was" but had recently discovered that "they're all very proud of being Brahmins." Lily had been digging around:

> "Last year I was exploring what my caste is, what caste we come from, what level of privilege do we occupy—[my grandmother] was like 'Yeah we're Konkanashta Brahmins!' [cheerily] Uhm… and my family was a long line of landed Brahmins. And married a boy who was also acceptably Brahmin enough."

She felt caste was not a thing in her own upbringing, saying: "So I grew up *legitimately* not knowing what my caste was"—"the most I interacted with caste was in my history text books." The stress on "legitimately" functions as a way to signal her knowledge of the criticisms of purported caste-innocence among savarna people (see chapter 6). Lily seemed to want to mark that, for her, not knowing was genuine: "Because of the Catholic thing. The Catholic thing is where you're not going to do 'one of these *Hindu* things.' Like being as gauche as talking

about caste." I read this as implying that she herself perhaps understood the family's silence as, nevertheless, a particular kind of modern and self-presentingly more 'civilized' form of brahminism.

Unlike her parents, her Chitpavan grandmother was "very real and honest, and racist as fuck." Her grandmother's openly casteist and racist comments perhaps appeared to Lily as in some sense less pretentious than the caste-blindness of others, perhaps including her own. Lily said that, before moving to Delhi, she "thought caste was something that happened to other people. Like 'in the villages' or in *super* traditional households." Her own immediate, Mumbai-based family maintained a near "complete silence" on the issue and saw it as a matter of pride not to "interact with [openly casteist] people like that."

While caste comes across as something much more stable than class, it is meaningful to note moments where the logic was not as clear-cut. Some of the narratives implied that there were marriages to non-savarna women or "illegitimate" children in family histories; these events were seen as becoming absorbed over time into the outward projection of 'upper'-casteness. In practice, caste sometimes seemed to be shaped more like historical European aristocracy: a desire to portray blue-blood 'purity' while being, in reality, more mixed. Lily said:

> "On my dad's side is where it actually does get like [murky]. I have no idea. Nobody talks about it because three generations up everyone has Catholic names. So you can make haphazard guesses."

She tried to ask about older relatives: "'What do they do?' and they'd be like 'They were farmers.' But they don't know whether they owned the land or worked the land."

4.9. Patterns of movement and independence

Movement has here appeared both as a physical movement and as changes in structural locations. The stories showed how, even when physical migrations took place decades or even multiple generations earlier, a sense of impact lingered. Agentic movement did not necessarily need to be tied to specific imagined characters in the family history. Sometimes, the change itself seemed to count as inspiration. Darsha, whose family had migrated several times, described this succinctly: "That movement outside has been a very crucial journey for us."

Sometimes, possibilities of imagined movement were connected to more specific people or precedents, seen as enabling change. Elliott has noted the importance of Indian family examples who "set out a pattern of independence" (Elliott 2005, 10) for women who come after them. While mothers, unsurprisingly, can often function in this role (see chapter 7), many other kinds of

people appear too. For the participants, such "renegade predecessors" (Elliott 2005, 10) could be of any gender, and included both people they had met and people they had only heard of.

Some families included exceptional histories of highly educated women. Tara painted a picture of an intellectually oriented but economically modest East-Bengali Brahmin refugee-migrant family, where even her great-grandmother was a college graduate and a public official. While the participants coming from such highly literate savarna families saw this legacy as in many ways privileged and structurally enabling, they felt that this in itself should not necessarily be understood as rebellious in a feminist sense—rather, the ancestral women did what women of their cultural, class, and caste position would be expected, or at least allowed, to do. While such participants did see the legacy of women's higher education as in many ways privileged and structurally enabling, it was not necessarily seen as "renegade" despite being uncommon in the larger, national milieu.

In settings where this was seen as less typical, representatives of earlier generations that supported the education and outward-orientedness of women were seen as more transformative. Maya said her maternal grandfather, a Brahmin with no male children, said: "'It's fine, my daughters are my sons.' And that dialogue has been like a really big deal in the family. That sort of… kind of is reflected in like giving us some push towards a career." While the utterance was enabling, it also came with very high demands of its own: "they really had to step into the shoes of the sons. Really perform all the jobs that a son is expected to do in that community" (cf. Donner 2015). This was not necessarily seen as good among the male members of the orthodox extended family. When her aunt—described as "the first person in my life who was a feminist I would say"—tried to do the funeral rites for the grandfather after he passed away, "these assholes wouldn't let her."

Men, perhaps by virtue of being men, were expressed to have had the opportunity to be more rebellious than women. Tara and Darsha saw their grandfathers as important, while at the same time reading them as operating with a patriarchal mindset. Male-focused forms of alternative behavior could thus be reinterpreted as something that would shape the interviewees' current being, including their own feminist negotiations with their parents. Tara described her grandfather as having been "a staunch Marxist," yet the discussions about Rosa Luxemburg only happened two generations later. Darsha, like Tara, grew up in a family with politically active people: "My grandfather was… he was ancient and he was a part of the freedom struggle. So he used to get into protests and would go to jail for that. So then… my father sort of knows where I'm coming from."

Not everyone in this study should be understood as at all having had long-term histories of political articulation and high levels of education among women. This did not stop them from having high ambitions for themselves. Earlier, we saw Aashi talk about her female cousins who did not get highly educated since they were assumed to be getting married soon, something she described as "quite repulsive." Aashi said she "always knew that this is not gonna be my life. Like if my mother could get [to where she got], I have to go beyond that. Otherwise, what's the point." Her mother's life served as a helpful reference point. Beyond this, Aashi had to make her own calls. She did so by getting into and excelling in one of the top legal colleges in the country, even though "law school was *fucking madness*. It was toxic masculinity in and out."

The story can be understood as a version of how negative, cautionary examples (things *not* to do) could also serve as inspiration. Putting it more bluntly, Maya argued that the "shit" she had faced from her father's family had meant being forced to rely on herself. "Had it been a sheltered life," she said, "I probably would have been very much rooted in that religion, in those family ties, [...] traditions, that you have to do things a certain way."

Examples from family histories were here used to place oneself within relational understandings that appeared neither entirely conservative/oppressive nor reliably supportive/explicitly feminist (cf. Lugones 2003). Specifically, the point of "renegade" predecessors was not that they were seen (or would see themselves) as necessarily feminist—rather, their function was to show that the family had already survived and even actively produced departures from various norms. As a result, the women were not alone in their choices, and being odd and making one's own choices could appear something like continuations of a kind of unruly streak.

Renegade inspiration had also been derived from cultural references that placed the family in relation to something seen as different. I noted Tara's interest in heavy metal and punk rock music, which she felt had allowed her to imagine herself as different from the good girls around her in the suburban 2000s. Anglosphere punk music makes for a more 'globally' legible model for rebellion, whereas other stories highlighted more regional phenomena. Aditi, from the South Indian family in Kolkata, said that she at one point "tried really hard to be Bengali":

> "Because I perceived that among the various communities that you could be, Bengali was clearly like 'up there.' Because it was intellectual, and it seemed to be… what do you say, it seemed to be organized on somehow more… noble ideas."

Ray argues that the Bengali *bhadralok* (established 'upper'-caste/class Bengalis) played an important role in the "long-standing oppositional and anti-

establishment culture" (Ray 2000, 55) of the city. Such an understanding of oneself as alternative and "intellectual" spoke to the young Aditi, since it offered a more "noble" script than what she was used to: "It was so much better a story than the one I had, which was just like essentially 'loyalty, loyalty, loyalty.'" Reading this against the background of a family that saw belonging as something inherited and obligatory, experimenting with other (even brahminical) cultural codes gave her a chance to feel that change was possible.

The histories of family movement seen in this chapter will be built upon in the next one. Sharangpani argues that "women strategically select material and emotional resources from within their social ecology and walk a tightrope between the 'problems of dependence and pleasures of identification'" of and with the natal family (2018, 543). While questions of dependency will become clearer in subsequent chapters, I have here explored the pleasures of both identification and disidentification with family legacies.

Chapter Five: Encountering Delhi, encountering feminisms

In the previous chapter, I argued that the women's own journeys can be made sense of against backgrounds of family movement and identity-building. Ahmed (2006) notes that people tend to move in relation to "lines" they inherit, meaning that movement is shaped by e.g. the family scripts available. In the women's own trajectories, there were multiple stops. All moved away from their parents at a young age. For some, this was at 17, across the country to Delhi or another big university city. For some it was a little bit later, for a master's degree. By their early to mid-20s, everyone had come to the capital[21]. As Blunt and Dowling write, looking at migration routes instead of clear-cut roots shows the "more mobile, multiple and transcultural geographies of home" (2006, 199). The mobility and multiplicity did not end in Delhi—home is also a state of becoming, homing.

This chapter looks at how the participants narrated their initial encounters with feminism, particularly in relation to the city of Delhi and attempts at homemaking in the capital. I am interested in the ways in which feminism can be thought of as a homing desire, offering possibilities of home and belonging beyond that of the natal family (Martin and Mohanty 1986). If the previous chapter focused on both identifications and disindentifications with the family, here we see a continuation of the latter. Such disidentifications can be understood as echoing Jack Halberstam's (2005) point about queer timelines. Leaving home in order to make a new one, in this view, interrupts (or at least suspends) the (hetero)normative scripts that structure familial expectations—even if such interruptions are tied to a personally specific time (say, one's 20s) (cf. Baas 2018).

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[21] Some of the participants had also studied for master's degrees outside of India before ending up in Delhi. Comparing classed and caste-related experiences of middle- to upper-class savarna women in Delhi and e.g. London or New York would make for an interesting study of its own. The women's relative privilege within the different contexts is drastically different, and so are the possibilities and demands put on them. For example, one participant who did an MA in London before coming to Delhi said she used to work as a waiter at an Indian restaurant in the city—something that would be utterly unthinkable and unacceptable for a woman of her class and caste status in Delhi. And, while English-speaking Brahmin women such as the participant would be in a dominant position in terms of caste in the Indian capital, their position as 'brown women' in the UK would be something different. At the same time, participants could also refer nostalgically to their studies abroad in relation to the personal and sexual freedom they had experienced.

Thapan (2025), in the context of international migration, discusses various "passages" that Indian women go through on their journeys out from their natal homes. These sometimes result in a dramatic "rupture" taking the shape of difficult, post-conflict independence. In my work too, the women's moves to Delhi were often described as life-changing, and marked by many (cultural, linguistic, networked) shifts similar to those more commonly associated with international migration. Yet here we do not see any necessary rupture, but rather something akin to a slow accumulation of an unhomely discomfort (cf. Gorman-Murray 2007; Waitt and Gorman-Murray 2010) that mingles with the growth of new possibilities of becoming.

In this chapter, families are made (momentarily) less central, and friendships and feminist networks arise as central meaning makers. However, I do not understand moving and staying as simply opposed—despite moving away, the participants remained within the relational fields of their natal families. Movement is, then, not about being free from family, but an expansion and complication of that relationship, about stretching rather than severing connections.

Feminists have critiqued the "privileging of movement over 'staying put'" (Ahmed et al. 2003, 7; cf. Sarma 2017). Nitin Sinha (2018) has furhter argued that while women's experiences in general have been marginalized in studies of migration, this is particularly the case for women staying (or being forced to stay). Sinha notes an interesting moralism related to the word movement itself: if change is good, not changing is bad—migration is mobile, which then implies a stagnation-adjacent "immobility" in those who "remain" (ibid., 213). I do not wish to prescribe a specific value to moving or claim it as a necessary condition for feminist growth, or to paint the place of origin as an antithesis to the metropolis in terms of feminist or queer possibility (cf. Waitt and Gorman-Murray 2011; Crawford 2008; Haritaworn 2015). Metropolitan-oriented movement is, however, likely to produce a certain kind of feminist self-understanding that will differ from ones generated in contexts of staying.

Movement can also be argued to always be a result of privilege, even in cases where movement is forced upon someone—the most vulnerable will most likely stay behind (Sinha 2018). Similarly, "technologies of travel [and] the geopolitics of mobility [...] require the sedentariness of some labourers, or limit the movement of others" (Ahmed at al. 2003, 7). Certainly, the family narratives set out here describe movement as being enabled by relative levels of privilege.

Noting the importance of narratives of movement to narratives of feminist growth, participants showed a high level of awareness around the nature of storytelling, noting how telling a "feminist story" about oneself could easily acquire a teleological ring to it. Aditi said, "it's also very convenient to tell that

story, saying 'I used to be shit and now I'm great!'" "I know this because I had that story for really long and I know the bullshit parts of it," she added.

5.1. Leaving home

Khushi spoke about how she and a friend used to conspire together about leaving their hometown:

> "Shivangi and I used to sit and talk about this a lot. This has been one highlight of our lives, this is what we say: 'The aim of our lives has literally been to get the out of that fucking city. The city is trash. Everybody in it is trash. Everybody who stays there ends up being trash. So just get the fuck out.' And that's what we did, we got the fuck out."

The girls had met in a "coaching class" that helped Khushi get into one of the "best colleges in the country." "Getting the fuck out" features here as a life-changing moment (cf. Dave 2012). Other participants expressed this in different words, but moving away from the parents was a central moment for all of them. The defining feature of the move was moving far enough away from the parents in order to justify having one's own apartment. This distance varied; for some it meant moving to Delhi from a satellite town, while others migrated across the country. Meera, who came to Delhi at 17, noted that it was important for her to move far enough away from her parents so that she "couldn't go back whenever [she] wanted to." By putting a 20-hour train ride in between herself and her hometown, the "option" of going back to the family home was "shut"—"so you started finding home in other places."

The participants regularly thought of their journeys out from the family home in terms of feminism. The stories also showed how desires for individuation and greater agency grew. While the participants often described their gendered family backgrounds as "less bad" than those of many others around them (see previous chapter), homes were nevertheless also described as stifling. Usually, moving out was seen as the only chance for marked change. For example, Khushi said she started "drifting apart from [her] family" because the experience of "being a girl in that small town" where the "extended family was around, and very involved" meant that even relatively progressive ideas would appear "strikingly" different. Changing others' views while staying there seemed impossible: "I always knew that there was a very set framework within which I had to operate: whatever I do, whatever my ideas are, it will have to be away from my parents."

Across the country, Shalini also felt that she was "an alien" in her community. Her experienced need for secrecy was lesser than that of Khushi and, with a certain pride, she said she "made sure that I was the alien." Back then, she said,

she "was just desperate to not get tied down, or *be* identified with my community at all." Expressing a deeply tactical teenage self, Shalini said she "wanted to do everything that was possible to do, with my age, with my resources. You know?":

> "I had to do something that… undermined my parental control and the conservative place I come from. That, you know, I have to […] to break out of this bubble of a life that I've grown up in. That I don't like this community and I have to get out of this community."

Control and family tension were explicitly connected to gender in the narratives. Vishakha said there was "a lot of *pain*" in her family, especially on her father's side. She noted that gender had been a running theme in "all" the conflicts her family had seen: "You can't really take that away, it's a constant, like, a flow." Astha said family anxieties about "girls from 'good families'" had an impact on "just like *everything*." Meera noted that for her friends and herself "the issues we were having with our parents were mostly feminist issues." Yet, the articulation of the issues as gendered—not to mention feminist—was not necessarily a given before the women moved out. Many of the desires for creating a better life for oneself were framed in a pre-feminist knowledge of something being wrong.

Several participants noted having felt "very independent" already as children; independence here meant thinking about gender roles. Tara said it "was more of a gut feeling. It was more of a lived experience. That my mom and dad are both working but my mom has to cook." That feeling led to a wish to understand and analyze her parents and herself. Aditi felt "she's been this way for quite a long time," even before she knew the word "patriarchy." She said she started thinking like a "social scientist"—seeing her parents as "other adult people"—in early adolescence. Finding out about an affair of one of the parents was felt to have forced this picture to emerge:

> "But that's quite *a lot* for a 13-14 year old to take on. Because that basically means that I have to forgive them for something that I'm constantly being trained to think of as very black-and-white wrong. And… yeah, it kind of breaks them down as people. So I've been doing this to them. Like psychoanalyzing my parents and really considering 'where is this coming from'-sort of thing."

Not everyone expressed having been so precocious. Some had "internalized" parts of the "flawed logic" of popular notions of gender and daughterhood, meaning that a conscious "unlearning" had to happen later on. To "shake off" normative assumptions and gendered trauma could take a long time. Personal experiences, witnessing the experiences of others "and the shaming that followed," as well as active feminist readings of them were seen as tools for articulation. Vishakha described the result as a kind of delayed recognition. The feelings had long been

there, she said, but "I only understood much later, after feminist language, that this was not about me being wrong."

The idea of how "to do everything that was possible to do, with my [...] resources," introduced by Tara in the earlier quote, is interesting. In the participants' descriptions, feminism—understood as discourses, methods of analysis, and social networks—becomes a resource through which new possibilities emerge. How the women arrived at their understandings of feminism differed. As above, some saw a proto-feminist understanding arising in their childhood selves. Others drew on the "renegade predecessors" (Elliott 2005) discussed in the previous chapter. Some described hours spent reading as crucial, while also noting that "bookishness" was a class and caste privilege. More than anything, stories of female friendships—most often in college—appeared as central for formulating a feminist stance. For those participants who had studied in Delhi, their feminist awakening was then tied to the city. Those who had studied elsewhere described already being vocal feminists when they moved to Delhi.

Narratives describing encounters with feminism emphasized both a sense of revelation and an uncertainty about whether one was allowed to claim it as one's own (whether one had the right credentials for it). While the women's everyday feminism during the period of their engagement with this study also related to a myriad of other things like housing, work, safety, macropolitics, and romantic relationships, family appeared as the first and in some ways still the primary site of feminist meaning-making. As Aditi illustrated, family could also be where one's feminism had the most visible effects. Asked about where her feminism was most apparent in her life, she said: "Family, *definitely*. I think family has been the biggest place that feminism has allowed me to… ground a stand. You know?"

Connecting feminism to her sense of self, Lily said it became a big part of her identity "because that was the thing that, the tool that I used to kind of navigate trauma with my parents." Emphasizing the impact, she said feminism "*completely* changed *everything*" about how she thought about her family, giving her a grid with which to analyze her parents. It also appeared as a way to (try to) tell them they could no longer behave as they had: "[...] if feminism hadn't told us that the way abuse works is keeping it silent, then we still wouldn't have *any* validity to be able to speak out, and just like exist on our terms."

Other times, the arrival of a feminist vocabulary preceded a feminist identity. Maya said she initially "knew what the term meant" but "just didn't know if *I* qualified for it!":

> "In my teens I used to think that let's say I start calling myself a feminist and let's say tomorrow someone asks me a question about feminism and I know nothing about it! I didn't know about feminist history, I didn't know about different campaigns, I didn't know the

> different standpoints on different issues—I had no idea about all that, it came to me after I did my master's in gender studies."

Maya expressed the idea that one needed to know feminism in a kind of formal sense ("master's in gender studies"), not just "feel strongly about these issues", in order to be a legitimate feminist. She said that now she "understands" that "there are so many people who do not study gender studies and are feminists. There have been people who are not very educated but are working so much for gender equality—they are feminists." Other people calling themselves feminists had an important function: Maya had once asked a visiting feminist filmmaker in college "'How do you even claim that word?'."

This interplay between home and college highlights the dual personal/private and social aspect of feminist growth. While much of the concrete labor of feminism took place in the family sphere, the ability to engage in such work was nonetheless described as developing socially.

5.2. College feminisms

While many had come to Delhi for their undergraduate degrees, some of the women had studied elsewhere first. Well-known universities beyond the capital—in Mumbai, Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Kolkata, Chennai, Pune, and a few other cities—can be seen to form a "migration circuit" (to borrow from Ahmed et al. 2003), where people move from one or the other for their bachelor's, master's, and doctoral studies. While much work on domestic migration in India has tended to focus on more precarious migration connected to poverty or political violence (e.g. Rajan and Sivakumar 2018; Haxar 2016), relatively privileged women's voluntary migration in search of greater independence forms an important case study for the development of feminisms and gender roles (Dutta and Shaw 2019). For young, middle-class and 'upper'-caste women searching for tools for greater independence, colleges could offer a chance to find "likeminded people": "And people who could inspire me. You know? People who could teach me things."

The participants generally attributed their opportunities for educational advancement and growing feminist awareness to their family histories of upward class mobility and caste privilege. Meera said she and her brother "had a lot of exposure to a lot of opportunities" because of the middle-class and 'upper'-caste family they "were born in." "Obviously," she said, this gave her "a lot of advantage already." Top Indian colleges, at least at the time of this study, could provide spaces for feminist growth in three ways: through peers and movements, specific teachers, and course- or program-level conscientization. Noor felt that her degree had helped her identify a lot of things back home: "When you study gender—or at least when we studied gender—the first thing you realize is how messed up your

own family is. That the system of family is so messed up." Tara said her university had a lot of "feminists," "some amazing professors," "a lot of talks, conferences… feminist ideas." Although these people were a minority within the larger college, they were still enough to form a "*community*." A sense of learning and doing together was palpable in her narration:

> "My batch-mates, juniors and seniors, who were becoming feminist at the same *time*, because they were being exposed to these ideas at the same time. We were having a discourse amongst ourselves. Then there was an anti-sexual harassment movement in my college, because of one case—one girl got assaulted and the college authorities were not letting the police probe, because of some political influence and shit like that. So when we were creating that student movement in our college, also, there was a lot of discourse. That was also the time I started understanding the sort of oppression—like, I always knew there was oppression but never could see it so clearly, how it happened, the structures of it."

Having feminist outlets meant that she felt "more at ease" and did not "have to rebel anymore" in unproductive or self-harming ways. Speaking about her time in secondary school, Darsha said she used to be "the judgmental sort." She sometimes felt more pushed toward being a "good girl" by her school than by her parents because "what I picked up [was that] you always make a distinction between self and Other and you wouldn't want to be the Other. The Other was always the bad guy."

A lot of unlearning happened in college. Colleges also included significant (cis) female-only spaces[22]—some of the participants went to women's colleges and others stayed in women-only hostels—which provided spaces for growth, despite the fight against the policing in them mentioned in the thesis introduction. This could especially be the case for women whose family environments were experienced as particularly restrictive. Aashi said she had "limited" "progressive ideas" in school, "but college was when I was free." For five years, she lived in the hostel of a college that, to her at that point, felt "supremely liberal": "It blew my fucking head. I came from a house where I couldn't even tell my parents I'm friends with boys."

College also gained particular significance through the fact that it was elsewhere than the family. Tara, who did her undergraduate degree in the city where her parents lived, spoke of the importance of moving across the country for her master's studies:

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[22] This does not mean that people in those settings would agree with this characterization. It is not uncommon for trans men to attend all-girls colleges (and for trans girls to be forced into boys' hostels). From a non cis-normative perspective, such spaces are clearly problematic, despite their feminist importance in this story.

> "I became even more aware when I moved out of Kolkata, when I went to study journalism [in South India]. Because then I was talking to some people about my family. Because they wanted to—they had no idea of where I came from. And we were already adults. So everybody wanted to know where you come from, you know?"

This distance helped her think about her relationship with her parents in a new way:

> "And also that alienation, I was already estranged from my family, I hadn't met them in a year. So that gave me this, sort of, perspective where I could see things more clearly. And that's when I started realizing what was wrong with the things, and why certain things were done to me, and my parents."

Arguably, "[o]ne can only strive to become [...] what one first imagines being" (Clark 2016, 11). This was visible in several of the articulations. Maya, after claiming the word feminist for herself, said that her studies gave her the confidence to start using the word. Earlier, while she did "*speak* up against that discrimination," she did not feel "confident in my action." Feminism could thus make it possible to not just recognize gendered policing and violence, but to build less personal and guilt-ridden responses to it.

Colleges, and the feminist changes that came with them, were also seen to have given space for other kinds of important gender-related growth. When asked about what feminism had given her, Vishakha mentioned "sex positivity": "I grew up in a conservative household—I was not really comfortable. Even if I would have had sex with that mindset, I wouldn't have been so open or even vocal about my desires." It helped her embrace (bi)sexuality in a larger sense: "Secondly, I was in a closet. Feminism is the one thing that helped me come out of it."

Illustrating the connections between sexual exploration, privilege, and religious prejudice, Jyoti said college brought people of somewhat different backgrounds together, which helped her see some of her own biases. Earlier, she had felt that "having pre-marital sex, having exploratory sex, renegotiating *your*... power dynamic with the person you're having sex with" were "all things that from my class position was pretty normal." In college, she made a friend from a "conservative Muslim family" and "expected that from her class position it wasn't." The word "class" seems here to be folding both caste and religion into it. Jyoti's assumption turned out to be false, something she explained in terms of the shared gendered-moral space. "Because of the space we both occupied, which was the university," she said she and her friend "got into relationships at the same time":

> "And our sexual progress was almost identical. So we would almost come to the point where on the same day we would be complaining about our partners, sexually, in the same words to this same [third] girl."

The idea of colleges as places where sexual exploration happened had also reached the world around them. The very same Delhi university colleges that were the highest ranked in the country were also seen to have a reputation for breeding "'characterless'" girls. The feminist girls of Darsha's college were thought of as "smart"—in Indian English not necessarily a good thing for women—"hippies and druggies and I don't know [what]." She noted the double nature of this: While the women of the school were thought of as bad, they were also thought of as *bad*—sexually alluring and potentially available.

Against the many romantic images of college life, the institutions were also seen as plagued by the general inequality of Indian society. Darsha studied at "an elite all-women's college" often considered the top undergraduate school in India —an assessment which, according to a laughing Darsha, "is *shit*." Khushi noted that colleges were "fucked in their own ways—casteism was rampant, homophobia was rampant, general slut-shaming and sexual harassment, all of these things—it was like a microcosm of anything that generally happens, but a microcosm of really smart people with better opportunities waiting for them later."

5.3. Encountering the city

"To see all these rabid feminists, it was just fucking amazing," Aashi said. The words capture something of the excitement related to coming to the capital. As elsewhere in the world, Indian "cities constitute LGBTQI+ imaginaries of freedom and rightfulness relative to rural and other non-urban spatialities (Kumar 2024, 377). Furthermore, "[i]n Delhi, physical proximity with state power, the nation's apex court, policy think tanks, NGOs, and media hubs in many ways tie queer social and political life, in affective and material ways, to the political theater of rights and the spaces in which they are wrought" (ibid.). Delhi is already an exciting place before one gets there. In several interviews, the city emerged as the place to be because of the feminists that came there—and they came there because it was the place to be. Aditi said:

> "People come to Delhi because it has opportunities that other cities don't have. *I* came to Delhi because I was running away from my family, rather than facing off with them. But the specific experiences I had in Delhi weren't just about it being the national capital or a power center. It was that I met a lot of other people who had a lot that they brought with them when they came here."

Tara had similar views. She said, in Delhi, "you have the chance to redefine yourself. You have the freedom to explore yourself. You have the chance to become someone and not be judged for who you were. You have this… sort of distance from your past." Like in Aditi's quote, the possibility of freedom is connected to finding your kind of people: "I say this a lot, it's my line: 'A place reveals itself to you through the people you know'. And it's very true for me. Especially cities."

Many spoke highly of the friend networks they had built in Delhi. Neha said she had a "whole *different* set of people [to] depend on"—not her family. "If I have, for instance, an emergency or something happens in the house, my relatives would be the *last* people I'd call to help out." Often, calling the family just made things worse. Neha said she had made friends through her engagement with (university-affiliated) queer collectives and generally "just being around queer spaces in Delhi." People in such spaces "obviously" had a lot of shared experiences. The word "obviously" is interesting and can be seen reflecting the privileged class and caste locations of such spaces. For the people who belonged, "one major part of being a part of the queer collective is that that's also, like, a support group," Neha said. The group provided help in queer-related issues ranging from medical help, assistance with lodging harassment complaints, shopping for gender-affirming clothes together, or offering help when moving house.

"Something that I learned back in college was that, no matter what happens, you support your sister," Meera said, using the trope of sisterhood to describe her friendships in Delhi. According to her, the idea was to counter the notion that women were each other's worst enemies. Often, this showed "in the *simpler*, smaller acts" of solidarity, for example in making sure people got home safely or had a place to crash when needed. Meera explicitly noted that her networks—built at college and around feminist social movements— became meaningful specifically when dealing with the family. Her friends had supported her "a lot in very different ways" in relation to her parents. Friends would, for example, help diffuse tensions when parents called incessantly to find out about their daughters.

"*Surprisingly*," Meera said (while stressing the unsurprising nature of it) she felt a deep sense of belonging with a group of women she knew from college, women who also were "really passionate about gender." Such women were not constantly questioning her, unlike many other young, non-feminist women she had met in Delhi. In Meera's view, feminist friends became—together—aware that the struggles they had at home were not just about 'bad' parents or 'bad' daughters, but about something larger:

> "You know that realization that 'Oh it's not just my family that's doing this,' but it's the *common ground* of all arguments you have. And then

> understanding that that stemmed from certain ideas about caste and certain ideas about class."

Locating oneself was a relief. Meera's comments also reveal the homogeneity of her friend group—the problems were common because the group shared structural locations (cf. Nakassis 2014). She herself alluded to this: "In my group—all of our middle-class parents tried to show that they were all really… I mean, that they were *not* being casteist. That they were *so progressive* [laughs] about their ideas about caste." Yet the parents would then talk about "character" and "*loose* women," making the underlying casteism and related patriarchal expectations show: "you realized *what* ideas they had about a lot of things." The friends, she said, "*learned* a lot together," "when we read about women and caste was when we realized what *character* has to do with any of this."

Feminist professors who would either discuss family politics in the classroom or be available for answering questions outside of it also helped. This learning, Meera said, made it possible for them to counter parental narratives about how a woman was supposed to behave.

While friend groups were central to building a life in the city, not everyone felt that they were or *should* be central to helping them negotiate family dynamics. Astha said she did not talk to her friends about family issues as much as about other political issues because bringing up these issues was exhausting. Usually, she said, only her romantic partners knew details about the family. Connecting this to class and caste, Astha noted that one reason for not bringing up her own family struggles in queer/feminist spaces was because she felt she came "from a *tremendous* place of privilege" and did not want the "hog" the space. For example, despite much drama, the fact that her parents were more or less "fine" with her being gay, even if they might be less so when she was not around, was not something most people could take for granted: "The fact that they are cool with *me* at least—it doesn't matter how they react to other people asking them questions about it." In Delhi, Astha knew others whose "relationship[s] with their parents are so abusive" so what she had seemed utopian in comparison.

In the introduction to this thesis, I noted that Pinjra Tod was the popular movement that came closest to directly tackling familial control as a feminist issue. This does not mean that one should assume that participation in social movements around other causes would not have an impact on negotiating family dynamics. As noted, the class- and caste-normative 'good' woman was not expected to be out protesting. The participants' narratives showed how, when they did, it also affected parental relationships in multiple ways. As parents' expectations, warnings, and judgment also rang in the ears of the participants when engaging with the outside world, familial feminist negotiations could then take the shape of internal assessments of how much one should let one's parents

know about these activities. Even Darsha, who had a history of explicit political activism in her family, said she did not disclose much to her parents when she was active in the students' movement. While the fact that her grandfather was jailed set a sort of precedent that made talking about certain things easier, she still chose to do it afterwards: "I've not been to jail and told him I'm there… but I've told him later." She felt that after the fact, there was less reason for a parent to get anxious or angry (see chapter 9).

5.4. Homemaking practices

"The home is a rich site and subject for research on material cultures," note Blunt and Dowling (2006, 74). Although family homes elsewhere in India formed much of the meaning of 'back home', it was the women's dwellings in South Delhi that formed their very material, de facto day-to-day homes. In their materiality, these homes were also the spaces in which the women were involved in their homemaking and homing practices—making spaces of their own, perhaps for the first time in their lives. Over the years of this study, the dwellings of the participants represented a large chunk of the variation available within South Delhi: from small, badly ventilated spaces in Khirki Extension or Humayunpur, to Nehruvian-utilitarian Delhi Development Authority (DDA) flats in Hauz Khas or Alaknanda, to somewhat larger and airier flats on leafier streets in neighborhoods like CR Park or Jangpura. The level of utilities, accessibility, and overall comfort and 'class' varied significantly between the participants and between different flats occupied by the same person over the year(s). Sometimes, a movement 'up' in terms of expectations of comfort could be seen across the period of the study.

In the early years after college and moving to South Delhi, the women's rooms/homes featured only the bare necessities. The mattress or bed would serve as the focal point of all socializing. Sofas and similar seating groups would only appear later, in the case of more disposable income and adult pretentions. The lack of more permanent furniture was also due to the often temporary nature of any dwelling (the women moved a *lot*, in search of better landlords and dwellings), and the revolving nature of flatmate arrangements (see next chapter). While all but one of the participants lived with flatmates in apartments that included halls (living rooms), these were often neglected and served more as storage areas than communal spaces. Beyond flatmates, many of the women had friends from other cities in India (or distant parts of Delhi-NCR) staying with them for periods of time, which could give the houses a less individualistic feel. Living at close quarters with other women was also something many had become accustomed to during their undergraduate dormitory or PG days.

Delhi also came with opportunities for making one's own money, something that "really changes you as a person", as one interviewee said. At the same time, growing up also meant feeling pressure to become financially independent. Noor, in her mid-20s, said she felt "a lot of anxiety about money," about still having to take money from her parents. She was earning enough to pay for basic expenses but relied on her family for things like psychotherapy costs. While she felt there could be a sense of revenge in making her father pay for her therapy, her lack of financial independence added to her sense of guilt and self-loathing around her dependency: "I feel anxious about that, I feel anxious that the tether is still there. Also I despise myself for it. I feel horrible for that even after earning, I would still have these thoughts." As NGO jobs were badly paid, Noor saw no quick way out from the situation (see chapter 9).

A focus on the *inter-* in migration studies can (inadvertently or not) stabilize ideas about the *national*, making such movement seem unproblematic. Yet, in a context of cultural muliplicity and federal statehood such as India, domestic migrants, like most of the interviewees, also cross any number of constructed borders. For many of the participants, moving to Delhi meant moving to a new linguistic context and a somewhat alien-seeming cultural, "North Indian," sphere. While a couple of the participants were from Hindi-speaking (or Hindi-adjacent[23]) areas and spoke at least some Hindi at home, most of the women had only learned Hindi in school and/or become fluent after coming to Delhi. With the move to the capital, a large part of everyday life, to do with house-hunting, setting up a place, running errands, interacting with (domestic) workers, etc. was conducted in this new language. At the same time, young middle-class, 'upper'-class social groups in South Delhi primarily spoke English.

The houses of the participants could serve as pockets of various cultural backgrounds. People brought different cultures and languages into their homes in the form of food, posters, music, films, and snippets of conversation with friends from similar backgrounds. People from certain communities—notably Bengalis—also had access to neighborhoods, markets or e.g. libraries where the language could be used and glimpses of a perhaps romanticized 'back home' could be seen. Yet, for many of the women, Delhi appeared—at least initially—as somewhat foreign. For participants like Lily, who described feeling "diasporic" despite living in her country of origin, this was accentuated by the cultural-political distance she felt from what was considered the conservative Delhi mainstream. The "extreme paranoia" most of the women felt in relation to the masculine-coded, potentially violent city around them (next chapter) may have influenced their need to create a

[23] Hindi can be understood to form a Hindustani (Hindi-Urdu) continuum and has commonalities with (closely or more distantly) related, partly mutually intelligible, languages around it.

sense of belonging that centered on their private feminist homes, spaces that were somewhat more under their control.

5.5. (Queer) moments of connection

One of the best aspects of Delhi was felt to be the way in which an engagement with feminism could bring together people who might otherwise not have known each other. For example, when looking for flatmates (online or via friends of friends), people would often specify a desire for someone who was explicitly feminist. Beyond the usual frictions of flatmates, the participants had negative experiences of living with more conservative women. Meera said that feminism "also causes you to sometimes lose a lot of friends," even young women. For Neha, espousing feminist politics also meant that "it becomes really hard to take shit from people." At the same time, feminist women were seen as helping each other to demand greater accountability from each other: "we kind of build an unspoken pressure on each other to just not be that asshole."

While many of the flatmate arrangements were largely transactional (not resulting in closer friendships), sometimes they resulted in enduring friendships. In the following quotes, two participants from different states of India and very different kinds of families describe each other and their classed, cultural, and gendered differences:

> "She grew up dancing the [North Indian] folk art form, this really really… amazing thing where these women wear these massive *cholis* and skirts and have like pots and stack the pots on their head. And very casually said 'Yeah I got up to eight pots and then I quit dancing'. And this was while she was listening to music that I had never listened to first hand. Like, just like *Desi* music. Ghazals and Urdu poetry, and like [state in North India] music—which in my head that just registers as village music. And I was literally like 'This is the kind of stuff that's not just that I would had seen it second-hand—I would have seen it in a passing glance and changed the channel'. Or like seen it outside, happening to someone on the train and then looked back into my fucking *English* book."

> "My parents [are] amazed by [her] okay? [laughs] […] they're amazed by her because she's *nothing* like the girls they've seen back there. She's nothing like a North Indian girl. She's *nothing*, *nothing* like one. And yet she's amazing. So they were just like very amused by her existence."

By 2018-2019 the two women had been sharing a flat for some time and were best friends. The women were from different kinds of 'upper'-caste backgrounds, again illustrating the diversity in cultures of (classed) gendering within such categories. Feminism brought the women together; in their lives in Delhi, they were both

fiercely feminist and bonded through this, becoming what can be understood as significant others to each other, people "who have a particular significance in, and commitment to, the shaping of a self" (Jamieson quoted in Roseneil and Ketokivi 2016, 145).

Above, there is an evident tension related to introducing friends to parents ("my parents were amazed by her"), something that many of the participants were hesitant to do. This was partly because they were afraid that their friends' presence might upset the facade of multiple half-truths and lies that most of the women had created for their parents ("the thing is they're very wary of what kind of influence you have", another participant said) and partly because they did not want their friends to have to deal with the "insanity" of their parents. Yet, in some positive cases, friends' families could also provide glimpses of how gendered and sexual expectations could be organized in less oppressive ways. Neha said that she had met some of her friends' parents in Delhi, who had shown her that families could in fact be supportive of her queerness, and supportive of discussing things like gay dating openly.

The communal and shared aspects of the participants' living arrangements can be understood as constituting what have been called "queer domesticities" (Gorman-Murray and Cook 2018). Like Janina Geist in their work on queer India, I "envision 'queer spaces' as spaces either occupied by self-identified queers, or by those who defy power and heteronormativity, for example due to their non-conforming gender expression, sexual orientation or choice of living. To qualify spaces as 'queer' means more than to suggest that 'queer people' hang out there" (Geist 2014, 94). Such queerness requires continuous upkeep.

Reimagining and creating 'home(s)' have also been a long-standing interest of other forms of feminist scholarship. Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty examined the idea of 'home' in feminist writing, as well as the alluring idea of "feminism as [a] home" (1986, 192). However, the authors argued for an "unsettl[ing] [of] any notion of feminism as an *all-encompassing* home" (ibid., emphasis mine). The caste-entangled disagreements of what feminism means in Delhi (see next chapter) attest to the same point. Yet, the participants' descriptions of life in the city show that feminism (in its various meanings) can be a homing strategy. Queer geographers Waitt and Gorman-Murray note that "[t]hrough homemaking activities, individuals can be considered as actively remapping places to help (re)constitute their subjectivities and understanding of place" (2011, 1241).

These spaces also blur "the line between female bonding and female homosexuality. Mundane homosocial activities [...] become invested with sexual and erotic energy" (Ghosh 2012, 437). As Ghosh writes, this can cause social upset since "[i]t can now no longer be assumed that things are what they *appear* to be"

(ibid., emphasis in original). In Delhi, certain forms of queerness could easily hide in plain sight as long as they did not *look* queer—while things that looked heterosexual could come under scrutiny (cf. Titzmann 2017; Lamb 2022). In my reading, some of the domestic settings of this study appeared friendly, romantic, platonically cuddly, and sexual at the same time—while others might have appeared physically intimate yet not romantic or sexual at all (cf. Phadke and Kanagasabain 2023, on Indian queer female friendships). Beyond flatmates and friends, partners—sometimes multiple—created more or less permanent parts of the home setting.

The materiality of homeliness was deeply felt: as much in the smog-stained ever-revolving fans and messy kitchens as in the scent of Classic Ice Burst cigarettes. Yet, in the setting of this study, homemaking could also be an online activity. Smartphones and social media make physical distinctions smaller, and the harshness of the outside world (see next chapter) sometimes means that one, in fact, ends up interacting more with people online than offline. Beyond friends, extended online feminist communities also existed. For example, some participants referred to the amorphous entity of "Indian feminist Twitter" as a kind of public space or town hall—and a central forum for the creation of a caste-aware feminist discourse, also questioning the ideas of the family that we saw in chapter 3.

A seamlessness of the on- and offline is central (see next chapter). As already Parmesh Shahani's (2008) writing on gay Bombay/Mumbai attested, online and offline spaces located across various media, cities, and countries are highly intertwined, forming what can (drawing on Appadurai) be called an "ethnoscape" (ibid., 82). Ten to fifteen years later, online communities, events, and engagement/activism were absolutely crucial for the creation of shared and very lively worlds and mental communities. Thinking back from now (2026), when much of the online presence of feminist activists has been curtailed in India, it can also be hard to remember that in 2016 to early 2020, young and radical feminist opinion-builders or influencers often posted up to a dozen times a day, keeping followers informed about seemingly endless issues and causes around the subcontinent. Such content was then engaged with, reposted and shared, creating "network counterpublics" (Jackson et al. 2018) and a shared feeling of things that 'everybody' was talking about, an odd feeling of 'being there'.

5.6. To find a place of one's own

"I've seen this need in me now to occupy space," Meera said. She felt she had been quieter before, tending to take up less space in order to accommodate others. Now she wanted to be "more open," "where I can assert some form of authority, where

I'm not *constantly* apologizing. To be able to say *no*, to be able to say *no* without having to justify that no. Just saying 'okay no' and that's the end of it."

Home could perhaps be described as the desire not to live elsewhere. The encounter with Delhi has here been described through the possibilities opened up by finding other feminists in the city. Making a home of one's own separate from the family sphere was a long and ongoing process, but certain things had already changed. Maya felt that different "kinds of, like, healing experiences occurred over a long period of time" in the city, to the point that she could now breathe somewhat more freely: "*Slowly*, very slowly, I started enjoying life. *Very* slowly. And came to a point where you could *really* enjoy life."

As noted, not all homes are equal—some homes have societal advantages that others do not (cf. Massey 1994). The hegemony of certain forms of home makes other forms harder to maintain—and the difficulty of maintaining them contributes to the continued hegemony of the former. Chosen but formally illegitimate, queer-*er* families can struggle to last alongside those that are legally and socially sanctioned (marriage, bloodlines, etc.). The kinds of feminist homing attempts seen here were rarely permanent—they rarely lasted even the few years of this study. People came and went, flatmates moved away, studies ended, people changed workplaces, got into exclusive romantic relationships, or went abroad for PhDs. This aligns with Geist's description of Indian queer spaces as "often temporary, fleeting [...] prone to change or are at risk to stop existing" (2014, 95; cf. Dave 2012). The important online spaces were ephemeral, and few (if any) of e.g. the Instagram "social justice" influencers who were big during the pre-pandemic era are online anymore. Tanvi Kanchan notes that while social media "may enable mediations of a radical politics of queer liberation," the "potential is also restricted, thwarted, and reconfigured by the design, logics, and political economy of the platform" (Kanchan 2024, 167). The corporate-political logics are often entwined with state demands and amplified by hate speech, making such "counterpublics" targets for "vicious reactionary responses" (Schultermandl 2022, 187).

The more feminist forms of homemaking seen here were also not necessarily intersectional in the ways demanded by circulating anti-caste discourses (see next chapter). While feminist friendships allowed for the kinds of exchanges seen here, they still seemed to draw together people with relatively similar educational, class, caste, and language capital. As Shalini said, "you end up making friends with people who have experiences in life with you." While this could mean an opening up of certain kinds of feminist spaces—as I have shown here—it could also imply a narrowing. Shalini's comments mirror this latter sense: "that also means that your privilege [...] *restricts* your friendships."

Participants expressed an awareness of the tentative nature of things. Maria said:

> "I'd *like* to think of my home as a feminist space. But, I'm using the words 'I'd like to' because somehow I don't feel very… confident in whether I've been able to uphold the idea of feminism, this being a feminist space."

As I read it, the fragility of queer-er constructions can also, for its part, be used to understand the reasons for the non-emergence of family control as a feminist movement-level issue; more stable ways of living differently would perhaps allow a weakening of the familialized hold. Despite these caveats, moments of feminist female friendship and even tentative counterpublics are, like Phadke and Kanagasabain (2023) also note, highly valuable not just for the scholar interested in feminist politics of the family but for any feminist movement at large, because of their potential to help us imagine differently.

I will continue discussing feminist homemaking in Delhi in the next chapter. While this chapter has largely focused on the relatively private, friendship-based or domestic forms of feminist homemaking, I will now turn outward to look at the public city, feminist contestations, and the world of employment and their implications for negotiations of family and feminism.

Chapter Six: Difficult city, "grainier" feminisms

In the previous chapter, Delhi appeared as a space of excitement and possibility. In this chapter, I explore some of the challenges to the participants' opportunities for change, self-creation, and growth in the city. Delhi will show itself as more exhausting, and the feminisms in it as more complex, than what initial encounters with it might have suggested. As the women were moving into their own flats and into paid employment, issues of family and gender became entwined with issues of professionalization and fears of selling out.

Delhi is known to be a difficult place even for relatively privileged women. In the 2010s, it became known in the media as the "rape capital" (e.g. Sashikala 2018) of what in 2018 was termed "the most dangerous country in the world for women" (Thompson Reuters Foundation 2018). Such narratives of violence also take on lives of their own, affecting the realities of women in the city and making the risk of gendered violence perpetrated by strangers become "a part of the affective frame [one] occup[ies]" in Delhi (Cherian and Bharadwaj 2019, 77; cf. Iyer 2019).

I see it as important to underline that the increased mediated focus on violence and increased scholarly attention (e.g. Edmunds and Gupta 2016; Chaudhuri 2014; Roychowdhury 2013; Lodhia 2015) can easily shape (or distort) the meanings cities like Delhi acquire. Nevertheless, based on the discussions in this chapter, Delhi shows itself as difficult and exhausting. Beyond the usual heat, smog, constant noise, and long commutes, (attempts at) gendered policing and sexualized threats structure everyday life. Such gendered policing and harassment also impacted the participants' negotiations of family, despite the often considerable physical distance. In other words, attempts at creating alternative, non-familial selves have to be thought about in relation to the encounters with Delhi.

This chapter also underscores how the women's feminism came to be shaped by them taking on paid work. In the post-college setting of this study, feminisms were increasingly professionalizing—turning into research, teaching, NGO work, etc. This came with potential for making the money needed for greater

independence, but also with troubling feelings of becoming part of what was seen as an essentially defanged upper-class and 'upper'-caste-coded space, feminist mainly in name. Such worries complicated the ideas of feminism as a potential homing strategy seen in the previous chapter. While professionalized feminism could give access to new communities, even internationally, and very concretely enable making the money needed for a more independent home, the power imbalances involved in it could leave it with a kind of unhomely nature. Thinking with Homi Bhabha's metaphor of "the unhomely [as] the shock of recognition of the world in the home" (1992, 141), we can perhaps rephrase it as the recognition of structural power within feminism.

6.1. Public space and paranoia

I asked the participants how being in the city had affected them. Like Darsha, many began by emphasizing their gendered stress and fatigue. "My experience of the city", she said, "has been one of extreme paranoia. I mean, I'm *really* paranoid about a lot of things. And not without cause."

Interviewees would describe this "paranoia" as being made up of two forms of gendered stress: the depressingly ordinary and the shocking. The former referred to e.g. forms of constant surveillance, that "weight in my head" that made one extremely aware of everything, the ways in which men were constantly "scanning you," the "very *odd* way in which people stare," the unwanted sexual advances/ harassment, and the so-called "death stares" (judgmental looks) given by neighborhood aunties. Such gendered violence took on the form of an accumulation of relatively minor but repetitive stresses. To be able to live in Delhi, some participants argued, one had to let much of this go. Shriya described this as getting "numb":

> "I think I leave a lot of my feminism at home, when I'm on the street. Because if I would have to think about that, it would make me very depressed. Because like micro-aggression culture here is so *rampant*, and one of the ways of dealing with it—a defense mechanism, I guess—is to just get completely *numb* to it. So unless it's gonna be an aggression that actively gets in my face to the point of, like, [active] harassment, it's very rare that I allow myself to even clock things."

The more overt or shocking form of gendered stress consisted of instances "that would make [you] question humanity", as Meera framed it. These were not uncommon, either, but still stood out. Meera talked about people throwing stones at her, throwing balloons filled with something else than water at her, spitting at her, throwing firecrackers at her. Before spending longer periods in the city,

Meera said she used to be a "very Rousseauvian[24] person." Laughing fondly at her own naiveté, she added: "*Right*?? Like *really* delusional." Now, enduring the city had made her "*really tired*." Thus, when asked what Delhi had given her, Meera responded with another ironic laugh:

> "I've become an *excellent* planner. Why? Because in my head, in *one minute*, I know that if I'm going to some place, 'this is how I should dress, this is what I should carry, this is when I should be back'. And it's all in one minute."

Meera's response echoes Indian feminist scholarship that has stressed "how perilous even basic mobility can routinely be" for women (Malik 2022, 711; Phadke et al 2011). Public space can be understood as heavily gendered and coded male (e.g. Srivastava 2022; Phadke 2005b). Phadke (2012) argues that the presence of women in public is seen as being necessitated by something that *has* to be done outside—women should swiftly do what they have to do in order to return to what is seen as their natural habitat: the private sphere.

Harassing women in public has been analyzed as a performance of heterosexual masculinity, a supposedly 'fun' pastime, or something seen as a "natural" response to women "seen in traditional 'male' spaces" (Bhatla 2012, 245; cf. Osella and Osella 2006). Harassment works to show the 'rules' of the place— it is "an attempt to maintain the existing structures of gender power, rather than a breakdown in the social order" (Srivastava 2012, 47). Delhi made the participants obsess about "how to get from one safe place to another": "any safety feels *earned*," Darsha said. Participants expressed that while men around them would think of opportunities to enjoy the city, women would first address questions of how to dress or how to ensure safety and escape routes.

Many of the interviewees also agreed with the oft-heard characterization of Delhi as particularly nasty for (young, single) women, compared to the other Indian A-list city of Mumbai. The perceived extreme tension of the capital was succinctly captured by Darsha's description of an everyday experience turned "unreal" in Mumbai:

> "I remember this one point of time where I was in Bombay—and it's not inclusive of all the times I've been there—but it's important because that's when I asked myself this question. I'd been standing somewhere at Marine Drive. It was evening, I was standing there, and nobody was staring at me. Nobody *even looked at me*. People were walking past and they were looking to the front, they were not turning to look at me. Nobody sang. Nobody called out to me. I was just there and—suddenly I felt like there was this void and I didn't know where I was. Because I was like 'How? What's going on?' It was this really *unreal* feeling. I

[24] Here meaning someone who believes people are good.

> mean, at that point of time I just realized how much of weight I'd been carrying in my head. And it's very, uhm, I don't like it. But at *that* point of time, nobody stared at me. I felt my shoulders relax, and I just stood there. For a good five minutes. And nobody stared at me. It was one of the most unreal experiences I've had in my life."

Here, being allowed to, as a young woman, exist in a public space without harassment or attention becomes the experience of a lifetime. Darsha uses an understatement to emphasize the strangeness of carrying a constant weight —"I don't like it," she says.

6.2. Classed and queered differences

Ayona Datta maintains that "[t]he domestic environment is an important site of production of the public citizen and, along with that, an experience of urban citizenship" (Datta 2016, 340). The participants had significant claims to urban belonging by virtue of their classed backgrounds. At the same time, being young, women-coded and sexualized, their claims were often bigger in theory than in practice.

As Phadke notes, there's "no foolproof way" (2005, 46) for women to avoid sexual harassment in public, no matter what capital they have or how much they try to adjust. Nevertheless, in the interviews, class—the class of the person and the class of the neighborhood—was seen as making a huge difference to how one was approached. Certain parts of the city were seen as safer (see section below), and coming across as upper class could sometimes protect you from some forms of harassment. Not all 'women'—those made into women by the city's gaze—were equal (cf. Paik 2022; Skeggs 1997).

The choices of modes of transport illustrate how class protected some women, but not perfectly. Darsha, after starting full-time work, said she could afford to take an Uber home at night instead of the metro or bus. Especially at night, taxis were felt to be significantly safer than public transport, though fears of molestation and rape by drivers were commonly heard in public discussions. Thus, when Darsha's cab was crossing "a really dark" and desolate area of the city, she again felt the familiar fear: "There were no lights, there were no cars in sight and for a moment I panicked really badly. Like I panicked really badly." She felt that if the driver was "taking me somewhere, there's nothing I could do." For "a few seconds" she had that "sinking feeling" that this was the moment she was going to be sexually assaulted, as had happened to many others. Darsha wondered what it would be like to live without that fear, "because I've always lived with it." The fear also meant that further class-based safety was usually made use of if

available, arguably leading to a cycle of avoidance. For example, Neha—who had recently inherited an old car—rarely used taxis any longer, to avoid the fear.

The participants' different gendered performances in terms of sexuality/queerness also meant being differently affected. While some exhibited what could be read as non-normative womanhood or sexuality, others performed what could be understood as a (hetero)sexualized femininity (cf. chapter 2; Harju 2021 on 'looking'). (Gender)queer-performing participants talked about routine harassment or ridicule in sharper terms than those read as straight/cis. In the city, one had to actively pick a gendered side multiple times a day—for example, entering the Delhi metro required passing a security check for "gents" or "ladies," and the metro had a separate "ladies coach." Museums, malls, and some restaurants required the same gender-segregated frisking, and titles like "Sir"/"Madam" were very frequently used, e.g. any time a salesperson or other stranger addressed you. It was impossible not to be constantly reminded of the discrepancies between looking and being, and "gendered spaces become *very* uncomfortable," as the genderqueer-performing Neha said. As trans scholars have pointed out, while people can try to perform and express their gender through physical, embodied, or audiovisual cues with various degrees of social legibility, they ultimately cannot control how other people and societies, so to speak, hail them to a gender (e.g. Malatino 2020).

Queerness should here not be understood as somehow monolithic. As much as 'hetero'-coded genders/sexualities, those coded queer do so inside intersecting axes of power. There are then very different ways in which one can be read as queer, with different impacts. Certain forms of queerness will be read as lower class. For example, Kira Hall, talking about a middle- to upper-class gender and sexuality education center in Delhi, notes that "it is [working class] kotis[25] who are the 'queer' ones" (2005, 133). As Hall also notes, if kothis are marginalized, hijras[26] are categorically excluded from the center—for being too visibly working class/'trans'/sex worker-coded for the well-off neighborhood in which it operates (ibid., 134). In contrast, in my research, looking visibly 'queer' in a more discursively privileged sense might, perhaps more importantly, mean looking upper-class. Together with a certain class-coded style of dress, a queer performance thus becomes a class performance—or rather, class might be read before sexuality, something previously noted by ethnographer Gayatri Reddy:

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[25] Kotis or kothis denotes an Indian, more working-class coded, gender role of a feminine man/AMAB person who prefers being the receptive partner in sex with (other) men; an effeminate bottom.

[26] Kinds of trans women. Hijras are a gender/mode of social organization and support on what can be called the transfeminine spectrum. The term is often (incorrectly) used as a catch-all term for multiple and disparate forms of South Asian transfeminine legacies.

> "My short hair, my 'ethnically chic' Fab India *salwar-kurta*, my educational background, my status as an unmarried woman, especially given my age, and my engagement in this academic project with hijras —factors that lead to a presumption about my *sexual* identity [...] in the United States—were, for hijras, signs of my *class* identification" (Reddy 2005, 1, italics in original).

The implications of hair styles serve as a good example here. Reddy's insight mirrors Darsha's, who felt that her current, more "queer" hairstyle—a quiff with shaved sides—was seen by people at her work with largely working-class students as "symbolic of the class I am from." Working with teenagers from mainly working-class families, Darsha felt that assigned female at birth people in her students' families would maybe not be "wearing a hairdo like this." Students often bombarded her with questions about why she did not look like a "girl," but their families were usually friendly and sometimes said she "looks really nice": "There is some fascination towards it. I don't know if it's aspirational, I don't know if it's curiosity." (Other parents had been "concerned" about why Darsha was "doing this to [her]self," making herself so un-marriable.) The assumption here—seemingly from both sides of a class divide—was that only women of a certain class had the opportunity of looking so strange and getting away with it.

Short hair also carries another sexual marker, beyond identities: it can be read as *modern*, a bit risky/risqué, marking someone as sexually experienced and available. This is not the same as being considered conventionally attractive. Readings would also mutate across space. Darsha noted that the "very superficial" changes she had recently made—the new hair, more androgynous clothes—had impacted how the city reacted to her. She wanted to cut her hair after growing tired of people telling her that she was "pretty" with long hair, saying she wanted to show to herself that something like people's opinions on her attractiveness did not dictate what she looked like. Yet the implications went beyond this. In Darsha's experience, the new hair gave out an "image" of someone who was, if not "formidable," then "certainly not an approachable person." People always wanted to know "*why*?"—"perhaps accompanied by a wail of anguish"—the move had "considerably" reduced staring. She felt this was because the hairstyle probably made her look less like a student and more like a young upper-class professional.

The classed-sexual implications of the hairstyle were different when Darsha visited her parents in what was "small"-town eastern India. Back home, "it is the sign of the big city girl. The big city girl who went to Delhi and god knows what she did." Laughing, she said people were very curious to figure out "*all* of the things I've done here," marking a sexually charged curiosity. Here, the ways in which space, class, gender, and sexuality come to interact shaped different possibilities: in relation to the parents of her students, Darsha could perform a professional role—graduate from a prestigious university, Brahmin teacher. In the

smaller city of her parents—where she was more likely to be understood as a daughter of a specific family—the possibilities for (re)creating herself appeared more limited.

6.3. South Delhi state of mind

"South Delhi" appeared across the participants' narratives. Different parts of the city were experienced differently in terms of gendered safety and comfort: South Delhi was spoken of as a place of relative ease, where the participants could feel more at home. As was noted in the thesis introduction, the status of South Delhi can be understood as a geography of class and moral(ism) (e.g. Bhandari 2023; Srivastava 2015). Shriya said it was not about class while making it clear that it was about class:

> "Another friend has said also this: South Delhi is a… it's a *culture shock* from North Delhi. It's a culture shock from West Delhi. Because… it's not just—it's not a class thing. Because there are really really posh pockets in those spaces as well. But those are the kind of posh pockets that come out of having like *farmland*, versus over here—which is just this massive centering of political people, policy people, lawyers, people who are media, that kind of white collar-richness."

In reality, the area is of course not uniform but has very large internal variation in terms of the "micro-segregation" typical of Indian cities (Bharathi et al. 2022) existing below the macro level. Much of the city's rich and ultra-rich live here (cf. Bhandari 2019; Bernroider 2018). South Delhi—the greenest part of town in terms of trees and parks—is discursively made to function as a shorthand for a certain kind of 'class' and 'classiness' in the many senses of the words. This includes an assumption of a more liberal attitude toward women. It can also be understood as a space of a continued class/caste-coded sexual tension, anxiety, or frustration. Delhi in general is surrounded by many of the most "backward" districts in the country (Kisana and Arora 2023), and the young migrant men who come to work in the city are sometimes seen as a threat to the good, class- and caste-coded order of South Delhi (e.g. Kumar 2024). In contrast, Bhandari notes that South Delhi "girls are considered elite, posh, and to that extent, inaccessible by those living outside these spaces" (2023, 36).

South Delhi is also where most opportunities for middle- to upper-class leisure, consumption, and nightlife are. It can also be understood as a geography of caste, as "both the new and old rich [of South Delhi] belong to the upper and middle castes" (Bhandari 2023, 41), and Indian cities generally exhibit high levels of caste-related segregation (e.g. Singh et al. 2019). The expression 'South Delhi,' then, also has a savarna tinge to it. Thinking with Fernandes and Heller's (2006)

discussion about middle-to-upper *class-in-practice*, South Delhi can be understood as producing an emblematic voice of an India that matters. This feeling of being 'where it's at'—like in Shriya's quote above—colors South Delhi lives.

The moral geography of South Delhi sometimes came out in passing remarks. "The ones you have to look out for are the BMWs with Haryana plates," a participant said while we were traveling through the city. Haryana, here, represents "the stuff of bourgeois nightmares" (Anwer and Marwah 2020, 1171) and seems to stand in imagined contrast to the BMW owners of South Delhi, who are presumed to be more civilized and perhaps less prone to random acts of violence. South Delhi was repeatedly viewed by the participants in related terms of safety. Lily said that, for the "first two years in Delhi I was *literally terrified* all the time, every time I got out at night," but that "South Delhi still has a 'I feel much safer around there'" vibe. Similarly, Maya said she "won't think *twice*" if she was "getting out at… two in the night" in South Delhi. "But if I am in Noida [a suburb], I'll probably call a cab and not step out before the cab comes." Maya stressed that this was a feeling she had, not an actual claim to reality.

Yet, even in South Delhi, the participants felt that "there are so many boundaries that you have to be very *cautious* of all the *time*." This showed itself most clearly in relation to choosing housing. Tara said:

> "As a *man*, aside from your preferences, you can stay anywhere almost. If you're not lower caste or Muslim. If you're a savarna Hindu, you can live anywhere. Regardless of your class thing—like you can stay in a slum area, or you can stay in a more unsafe area. But, as women, we have to choose our localities very cautiously. As [unmarried] women, we also have certain lifestyles, which are not approved of in certain communities."

The savarna Hindu man served here as the normative location. On the other hand, single women, Tara felt, are marked, even when privileged in terms of class, caste and religion. Echoing earlier research (Bernroider 2018), the issue of finding a decent apartment was a perennial annoyance for the participants, ranging from the neighborhood down to particular landlords. The women, in Delhi, did not have access to family property or the kind of authority that house ownership would come with. In this sense, all but one of the participants (whose grandparents owned a small apartment in Delhi) appeared very 'middle' class, reliant on their educational/professional background and income. Due to the difficulty of finding a comfortable and safe place to live, the participants kept moving a lot.

In neighborhoods that were felt to cater to "families," the women often felt they were under surveillance and stifled. Uma described her experiences of a DDA

enclave in Hauz Khas: "I actually think I feel more safe—slightly safer—outside where you have *more* people, a more diverse set of people around you, rather than *here*." This echoes Phadke, Khan, and Ranade, who argue that while "[l]ogic would suggest that women feel safest and will have most access to public space in the spaces most familiar to them" (2011, 37), many women feel less safe in areas where people can be assumed to know them or their families. The authors note that the more homogenous a locality is in terms of (caste, geographical, religious) community, the stricter the control on insiders. Uma did not know anyone in the DDA enclave—or rather, no-one knew her family or much of her background. Things might have been worse if they had. This sentiment was echoed by the Bengali Tara, living in Bengali-centric CR Park, who said:

> "Actually you can do more unconventional things, lead a more unconventional life, if you're not a Bengali there. If you're a Bengali, they expect you to go by the rules of the community. Stick to the traditions and the moralities."

While more mixed in terms of class and community, cheaper locations like Khirki Extension or Arjun Nagar/Humayunpur had their own limitations in terms of infrastructure, reachability and (sense of) safety in the streets at night, these could be experienced as less panoptic, despite the closer proximity of life. While, like Phadke notes, the density of working-class localities means that women's "arrivals and departures from their front doors are easily visible to neighbours" (2005b, 45), many upper-class houses had landlords living on the property or guards at work 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They usually kept a close eye—explained as "protection"—on young female tenants and sometimes insisted on locking outer gates at night—even refusing to give tenants the key (saying that they would come and open the gate on call), creating de facto curfews. Upper-class streets were also emptier, making it generally easy for anyone to observe who came home at what hour and with whom.

This quest for a space to feel at home in can be understood as part of Ayona Datta's description of "the intimate city" (Datta 2016, 325). Datta understands the "struggle to maintain intimacy in the various spaces of the home, neighbourhood [...] and the wider city" as a fight for "urban citizenship" and to "maintain a right to intimacy in an exclusionary city" (ibid., 329). Feminists, broadly, argue that the idea of a public-private divide is, in itself, not just sexist but based on classist and casteist access to resources and ideas of a normative life (e.g. Butalia 2012[27]). The southern parts of the city appeared to provide opportunities for making a home, yet such homing efforts were not straightforward. This duality is central for my

[27] Urvashi Butalia (2012) notes that there are (at least) some 150,000 unhoused people in Delhi who do not have access to any kind of private space, except whatever is temporarily makeable on the street.

analysis: while the fact that their parents were not in Delhi enabled the participants to move toward more independent lives, it also meant that they were forced to learn how to face multiple challenges on the way.

The aspirational status of South Delhi could also be criticized and made fun of. "God, they're all these typical South Delhi *chutiyas*![28]" Uma once said, in a passing comment on the street in 2016. At that point, she was living outside of the city-proper herself—her reference was to people with a kind of posture, confidence, or entitlement that came with the sense of belonging in the rich parts of the city. Yet, the aspirational pull of South Delhi showed itself when Uma, after a few years abroad and with a new, well-paying job in the NGO sector, herself moved to South Delhi.

6.4. A segregated city

The privatization, securitization, and increased "grassroots authoritarianism" (Kamra et al. 2023) of South Delhi has been a much-discussed topic in the sociological literature on the city (e.g. Srivastava 2015; Ghertner 2015; Singh et al. 2024). The kinds of gendered anxieties mentioned in this chapter make connections across structural boundaries even less likely. The women's attempts to feel at home in the city can then be seen as shaped by limitations of class and caste on both the macro and the micro level, something several pariticipants themselves stressed.

One participant grew up in an NCR suburb and a couple of the women had to travel across the city for journalistic work. For other interviewees, current post-college[29] life was mainly focused on South Delhi, and many expressed not having been much in other parts of the city: "And even if I have gone, I just keep to myself." Sometimes, trips to lesser-known parts of the city could be recounted with an exoticizing fascination and a simultaneous self-aware criticism of one's own limitations. Shriya told a story about a date she had recently gone on, in the neighborhood of Paharganj, near Old Delhi and the city's main train station. The area is known for its hippie backpacker hotels, cheap bars, drug dealing, and tourist kitsch. It has been described as a "deviant space," hedonistic and dangerous in the popular imagination (Ashraf Uddin 2019). It appears as such in Shriya's first impressions, too:

> "But then I went to *this* space, that was out of my comfort zone, in terms of the kind of people that were out on the streets. This place was

[28] Used more or less like the English word "fuckers".

[29] During college, many spent extensive periods in what is called North Campus, north of Old Delhi, where many well-known Delhi University colleges are.

> lit up like fucking Sunset Boulevard, just like *really* shady restaurants and *dive* bars and all these fucking neon flashing lights. And it was dark —so I've only ever been there in the daytime."

During the day, Shriya said she could distance herself "like this posh fucking outsider, exoticizing and viewing this old city." At night things felt different. Her date asked her to come to a bar in a lane where cars couldn't enter, she had to walk, "and my first thought was 'Jesus, fuck I should not have worn shorts to a place where I didn't [know] what it was gonna be like.' 'That was *stupid* of me.'" Shriya found the bar:

> "and this guy was sitting right at the end. So I had to walk through the entire bar in like high heeled slippers and… tiny fucking shorts that just about covered my ass, and a tight black t-shirt—I looked hot as hell!—and the *entire* bar fell silent. Like, like, this wave of silence followed me as I walked in."

Echoing Phadke's description of space as "both real and imagined" (2012, 53), Shriya mused on the uncomfortable experience in retrospect. Saying Paharganj was "a tourist trap" and, if she was thinking rationally, "I'm sure I was as fucking safe in Paharganj as I would have been *anywhere* else in Delhi as well." Yet, a lot of life in the city is "not really related to the reality at all"; she felt that "rather than how safe anything actually is," you reacted on the basis of "*how safe you feel*."

As in Shriya's self-criticism of the "posh fucking outsider," the Indian upper classes have been accused of "liv[ing] as tourists" in their cities (Kapur 2014, 109). The participants showed a reflexivity around segregation in multiple ways. Conversations about Delhi identified the strange proximity and structural separation of lives. Tara felt that "there was so much *micro*-ghettoization" that meant that a neighborhood like hers actually contained multiple economic realities "even though you're staying *right* across the street." And "even if you're living in a big city," she argued, "it doesn't mean you'll meet all kinds of people." Rather, she felt you would meet people who corresponded to your class, caste, and lifestyle. For Tara, this worked both ways: while she did not really have friends from a radically lower-class background than herself, she also did not "know rich people" since she felt she "can't identify" or "hang out with them."

On a personal, feminist, level, the segregation could be felt as a failure. This was expressed by Aditi: "What I feel sad about is that it's part of the potential of this city. On the one hand you can hide perfectly. On the other, everything is at your doorstep." People in Delhi, she felt, also liked to talk and share, yet she did not use that potential even when it was right there and did not require some anthropological excursion: "Like you don't have to go to some back gali [lane] in Hauz Rani to see how the other people live."

Other participants also expressed a desire to reach across the divides, even if momentarily. Meera tried to talk to people from different backgrounds, saying she tended to get "*really bored*" with "these middle- and upper-class people talking about shitty things" like their parties and relationships. Cross-boundary conversations had led to "moments of joy" and connection, Meera said. She reported an interaction during an autorickshaw ride: "The autowallah bhai said 'My son is of marriageable age, do you want to marry him?' And I was like 'We've just met two minutes ago, uncle, let's not get ahead of ourselves.'" Despite the gendered social expectations and class dynamics in the encounter, it was seen as a sweet and humorous meeting creating a fleeting sense of a shared city space.

Moments could sometimes turn into a more sustained sense of a shared city—which did not have to mean friendship but rather a mutual deferral of judgment. Shriya, who lived in what she saw as a "posh" building in a not-so-posh but gentrifying, middle-density, middle-class part of South Delhi, described such a relationship:

> "I go downstairs to get milk in the morning. Or whatever, eggs and cigarettes. And I'm a girl who buys cigarettes, and my shopkeeper's an old Muslim uncle. And he just fucking knows my order for cigarettes by now, and I never had any trouble with him. Like I go down in my night shirt. So this isn't even shorts. It'll come up to like my mid-thigh, and I'm not wearing a bra or anything. And I've never trouble."

6.5. "What he sees on television is constant gore"

So far in this chapter, the family has seemingly taken a back seat. Yet, neighborhood gossip, staring, and moralistic landlords would not have bothered the participants as much had it not been for the fact that it was associated with their fear of their parents finding out too much about their lives in Delhi. Of course, the city comes with any number of real and direct dangers and specters of (sexual) violence, but many things would appear less frightening if one could be sure of family support. Particularly for some of the women, the most acute threat to their newfound independence in Delhi came from their parents who might try to get them to return 'home' or otherwise complicate their lives.

This reflects the deeply relational and entangled nature of the Delhi and the family self. Most of the participants had internalized a kind of governmentality. As Noor said, "family *guilt* follows me here." With smartphones and video calls, active control by the parents was never far away. Word could also travel back home in other ways (cf. Bernroider 2018). Neha had a direct family connection to the city while she stayed in the apartment owned by her grandparents. While none of her immediate or extended family members had lived in the city for quite some

time, the neighbors still considered the house to belong to the sphere of influence of the aged grandparents. Thus, "the surveillance is greater." The grandparents had given Neha their old car to use. Coming home one night, she had parked it in a different spot than usual—after which the alarmed neighbors had immediately called the grandparents to see if everything was alright. Domestic workers were also feared to have a similar backchannel connection to the neighbors and potentially the family, as they might gossip with landlords or even talk to parents. In many cases, beer bottles, cigarette butts, and sexual partners had to be tidied away out of sight before any "maids" would arrive—"we have to air out the house and use air fresheners and everything" (cf. Harju 2017).

Participants' parents expressed anxieties fueled by the narratives of danger that circulated around Delhi. And, since parents had limited personal experience of the city, media images remained largely unchallenged. Some of the women had tried to share some of their less bad experiences of the city with their parents in order to give them a more balanced view. Meera told a story of having video-called her father (who lived in a smaller town where everything was dark and deserted in the evenings) while walking on the street at 10pm in order to show him that there were both street lights and some other women around. The attempt had not been very successful, because "what he sees on television is very different from what I live here. What he sees on television is constant… gore."

As Hille Koskela writes, "securitization makes bravery seem pathological" (2009, 69). The large amount of fear-based discourses about Delhi also led some parents to try to impose restrictions on their daughters (cf. Iyer 2019). They were said to push their daughters toward what was seen as a class-, caste- and gender-appropriate use of space. This was often in explicit contrast to the desires of the daughters. Neha was active in the students' movement that fought for (middle-class) women's access to (university and city) space. The ideals these campaigns stood for—being able to "go out after dark, assert your independence, assert your autonomy, that women should have the right to take risks, agree to go out on the streets"—were not seen as appropriate by Neha's parents. For her family, "public space—not like in malls, but in terms of parks and streets" was not "*meant* for middle-class people."

Kumar notes that a woman's right to space is heavily "regulated by her current family" (Kumar 2016, 151). For unmarried women like the participants, this meant their parents. The parents tried to infuence the apartment choices of their daughters, so that they would stay in areas or arrangements seen as safer or more controllable by the family. They might offer to pay the rent in order to get their daughters to live on a more respectable street, or try to push the daughters to (continue) to live in PG accommodation. Astha, studying for a graduate degree, said:

> "So they're okay with spending 15,000 per month if I'm living in a hostel, but if I'm living in a flat then—even though I tell them I'm saving money, that it's cheaper so you should be okay with it—the argument they give is [...] that 'you don't *need* to live in a flat right now'—that 'you're still a student' and students 'don't live in flats.' They live in regulated spaces, basically spaces that have supervision."

Flats, Astha said, meant "too much freedom." As the parents were away and did not have proxies in the city, such attempts were relatively futile in the end. All of the daughters continued their search for anonymity—finding places where "nobody knows my family," places where "I'm safe that way," as Shalini put it.

Most participants hid much of their lives from their family, including romantic and sexual partners, being out at night, drinking, and smoking. The very common and everyday nature of such hidden acts meant that the everyday was also filled with reminders of parental control. At the same time, the women expressed having honed strategies over many years, noting that lies should not be too unbelievable—parents did know something about how modern life worked:

> "So I've always played it as a thing of I don't want to make it too unreal, I will make it *just* believable. So I would tell them that 'Yes, people drink in the hostel'—I wouldn't tell them any of my friends drink, and of course I wouldn't tell them I drink. So that's how I keep it balanced."

Not everyone had to worry about the same things: some participants could, for example, tell their parents they were dating, while other families knew nothing about their daughters' partners and were reported to prefer to think that their daughters were "virgins." Opinions also differed in terms of how catastrophic things would be if the parents did find out: some felt that they could take on their parents and fight their judgments, while others felt there was a "nuclear fucking bomb waiting there."

Hiding partners was reported to be difficult and painful. Even in families where dating was acceptable, less 'suitable' partners sometimes needed to be hidden. As noted previously, control over women's sexuality is linked to 'purity' (e.g. Paik 2022) and the reproduction of caste (e.g. Gopal 2012), which seems to be confirmed here: sexual liaisons across caste or religious boundaries were particularly disconcerting for the parents (cf. Bhandari 2017b). Khushi, 25 years old and from a Hindu family, explained her dating-related conundrum when asked what it was that her parents disapproved of: "Well, A) boys in general B) boys significantly fucking older than me. He's 33 right now, which would be a big deal. C) he's Muslim."

Religious difference was, unsurprisingly, a major issue that appeared in various guises. Noor knew that her religious mother would not approve of her

non-Muslim boyfriend, whom Noor was very close to. This seemed deeply troubling to her:

> "And now what does this mean? Does this mean I have to *end* my relationship? Will I be able to live with it? Can I *do* that to… him? And can I do that to myself? Or do I continue my relationship with [him] and sacrifice my relationship with my mother?"

Aditi said that while her sister had once told their "horribly racist," "classist" parents about a boyfriend who was a foreigner, Black, and a gym instructor (all very inappropriate qualities in the context), she herself had never told them about anyone—not even about a five-year relationship. Thinking back on it, Aditi stressed there was a lot she was not proud of. Nonetheless, she felt like she would have had to know that things would work out long term with the partner she introduced, since a break-up would reflect badly on her. It was not just that relationships would be "*disapproved* of," she said, but that they would:

> "set much more restrictions on my future behavior, especially if they didn't work out. Because they would imply things about my judgement. And, if nothing else, I need to have them leave me space… to make my own judgements about my life. And being seen as someone who made poor personal judgements is… in family stories and what I know from my own experience, it's… a death nail for giving you that space."

Aditi felt that, in order to be able to make decisions about her life, her parents could not know about her choices. The story was told hesitantly, with a certain remorse. In such examples, some of the women echoed the research by Sirisena (2024) who reported some participants breaking up with a partner in order to placate the family. Bhandari, also looking at Delhi, has noted the discrepancy in how "[m]en and women appropriate this phase of 'non-marriage' to experience diverse romantic encounters," which makes this phase "associated with ideologies of individualism, freedom, and liberty" (2017a, 3). Yet family expectations affect these relationships, and "experiences [can] in fact abide by the moral frameworks set by the family," including young people making sure that "serious" relationships are only entered into with not-too-upsetting partners.

Hiding happened with male friends, too. While (cis) lesbianism could hide in plain sight[30], heterosexual-looking relationships could be difficult. Most landlords did not want unmarried, "mixed" "boy-girl" couples as tenants. A push to live with "girls" also came from many parents; having a male flatmate could be seen as a sexual risk or a bad cover-up for much-dreaded live-in relationships (Titzmann 2017). Titzmann argues that, in some sense, the actual nature of the relationship is

[30] In one example, a participant lived and shared a bed with her girlfriend in the latter's parents' house for a year without anyone suspecting the sexual nature of the relationship.

secondary, since the "visibility of the unconventional is already a challenge to the idea of the Indian family" (ibid., 2). Hiding male flatmates could require elaborate arrangements when parents came to visit. Aashi said:

> "They've seen this place once. I made Vikram [male flatmate] fuck off. So they knew my third flatmate as Megha [a real-life friend in Delhi]. I made sure that it was as real as possible, so that if I ever have to present Megha, I can. I plan these things like way fucking ahead. Like *every fucking thing*. And I do it out of instinct, because I've done it all my life. So *haan* they came and saw the place. Megha wasn't there, Megha was conveniently out for the weekend. They only came here once, and they quite liked the place. Said it's nice and everything."

Parents, thankfully, visited Delhi infrequently. The jugaad engaged in when they did can be understood as a form of feminist solidarity or homemaking, where groups of people (in this case both women and men) come together to cover for each other and, if needed, stage elaborate scenes in order to maintain a facade. For friends, understanding the difficulties other people face with their parents, and accommodating them, appears here as a form of feminist care. Yet other narratives challenged how far one should go to accommodate demanding parents (see chapter 9).

6.6. Feminist frictions

The employment the women had could sometimes provide a sense of purpose and build confidence. Darsha, a teacher of working-class teenage boys, said the job countered some of her mother's classist fears about "'the kind of people who are *out there*'"—"the kind of people who are out there are in my classroom." Such work also functioned to keep her feminism "*constantly* evolving." If college had given her a background that was "*very theoretical* in nature," feminist students' movements had supplemented this but also kept things within a certain classed fold. Now, through work, a lot of her feelings had become "*grainier*." This meant confronting her own privilege and narrow-mindedness in terms of class and caste.

Giving an example of gender and class, she noted that unlike teenage boys of her background, the boys she taught at school often knew how to cook. At the same time, people in the setting she worked in—including the students—were "*deeply* misogynist," which meant that as a young female-coded teacher she had to fight "to be seen as someone who's *worth* listening to." If, in the spaces of feminist movements, being "vulnerable" was something one should be proud of, such tactics did not work in her work setting.

The sense that the various strands of feminism were becoming more complex came up in many other discussions, too. If an initial encounter with feminism in

Delhi could had been felt to be "fucking amazing," some said they had come to learn "that even feminism could be a restrictive term." Contestations existed on a number of levels, both in terms of intersectionality and in terms of feminism as a movement versus something that could be professionalized (cf. Kaskinen 2025). Contestations could also implicate one in very different kinds of ways: while one was sometimes the one pushing for change, other times others were doing the pushing and one had to try to keep up.

Issues around who was doing the activism included queerness, generational hierarchies, and the right to fun. Genderqueer Neha felt that "with feminism, I think gender issues sometimes get taken over by women's rights," which meant that lesbian and bisexual women did not get the visibility they deserved. Even with the changes happening in the Indian legal framework over the period of this study, Neha felt that the subject of feminism was still often assumed to be a cishet woman, echoing well-known crititiques (Dave 2012). The late legal recognition of non-normative genders and sexualities seems to be reflected in the relatively low status of these issues in the women's movements, which had focused more on issues like dowry violence (e.g. Mehrotra 2025) or more "'pragmatic interests'" like employment, literacy, or the "participation of women in general democratic struggles" (Ray 2000, 4-5). At the same time, queer organizations could also be seen as limiting; Neha said that much of popular gay organizing like Delhi Pride was "dominated by gay guys, cis gay guys from an upper class, upper caste." The power of being in many places at once was pointed out by queer and asexual Nidhi, who said she did not "think I would have been able to address, say, transphobia in feminism without having one foot in the LGBT movement. And I wouldn't have been able to address male dominated spaces without feminism."

Several of the participants also expressed disappointment with what they saw as a generational hierarchy in Delhi feminism. Older feminists in positions of authority were seen to sometimes act in a "really condescending" way toward younger women. Meera told a story about the ick she once felt when an iconic Indian feminist figure she used to work with asked her to "please call me Didi" (elder sister) as an imagined courtesy. "You're not my Didi!" she wanted to shout (cf. Henry 2004). Nidhi said that there should not be a "feminist hall of fame" and felt that younger feminists were trying to "build a more faceless movement." Darsha said she had seen how "the ownership of the movement [was] collective" during her time with the feminist students' organizing, saying that the face of the movement was supposed to be the multitude:

> "Because our strength also lies in our numbers, that we're so many, this *mass* of women. You can't say 'Okay that's this one, she's the one,' you can never say who's leading because I mean suddenly—you think okay this is the one with the slogans so she's the one who's leading it, and

> suddenly someone from the back starts saying something and you're like 'Okay no maybe she's the one'—it's a whole mass of women moving forward together."

Older generations were also seen to gatekeep what issues should be given what importance. For example, fun and sex could be dismissed as "frivolous"—echoing Brinda Bose's description of sex being seen as a "bourgeois indulgence and debased threat" (2017, 3). Meera felt that it was disingenuous and not really pro-women to label the more positive aspects of women's lives as a distraction from what really matters:

> "Why wouldn't women be allowed to have fun? Why should I only prove my feminism in my ability to do certain things, why should I only fight for work or equal wages? Why can't fun also be seen as a political issue?"

Fun, she added, was "not a distraction!" For Meera, the political nature of fun could be seen in how hard it was for women like her to actually have it. Even trying to enjoy a cup of chai while people-watching at a roadside stall could be a lot of work:

> "Even 'fun,' in that context, becomes an act of deliberate resistance. Once again you're putting a lot of thought into it, so I don't know how much you're really enjoying the space then, if you're also calculating how to occupy that space."

"If it's something that requires so much of thought," she asked, "is it really fun?" At the same time, the participants noted how they could also be accused of prioritizing their concerns over those of others. Women who had been active in feminist students' movements were aware of the critique directed at them and projects such as *Why Loiter?* (Phadke et al 2011): "'Okay so you're talking about savarna women occupying the street, but you're not talking about the low-caste women who are *always* on the streets.'"

The participants could also see the point of view of the older generation of feminists, and were perhaps indirectly asking for their own limitations to also be understood. Neha said she did not think the "hierarchy is deliberate," but that it seemed to be inevitable. Similarly, Aashi noted: "I guess it's a learning process for both generations." In her view, critique was welcome as long as it was not made into an obstacle. She wished to stress that the most serious obstacles came from actively anti-feminist forces. Vishakha wanted to combat hierarchies by thinking things beyond either/or:

> "Feminism has to happen with people who are dealing with violence, and with people who are dealing with art. Only *then* will it be a part of

> everyday life and will, basically, *surround* us. That's the aim: to have it in every sphere."

To a large extent, feminism becoming "grainier" meant learning to be critical of oneself. Questions in relation to which issue was being pushed forward involved, more than anything, caste and 'upper'-caste privilege. As mentioned in chapter 3, the 2010s could be understood as a time of discursive change in feminist Delhi, where critical Dalit and other anti-caste feminists pushed progressive 'upper'-caste spaces toward taking caste seriously. I see that as a result of this, caste also emerged as a major, intimately felt factor in the participants' narratives.

In her interview, Meera introduced herself "*for full disclosure*" as a "savarna person." "That's there," she underlined. Putting it differently, Astha spoke of herself when she noted that "Brahmin women have support," repeating that "they can't really get rid of that support." The participants expressed that such language had not always been there—in chapter 4, we saw how families had cloaked caste in euphemisms like "good families" and "good stock."

The tools for analyzing caste and, especially, for placing oneself within systems of power were in an active process of emerging in the context of Delhi. The "pretty terrible" person one had been in relation to one's ignorance around caste, as Khushi expressed it, was being engaged with reflexively. The narratives around caste privilege would consequently happen in a more uncertain mode, with an analysis of caste appearing as something one did not have a natural authority in. Sometimes this uncertainty could mean fighting the urge to retreat back to an active ignorance, as when Meera said: "When I talk about caste I feel like I should withdraw because I really don't know anything about it"—"Because there have been times that I've felt *really*… like I didn't know anything."

The interviewees stressed the need to push through that discomfort and remain open to learning. Shalini said she had seen "savarna feminists" failing in this: "They understand the whole caste problem in theory, but when they're being called out they get very defensive." Speaking in a way that included herself in the problem of "us" hurting "them," she continued: "There's this defense mechanism so ingrained into us that… we would start being like 'Oh no I'm your ally, I don't try to mean that.' But what you're doing—you have to understand that—what you're doing is affecting them." Allyship could not mean announcing yourself as a good person:

> "So you have to—*time and again*—you have to constantly acknowledge that you are more privileged. You know? That is where we failed. 'I am not casteist'—it doesn't matter! You still *enjoy* your privileges. You are not even *aware* of your privileges."

As noted in the previous chapter, friends and e.g. feminist peer groups at universities were and had been relatively caste-homogenous (-exclusive), which meant that a lot of the anti-caste learning that the participants engaged in happened online. Social media was felt to be just that—social—which meant that one became actively engaged in the "discourse, in real time." Khushi emphasized her ongoing learning:

> "Especially there are a lot of Dalit voices on Twitter, and I'm really glad that there are and they are very very very vocal… Even though I might think I know a lot about caste, I don't know enough. So I make sure I'm in the loop and listen to everything that they say and make sure that my behavior is [modified]."

She describes her interaction with "very very very vocal" Dalit voices as a movement toward internalizing these debates as a sort of ethical guideline for herself. Khushi here echoed Shriya, who said that feminism was "an external sort of gridline for the ethics with which I want to operate": "Because I don't actually trust my own judgment. […] Like, I don't think I'm a fundamentally good person but I know I want to be one." Part of this journey toward being a better person was, for her, to listen and learn. Alternative Indian online spaces appear here not so much as "allow[ing] persons to communicate, identify and relate with each other" (Dasgupta and Dasgupta 2018, 935) but as sites of political learning between feminists that would—because of structural differences/inequality—be unlikely to meet in person.

In many ways, the discussions around 'upper'-casteness and feminism echoed those around whiteness circulating elsewhere around the same time (Harju 2026). Making an explicit connection between savarna and white feminisms as modes of ignorance (cf. e.g. sahiba 2022), Khushi said her feminism "needs to be fucking intersectional":

> "Like I can't… I can't like… I can't be a white feminist, I can't do this to other people. This is something I'm very very strongly and emotionally about. Not in a way that you know, I make it… I mean for me it's just very logical as well, in my head. It's so easy right, like what I'm expecting of a man as my oppressor, I'm also the oppressor of someone. And if I don't see that, *fuck me*."

I here understand Khushi as wanting to stress (without getting to the point of saying it out loud) that this "emotion" – the discomfort she is expressing around caste – is not really about her, or are not supposed to be made to be about her or her desires to perhaps also be a 'good' person (cf. Thomson 2003; Harju 2026). Rather, it is portrayed as following the logic of feminism, that she cannot be in a relation to others what she expects others not to be to her.

The emphasis on "very vocal Dalit voices" in the quote is important. This "very vocal" way of talking—speaking up—appears here as something new, unlike the ways in which caste would have been discussed in other contexts Khushi might have encountered. Thinking with Gee Semmalar, one can argue that such reactions can be seen to reflect an "anxiety towards neo educated dalits questioning *in the same language as the savarnas use*, talking back to you, occupying the same spaces as you" (Semmalar 2016, 160, emphasis mine). The theme of a newness-related discomfort was repeated by Shriya. She said she had actively sought to follow more Dalit voices, to make her feminism more rooted in what she called "the Indian context." Having some "exposure" to "marginalized communities" through online feminisms had allowed her to move away from "one normative, sterilized narrative" on what feminism meant. Shriya said this had "helped a lot" in terms of developing her thinking, but the growing but imperfect understanding of caste privilege had also made her anxious. Connecting to several of the themes of this chapter, Shriya said:

> "Like I know that caste is something that I will not even begin to start talking about, because there's this one woman on Twitter who I'm scared *shitless* of. Because she just jumps down the throat on anyone who steps a *foot* out of their lane—*validly* so! So a lot of my interaction with that discourse right now is 'don't say anything because this woman's gonna fucking kill you.' And she will be within her rights to do so."

In the quote, one immediately notes the dominant presence of the non-savarna voice ("there is this woman on Twitter"), as if she is asserting control over the discursive field. Twitter, here, can be understood as "reflective of the power of the medium as a platform for marginalized voices" (Jackson et al. 2018, 1874), breaking the impasse of 'polite' silence among 'upper'-caste friend groups (cf. Nakassis 2014). One also senses the intimate and powerful accountability created by the virtual closeness (the ability to "jump down the throat" and "fucking kill you"). This also hints at the savarna-associated feeling that perhaps the online discourse has gone too far, become too aggressive—although Shriya repeatedly assured me, the listener, that she was also aware of the criticism levelled against 'upper'-caste women who call non-savarna women too angry. Perhaps overemphasizing, wanting to make sure I understand, she stressed her approval of the tactics: "*validly* so," and "within her rights to do so." Like Khushi and Meera above, Shriya here states that her role in the (non-)dialogue is to be quiet and listen. The silence might be tinged with more fear for Shriya—although with the caveat that some fear might actually be a good thing.

The externalization of learning is interesting, reflecting a pattern also noted within whiteness studies: some white women have been seen to treat particularly

Black feminists as educators in terms of race (Srivastava 2005), which has sometimes been seen to include a tendency to seek some kind of redemption from non-white or non-'Western' feminists. Marta Cuesta and Diana Mulinari have described this as "'worse than a Catholic mass'" (2018, 987). Not all of the participants' tones, however, would seem to imply self-flagellation: "I don't know enough" could be said flatly, as a statement.

In the context of feminist self-building in Delhi, learning more meant that the participants were rethinking things and placing their own feminist engagement in a larger context of inequality, noting how locations like caste came to shape possibilities of resistance on a overarching scale. Khushi stressed seeing the inequality as both discursive and highly material:

> "We live in a country where there's a *huge*—do you know what I mean? —a *huge* divide between the kind of women who can speak up and the kind of women who are speaking up and are facing *a lot more consequences*."

6.7. Professional contestations

As discussed above, feminism appeared not just as a liberatory but also a potentially exclusionary discourse, in the worst case only representing a privileged minority in terms of class, caste, age and sexuality while claiming to speak for all. The women positioned themselves as both agents of change, criticizing older and exclusionary discourses, and also as potential hindrances themselves.

As the women were moving into employment in feminism-adjacent non-governmental, media or educational organizations, a lot of their current feminist contestation happened in relation to this. As Amanda Gilbertson (2018, 2023) has shown in her work on (very familiar-sounding!) young Delhi women for whom feminism is a kind of professional field tied to NGOs and consultancies, women from structurally privileged locations were able to convert their structural capital into forms that allowed them to circulate within professional gender/justice networks in ways unavailable to less privileged peers.

Lata Narayanaswami (2016) notes that Delhi feminism carries a disproportionate weight in relation to movements and discussions elsewhere in the country. The author marks the need to name "Southern elite feminisms," a professionalized section connected to the rise of "'women's rights' as a space in development discourse" (ibid., 2156). In Narayanaswami's view, what was called the "women's movement" in India "came to represent the concerns of upper class/ caste women as the universal concerns of Indian women" (ibid., 2163). The participants of this study expressed being highly aware of this—seeing themselves as implicated in the consequences.

Moving from social movements and shared domesticities where feminism was something that young women did together—for each other, for justice, for fun, and in order to become political subjects—working in an NGO in development or as a research consultant was felt to be in many ways disappointing. This stemmed from both practical and larger epistemic-political grievances with the culture of the sector. The ironic relationship to the perceived ineffectual nature of the work was captured by Uma, who corrected me after asking about her work at "an NGO": "It's also a bit of a misunderstanding, because we're not technically an NGO. We don't do *anything*, I mean, we do 'impact evaluation.'" The latter, then, was implied to be a fancy term for not very much.

The participants saw Delhi's "elite feminism" (Narayanaswami 2016) as connected to similar spaces across organizations, institutions, and universities outside India, creating a kind of global professional feminist circuit. The participants expressed their criticism of this in declaration and through humor. Talking about how women who had "rich parents," do not "have to pay rent," and have not "really needed to worry about anything" went abroad to represent "women in India" at conferences, Aashi emphasized almost every word:

> "*You're not representing women in India*, can you just *back out of that thing and let someone else have a chance? You cannot* represent India. *I cannot represent India. We cannot. We should* not."

In questioning women who do so, she identified herself as part of the problem. Harking back to our discussions about class, caste, and whose voices are heard, she added:

> "There are a lot of women doing a *lot* of great work, but they *never* get the same recognition. They never *will*. And, like, they're just doing their thing. They live and die and nobody cares. Or bothers. But if I'm a posh modern woman on Twitter, who has like 20,000 followers, if I say something my profile will end up in *Bloomberg*."

Book launches, panels, or talks at places like India Habitat or International Center were used as shorthand for the establishment. The participants said that it was usually possible to recognize the crowd at such events from afar by virtue of the ethnic-contemporary fashion from brands like *Anokhi* or someone's "aunt's small-scale business" that aims to "empower local women."[31] Many of the participants felt highly ambivalent about this characterization, even while recognizing it in

[31] I have no data on how common this really is, but anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that some women of wealthy Indian families run small socially oriented/vanity businesses employing poor women making handicrafts or traditional fabrics. I have heard variations of this statement numerous times.

themselves. Jyoti noted her desire to dress differently out of a humorous sense of spite:

> "When I go to these liberal arts events like book readings—I go to book launches wearing my *most corporate* clothes. Like *shirt* and trousers and formal shoes. Because everyone there, I know, will be dressed in Fabindia. With wooden earrings 'hand-made by some tribal people' [laughs] and Kolhapuri chappals. And it *frustrates* me. Because *that's* how they build their community. They claim to build their community based on ideas, based on agreement, but what they're doing is pretty much what other people are doing—which is building it based on identity and *very* shallow markers of that identity."

Feminism, she implied, was supposed to be a community of ideas and ideals, but could boil down to signaling belonging through the 'correct' appearance. Jyoti, with significant family money to fall back on, could dress in a power suit and perhaps feel slightly above it all, but also seemed aware that others could not. For many of the women in this setting, professionalized feminist circles provided the main opportunity for meaningful work.

The relative glamor of Central Delhi events was felt to stand in contrast to the mundaneity of most participants' salaries, of which up to a half would go into paying for a room in a shared flat in South Delhi. The participants also argued that several Indian organizations expected you to be grateful for whatever you were being paid, as all employees were assumed to come from moneyed families. "You know what I've come to realize this past week?", Noor rhetorically asked: "That even in this job, in this [NGO] sector, there are still people who are getting *much* more than I'm getting." She felt she was not able to ask for more "because all this time I've internalized what I have heard and perceived from my bosses." The "take" of an earlier boss was that:

> "'You are all middle-class people—we've not paid our salary for two months.' Yeah, they didn't have money and the money they had they used for other projects, without letting us know. So, instead of apologizing about that, he turned it on us and said 'You are entitled—you are middle-class people, your parents earn a lot of money, don't make a fuss about this.'"

The jobs can be understood as enforcing a kind of privilege trap (cf. Bourdieu 1999). Aashi explicitly felt that her NGO employment was "the kind of job only privileged people can do." It kept her dependent on her family since "you can't sustain on this salary in this city. If I had to get my AC, I had to call my parents." While this could mean that participants did not "have to live like someone who earns as much as I do," it made independence harder.

Better salaries were seen as available for a chosen few in supranational organizations, international non-governmental organizations, and consultancies that paid in stronger currencies. This was seen to emphasize structural inequality and one's sense of alienation. The participants who had found work in international organizations said they were being paid much better than workers located "in the field" elsewhere in India. The discrepancy between "mostly upper-class, upper-caste" metropolitan staff and those in the periphery was expressed by Uma as being somewhat perverse:

> "[Someone] comes right after college and starts managing large data collection efforts—is managing these field staff who are almost always lower class, lower caste people… uhm… Might be much older than them, and then there's these power dynamics that's instituted—and these people who are like 20-21—obviously *huge* pay difference—and there's not much security for field staff."

Sounding troubled, Uma said she had "always found it really… uhm, wrong." Despite the organization supposedly telling people to be "very very cognizant of your own privilege," Uma felt that city staff were entitled, having joined the organization with "good recommendation letters" from so-called important people —perhaps "the academic chair of the project," a person "sitting somewhere in the US usually." Some international organization also filled certain Delhi-based positions through sister offices abroad, which meant that some workers would be paid 3-5 times as much as their locally hired counterparts. And, in exceptional cases, spoken of with disdain, certain managerial or consusltancy positions could come with very high salaries[32].

The participants said that a lot of the most important work in India was being done by people across the country who did not receive the recognition they deserved. Like in Gilbertson's (2018, 2023) and Narayanaswami's (2016) studies, the participants felt that people outside the NGOized sphere suffered from not speaking whatever the 'correct' language of gender and development or big-city feminism was. Lily, at that point a journalist and not in the development sector, spoke about wokeness:

> "*anyone* in this country, unless they have at least some amount of privilege, isn't [woke] within a Western sense. Like, you could have someone straight out a fucking village, who's been fighting child

[32] During my time in Delhi, I got to secretly observe one such case. In a gender-related NGO with an office in Delhi, the most senior managers and consultants were paid US$100,000-200,000 a year, corresponding to monthly salaries closer to a million Indian rupees. This information was kept from lower-level workers but was accidentally leaked and became more widely known within the organization. Employees did not want to speak openly about the system for fear of being blacklisted in the sector.

> marriage her entire fucking life, and your Delhi elites who talk about feminism will *not*, you know, be comfortable with that."

Caste returned as a key site of contestation. For example, Maya's analysis echoed Yashica Dutt's (2019) analysis of the Dalit closet:

> "Coming out as a gay person in Indian academic circles is *very easy*. I've myself seen that, people are accepting. But if you're coming out as a Dalit in an academic circle, people will be accepting *but* it will be superficial. It's not—it's really difficult to come out as Dalit in India."

Such discussions were reminiscent of the criticisms of professionalized feminisms and anti-racism in other geographical contexts (e.g. Alcoff 2023). The participants could see themselves as part of the problem, without clear answers to their ethical qualms. Aashi said she was "of course" "oppressing a lot of people while doing it [her work]." "The system sucks," she said, "but I will do whatever I can in it to…" The sentence trailed off.

Yet, while most of the industry was seen to be badly paid and/or morally dubious, the possibilities that professionalized feminism could offer to women like the ones in this study could not be overlooked. NGO or research work, especially for international organizations, entailed a possible path to financial independence and maybe even a way out of Delhi and/or India for those who wanted it (see chapter 9). Moreover, despite the moral complexity, the work was still often seen as the most meaningful work available, and sometimes deeply rewarding. Aashi, a graduate from a top law school, said there was "a reason" she did the kind of work she did:

> "I could be a very low-paid lawyer [sic, irony]. But I am currently a very low-paid person in the fucking development sector. It's because this is —I just *have* to otherwise I—it's not because of my career ambitions or something—I could make a career in *anything*. But I do this because… it drives me."

For Aashi, her professional output also had an impact on her family since her mother sometimes asked her to show her the things she wrote. Aashi had warned her mother that her articles could be "a bit rebellious." Yet, since the writing was done professionally and thus separated from the immediate family sphere, communication was less loaded: "Like, as long as it is an *opinion* they will be okay with it." An opinion would mean something like being fine with other people living their lives as they wanted, not practicing it yourself: "If they think it is like 'casual sex is amazing, I'm having it,' that shit's just not gonna fly [laughingly]. I don't have time for that kind of drama."

Similarly, Jyoti said that money was the only "good reason for doing a job" if one asked her family. In contrast, she said: "idealism has always been a part of my

reasons. It's a strong motivator for me." She felt that choosing to work in something she cared about (and not out of family expectations) could be understood as "another measure of independence." Nevertheless, her NGO-researcher job "still smacks of *hobby* for them". According to them, "'you can do it essentially because you can afford to do it'": "which is not *wrong* at all. It's quite elite of me to think that I don't [somewhat apologetically] really need to earn my income." Jyoti then, was perhaps the kind of independently wealthy employee that NGOs like Noor's were looking for.

6.8. Building homeliness, again

In this chapter, the city has shown itself to be a more complex and difficult place. Even feminist settings were mired in tensions of structural inequality and being co-opted by capitalist logics. Yet there were always other kinds of moments, too. The interviewees reported making use of the city in multiple ways. Many things required money—like going to restaurants or pseudo-public spaces like malls (e.g Phadke et al. 2011)—but a sense of belonging could also be created in ways that required very little spending. Delhi was full of parks and monuments with grassy lawns and shady groves, and *pani puri* and tea for two at the market did not cost much. More fashionable bars tried to attract women customers with free "ladies night" drinks (which were terrible), and some of the so-called uncle bars were not too bad for women either, at least when in a group. Walking was, admittedly, hard[33], but the metro connected you with almost everywhere. The participants found ways to navigate, sidestep, or momentarily resist the gendered expectations placed on them, illustrating Jyoti Puri's reminder that "disciplinary and normalizing strategies are not always effective" (1999, 13).

People sometimes laughed that living in/with Delhi was "a bit of an abusive relationship," yet things were "nice-er" than before. When asked what the city had given them, the participants returned to the sense of mobility. Aashi said:

> "Freedom? *-ish*. I don't know if it's a function of the city, or just me being in a *time* in my life where I can be free as such. I mean there is no oversight, *at all*. [...] None of that shit now. I can be free, and the city is very accessible, I can go anywhere—I can take an auto, or I can take a cab—well I can't take that much cabs because they're really expensive. But so yeah, I can *do things*. So if I wake up one day and feel bored, there are *things* I can do always in this city."

Maya said:

[33] White people living in Delhi famously love to walk, despite facing difficulty and ridicule (Miller 2009).

> "With all the negative feelings I have about Delhi, I *really* like the *parks*. And I really like the monuments. And I like the fact that I can go there and *be* alone. And… I like all of that. I also appreciate, just being able to… This is gonna sound very silly! But *use* the metro and go to places."

For Maria, being in Delhi was not just about being able to "drink" or "smoke," but about "learning to live alone," to "be able to have a relationship with someone—and *share* space with them, physically, getting intimate with them," having a "sense of being able to do what I want to do," even about "how to manage my finances." As part of learning to live alone, Delhi emerged as a site of learning how to take care of oneself. Here, feminism was a key tool for homemaking and claiming a stake in the city. Lily said "feminism" had given her "a kind of road map" for how to engage with the harassment she experienced—it had shown her she was "allowed to be like 'fuck the fuck off!'" Living in Delhi reportedly shaped relations to gender in other ways too. "Being in this city," Darsha said, "sort of changed how I looked at myself as a woman, and how others looked at me as a woman." In this case, this was freeing. For others, being allowed to perform gender roles in ways that were more for their own satisfaction had allowed them to feel more accepting toward embracing a femininity that would have felt oppressive before. For Shalini, becoming an adult and living on one's own meant that she felt like dressing up feminine for the first time.

In light of such changes, the women's relationships with their natal homes were no longer seen to be the same (see chapter 9). At the same time, families still wanted these daughters to come home for a visit any chance they got. Parents could not understand why their daughters preferred to spend their time off with friends rather than with relatives "who basically do not approve of the kind of life I'm living," as Neha said.

Chapter Seven: Entangled mothers

"Sometimes people who don't know you well enough take something on the face value. If I say that my mom used to beat me, they would just take that thing and think 'Okay [her] mother is probably a horrible person.' But she's not absolutely. So one needs to know a lot of context and a lot of things about why it happened."

Shalini and I were sitting on her sofabed in her studio apartment speaking about the judgments people made about one's family. At the time of the interviews, she and I had not known each other very long, and I asked her if there was something she wanted to make sure I "got." "Yeah, yeah, all the sensitive stuff," she said. "I want you to know the whole story, to understand in what context things happened."

In this chapter I try to offer just such a contextualization. After two chapters about the women finding their independence in Delhi, a certain sense of oppositionality to the family could perhaps mislead one to paying less attention to how central love and care—intertwined with responsibility and guilt—was to the interviewees' family narratives and feminist interpretations of them. Thinking with South Asian (including diasporic) feminisms, one can describe this as the "praxis committed to not leaving our communities behind" (Roshanravan 2019, 106). Nowhere is this desire more apparent than in the stories about mothers.

I will first look at how ways of understanding mothers have appeared in Indian feminist writing. After that, I will look at the multilayered ways in which the participants spoke about their mothers. Mothers appeared as patriarchal agents, as victims or products of their circumstances, in need of protection, as interlocutors and supporters, and as moving toward being independent people separate from the mother-role. Mothers were pitiful and depressed, yet also funny, loving, and cherished. Through this, the participants seemed to be moving away from mother-stories as a given, learning to exercise what can be called one's "tolerance for ambiguity" (Anzaldúa 2012, 101).

7.1. Feminism and mother-stories

Any discussion about mothers will become part of a long feminist tradition (in India e.g. Gulati and Bagchi 2005; Bhattacharya 2006a; Raja and Souter 2010;

Pinto 2014; outside India e.g. Rich 1976; Walker 1983; Henry 2004). As feminists have argued, mothers and the labor of mothering have been socially devalued, while women who are mothers have also not been allowed roles apart from that of the mother. Amrita Nandy notes that this has particularly been the case in brahminical traditions, where "[t]he dominant conception of a complete and ideal Indian woman is the mother, the epitome of femininity and womanhood" (2017, 16). Nandy calls this "mater-normativity" (ibid., 60).

In a mater-normative system, being (seen as) a mother is thought to confer a certain status on women—functioning as a carrot (e.g. Kakar 2001[34]). On the stick side are the superhuman demands put on the ideal Hindu-ized, devoted and forgiving, Sita-like, wife-mother-woman (e.g. Luthra 2014). Against this backdrop, one understands the feminist interest in counternarratives that reappreciate motherhood or mothers existing outside normative confines. Maithili Rao notes that there is an "implicit" feminism in the "assertion of women's strength" seen in stories of motherhood (Rao 2022, xii). If mothers are supposed to be self-sacrificing, ever ready, and available, the moments when they are not become interesting (e.g. Rich 1976). Feminist scholarship looks at such women as agentic, even if not necessarily feminist.

In Indian feminist literature and scholarship, mothers often appear in (auto)biographies of finding "emotional lines of matrilinity within the social structure of patrilinity" (Elliott 2005, 10). Because of the arguable "centrality of the mother-son relationship in Indian society," there is popularly a "much more slender tradition of [portrayals] of 'mother-daughter' relationships" (Singh 2013, 51), something feminists have tried to rectify. Connecting Indian feminisms to other feminists of color—particularly Black feminisms (e.g. Walker 1983; Nash 2011)—(re)appreciating the mother and the generational solidarities between mothers and daughters has also been understood as having something of a decolonizing power (cf. Roshanravan 2019). In an interestingly essentializing way, motherhood has also been understood as something more meaningful in Indian feminist contexts, such as when Rao—in the introduction to a feminist volume on motherhood called *The Oldest Love Story* (Bhattacharya and Rao 2022)—argues that "[m]otherhood has become passé as a subject for White academics while women of colour find agency through motherhood" (Rao 2022, xi).

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[34] Kakar argued that "an Indian [Hindu] woman knows that motherhood confers upon her a purpose and identity that nothing else in her culture can" (Kakar 2001, 7). Kakar argues that "revering motherhood" is not "unique" for "Hindu society," but that the "ubiquitous," "absolute and all-encompassing social importance of motherhood" is particularly striking here (ibid., 28). Like Srivastava (2022), I read such generalizations as mainly useful for understanding ideas about norms.

In a context of strong mater-normativity, feminist thinking obviously also gets affected. If the traditional "Indian" idea—pandered to by e.g. much of Bollywood—is that a good child's "eyes must lower at the very mention of 'maa'" (Singh 2013, 40), certain feminist narratives are not that different. Sometimes, they're indistinguishable from it, as when Roshan G. Shahani, a feminist of the early Indian women's movement, writes: "Mum would chop onions very fine—like a *bhelwala*, I used to tell her. Today when I chop onions (not so fine), the tears I shed are not onion-tears alone" (Shahani 2006, 71, italics in original).

Such stories of mothers can inadvertently reinforce a somewhat saintly centrality of the mother figure. What sets feminist narratives apart from mainstream depictions about mothers' labor is their emphasis on the daughters' critical learning. Feminism becomes a tool through which one's own relationship with her can be re-evaluated and contextualized. It is a kind of heroine's journey that leads to appreciation of the devalued work and self-sacrifice of the mother. The emphasis on feminism as learning to understand the mother is seen in e.g. the narrative of Maitreyi Chatterji, another member of the 1980s women's movement:

> "As I became deeply involved in the women's movement, the scales fell away from my eyes. My mother emerged before me in a new light. [...] The movement made women search for their real identity. I began to reflect about my mother's struggle from the time I could remember, her feisty fights, her total support to us [...]" (Chatterji 2006, 41)

"I realize today," Chatterji says "[that I am] entirely my mother's handiwork" (ibid., 43). In the same anthology, most essays follow a similar pattern. Editor Rao, for example, writes that:

> "From instinctive teenage rebellion against what 'mother' stood for, to a gradual understanding of that taken-for-granted figure as an individual, comes my own maturity as a person" (Rao 2006, 87).

One should note the moral undertone: understanding your mother is the mature thing to do. Thinking with Astrid Henry's (2004) notion of the "matrophor" in feminist scholarship, we can ask if certain ways of understanding mothers can come to restrict our ability to see or speak of mothers differently. If feminist discourses posit a narrative that ends in a reconciliation with a rehabilitated or (re)appreciated struggling or bad mother, can the necessity of understanding be questioned? Indian feminist novelist Shashi Deshpande asks exactly this question in an essay on mothering: "[D]oes feminist mean inflating the importance of mothers beyond what they actually meant in our lives? Does feminism, in other words, mean going beyond the truth to right the balance [of devalued mothers]?" (Deshpande 2013, 173)

In the light of this, I see it as meaningful to ask to what extent mother-stories are able to move beyond "myths of shared womanhood" (McKenzie 2014, 106) and discuss ways in which mothers and daughters have different positions and demands. In what ways are mothers discussed beyond simply as victims of their gendering, and seen as active beneficiaries of systems of class and caste supremacy? Anti-caste feminist scholar V. Geetha has noted that the "crucial role that the household plays" in creating and upholding social inequality in all its intersecting forms is "yet to be appraised with the seriousness and criticality it deserves" (2018, 96). As I read it, traditions of feminist matrophors focused on (re)appreciating mothers might inadvertently contribute to making this harder.

7.2. Fighting with mothers

For most of the participants, their mothers had been tasked with the practical care and disciplining of the daughters. This practical connection meant that the daughters knew their mothers better than they knew their fathers (next chapter), but also that most of the difficulties and hostility they faced while growing up was connected to their mothers. Tara said that, for the women of her family:

> "the onus is on them to carry on *tradition*. No matter how politically active they are, no matter how educated they are. In their personal lives they're not liberated and they won't let their fellow women be liberated as well."

Much of this control was, to paraphrase Ahmed (2004b), "in the name of love." Daughters and mothers clashed in multiple ways. Mothers were seen as emotionally controlling and physically violent, often surveilling and policing, slut-shaming and body-shaming their daughters. Tensions could take on less obviously violent forms such as trying to get a tomboyish child to "dress up" against her will or hiring "a lady who would come *every week* to put some six hundred kinds of things on [my face]" so that the "dark" girl child would get "fairer." Mothers could also enable the violence of others. One participant spoke about how her mother kept telling her to just "'put up an armor of love and protection'" against the culture of fear perpetrated by the father. In other examples, mothers helped keep the lid on sexual abuse in order to protect the family name.

Because of the tense history, several women expressed having felt antagonistic or hostile towards their mothers while growing up. Neha said she "always thought it was my mom who was the reason why I felt the way I did":

> "For the longest time, I thought my mom was the only enemy. So I thought my mom was the only reason for my dissatisfaction with

> myself, my discomfort with my body. I thought that was directly related to my mom. Because the stuff she used to say when I was a little kid."

The quote expressed something typical of almost all the interviews: descriptions of (past) anger and resentment directed toward the mother tended to develop into a later nuancing of the issue. It was as if the teller wanted to get to the interjection, '*but…*' as soon as possible, to stress the importance of contextualization. Such movement toward nuancing could be seen in the ways in which the participants described their relation to anger directed against the mother. Maya said, "years ago, I would have been crazy angry at my mother for being conservative." She described herself as having been a "very angry teenager," but said the anger was now reserved for others, not her mother. Similarly, Shalini said she used to "*hate*" her parents for fighting so much, but later realized her mother was violent toward her because of the difficulties in her marriage. While the downplaying of strong emotions like anger in the interviews should also be understood as part of a desire to tell a more sober and academically useful story (not a "rant," as Maya said in chapter 2), the more general dissipation of anger can be understood as a stage in what is seen by the women as a feminist learning process.

Fighting less with the mothers was also described as a pragmatic move. The women had noticed that outright anger rarely led to the desired results (see chapter 9). Fighting with mothers was also seen as marking the latter's relatively lower position compared to fathers or other authority figures—mothers were seen to have been more available for fighting with in ways that others were not. Nevertheless, some recent examples of productive and solidaric anger were given. These situations were seen as exceptional, requiring a lot from both the daughers and the mothers. Fights would only be meaningful in situations where parents could understand that being challenged was a form of care—something that e.g. Neha had long tried to get across. So far, this had not worked—according to her, her parents were stuck in the thought that good children shouldn't challenge their parents. They often negatively compared her to other families whose daughters seemed unconfrontational. What her parents didn't understand, Neha said, was that "most kids lie."

Fights were reported as only productive under atypical, non-normative circumstances: Vishakha had grown up with a single (separated) mother in an all-women's household. Lily said her parents raised her to be anti-authoritarian and were now reaping what they had sowed; her parents had also been separated for multiple long periods of time. Even so, fights still had to be viewed by mothers in the right way in order to be meaningful. Under the right conditions, expressing anger, daring to fight with them, even insulting the parents could become meaningful political acts (cf. Griffin 2012; Stryker 1994). In those circumstances,

fights could bring mothers and daughters together, reinforcing bonds, with both parties appreciating the ability to clash.

Vishakha had moved to Delhi alone after receiving her undergraduate degree in journalism, almost a decade before the interviews. She had a postgraduate degree in gender studies, had worked at a number of media houses and NGOs, and been active in LGBTQ organizing. At the time of the interviews, she was working the evening shift at a newspaper, which required her to regularly travel across town alone at night. Despite everything, her mother had not stopped worrying about her whereabouts constantly, and kept bombarding the daughter with calls every evening, which the latter often ignored. Having to call her back was getting on Vishakha's nerves:

> "So one night I was *really* irritated and angry. And I reached home around, I don't know, twelve o'clock. I was walking towards my house, and I called her like '*Why* are you giving me so many calls?!' Like 'It's been eight years, what the fuck is happening to me? I'm safe, what the fuck do you want?!' And then she's like 'I just can't sleep without knowing that you're safe.' And I'm like 'Yeah! That's *all* that matters in your life. That I'm fucking safe! That I'm not fucking raped.' 'That's all that matters. Have you ever asked me, in all these months, what else is going on in my life?! Do you even care about that? All you care about is that I'm home at a certain time. That's all that matters to you!'"

Her mother had gone silent and Vishakha hung up. The spontaneous outburst functioned in unexpectedly productive ways, for the next day she again got a call at work:

> "She's like 'How are you?' [gently] and I'm like 'I'm fine.' And she's like 'So tell me what's new in your life?'. And like... *whaat*?—uhm... And she's like 'I'm sorry, but I get worried.' And I'm like 'okay.' But since that day we've started talking during daytime. And talking about like other things also."

In the example, the fight led to a certain clearing of the air. Vishakha's mother reacted productively to her daughter's anger with an apology and a change in her behavior. Vishakha narrated the change as temporary and running in parallel with other ways of interacting but still representing a change. After the event, the two had spoken about shared female experiences such as menstruation and her use of menstrual cups (which was hard for her mother because "the idea is that if you can shove something that big up your vagina then you're *definitely* not a virgin") and—excitingly—the uselessness of men: "She bitches about men! We bond a lot when we bitch about men together."

Another example illustrated a desire to shock and even consciously hurt the mother in order to shake up the relationship. During an explanation about how

fondly she felt about her mother, Lily told me a story about a family friend's party in her hometown some time earlier. Lily said she had been drinking a lot and was "shot as shit." Her mother had asked her about her dating life, and she had told her about a recent bisexual threesome, an experience she described as "fucking spiritual." In response, her mother had had a "*distasteful* look on her face," "she was just like 'Lily, please don't tell me about these like—you don't need to tell me about these things that you're doing.'" She said it, "in retrospect, is just like a *really normal* thing for a parent visualizing their child's love life. But at that point of time it just felt like another one of those, like, 'you don't get to judge me and the fact that I have an alternative life!'" As a result, the two of them "got into a *screaming* match about it" which ended with Lily being dismissive about her parents' marriage and leaving the party:

> "I remember telling her that 'That one threesome was more meaningful than your twenty-five years of shitty marriage.' Like *yeaah*, dropped bombs, slammered the house… and uh… so, she then… I walked out of the house without my wallet or my phone [cringing/laughing] and like my shoe went missing somewhere along the way because I was so drunk. I land at my grandma's house… and then she just shows up like six hours later, with my stuff, and we just never mention it again. So, I feel like, for my *personal* relationship with my mom… she has *stepped up* whenever I needed her to."

Lily spoke the last sentence very tenderly. The fact that she could be drunk, provoke her mother, and openly fight with her in front of family and others is thus, in a way, shown as strong proof of their mutual care. Lily said she could not stay with her mother for more than a few days without going "crazy," "but in terms of when I look back at my life and her place in it, she's *yet to let me down*."

Similarly to what Neha tried to explain to her parents, even dramatic-seeming fighting appears here as something you do specifically with someone who you feel might actually listen and someone you very much care about—a kind of agonistic reimagining of "faithful witnessing" (Roshanravan 2019). Being faithful would here mean fighting, even violently so, but committing to not leaving the relationship. For participants like Lily, how she feels about fighting expresses a crucial difference in her relationship to her parents. With her mother, she said, "we'll fight till the fucking cows come home, but it's still a fight that I will show up for. You know?"

Tara also felt there was space for aggression on "both sides" in her parental relationships: "But not everyone can do that. Not everyone can be aggressive about these things." Such relationships did indeed not appear possible for many of the other participants. Yet, several stated that "feminism" had nonetheless informed a change in their relationship with their mothers. It had taught them

empathy and lessened their anger. Maya explicitly named the impact that Alice Walker's (1983) classic "search of our mothers' gardens" had had on her. She now saw herself as less "judgmental": "Today I try to look at her perspective, that there's a reason maybe for why she's like that." If her mother and aunt "would have been given space they could have been creative in their own ways."

As part of her feminist learning and reappreciation of her mother, Maya had gained the courage to tell her "most" things—such as about her bisexuality—even when it had been hard for the latter to process: "The one person I was really scared of was my mother and I overcame that." Not telling her had been a burden for a long time:

> "Now that I've told her myself, it's like a relief. That I'll attribute to feminism. My mother's really conservative when it comes to LGBT issues. She does agree with me on a lot of other things that were taken up by the 80s feminists, but she's not really comfortable with me—still—going to the temple when I'm menstruating. I've told her that I'll do it anyway, you're not gonna stop me. I've told her about the sexuality thing, which was a *huge* thing. But, [exhales laughingly] it's done."

The mothers' responses to their daughters' growing feminist assertiveness were varied. Some of the participants noted a contrast between what their mothers claimed to be "really *cool*" or "*fine*" with in theory and what was tolerated in practice—being political was more understandable in the abstract than when it came back to challenge the family. Darsha said that her mother still reacted by martyring herself and being "in absolute denial" about the fact that Darsha was seeking therapy to deal with her family-related issues:

> "So she comes up to me all the time, saying 'You know, when you were a child you were so nice. You didn't speak so much. But now as an adult, you speak too much. And you find flaws with our parenting. That's not okay.'"

The participants' mothers' responses could also differ depending on the day, showing how all situations can understood as multiple. Lily, despite being able to fight with her mother, still felt that her "mom's just like 'You've become too *angry* now,' 'you're too aggressive'. And 'you don't value the same things anymore.'"

7.3. The mother "as a woman"

"I feel like I understood my mom as a mother much more when I started to understand her as a woman," Shriya said. Discussions about mothers often circled around variations on the theme of coming to understand the mother as a compromised actor. Some participants felt that they had, earlier, internalized a

misogynistic attitude toward their mothers, seen them as "annoying wom[e]n" whose actions and desires were dumb. The process of feminist learning was a kind of penitence, sometimes leading to an explicit partiality toward the mother (cf. Deshpande 2013).

Ahmed-Ghosh writes that "[w]omen, while raising daughters, comply with patriarchal familial ideologies because their multilayered identities are rooted in their class, caste, and the family's notion of status" (2004, 111). As being a mother is one of the few available ways to gain status, "acquiescing to such ideologies becomes for many women their only way of justifying their sense of self-worth" (ibid.). Many of the participants seemed to agree. The same family genealogies that we saw in chapter 4 were used by the participants to make sense of their mothers. For example, when asked about her upbringing, Tara said she needed to give me an overview that went "a hundred years" back. In her examples, the classed, caste-coded, and educational histories and struggles of grand- and great-grandmothers functioned as reference points. In a way that was both particular and typical, Tara pointed out difficult female histories (how her grandmother had had her first child at age 14, how her aunt became a surrogate parent for her mother, etc.), and how brilliant and undersupported her artist-mother was. The approach, then, was that of a feminist biographer trying to explain the "sort of things my mother went through."

Illustrating the relationship between movement and feminist development, the changes in relation to one's thinking about the mother's positionality were also seen as enabled by having come to Delhi, the employment and income found there, and the confidence boost received from taking on the city. Shriya said she had been an "unconfrontational, shyish child before," something that started changing once she moved to the capital and made her own money: "A lot of the ways I started reconciling the fact of emotional abuse from my childhood happened at that point, with that independence."

As a child, Shriya said, any resistance was "beat down, as it were"—"and this time I stopped kind of necessarily accepting that narrative." Resistance here meant both re-evaluating the mother but also seeing one's own worth and not accepting (as much of) continued harm. I read their desire to re-read their mothers "as women" as connected to a wish to protect the mother and oneself, but also as showing maturity as feminist subjects, echoing earlier literature (e.g. Rao 2006). When read against the hihgly self-reflexive tendency among the participants, the tendency of reading the mother "as a woman" also marks a curious difference in terms of the agency imagined between different generations of women, painting something of a generational model of feminist progress (cf. Coleman and Ferreday 2013). In other words, the participants did not see their mothers as having access to the same kinds of resources for feminist reflection as

they themselves had. This also meant that they were not seen as accountable for their actions in the same way that their daughters would see themselves being.

I see this reflecting the centrality of narratives of struggle in the daughters' picture of their mothers. All of the interviewees—some more, some less—spoke of seeing their mothers suffering. In many cases, it appeared to have become one of the primary lenses through which the daughters viewed their mothers. A central part of the category of "mother" was made up of the extreme demands put on them—demands that differed drastically from those put on men around them, particularly husbands. As Aditi said, "you had to be "*twice* as good." Since all of their mothers (had) worked, and working meant that a certain doubt would be cast on your quality as a mother, you had to be "twice as *morally* good, so that you were above suspicion." Aditi said that her high-performing businesswoman mother "had to be, like, Cleopatra as wife":

> "And… the weight of that is *constantly* on her life. Like, it's, it's… upset her health, it's always in her mind, it's starting to—I think—affect her memory as well. [It's about] like never neglecting a duty as a mother, never neglecting a duty as a daughter, never missing a call to your sister or your mother-in-law—like, even if your mother-in-law is horrible, you are perfect. You know, you are the perfect wife, the perfect… everything. Just to show that your profession isn't making you a worse person."

Aditi said she used to wonder why her mother was never "allowed to be nasty," "let off steam" —"and she doesn't of course, it's all suppressed inside."

Another way in which the category of "mother" was constructed was in relation to bad marriages, violent husbands, and the mother's ability to tolerate abuse. Even with notable exceptions, many of the participants described seeing their mothers being emotionally and physically abused by their fathers (and their fathers' families): "Like my mother would be *crying*—I'd seen her being beaten up when I was a four-year-old". Most times, mothers were understood as unable and unwilling to leave, even in very difficult situations: "There was *no way* in hell [my mom] was going to leave [my dad] after 20 years of like just this being normal." As Choudhary argues, divorce in India remains a (feminist) "political act" and a "double act of defiance" not just in relation to the family but to "the [caste-coded] community at large" (2026, 38).

Loyalty toward husbands could also create friction between the mother and the daughter, who perhaps expected unconditional love from the mother. Lily remembered telling her mother: "'Mom, if it came down to it, if you'd have to pick between the two of us, I *don't* know if you'd pick me or support me.'" Interestingly, even those participants whose mothers had separated from their fathers felt that

that the directionality remained—the mother still lived somehow as if the father and the wife-role were significant.

Part of understanding their mothers "as women" was connected to their own experiences with "men" (whether boyfriends, male family members in adulthood, or with "creepy" and abusive men in general). Having to, as adults, deal with the world and expectations of "men"—being treated "as a woman" (i.e. badly) oneself—here created yourself as a woman. The participants understood the violence their mothers had endured as part of a larger culture of normalized violence, including violence against children, again using the generalizing word "Indian" to describe it. Neha said it was a "cultural thing":

> "Like, in middle-class Indian families it's *very normal* to beat your kids if they're acting bad [laugh]. Now it's less but when I was growing up, people would say like 'Why is your kid not in control?', like 'Beat them up or something.' It's just such a normal thing for people to say."

Understanding the mother as part of a broader culture also meant that the violence she inflicted on her children was understood in a broader context, too. Lily said:

> "Uhm, it was like a little trickle down-thing: My dad felt bad and made my mom feel like shit; my mom felt like shit, she made my sister feel like shit. Uhm… so there was a lot of—my mom displaced, transferred a lot of stress, uhm, on us. Uhm, from… from when she was not being treated well by my dad."

Here, the interviewee became hesitant, with many "uhm"s and pauses. I understand this as the interviewee trying to make sense of the contradiction between the face value of things (the mother as a perpetrator of violence) and an interpretation of things as, ultimately, not being the mother's fault. Almost the same story was repeated by Shalini and Astha, respectively, who said:

> "My mom was not the perfect mom, okay? I was her punching bag all throughout my school life, because her marriage was, like, really fucked up. So that would get projected onto me—that I later understood."

> "She's been super emotionally abusive, as a parent. But I've kind of recognized that that abuse also comes from a place, because she herself has had a terrible, like, *life*."

The participants speak here of an internalized patriarchy and contribution to the perpetuation of "cultural norms of female inferiority" (Hunjan and Towson 2007, 62), a recurrent theme in research on Indian and South Asian (including diasporic) women. Mothers were in some sense understood as not being able to help but to push the same expectations onto their daughters. Jyoti said her

mother "would have failed as a mother if I don't follow her footsteps—even if her footsteps led her to a lot of unhappiness." This helped the interviewees make sense of why, for example, mothers wanted their daughters to get married even when their own marriages had included multiple forms of abuse (cf. Thapan 2003). Mothers also functioned as cautionary examples of the kinds of struggles their daughters, "as women", would face in the future.

The care they felt for their mother, understood as a victim of her circumstances, did not mean that the participants accepted things in a moral sense or felt that their mothers were in any way right in their understanding of society. Mothers could also, at least to an extent, be seen as benefiting from their role in patriarchy. Noor said her mother, whom she was very close to, was "working for the system so the system is rewarding you." Consequently:

> "I don't feel a great sense of solidarity, because I know I would do things very differently. My mother has faced things because of her gender, but she seems to somehow have accepted it. She feels like that is what the system is like. And… I *don't* buy that."

Sometimes, even in academic texts, a kind of slippage happens where women are written *as if* a more 'real,' non-patriarchal self would exist underneath the patriarchally interpellated one (cf. Skeggs 1997): "[a] woman is transposed into a *false consciousness* whereby conforming to patriarchal norms is sought by investing the honor of the family in her being, her behavior, and her sense of duty and sacrifice" (Ahmed-Ghosh 2004, 111, emphasis mine). Sometimes, the participants warned (themselves) against reading their mother's lives as without agency to challenge such so-called false consciousness. In this reading, giving back agency, even when this meant making mothers more culpable, could be understood as a 'feminist thing to do'. For example, Astha, whose story about almost being aborted was discussed in chapter 2, recognized the danger of simplification. While repeating the idea of her abusive mother having "suffered terribly," she said she "wouldn't want to necessarily reduce it to that as well."

Lily also emphasized that her mother was not "exactly some kind of blushing flower" but that she fought back hard against her father. In her view, her parents were in many ways equal—"equal in the sense that they would both be screaming horrible things at each other." Interestingly, her mother's rage also seemed to make her something of a positive role model for Lily—other mothers around her did not speak up the way her own mother did. In this somewhat romanticized reading of agency, a mother's violence could be reframed as a kind of liberatory act. Equality and freedom would here mean the freedom to be allowed to be as horrible as any man, with one's rage and abuse unconstrained by ideas of 'proper' behavior.

Even with such caveats and moments of critique of reductionism, the readings of the mother "as a woman" largely focused on understanding her as a victim or survivor. This reading will become even clearer when contrasted (in the next chapter) with how the participants perceived their fathers.

7.4. The mother as (a flawed) feminist

Thapan (2009) has noted a tendency among Indian middle-class girls to idealize their mothers. Among Thapan's teenage interviewees, mothers were described as confidantes, "ideal," "out of the world," and one's "daughter-mother relationship" was seen as "perfect" (ibid., 33-34). The girls' attitudes seem to mirror the generalizations of Kakar, who writes about how mothers often become "confidante and counsellor" for daughters "in the bewildering turmoil of adolescence" (2001, 21). Thapan argues that this is a particularly middle-class view, as her research with "educationally disadvantaged young women" tends to show "[r]elationships with the family [that] are vastly different from the earlier set of young women. There are no [...] perfect mothers" (ibid., 50). Although I do not know what the participants in my research actually felt during their adolescence, we can see how their remembering of earlier selves also implies a much less idealized relationship, critical of idealization. Mothers were described as having been viewed negatively during one's adolescence, with the adult relationship moving toward a greater contextualization, yet without idealization or an acceptance of the mothers' actions.

Many of the women did, expectedly, describe their mothers as having a (proto-)feminist influence on them, in both the past and the present tense. Maya felt that her mother would never stop being religious and conservative but had also expressed a desire for her daughter to not be exactly the same. She had been supportive of her daughter moving across the country to study and work, "because she wants me to not be like that." Aashi said "my mom really stood out in my extended family. She's been the most influential woman in my life." Few of the mothers had described themselves as feminists in any explicit sense, yet most were portrayed as (in some ways) daring. This alterity was evident not just in comparison to fathers or the male attitudes around them but also compared to other women of the family. Types of feminist influence by the mothers included setting an example through their own lives, supporting their daughters' ambitions, and being meaningfully present in contemporary conversations around gender. In such, mothers could be presented more as co-learners than as examples.

Again, the interviewees stressed the need to understand things in context, reading any tentative feminist influence against the backdrop of whatever was regarded as normal in their setting. Aashi, who saw herself as different from both

her conservative baniya family and those Delhi friends who came from more progressive families, implied that other young women did not always understand the very basic nature of the struggles she faced. Within her context, alternative imaginaries for women were very limited, yet her mother had managed to have an influence within that. "My mom also has a set framework," Aashi said: "You have to get married and you have to get married to the right kind of person et cetera." "But even then, there was a push towards independence, some sort of push": "Like, 'be financially independent' and 'study.'"

The story of having had "some sort of push" from their mothers was repeated by others. Without her mother's example, Aashi doubted she would have got to where she was. She said all of her female cousins "weren't doing anything," and grew up without good role models: "Your role models are literally people who just tell you to be fairer and get a nicer husband."

> "Like, their life course was set. They would go to some shitty little college [back home] and just go get a husband. That's it. It ended there for everyone. But my mother was someone who wasn't that person. And she used to talk about the fact that she had to fight for it. That, I think, just stayed with me."

Aashi said that her mother had "*literally*" fought her family to get to college, whereas her aunts had been "married off right after class 10. One of them didn't even go to class 10. They were just married off to horrific families, where like—every cliché you've heard about a bad Indian marriage, it was worse." That her mother only got married at 26, after having got an education and a "stable job" was "a *big* deal in the 80s." I read the mention of the mother's "fight" as particularly important—the example of challenging the family on *something* might in itself be more important than what was being challenged.

Several women stated that their mothers generally pushed them to study and allowed them to "read" as much as possible, thus broadening their horizons—sometimes in unforeseen ways. Tara, somewhat ironically, said that it was all the reading she had done that had in the end made it impossible for her and her mother to really see eye to eye since their worlds had become too different.

Like Aashi, Astha told a story involving her mother, narrow-minded towns, and fighting the family, linking this to her current feminism. In her "small town in central India," her highly educated and employed mother was the "first inspiration" and origin of her feminist engagement. Astha's story didn't end there, but emphasized the dual nature of her mother as both an inspiration and a conservative figure. The fact that her mother had seemingly become "stuck in the second wave of feminism" and did not understand things like staying out late or wanting to dress in less normative ways led Astha to later have "very uncomfortable conversations about feminism" with her mother.

Genderqueer Astha seemed to expect more. The rift between generations of women became particularly visible when, toward the end of high school, she came out as queer: "she didn't understand that at all." While Astha's mother had fought for her own beliefs, she was unable to understand why her daughter had to do the same. Nevertheless, Astha could not disregard her mother's imperfect struggle with "patriarchy" just because "she was reinforcing [it] too". She felt it would be hypocritical to do so: "I might be very feminist in one way but might be regressive in certain other ways which I don't know yet. Would that disregard everything I've done for women?" Astha was putting herself under scrutiny, creating what I see as a sense of shared feminist uncertainty and strife.

Mothers' paradoxes did not end there. While they were often blamed for the everyday policing of gender, they sometimes tried to allow their daughters more freedom of expression. For example, Shalini said that a number of women in her family would shame her, as a child, for being a tomboy and not dressing 'appropriately' for a girl. Her mother, despite being "known for having good taste" and being very pretty, did not ask her daughter to look like that. Similarly, Neha said she was "*slut*-shamed as a kid, by my own family" for not wearing a dupatta to cover her chest, but that her mother would speak up for her.

Growing up, participants' mothers had both supported and struggled with supporting their daughters in reaction to sexualized violence and shame, "struggling with being this polite person to the society, and then trying to protect me as well." In one example, a participant had been molested by a close friend of her grandfather's, which her mother had not been able to speak up about for a long time. Tellingly, the participant did not criticize the mother for this. Instead, again contextualizing things as "India," she said that "*most* other parents in India would make you shut up if the person is a family friend." Her mother gained courage with time, confronting the perpetrator much later on: "It took time, but after a few years she called him out. Like 'What the fuck have you done?'"

There were also other kinds of alliances between the daughters and their mothers. Lily said her mother felt it was better that she knew about the 'bad' things her daughter was doing, since this meant no nasty surprises from disapproving neighbors or relatives. According to Lily, her mother would tell her: "'Whatever you want to do, that's like a shady thing to do, just do it in our house. I don't want someone else to come and tell me about it." In another example of shared tactics, Lily narrated a story of her mother pretending to scold her so badly in front of a disapproving school principal that the latter felt sorry for Lily and let her go without punishment. These examples show a kind of strategic solidarity, while still heavily promoting a notion of family interests rising above other considerations (cf. Chakrabarti 2024).

At other times, mothers seemed to struggle with the loss of authority that came with their adult daughters' increased confidence. Learning to deal with the loss was seen as a form of feminist learning from the mothers' side. Aashi talked about her mother becoming "cute" as a result of learning from her daughter. If the latter used to try to make Aashi "fairer" as a child, "now she doesn't, now she's really scared of me [chuckles]." "And she's also evolved now," Aashi added.

A similar moment of growth and humor was narrated in reference to what was seen as the "middle-class Indian" pleasure of disapproving of other people's children. Neha said her mother was both perturbed and able to be amused by her loss of authority in front of her two queer children. Her mother told her:

> "'You know, because you guys are gay and because you live the kind of life that you do, it's *completely* taken away my authority to be bitchy about other people's kids.' So she's like 'Now I can never go to somebody else's house and just be like "Oh my god your daughter is wearing short-shorts," because *my* daughter does the same thing.'"

Paradoxically, while Neha's mother had struggled a lot with her daughter being gay and somehow still expected her to get married, her mother sometimes also told her "'What's the point in being ashamed of something if you are that person?'" Subsequently, when Neha talked about gender and sexuality at various public events, "mom is always there in the back of my head, saying like '*Theek hai* [it's okay], if you are gay then you should not be ashamed of it.'" Lily also noted the many things her mother seemed to have accepted:

> "My mom's taken a bit of time to come around, now and then, but like she's been okay with me being queer, okay with me being poly, okay with my sister being non-binary and kind of like male-performing."

As often as not, any rosy picture would snap back to a gloomier, and often back again.

7.5. A sense of guilt

"I think it's mostly emotional. Especially with my—my mother's mental health right now is not great. So there is always a sense of guilt," Uma said. Guilt was a central theme in relation to mothers. There was a certain doubleness in the idea of the mother as a victim of patriarchy: it promoted understanding but could also induce guilt in the daughter. Many of the women expressed feeling not just sad but profoundly guilty with regard to their mothers, for the difficult lives they were felt to have led, and for having to carry them (their daughters) along with them. Guilt could arise from a sense of having moved beyond the mothers or leaving

them behind. Vishakha said she was "always" with her mother: "Wherever she was, I was always there."

> "And I really feel sad for, like, my mother. She had to endure [the abuse from the father] and… unlike me, she hasn't moved away from that tradition, or religion, or anything. So in her head it's like—like she says, 'You only get married once in a life'—like why the *fuck* are you… Where is your sexual life? She doesn't have one. Why are you inflicting that kind of, like, *shit* on yourself? I can't… I can't… bring her out of that, because she's so deeply… rooted in that kind of society. Like 'What will people say?', all that. I can't, I mean I can talk to her and she knows my views on it, but… I'm not going to be able to bring her out of that."

Vishakha here presents herself as having changed and moved beyond her mother in ways that are not available to the latter. Managing to free herself from the constraints of what she sees as a toxic tradition, she is not able to bring her mother to the same place. The difficulty with which she expresses this ("I can't… I can't… ") seems to suggest that she is also trying to tell herself that changing the mother is not really her job.

Interestingly, the guilt one felt could also be negatively affected by one's feminist growth, i.e. by understanding mothers as parts of larger social systems. Several of the women spoke of how not really having had a choice in whether or not to have children had made a big dent in their mothers' ambitions; their guilt as a daughter was compounded by a more abstract, feminist knowledge of how being a mother significantly limited a woman's life.

Mothers were sometimes expressed to explicitly blame their children. Astha said her mother was "never the kind of person who wanted to stay home and take care of kids." Yet "she took it as a necessary part of your life as a woman, that she has to get married." Her mother would later take this out on her daughter, telling her "you are the reason that whatever bad has happened to me has happened." Similarly, Tara told a story of her mother falling out of touch with her best friend because she had to get married to Tara's father, something the daughter felt indirectly guilty about as the child of that union.

I read these contextualizations of the mother as ways for daughters to protect both their mothers and themselves, and as a move through which they could perhaps reconcile with the hostility they had faced. If Astha's mother, who was given away for adoption as a child, said Astha was the reason her parents fought, then putting things into context could help her to understand things, if not fully then at least somewhat "better":

> "But you have to also kind of recognize that she's *really* insecure about people loving her. So she kinda projects that on everybody, right? She's super insecure as a person, and then you can imagine that the whole

> adopted situation can create those anxieties in people. I kind of understand that now… *better*, at least."

By asking me to agree ("right?"), the teller is perhaps trying to convince herself, too.

The women's relative lack of seeing their mothers actively benefit from class and caste privilege, noted earlier, can also be understood in relation to this sense of guilt. A hint of this could be seen when Lily compared her relationship with her mother to that with her father:

> "I feel like there's a lot more of an insidious, unspoken sense of expectations that I accept with my mother. Like I would let a lot of shit go with her. And let a lot of stuff pass. Make a lot of 'Oh no she's tired' or 'It's just how she is.'"

Because of the "insidious" nature of the love she feels toward her mother, the normativity and potentially regressive attitudes of the latter might then be allowed to pass in a way they would not be with the father. "Feminism has also taught me that I have to respect her agency," Lily said, even if that agency might mean supporting harmful systems. "Why?" I asked her. "Because I feel like I *owe* it to her," she said. Lily recognized the feeling of "owing" as "insidious," yet felt she could and did not really *want* to do much about it. In comparison, she said she had tried "really hard" not to be her "father's daughter." It was hard to articulate her feelings about her mother, she noted, but it was a "very visceral sense of 'you are my mother.'" Speaking as if directly both to her mother and me, Lily added:

> "There's never going to be a point where I'm going to cut you out of my life. You know? My father, yes, because I've had *such* an antagonistic relationship with him for *so* long. But you're just this fixture in the sky, which is a mother. And I'm always going to be your daughter."

Here, one sees the difficulties arising from multiple readings of what the 'feminist thing to do' is: both interfering and not interfering in their mothers' life could be understood as feminist, pulling the daughters in different directions. Aditi, who saw herself as a kind of diplomat in relation to her family, explicitly noted that it could be very hard to distinguish what a feminist understanding of the mother was —and what was, in fact, a reproduction of family narratives of loyalty. Often, Aditi looked critically at her own fears of conflict, seeing herself as pragmatic, or perhaps something of a coward. In my reading, this functioned as an attempt at a kind of radical vulnerability that would scrutinize larger feminist desires to appear certain and morally blameless—it can also be understood as feeling relatively comfortable in her own political imperfection. It also illustrates the fact that, of all

the participants, Aditi expressed the strongest desire to live in close connection to her family.

7.6. The mother as in need of protection

Speaking from relative positions of independence at the time of the interviews, the participants also perceived their mothers as in need of a kind of protection. The women understood themselves as having had more opportunities and freedoms than their mothers and could sometimes feel that they had become more powerful than them, despite the control the latter still had over them. In such cases, daughters expressed a desire not to cause already overburdened mothers more harm.

This could mean protecting their mothers from things pertaining to themselves or their lives in Delhi—values, opinions, and lifestyles, or particularly negative experiences such as sexual harassment. The mothers could also be protected against accusations of having been "bad" mothers. I see it as probable that the women extended this wish to protect to my interviews as well, moderating their responses accordingly.

In relation to this, lying to their parents takes on a different tone here. If many other kinds of lies were used to make one's own life bearable, here they (also) functioned to protect the mother. Tara explained it as follows:

> "I have seen my mom standing up for me so much that sometimes I protected her from my reality. Which… I guess she was not ready to understand certain things. She can't understand me having multiple sexual relationships, ever. So I have to protect her from that reality, that side of me. So I think it also comes from that sort of—like, if I'd expose her to that, she will suffer. And that's where the guilt would come from. I would feel guilty for making her suffer."

Although Tara was adamant that she did not want to e.g. get married and said her mother "*will*" have to understand that sooner or later, there were parts of her life that were important to her that she did not feel her mother needed to know about. Tara thus challenged individual queer politics of being out (cf. Achar and Gopal 2023), choosing to focus on relational care (Roshanravan 2019; Lugones 2003).

What is crucial here is Tara's insistence that the hiding was not about being afraid of the repercussions for herself (cf. Huang and Brouwer 2018). Yet she seemed to note that an inability to speak to her mother might make her a appear compromised or failed as a feminist. To counter this, she stressed that she had fought "for *everything* with my parents, and they eventually understood." Across our interviews, she urged other women to fight, saying that nothing will happen without it. Yet fighting certain things would "break" her mother. Thus, if her

feminist engagement was to be fair and not unnecessarily punitive toward her mother, it had to be informed by the personal difficulties and traumas faced by the latter, this time again because of the father. Tara said she had started to understand where her mother's views came from when she herself was studying for her master's, away from her hometown:

> "Because I was the only person she expected *anything* from. And I *couldn't* be the person she hated—I couldn't be my dad. I couldn't tell my mom that I drank—I got caught smoking, and that broke my mom. She didn't scream at me, she started crying."

Initially thinking that her mother cried because her daughter had become a "bad person," Tara came to realize that it was a symptom of something else. Mundane acts like smoking and drinking were symbols of both personal histories and the unfair freedom of men:

> "She has this—she doesn't like addiction in general, in men and women and… it's also representative of my father who now has become an alcoholic. And he smokes a lot. And he's… an epitome of what my mother doesn't like. And if I do that, she sees my father in me. And she can't really… accept that."

Because of this, Tara felt that her mother "has some sort of trauma ingrained in her brain, and I just can't get through to her." Protecting the mother—perceived to be fragile and lacking mobility—here marks a generational distance: In her mid-20s, Tara was now an outspoken feminist living independently and working as a journalist in Delhi. She had moved away physically and mentally, while her mother was still living across the country with her father. Tara's own independence would allow her to do the things men like her father did—things her mother could never do.

Another reason for protecting mothers was also given: mothers were seen to be a lot more bound to the (extended) family sphere and its potential heavy criticism. As they were living amid families, "the consequences of your actions" were seen to fall on them. Mothers had to answer for their daughters' perceived failures, be obliged to uphold a "'mother performance'" (Aneja and Vaidya 2016, 136), itself a "collusion in patriarchal social structures" (ibid., 146). Jyoti said she could not "dislodge" this "weight on my head," the weight of knowing how much her mother did for her in relation to the wider family: "every bit of freedom *she* secures for me —by being a buffer between the rest of the family—*she's* accountable for it, not me."

We see here how expectations of womanhood change with age, marital status, and motherhood. Aashi said her mother had asked her not to "cause a scene at home," since she did not stick around to deal with the consequences. Aashi argued

that one could either try to fully leave this structure or try to make peace with it. Her mother had chosen—or been forced to choose—the latter. Telling me about a fight with her aunt about menstruation-related rules at her aunt's house, she said:

> "My mother shut me up saying 'You will *leave*. You're here for one month and then you will leave. And I will be the one answering her back.' So that's when I really saw my position in the household, that I'm an *outsider*. As much as I would like to be the insider—I know I love my parents and they love me back and don't see me as an outsider, but I really am. There are a lot of fights I can't fight because I don't live there."

Living in Delhi, Aashi had become an outsider to the moral network of the family. While it allowed her much greater freedom, it also meant that she no longer felt in a position to have a say in how they should live. Trying to do so would hurt her mother and the wider family. "There's a lot riding on my parents' izzat," Aashi said. Here, loyalty to the mother—and through her the larger family system—becomes a central value that shapes Aashi's decisions. She does not want her commitments to living her own life in a feminist way to hurt the larger prospects of the family, especially since she is not there to deal with the consequences. Attachment, then, also turns into passive structural support (cf. Sirisena 2024).

Thinking about protectiveness, one can ask what realistic chances the women felt they had of being otherwise. Worry and protectiveness can be seen as integral parts of the package of 'care' that ('Indian') women are brought up to embody (chapter 3; cf. e.g. Donner 2008). Many of the women felt that they had been "looking out" for their mothers for a long time. Some explicitly stated that their mothers had demanded that they do so, with mothers relying on them in what were felt to be "unhealthy" ways. A feminist aim to protect can be understood as a reframing of this expectation of care. Nevertheless, the wish to protect is genuine, as in Maria's story, where seeing her mother as (proto-)feminist becomes mixed up with a desire to protect her:

> "She's the only one I can talk to. Also I feel my mother's reflective. So if you'll tell her things, *na*, she'll… she's not stuck up. Sometimes I think I would even use the word 'naive' to describe her. Innocent [gently]."

Despite Maria feeling that there were a number of things her mother could not understand or accept, she felt moments of closeness amid disagreements:

> "Today she was scolding me, and she corrected herself because she said the wrong thing. [laughs] And we both started laughing and she was telling me that, you know, 'You're shameless, I'm trying to scold you and you're laughing!' [chuckles] So there have been those moments as well."

7.7. The mother as an independent person

All of the participants' mothers (had) worked outside the household. A few were single parents, and at least a couple of the mothers were the main breadwinners in the family despite the presence of a father. As mater-normativity (Nandy 2017) affects not just women's own trajectories, but their ideas about those of others, the participants can also be understood as struggling to think of their mothers outside of what Lily called "this fixture in the sky, which is a mother." Nandy noted the issue in herself, "wish[ing] that [the mother] would not allow her motherhood to submerge her other identities," yet she "could only know her [mother] as a mother/care giver" (ibid.). Trying to know the mother beyond motherhood can be understood as part of the feminist vocabulary the participants were building.

Some spoke about letting go of some of the expectations they had had on their mothers. One person phrased this as the difference between "being able to just love my mother and being able to love and respect her"—respect here meaning allowing her to be her own person. This was connected to one's own growth, to becoming more self-sufficient, outgrowing the younger self that needed another kind of parent. Lily said her parents had separated multiple times, which for Lily led to her mother confiding in her "more than I—as an adult—feel would have been healthy for me." In an important observation, Lily saw that what felt unhealthy for herself was perhaps good for her mother: "When I was growing up, the idea of a woman voluntarily wanting to divorce a guy was unheard of. Like, if anything, you got left. But you were never the one who did the leaving. And my mom left fairly often."

Others also expressed having had fears about their mothers leaving. Growing up to allow the mother an individuality beyond the mother-role meant allowing her to make decisions that one would not make oneself. In Shalini's story, trying to interfere and bend things to her will as a child came back to haunt her later:

> "I separately went to my parents and *cried* and I told them not to *leave*, you know—one day my mom was leaving with a suitcase—these memories are really blurry, I think I've suppressed a lot of them… But yeah, they stayed together. And when I grew up I really regretted doing this, I was like 'I should have let them go.' Because now it's too late—now my mother is too old and sick to leave my father, although she hates him. Like, hates him but also can't live without him, because they're so *used* to living together."

Mothers leaving, including leaving their children to some extent, here gains a liberatory sense. Darsha said her mother struggled with severe mental illness through much of her childhood, and left the family when Darsha was a teenager. Spending large parts of their life apart, she felt she had a stormy but meaningful

relationship with her mother. Like the others, she said things started changing for the better when she began to understand her mother as a person with needs bigger than just those of the "mother"—even if this meant accepting that she herself was not the be all and end all of her mother's life:

> "She's the more independent person, actually, of the two of my parents. My mother was way way more independent, emotionally—not financially of course—but emotionally she was. I mean, she's very self-sufficient. She doesn't need anybody else. She doesn't need me either. She *cares* about her family, but is she willing to give away her life for it? No, she's not. And she's very clear about that."

This suggests that part of feminist daughterhood was to understand that mothers did perhaps not want to live (just) for you. And, in a way, demanding less from her mother also enabled Darsha to demand more freedom for herself. In an important turn of events, during my fieldwork, Darsha's mother unexpectedly moved to Delhi to live with her daughter for some time. Darsha said she was "very apprehensive about this arrangement" as "one of us was bound to kill [the] other," but it had turned out better than expected. In fact, the somewhat upturned dynamics meant that Darsha was now the party with more responsibilities (e.g. the lease, a job, being the caregiver). As a consequence, the relationship was evolving:

> "Even now it's changing a lot. Because, for example, she'd just say… something about periods, she'd say something like 'Oh you're bleeding.' And I'd be like 'No, no. What's happening? What is 'that time of the month' called? What do you *call* it? You call it *menstruation*'—and she'd be like 'Oh my god you're using those words!' [laughs] But now she'll be like 'Yeah okay.'"

The mother is here living in the daughter's house and learning from her, and as a part of it she perhaps comes to revise some parts of her own patriarchal bargains. The example above upends the normative story of top-down generational feminist learning. This did not mean that the daughter did not keep scandalizing the mother. Gleefully, Darsha noted:

> "So, you know, it's in those small things. If the kind of clothes I'm wearing aren't 'suitable' or '*appropriate*' or basically I'm just wearing a shirt and roaming around the house, she'd be like 'Oh my god'—earlier she'd be like 'You're not wearing anything!' and now she's like [jokingly] 'You don't know how to wear clothes. You've gone back to your jungle version. You're very primitive.' So it's gone from 'You're being an *ashlil* daughter' […] to 'You are a primitive person.' So it's become more from girl to person."

The last point is important: Darsha felt that her mother was still judging her, but in less sexist terms. Returning to the point of even mothers being people, she said that coming to stay in the capital had been a time of liberation for her mother. For the first time ever, she was allowed to see her mother as able to look at herself from the outside. Her mother was a free-er woman in Delhi:

> "She explores the city on her own. She takes buses to nowhere. And she just travels here and there. And she tells me stories of what she's done in the city. This part of the city. What she's done, what she's liked, the people she's seen… Uhm, she talks about *her* memories of her school, sometimes. And she also has a good sense of humor… which borders on making fun of other people. Which I have acquired, I realize [laughs]."

The mother, like Darsha, had also started making fun of herself, something the daughter had not seen before:

> "I'm not aware if that was always there and she just needed a freer space to do that—like she says she doesn't wanna go home anymore. She's said 'I'm not going back to [West Bengal],' 'I'm staying here.' She's not said 'I'm staying here with *you*.' So she's very clear about that. What she means is that she likes… *here*, and the person she gets to be here. Here she's not just somebody's partner—she is somebody's parent, but not necessarily just that."

The mother is perceived to have gained a new lease on selfhood. The two give each other space, and do not obsess over having a "family" lifestyle: "Because in my ways—I eat at home, that's all I do. I go off, to school, I'm going off to meetings all the time. I just *eat* at home. That's all I do." In the story, a practical reconciliation seems possible. The reconciliation would be built on a mutual inability to be perfect for each other, or a kind of conditional and respectful love (Roshanravan 2019). Neha said she had tried to get precisely this across to her parents: "Just like I can't be an ideal kid to you, you're not ideal parents to me. But we're living with it."

The categorizations of mothers seen in this chapter are not exclusive and should not be understood as developmental stages. Rather, the participants moved back and forth between and within modes, telling not a single narrative but more of a changing, "rhizomatic" (Sermjin et al. 2008) network of fragments using multiple vocabularies (Povinelli 2001). Retelling this in writing often requires proceeding as if one strand of the story will make sense on its own—always requiring a certain suspension of disbelief despite my best efforts at ethical, polyvocal narration (Davis and Craven 2016).

I read the interviewees' emphasis on complexity and multiplicity as reflecting the deeply relational nature of self-building and agency (e.g. Roseneil and Ketokivi 2016; Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000) and what can be understood as feminist ethics

of both receiving and giving care (e.g. Raghuram 2019). The mother-stories emphasize vulnerability and context. Moreover, they are told from the position of *current* and still relatively young daughters, engaged in active negotiations, in situations where they felt sometimes powerless, sometimes agentic. This sets the participants' narratives apart from many of the other Indian feminist narratives of mothers (such as the books cited at the beginning of this chapter), where stories are mainly told in past tense, often in relation to oneself having become a mother and one's own mother growing old or dying.

More than anything, mothers *appear*. Mothers are very present in their daughters' stories, in more complex ways than most fathers (see next chapter). This should be understood in relation to the sociological reality of women being both the primary caregivers and practical guardians of 'tradition' and gender socialization in Indian families (e.g. Donner 2008; Luke et al 2014). In some sense, mothers appear to be even more important in my material than in some of the earlier Indian feminist family narratives. In the introduction to the anthology *A Space of Her Own*, Elliott writes that "our writers did not find it possible or useful to extricate their relationships with these key persons [i.e. mothers] from a larger narrative of family life" (2005, 10). The text sees such "embeddedness" (ibid.) of Indian women as a regular finding in various studies. While the subjects of my research were undoubtedly embedded in larger networks of kin and caste, and tell multigenerational stories of autobiographical sense-making (as seen in chapter 4), many of the women were also alienated from many or most of their family members. This smaller role of others in their lives can be understood as making the mother-story even more important.

Chapter Eight: Irrelevant fathers?

This chapter looks at the participants' narratives of their fathers. I pay attention to how their stories compare to those of mothers and, as before, particularly to the ways in which feminism comes to be used in relation to this sense-making. As the extant feminist literature on Indian women's father-stories is limited in comparison to the literature on mothers, this chapter also contributes to documenting more narratives. I see the dearth of circulating texts as in itself telling, and as something that in itself affects what stories become available for use in young women's self-narrations. As Vishakha said: "Okay, honestly, I've given very less thought to fatherhood." Yet, as we shall see, many opportunities for rethinking fathers do show up in the interviews.

Thapan (2009), discussing "educationally advantaged young women" (adolescent girls), argues that Indian middle-class nuclear families often remain deeply patriarchal despite their ostensible 'modernity,' and that daughters tend to idealize their fathers. For her interviewees, dads are "'perfect,'" handsome, and have a mentor-like role (ibid., 32, 35, 36). Affection and hierarchy coexist—patriarchy is here not enforced so much through coercion as through reverence. Thapan notes that fathers were idolized even for performing tasks that in mothers would be taken for granted. Adding to the well-known trope of 'fun dads', mothers would be described as strict (Thapan 2009, 34). At the same time, the girls interviewed by Thapan felt that they did not really "know [the father] as a person" (ibid., 34); him remaining emotionally aloof, not a confidant in the way mothers were.

Yet, the fathers' impact on their daughters' educational and other future possibilities has been seen as crucial (e.g. Clark 2016). In the realm of pop-feminist literature, Indian fathers have also been discussed from the perspective of their inadvertent or "subconscious" positive influence (Singla 2023), stressing how even small but consistent patterns of support could make a meaningful change for daughters (and for sons growing up to be less sexist).

Ideas of distant fathers, daddies' girls, and the positive influence of fathers find their place in my interviews, too. They appear between narratives of anger and violence, as well as more multilayered narratives of closeness and care. Discussions about violence can be seen as coming as no surprise—already in the

previous chapter, we saw the centrality of threat to the description of fathers' influence on mothers. Mothers were also often contextualized through their relation to what were seen as largely abusive or demanding husbands. In my material, fathers were generally spoken of less than mothers by most of the interviewees, which can be understood as a reflection of the, in many ways, smaller everyday role played by these fathers. What then emerges as new in this chapter is the deeper contextualization of and understanding shown towards certain fathers—particularly those who had been very actively involved in the daughters' lives, thus taking on more 'motherly,' caring roles. Such fathers also received a different kind of feminist nuancing, allowing them to be understood as entangled in webs of limited agency in ways that were similar to the contextualization of mothers.

8.1. Daddies' girls

"I used to be a major dad person, till a certain age. Now I've grown extremely dissatisfied with both my parents," Astha said. The character of daddy's girl (or in Delhi terms "papa's princess") as seen e.g. in Thapan (2009) was not unfamiliar to the participants. Like Astha, some expressed having seen their fathers in a more positive light as children, since their fathers came across as less nagging and controlling than their mothers. Darsha described this as her dad being able to "just waltz in and be the 'cooler' parent." The father got to travel more than the mother and generally "seemed like the more fun person." Aashi explained the dichotomy: "Dads get to be friends. Whereas mothers have to be a *fucking* parent and do all the horrible shit." As mentioned in chapter 4, relations had sometimes been better before puberty, which corresponded to the onset of stricter moral policing. The entrance to social womanhood denoted a trauma: Astha expressed this as going from watching cricket with her father to being told to go help her mother in the kitchen.

After the daughters had gone through puberty, most fathers had left much of the policing of gendered expressions to the mother: "I think my dad felt it wasn't his place to tell me how to be a woman," which meant that "my mom was doing it on his behalf," Astha said. Yet the father stepped in when the mother was perceived to be failing in upholding expectations. As a result of realizing this, Astha went from thinking that her mother was "the only enemy" to seeing her father being "exactly the same—it's just that he never said anything!" As part of her feminist re-evaluation of the father, Astha said she "started remembering" things from her teenage years:

> "I guess I was fourteen or fifteen when we had to go to a picnic with some friends. My mom had bought me a dress. I didn't really like it, but

> just for her satisfaction I decided to wear it. I remember my dad telling my mom—he didn't say that directly to me—that 'she looks like a prostitute in that dress.' My discomfort then—even though I didn't want to wear that dress, but him saying that really made me angry."

Astha decided to wear the dress just so she could challenge her father. Others noted similar ways in which fathers would use class and caste-coded euphemisms such as looking "unsmart" or hinting at having a questionable "character." If a daughter wore "short clothes" in public, there could be a train of thought leading to "probably, prostitutes." Some fathers "would obviously never say the word," but it would be felt to be implied. Such comments echo the scholarship of V. Geetha, who notes that "[i]t is not that fathers are any less particular" (2018, 94) about upholding gender, caste, and class, but have less of a role in doing it day to day.

The interviewees saw that the distance from everyday policing allowed fathers to maintain a certain plausible deniability, making it harder to know what they really thought of things. Jyoti said her father "claims" he did not have issues with caste and simply humored her casteist mother—responsibility for the reproduction of structures could thus be deflected, helping fathers appear more liberal or relaxed. Jyoti noted that it was impossible to tell how much of the father's professed attitudes would really translate into support for non-normative choices, since everyone in the family had always behaved according to caste-normative expectations.

None of the participants held a particularly romanticized view of their fathers. Rather, some strongly expressed that women who did so were deluding themselves. Maya scoffed: "Some friends are in *awe* of their father. And when I meet them and see them talk, I'm like 'Why the fuck are you in awe of them?'" In her view, women who idolized their fathers had been brainwashed into thinking of themselves as "princesses": "And I'm like [clapping sarcastically] 'Woah! Good job!'" Maya felt that fathers—perhaps particularly wealthy and powerful fathers—kept their daughters locked in traps of privilege (cf. Chakrabarti 2024; Bourdieu 1999). Telling a story of a holiday at a house owned by the rich father of an acquaintance, she explained: "I mean, he's an industrialist, they have farmhouses[35], it's a good holiday, fuck it, let's go." However, the way the friend's father talked to the daughter made her very uncomfortable:

> "It was such a *fucking* patronizing, *bullshit* talk. It was like 'You're my little daughter. I'm taking care of you. But I will always be there for you'—and when I say 'always'—I'm talking about the vibe I got—like, 'I'm taking care of you. Never you fucking dare go away from my shadow.' She hasn't! She's my fucking age—no, older than me! She's still there, in that fucking umbrella!"

[35] Farmhouse is Indian English for a villa or estate outside the city proper.

Maya saw the acquaintance, in her late 20s, as infantilizing herself in front of her "daddy" who took care of her—"because it's cushioned it's like a golden cage, and you're gonna be there." The quote echoes Bourdieu (1999) and Thapan (2009), yet the daughter was not perceived to be without agency and it was felt she should know better. "It's *offensive*," Maya said, not clear if she meant the friend or the father: "*Fuck you*, man. You fucking see a problem?" Maya, herself, had parted from her father, who she said was violent toward both herself and her mother:

> "My father was a major asshole to my mother. His *family* was like… a major asshole to her. Not just verbal, but like physical abuse. It was, uhm… it was really bad."

"Never have there been positive conversations around fatherhood, in my personal life," Maya said. Her estranged father did not seem to appreciate his daughter's growing feminist identity, pitying the daughter for choosing such a difficult and sad life. She described when the two had met more recently:

> "We're sitting there chatting and somehow it comes up and I tell him that I'm a feminist and the look on his face was of actual *pity*—like 'God be with you!'—I can't forget that face. He also said something like 'Please don't say that'—and not like in an angry way, but in like a really considerate like 'I care for you but *please* don't say that you're a feminist' kind of [way]."

In other stories, fathers appeared as looming, violent characters for whom fatherhood was just one aspect of authority. Aditi said her "father was the final source of discipline":

> "In the sense that my father was always an *angry* person… and he was always a disciplinarian. And… that was his self-proclaimed, like, self-appointed role. So even though he loved his kids and loved having kids, being a father, those things were very much secondary to his image—it had to be big and scary and mustached. He had to be that guy."

Aditi saw a deep sense of entitlement in her father, fueled by the fact that he (unlike her mother) was allowed to be other things than just a parent—for example, angry:

> "If my mom would have shouted and screamed the way my dad shouted and screamed… she would have *nothing* left. He would have walked out on her. People would have called her some 'banshee' or some horrible name, and her reputation would have been ruined for life. He shouts and screams and he just has an 'anger problem,' at most. And people are a bit socially awkward around him, but that's it. Because he's *allowed* to be angry."

Anger was a recurring theme. Lily said: "My dad is also a—volatile is a nice way to put it, violent is an honest way to put it." As in the previous chapter, the participants saw several kinds of violence as normalized and 'culturally' typical. Lily described her father's behavior as "in the style of Indian men, very oppressive." While this could be understood as contextualizing the behavior, such an enmeshment in a culture of violence did not mean that the participants gave their father the kind of benefit of the doubt we saw their mothers receiving in the previous chapter. Rather, in cases of "typical" angry or violent fathers, there was no quick pivot towards understanding.

8.2. Distant and distanced fathers

Fathers, again in the tradition of certain earlier Indian descriptions (e.g. Kakar 2001[36]), also appeared as distant. Sometimes this meant physical distance—a couple of the participants had lived large parts of their lives apart from their fathers—but could also mean the father being relatively uninvolved in the everyday life of the family unit. Aashi felt it was a "function of gender roles" that she spoke more about her mother than about her father in the interviews. Thinking with Shannon Philip's writing about 'modern' Indian masculinities, "connecting the mundane and everyday actions of men with more spectacular forms of violence" helps us understand the "gendered field of relationships and living" (Philip 2024, 89). The passive or vaguely threatening distance of some fathers can be understood as a mundane performance of masculinity. Interestingly, several of the women seemed to be okay with their fathers being absent—it was not spoken of as something traumatic but more in the sense of 'good riddance.'

Sometimes fathers created their own obsolescence. Aditi felt that her "father's always been a bit distant": "And the trouble with being a distant authority figure is that you end up being a distant and slightly irrelevant figure." While being a mother meant that everyone expected things from you, it also meant that people came to you. Her father had the luxury of being unavailable, but it also meant that no-one included him—a sentiment also noted in earlier feminist literature (Rao

[36] Kakar, writing about Indian maternal omnipresence, describes a client's father as "a dim figure, hovering at the outskirts of an animated family life" (2001, 187). Later, Kakar notes that (in Hindu myth and in real life) "the father may be unassuming and remote, yet powerful" (ibid., 190-1). According to this reading, classic fathers tend to "withdraw" from their daughters' lives in different ways after the latter reach puberty, after which the daughter is "completely given over to the women's world" (ibid., 272). As we see in this chapter, fathers also differed from this stereotyped picture in multiple ways.

2006[37]). Aditi explained how being angry all the time eventually made that anger seem irrelevant:

> "You get reduced to a symbol. And both with my sister and I—we've always seen him as a disciplinarian, but also as the person whose rage is a *constant* feature. It is not based on the circumstances. Because we've seen him very angry about things that have nothing to do with us. But also in situations where he was made to look quite small. So we see his rage almost like a disease, rather than as a manifestation of justice, so to speak. And… as a result of which we've not respected that patriarchal authority very much."

Through being angry, her father managed to make himself feel important, yet appeared somewhat ridiculous. Unfortunately, this made him even more frustrated, thus continuing the cycle:

> "At the same time we've not gotten close to our father, which he really resents now. He's like 'You never call me, nobody calls me, nobody talks to me.' And we're like 'You're not a very nice person to talk to. You're always giving instructions, or not really listening. Or like we feel like we're reporting to you and marking attendance.'"

Aditi said her father could not grasp the amount of work her mother did in order to be the person people called on, nor "the price of" people assuming you were available all the time. Others also felt that their fathers tended to sulk and "bitch" about their (perceived) lack of authority. Having daughters, especially feminist ones, could be seen by fathers as a personal attack on them. The perceived, post-pubertal gender difference also meant that trying to discuss everyday "womanly" things like periods would be met with annoyance and embarrassment, felt to be both "hilarious and terrifying." At the same time, fathers would be seen to uphold double standards about bodies in the home: they could wear anything, while daughters were told to wear e.g. bras and long trousers, even at home.

The women seemed to have become less afraid of their fathers with time, contributing to the fathers' sense of a loss of authority. Fathers were not necessarily seen to have grown softer or any more progressive over time. Some had become more patriarchal, right-wing, or conservatively religious with age. A loss of social standing as well as the hardening of the general social and political climate around them were seen as factors contributing to the fathers' growing conservatism. Jyoti felt her "parents have gotten worse with age"—"which is not what most people tend to feel, because they feel that things kind of balance out a bit as you get older." Khushi said that "when men retire here—this is what I've

[37] The author explains how, after her mother died, the family stopped keeping in touch with the father, as it was the mother that had acted as a binding force.

heard—they become crazy." Perhaps, she said, her father was "feeling he's inadequate, not contributing enough to the family" or perhaps it was some other "insecurities happening, which play out really violently sometimes." In the story, her father appeared almost childlike, demanding attention:

> "Like one time he ran away from the household and we had to go looking for him, brought him home. He's acting up a lot. So we have to tiptoe around that a little bit. I don't know how far these things can go."

Fathers were not the only ones creating distance between the daughters and themselves. In multiple cases, the daughters expressed having worked hard to get away (mentally or physically) from their fathers. The desire to distance themselves from their fathers could be expressed in deeply symbolic forms: unlike her description of a "visceral" sense of being her mother's daughter, Lily said she used to daydream about her mom having had an affair with a family friend that would have led to the mother becoming pregnant—allowing Lily to, quite literally, not be her "father's daughter." She "wanted very much not to be" that.

Shriya described the process of getting away from her father as years of terrible fights, panic attacks, attempts at distancing herself, and overwhelming feelings of guilt and shame. She said her father would tell her she "really is shit," deep down, and that she on some level believed it. To counter her attempts at asserting herself, her father would stage public displays of martyrdom at family gatherings, where he would elicit sympathy from friends and relatives for having such an ungrateful daughter. Shriya said she tried countless times to break with him but was convinced —mainly by female members of the family—to forgive him. Later, things had changed. With some pride, Shriya said "like, I no longer speak to my father. You know?"

The discussion here came back to feminism: "I think feminism, for me, was the thing," Shriya said. She felt it was feminism that helped her to stop listening to her father (and sycophantic relatives) and instead "demand accountability from the people who are actually hurting you," even if they were family members:

> "That was the point when I was like 'You've always been a *terrible* human being in all of these different spaces' and 'this is what a person who is emotionally abusive *looks like*.' And, uhm, 'I no longer want to have you in my life.'"

Noting the importance of distance, Shriya also felt that the change with the father "would not have happened if I wasn't in Delhi." Even so, Shriya sounded quite melancholic, laughing slightly. She said she spoke a lot about her father since she closely resembled him: "I can see that every single one of my passions and hobbies as an adult are almost a direct reflection of the kind of stuff my dad was into." More profoundly, and despite her father's practical sexism, she felt there were

deep similarities in their more abstract values and politics. Describing herself as "very liberal," she said she hoped it would be the same "regardless of my parents." At another point in the interviews, she said she "can't imagine growing up into a person my father would not have approved of."

8.3. Projects and peacocks

Above, in Shriya's distancing herself from her father (and not the other way around), we see how not all difficult fathers were absent from their daughters' lives—some were highly present. Presence should not be understood as being read by the daughters as any clear-cut feminist influence, even if fathers' investment in their daughters was seen to have (inadvertently) pushed the daughters toward greater educational achievements, careers, and potential independence. Closeness was more directly read as an attempt at molding the daughter, something that could be seen as another form of patriarchal interference, albeit with varying levels of harmfulness—and sometimes great potential benefit.

Some participants described their fathers as being involved in their lives in ways that turned the daughters into projects, to which the latter contributed more or less willingly—often consent was both present and not (cf. Clark 2016). Participants like Uma (chapter 4) were pressured into doing a PhD, and said that "always fe[eling] like I was some kind of *project*" was common—"most people do, I guess." In the case of her NGO-working, politically progressive father, the parental pressure "was not about finding the right husband, it was all about *molding* my career choices, my educational choices, et cetera" to fit those of the parent. Uma did not outright disapprove of the way she had "mirrored exactly" her father, but now felt it was time to go her own way, despite the tension this was creating:

> "I mean my dad was in the NGO sector and I became interested in similar issues. I did similar topics, I studied the same sort of areas of interest as he had, and the *moment* I sort of, diverged, it's become a little bit of a [contestation]. And I don't wanna be a clone of him… I mean, not anymore—I used to! But not anymore."

This echoes Clark (2016), who argues that Indian middle-class fathers and daughters can often be seen as involved in a shared status-raising. Clark notes that fathers can use their power within the family system to offer things (such as education or 'freedom' to work) to the daughter in a way that mothers rarely can. In return, successful daughters can bring their families material and social benefits, such as salaries and 'prestige'. In my research, the participants again made sense of this through the feminist vocabularies available to them.

For example, not all of the fathers' projects were particularly normative but could nevertheless be understood as connecting to a larger attempt to build status. I see this as echoing the idea that among a segment of men, a desire "to become 'modern' Indian masculine subjects" is expressed "by creating a superior sense of self by supposedly dissenting from the inequalities of gender, class, and caste, yet at the same time, [...] reproduc[ing] these inequalities in novel and more insidious ways" (Philip 2024, 88). Lily said her father wanted a "cool" daughter. Her father was not a traditional man either. Rather, he was described as "vain," "peacock"-like, a person who got his nails manicured and had a "leave-in conditioner that costs more than all of our [family members] hair products put together." Yet, "he was also very dismissive of feminine performing men" and those he saw as "gay."

In Lily's reading, her father wanted to stand out from his conservative surroundings by trying to make his daughters as alternative as possible, forbidding behavior and ways of speaking that he deemed to be too "Indian," here understood as somehow backward or regressive. "He's a bigot, effectively," Lily said. I asked if she felt this gave her father some kind of status. "I don't know if I would contextualize it as status," she said, "but I do think there was something very identity-performing about it." Her parents "were always very invested in seeing themselves as an *other*." Her mother, according to Lily, was the primary breadwinner of the family, while her father accused the three women of the family (mother and two daughters) of "costing" him his "dream." In Lily's reading, this made him feel he was allowed to "be a dick and spend your money."

As a part of a liberal leaning, her father was demonstratively "more feminist" than her "heteronormative" mother. In retrospect, Lily said: "He's actually a 'woke boy' before his time. So he's politically liberal but just, like, a dick." She felt he wanted people to "boss over" and did not take well to women telling him what his feminism should look like: "He's never been comfortable with having someone he's personally oppressed trying to dictate the terms of what his thing should be." What this meant was that even if her father wanted his daughters to be different from the mainstream, it did not mean allowing them to be whatever they wanted.

I asked Lily what kind of daughter she felt she was supposed to be. She said: "I feel that my dad wanted us to be the kind of women that were successful within a male idea of what a 'successful woman' was." "It was *so* strange," she added. Her father wanted to show his "value" to the world by having independent, funny, and beautiful daughters. One of his doctrines was "don't chew on your nails and don't get fat," both of which Lily did. The daughters were told not to be "boring" and to dress up in showy clothing at family functions, while at the same time "obviously" not "go out dressed slutty with other people." The clash was "really strange," Lily repeated and said:

> "I think my dad just wanted to have girl children that he could sort of be proud of, but in a very very kind of—'These are the kind of women that are *cool* women.' And cool women are sexy women, basically, who don't raise fights with people but who also stand up for themselves and are *feisty*. Like, think of any 'strong woman' ever written by, like, a horrible TV-show writer."

The father was also seen to be very particular about coming across as more interesting than some regular father. Lily often saw her father make fun of other men who, according to him, did not have much else going for them except their children. "'If I'm ever that guy, just shoot me,'" she remembered him saying, being "weirdly hurt" by it.

Sociologically, the interesting part about Lily's story is perhaps not how different her father was from the surrounding norms, but how similar the patterns of parental control experienced by the interviewees were despite coming in different guises. Things come across as somewhat flipped, yet they remain the same: If Aashi's family tried to get her to rub her skin with ointments to make it lighter, the opposite was the concern for Lily. She said her father, who had been bullied for his "dark" skin, said he wanted her to be "black and beautiful" too: "And I feel it was a massive betrayal for him when I didn't come out the color that he thought I would." She felt her father was bitter for years because his daughter was lighter-skinned (thus "better") than him.

The tendency of parental control can be also noted in Lily's educational path. Like all the women in this study, she was brilliant in school and aced her 12th standard exams. This was also the expectation put on her. "My family has always been like 'You're gonna grow up and you're going to go to [prestigious] college, the college we both loved and could never go to," she said. In this expression of wanting (or forcing) their children to do the things the parents had dreamt of, the parents come across as very similar to Uma's father, who wanted her to continue in his footsteps in the NGO sector. Yet, while other families might have wanted their daughters to study something more immediately profitable, Lily's self-identifying liberal parents wanted their daughter to take up the arts and be a "literary" and "worldly" sort of person.

Much of what her father did had felt hard to articulate. Lily, again, credited feminism with being able to better understand these dynamics.

8.4. Moments of difference

As Caroline Osella and Filippo Osella have remarked, "finding islands of anti-hierarchy within a wider hierarchical system" is a "time-honored tradition" in Indian studies (1998, 189). The tradition can be continued here. In the above

examples, the interviewees were not contextualizing their fathers as compromised actors within larger systems of inequality. Rather, they appear as variations on patriarchal themes. Yet, important moments of (re)evaluation and appreciation also appeared in the father-stories. Appreciation could take two forms: an appreciation of fathers seen as engaging meaningfully in more traditional 'masculine' roles, or an appreciation of moments of alternative maleness—moments where fathers would take on more socially feminized, 'mother'-coded roles.

As Parvati Raghuram (2019) notes, manly care is traditionally assumed to be caring *about*, not so much caring *for* the family. This corresponds to a breadwinner model which the participants also recognized: expectations put on the fathers were felt to primarily consist of providing money and shelter for the family. Not everyone's fathers filled the traditional masculine role either; any demand on men to earn (more) was thus not absolute. This narrow model of care did not mean that such work could not be appreciated. Participants from more modest (or more recently upwardly mobile) backgrounds stressed their fathers' labor. Like with mothers, longer family histories could here also be used to make sense of the struggles, as when Aashi noted that her "dad's dad died when he was like a year old. There were like eleven brothers and sisters. So the older brothers were taking care of the younger ones. It was a very difficult time for dad." As we saw in chapter 4, Aashi felt that she owed everything she had in terms of financial privilege to her parents' work, and a sense of duty followed from this.

Aashi also appreciated the way "even" her father told her: "'study,' 'you have to get a job,' 'you have to get a good degree'"—"or it's not as much 'you have to' as in 'if you want to, we will support you. Because if you don't want to, there are like hundreds of [marriage] options in this city.'" She felt this was different from other fathers in her setting, who did not invest as much in their daughters' education. At the same time, she also felt he "wasn't like one of those bad parents who just really wants their kids to achieve shit," a description that would perhaps fit some of the other fathers in the narratives.

Fathers could also be appreciated for the ways in which they navigated and challenged what were understood as larger systems of violence. Even when fathers were not seen as being able to step outside of patriarchy, appreciation could be expressed for them using their male status to intervene in blatant forms of discrimination. Khushi talked about a badly abused niece of a friend of her father's, who "used to get beaten up regularly" by her in-laws:

> "And her family was just like 'We married our daughter off; that is her house.' That was when my dad stepped up. So he went with [his friend] and said 'Are you guys fucking crazy?' 'They're gonna burn her alive.'

> And they would have. So they got her back. So it's not that my family is *completely* patriarchal, but you see those things."

Her father's status as a respected man in the family network made his opinion have weight. The quote also illustrates the scale and severity of things: being "*completely* patriarchal" would mean turning a blind eye to in-laws burning a daughter-in-law alive[38].

In another and more mundane narrative, Khushi felt the way her father forced her to buy things for herself with his credit card since it seemed to fill some kind of father-performance for him:

> "I don't even want anything, but he does it out of so much love that if I don't buy anything, I'll feel bad. [laughs] So what I'll do is I'll go out and buy a couple of things and pay for them myself, and then buy one thing and pay it on his card. So he feels good about it and I don't feel bad about spending a lot of his money."

For the most part, practical childcare or household work was not seen as a requirement for fathers. Maya summarized this view, saying that "even if your mother is missing, it was never expected that he'll cook. It was expected that maybe he'll remarry and that new mother will cook. But it wasn't expected that he'll become the mother." This is similar to the view of Nandy, who notes that the normative line in India is that "men are obligated to offer care *only* if women are unavailable—in exceptional and dire situations" (2017, 103, emphasis in original). Through looking at policies of childcare leave, Nandy argues that the official Indian state line is that the "care givers' role" is reserved "for those assigned female at birth." Men's care is "an anomaly" (ibid.).

Some narratives reported such an anomaly. Darsha said her mother had been largely absent or unable to do the role of the mother, partly because of mental health issues and partly out of her own volition. As a result, her father had been the "primary caregiver for a long time" and had in many ways risen to the challenge. Darsha saw this as unusual, saying that the roles in her family were "flipped" from the traditional ones: her mother was the more "reserved" one and her father the more "sensitive."

The roles were emphasized when her mother left, leaving her father to cook and take care of the children. While her father did so, Darsha also felt that he came to expect her, as the elder daughter, to provide "that whole emotional stability thing." Darsha had taken it on as her obligation in order to allow her father to not have to go back to the turbulent marriage. The father did shoulder

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[38] In 2015, official statistics showed an average of 21 cases of murders of daughters-in-law per day in India, most of them by burning. Actual figures are, as always, probably higher (cf. Kaur and Byard 2020).

other emotional roles otherwise seen as allotted to women, such as active moral policing and incessant worrying about his daughter's safety. To Darsha, her father appeared as very different from the others around her, something she in many ways appreciated him for. After moving to Delhi, the father's worrying had intensified (see section below), yet she also felt that her father, who could previously have "slut shamed" her, had also begun "to realize things." Joyously, she said: "Very recently he actually said to me 'Yeah it's very important to be a feminist, even the world needs feminism' and I was *so happy*, I don't think I've ever been happier with my dad."

Daughters stepping in to provide emotional labor in contexts where mothers were not able to do so came up in another conversation, too. Uma also had experience with a mentally unwell mother and felt that her father had increasingly tried to assign her the role of the caretaker. While Uma felt that she "want[ed] to be *close* with them," she was hesitant about the exchange:

> "Because in his head it's something like 'I have done it for these many years, so now it's your turn.' So even though I become defensive when that topic comes up, I do tell him like [slight laugh] 'I'm not married to her.' So like, 'I do have a responsibility but it's slightly different.' That has been mentioned so many times that I feel like if I *do* other things—like, I don't want to take full responsibility here, I don't think I'm equipped to—but if I do other things that sort of tug at that thread, it's gonna become more disruptive and that's... I just don't know..."

In Uma's reading, the conjugal and (at least initially more or less) voluntary decision of marrying someone created a greater responsibility for care than the (involuntary) relation of being born as someone's child—at the same time, she also wanted to step up in a "slightly different" way. Finding out what that meant seems here to be a continuing negotiation, something she was not sure if she was fully equipped for.

Even with the need to include their daughters in the emotional and practical regulation of the family system, cases like Darsha's and Uma's can be read as examples of more "caring masculinities," understandable as "a critical form of men's engagement in gender equality" (Elliot 2016, 254). As Karla Elliot argues, "doing care work requires men to resist hegemonic masculinity and to adopt values and characteristics of care that are antithetical to hegemonic masculinity" (ibid.), something that was seen as uncommon or unheard of by some of the participants.

Examples of caring can be understood as particularly meaningful in a context of heavily policed masculinities, yet the strictness of the rules might also make one overemphasize relatively small moments of change. The participants noted that a problem with speaking about good or better fathers was that the expectations

were so low that perceptions could become skewed. At the same time, they also noted that wanting fathers to meet some 'higher' feminist standard was actually not socially seen as desirable. Most people in their family networks, participants argued, were of the opinion that men were not supposed to be alternative or take on roles that were seen as belonging to mothers; if they did, they were not celebrated for doing so.

This connects to a Kakarian reading of a 'traditional,' caste-Hindu, middle-class family, where the father's involvement in childcare would actually be frowned upon (Kakar 1978; Kakar and Kakar 2014). Thinking about her larger family setting, Lily said there were two or three men around her whom she would see as (at least in some ways) "good" fathers. "But," she said, "they were never spoken of as good fathers." Rather, they were looked down upon, spoken of "*contemptuously*" as unmanly men. Socially, it was a "*failure*" to be defined as a "good dad." Aashi also noted that while her dad used to wash the dishes, "we were strictly told to never tell anyone outside the house because otherwise people will make *fun* of him." Importantly, good fathers could also come to be socially understood as implying bad mothers. Nandy's research, for example, shows how female participants reported being scolded for letting their husbands do housework or care work: it made the wives seem "irresponsible and lazy" (2017, 298).

In certain cases, the characterization of men as underperforming was seen as shared among women in the family sphere. A participant whose aunt scolded her for not staying closer to her father (telling her she would "regret it" when he died) also felt that "as a family, we've raised our men to be really really *fucking* useless." As a plot twist, the aunt felt that this meant that the women of the family would have to, once again, step up. Her understanding was that, since the men had been allowed to grow up so "useless," fathers were so bad at taking care of themselves that they might become "destitute" or even die if their wives and daughters stopped caring for them.

This aunt's example also illustrates the (real or not) threat and guilt involved in standing up to a parent. For the people who had ended up distancing themselves from hostile fathers, it required being, on some level, able to say "I *legitimately* do not care if he dies", as one participant put it. An enormous amount of work—psychological, social, and economic—was necessary to take such a stand. Feminism would here function as a part of learning to ask for or demand more and making it safer to think previously unthinkable thoughts. This is not to say that the women who were in contact with their fathers expressed desiring any such a patricidal-coded break; they did not, nor did they want to imagine a scenario where it would be a necessary. Even when some participants expressed

having asked themselves time and again "'why don't you just leave?'" this did not amount to them actually wanting to do so.

Albeit to a lesser degree than with their mothers, some of the participants contextualized their fathers in important ways and often saw them as "comparatively better" than many people in the same circumstances that they grew up in. Illustrating the duality of experiences, Aashi said:

> "I'm not saying they divided the household responsibilities equally, *no*, that's never the case, but he was involved. Like there were some clear duties that were his. And it was never a thing of 'Dad's doing work, great.' No. Laundry was his job. And when my mom fell sick, he started taking more responsibilities etc. So, this whole thing of dads getting points for doing things, that didn't happen in my house as such."

The most nuanced analysis of the father as someone functioning within limiting circumstances came from Neha. In her parents "*really* small town" many family members were "really homophobic," yet she felt her parents were no longer that. This amounted to a lot of progress "especially for my dad, with the pressures of masculinity that especially a family imposes on you." Neha explained this pressure through a story around her staying with her uncle in her birth city for a week:

> "And I used to come back late—so one day he called my dad and was like 'What kind of father are you if you can't even control your kids?!' And when I went back I recognized that that had really affected my dad. So he started becoming—for a brief time at least—he started becoming super uber-masculine, in the sense that he was just like 'When you come to [city in Madhya Pradesh] you can't wear shorts! When you come to [city] you have to come back early!' and everything. So I'm also like sympathetic to him because, you know, even though he doesn't want to *be* that kind of authoritative figure, it's like he's pressurized into being that because the rest of the people in his family—whom he really loves—give *him* flak for not being able to keep his house in order."

Neha here reads her father as having limited control in a system of relational deference. This was emphasized further when she said her grand*mother*, who sometimes stayed with the family, would tell her father not to come home too late. Neha felt this must be annoying to her father, but that "as a kid" (as a perpetual kid) he had learned that he was supposed to "take it." The story of the father as accountable to larger family networks is very similar to some of the stories about mothers that we saw in the previous chapter. The story can also be understood as a rare example where understanding the father *as a man* (compare the "as a woman" discussion) means understanding him as a compromised actor within a patriarchal field. In most other cases, understanding the father "as a man" would

not mean expressing more of a tolerance/ambiguity in relation to his actions. Rather, understanding the father "as a man" would mean understanding him as benefiting from larger mobility and agency, making his actions (if anything) morally worse.

Participants usually struggled with sharing personal feminist grievances more in relation to their fathers than to their mothers. Echoing chapter 4, where we saw that more abstract political concerns were felt to be easier to bring up with the parents than those relating more obviously to the politics of the family, Neha said she had a "constant banter" with her father about being "really proud that [he's] not a right-wing person." At the same she said there was "only one time that I've told him that 'I'm really glad you're not as patriarchal as some fathers can be, and you've always given us the freedom to explore for ourselves.'"

Such appreciation was expressed as something she wished her parents would appreciate (see next chapter). Darsha also said she wanted to give appreciation precisely in situations where she was not forced to do it, saying "if he [father] *wanted* gratitude, I was not gonna give it to him. But if he was not asking for it, then I would feel really grateful." Neha, who was on a path to become a gender scholar, felt that even many family members who had emigrated to the US (imagined here to be a more 'liberal' social context) did not have the kind of freedom in, for example, career choices that she had. For her, this was wonderful, although she was unsure if her father understood it like that. While Neha kept contextualizing her father through a great deal of analysis which (re)appreciated him in ways that few fathers were afforded, she said she didn't think her "dad *really* understands what that means." "Like, I think he somehow takes it as an insult," she added. Akin to the example of the father doing the dishes, having brought up a sociologizing feminist daughter was perhaps not something uniformly celebrated.

8.5. Sorry fathers

The final section of this chapter will look at the ways in which the women came to position their fathers as not needing to know. The possibility of seeing fathers as trapped in webs of power also raises the question of whether it was possible for the women to see their fathers as somehow 'less' powerful. While fathers were not seen as victims/survivors in the sense that many mothers were in the previous chapter, sometimes a need to care for and protect them could still be apparent.

Participants who were close to their fathers in an everyday sense felt a need to filter what Delhi experiences were shared with them. Darsha said she had felt a huge sense of guilt and a sense of owing things in relation to her father from an early age, because she felt that "not a lot of my friends have fathers like this." This

included a feeling of needing to protect and in some sense mother him. This also arose from seeing him as flawed and needy in a recognizable way. Darsha spoke of her parents' separation as a disturbing but enlightening event that rid her of the societal notion of parents as infallible:

> "What we do is we put them on a pedestal and we feel—I felt—they were not supposed to do anything wrong. And then when this whole thing about them separating came up, it was just a tough time for me to reconcile with the fact that my parents had made a *huge* mistake, which was marrying each other."

This humanizing tendency could again open up possibilities for not having to be perfect oneself. As she moved to Delhi, "certain things became prominent, like my father's worry about my safety"—"that became *much* more prominent." Darsha now protected him against knowing much of what happened in the city, because she knew he was "feeling scared." Darsha said that "honesty is good when it's not unadulterated. It's not good when it's just—when you tell them everything. It just freaks them out."

Not sharing things also protected Darsha from her father's disappointing reactions. Earlier experiences had shown her that her father still held views that could surprise her in depressing ways. During college, she used to live in two different PGs: The first one had a curfew at 7.30pm and when she would come back at 11.30pm, "the PG owner called my father and said [...] 'we can't let her in, because it's a security threat.'" Darsha's father called her "to scream," only to apologize the next day. Yet when the daughter had later moved to another, more lenient PG with a 10.30pm curfew (which meant that Darsha "would obviously come back at twelve o clock") the same matter came up again. One night, Darsha said, she was feeling happily drunk and coming home at midnight "not feeling scared because I knew I had a room to get back to." Such a sense of safety and urban ownership was, however, not what her father seemed to have wanted. Darsha said the father had felt "'it was better'" before, when she had to be locked up inside by 7.30pm:

> "And that *broke* me. Because… he was a person that I loved and trusted, saying that '*knowing* that you are *safe* matters more to me than you being happy or making your own decisions.' And I felt… terribly like an infant who had to be cared for by their parents and has *no* agency whatsoever of anything."

In moments of conflict, Darsha still heard her father saying he "sent her" to Delhi, using a phrase that made it sound like she was his property. The father here appeared quite similar to the mother in Vishakha's story about an obsession with not being raped (see previous chapter), both expressing what to one person

seemed like care but was experienced as control and a lack of appreciation by the other.

Striking a balance between "not disclosing too much and disclosing after things have been done" was an art form that took a while to learn, and protected both the parents and the daughters from disappointments as well as attempts at being blackmailed by hypochondriac fathers with self-diagnosed "high blood pressure." The problem with not disclosing the many hardships one went through (and survived!) was that it could lead to a father not knowing how competent his daughter actually was: "Which is why he still thinks I'm a very naive… child. I'm still stuck at, I don't know what, thirteen." In reality, the women faced issues well beyond what was (considered) safe or appropriate for young middle-class, 'upper'-caste women. Being able to show the father some of this, in appropriate doses, was seen as strengthening one's own agency and position. At the time of the interviews, Darsha was in her early 20s and teaching a class of 50 teenage boys:

> "It's an all boys school, it doesn't *get*… anywhere after that. It's an all-male staff, it's an all boys classroom. So if ever they [parents] had a problem with men, boys—I walked into the lion's den. There's nothing they can say after that."

Different kinds of transgressions were, of course, differently understood by the parents—while working in the school might be more draining and violent than e.g. being outside at night (in most of Darsha's stories, the old male teachers were worse than the pupils), this might not be understood by the parent. Since Darsha's father (and his father!) were also schoolteachers, the profession was understandable to him. It was also very caste-appropriate, whether this was said out loud or not. Darsha recognized how her work had made it possible "to have a lot of conversations with him," and made him complain a little bit less about his daughter "never" talking to him. While knowing everything about the kind of harassment she'd faced in Delhi "would… break his heart," she had here found a kind of balance where she kept pushing against her father in order to teach him to trust her judgment when it came to the safety of a given situation.

Darsha also felt "lucky to have parents who can laugh at me." Humor showed the care informing her decisions: "Because it *lightens* the mood. Especially if my father's getting a little too… *sad* about things, and I'm able to *somehow* make it a little lighter for him… the conversation goes the way I'd want it to." While noting that her father kept trying to emotionally manipulate her, Darsha also saw their closeness as something that allowed her to manipulate him back in (not so) gentle ways—more than she felt able to fool her emotionally more distant mother. Laughing, Darsha explained how she played her parents against each other: "I am *not the ideal child* they portray in the books and fairytales and everything. I'm definitely not that. I do what serves me." As Sirisena (2024) has noted, family

negotiations are fragmented, as mothers and fathers inhabit different positions within them. Rather than confronting the family as a unified entity, the participants engaged with different members tactically, to diffuse authority. Darsha explained her cunningness in getting her father to support "smart things" by making it seem like her mother had already supported something:

> "Whenever my mother's saying really smart things, like 'My daughter should be allowed to do whatever she wants to do and no-one should question her,' I *reaally* slowly slide towards my mother. And tell my father 'You know, even Ma understands this—I don't know why *you* don't." So then my father will immediately be like '*What*? She was closer to me! I have to understand this!' And then he understands it."

Here, Darsha poked fun at herself, inhabiting the role of a mischievous child. In more serious examples, Darsha and her father seemed to jointly shoulder the responsibilities of keeping the family running. This was not something she was particularly happy about—"it was always *me* taking care of my father *and* my brother, at the same time"—yet Darsha felt that the family would have fallen apart without her mothering both herself and others. This caretaker/co-parent role is seen in a conversation she had with her father about how to raise her teenage brother:

> "I had this conversation with my father, he said that, you know—he said 'Oh you know, men have been raised to be irresponsible so then women have to bla bla whatever,' you know how that goes. Then I said 'No, my brother's a sensitive boy, right? So if we can raise him in a way where he's a sensitive person, who understands consent'—of course there's still a lot for him to learn, because he ingests a lot of pop culture—'then I mean, it's just how you're raising your sons. Then there is no excuse.' So then he agreed, he said, 'No that makes sense.'"

With "you're raising" and "we can raise him" blending together, the feminist child-rearing (and parent-rearing) seems to have become the task of the daughter-turned-parent, with the father-turned-co-parent being a not too antagonistic a learner.

The tone in Darsha's narratives about her father was often frustrated but tender. Not all narratives had that tone. In some stories, fathers were described as somewhat pitiful, especially when compared to mothers. Explaining the conflict between her parents, Shalini said:

> "My dad is dirty and has no sense of arts or anything, but my mom is an artist and has great sensibilities and everything. And she's an OCD germaphobe person and she really hates when my father is messy and dirty."

Shalini was also one of the women who said she used to be closer to her father than her mother but felt this had changed. As a teenager, her father would take her to protest "marches and do all those [left-wing] slogans." This, she says, was exciting and gave her a crucial "*little* space" to argue with her parents. Now, she said: "I still love him, but he's very annoying." She had realized this "because he started coming [to Delhi] and staying with me on his own and I understood… why my mom was always so pissed off." Shalini said that "he's just a very *man* sort of a person, you know? He would cook and everything, that's not the thing, but he's… it's like he can't do anything properly."

Shalini's father appears here no longer as her father but as "a very man sort of a person." The results are not flattering—as earlier, men come across as useless, people who "can't do anything properly." Here, seeing the parent as a person means the opposite of what it did in relation to the mother, with the difference getting attached to the body: "My dad is dirty." Shalini said she used to be a messy teenager but is now becoming "sort of" her mother in terms of how she likes her household to be: "there's a saying that women end up becoming their mothers when they're older."

As in the previous chapter about mothers, it is important to note that, more often than not, multiple narratives could be true at the same time, describing fathers not uniformedly or linerarly but in ways that offered a space for complex effects and interpretations. In the next and final chapter before the conclusion, I will look at how participants turned toward the future and imagined how their family relationships would play out over the coming years, at age 30 and beyond.

Chapter Nine: Imagining (family) futures

> Meera: I know that my twenties are going to be *really* rocky. So…
> Lotti: Because of family?
> Meera: Because of family.

Here, we move into future tense. This chapter looks at what further movements both outward—away from—and possibly inward again—closer toward the parents—the participants envisioned. Looking at discussions of change, future familial negotiations, feminist responsibility, and dreams and worries around work, the chapter shows how future decisions and uncertainties shape the current self.

I have argued that the interviewees' young single adulthood in Delhi can be understood as a kind of migrant queer temporality (cf. Baas 2018; Luo, Li and Qi 2023), enabling life situations that are more conducive to different forms of living and dreaming. I understand the women's 20s as being marked both by the potential for building material, social, and emotional settings that could enable them to keep creating a desirable, personal, and perhaps feminist life in later decades—and by the anxiety of time running out. Popularly, a certain rebelliousness has also been understood as a somewhat expected part of contemporary 'upper'-caste women's youth, something that is tolerated as long as it will pass (e.g. Kisana 2025; cf. Nakassis 2014[39]). As the women were getting closer to age 30, expectations around conformity and heteronormativity were in many ways felt to be increasing. While growing older could mean gathering resources and the confidence to do more of what one wanted, it also meant that the time when one was expected to "settle down" was soon to arrive: "I think the expectation is that as you grow older, you'll start behaving more 'traditionally.'"

I have touched upon this liminal kind of life in an earlier study set in Delhi (Harju 2017). A then 28-year-old PhD student said:

> "I can live like this and my extended family will understand it because for them *I am not yet married*. But the point is that for me as a 28-year-old my family would expect me to be living in a very different kind

[39] Speaking in the context of Tamil mascunilinity, Nakassis makes the point that rebellious-seeming performances of youth do not need to aim for a "liberation of a generation" but function as "biding one's time in a liminal life stage until one is authorised to join the next age set" (2013, 249)—a kind of subordination.

> of world right now, but they'll excuse this because I've been a student, and I'm whatever. For my family again, this is not adult life" (interviewee in Harju 2017, 22).

Among the participants of the current study, too, activities such as PhD research or working toward a certain job could prolong the period of not-yet-'adult' life somewhat beyond 30, but the source of conflict was not securely removed and could return. Because of its centrality in family systems, marriage can be understood as a case study around which many of the questions of whether one will diverge from or stay within the family fold are centered (cf. Titzmann 2017).

At the same time, not all of the participants faced the same pressures to marry: Lily's mother did not care. Uma did not expect marriage to be a big deal compared to work and studies. Maya said she had "the privilege to remain unmarried because of an abusive past," meaning the violence and abandonment her mother had experienced in her own marriage. At the same time, Maya seemed to note a kind of sneaky way that things crept up on you: "If I wasn't a feminist, probably by now I would be married." Yet, all participants understood the symbolic value that marriage held in their context: in a sense, as long as one remained unmarried, a *potential* for a radically alternative, non-family-oriented future remained. Conversely marriage, particularly a family-sanctioned (not too socially upsetting) one, would be understood as finally giving in.

For many, questions around marriage were becoming more pressing. Noor said "the conflicts seem more *real* now":

> "I think also with *time* passing—when I was 22 and my mother would talk to me about marriage, it didn't… there wasn't that kind of urgency, or it didn't feel real enough. But now at 26, when she's talking to me about marriage […] it's affecting me much more. I spent a lot of time crying about it, and thinking that '*where* have I reached in my life?'"

Noor was 26 and felt she was still fighting the same issues, in an even more difficult situation than before. The participants were frustrated by and at the same time took comfort in knowing that even narratives of much older feminist women contained endless parental issues: as well-known gender scholar Shilpa Phadke (speaking of herself) notes, "we never stop negotiating with our families" (Phadke 2015, 69).

9.1. No going back?

The personal changes that had occurred since moving away from the parents were felt to have affected the participants in ways that made retaining a seemingly conflict-free existence with the family hard. Neha said that "after four years of

living away from home, I've realized that when I go back it's terrible." Back when she was living in central India, she never knew how much that life could bother her: "I guess I didn't know there could be a life that was different." In Delhi, she had "gotten used to a certain kind of life," "to living on my own." There were no curfews, no need to explain where she was going or with whom. While she felt that her parents' "affection for me as a person" had grown in her absence, she did not necessarily feel the same—and even if did, she would still prefer living alone.

Some interviewees noted that their parents felt that the daughters had become "entitled," too used to an "open lifestyle," too "modern," and too "political" while living on their own. Sometimes parents demonstratively blamed themselves for having been too lenient, saying "if we would have rightly parented you, you wouldn't be the kind of people you are now." Neha said her parents now seemed alien to her, as alien as she seemed to them. The alienation also extended to the children of her parents' friends: "I feel like their kids will never be my friends"—"I would never be friends with the kind of people my parents are friends with." Her values were just "so different from how they envision the world."

Differences could turn into conflicts when parents and daughters were in the same place, which made going home difficult. Neha said her father told her to adhere to their rules when she went 'home.' What might be okay in Delhi was not okay there—"'here you have to be proper.'" Part of these demands was seen as related to the culture of "small towns," as when Darsha said she had now become "much more aware of the constant, piercing gaze that's always there" in her old city. Back there, heads turned to follow you, "just looking at you till you're out of sight." Yet, more than that, it was understood to be about family morality. Uma said her parents felt she was behaving in a way that was too "Europeanized" after coming back from master's studies abroad. While they had spent some time with her in Europe after her graduation, and there "*kind* of, here and there, got a larger picture of the lifestyle I had developed over the last two years," things were expected to change back after she moved to India: "There was a constant think about 'Oh okay, so you know we are okay with you doing this here [in Europe], but you will not be able to do this back home.' And it wasn't 'back home' as in their house, but in general."

Going back to live with the parents was no longer felt to be feasible. Noor said she realized what a "*boon* […] it is to stay away from my family" after she "considered moving back"—"I realized *what* I would have given up if I'd gone." Sometimes, this was told with a kind of poetic melancholy that encapsulated the distance in the inability to share a household any longer. Tara said:

> "The person I've become, the life I've lived, I can't continue that in Kolkata. Especially because my parents will not be okay with me staying *outside* the house or renting my own place. So if I have to live

> with them, I can't be myself anymore. So that would be *very* problematic, for them and me. So there's no going back."

Noting how life there had gone on without her, Tara continued:

> "And now my dad stays in my room, so I can't even go back. Because he drinks every night and my mom can't stand the smell. So she makes him sleep in my bed and she sleeps in the [other] room. So [laughs]. Now when I go back, it's full of my dad's things. So I don't really feel at home also."

That door was shut and should maybe remain shut. Yearnings for a sense of belonging back home can be understood as tentative, in the manner of Elspeth Probyn, who described belonging as "a tenacious and fragile desire [...] performed in the knowledge of the impossibility of ever really and truly belonging" (1996, 8). Yet, Probyn argues, "the desire to belong lives on" (ibid., 9). Participants' descriptions reflected this sense of desire to belong while never really belonging. Tara said she saw a "rootlessness in so many people," not just in women but also in queer men: "The people who've managed to move out of their homes, and become the person they want to be. And then they can't go back ever. Because it would mean becoming a lesser person than who they are."

A combined feeling of pain and necessity was also noted by Noor, who expressed she was still working on building her sense of happiness on something else than pleasing her family:

> "For the longest time I felt like wanting their love and affection—and like, getting a stamp of approval from them—would mean happiness and also security in some sense for me. And that would only happen if I tow the line."

She added: "Recently I've started questioning that much more. So I'm realizing that I'm probably moving away from my family. It still pains me."

9.2. To be known or not to be known

Above, Tara stressed how "problematic" it would be for her to live with her parents, since it would mean giving up her sense of identity, not being herself anymore. In other descriptions, parents were seen as just as alien as one was to them, and going back home would mean being something "lesser," not the self one had worked so hard to become. In such descriptions, the splitting of different and differently *valued* selves (or aspects of the self) becomes obvious. Not only does selfhood appear as multiple, but it is hierarchical. In such narratives, the Delhi self, the feminist self, appears as the preferred and in some sense more authentic

version of oneself. The participants' constructions of self cannot then be collapsed into single identities, yet different aspects of selfhood are not considered equal, democratic, or always peacefully coexisting. Importantly, none of the participants described what they saw as their muted family self in terms that would imply it was who they 'really' were; it was described as a kind of make-believe or an illusion mainly existing in the minds of the family.

The idea of the Delhi self as the *preferred* self was emphasized in questions about what it meant to be known. I asked Astha how much she felt her parents knew her. "As a person?" she replied, "I don't think they know me at all." Similarly, Meera said: "I don't think my family's ever gonna think of me as a real person." By "real" she meant something more (self-determining) than a child of her parents, something akin to what daughters were seen to give their mothers in chapter 7. "It is a very depressing thought, honestly." The responses to not feeling known were very ambivalent: some expressed sadness and others felt that not being known was a way of remaining more ungovernable. As we have seen throughout the interviews, lying and witholding information from the parents appears as a central tool for agency among the daughters. Neha felt that, for parents, knowing your child was a "supremely slick way" of controlling them. Coming across as being on your child's side could, in Neha's reading, hold "tremendous power" and hide the factually existing hierarchies: "at least in this sense, where I have a contentious relationship with my parents, I can *openly* oppose them."

Yet, different participants had different feelings of guilt, which meant different possibilities for emotional blackmail. Khushi felt that emotional blackmail was used to get children to confide in their parents, something she vehemently resisted:

> "There's a lot of Desi guilt attached to lying to your parents and I have none of it. I have no—none. Nope. You can't grow up as a woman in this country and not lie to your parents."

Thus, many of the women did not spend much energy on wishing to be known by their families. Khushi said she loved her parents and that they loved her, and when thinking about the future she said she wanted to stay in touch with them. At the same time, she expected to keep hiding from them everything to do with what she saw as her own life. "Because these people will not change. That was something I gave up on when I was in school," she said. "So I have to hide everything. Which is what I did, and I did it very fucking well." Khushi noted that she knew this wasn't the only way to go about things—some people had parents that had a relatively non-judgmental presence in their daughters' lives, but this was not the case for her:

> "I mean, once in a while it feels a little bit bad. Because… It just comes from a place of 'I wish my parents knew me.' And I see these *super cool kids* [somewhat sarcastically] with like super cool relationships with their parents. Where the parents are an active part of their lives. Sometimes it feels like I wish that was there for me."

In other situations, previously unthinkable things could happen with time, in ways that were felt to be helpful for oneself. Maya said that after she had finally told her mother about her bisexuality, some of her stress had lessened. Even if her mother was "still in denial," Maya felt proud of herself: "something that I thought was impossible happened."

The way her mother's denial appears as less relevant than the act of telling her illustrates how being known should here be understood as a separate issue from parents agreeing with you or coming to hold views similar to your own. The latter was usually not seen as possible. As a somewhat melancholic Maria said about her mother, "she won't get it"; this "it" could have different meanings for different people. Rather than agreeing on things, being known was understood to mean that the parties somehow recognized each other's positions as valid and worthy. Thinking with political metaphors, this can be seen as moving from antagonism to agonism (Mouffe 2005). Neha said:

> "What I kind of wish was different is that, you know, my parents have a vision of me and my brother which is that they think that we're really spoiled kids. Like they *think* that we're the most terrible kids to have ever walked the face of this earth. But what I *really* wish they'd knew about me is just the fact that when I go to uni and stuff, my professors *really* love me. Because, you know, I get good grades. And I'm like… I have sometimes interesting things to say in class. So like… the circle that I've made for myself in Delhi, in that circle I get supremely validated for the kind of person that I am. And I feel like my parents don't know that about me. So like, for them, they only know me as this really spoiled, bad child. But I really wish that they knew that I'm only a bad child if you look at me from a certain perspective. If you change the perspective, I'm really not that bad a person."

Although Neha believed it was not how her parents thought of her, she "sometimes [has] interesting things to say." Outside of the family sphere, she was something more than a bad child; she was bad only from a perspective that assumes loyalty and normativity, a perspective where learning only travels in a top-down direction. Outside of the family home, Neha had a whole new life—a life in which many people saw her worth, were happy to hear her opinions, and supported her ambitions and gendered or sexual expressions. As Neha said, there was another "perspective," one in which she was worthy and also contributed to the well-being of others.

I asked her why she thought she was such a bad person in her parents' eyes. Neha said it was because she did not listen, "and also just *as a girl*" (emphasis mine), meaning that her girl-ness or her way of being a girl was bad. The things Neha did were the habits of a bad Indian girl: the girl who drinks and smokes, cuts her hair short, wears shorts, goes out late at night, drives around on her own, is sexually active, studies the wrong things, and speaks back to her parents. Such imagined vices came to define how she saw her parents seeing her, making the rest invisible. What she thought and felt did not matter, nor did her own budding recognition of that value:

> "But they don't recognize… I just want them to know that the world doesn't work in those kinds of binaries. Because I do all of those things but I'm also… I feel I'm really proud of some things I *think* about and everything."

Aashi also emphasized that her parents were not able to see things as agonistic: "they don't see it as a thing of 'your views are different." They see it as 'you're a bad person!' 'You don't care about us enough!'" Parents, she said, see it as a "value system, where the younger people make compromises for the older ones, listen to them and so [on]." "'Everyone has to make compromises'" was the usual message (cf. Robinson 2014); if you spoke back, "'you're not making enough compromises.'"

9.3. Needing to have a family

"It's not a very good, bright world with good people," Vishakha said:

> "You make friends but not every friend is dependable. Family is dependable, at least in terms of that even if they're *shitty* and you have no place to go, at least there's a house. That's the part which is very difficult to get rid of."

Regimes of familialization and the family safety net of care and economic security was seen to be really hard to break away from. In some sense, Vishakha felt that (caste-)privileged women became trapped in their families, "even Uma Chakravarti says [so], right?[40]" While no systematic empirical literature on Indian children trying to 'separate' from their families seems to exist, literature on Indian marriage conflicts notes that a "lack of economic resources" and social "stigma" (Anant and Raguram 2005, 475; cf. Mahapatro and Singh 2019), among other things, make women stay even in abusive situations. Similarly, scholarship on

[40] Vishakha is here referring to historian Uma Chakravarti's (1993) formulation of brahminical patriarchy being particularly concerned with the control of 'upper'-caste women's imagined purity.

Indian diasporic queer lives (talking about sexuality but perhaps possible to read in a more general sense here) has noted that there are "valid reasons for staying in the closet," as "[t]he emotional, financial, and/or physical violence that lesbian and bisexual women [...] face is very real. What emerges (or sometimes what we only fear may emerge) when we are seen and heard is total rejection, disconnection, and often uncontrolled violence and rage" (Choudhury 2007, 129). Choudhury makes the important point that what actually emerges and what one simply is afraid might emerge can have the same power.

The participants repeatedly acknowledged the different ways in which a need for economic and social support affected their negotiation of family dynamics. As Astha, then a graduate student, expressed it, one was dependent on the very structures of inequality that affected one negatively:

> "I feel like it's common sense to know that the reason why I'm able to practice the kind of politics that I do today, is because I've had *tremendous* privilege in terms of family in the past. I wouldn't have had this kind of education if I didn't have my parents. That's very like… So it's like also every time I have an argument with them, it's like… if they cut me off, I wouldn't be able to continue studying at [university]. So then I wouldn't have *half* of the things—and the kind of articulations that I have—if I didn't have that privilege, if I couldn't depend on them for support. So it's like *all* of us actually *are*—like you can't say that we can completely free ourselves from patriarchy in that sense. Because, the truth is that somehow patriarchy is—like all of this stuff—you are products of it, right?"

Putting things more bluntly, Vishakha said:

> "Money! Very basic. You're dependent on someone—you will *not* dare to offend them. You will offend them, but you know there's a line. If you cross that line, money will stop. And you can't cross that line, no matter what."

In such descriptions, the system of oppression is the same as the system of privilege that allows one to critique it. For Astha, her "queerness" was a "huge" part of what made her family so alien to her; at the same time, she felt that she had avoided a number of struggles because of the support and security she got from her family. Because of the economic capital of her parents, she could study without a scholarship. That she can "afford [to rent] a house, an apartment, that's because of my family." Furthermore, she would gain "admission into places much easier than other people [...] because of the caste that I belong to." While the master's tools—to use the obvious metaphor from Audrey Lorde (1984)—might not dismantle the master's house, might they allow you to build a new house apart from it?

For the women who *felt* that their parents cutting them off or withdrawing economic support was a realistic possibility, this came with awkward realizations. Khushi said she "used to think of the fact that I probably don't need to have a lot of savings, because my parents will leave me things—like, I will be fine":

> "But this changed last year, when I started dating [Muslim boyfriend]. It wasn't just because of him. I realized 'Oh my god I'm such a fucking idiot.' Because let's say I want to bring [him] home one day, my parents are gonna kick me *the fuck* out. I'm imagining the worst things. It might not happen, but it just might. My dad has become a little conservative over the years. It's very weird."

"A little conservative" feels like something of an understatement in this context. Being kicked out might not happen, but the fact that it just might is again enough of a fear. "[C]loseting as a survival strategy" is then "[not] a passive choice" (Choudhury 2007, 128). The threat of potential punishment should also be understood as appearing worse when set against the promise of being rewarded for loyalty. Noor said that, if she marries wrong, "basically all of the support that my family *would* have provided me, that I could have taken for granted, all of that will go." But, if she marries someone that her family approves of, "they will *rejoice*."

The threat of being "cut off" from support was then never only about the finances, but about families threatening to withdraw love and practical care. Maya saw the emotional as the "primary" thing in the relation of dependency:

> "That is why even people who have financial security are not able to break it off, because emotional dependency is *really* like—you have to be really hardened or have a really good support system outside your family to be able to break that barrier."

Loving her parents, Tara said, meant that "I can't *stand* them being sad or inflicting sadness on them. I do, but then I feel *guilty* and then I become sad. So it's like a vicious cycle, that way."

Dependency was further linked to love and a fear of loss. Darsha, speaking about what it was she feared that would ultimately happen if she did something wrong, said it had to do with "a lot of guilt." She emphasized her "fear of losing my loved ones, to death." If she was "not grateful today," she might regret things later. Tara also spoke about love and guilt, saying "I can't detach myself from my family for the sole reason that I love them." Uma, who did not have siblings, felt she "always had [the feeling] like 'No I need to have *some*… family.'" And, as much as Noor appreciated being able to live independently, she found herself "faltering sometimes": "There are moments when I really miss my mother. There are moments *alone* here in the room and I'm also *very* far away from her."

If family and community are indeed routinely understood to be the first definition and guaranteer of who one "is" and can rely on in India (Chakrabarti 2024), the interviewees did not want to opt out of the familialized idea, even when they (partly) rejected what they saw as the oppressive functioning of many, most, or even all real-life families. While the women were building systems of support and solidarity in Delhi, the nature of these was more transient and fragmented, especially after leaving university environments and/or feminist social movements for other kinds of life and work (see section further below). From their perspective, of women in their 20s, the idea of really being able to build new and perhaps queer-er families through romantic relationships or kinships also appeared unlikely or too distant to be realistic. As Maya said, without exceptionally good alternative systems of support or queer-er networks of kinship, you had to either "be really hardened" or go back to the family. Thus, whatever "some… family" that Uma was imagining came from the parents.

The interplay between coercion and desire is central. The participants, like people in general, were "needy, vulnerable beings, suspended between things as they are and as they might become, for better or worse, and as we need or want them to become" (Sayer 2011, 4). During the period of this study, everyone was involved in processes of moving outward toward other houses and homes, perhaps further away from the family. Yet, many also imagined or desired later movements back. They not only wanted to be cared for, but to care for their parents in return. While this could mean a desire for a new sense of belonging with them (compare chapter 4), it did not necessarily need to mean so. Aditi, despite her bisexuality, expected to live mentally close to her family and said she actually wanted to get heterosexually married and have children—a desire she felt was uncommon and seen as weird in the feminist setting she was in. Others could want to be there to care, even without wanting to feel connected to family systems at large.

Sharangpani argues that, in families, "women strategically select material and emotional resources from within their social ecology and walk a tightrope between the 'problems of dependence and pleasures of identification'" (Sharangpani 2018, 543). For the participants, such a process of negotiating involved, among other things, re-evaluating things that could have felt stifling as a child. Shalini said she "used to *hate* her parents" growing up: "I was so *averse* to anything that tied me to the community, that I started hating everything without a reason!" Re-evaluating her parents meant she could enjoy aspects of a shared culture with them. She could now "love Hindustani classical and ghazals and all these things my dad used to listen to. Now my dad and I sing old Hindi songs together [laughs]."

Larger identifications included a commitment to care. In contrast to Chowdhury, who notes that Indian women's care for "tyrannical" relatives can

take the form of a "complicitous and resentful agency" (2016, 171), something more positive was also possible. Darsha said, about her parents:

> "And as much as they annoy the *hell* out of me sometimes—especially my father with his emotional drama that he *keeps on all the time*—I would miss a lot of the other, happy things that I've shared with him."

Darsha said she wanted to be a carer for her father if needed. She expected things to always remain hard, "but," she said, "I might as well make my peace with it and find some way to laugh about it." She expressed a desire to give back something akin to the care she herself had received:

> "Not live with him forever, but something… I wanna see how that feels, in a place where… he is not my caregiver. Where he's *also* not the reason I'm surviving financially, but somewhere where I can give him a little bit of the books and the comfort that he's given me, growing up as a child."

In some sense, being the carer—while being heavy work—would then also be agentic. In Darsha's dream, the parent-child dynamic would be radically different from what it was while she was growing up, since she would be the (financially) more stable one. In such a role, she could give back something of what she had received a child, without being reduced to a child herself.

Aashi, too, wanted to take care of her parents in their old age. The wish to care for the parents did not always mean being able to "stand" them; the desire to care was also separate from a possible desire to be known. One could practice care even without knowing or understanding each other, especially in situations where the parents were imagined as old and infirm. Shalini said she would like to go back to where her parents lived if she could have a house of her own—she would not be able to live with her parents, but perhaps she could live somewhere nearby. She felt that her father would eventually not be able to take care of her aging mother, which "scared" her. For someone of their class, paying to get her mother a full-time carer would be impossible. In the story, Shalini expressed a strong sense of reciprocal duty, based on her parents' sacrifices and them having tried their best. Sometimes, the sense of owing them things would feel "crippling": "Because I really wanna take care of them because I *know* they have taken care of me. Like, *to their* best. Maybe it's not the perfect way, but whatever they could do, they did."

One could want to give back in other ways, too. For some of the women from less affluent families, dreams of a decent salary were also connected to care. By not taking money from the parents, the daughters felt their parents could have more for themselves or for e.g. supporting the educational aspirations of the younger children. Tara said she could no longer take money from her parents

because they "don't have a lot of savings. And they're not very healthy people. And I know if they ever fall sick, they'll need whatever savings they have."

Thinking back to how mothers and fathers were described in earlier chapters, it's important to note that such obligations/desires to care for them were not always felt to include both parents. While all mothers seemed to generally fall into the category of people to be taken care of and some fathers had earned that status, absent or overtly abusive fathers were not necessarily included. Maya said: "I love my mother—obviously, I will care for her. *But*, apart from that I'm like zero obligations in my head."

9.4. A sense of failure?

Lying and withholding information have appeared as central strategies for the interviewees across a number of discussions in this study. Getting out of the family home did—more often than not—not mean coming out, so to speak, but choosing a strategy of active hiding. Aditi said that hiding things from her parents allowed for other parts of her life to run "really conveniently", while not lying would mean "endangering my own capacity for freedom, if I fought *actively* for that freedom, or openly for it." Yet, other times a sense of having to perpetually hide things felt less convenient and free.

Across several instances, I have noted the ways in which some daughters had tried to get their mothers and fathers to see fighting with them as a form of caring about them. Yet, most of the participants still saw being able to openly challenge and "talk back" to their parents in culturally unsanctioned ways as something rare and in many ways privileged—those who felt able to do so said they felt lucky. Even so, things were not easy, emotionally. Meera, someone who did openly argue about feminism with her parents, said that "the toughest part of feminism is having to go back home and talk to your family. Because they're the people closest to you, and also the people capable of *really* hurting you. And you're also someone capable of really hurting them, so sometimes you're always walking on eggshells."

Pain would go both ways, and doing the work needed to build a more agentic future for yourself meant that you were going to "make a lot of decisions which are not going to be very happy for your family." To be able to have arguments with your parents, you had to overcome not just the fear of loss and disappointment but also multiple bigger or smaller rules you might have internalized. Maria, whose mother did not approve of alcohol, said there were times when she herself was open about drinking and did not care, but also times when she kept going back to feeling she was doing something wrong: "And I picture my *mom*, and I picture her flabbergasted at the fact that I'm drinking. *My god*, I cannot even imagine how she'd respond if she'd find out [slight laugh]. I can't".

The different narratives point towards what I see as a central feminist tension between Delhi and family selfhood(s) and the (im)possibility of being known. Some of this tension can be understood as stemming from a form of political discourse prioritizing ethical coherence, transparency, and what is seen as political authenticity (cf. Roshanravan 2019)—a discourse according to which people should practice what they preach: "If you don't walk the walk, then there's *no point* frankly," Neha said.

In earlier chapters of this work, I have argued that a discourse of political authenthicity should be understood not just as identitarian cohesion but also as linked to—particularly—Dalit critiques of a perceived lack of self-criticism within savarna feminisms. At the same time, a demand of ethical coherence goes against the multiplicity and messiness seen by ethnographers as a defining feature of selfhood. As noted in the introduction, Srivastava's (2010) research on masculinity in Delhi argues that "fragmented", incommensurable values/beliefs/sexualities can readily coexist in a person and/or a group without this causing a sense of internal conflict, not to mention crisis (cf. Thapan 2009, 2025). Srivastava argues that being several different things might in fact be experienced as quite pleasurable. As I have shown in the sections above, several if not all of the women in this study were able to take pleasure in certain forms of identification with the family, while also feeling quite alien from them. However, for the majority of the women in this study, fragmentation did not appear pleasurable, but was rather spoken of as something inevitable that nevertheless helped facilitate a meaningful life for oneself.

In some situations, the multiple beliefs and value-laden desires existing in the same women came to generate internal conflict and a sense of failure. For some of the participants, the inability to close the gap between their Delhi and their family selves represented a failure to fully emerge as a political actor or the kind of acting feminist subject they desired to be (cf. Kilomba 2008). Insinuation or criticism along such lines circulated widely in the setting of the study, and would later be found in popular anti-caste writing, such as that of Kisana (2023, 2025). Kisana argues that young, highly educated savarna people can use the idea of family pressure as a way to shed responsibility and agency, thus becoming part of systems of inequality. He doubts "whether family and community pressure is really so intense and suffocating that even the most privileged Savarnas with dynamic, ideological, and assertive personalities break down when confronted by it" (Kisana 2023, paragraph 4). In his view, playing along with family expectations means, for progressive 'upper'-caste people, "abandon[ing] the radical posturings of their youth to transition into the exact kind of uncles and aunties they spent their youth rebelling against" (ibid., paragraph 9). Not trying to change your

parents means allowing for their sexist, classist, casteist, and racist views to live on through you, even if in diluted form.

Kisana's argument is deliberately pointed and meant to generate debate. I understand agency as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn 2001, 112) and "grounded in acts of [social] meaning" (ibid., 115), which means that the women's adjustments and possible actions within their family fields (Atkinson 2014) are inevitably shaped by the vocabularies, expectations, and spatial arrangements pushing familialization that we have encountered in this thesis. Nevertheless, a certain sense of feminist failure could linger, which fueled a need to keep pushing for change in participants like Astha:

> "Every time I go back home and I'm having an argument with my parents and I bring out like, you know, 'What's the point in sending me to do gender studies if you're gonna be this patriarchal at home?' And I say stuff like 'If I can't even make *you* not be patriarchal, then there's no use for me to have a degree in gender studies.' Because I'm just like a person who cannot have this dual kind of life, where I'm like going out and being super progressive but when I come home I'm just like a good bachcha [child]."

This was something she was asking herself: what does being a feminist mean if she comes home just to hide it? The quote points to a sense of having a larger ethical responsibility—both for oneself and in terms of the larger feminist issue—to what another participant called "doing the work" in relation to one's parents. Some women felt that they had to, sooner or later, speak up against their parents and not keep letting them have their way. This was not explained to mean telling parents everything at once, but remaining steady in a slow "exposure therapy" or "training" of the parents; this might take years or decades. Yet, even when being tactical, conflict and hurt could (and should) not be avoided: Astha said that challenging her parents' views on family was important even when it seemed to "disturb" them more than it seemed to translate into actual change.

Planning a feminist pushback against parents was expressed to be heavily dependent on improving one's own leverage, again mainly by having an income of one's own. Meera said that things had become less "murky" since she got a job. Without your own money, "especially in the context where your parents are gods and that relationship is sacred, it becomes really tough to speak out against it," she noted. To ensure greater financial independence, Meera also felt ready to make some sacrifices. She said she preferred living in places others might consider "crappy," in a back alley where cars could not go, and "people don't know where it is." "It is *fine* by me," "because I don't wanna ask for money from… my father."

Yet, making your own money was only part of the solution. One still needed to speak up. Neha, sarcastically, explained:

> "This argument never ends, is what I've realized. *Pehle* [first], it's 'you're living under our roof, so you do as we say.' Then it's like 'you're spending our money, so do what we're saying.' Then eventually, when you're not doing any of those things, it's like 'You're part of this family, so you still have to do whatever we're saying.' There is no end to it. Until you just tell them 'Okay, as a child I'm rejecting you as parents and I'm disowning this family and I'm going on—that's the only time they'll let you make decisions on your own."

Neha rejects the idea of needing to uphold the parents' ideas about respectability politics at home in order to protect the family (Sirisena 2024). This should not be seen as her necessarily wanting to leave the family, but rather as wanting to stay on more equal terms. Neha's wish, just like Astha's desire to not have to be "a good bachcha," appears to be to achieve a sense of safety and belonging in the family home as the women they are now, of ridding themselves of the unhomeliness of the "dual life". Here, unlike the pleasures of fragmentation (Srivastava 2010), living with a feminist fragmentation appears to be felt both personally and politically disturbing. Tara also saw this alienation or unhomelyness as a very common experience:

> "It's hard to cope. I don't think there's a very… good way to deal with that. Because… home becomes a place where you can't be yourself. That's really hard. Because home is a place where you're supposed to be the most safe, the most comfortable. And if you're *not*, then it's like the saddest thing ever. And I think that has happened so much to so many people."

As Achar and Gopal note, individual-focused queer narratives can also enforce a narrative where a "fusion of the dual lives" (Achar and Gopal 2023, 171) produces relief or a more coherent political self. However, other participants challenged a narrative that posits the separation of different moral/political lives as any necessary feminist failure. Aashi said:

> "I've made my peace long ago with the fact that that's how it's gonna be. I knew I would live on my own terms, because that's the only way I was gonna be able to live my life, instead of just following my textbook. This is just another one of those things. So, yeah, it doesn't feel that bad. I *hope* to god that some day I will be able to bridge some of [the divide], but I know that I won't be able to—[my parents] will never know me."

While her life and work in Delhi pushed the boundaries of normative womanhood, she was "a very different person" when she went home: "If you look at me, I look like your Desi, sweet North Indian girl." Aashi thus transgressed on her own time: "When I go home I make sure—I pick my outfit depending on who I'm visiting. I like wearing traditional clothes." Perhaps noting that the "peace" she had made

with things was not always that peaceful, she said: "I keep thinking 'is it a good thing or is it a bad thing?'" The problem was that people back home could start believing the performance:

> "Because now these fuckers think I'm your—like a proper girl. But I'm not trying to be that girl, but I still end up being that girl and then I don't mind being that girl because it just saves me all the fucking hassle."

The idea of saving oneself the hassle is important. One does not "try to be that [proper] girl" but ends up being it, because doing so is easier for oneself. Yet, choosing to remain in the so-called closet is not equally possible for everyone. While being able to be more open with one's parents was commonly seen as a form of privilege by the participants—reflecting a culturally more 'liberal' or big-city upbringing–hiding should also be understood as dependent on capital. When women hide things—sex, alcohol use, smoking, roaming outside at night, partners, male flatemates, etc.—from their parents, they perform themselves as respectable and worthy (cf. Skeggs 1997). Hiding can provide access to larger societal approval given to (particularly savarna-coded) 'good' women. Women like the participants can be understood to partly be able to hide things because the assumption is that, as daughters of respectable families, their default position would be respectable, too. And, even in cases where respectability would be temporarily lost, the way assumed vulgarity stuck less to 'upper'-caste bodies (Paik 2022) meant that they would also have higher chances of successfully reclaiming respectable femininity again when so needed or desired (cf. Krishnan 2016).

At the same time, keeping the peace is possibly more complex than it first appears. As Sharangpani has noted in her own work on family, even "the act of making peace [...] is not one of passive submission, but of active engagement, the constant doing of little things that will keep one's world together and one's place in it secure" (Sharangpani 2018, 544). Motives may not be altruistic, but they are not fully selfish either: Aashi understood part of the good girl-performance as being done in a kind of feminist solidarity with not just her mother (chapter 7) but also her sister-in-law, whom the family had forced to dress more modestly (chapter 4). "I took it upon myself to not wear shorts in the house," she said, continuing:

> "It just came from a place of guilt, that I have this privilege that I can wear whatever I want in this household and she can't. And I can't do anything about it. I'm not doing anything to change that, and if I can't change that I don't have this right either."

What appears as self-policing conformity spreading from one woman to the other, here becomes understood as a solidaric move, something akin to the "complicitous

and resentful agency" described by Chowdhury (2016). Since she cannot free the sister-in-law from the system, Aashi expresses not having the right to flaunt her own freedom to not follow the rules. The differences between Aashi's own views and those of the family ("these fuckers") are so stark that aiming for mutual understanding is not felt to be a meaningful use of her limited resources.

Life outside of family control is again clearly positioned as her life—the life *she* lives on *her* "own terms." Observing the family rules should then not be understood to be a reflection of what the narrator understands as her genuine self. As the person observing those rules is understood to not really be her, this perhaps also makes her Delhi self less responsible for her actions at home. Underneath the sweet Desi girl is, then, the actual improper self that swears profusely and lives life in Delhi on her own terms.

We see here how the act of playing along with sexist rules functions in two ways, both to protect oneself and to protect the peace of the family (cf. Sharangpani 2018). Huang and Brower, writing about China, argue that "coming back to the family, [means] reining in and covering queer desires in order to stay close to the family" (Huang and Brower 2018, 97). That seems to hold true here too, yet this should not be understood as a permanent either or. As Aashi's example shows, her individualism and feminist ambitions are performed elsewhere (see section on work further below).

9.5. Beyond good and evil

"There are two functions of a coping strategy: (a) to regulate distress and (b) to manage the problem that is causing that distress," Indian psychologists Meerambika Mahapatro and Sudhir Singh (2019, 819) write in relation to women in abusive family situations. A problem can be tackled either by removing (some) of it or by making it less of a problem for oneself. Both coping strategies are clearly in evidence in the interview material. I understand the participants as strategizing, trying to either engage with or to distance themselves in relation to what they see as a meaningful use of their time.

Jyoti laughed about how "liberal people" in general tended to "overestimate their own influence on discourse." By liberal people, she meant herself. When she was younger, she often felt she was the "'only person bringing enlightenment!'" to her family, that her "parents just know lots of other conservative, horrible people so where else will they get this information from?" These days, she wondered: if she was really the lone voice of reason, how much of an impact could she actually expect to have on her family? "If they haven't, for instance, managed to influence or be a dominating influence on *my* life and my thinking, how should I have been

one on theirs?"—especially since her parents had a lot more resources and a societal system on their side.

In light of this, most discussions veered toward an emphasis on messiness and a rejection of the kind of dichotomy between resistance and family co-optation that critics like Kisana (2025) posit. Participants felt the need to look at both at the same time, perhaps seeing co-optation in what appeared as resistance, and subject-becoming in what looked like giving in. Participants were actively drawing and redrawing lines of what should count as feminist success and/or failure.

I asked Shalini if people were somehow resigned to how things were. She recognized that parents were in a way counting on familialization (Chakrabarti 2024), that children "ultimately become them." Like many others, she felt one "can't really change these people" since "they're so resistant and they don't take you seriously"—"They'll tell you 'Oh you're having all these ideas now, but once you grow up and get married, you'll know what it is like.'" Yet, any "acceptance" of things from the daughters' side was about accepting the impossibility of effecting more radical change—not an acceptance of the political or ethical positions of the parents. Shalini also stressed the importance of recognizing incremental change (Sirisena 2024), even when it appeared miniscule:

> "I think we've come a long way and something has changed within people. Yeah, probably they'll fall into the trap of tradition and living in a society like social animals, but… they will, something would have been changed. They would be more progressive than the previous generation in terms of gender. It's happening, I can see that also in the way I've seen my parents grow. I've seen my [parents go] from having a scowl whenever someone eloped with their boyfriend to marry, to now coming to the point where they're like 'Parents should understand that kids should have a choice in their marriage.' So that's their progress, that I've seen in 10-15 years."

Shalini here echoed Titzmann, who notes that individual families can be seen "as factors for change and social mobility" (2017, 10) even within very slow-moving larger (e.g. caste) communities. While Shalini asserts that people tend to be "social animals" who will want to live in society, they can still bring change with them. As the change is so slow, maintaining resistance becomes central. A similar view was held by Aditi who, despite her self-expressed conflict avoidance, felt she had managed to change her parents to an extent. What counted as success should perhaps be made more reasonable, she implied. After all, her family members "have moved a little further by knowing me, or by interacting with me over a time." Laughing throughout the passage, she spoke about the "sustained" difference that had forced her parents to "re*think*, you know, what they're okay with":

> "I've really pushed boundaries of what they think is acceptable behavior for a *girl*, and for a person of our class. So when they thought English was too lousy a career choice, I went and took sociology. Which seemed to them even worse. And then once I started working in development and they thought 'Oh god this is terrible,' I then started agitating to be a civil servant, [to] which they were like 'Oh shit that's worse!' And so they're actually relieved now—their standards have, so to speak, fallen to the point where they're like 'Oh she's in an office of some kind and not in a Naxal-infected area as a district collector—this is great! This is better than we hoped for!'"

This kind of bait-and-switch tactic she had exercised over a number of years had brought some change. Aditi laughed about how "disturbing" it was for her family that "among the three of us [younger female cousins] who are working, there's just me who earns terribly and has no—and refuses to marry well—has no immediate prospects of social mobility into where I'm supposed to be." In a somber tone, she added: "But it's by pushing that you'll see how far they stretch. And in my less cynical moments I think about how my parents have actually stretched quite a bit. More than I would have expected."

Aditi's comments also illustrated the *vast* difference between social change and the personal effort required—to outsiders, the change in the parents might hardly be noticeable, yet it could have taken decades of work from the daughter. Furthermore, what was a big change for one family might be nothing for another. Interestingly, while Aditi often noted how being a researcher made it easier for her to analyze her parents, she felt it might at the same time make it harder for her to judge them: "I can't divorce them, being a social scientist, I can't divorce them from their context." Looking at them contextually, she felt they had come a long way: "Uhm—I don't know whether I have low expectations, it's possible."

Such comments expressed a desire to move away from black-and-white ideas of what the feminist thing to do would be. While feminism sometimes meant being punitive and looking for culpability in systems of inequality, Shriya felt it should sometimes also mean cutting people some slack:

> "Insofar that everything is a movement, it's going to be forever *messy* and it's going to be *incomplete*. The entire business of intersectional feminism, or the entire business of any kind of revolution, is about that movement."

Shriya saw messiness as a condition of humanity, including feminist struggles for change. Removing the messiness and lack of perfection would mean removing something essential:

> "I feel feminism has proved this repeatedly that [the idea that] if marginalized people attain a semblance of power, they will somehow be

> as pure as the driven snow—that's doing them a disservice. It's cutting them off from the condition of being human. [...] I think it's missing the point to assume that everyone's going to do the right thing, and should do the right thing. And will always do the right thing, if they just knew any better. It's kinda daft."

Similarly, Meera said that the question of how to deal with the family as a feminist was "something that I'm still figuring out":

> "Because in *theory*, you know, there's a lot of things that you're supposed to be saying, a lot of things you're supposed to be doing. But at the end of the day, it's all *people*. And people are very rarely...[scoffs/ laughs] they very rarely make sense, you know?"

When Meera says that people very rarely make sense, i.e. think and act in logically or in morally consistent ways, she is speaking about both her parents and herself. Such quotes refute a kind of feminist theoreticism—the idea that people would do the right thing if they only had the right theory. Shriya challenges the idea of any woman being a "*pure*", moral actor, seeing any such assumption as a disservice to the cause. What is left is a kind of politics organized around both resistance as well as commitment and care (cf. Nash 2011).

9.6. Who should educate whom?

Feminism was sometimes described as "exhausting" by the participants. As a feminist, there were so many things around that were so wrong, and one had to have an opinion on everything. The sense of being in a minority in society made the exhaustion worse. Vishakha explained: "Why are feminists so angry? Because all the burdens of showing people that there should be expectations from all the genders is *just* on this particular group of people." "There's so much work, they're overburdened," she added, feeling that there were superhuman, "boxer"-like demands put on all Indian women, and that feminists were tasked with the particularly thankless chores of creating change.

Issues concerning the family could be experienced as particularly exhausting. Neha said gender had "been a contentious subject ever since I was growing up":

> "So every time I have a disagreement with my mother or something, or with my dad, it becomes *super* triggering of *all* of the anxieties I've had since childhood. All of the fights we've had about everything, growing up, and stuff. So it becomes *super* tough, like mentally."

In such moments, feminist friend networks were crucial for grounding oneself: "when that happens it's mostly only my girlfriends who step in for emotional support, you know 'we love you' and everything. So... [exhales deeply] yeah."

Against the backdrop of exhaustion, not every conversation was seen as worth having. Tara said she was not able to talk to her father about the sexual harassment she had experienced over the years. If she tried, it would only make her feel worse:

> "That's something I've just given up on. Like, I'm not gonna go through that. Because it's not always just about the fight, it's about how it takes a toll on you, as a person. How it makes you anxious and uncomfortable. That should also really count."

Understanding feminism as a kind of care for the self, sometimes trying to win a fight was less important than not making yourself feel awful. Jyoti was tired too, feeling that feminism in the family meant "a lot of thinking about things that are both sort of intellectually and emotionally difficult to think about." Noor felt it was "draining," "disappointing," and "painful" to fight your parents and to have to be faced with the fact "that your family is not different from the society you see around you." In relation to this exhaustion, she questioned whether it was meaningful to task young feminists with changing their parents, on top of everything else. Noor said she "*used* to think that!"—"now I'm somewhere between 'I think it's my responsibility but I also think I won't be able to really do much.'" In a way, putting the onus on the daughters could reinforce a top-down system where parents were not assumed to have a responsibility to engage in active learning. Aashi said she would "also assign some responsibility to my parents."

> "I mean, as parents, they could have also made this relationship work. And… if they're not gonna do that, it's not my burden. I will do as much as I can. I mean, yes, I am an emotional being and I wanna be, like, in their life and et cetera. But, if they do not know the entirety of my existence, it is not my fault."

Comments like these reframe the problem and again refuse an idea of failed feminist subjects. The contextualization given to mothers and certain fathers is here extended to daughters. It is central to note the ongoing privatization of the tactics or demands seen by the interviewees, reminding one of the non-emergence of public movements around family pressures, discussed in the thesis introduction. The lack of larger networks and political organizing around changing patriarchal family forms meant that people wishing to change things were left to find solutions on their own or in closed friend groups, very possibly leading to failure. Neha also questioned what usefulness her trying to change her family on her own really had for the larger feminist cause:

> "Now with age I've realized that it is kind of like a survival tactic. Cause if you go and practice politics in the streets and then you come and bring that politics back home you have *no* peace in life. You have nothing left."

In order to be able to keep fighting elsewhere, she felt she had to let some things be:

> "If I have an argument with my parents I get so disturbed that sometimes I can't get out of bed all day. So it's very important for me to sometimes let go of these things at home, to actually be able to do *anything* outside."

The idea that daughters could change their individual parents was also seen to assume that parents would on some level be positive toward them and not cut them off. Yet change was a two-way street, and the daughters had to take seriously the possibility that their parents might genuinely not like the feminist person their daughter had become. As a feminist, Noor said, "you become the woman who is always angry, and who is a party-pooper. And I've had that experience in my family. Somehow I'm now the one who will always see problems in things." Going home would then not just be a matter of going—home had to want you there. Aditi wondered what her parents thought of her:

> "I think one of the reasons I don't really know if my parents like me very much, my family, is that I feel they can see me doing this [analysis]. Like at some level, they can see that I'm not 100% with them, you know, on that partisan side."

"It must be quite uncomfortable" to be constantly analyzed, she added:

> "There's always this social scientist-child peering through her glasses at her parents. And at some level they can see that. And they can't with full honesty say 'She loves us and she would do anything for us,' because maybe she wouldn't, right?"

If the person she had become could not offer the kind of unconditional love or loyalty a family like hers expected, then who was she to assume they should necessarily accept her?

9.7. How to (not) end up on a feminist panel

The perceived impossibility of moving "back home" was often compounded by the economic factors that supported the women's inital move to Delhi. "Back home" there were no jobs in the sectors the interviewees worked in. For those who did

not want or could not take money from their parents, "fall[ing] back on them" was not an option. Shalini said:

> "So if I ever think that I wanna quit my job, or go travel or stay in the mountains for a while—which I really want to do—I can't. I *have* to have my job, or I have to have enough savings. So it's a compulsion for me. Quitting my job means going back to that place. Which is not comfortable for me anymore. So that's a huge compulsion for me."

Like rootlessness, this compulsion to work in order to not get ensnared in the family was something Shalini also saw as typical for people in professions like hers; she felt her communities would always be "living in borrowed rooms."

Work was about other things, too. As Neha said, choosing to fight less with the family might allow oneself to do more meaningful things "*outside*." There were other ways in which to engage with the world as a feminist apart from trying to change your parents. Yet, this was not without pitfalls of its own. In chapter 6, I noted how the work trajectories of the women were leading to an increased professionalization of their feminist engagement. This also meant that more informal collective forms of organizing and belonging fell away. No longer a student, Meera felt "*cut off*" from much of the political activism she so enthusiastically engaged in two years earlier. "I'm getting into a lot more *organized* space," she said—"institutionalized". Uma said that she "always thought that feminism plays a very huge role" in her life but that in "college it was *easier* to, sort of, see that." Right now, she was very busy as a "junior worker" at a think tank and did not find the energy for "feminist engagements" after work: "I feel like maybe, as I progress in my career, I will have more space to do these kinds of things again. But at the same time, I don't want to become one of those older generation types."

We also saw the "older generation types" in chapter 6. "There is that fear, definitely," Uma repeated—of "becoming those Khan market liberal[41] types." "Reformist feminism" has been identified as a "route to class mobility" (hooks 2000a, 5) for certain privileged categories of women, also in Delhi (Gilbertson 2018, 2023; Minj and Pandit 2024). As the participants were moving on in their adult lives and securing jobs, such possible avenues could also open up for them. While professionalization could mean new ways of gaining power in the family, new ways of doing feminism, and perhaps a route out from Delhi and maybe even India (a job at an INGO, a PhD position at a prestigious university, a consultancy with UN Women, etc.), new concerns about the self had to be considered. Aashi expressed this succinctly:

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[41] Expensive shopping and restaurant hub in Central Delhi, near the state and 'big' (I)NGO institutions. The upper-class/'upper'-caste "Khan market liberal" is a well-known and ridiculed figure among both left- and right-wing Delhiites.

> "Your sense of yourself, it cannot be a static thing. And for the *longest*, where I came from was what defined me, what I was. But *now*, I can see where I'm going. So *now* I'm trapped in this thing of 'Oh my god I don't wanna end up like one of those women wearing like *a* really *nice* sari, on a panel, talking about *women's justice*,' shit like that. Where I'm fifty and like really demure and everything. I just don't wanna be that."

If Aashi kept building her sense of self—her feminism—on the struggles she had faced growing up as a woman and not accounting for the privilege-related potential she embodied, she risked not seeing the capital she was cultivating. In the worst case, she would end up as an academic-feminist woman in a "really *nice* sari," not noticing how "demure" she had become over the years. The risk here is not directed only towards herself, but even more so about potentially doing a disservice to feminism on a larger scale and to women in less advantageous positions. Aashi connected her own conservative upbringing in Rajasthan, via her upward social mobility (enabled by an intense personal drive, law-school education, and family caste and class) to the futures that seemed to have suddenly opened up for her:

> "I came from where women were nobodies, technically. I was afraid of being a nobody. But, now that I'm gaining an education and, like, working and growing *slightly* more confident in whoever I'm becoming. *Now* I'm scared of, you know, being a 'somebody'. Because I have no right to be. I *don't*."

Aashi, here, makes a distinction between the feminism she has a right to in the public sphere, compared to that which she has a right to in her parental home. If, at home, she was allowed to be messy and morally multiple, that was not the case outside the home. The fear she fought so long—of being a woman who, because of her family, remained a "nobody"—was no longer as big a fear; now the fear was being someone who trampled on others. In many ways, her Delhi self was beyond her family and their ability to control her. Going forward, not everything could be about her own journey or about being allowed to passively contribute to systems of violence anymore—feminism could no longer be about her as an individual. Similarly, Lily said her feminism, earlier, "would have been 'How do we save Lily, through this academic context?'" Now: "It's not just about me anymore. I operate within an intersection of privilege that—like it doesn't just have to be about a safe space for me—it can be a little punitive for me as well."

Aashi's call to pay attention to the "demure" woman on the panel showed how professionalization could also be a new kind of respectability trap. NGOized feminism might not have been exactly the 'good' womanhood one's relatives might had wanted one to perform, but there was no use in pretending it would be all that far off either. The road toward class and caste respectability was sometimes seen

as dangerously easy to take. In another interview, some months later, Aashi said: "I *don't* identify as a posh person! [But] I know I'm on the road to be one. I don't know how to not be one."

A similar fear was voiced by Uma, who used to be active in the feminist groups at her college. She used to judge college peers who grew up in South Delhi and said she did not "want to become one of those people who becomes so removed from the people she claims to, like, 'help'", yet this seemed to be happening whether she wanted it or not. Her caste background, middle-class parents, hard work, degree from a top Delhi college, and foreign master's degree had made the conversion of capital into 'liberal' know-how and a well-paying job so fast that it made her uncomfortable. In a drastic change, at age 24, she, the daughter, had started earning more than her father did. At the time of the interviews, she lived in a spacious rented flat in a nice part of South Delhi, while her parents lived in a far-off satellite town. She worried that the politically progressive education she had received at home might "very subtly, over time" slip away between all the "compromises" she had to make at work. The fact that her father said that her policy work meant that ""you're doing what centrists do'" did not help her discomfort. Subsequently, in her case, making her own money did not make Uma feel she had more of a say in family matters, rather it made her worry about coming across as "snobbish."

Yet, at work in the think tank, Uma also felt a mounting pressure to look and perform more "feminine" like the other "women" around her. This was against the gendering she would more naturally perform, "which is very untraditional." Such a performance of gender at work could not be detached from gendered expectations elsewhere, Uma felt, adding to a sense of a sneaking conformism. If she gave in in one place, she felt it would make it harder not to give in elsewhere:

> "Because [parents, in-laws] they *know* that there is a certain expectation within the workplace, it's easier for them to like try to use that and make our behavior more malleable in the house. Which is like, when you want to actively challenge that in your personal life, it becomes harder because 'Oh you do this all day long, you're spending ten hours in the office and you're behaving like a traditional woman, but you come home and suddenly you want to do *other* things.'"

Thinking about the ideology of familialization (Chakrabarti 2024), where dissenting subjects are not excluded but incorporated into the familial fold through partial transformations that leave dominant structures intact, we can perhaps understand the professionalization of feminism as fitting that project. The participants were aware of this—yet the dearth of other meaningful job prospects made it hard to do other things. Laughing at being reminded of her scoff

about "typical South Delhi *chutiyas*," Uma said she had not yet become one: "No, no, no. Definitely not. Hopefully never."

9.8. Where to next?

Drinking coffee with me on a particularly beautiful Delhi morning in March, Maya somewhat surprisingly said that reading Darwin had helped her. She said she used to feel like a fixed branch of a (family) tree, but that she had come to the insight that she could actually move: "You have legs—so you can actually wander off. [...] Darwin has made me feel like I'm not a tree—I'm an animal. Go away, it's fine. Fly! Run! It's *fine*!"

Twenty-seven years old at the time, she continued: "Is it coming of age, becoming an actual adult, stepping out of my childhood? Like, in my head, maybe I was a *child* until now." Again, Maya said she still gets angry but that she now tried to use her energy for other things:

> "It's so good to not care. Or like you care! You care! But you don't let it consume you. [...] And there's more to life than parents. There's so much more. Like coffee, trees, hills, winter... Yeah."

Many of her insights had come to her through what she described as "trauma." Having had to sort out so much on her own had made her a very self-reliant person. Yet, she wished there would have been another way:

> "I really think there should be, like, lessons included in education about how children can develop emotional independence, *without trauma*. Like, *really*, this lesson shouldn't trickle down to you through trauma."

Maya, ironically, asked: "Like, are we idiots that need trauma to evolve?" At the same time, trauma only becomes educational when made sense of through a meaningful lens like feminism:

> "Obviously feminism has been the biggest uhm... catalyst in pushing me towards that point. [...] I've come to that point where I've realized I actually want to be happy. Yeah, I'm angry, but I can reserve my anger now to certain situations. I'm not letting that affect my entire persona, entire *being*. So I think that's what my journey of feminism has been."

Without anger, she felt that the family had a lot less power over her, "your power is sort of... void." That spring morning, the city seemed quite gentle, perhaps deceivingly so. Delhi had been "a great teacher," Maya said, scoffing somewhat. She dreamt about the hills:

> "Delhi *has* given me things like… There's a career, there's an income, there's… different kinds of friendships. But I… *hate* Delhi. Because… I grew up in [the hills]. And even though there is family there, apart from that there is… it's so beautiful. Green, clean air. Even if your home—of course it'll be different for different people—if your home is a space that constricts you, if you walk out into the jungle… you are your person. That, no-one can take from you."

She wanted a place, a jungle, where she could feel a "*childlike*" wonder. "In Delhi, I feel like… [sighs] like no garden is big enough. To… replace that." I asked her if she wanted to leave. Like many others, she kept coming back to financial considerations: "That would be nice [laughs] if there was some… *job*. That would be really nice, yeah."

Stories like this illustrate how people's "imaginaries and desires for home change as people grow older" (Blunt and Dowling 2006, 114), and leaving can both intensify and resolve emotional ties to 'back home' (cf. Gorman-Murray 2009). They also show how the relationality of selfhood means making plans in reference to a desired "geographical proximity to kin" (Mason 2004, 167), even when distance is seen as helpful. Tara said she had "*grown up* to be a person who likes roots." Lily also dreamt about moving back to "Bombay" where she could feel culturally at home; to do that, she too would have to earn "significantly more."

Delhi had sometimes kept people as kinds of hostages for longer than they expected. Noor was surprised she had been around for so many years: "This still feels like an in-transit place. I feel like I'm here for a *bit*. I myself get surprised sometimes […] I always thought that I would leave. Because I did not *like* Delhi." She felt the kind of "*wealth* that is there" in the city, and "how people show it off," the kind of "*pride* that came with having money" was making her very uncomfortable. Like for others, the NGO jobs for her were in Delhi—back home, the only work she could imagine herself finding was as a schoolteacher.

Even with such a backdrop of dreams about 'back home,' and perhaps impossible homing desires restrained by so-called economic realities, much of the interviewees' dreaming was not directed toward going back. Many dreamt of further migration, about work, about studying more, perhaps going for that PhD abroad or—as one participant in Robinson's study on young people in Pune noted—simply to "get out of reach of the constant check and control" of the family (2014, 140). New class divisions were appearing between the women in Delhi in relation to such dreams about further studies and travel. Some could dream about moving to the UK or the US, while others felt that higher education prices even in India were "just *shooting* through the roof"—"and they might just soon be inaccessible for me."

At the time of the study, the interviewees did not know what was going to happen to the spaces of liminality or freedom that had been created in the city,

whether they would grow into more permanent challenges to familial systems or stay “fleeting” and forever at “risk to stop existing” (Geist 2014, 95).

Chapter Ten: Conclusion–Building relationality

This final chapter summarizes the analytic journey taken in this thesis, with a focus on the research questions concerning constructions of selfhood and what role feminisms come to play in these. Below, I first look at the individual chapters, after which I provide a short concluding discussion.

As is usual, chapter 1 set the scene. In it, I discussed the larger backgrounds, bodies of literature, questions of the political (non-)emergence of family control, and feminist, ethnographic and personal research interests informing this dissertation. In chapter 2, I looked closer at the methodologies and affects involved in conducting this study, showing how "[f]amily relationships are nothing if not permeated with every imaginable kind of feeling" (Smart 2007, 84). I stressed the importance of understanding the power of emotions in shaping the participants' family belonging, desires, and feminist motivations. I noted how the affective regimes of love, loyalty, indebtedness, and "not airing your dirty laundry" were seen to shape the data and the feminist challenge the participants directed toward their parents. The chapter also discussed the ethnographic methodology and my positioning in relation to the field and topic, analyzing both structural and interpersonal relationships I see as both enabling and constraining the narrations of selfhood and feminisms in this work. I paid attention to how participant-friends pushed back and asserted their agency in explicit or implicit ways, as well as to how they expressed their motivation to provide what they saw as the most useful data or narration for my study. Through such meta-work, the interviewees established themselves as highly reflexive and prone to "sociologizing" their own situation.

Chapter 3 contextualized the thesis through a discussion of the construction of the shorthand "Indian," and certain class- and caste-related patterns of kinship that have come to be popularly and academically recognizable as "Indian families." Of particular interest was how such stereotypes/explanations also came to function as parts of the self-understanding/-narration of the participants. Even when at the same time criticizing the constructed nature of the term, "Indian" was still used as a shorthand by the women. I argued that this could be understood as

a tool through which the participants placed themselves as members of larger imagined communities of what are seen as similar women facing similar issues. At the same time, "Indian" could have the negative effect of normalizing violence and control in family relationships between parents and daughters, again making it harder to frame the relationships between parents and adult children as a political, feminist issue. The chapter also aimed to sensitize us to the slippages that happen when discursively powerful constructions take on the form of models for what "all" families are like. Aware of the important message of anti-caste scholarship that encourages researchers to turn an 'upper'-caste gaze inward, the chapter was inspired by what can be called a debrahmanized decolonization of narratives of family and gender (Patil 2013).

Chapter 4 looked at how the gendered cultures of the natal homes, family histories of movement, and ideas about "renegade predecessors" (Elliott 2005) came to be used in the interviewees' narrations of self and feminism. I showed how the women, through stories reaching back several generations, understood themselves as both shaped by and in opposition to what were seen as family identities and attempts at creating them. In the chapter, examples of past physical and mental mobility in the family came across as important to one's own trajectory of greater independence. Examples of such departures were found in both expected and unexpected places—not necessarily in familial histories of highly educated women, but rather in moments when the family had survived or actively produced non-normative moments. Conversely, inspiration to build oneself anew was also sought in moments that functioned as negative examples, warnings of what one's future would look like if one did not seek to change it. The interviewees, as feminists, grappled with making sense of the many personal and structural contradictions of their upbringing and their families' gendered expectations. One's own family was seen as both severely limiting but also "relatively better" than much of what one had seen around oneself—and this "relatively," in turn, was connected to ideas of a privilege trap, or a gilded cage. The metaphor, with its somewhat cynical tone, however, downplays the severe emotional and material difficulty of any 'true' departure from normativity in a social context such as the one in this thesis.

Chapter 5 analyzed the excited, joyful, and collective experiences of college, feminist (peer) learning, and encounters with the city of Delhi. The chapter focused on what can be understood as a sense of possible selves associated with the growth narrated as happening after leaving home, in the city. Looking at how "feminism completely changed everything," I explored moments of non-familial forms of homemaking and the idea of feminism as a kind of alternative home for young women like the participants. While noting that the kinds of collectivities being built in the city were nevertheless largely structured by class, caste, and

privileged university education, the women expressed a genuine shift in their lives in moments of a shared feminist coming-of-age. Such spaces, analyzed through a queer lens of home- or collective-building (Geist 2014; Dave 2012), offered the participants a possible sense of belonging outside the natal family. At the same time, these (more) feminist spaces were already threatened by their own temporary nature, haunted by the threat of future familialization (Chakrabarti 2024).

Chapter 6 looked at how senses of self, through feminism, became more complex, difficult, and "grainier" as life experiences accumulated in Delhi. The chapter noted how the city came to take its toll on the women, even when relatively protected by class and/or caste. Echoing earlier works on gender in Indian cities (e.g. Pilot and Prabhu 2012), Delhi was sometimes represented as a constant attack, where unmarried women were subject to the patriarchal gaze and the policing by everyone from strangers to landlords. The ability to just be and not be observed could appear as utopian. At the same time, parents' long-distance anxieties, based on imaginaries of Delhi as even worse than it actually was felt to be, colored the experience of the city. In contrast, finding one's way through the hostility and segregation of the city was experienced as building confidence that was reflected in what kinds of feminist arguments could be taken back to the family. Delhi also introduced a crucial widening and rethinking of what feminism meant for oneself, moving it from a way to "save" oneself to something that could be "punitive as well." The women perceived themselves not just as agents of change, but as privileged and sometimes ignorant particualrly in terms of caste—needing to learn from other feminisms in Delhi. With this increasing complexity, the chapter noted how possibilities and anxieties around selfhood and feminism were growing and changing in relation to employment and the desire to be financially independent.

Chapter 7 examined the participants' narratives of their mothers, with an insistence on paying attention to the "sensitive stuff" happening in them. I analyzed these mother-stories as sites where shared narratives of understanding the structurally compromised or victimized mother signaled personal maturity and feminist growth that was meaningful to self-making as feminist. These stories expressed an understanding of mothers as complicit in family control and violence but they also portrayed mothers as their own persons beyond the mother role. The chapter highlighted the importance of nuance and multiple forms of care in the self-building of the participants, showing in particular how ideas of family and feminist selfhood were co-constructed. In these mother-narratives, the concept of care was also expanded beyond the ramifications of faithful witnessing as being respectful of the reality of the other (Lugones 2003; Roshanravan 2019) in interesting ways, to involve the idea of fighting as caring—fighting, here, meaning

not leaving but staying in the conflict, but also demanding the other to engage. In another notable addition to constructions of selfhood, the women spoke of themselves as in many ways significantly more agentic than their mothers—despite the power the latter might have over them—subsequently attaching different moral values to their own actions from those of the mothers. While their own feminism meant seeking to minimize the violence they inflicted on others, they sought to understand and contextualize their mothers' violence toward them.

Chapter 8 discussed fathers and how differently, and sometimes similarly, they were narrated from the mothers. In the interviews, some fathers came across as distant or violent, while others came across as trying to bring up their daughters as projects that would enhance their own social status. In certain cases, fathers were spoken of tenderly as significant contributors or examples of caring masculinities (Elliot 2016), allowing for the kind of nuancing and complexity we saw with mothers. In other cases, fathers were seen as more or less irrelevant to family systems and the daughters' own journey with selfhood and feminism except as an indirect patriarchal reference point. Yet, in others, fathers came across as central to the kind of people the daughters saw themselves as having grown up to be. In some cases, the participants actively distanced themselves from their fathers despite the best efforts of families to keep them from doing so. Noting the intensity of affective regimes, such narratives revealed how the process of distancing—even from a parent one did not want to care for—could mean years of fighting, collective shaming, and mental distress. At the same time, new ways of imagining oneself could be seen in some interviewees' desire to care for their father, who was seen as having been different from the norm.

Finally, in chapter 9, I turned to a consideration of imagined futures. Family-related futures were not envisioned as a "rupture" (Thapan 2025) but as a slow movement from the now, holding both positive and negative potential. Time, particularly the sense of liminality attached to one's 20s, was central. The selfhood and feminisms of the interviewees were marked by the "futurity" (Patel 2016) of things, connected to a sense of "elongated" youth (Bhandari 2017a) and the deferral of certain choices or conflicts. Yet as the participants were imagining futures and ways of building stability, worries of a "queer time" (Baas 2018) coming to an end could be seen. The chapter also analyzed how to understand feminist success or failure in terms of changing parental attitudes or family dynamics, and how this affected the participants' understandings of themselves as feminists. It noted how some feared a co-optation into a savarna fold (cf. Kisana 2025), while others questioned the idea that daughters should be held responsible for the feminist education of their parents. Chapter 9 also returned to the now more pressing questions around employment and how the professionalization of feminist engagements in Delhi came to affect how the women perceived the

attainability of a desired feminist selfhood. While possible career advancement could increase the daughters' leverage in family negotiations, new anxieties emerged. For the ever-reflexive women, white-collar work in progressive sectors could mean another potential respectability trap, ending in a kind of familialization that they had spent years fighting.

10.1. Selfhood, agency, feminism

This thesis has examined self-making and feminist (re)conceptualizations in narratives of family negotiations among a group of young women in highly educated, middle- to upper-class, 'savarna'-coded India. Tracing their journeys to and in the city of Delhi, I showed how the distance from families of origin became a productive—albeit in no way simple—space in which familial control, care, love, and loyalty could be analyzed and partially remolded. The thesis moved through stories of past, present, and future to demonstrate how the building of a more independent and 'adult' selfhood in Delhi was deeply intertwined and co-created with ideas of daughterhood and (partial) family belonging. Drawing on insights from e.g. Roseneil and Ketokivi (2016) and Thapan (2009), I showed how both self and family appear as relational—created and existing in the relationships themselves, not as pre-given formations engaging in relationships. In a feminist, ethnographic tradition, I argued that this active shaping of selves in this setting needs to be understood both in relation to material and discursive limitations and openings around the family field—particularly those of gender, class, and caste.

As selfhood is relational, it is also unavoidably multiple. In this thesis, I paid particular attention to the formulation of what can now be identified as a "feminist" and a "family" self—the two modes of narration emerging in the interviews—which both acquire their meaning from their relation to the other. This means that, in practice, both selves are cross-contaminated and dependent—there is feminism in the family and vice versa. Yet as the selves are narrated as existing within separate moral frameworks, interesting questions around the valuing, hierarchization, and potential conflicts of selfhoods could be addressed.

Inspired by Srivastava (2010) and Kumar (2014), who argue that multiple and fragmented selves do not necessarily constitute a problem or a sense of conflict for those experiencing them, this thesis was interested in understanding how the participants valued and ranked the multiplicities they were involved in. As a result, I showed that while the feminist self and the family self were deeply intertwined, they were also not experienced as occupying equal, fair, or democratic positions within the narratives. The in-depth view provided by the multiple ethnographic interviews allowed me to see how these hierarchies are, in themselves, multiple. While the family self was narrated as more sustaining and

powerful, the feminist self was, nevertheless, narrated as more genuine or identified-with.

The understanding of the family self as stronger or more powerful reflects the highly unequal positions discourses of family and feminism occupy in the social landscape of middle- to upper-class, savarna-coded India, in which this study took place. As Doreen Massey has noted, a "dominant ideology of home valorizes some social relations and marginalizes others" (Massey 1994, 26), and the family holds a legitimacy and continuity not afforded to emergent feminist selves. As I have demonstrated, families are also intense affective and economic structures impacting the twentysomething-year-old participants in both inescapable and deeply desired ways. In this sense, a feminist self is an underdog that is forced to relate to the family, not the other way around. Yet, at the same time, a multitude of narratives attest to the feminist, Delhi self being understood as the, in some sense, more 'real' one—the 'I' that lives its own life, the 'me' the parents do not know and might never know. It is also, crucially, portrayed as the morally preferred and superior one, meaning that family identifications come to be scrutinized through feminist moral frameworks—so the latter is, in this limited sense, also superior.

As a result of the valuations of selves, interacting with the family, after living in Delhi for a number of years, takes on a performative role in many of the narratives —the women describe themselves as, in a sense, playing the daughter in ways that might be both exhausting and (sometimes) comforting. This performance was portrayed as more or less forced or more or less chosen. Some portrayed it as something they did with natural ease, while others come across as increasingly struggling. While the Delhi self is also understood as a process of constant becoming, requiring active work—and the family can appear as something existing without you, threatening to pull you in—the labor involved in building a feminist self can be understood as unalienated, equipping the teller with a sense of 'realness', ownership over and belonging in one's own personhood.

Srivastava (2010) has identified the possible pleasures involved in a fragmentation of self, a process, he argues, that subjects often have an active interest in. Some of the most interesting findings of my thesis relate to the question of how multiplicity and hierarchy was reported to be *felt* by these self-identifying feminist participants. To what extent was this seen as a conflict, and to what extent was a desire for closure or wholeness expressed? The responses showed moments of what can be understandable as pleasure, moments of deep disavowal, and many moments of ambivalence and political pragmatism. While many of the women expressed a desire for emotional investment in what were seen as deeply conflicting positions, multiplicity itself was not seen as pleasurable. Rather, in the majority of cases, fragmentation was narrated as a somewhat

inevitable ill, needed to facilitate a meaningful life. Often, fragmentation was seen as meaningful in the sense of creating an unknown and thus less governable self, distanced from the parents. In light of this, participants did not express any personal or political-feminist imperative to aim to suture these different selves together, although the alienation they felt in the family sphere could also be experienced as "the saddest thing ever." Ambivalence and multiplicity, in their multiple affective registers, often happened in parallel during the interviews. Multiple and conflicting emotions were expressed in interwoven ways: guilt and joy, relief and sadness, excitement and fear.

As selfhood, in this thesis, is shown to be an active process of becoming, it is intimately linked to questions of agency. Throughout this thesis, we have observed how agency gets formed within relationships of imperfect support and is at the same time radically constrained by those very same relationships. If knowledge begins at home, so does the possibility for acquiring new knowledge. The women's privileges, ability to think critically, and limited ability/desire to break with the system were seen by them as having developed in the family. The daughters' university degrees, the life and work in Delhi, and the critical feminist vocabularies were seen as largely enabled by particular kinds of social background (meaning both personal family background and structural capital). At the same time, support from the family came with economic dependency, a sense of guilt and indebtedness, and a genuine desire to give back something of what they had received. Echoing e.g. Sharangpani (2018), this thesis has demonstrated how familial relationships are best understood as neither simply supportive nor oppressive, but as sites of contradiction within which subjects appear and which they must negotiate. The daughters' negotiations of relationships with family members were different depending on the relationship: mothers and fathers were perceived and talked about very differently. What can be called a daughterly habitus appears here as generative and adaptive, not fixed—the interviews articulated a constant renegotiation around gender and family roles using explicitly feminist language.

This thesis has underscored the ways in which the participating women depicted their relationship to feminism as the key means through which they negotiated family relationships. Family was made sense of *as feminists*, creating themselves as evolving political subjects in the process. In contrast to Thapan's argument that the lack of change in familial gender roles and political awareness in middle-class ('upper' caste-coded) families means that "the gendered self does not seek to consciously develop an interior world of social and political awareness that may challenge social constructions of identity" (2009, 32), quite the opposite was the case in this data. The women drew upon multiple feminist scripts and modes to make sense of the family and, in the process of doing so, emphasized

family control of daughters as a feminist issue. At the same time, this did not constitute any necessary break with the family; rather, it was via the opportunities afforded by the family that the participants' came to take up new spaces, queer-er worlds, and critical vocabularies.

What's more, the reflexive and aiming-to-be-intersectional language used by the interviewees made the issue of gendered negotiations and control not just a (liberal) issue for oneself, but as something that had implications for other members of the family, as well as implications of complicity in terms of larger feminist causes, in which different women are very differently located structurally. Here, my work moves on from earlier South Asian discussions of daughterly negotiations—such as Sirisena's (2024) article on Sri Lankan daughters and Krishnan's work (2016, 2018, 2021) on college girls bending rules in Chennai. While agentic young women such as those studied by Sirisena and Krishnan make sense of the complexities of individual desires, care, love, and family control, questions of how their personal decisions might affect other women or society negatively on a structural level do not arise. The women in this study consciously separated out agency from feminism—with an understanding that one's own agency might be actively anti-feminist if left unchecked. At the same time, by virtue of the lack of collective movements addressing family control of adult daughters—emphasized in the participants' post-college life—the interviewees often appeared very alone in relation to the practical work that would needed to potentially change to parents. This could contribute to a sense of alientation and exhaustion.

Despite this, my study shows the women going beyond observations prevalent in earlier literature by showing how the participants' agency is not only used to "disagree, not disrupt" (Sirisena 2024), but, when needed, can also—at least in the case of some of the women—meant pushing for a more radical remaking of the family, such as in the case of distancing oneself from fathers or severely challenging the mothers. The complex negotiations involved in this shows how "relationality should not be solely understood as a positive good, but should be seen in open-ended terms, noting that sometimes relationality drives people away from draining relationships" (Roseneil and Ketokivi 2016, 149).

At the same time, the study also shows how a "desire to care" (Ramdas 2015) can at other times be central—highlighting how "caring for the self and the other is deeply intertwined" (ibid., 255). While scholarship has often focused on ideas of a duty to care among girls (Thapan 2009) and the "resentful" agency this could lead to in older women (Chowdhury 2016), multiple narratives seen in this study frame care as something the women imagine as giving to those seen as deserving, on the basis of the care they themselves had received. Importantly, the interviews also showed how this desire to care should be understood as separate from any active

identification with (the values of) the care-receiver—one might want to care for a parent even when thinking they are wrong about most things. The women's lack of identification with their parents' views also served to protect their own identity and their feminist values, aiming to provide care without participating in (structural) harm.

Agency could take on multiple other forms, too, along the scale from fighting the family to playing along with it. Agency was not considered simply on an individual level; the women considered the potential consequences for others. This focus on the complex interconnections between agency and care was evident in the multiple meanings attached to lying, hiding, and creating a separate world for oneself. Most often, this functioned to establish and protect oneself; not sharing things, as Bhandari has noted, "become[s] a boundary marker of a personal life separate from that of the family" (2017a, para. 16). Yet lying was seen to perform multiple tasks beyond self-preservation, echoing Thapan (2009) who notes that compliance and control are not a binary.

Interestingly, lying was also understood as a form of (feminist) care, protecting parents from knowledge that would cause them to worry about their daughters in Delhi. At other times, care meant protecting a parent (typically a mother) from facing the familial and social consequences of having 'failed' as a parent. In such instances, care could also mean protecting the parents' standing in the eyes of the larger family network or kin. As part of this, lying could also mean performing 'good' womanhood in order to benefit from the approval and protection resulting from it (e.g. Thapan 2009). In such cases, the lines between what can be understood as feminist agency and being complicit in systems of inequality again became blurry, which was reflected in the narratives—participants would regularly question whether they were doing the wrong thing by not pushing harder against patriarchal norms. Yet, the complexity also allowed for further analyses and constructions of feminist selfhood, with the interviewees stressing the lack of moral clarity as something that characterized everyone, including themselves. This echoes Lugones (2003), who notes that resisting <——> oppressing does not constitute a dichotomy.

Taken together, ideas of selfhood and ideas of feminism are deeply interlinked in this work. What one is, imagines becoming, and fears becoming are articulated in feminist terms—the self (or possible self) is a *self as a feminist*. Feminism is repeatedly returned to as the enabler of the discussions, analyses and constructive challenges in relation to the family. Feminism appears in the interviews as providing a multitude of things: guidance, a sense of legitimacy to feeling and speaking out, a sociologized analysis of something perhaps only vaguely felt, difficult questions to ask oneself, and a promise of broadened horizons. Feminism appears as an opportunity for connecting and building a community in college, as

a reason to pick a certain flatmate, and a way to invest in friendships and love lives. Feminism means learning to contextualize oneself and one's parents, understanding how mothers, fathers and even onself can exist within the terms of limited agency, and showing and providing care in situations where it is deserved. Feminism also comes to mean being allowed to be angry, "uncouth," and doing things that "hurt" parents that expect their daughters to not talk back. It means that fighting and sometimes even leaving the family is okay. Feminism also means networks and potential job opportunities, ironically seen to also potentially threaten the future of one's more movement-oriented feminism. As people who are structurally both constrained and privileged, the women understand feminism to require a need for continuous reflection and vigilance, of not thinking one knows everything. Feminism "needs to be fucking intersectional" if the women are to practice what they preach.

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