

On Being Single

Nayani placed an array of tempting dishes on the freshly wiped floor of the small room she used for dining, living, and sleeping. I had arrived with two other women to share lunch in Nayani's rented two-room apartment on the outskirts of Kolkata. "No one be shy while eating!" Nayani exclaimed. "Eat anything you want, and take anything you want." Three single women friends and I had gathered to socialize and share stories for my research project, sitting on brightly colored hand-sewn floor cushions. I was the odd one out here, not only as an American but also as married. Yet, the others generously welcomed interest in single Bengali women's lives.

"Why did you cook all this?" Nita scolded Nayani. "I told you on the phone not to cook a lot! Bad girl, you made so much food. You know I don't eat a lot!"

"I'm starting to eat!" Medha dug in enthusiastically. "An amazing feast—friends, food, and fun. This is our Valentine's Day!"

Everyone laughed. The date was, in fact, February 14.

"Other people celebrate Valentine's Day with diamond jewelry," Nita remarked. She was dressed in a blue, white, and magenta printed silk sari with her long black hair pulled back.

"Our friendship is worth more than diamonds!" Nayani jumped in. This group had never before or since (now seven years later as I write) gathered together liked this, constrained by the demands of their work lives and a cultural milieu of limited opportunities for adult women's friendships beyond the family (chapter 7). Still, we were happy and enjoying each other's company that afternoon.

"Others often don't have real love anyway," Nita declared. "They buy diamonds just to show off."

Nayani urged us again to eat, gesturing to the bountiful rice, fish curry, fried potatoes, vegetable dishes, and sliced cucumbers with purple onion, lime, and cilantro before us. "Everyone fill your stomachs—eat as much as you can!"

Nayani and her friend Nita had met several years back while working part time at Sachetana, a feminist charitable NGO. Nayani had first joined the NGO as a client receiving skills training for domestic workers looking to advance, and she was later hired as part-time staff. Medha had located Nayani and Nita through the same NGO while trying to expand her network of single women, wishing to help me with my research and aspiring to make like-minded friends. We all chatted as we enjoyed our meal, and the women invited me to leave my audio recorder switched on.

Nayani's lavish cooking brought to mind other delicious meals I had enjoyed in elite Kolkata households, as Nayani had been trained to cook for a wealthy family with whom she had lived as a domestic servant since the age of seven. After she left that position in her late twenties, the Sachetana organization helped Nayani secure a job as a clerk in a Kolkata office. Nayani had never gone to school, but had learned to read and write while looking over the shoulders of her employer's daughter, enabling Nayani to move beyond domestic service. She was now almost 35. Dressed in a contemporary style with maroon pants and a woolen winter kurta, Nayani told us how she loves to cook but cannot find time to do much cooking in a typical day, leaving at 7 a.m. for work and returning around 8 or 9 in the evening, enduring a one- to two-hour commute by bus and train. She also does not enjoy eating alone.

Medha spoke up, "I'm giving you a proposal. I have an apartment in Kolkata, but I don't usually live there." Medha had arranged the apartment for visits to Kolkata, enjoying the cosmopolitan lifestyle in West Bengal's capital compared to the provincial city where she lives and teaches in a regional college. "I'd be very happy if someone stays there. You wouldn't have to think much about money. . . . I want to mix with others. I suffer a lot being so alone. Give my proposal a thought."

"So you would not feel so alone," Nita added to them both. Nita herself had never moved out of her natal home, residing with her elderly mother, married brother, sister-in-law, and nephew.

"Thank you," Nayani said to Medha, although noncommittally. I gradually came to learn how difficult it is to form not only marriages but also domestic partnerships and even friendships across class lines. Nayani and Medha had both been born in villages to impoverished families, but Medha had, against all odds, achieved a PhD and university professorship, while Nayani had spent most of her life as a domestic servant.

Medha and Nayani both spoke of how it would feel better if someone lived with them. "After a day of work," Medha reflected, "I just wish there were someone I could share everything with. That is why I get depressed sometimes. . . . I want to come home to someone who would ask, 'What did you do today? How was work?' I have no one at all. I go to South City Mall to watch movies sometimes—just alone! Just to feel like I am with some other people."

Nayani commented sympathetically, “Even if living with a family, one can feel very lonely, though. Can one express all things? If you find someone like that, you are very lucky, right?”

Nita turned to tell me about Nayani’s situation.

“There’s a problem Nayani faces,” Nita related. “The people in her village get married to others from the same or nearby villages, but since she has lived in the city, Kolkata, most of her life, her ways of thinking are quite modern (*adhunik*). She can’t get along with the ways of life of the villagers. She can’t marry and live with a guy from a village.” Nayani’s parents, unable to feed all their four children, had been the ones to bring Nayani to the city as a young girl to work as a domestic servant. We will see in chapter 2 how class mobility isolates the single woman both from the social class she left and the one she has now reached, generating a near insurmountable impediment to marriage.

“Who lives in Nayani’s village home now?” I asked.

“Only her mother lives there,” Nita replied. “Her father died, and her brother works and lives in Kolkata. Her sisters live in the village, because they married there and live with their in-laws and children. Nayani takes care of the finances for the family. They come to her for money when they are in need.”

“That was another reason for my not marrying,” Nayani explained. “I had to take care of people in the family. My sisters were not married, and I needed to get them married.” She had used her domestic-servant salary to pay for their wedding expenses and dowries. “I needed also to take care of the elderly people [in my employer’s family]. If I got married, I wouldn’t be able to take care of them all.” This—a daughter’s and sister’s care—is a central theme of chapter 3, how first-employed sisters in struggling families forego marriage as a way to support their own natal kin.

Medha commented to me, “This is her mind-set—she wanted to take care of her sisters and fulfill her family duties.”

“It’s not like they didn’t want me to get married,” Nayani asserted. “They wanted to get me married. . . . But anyway, now I am free—all my siblings are married.”

Medha turned to Nita, “Why don’t you find someone for her?”

Nita replied, “She wants to marry. If you can find someone good,” Nita urged Medha, “then please do look for her.”

We all spoke more about the delicious food, and then Medha volunteered, “I have another proposal. Let’s go on a vacation trip together!”

Everyone spoke at once about how much they love traveling, and yet how hard it is to travel as a single woman—it is not safe, and it always costs more. “Shall we go somewhere together then?” Medha suggested eagerly.

Nita apologized, “These days I can’t really go out or travel anywhere, because I have to take care of my mother.” Nita had recently given up her job as a school-teacher to care for her ailing mother. She complained that her sister-in-law, her

brother's wife, does not stay at home or take care of her mother at all, even though she is a 'housewife' and does not work outside the home.¹ Conventionally in Bengali families, it would be daughters-in-law who provide the bulk of care for their older parents-in-law.

Talk soon turned to the stigmas single women face in society, especially surrounding insinuations of impropriety. "Even if we are not doing anything bad, we have to hear things from people," Nayani protested. "People in the village will say, 'We know what your daughter is doing in the city.' And here in this neighborhood, when I come home late at night because of work, people won't say anything to my face, but they talk behind my back." Contending with social ideologies surrounding the dangers of unattached female sexuality is an immense problem in single women's lives, explored in chapter 5.

Medha added, "In 'Indian society,' men think they can control women. 'Indian society' doesn't think women can have their independence. When women stay out late at night, people think they have boyfriends or are doing something bad. And the women who stay inside with their families are jealous of those who are more liberal and working outside."

"I can understand [the jealousy of the housewives]," Nayani remarked, "because they are not out meeting or interacting with other people."

"No, this is not about not interacting with people," Nita jumped in. "My sister-in-law does not stay inside. Ever since my nephew was three years old, she would take him to school and wait for him there, talking with all the other mothers, and then after school she would go to her own mother's house. Around evening or night, she would return to our house, to avoid all responsibility. . . . She is always going out, with her son, and then hanging out with her friends. But no one says anything, because she has the mark of *sindur*," referring to the key sign of marriage for many Hindu women, include Hindu Bengalis—red vermilion in the part of the hair.

Nita's remarks displayed how a sexual double standard applies differently not only to the practices of men and women, but also to married women and single women. (Unmarried men, it went without saying for Nita and her friends, face no problems regarding sexual respectability if they socialize beyond the home or venture to cities for work.)

I asked Medha and Nita, who were both in their fifties, "Is it any easier now that you are older? Do people say less than when you were young?"

"When you are younger, people will say things to you," Medha replied, "but even when you're older, people will say things."

Nita agreed. "If someone is old and unmarried and going out, then people will still ask about where she is going."

"I'm 54," Medha remarked, "and people still wonder where I'm going."

"Now I'm at home," Nita said, alluding to the fact that she had recently given up her job, "but now I'm facing something new—the women who are working out-

side wonder if unmarried women who stay *at home* have sexual relations or affairs with people from *within the house!*"

"Right! Either way!" Nayani added. "Whether you work outside or stay at home, people will talk. Some people will say that unmarried women who stay at home are 'sick.'" Nayani uses the English term to imply someone engaging in improper or perverted behavior.

Medha went on to talk about how much rape is happening in India.² "It's terrible. And if an [unmarried] village girl gets pregnant, she can't even enter the village again! They won't let her enter!"

Nita explained to me, "That's why mothers marry their girls off at such a young age. They think, 'If I get my daughter married, and if she gets raped, OK, then it's not *my* responsibility (*dayitva*).'" She gave a contemptuous laugh.

The three discussed what they do to stay safe and maintain their reputations. Nita always wears a sari, the most conventional Bengali woman's dress, vigilantly performing respectability in the sartorial realm to make up for perceived inadequacies in marital status. "If I wear a sari, people may look a little. But if I were to wear tight pants and shirt, that much more would they look!"

Medha commented, "This is the condition we're living in. There's nothing we can do."

The remainder of this chapter offers background and context on singlehood in India to frame the chapters to come. *Why* does Indian society create such powerful obstacles to remaining an unattached, unmarried adult woman? And yet, how nonetheless are women increasingly opting out of marriage? Is being single best understood as a "choice," or as the unintended consequence of other pressing life situations, or as a more complex admixture of both agency and constraint? I first paint in broad strokes my interlocutors' overlapping reasons for not marrying, and I begin to explore the powerful gendered marriage imperative. I close with an exploration of living solo as an unusual form of personhood: a key reason even those who resist marriage often find singlehood challenging is that living singly apart from kin is not a familiar, unremarked part of habitus for most in India.³

THE QUESTION OF WHY

The question of *why* a person did not marry perpetually surrounds the single individual in India, whether male or female. My single women interlocutors were constantly asked, "Why didn't you marry?" Or "Why didn't your marriage happen?"—the latter phrasing the more commonly posed to women. As noted in the introduction, Bengalis generally use the passive "marriage has not happened" (*biye hoy ni*) to refer to women, articulating that girls' or women's marriages "happen," boys or men "do" marriage, and parents "give" marriage.⁴

Usually, I hesitated to ask directly or immediately, "Why didn't you marry?" knowing that single women have had to respond to this persistent and irritating

TABLE 1. Reasons for Not Marrying

Reason for Not Marrying	Participants (out of 54)
Purposefully chose not to	16 (~30%)
Conveying a feminist sensibility: perceiving marriage at odds with gender equality	15
Parents/kin failed to arrange marriage	13
Engrossed in education and/or work	13
Natal kin needed income and care labor	10
Stigmatized embodiment (regarded as disabled, ill, infertile, too dark skinned, and/or unattractive)	9
Too educated and/or high-achieving to find a suitable match	6
Could not (yet) find the right man	5
Uncomfortable with arranged marriage process but no real access to finding own partner	5
Preference for natal kin	4
Identifies as lesbian	4
Expresses some gender dysphoria	4
Disgusted by or uncomfortable with sex and/or men	2
“No one liked me”	1
Tarnished public sexual reputation	1
Pursuing a spiritual life instead	1

NOTE: Most participants conveyed two or more reasons, so the figures add up to more than 54.

question over and over again throughout their adult lives. I would wait until I had gotten to know an interlocutor better, or if only meeting for a single interview, I would start by asking her to tell me her life story. In the life-story context, the question of why could unfold slowly in its multilayered complexity.

Medha—my “key informant” and closest collaborator and friend in this project—gradually conveyed multiple layers of her reasons for not marrying, with which I open the next chapter.⁵ But when strangers posed the question “Why didn’t you marry?” as we went around together, Medha’s most common response was the curt, “I didn’t want to,” voiced in a dismissive, conversation-ending tone. I knew I had to be less direct in my questioning if I wanted to understand my interlocutors’ genuine, multilayered experiences.

Table 1 portrays in plain strokes my interpretation of the reasons for not marrying conveyed by my fifty-four primary interlocutors through their life-story narratives and our fieldwork conversations. The chapters to follow flesh out these reasons in more depth, but for now, I find a simple list of intersecting reasons for not marrying illuminating to consider.

We can see from this table that near 30 percent (16) of my participants articulated that they had purposefully chosen not to marry. This does not mean that these women never regretted some aspects of their decision. Pratima, a retired schoolteacher who had chosen not to marry, reported: “I would not advise my students now to be single—I tell them to think about it very carefully.” Especially for those who pursue unconventional life paths, making the decision is not always straightforward, and often involves pain and loss. Nonetheless, many in this group expressed confidence in their decisions to evade marriage, even if single life is not always easy.

Of those who *deliberately chose* to evade marriage, their most common reasons for making this choice included the following: what I call “conveying a feminist sensibility” or feeling reluctant to be subsumed within a sexist marital family, potentially facing triviality, oppression, and/or abuse (7 people); natal kin needing one’s income and feeling very attached to one’s own natal kin (6 people); being too engrossed in education (5 people); identifying as lesbian (4 people); and being too busy with work (3 people). (Other women also identified with these same categories but without seeing themselves as having deliberately chosen never to marry.)

Regarding the category I label “conveying a feminist sensibility,” only a handful of my interlocutors specifically referred to themselves as “feminist” using the English term, but many expressed perspectives that I would consider strongly feminist, believing that every person, regardless of gender, should be treated with respect as a full human being with equal rights. Fifteen women articulated such feminist perspectives as a core reason for being reluctant to marry, imagining conventional gendered family settings as oppressive toward in-marriage wives and daughters-in-law. Polly Chakraborty, a distinguished professor and researcher, exclaimed, “Imagine if I were to be working hard on a paper, and my husband were to ask that I make him some tea!” Others told of witnessing married female relatives and neighbors being physically abused, and of how all the trappings of married household life (*shongshar*)—including dressing up, donning gold jewelry, and wearing nice saris—seemed so trivial and confining.⁶

Bengali girls also hear while growing up all sorts of warnings about the bad things that might happen to them in their in-laws’ homes (*shoshur bari*) unless they learn to behave, cook, and be docile. Hanvi, who achieved an MA and enjoyed living independently, recalled how she was “too willful, even as a child,” to be suitable for marriage. “My mother used to lose her temper and say, ‘I don’t know how that girl will ever manage to do married/household life! Her mother-in-law will welcome her in through one door and promptly kick her out through another!’”

Sanjaya, who strongly self-identifies as feminist, criticized Bengali society and young women for continuing to believe that conventional gender and marriage systems are good for women. She explained:

During the generation of my mother, 95 percent of marriages were arranged marriages. And women had to accept every character flaw of their husbands and their husbands' families. This could range from hitting to beatings, and all sorts of bad behaviors. Everything they faced, they never had a chance to open their mouth and complain. They just had to accept that life and live it. There was no chance for personal desire.⁷

Definitely things are changing. Otherwise I would not be here speaking so frankly. Many of my friends are living very independently. More women are accepting the fact that they need to earn, and they can't just depend. They need some economic independence.

Still, the vast majority of women accept—they assume that marriage is a happy life. This is especially a problem in the middle classes. Upper-class women have wealth and will manage. Among the lower classes, everyone needs to work; all women must work. But the middle-class situation is very difficult. Women see instances of domestic violence every day. But *still* they make themselves believe that they have not seen anything bad. They see “the picture of my life” as marriage.

This is idiotic—a very stupid culture and way of bringing up daughters.

Not all who expressed such feminist sensibilities, however, saw themselves as having deliberately chosen not (ever) to marry. Although not willing to marry into an oppressive situation, many had hoped to find or still hoped to find a good partner who would be respectful of women, including their autonomy, worth, work, and desires. Sanjaya herself would still be very happy to find a suitable man, if possible. Medha, too, was one who had never deliberately chosen not to marry and still dreamed sometimes of finding a suitable match. Sanjaya was in her forties during my fieldwork period and Medha in her fifties, each beyond what would ordinarily be a marriable age. Each also expressed openness to finding a good male partner with whom to “live in” outside of marriage.⁸ But neither believed such an outcome would be at all likely, given all the other personal and social contexts of their lives. Further, both identify as strongly feminist and could not tolerate the idea of being partnered with a sexist man.

Being too engrossed in education and/or work to marry, or to think about marriage at the appropriate time, was a major reason for remaining single for about 25 percent of the women in my study, as I explore in chapter 2. Education and work for women are often regarded as two pillars of a silent gendered revolution taking place around the world.⁹ In India, growing recognition of the value of educating girls and fostering women's desires to work are a major factor making the opting out of marriage increasingly possible.¹⁰

Many who pursued education or work with passion did not in their early years, however, realize that gaining an advanced degree or professional success could mean they would never marry. Instead, for many, “age happened” gradually as they pursued their studies, or they became “too qualified” to find a suitable match. Aarini recalled, “I never thought that getting a PhD would mean I would not marry. But time passed, and then I was too old.” “Too much” education and

success can also lead to a dearth of qualified, eligible grooms. Medha pronounced derisively, “In Indian society, the groom must be superior to the bride in all ways, in *all* ways—except for looks!”

Table 1 indicates that the majority of women—70 percent in my study—did not see themselves as having purposefully chosen to opt out of marriage. The most common reason for being unmarried not by choice was when parents (especially fathers, according to women’s narratives) failed to arrange their daughter’s marriage—due to factors such as death, impoverishment, intoxication, incompetence, and/or selfishness. In rural settings, that parents and other kin failed to arrange a daughter’s marriage was the only common reason for finding never-married women. This was even true for Medha, who grew up in a village. Her parents had both died, and her brother (for reasons we will learn in chapter 2) never worked hard or effectively enough to arrange his younger sister’s marriage. Among my participants, the most common reasons parents failed to arrange a daughter’s marriage included the following: the father or both parents being deceased (8), the family being too poor to afford marriage expenses (7), and the father being incompetent, selfish, and/or intoxicated (5). Poverty often overlapped with these subcategories, for the death or incapacity of a father due to drunkenness or drug addiction often sends a family into economic precarity.

Although self-chosen “love” marriages are on the rise, the majority of marriages in India are still arranged by kin (Trivedi 2014), and wedding expenses for the bride’s family can be immense, including gold jewelry for the bride, copious gifts for the groom’s family (such as furniture, a refrigerator, fancy clothing), and often cash dowries. Some of my interlocutors with knowledge of Bengali social history recalled the story of Snehalata of Kolkata’s British colonial era, who in 1914 took her own life at the age of 14, reportedly to save her father the untenable decision either to sell their ancestral property to fund her marriage or, unthinkable, to have an unmarried daughter (Majumdar 2004). This event incited heated public debates and social protest against dowry, which is now technically illegal in India; yet parental incapacity to fund and arrange a daughter’s marriage still leads to singlehood for women today.

For women from poor and working-class families, like Nayani’s, another common reason for not marrying was that their natal kin were so dependent on their income and care labor that they did not feel they could depart in marriage—the central theme of chapter 3. Marriage in a virilocal Bengali context means that a woman’s income and domestic labor belong to her husband’s family rather than her natal kin. Although some married women continue to support parents and siblings through visits and gifts, the prevailing sense is that a woman cannot predict beforehand whether as a wife and daughter-in-law she will have control over her own financial decisions and ability to come and go from the marital home. This gendered kinship system drives some daughters and sisters to resist marrying in order to prioritize caring for and living with natal kin.

The force of ideologies about the value of the beautiful, sexual, fertile, fit female body within heterosexual marriage also explains why women outside prevailing standards of feminine fitness and attractiveness often cannot marry (nine persons in this study). Being “too black” (*kalo*) is a common reason Bengalis provide for why a girl or woman may face difficulty marrying, experiencing the colorism which has emerged in India as a “formidable form of discrimination” and “deep-rooted problematic practice embraced by both the oppressor and the victim” (N. Mishra 2015: 749, 725).

To be infertile or otherwise disabled or perceived as ill—such as being blind or deaf, or having once had cancer, even if perfectly fine at the expected age of marrying—can be a formidable obstacle to marrying.¹¹ Common assumptions are that a physically “imperfect” woman may not be adequately fit and able as a wife, reproducer, mother, household worker, and emblem of her new marital family. In some cases, concerned parents worry that their dark or disabled daughter will be treated poorly in her in-laws’ home and therefore choose to keep her with them, unmarried. Men with physical imperfections do not face the same difficulty getting married, my interlocutors explained, because of how people place more emphasis on a woman’s appearance than a man’s. Further, since women marry into a family from the outside, a groom’s kin may resist tainting the family line by bringing in a bride of perceived lesser bodily caliber. A dark in-marrying wife may produce darker descendants, for instance.

When I asked Sanjaya—who had suffered from polio as a child and now directs an NGO centered on disabled girls’ and women’s rights—if disabled women have a harder time getting married, she replied:

They don’t get married; it doesn’t happen. No one wants to marry them. Marriage is a kind of business, if I may say. Beauty, ability, and competency—these all go together. . . . Of course, there is a love thing, but that love also has preconditions. All these preconditions—a disabled woman doesn’t meet them. Or maybe we can say she’s the lowest on the marriage market; she doesn’t have sale-ability. . . .

There are three key criteria: a bride must be fair, she must be beautiful, and she must be physically fit—so she can work from 5 a.m. to 12 at night. . . . If a woman does not give birth to a child, this is also a disability. Then in 98 percent—no, in 99 percent of the time, she will be deserted by the family, and her husband will marry another.

Sanjaya spoke with eloquence and passion about how ideas of the body, marriage, sexuality, and value are interconnected in Bengali society. “Marriage is all about how much value the bride can bring from her father’s home,” she declared. “How much gold, cash, beauty, and other assets. A disabled woman really can’t compete. . . . The perception of a bride’s body is key, the overall perception. She must look very nice! Everything must be *perfect*. Jewels, nose, fair skin color. How beautiful are the hands. Oh, what nice legs and feet. . . . Now, the legs are most important. Why the legs? Because they are ‘sexy’; they connect directly to the ‘vagina.’ Hands are not ‘sexy’ in the same way, because they do not connect to the ‘vagina.’”

My research assistant Madhabi, who was with Sanjaya and me as we talked in Sanjaya's office over tea, interrupted to agree, adding, "And when the groom's family comes to look at the bride for marriage, they raise the girl's sari to see if her legs have any faults—maybe a flat foot, or too dark—"

"That's right," Sanjaya continued. "So, the beauty and *perfectness* of the woman's body is paramount. And people are so ignorant. They think that if there is a disabled mother, the children will get the same disability. Of course, that's usually not true! Like in my case, my disability from childhood polio, I can't pass this on to my children. But the thing that makes me so furious is that even educated people will believe that my disability will be transferred to my children.

"And our society is so 'patriarchal' that an impaired *boy* will have no problem getting married. The male child is regarded as a gold ring. Even if the gold ring is broken or bent, it is still gold. But a mother-in-law looking for a bride for her son will *never* think that a disabled girl (*pratibandhi*) is good for him. Unless a love marriage. But even in the case of love, the family will try with all their might to stop him from marrying her. And if he does, they will try to throw her out from the home.

"And if the girl's skin is black?" Sanjaya continued. "It will be very difficult to get her married. If very fair, even if she is not educated, or if her father has no money, still she will get married. For a disabled girl like me? Marriage is not possible. Maybe one in a lakh [100,000] chance."

Regarding sexual and gender identities, the four women in my study who identified as lesbian told of growing up being unaware of gay and lesbian identities as a category, but knowing they loved women and shunning heterosexual marriage, as I explore further in chapter 5. Among the four who expressed some gender dysphoria—a conflict between a person's assigned gender and the gender with which they identify—two identified as lesbian, and one told of being disgusted by the idea of sexual relations with men as a reason not to marry. One told of feeling "kind of like a boy" when growing up, often preferring boys' games, and at times wishing they had been born a boy. Another interlocutor, a retired schoolteacher now in her eighties, told of dressing up in her brother's clothing and screaming relentlessly each time her parents arranged to have a prospective groom and his family visit, praying to God that she would not have to marry but rather "work myself, earn money myself, and eat that way." One interlocutor, Ajay, dressed mostly in masculine-style clothing, had taken on a male name, and identified both as a lesbian woman and a transgender person.¹²

Finally, one woman in my study, from a poor rural family, had become pregnant through a consensual relationship with a young man from her village neighborhood, believing they would marry. After his family rejected her for becoming pregnant out of wedlock and because her family was poor (although a higher caste than his), she raised her son in the village defiantly as a single mother. Her son's father easily married—a story I tell in chapter 6.

A sexual double standard persists across social classes and rural-urban contexts in India (as in the United States and societies around the world).¹³ Many Indian parents insist that a good bride must be a virgin before marriage, although a boy may do what he pleases, a double standard portrayed in the popular 2019 Indian web television series *Made in Heaven*, centered on a wedding-planning business for the uber-rich. Depicting a potent blend of old and new, the first episode features billionaire heir Angad Roshan defending his fiancée's sexual past to his judgmental parents. His father advises his son, "It's OK to have fun with whoever you want, but the girl you *marry* should be pure." Angad responds, sarcastically: "Pure? Like ghee?" His mother exclaims, horrified: "She's not a virgin!" Angad retorts, "Nor am I!"¹⁴

One way that parents of "unattractive" or "undesirable" daughters might nonetheless find a respectable groom is to offer a higher-than-average dowry. The perceived deficits of dark skin, previous illness, or rumors of a previous sexual relationship, for example, can often be compensated for with a large enough dowry. However, such financial resources are out of many families' reach.

Considering my fifty-four interlocutors' intersecting reasons for not marrying, I found that it is mostly only women from highly privileged, educated, and cosmopolitan classes who are able to embrace singlehood as a distinctive lifestyle emerging from a claim to freedom of choice. Moreover, even for the elite, evading marriage is most often intertwined with other pressing life decisions and social, cultural, and economic circumstances—rarely best understood as merely a simple, free "choice."

Further, recent media stories and anthologies celebrating the rise of single women in India by choice often seem aimed more at promoting new ways of thinking about women and marriage than at describing actual widespread societal transformations taking place beyond the most elite.¹⁵ In rural contexts, only Subhagi (chapters 2 and 3) conveyed a strong sense of personal choice and agency behind her decision to be unmarried forever—in order to keep laboring to support her natal family and to live with them forever, the way a son can. The other reasons for not marrying among the nine rural women in my study were that their (impoverished or deceased) fathers had failed to arrange their marriages (5); that they had been born with congenital dwarfism (1); that they chose to serve God instead (1);¹⁶ and that they had become pregnant out of wedlock (Suravi of chapter 6). All nine of these rural women lived with their natal kin, as really there are no other living options in a village. Medha and Nayani were themselves born in villages and had followed diverse life paths to become solo-living urban single women. Yet neither had ever precisely chosen never to marry. We will learn much more about these two women's lives over the chapters to come.

Importantly, I also met no woman of any social class who had not faced forceful social pressure to marry. This leads to the next topic: the gendered marriage imperative.

THE GENDERED MARRIAGE IMPERATIVE

A 2019 United Nations report finds that less than 1 percent of all women aged 45 to 49 in India have never married, one of the lowest non-marriage rates in the world (UN Women 2019: 54). Marriage in India is the only familiar path toward achieving economic and social security, respect, and a socially legitimate way of being sexual. Primarily only the most privileged, city-educated, and cosmopolitan are the ones who can now embrace single lifestyles by choice, and even then, many must battle to make their singlehood accepted in the wider society. Despite online campaigns such as the Happily Unmarried project of the feminist Majlis Legal Centre, fighting “to remove the stigma attached to being an unmarried woman in society,” it is still hard for most Indian women to fight the social stigma tied to not marrying.¹⁷ Priya Satalkar recalls painfully how family and friends in India deemed that “something was terribly wrong with . . . me,” for not taking “the life path I was expected to walk in my society” by marrying, even though by other measures she was successful—well-educated and with a professional career. Yet, “being 30 and not married was a defect that outweighed all my professional and other personal achievements, even for my mother” (2012: 209).

One aim of this book is to move beyond implicitly situating marriage as a normative referent in the anthropology of gender and kinship.¹⁸ But what if the emic perspectives of so many of my single interlocutors or their community members underscore that marriage is unavoidably the normative referent in women’s lives?

As in the United States, where forms of singlism (implicit bias against singles) and marital privilege often go unrecognized and unacknowledged, so in India the prevailing worldview that marriage is normal and right, especially for women, ordinarily goes unquestioned.¹⁹ The rightness and normality of marriage is generally so taken for granted that it rather goes without saying, an excellent example of what Pierre Bourdieu terms “doxa”—“the world of tradition experienced as a ‘natural world’ and taken for granted” (1977: 164). But a core aim of anthropology, like feminism, queer studies, and critical heterosexuality studies, is to probe the taken-for-granted, to make visible systems of meaning and inequality in order to better invite critique. So, I begin to make visible here the underlying logics of the gendered marriage imperative—that is, the ways the marriage imperative connects to specific and distinct notions about male and female gender—one of the key concerns of my fieldwork project.

The most obvious reason behind the gendered marriage imperative in India is to control sexuality, containing and channeling sexual activity within a socially sanctioned, familial, heterosexual marital context. This goes for both men and women, although generally with an even greater sense of urgency and set of restrictions for girls and women.

Ideologies about sexuality form a core part of the “sex/gender system” in any society, to borrow Gayle Rubin’s useful phrase (1975). Rubin defines the sex/gender system as “a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention and satisfied in a conventional manner” (2011c [1975]: 39). These sex/gender systems “provide ultimate propositions about the nature of human beings themselves” (2011c [1975]: 60). In her germinal essay “Thinking Sex,” Rubin further argues that societies create “sex hierarchies” that distinguish so-called good, normal, and natural sexuality (such as heterosexual, marital, and procreative unions) from bad, abnormal, and unnatural sexual identities and practices (2011b [1984]). Through such sex hierarchies, societies organize sexualities into systems of power “which reward and encourage some individuals and activities, while punishing and suppressing others” (2011b [1984]: 180).

In India, channeling sexuality and procreation within heterosexual marriage is central to prevailing ideas about gender and the achievement of adult femininity and masculinity. Like women, men across India face pervasive and powerful expectations that they will marry heterosexually and reproduce. This can pose an especially difficult problem for gay men (chapter 6). Scholarship on “over-aged” rural bachelors in northern and northwestern India likewise exposes challenges to masculinity faced by men unable to find brides. Because of skewed sex ratios stemming from sex-selective abortions (an illegal practice that nonetheless persists) and the increasingly popular practice of hypergamy (brides and their families aspiring for higher-ranked grooms), men in many peasant communities are facing a shortage of potential brides.²⁰ In the northern Indian state of Haryana, over-aged bachelors are described as “bare branches” or *chade*, “a term that not only refers to bare branches of a family tree that will not yield any fruit (offspring) but also to clubs or sticks, thereby hinting at the propensity of these men towards physical and sexual violence,” behaving dangerously like “uncontrolled bulls,” missing the benefits of a channelized marital sexuality (P. Mishra 2018: 34). Such studies highlight the “indispensability of marriage and procreation in defining masculinities” (P. Mishra 2018: 27).²¹

In the popular 2020 Netflix original *Indian Matchmaking*—a reality TV series about arranged marriages among both Indians and Indian Americans—we also see portrayed the enormous pressure to wed for young people of both genders.²² The most intensely pro-marriage character in the series may be the mother of Akshay, the eligible young lad from a wealthy, Mumbai-based business family. As picky and hesitant Akshay rejects over seventy matches offered up by the matchmaker, his mother Preeti gives him an ultimatum: he must get married in the next few months, by immediately picking one of three girls she has found for him, or else she and her husband will choose for him. Moreover, Preeti blames her son’s indecision for her high blood pressure and worries that Akshay’s delay in choosing a bride is causing her older son and wife to delay having a baby, thus ruining the

whole family's plans. Preeti's overwhelming sense of determination and urgency relaxes only after her son finally enters into a lavish pre-engagement ceremony with a chosen match. *Meet the Patels* offers another popular representation of the intense parental mandate to get one's son married (Patel and Patel 2014).

Young women, however, tend to face even more pressure to marry than men, an unequal pressure tied to ideologies of natural differences in sexed/gendered bodies and roles. First, the risk of pregnancy out of wedlock threatens the moral reputation and respectability of not only the individual girl or woman but also her family and wider community. Concerns about caste and class purity also heighten concerns about the pregnancy of unmarried girls and women outside sanctioned unions.²³

Relatedly, marriage as a crucial foundation for reproduction and motherhood is central to prevailing ideas of adult femininity and female personhood. Medha remarked on this point in an incisive email she sent me in English after I had returned to the United States from a fieldwork trip in West Bengal: "I would like to draw your attention to some customs/conducts of Indian/Bengali society that I am facing in my everyday life and sometimes make me irritated. You know in India every Indian girl is addressed as Ma (mother) by others. They may be their family members or other persons from outside the family or even by strangers! The girl should be a mother anyhow as early as possible. Indian culture has no acceptance that women could reject motherhood!"

Medha went on to note how the various Bengali kinship terms for aunt (*kakima*, *jethima*, *pisima*, *masima*, and *mamima*) all include the term "ma"—mother—signifying again the ways motherhood is intimately entwined with people's conceptions about a woman's identity.²⁴ The corresponding terms for uncle (*kaka*, *jetha*, *meso*, etc.) contain no particle referencing fatherhood.

Further, the Bengali practice of calling people by kin terms in everyday interactions reinforces a sense of compulsory motherhood and marriage, as Medha articulated in the same email: "Another point should be noted that when I am travelling by public bus or train or meet people in the vegetable market or other places, . . . everybody addresses me as kakima (wife of father's younger brother) or jethima (wife of father's elder brother) or boudi (wife of elder brother). People do not allow the womenfolk to be unmarried even in their subconscious mind!"

Marriage, too, is the only normal way for an adult woman to establish a secure place within a family, in a society where family is key to social and economic security (chapters 3, 4; Basu 1999, 2015).

All this helps explain not only the immense pressure to marry but also the pressure for girls and women to marry young. UNICEF reports that one in three of the world's child brides live in India (2019: 4). In 2015–2016, approximately one in four young women in India had been married before their 18th birthday, and nearly half of these women were married before turning age 15.²⁵ In the state of West Bengal, where I centered my research, 42 percent of young women

currently aged 20 to 24 were first married before age 18 (UNICEF 2019: 4, 9). This is true even though child marriage in India—below 18 for women and 21 for men—is technically illegal.

One key incentive for marrying a daughter young is to keep her peak years of fertility, sexual attractiveness, and sexual desire safely contained within marriage. Grooms and their families also value a young bride as likely to be more docile and adaptable than a mature one. The fact that grooms tend to be older than their brides by around 2 to 12 years in both rural and urban contexts in India helps maintain a naturalized male dominance within marriage. As Pierre Bourdieu articulates, the widespread desire (in France and so many other societies) that a male partner be not only older but also taller than a female partner serves to “tacitly and unarguably demand that, at least in appearances and seen from the outside, the man should occupy the dominant position within the couple” (2004: 340).

Everyday fieldwork conversations with both married and unmarried persons highlight the interconnected ideologies of sexuality, reproduction, kinship, and respectability making up the gendered marriage imperative. In my fieldwork in Bengali villages, I would commonly ask, “At what age is it good for girls or women (*meyera*) to get married?”²⁶ I asked this question one pleasant winter morning in a mixed-class and -caste village neighborhood where several adult women were gathered out on the central lane.

“After about age 15 or 16, you begin to think—‘How is this girl’s marriage going to happen? How are we going to get her married?’” Chobi replied.

“By age 18, it’s a must,” Subhagi added. “Girls should be married by age 18.”

Bandana offered a slightly higher age. “By age 20 to 22, it’s good to get a girl married.”

Others quickly interrupted: “Where are people waiting until 20 or 22? No one is waiting until the girls are age 20! Still now no one is waiting until she is 20 to give a girl’s marriage!”

“Where are they even letting the girls reach 18 years?” Subhagi chimed in. “Society is there, no? Boys will grab the girls and eat them!” (referring to the vulnerability of unmarried girls to sexual assault). “It is better to get them married around 15 or 16.”

Among more elite social classes and in urban contexts, young women pursuing education and careers often now wait until around age 22 to 28 to marry. Above age 30, many begin to feel that a woman is getting too old for marriage, and it is highly unusual for a woman in India to marry after age 35.

Author Ira Trivedi tells of her grandfather’s advice on the occasion of her 21st birthday: “He said I should get married quickly because ‘women are like balls of dough. If they sit around for too long they harden and make deformed chapattis.’ My grandfather believed that a good marriage [or wife?] was like a perfectly round chapatti and to achieve this perfection, the dough had to be supple, fresh, and

young. It has been nearly seven years since then, and now at 28, I am unequivocally, by Dadaji's standards, a hardened deformed, inedible roti" (2014: 173).

On another occasion in Kolkata, Shipra Chatterjee, a mother in her fifties from an upper-middle-class family, articulated a clear biological rationale for the marriage imperative, tied to her sense of natural differences between male and female bodies. Her own daughter, Aparajita, had married late at almost age 30 while pursuing a PhD. The long years of her daughter's single status had caused Mrs. Chatterjee much concern.

"These days, many educated girls are saying, 'There is no benefit to getting married. I can earn my own income, stand on my own two feet.' But their parents worry—when they get old, what will happen?" That is, with no children, who will care for them in old age?²⁷ Further, Shipra Chatterjee had faced criticism from her neighbors and kin for letting her daughter remain unmarried. "People would criticize and falsely slander us, saying, 'Your daughter is wandering around here and there, coming home late.'"

Mrs. Chatterjee, Aparajita, and I were dining together in the family's apartment, enjoying a noon meal of rice, daal, fish stew, and delectable vegetable dishes. "We worry much more about an unmarried daughter than a son," Mrs. Chatterjee explained, "because of the 'biological difference' between boys and girls."

Aparajita asked her mother with a critical tone, "What do you mean by 'biological difference'?"

Mrs. Chatterjee blushed and hesitated to answer. I asked if she was referring to the risk of pregnancy. "Yes, that's it. In Western societies, girls may know how to protect themselves; but here they don't know all that—they could suddenly fall into trouble." Aparajita later elaborated that her mother likely was expressing her general sense that Western young women have more control over their bodies and sexuality—more sex education knowledge, more access to birth control, less vulnerability to sexual assault.²⁸

In another village, I gathered with three married sisters I had known since they were girls, when I had conducted dissertation fieldwork in their natal village thirty years earlier. We were assembled for a jovial reunion at the middle sister's brightly painted brick-and-plaster house, looking out to a walled courtyard filled with a kitchen garden, papaya tree, and abundant flowers. Each sister now had daughters of her own. The oldest sister, Mithu, had arranged her daughter's marriage at age 13; the youngest, Asha, had just arranged her daughter's marriage at age 15. The family had been working on finding a suitable match anyway, but sped up the process when Asha's daughter had begun flirting with a neighborhood boy they deemed to be from a lower caste. Roudri, the only one whose husband had a reliable salaried job, raising her social class a little above that of her sisters, had two daughters ages 16 and 18 who were still unmarried and in school. These girls' increased education promised to bring them higher-ranked grooms, but still their father and aunts were becoming worried.

“He’ll feel a big relief once the girls are married,” Roudri said of her husband.

It was a Sunday, and Roudri’s husband, Dilip, was present. He concurred: “Whoever has daughters worries greatly.”

But Roudri spoke of how she feels like crying each time the subject of her daughters’ marriages comes up. The girls’ father is home just a few days per month, residing most of the time in a coal company housing complex several hours’ journey away. Roudri and her daughters spend all their time together and have become such good pals. Roudri’s in-laws live right nearby in the same village neighborhood, but she and her husband had set up their own separate household.

Mithu scolded her younger sister, “Mothers will always feel bad during their daughters’ weddings, but you must gain strength.” In Bengali families, sons conventionally stay living with their parents after marriage, while daughters move away.

Roudri responded, “That’s what everyone says. But I don’t know why—I feel like crying. I cannot live without them.”

Asha, the youngest of the three adult sisters, offered sympathetically, “I also at times cry for my daughter” (her only child, gone at age 15 for just the past month). Asha laughed gently to lighten the mood. She had also seemed proud and excited by her daughter’s marriage when first sharing the news with me.

Anindita, my research assistant who was present that day and getting along especially well with Roudri’s two teenage daughters, asked the group, “If a *boy* would be around 26 or 27 and unmarried, would you get worried then?”

“No!” Mithu answered quickly.

Dilip replied, “Until 30 is OK for a boy. Actually, if the boys want to marry, then they can, and if they do not want to marry, then let it be. For boys there is nothing to worry about.²⁹ But for girls—,” he paused. “For girls—,” he paused again. “Well, if I die, then what will they eat?” He articulated the important matter of economic security, but I sensed that underneath his comments lay an even greater concern: that the girls could become pregnant out of wedlock, their reputations ruined.

The youngest of the two daughters jumped in to protest, “You’ll see! We can look after ourselves! We can look after ourselves.”

One of the largest and most important responsibilities of Indian parents, people say, is to ensure that their children, of either gender, are married, as part of ensuring economic and kinship security, sexual propriety, patrilineal reproductivity, old age care, and perceived normal adulthood. Rachana Sen, a never-married history professor in her fifties who resides in her natal home, commented at the end of her life-story narrative: “I regret one thing—that my father died with that regret of my not marrying; and my mother still worries—what will happen after she leaves.”

Aarini, the computer engineer in her forties who had worked in Silicon Valley before returning to her ancestral home in Kolkata, would sometimes criticize her own parents for failing to arrange her marriage: “It is the parents’ *‘moral responsibility’* [she emphasized these two terms, speaking in English] to get their children

married, and to a *good person*, too.” According to Aarini, over the years her parents had only ineffectively suggested a few matches, thinking that their independent, PhD-pursuing daughter would likely find her own match instead.

To emphasize parents’ duty to give their daughters in marriage, some Bengalis invoke age-old Hindu traditions, such as codes for conduct set forth in the ancient Sanskrit text *Laws of Manu*.³⁰ One well-known prescription from the *Laws of Manu* stipulates that a father sins if he fails to marry his daughter off by the time she reaches puberty. One father explained that the text puts it this way: “If one drop of menstrual blood flows before his daughter is married, then the father has sinned.” In the *Manu* text, this statement follows another well-known passage articulating the appropriate dependence of women on male kin: “Her father guards her in childhood, her husband guards her in youth, and her sons guard her in old age. A woman is not fit for independence. A father who does not give [his daughter] away at the proper time should be blamed” (*Manu* 1991: IX.2–4, 197). Giving a daughter in marriage at the appropriate time, according to the text as it goes on, is essential not only to ensure the purity of the daughter and her family line but also to foster reproduction. Just as it is reprehensible for a father not to arrange his daughter’s marriage at the proper time, so “a husband who does not have sex with her at the proper time should be blamed” (*Manu* 1991: IX.4, 197). Further, “women were created to bear children, and men to carry on the [family] line; that is why the revealed canon prescribes a joint duty (for a man) together with his wife” (*Manu* 1991: IX.96, 209). Although some critique the patriarchal assumptions underlying such textual passages, the lines convey ideologies familiar to many in India.

Given the powerful expectation that marrying is proper, normal, and necessary, many have a hard time comprehending how some women remain unmarried. One Western anthropologist I met on a train returning to Kolkata from a rural fieldwork stint told me that she loved my project. She herself had never married and had tried for years to explain to her interlocutors in India that not marrying was a choice for her. They could not understand. Finally, she decided it was easier just to strike her forehead—the location of fate—and exclaim, “O, Bhagavan!” (Oh, God!), signifying that we cannot understand God’s ways. This response, she said, goes over much better. When I reported the incident to Medha, she laughed hard.

SINGLES HOUSING, AND LIVING SOLO AS A UNIQUE FORM OF PERSONHOOD

Before closing this overview chapter on being single, I wish to probe a broader ideology of personhood and sociality at play—the fundamental matter of the suitability or unsuitability of any person living alone and/or apart from kin. An additional challenge to not marrying for women in India is that few housing options exist beyond the family. For most people in India, to live apart from kin, and

especially to live alone, is not a familiar or accessible way of being. One of my Bengali research assistants, herself unmarried in her thirties while living in her north Kolkata natal home, reported by email her mother's reflections on the notion of living alone:

If living by oneself was that easy and acceptable hereabouts, then other things that we take for granted—like the imperative on getting married, or on looking after one's parents when they're older—would fall apart quite soon. Voluntarily living by oneself outside one's family home when it's not required professionally indicates to my mother (and to me, now that I think about it) an adoption of a lifestyle quite different from what we think of as the Indian or Bengali way of life.

In contrast, recent research suggests that singles in North America and western Europe mostly prefer to live alone (e.g., Kislev 2019a: 174). National housing statistics reveal a lot. People who live alone make up 28 percent of all US households (Klinenberg 2012: 4–5), and the percentage of one-person households in several major European cities has exceeded 50 percent (Kislev 2019a: 4). In Japan, too, one-person households have recently become the most common type (Raymo 2015). In India, merely 3.7 percent of households are single person (Dommaraju 2015: 1246–1247). Although a few women in my study professed to enjoy living solo, one reason others were ambivalent about being single is the threat that they might have to live alone.

It may come as no surprise, then, that the most common living situation for unmarried women and men in India is to live with natal kin. Normally daughters are expected to be transient members of their natal homes in anticipation of moving to their husband's home upon marriage. Yet, 27 of my 54 key interlocutors lived with natal kin in their homes of birth, striving to legitimize the kinds of lifelong ties to natal kin and home that their brothers more commonly enjoy. Three more lived with sisters in other ways beyond the natal home—one on the floor of a hall in a married sister's home, and two more sisters with each other in a home purchased by the elder sister's former employer, for whom she had worked for thirty years as a live-in domestic helper (table 2).

Beyond the family, women in India still ordinarily have few housing choices. As I detail further in chapter 5, prospective urban landlords often refuse to rent to single women, finding them morally suspect. In rural areas, virtually no housing exists beyond family homes.

Yet, one transition making singlehood increasingly possible in India's metros is the expanding of independent living options, primarily for the middle and elite classes. These include

- the burgeoning of high-rise apartment complexes, featuring nuclear-family-style apartments appealing to some solo dwellers (although some housing complexes specifically forbid single women residents, or require that such a

TABLE 2. Living Situations of Single Women Participants

Living Situation	Participants (out of 54)
With natal kin in natal home	27
Alone in a single-person household	13
In a working women's hostel	7
In an old age home	3
With a sister (not in the natal home)	3
With friends	1

- woman provide a letter from a father or sign a pledge that she will not drink alcohol, smoke, stay out late, or entertain men);
- the development of urban hostels for unmarried, divorced, and widowed working women, such as the Government of West Bengal Working Girls' Hostel in Kolkata, where I spent much time conducting participant observation fieldwork; and
 - the emergence of a retirement home market, institutions often termed in English "old age homes" (although co-residence with adult children is still the norm in India).

Working women's hostels and old age homes provide two contemporary non-kin housing options for ten of the women in this study, seven in a working women's hostel and initially three in old age homes. Two more women subsequently moved into an old age home over the course of this research. The growing senior living market in India—ranging from modest informal apartments housing a handful of elders to upscale retirement villages—supports a broader social trend of independent living among especially the urban middle and upper classes, explored in chapter 4.³¹

To provide socially acceptable, safe, and inexpensive accommodations for working women needing to live away from their families due to professional commitments, the Government of India in 1972–1973 launched the working women's hostels scheme.³² Some hostels are run by the housing departments of state governments, such as the Government of West Bengal Working Girls' Hostel in the Gariahat neighborhood of Kolkata, where I conducted fieldwork.

In establishing such hostels, the state assumes the role of paternalistic guardian of its city's working women living apart from families. The Government of West Bengal Working Girls' Hostel maintains strict rules, including restricted visiting hours from 7 to 9 a.m. and 6 to 7 p.m. (6 to 8 p.m. on Sundays and holidays), no male visitors (including no brothers or fathers) allowed indoors beyond the one public ground-floor visiting room where the door must be left open at all times, and a 10 p.m. curfew. Any woman who needs to stay out beyond 10 p.m. due to night duty must provide a written certificate from her employer to

the hostel superintendent. This particular four-story hostel houses around three hundred women, two or three to a room, paying just 150 INR (around US\$2) per month. (All the residents agree that this fee, which has not increased in years, is very inexpensive, especially in such a desirable neighborhood of Kolkata.) Most of the residents come from working- and middle-class families, and their ages range primarily from the twenties to sixties (although Sukhi-di, one of my key interlocutors, was in her seventies during the seven years of my research and had resided in the hostel for over thirty years).

Strikingly, only 1 of the 54 women in my core group lived with friends, revealing the dominance of kinship over friendship in ordinary housing arrangements. Moreover, this woman, Sana, expected her residence with friends to be temporary. Sana identified as a lesbian, but was not out about her identity to the friends with whom she lived. She owns her own apartment, which she had purchased and decorated while dreaming of making a life there with her longtime girlfriend. When her girlfriend ended up marrying a man, Sana found it too painful to stay in the apartment. I tell her story more fully in chapter 5.

Although Bengalis tend to regard living entirely alone as highly unusual and sometimes almost unthinkable, 13 of my 54 participants, or almost 25 percent, did live alone in single-person households. Each of these solo-living women lived in urban areas, and all but Nayani (the host from this chapter's opening vignette) had achieved education up to the bachelor's (2), master's (6), and PhD (4) levels and had established careers with stable incomes.

Medha was one of the thirteen who now lived completely alone, in an apartment she had purchased on her own. Sukhi-di, who resided with two roommates in the Government of West Bengal Working Girls' Hostel, exclaimed to Medha, "I can't believe you can live all alone! I would be so scared if I locked the door at night and no one else was inside! At least *one* person is necessary!"

Others would ask Medha in disbelief and pity, as we traveled together to various villages in search of other never-married women: "Who is in your home? Your parents are there? Your brothers? You don't have *anyone*?"—questions posed with a tone of rising alarm.

"I have no one," Medha would reply simply. "I live alone."

"You have *no one*!?"—incredulous, aghast, almost unable to fathom.

A never-married woman who had chosen to move into an old age home explained her decision, remarking simply: "Living cannot happen alone (*eka to thaka jae na*). No one at any age can live alone."³³

Medha herself went through a period of hiring a woman to stay with her at night, on a mat on the floor next to Medha's bed, just so that another human presence would be there. Reluctantly coming for the income, the woman, who had been abandoned by her husband, would arrive quietly around 9 p.m. after depositing her two young children at her brother's house, and then slip out at dawn, tucking her mosquito net and mat under Medha's bed.³⁴

Men also face deep-seated pressures to marry, as we have seen, and to not live alone. This is a problem that can be particularly critical for gay men. After twenty years of living singly in the United States, gay Bengali journalist Sandip Roy returned to India, a country where “the idea of a man living alone is baffling” (S. Roy 2015). Roy, trying to set up an independent apartment, made an appointment with a modular kitchen consultant, who beamingly asked Roy to return with madam to approve the final selections. “When it finally dawned on him that there was no madam at all,” Roy writes, “he was aghast. I don’t know what shocked him more—that a man might approve a kitchen design, or that I lived alone, or that a man who lived alone wanted a kitchen.” Roy reflects, “I had not reckoned that what would be truly difficult was being an unmarried man,” not necessarily being gay, “especially an unmarried man living part of the time on his own, away from family. That was what was regarded as profoundly abnormal.”

Roy concludes: “It sometimes makes me wonder whether Indians can more intuitively grasp a right to marriage rather than a right to privacy or self-expression. . . . India might be a conservative country but if it understands anything, it understands marriage. That might just extend even to same-sex marriage one day. At least he married someone, thank goodness” (S. Roy 2015; see also S. Roy 2008).

A CLOSING TALE

I close this overview chapter on Indian singlehood by sharing a moving email I received while writing this book, from a woman who had read my first published article on being single in India (Lamb 2018). Her story powerfully illustrates many of this chapter’s themes, surrounding both reasons for not marrying and the gendered marriage imperative. She gave me permission to repeat some of her email message here:

I was raised by two parents of lower middle-class background in semi-urban Mumbai, and they were the earliest feminist influence on me. Me and my brother had exactly equal shares of food and privileges, and we were required to do an equal volume and scope of household activities. It was OK that my brother was more interested in household activities and would be with my mother in the kitchen and helping in cooking, while I was free to read books or follow my interests as long as I helped in the household in other ways.

All this started to change after my father’s death. I was 27. My feminist mother suddenly started pushing me to get married—those endless nudges to “settle down.” It seems suddenly she became aware that without my father, it was solely her responsibility to get me married in a timely fashion. She almost turned it into a mission to get me married. I had my career dreams, and I simply could not relate to my mother as my own—it was too confusing to make sense of the mother I knew who had told me that there is nothing in this world that is beyond my reach just because I am a woman and that I could make my dreams come true if I worked hard for them,

with this new woman who started implying that my life is meaningless if I do not marry, and who would remind me of my ticking biological clock. We fought and argued endlessly.

I was working with [a large international organization] back then, and that income suddenly pushed us from the “lower” to the “middle” middle class. My mother started worrying that the society would think that she did not marry me because of the money I was earning. So she refused to accept my financial support to the family. Many of my male work colleagues also started telling me that I will not find a man for marriage because I am too independent and had too much income, which does not go well with most men, even educated ones. . . .

During that same time, a scholarship in 2009 helped me move to [Europe] to pursue a master’s degree. . . . Meanwhile, a long-term male friend who was also being pestered by his family to marry asked whether we should marry. We were not in love but we understood each other well and thought this would be better than marrying some stranger. . . . [But] just before our planned wedding day, I called it off creating a huge social scandal. Though I was criticized for taking that step, it was my mother who paid the biggest price for it. She was now a double failure—she not only had failed to marry me off in time but she had also failed to raise me according to Indian values. She became suicidal and I had to start her on anti-depressants.

In this whole drama, my brother stood rock solid by my side, and made me aware that if I wanted to have a good life, I had to leave India. Society is not ready yet for women like me. I am in Europe since then. . . .

Reading your paper this morning brought back so many memories that I had to write to you. Thank you for studying and writing about us. Though now I am happily married, I still feel I belong to these women in your stories. We are the women making unconventional choices in my society, and in my class, middle class is really the worst affected where the pressure to confine to the norms is the highest. You rightly point out the price we pay for those choices.

This chapter has begun to make clear how singlehood can only be understood through the thickness of social-cultural specificity and attention to the intertwined phenomena of freedom and constraint in human life. The chapters to follow further uncover the intersecting conditions of social life making singlehood in India both increasingly possible yet incredibly challenging.