Becoming “Good Daughters” in New India

A Study of Urban Middle-Classes in Delhi-NCR

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Michaelmas Term 2025

Abstract

This thesis examines the construction of daughterhood in contemporary, urban, middle and upper-middle-class India, challenging dominant framings of gender inequality as a problem of poverty, lack of education, or limited awareness. By shifting analytical attention to educated and economically privileged families, it demonstrates how gendered inequalities persist and are reworked within contexts of aspiration, progress, and social mobility. Conceptualising daughterhood not as a demographic category but as a relational and affective position, the study explores how daughters' lives are shaped through everyday interactions, emotional expectations, and evolving intergenerational negotiations.

While existing scholarship on gender and the Indian middle class has focused largely on marriage and motherhood as sites of discipline, *daughterhood* as an ongoing intergenerational relationship has received far less attention. Addressing this gap, the thesis centres daughters' own accounts of family life, aspiration, negotiation, and constraint, drawing on qualitative research with highly educated, middle-class women born and raised in post 1990s Delhi-NCR.

The central analytical contribution of the thesis is the concept of "good daughterhood", developed as a gendered and classed affective formation that operates both as an internalised ideal and a regulatory framework. Drawing on feminist engagements with habitus, affect, embodiment, and feeling rules, the thesis shows how emotions such as gratitude and guilt function as mechanisms of affective governance. By transforming parental investment into moral debt, these emotional obligations produce self-monitoring subjects whose agency is exercised within symbolic boundaries of middle-class respectability, contributing to the reproduction of patriarchal norms within ostensibly progressive families.

Empirically, the thesis traces the enactment of good daughterhood across four interlinked domains: early socialization, education, marriage, and caregiving. It shows how daughters are marked as conditional family members from childhood; how education offers legitimacy while intensifying emotional discipline; how marriage reveals the limits of autonomy within family projects of class and respectability; and how caregiving consolidates moral worth even as daughters' labour is naturalised as love. In articulating the "double duty of daughterhood"- the expectation of availability to both natal and marital families- the study highlights an emerging and overlooked form of labour in urban India.

Ultimately, the thesis recasts daughterhood as an extended, affectively sticky relationship expected to endure "forever", generating new paradoxes that intensify daughters' obligations without unsettling the structural foundations of gendered kinship.

Table of Contents

Abstract i

Table of Contents ii

Prologue: *Kanya-daan or Kanya-maan?* On the limits of belonging 1

I. Introduction: Exploring Daughterhood in New India 8

Background to the study: Daughter discrimination in the Indian context 10

Implicit assumptions and persisting paradoxes: the case of the middle classes 13

Aim of the research: Understanding the flux, pushing the conversation 20

Research questions 26

II. Situating the Middle Class in India: An overview 32

Historical Background 32

The 'New' Middle Class: The discursive shift in the 90s 34

The middle class as a performative grouping 36

Middle class moralities 37

Gender and the Middle Classes: The relevance of studying the new middle classes 39

The changing significance of daughterhood 41

Characterising the thesis respondents 44

III. Research Design and Methodology 48

Thinking about daughterhood: Research Design and epistemological orientation 48

Fieldwork Design and Scope 51

Ethics of Intimacy and Digital Fieldwork: Reflections on the process 56

Supplementary Engagements: Interviewing Parents and Extended Fieldwork 58

Patchwork Ethnography as an Adapted Method 62

Modes of analysis: From Narratives to Themes 64

Positionality and Reflexivity 66

IV. Analytical Framework 70

Part One: The Dynamics of Agency: Reflexivity, Habitus and Gendered Subjectivities 71

Part Two: The Emotional Economy of Daughterhood 82

Part Three: The Intersection of Class and Gender: The Currency of Respectability 87

V. Becoming Good Daughters- Formative Years 92

Part One: Beginning at birth 95

The emergence of gratitude 96

Knowing one's place: the symbolic economy of daughterhood 113

Part Two: The everyday practice of good daughterhood 116

What makes an ideal daughter? 116

Internalised rules 117

Fields of influence: Beyond family 119
Cultivating the right disposition: Embodying good daughterhood 123
Part Three: Respectable femininity and Middle-Class Moralities 127
From the body to society: Gender, Class and Moral Regulation 127
The spectre of the city 131
Good daughterhood as a framework for navigating life 139
VI. Educated Daughters: From Promises to Paradoxes 141
Part One: Promises and Possibilities 146
The centrality of education: defining oneself 146
The pursuit of education as a middle-class morality project 147
The instrumental use of education 150
Against dependence: the gendered significance of education 151
Parental sacrifices: good parenting and collective goals 156
Pride, prestige, and returns from education 162
The irrelevance of gender? 163
Part Two: Pressures and Performances 167
The privilege- and irony of support 167
The gendered symbolic and cultural capital of educating daughters: 168
Daughters' education as exceptional: the invocation of gratitude 173
Becoming good daughters through academic excellence 176
Part Three: Paradoxes 191
Following my passion: 191
The classed and gendered hierarchy of ambitions 192
Gendered freedoms: 193
Neither dependent nor truly independent 201
The paradox of education: Too much exposure, too much awareness 202
VII. Dating, Love and Marriage: The litmus test of good daughterhood 206
Part I: Perfect Alignment – Dutiful Daughters 211
Marriage as a collaborative familial goal 211
Pragmatics of obedience 224
The internalised habitus of good daughterhood 226
Wedding ceremonies as sites of social reproduction 228
Marriage as the site of reciprocal negotiation: promise and perils 231
Part Two: Shock and Betrayal- Disobedient Daughters 235
The (restricted) freedom to say no: Anusha 235
The (restricted) freedom to say yes: Ragini 241
Post-facto approval: Gina 246
Part Three: Elongated Waithood- Disappointing Daughters 254

Overstayed welcomes: Shalini 257
Waithood and gendered worries 263
Voluntarily single: Anukriti 266
VIII. The Double Duty of Daughterhood: Care and its contradictions 279
Part One: Duty and Devotion- The practice of caregiving 279
The practice of care 279
Care as an enabling force: present shifts 284
"Forever" daughterhood? 290
Caring from a distance, digital kinship and technology 290
Part Two: Problems and Pressures: The stereotype of the good daughter 294
The perils of caring? Selfish sons vs loving daughters 294
The complications of money 301
Part Three: Dissonances: The limits of good daughterhood 314
The sacrifices of good daughterhood: material costs and gendered harms 316
Choosing their own burdens: the double duty of daughterhood 318
Limits to caring: The existential dissonance of daughterhood 323
The existential dissonance of modern daughterhood 327
The paradox of good daughterhood: Final reflections 328

IX. Conclusion 332

Bibliography 350

Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet 386
Appendix 2: Oral Consent Script 390
Appendix 3: Written Consent Form 392
Appendix 4: Recruitment Call for respondents 394
Appendix 5: List of Primary Respondents- Daughters 395
Appendix 6: List of Separate Parent Interviewees 400

Prologue: *Kanya-daan or Kanya-maan?* On the limits of belonging

December 2021. Manyavar Mohey Ad, Part I.

Just around the time I first began writing this thesis, a newly launched TV commercial by the popular wedding wear clothing brand, *Manyavar* found itself in the midst of much controversy, becoming the latest addition to a growing list of actors, brands and movies in recent years that have been 'boycotted' on social media. The advertisement, headlined by Bollywood star Alia Bhatt, was intended to launch *Manyavar's* bridal collection *Mohey,* targeting young, middle- and upper- middle class women as consumers of wedding finery- a market that has exponentially grown over the last decade.

The ad featured Bhatt, as a Hindu bride in traditional Indian attire, seated on her *mandap* (wedding stage), breaking the fourth wall to reflect on her position as a daughter at the moment of marriage. Recounting how she had been loved and cherished by her family throughout childhood, she proudly proclaims being "daddy's princess", who was indulged despite protestations by society to not "spoil daughters", and always shielded from being seen as *paraya dhan* (a monicker used to refer to daughters as outsiders to their natal families) by a doting father who never paid heed to such labels.

In a sobering afterthought however, the camera zooms in on a more serious-looking Bhatt, wondering why her father's reaction was always to *ignore* what society told him about daughters- but never to *challenge* it or *deny* it. She questions why he never told people making snide remarks that she, his daughter, was neither *paraya* (belonging to a stranger), nor a kind of *dhan* (wealth or property). Remembering her mother and grandmother's loving insistence that she would be missed when she would "fly away to her *own* nest", she asks whether those

declarations were, in fact, confirmation that her childhood home was never fully *hers*- that she was an outsider, even if a beloved one.

Reflecting on the wedding ceremony, Bhatt then questions whether a daughter can be seen as something to be 'given away' during the ritual of *Kanyadaan* - literally, the "gifting of a virgin daughter". In a voice laden with confusion, hesitation and hurt, she asks whether a daughter is something that can be *donated?*

The advertisement closes with an appeal for a reimagining of ritual, with Bhatt advocating for a "new idea"- *Kanya Maan* (respect for a daughter), instead of *Kanya Daan* (gift of the daughter). In a departure from convention, during the marriage ceremony thereafter, instead of the bride's parents placing her hand in the groom's, the ritual concludes with the bride, her parents, the groom and the in-laws all holding Bhatt's hand together, welcoming the advent of a new relationship. The gesture is intended to symbolize mutual respect for a daughter, to acknowledge her personhood, and affirm her continued relationship with her natal family even after marriage.



[P1: Screen grab from YouTube]

The advertisement's aim was to address the underlying sexism in the act of *kanyadaan*, a Hindu ritual that has evoked widespread debates in recent years, principally among urban, educated women among certain classes. Instances of daughters opting to have weddings without the ritual at all, of female priests modifying the rituals, and of parents publicly refusing to "give away" their daughters have gained attention as emblematic of changing attitudes towards daughters in India (Arya 2019; Hebbar 2017; Jahangir-Saxena 2016). In 2019, a viral video of a father freely denouncing the practice as he read a speech during his daughter's wedding was widely hailed as evidence of progressive paradigm shifts in India (NDTV 2019). Given this broader climate, where advocating for gender equality is increasingly deemed as a moral, even fashionable stance, especially among the privileged and educated classes, *Manyavar* likely expected its attempt to incorporate these values in its advertisement to reap rich rewards.

However, what ensued instead was a veritable explosion of hate and vitriol. #BoycottManyavarMohey trended on Twitter and other social media, accompanied by prime-time news debates accusing the advertisement of "disrespecting" Hindu rituals, while angry netizens alleged "anti-Hindu" propaganda (News18 2021; PTI 2021; Sanatan Prabhat 2021). Critics attacked the brand for misrepresenting the ritual's intent, challenging age-old traditions regarding the pious and ephemeral relationship between parents and daughters in Hinduism, even suggesting that questioning the practice amounted to an attack on Indian culture, especially when articulated through a commercial advertisement (Hindu Janjagran Samiti 2021). On Instagram, national-award winning actress Kangana Ranaut, a contemporary of Alia Bhatt (and now a BJP MP), lashed out at the brand for endorsing the "manipulation of naïve consumers" through "misleading advertising" that "demonized the Hindu religion" (ET Online 2021).

In response, *Manyavar* issued an apology, clarifying that that the ad's aim was "to promote a more inclusive and equal space for women in marriage and in life". While re-asserting that *kanyadaan* was "an intrinsic part of our society", the company claimed that their objective was to challenge the conventional *thought* behind the ritual rather than the custom itself (Agarwal 2021). Nevertheless, the brand withdrew the commercial from its official platforms soon after.

December 2022. Manyavar Mohey Ad, Part II.

In a subsequent *Mohey* campaign launched a year later, again featuring Alia Bhatt featuring as a modern Hindu bride, there was no allusion to any rituals or customs, despite the wedding setting remaining intact. Instead of a bride on her *mandap*, Bhatt appears as a confident young woman giving a speech during her wedding dinner. Addressing her parents with visible emotion, she speaks of how fortunate she was to be born *their* daughter- encouraged, indulged, free to dream and follow her passions, and never restricted from anything on account of her gender. Instead, she asserts proudly, her parents "let her be, just as she was" - *Jaisi thi, waisi hi rehne diya*, in the process arming her with the confidence to take on life on her own terms.

Turning to her in-laws, she then declares that she is carrying the same confidence with her as she makes her way "to her new home", "to her new family", with the hope that they too, will "spoil her rotten", just the way her parents did. The advertisement concludes with everyone laughing, welcoming smiles all around, as Bhatt endorses *Manyavar-Mohey's* new bridal collection.



[P2: Screen Grab from Youtube]

Explaining the intent behind the advertisement, Vedant Modi, the Chief Marketing Officer of *Manyavar Mohey* declared "we believe in progressive communication, and our main goal in making this film was to deliver a powerful voice of the new age woman, and inspire women who believe to be independent, confident, and find their place in marital life equally" (BrandWagon Online 2022).

The reception of this second advertisement in comparison to the one released merely a year earlier is a study in contrasts. Despite the similar themes, the same actress and same setting, this campaign elicited none of the outrage that greeted its predecessor. By combining aspects of modernity and tradition in a delicate balance, *Mohey's* new campaign projected the daughter as lovable and the parents as liberal, without ruffling any religious feathers.

In doing so, this ad departed from its predecessor in two significant ways. First, it made no observation on Hindu rituals, avoiding the previously critiqued social commentary. Second, instead of questioning the daughter's 'rightful place' in her parents' home or casting aspersions on parents for not challenging existing norms, it implicitly *accepted* the transition of a daughter from one home to another as inevitable, even happy- focusing on the love and care she was

hoping to receive in her “new home” amongst her “new family”. Neatly sidestepping the question of whether her natal home would no longer be hers, the advertisement instead heaped praise on the parents for their ‘gender-equal’ parenting, while simultaneously condoning patrilocality as desirable. Subsequent advertisements in the brand’s campaign followed this theme, depicting Bhatt happily adjusting to her new family and striking the “perfect balance” as a *Mohey* bride (Mohey 2022).

The trajectory of these two campaigns is not merely a story of consumer backlash. It reveals a deeper ambivalence within a society that is increasingly vocal about loving and valuing daughters, yet remains uneasy about confronting the *implications* of that love. In a fast changing, post liberalisation, globally connected India, the language of gender equality has gained increasing resonance amongst the urban, affluent families and daughters are seen as equally dear to parents as sons (Bhatnagar 2023). However, as the backlash to the first advertisement demonstrates, this affirmation of daughters is expected to co-exist comfortably with existing cultural norms and practices, but not disrupt them. Uncomfortable questions, when they arise, are best avoided, brushed under the carpet, or assimilated within modern desires in a way that does not contravene tradition.

However, in this ‘new’ Indian context, despite narratives of loving parents raising strong daughters, the continued acceptance that a daughter’s marital home is her ‘real’ home shows the difficulty of fully placing daughters- both literally and symbolically. What is her ‘home’, and where does she *really* belong? How can a daughter begin to answer uneasy questions about belonging, obligation and selfhood, in the face of both love and gratitude towards parents on the one hand, and dissonance towards unchanging gendered and restrictions on the other?

This thesis is an attempt to unpack the contradictions of modern daughterhood in 'New India', particularly among relatively privileged daughters who appear to 'have it all'. It is a story of their unending desire to please, their confusion and angst at encountering gendered limits, and their fight to find a rightful place, as *daughters,* in a society that has accepted them somewhat more willingly than before, but only, as some have found, "within the limits" (Gilbertson 2017).

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I. Introduction: Exploring Daughterhood in New India

"Of all the roles women are required to fill in this society, daughterhood is universal. Being born, every woman is another woman's daughter."

- Judith Pildes, Mothers and Daughters- Understanding the roles (1978)

The experience of being a daughter, as Pildes writes, is a universal one for every woman, irrespective of whether she fulfils any other socially sanctioned roles later in life. Whether she eventually becomes a wife or a mother, whether her own parents are known or unknown to her, whether they despise her presence or love her ardently, the very fact that she *exists*, makes her a daughter.

Yet, academic, sociological and anthropological scholarship on daughters has remained relatively limited- especially that which privileges the perspective of daughters themselves. In studying daughterhood through the lens of parents, families, societal or governmental institutions, as something that happens *to* them, the figure of the daughter becomes a passive object, a problem to resolve in the story of another; rather than a living, breathing being with her own desires, motivations, and agency in the face of various structural and socio-cultural constraints. Rephrasing a famous quote from Simone De Beauvoir's seminal work, The Second Sex (1958), "One is not merely *born* a daughter- they learn to *become* one". But how exactly does this process of daughterhood unfold?

At its core, this is the subject of this thesis- daughterhood. Its many meanings, its social construction, and its actual practice. More specifically, this is a thesis about *good* daughterhood. It deals with the question of what it means to be a good daughter in a fast-changing,

modernizing world, in a patriarchal country which has conventionally viewed the birth of a daughter as an unwanted accident, a mark of grave misfortune, a curse, or a punishment for misdeeds from a previous life. Today, as traditional scripts of gender equality, social norms around son preference and inter-familial relationships evolve to keep pace with a more progressive world, allowing room for daughters to exist and thrive, this project attempts to understand the experience of daughterhood in the voices of young women living this change. It explores how young daughters from privileged backgrounds contend with the contested and often conflicting notions of their own value and worth, in a world caught between diametrically opposed modernizing and conservative influences, which threaten to destabilize any attempt at creating a congruent sense of self.

Through this thesis, I seek to explore the complicated ways of *being* and *becoming* 'good daughters' for a relatively small but important category of young, middle class, educated, urban Indian women, who, while fairly privileged in the caste-class position they occupy and the opportunities they are presented with, have to contend with numerous disadvantages, restrictions and limitations that their existence as middle-class daughters foists on them. I trace the insidious ways in which gender discrimination continues to permeate their lives, placing limits on their purported freedoms and circumscribing their lives, often with their own consent. In sharing their stories, I hope to use the lens of daughterhood as a means of shedding some light on the intersection of gender and class in a post-liberalisation India, to reflect on the continuity and change in shifting middle class moralities, to understand the stickiness of patriarchal social norms, and to examine the important role that daughterhood plays in the social reproduction of existing caste-class hierarchies.

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The rest of the chapter provides a background to the study, explains its significance, outlines the main research questions and elaborates on the thesis structure.

Background to the study: Daughter discrimination in the Indian context

Discrimination against daughters has been a long-standing issue in India, with deep seated son preference legitimized through a combination of historical, social, cultural and religious patriarchal practices for centuries. The existence of a traditional patriarchal lineage system and son-centric inheritance norms, the extreme significance of sons from a ritualistic perspective (across different religious and cultural systems), and the continuation of patrivirilocal customs preventing co-residence, financial or old-age support from daughters directed towards parents, have only been few in a long list of factors that contributed towards the persisting preference for sons over daughters in the Indian context (Bhalla, Kaur, and Agrawal 2013; Clark 2000; Das Gupta et al. 2003; Kaur and Kapoor 2021; Purewal 2010). When combined with age-old expectations of daughters breaking bonds with their natal families post marriage, leaving for their 'own, rightful homes' once wedded, the notion that daughters are a form of *paraya dhan* - an asset belonging to a stranger, who will only be a transient part of their birth families, makes the devaluation of daughters within the family appears only 'natural', even an inevitable outcome (Larsen 2012; Sekher and Hatti 2007, 2010). Popular adages have consequently likened parents investing in daughters as akin to "watering the neighbour's garden", given the fact that the benefits of enabling daughters would never be reaped by her own parents in any way (Attané and Guilmoto 2007; De Pril 2008).

Sons, on the other hand, are viewed in popular narratives as a divine blessing, a form of good luck, an insurance for parents against old age, and worthy successors to family legacies (Jayachandran 2023; Pande and Astone 2007). The perception of daughters as "dead

investments" or "sunk costs" has been further strengthened through the economic liabilities posed by rituals such as dowry, increasingly expensive marriages (with costs borne almost entirely by the bride's family) and lifelong gift-giving from her natal home towards her marital home, which reinforce the view of daughters as financial burdens or "curses" for their families (Jeffery 2014, 2016; Kaur and Palriwala 2014; Sangari 2012; Tafuro 2020). This is especially true in the case of families which are not economically well-off, although the costs of raising and marrying a daughter have been known to drive even those financially better-off towards economic ruin, in an effort to uphold societal standards of prestige (Diamond-Smith and McGarvey 2008; Jeffery 2014; Robitaille 2020).

Finally, being repositories of familial honour, daughters' safety and security has also been a prime concern for parents of young women, necessitating rigid and continuous control over their mobility, freedom and sexuality, till such time as they are respectably 'given away' in marriage. Parents' continued responsibility to police the sexuality of young daughters, whose adherence to strict standards of "respectable" behaviour is critical to the preservation of caste and class boundaries makes daughters a source of lifelong anxiety and worry, further increasing aversion towards them (Desai and Andrist 2010; Phadke 2007; Vishwanath and Palakonda 2011).

It is no surprise therefore, that in many Indian households, the birth of a daughter continues to be marked as a day of misfortune and sorrow even today, with parents often feeling compelled to start saving for a daughter's marriage from the day she is born. In some instances in villages of rural Maharashtra, parents have been known to name their daughters various versions of words like "Bad luck", "Misfortune", "Worry", "Enough", "No More" and "Stop", in the hope that doing so registers their unhappiness with the birth of a daughter and compels some version of heavenly intervention to change their misfortune- a practice that had to be forcibly reversed

with state interference (BBC News 2015; PTI 2011). Historically, such aversion towards daughters in Indian society has also taken various violent forms, ranging from female foeticide to infanticide, purposive abandonment, malnutrition, discrimination, and forced early marriages of young daughters - all directed either towards preventing the birth of daughters, or the continuation of their life as burdens to their natal families (Croll 2000; Larsen 2012; Miller 1997)

A direct manifestation of such violence is evident in India's historically low sex ratios, which were in a state of consistent decline since the 1950s, when the Indian census first started recording this data, until the mid-2000s (Mayer 1999). From the 1980s onwards, declining fertility rates and smaller family norms combined with easier access to new reproductive technologies reduced the moral quandaries around abortions, facilitating an avalanche of gender-biased sex selection across the country that further skewed these already distorted ratios (van Balen and Inhorn 2003; Bhatia 2018; Bhatt, Murty, and Ramamurthy 2010; Jha et al. 2011; Kaur and Kapoor 2021; Purewal 2018). In 1990, the publication of Nobel Prize winning laureate Amartya Sen's article in the New York Times, describing how such processes had led to the cumulative projected loss of 100 million "missing girls" who had not been allowed to be born worldwide, brought global attention to the issue of discrimination against daughters in Asia, spurring widespread debate and discussion among international development agencies and organisations and renewed efforts by the Indian government to work towards the care and protection of girl children (Guilmoto, Chao, and Kulkarni 2020; Sen 1990; Tambe 2019).

In the post 1990s era, the issue of the girl child has remained the focus of numerous government interventions in India, supplemented by the introduction of stricter criminal laws against sex selection, large-scale awareness campaigns to raise the value of the girl child, and an intensive promotion of girls' education and health through a combination of policies, monetary subsidies

and infrastructure investment (Kaur and Kapoor 2021; Tambe 2019). In 2015, the cause of the girl child received a major impetus with the declaration of Prime Minister Modi's flagship scheme, *"Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao"* (Save the girl child, educate the girl child, henceforth BBBP), which sought to increase awareness of the ills of gender discrimination and to encourage the masses to invest in their daughters' education, while targeting "gender critical districts" for their low sex ratios (PIB Delhi 2015). The scheme recently celebrated its 10th anniversary, an occasion marked by the Indian Prime Minister in his Independence Day Address from the Red fort, where he celebrated women's empowerment as a key metric of "New India's" development story (PIB 2025).

Implicit assumptions and persisting paradoxes: the case of the middle classes

Despite these positive developments, a closer scrutiny reveals what is perhaps the most intriguing aspect of these approaches. Implicit in the discourses popularised by policy as well as media narratives is the assumption that discrimination against daughters is *fundamentally* a problem of poverty, practised only by the poor, illiterate, ignorant Indian, who holds regressive values, and must be made more gender-aware by those more conscientious than him. This is exemplified in the slew of governmental and civil society efforts in the last few decades which have narrowly focused their attention either on increasing 'awareness' of the ill-informed downtrodden masses (in an attempt to help them realise the worth of daughters), or on providing (often meagre) financial support, in cash or in kind, to below poverty line families, in order to incentivize the birth of daughters (Gaur and Anand 2015; Sinha and Gasper 2010). A journalistic investigation in 2021 analysing the expenditure of the BBBP scheme flagged how 80% of the outlay of the scheme was spent only on media advocacy and advertisements (Chandra 2021). These attempts have been accompanied by intensified governmental efforts to

discipline and punish the body of the poor woman, who is deemed to be the perpetrator of violence against daughters, by increasing targeted surveillance on her through *Anganwadi* workers in low CSR districts, in an effort to prevent potential sex-selection in rural areas (Wilson 2018). Awareness campaigns by governments and NGOs seeking to 'save and educate' the masses and increase the social value of daughters similarly reinforce the underlying belief that son preference exists among the uneducated, poorer, rural masses who hold regressive beliefs that devalue daughters.

At their core, these approaches operate with a presumption of guilt directed towards the poor man or woman, who is assumed to be engaging in discrimination against daughters or aborting them either as a result of his or her ignorance, or due to economic compulsions that make daughters unaffordable, effectively reducing the problem to a cost-benefit calculus (Klaus and Tipandjan 2015; Rosenblum 2017; Sangari 2012). A corollary of the argument imbued in these narratives is that those *with* access to education, exposure, or wealth (such as the middle- or upper-classes) will neither *need* to, nor *choose* to engage in discrimination against daughters at all, which explains the complete absence of the more educated and affluent sections of society from conversations around daughter discrimination.

Such a perception is bolstered perhaps by celebratory narratives discussing the exponential rise in young, middle-class Indian women's access to higher education in the last three decades, coupled with increasing opportunities for paid employment, greater agency in decision-making around dating and marriage, more mobility, increasing visibility and overall freedoms for these young girls, who are supported unequivocally in their endeavours by loving and encouraging parents (Alice W Clark 2016; De Neve 2016; Grover 2011; Tara and Ilavarasan 2009). Supplemented by declining fertility rates, smaller families and expressions of more gender-equal fertility preferences within them, scholars have recorded how middle-class parents, from

urban, educated and relatively affluent families increasingly seek to invest equitably in, and equally support the aspirations of *all* their children, irrespective of whether they are sons or daughters- indicating shifting social norms in these sections of society (Bhatnagar 2023; Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics and UNFPA 2017).

In recent times therefore, a triumphant, positive attitude towards daughters has become a commonplace part of mainstream media and public discourses featuring the middle classes, championing the figure of the empowered "New Indian Woman" (who deftly straddles modernity and tradition) or the "Valued Daughter" (who is loved and spoilt by her parents as much as any son) as a marker of change (Belliappa 2013; Alice W. Clark 2016; Radhakrishnan 2011; Seymour 1999). From celebrity astronauts like Kalpana Chawla and Sunita Williams, to sports figures like Mary Kom, Sania Mirza and Saina Nehwal, the moniker of "India's daughter" and "India's pride" has been liberally applied to an emerging category of middle-class Indian women who are deemed role models for a new generation, reminding girls that their dreams should have no boundaries (Kaur 2018). Celebrations of occasions like National Girl Child Day, Daughter's Day and policy campaigns like "Selfie with Daughter" that have garnered much media attention have also sought to reiterate the message that daughters are a blessing and a source of pride in today's India, especially among the educated-elite sections of society (Rao 2023).

These trends have coincided with the advent of a "New India" in a liberalised, globally connected economy which emerged in the aftermath of the 1991 economic reforms, whose primary beneficiaries have been members of the emerging middle- and upper-middle classes (Derné 2008; Fernandes 2006; Liechty 2003). Along with the forces of rapid modernisation, urbanisation and migration, which have changed traditional family structures in these groups, the access to educational and professional opportunities, greater income stability, changing

consumption practices and exposure to shifting global norms has led members of these classes to vociferously and publicly adopt more gender-equal attitudes towards their children (Lukose 2020). Shifts in cinematic iconography and new forms of media have also played an important role in mainstreaming ideas of gender equality, making them a marker of modernity (Dar 2024; Garg 2024). A string of recent movies, commercial advertisements and television serials in the past decade have successfully adopted the plank of equality and women's empowerment as a way to connect with their target audiences, highlighting the contemporary resonance of gender equality as an aspirational ideal (Deodrin Maria Correa 2011; Föhl et al. 2025).

Discourses of cosmopolitan open-mindedness and middle-class respectability, as some scholars have suggested, are now a key aspect of reaffirming class and gender boundaries and marking distinction for members of these classes (Gilbertson 2017; Säävälä 2010). Consequently, in the popular imagination of the issue, middle and upper-class parents, who have adopted this language and are willing to celebrate, support and encourage their daughters dreams' and ambitions, are assumed *not* to be a part of the 'girl child problem' in the country at all.

But why is this an issue?

In her work on the social constructivism of government policies, Carol Bacchi (2012) uses the "What's the problem" framework to discuss the significance and impact of "defining a social problem in a specific way". Embedded in *how* a problem gets defined, she argues, lie the "limits to its solution". She argues that it is equally important to think about what is left *unproblematic* in a particular construction, that which is *denied* a problem status, not just as a question of agenda setting, but in understanding the limits to *imagining* how a problem can be resolved.

In the present discourse, by conflating gender discrimination squarely with poverty, as a problem of economics, which can be solved for either by educating the poor or by giving them

cash, a significant aspect of continued discrimination amongst the wealthiest and educated sections of society remains completely ignored, with the assumption that discrimination against daughters in these classes is either non-existent, or not worthy of analysis.

Uneven gains? The complicated position of privileged daughters

However, scratching the surface reveals serious inconsistencies between narratives of gender equality between sons and daughters, and its actual manifestation within richer households. While investments in daughters' education and careers have indeed grown, achieving a normative status as desirable within middle-class families, scholars have found that gender biased sex-selection and continued son preference continues to be practised most aggressively by members of the "emerging middle classes", which constitutes some of the most educated and prosperous sections of society, residing in urban city centres (Gupta 2005; Kaur, S. S. Bhalla, et al. 2016). According to the Niti Ayog's SDG 2019 index, some of the most prosperous Indian states, like Haryana and Punjab, have recorded the lowest sex ratios in the country (833 and 886 girls per 1000 men respectively), performing much worse than more economically disadvantaged states like Bihar, Jharkhand, with trends in upper castes and classes being worse than those in less privileged communities such as scheduled castes and tribals (Niti Aayog 2019). As per NFHS-5 Data recorded between 2019-21, India's capital, Delhi, was among bottom five states and union territories with respect to worst performing sex ratios at 913 women per 1000 men, lower than the national average for both sex ratio, as well as sex ratio at birth (MoH&FW, GoI 2021).

Such findings are consistent with academic scholarship that has discussed the newfound tendencies of middle and upper middle-class families to practice sex selection to compose "ideal" families using more advanced reproductive technologies, wherein a firstborn daughter

may be tolerated or even welcomed as a part of the family, but the presence of a son continues to be *mandatory* (Jayachandran 2023; John 2021). Some studies have in fact revealed a significant correlation between increased education and wealth with reduced preference for daughters (Bhalotra and Cochrane 2010; Borker et al. 2024; Das Gupta and Mari Bhat 1997; Guilmoto 2009). A 2022 nationally representative gender-attitudes survey of nearly 30 thousand people by Pew Research suggested that four in ten Indians believe that it is either completely, or somewhat acceptable, to "get a checkup with modern methods to balance the number of girls and boys in the family"- a euphemism for continued sex selection (PEW Research Center 2022). Declining fertility rates have only further intensified this tendency (Raju 2023), especially among the more affluent classes, since with an ideal family size of two, the significance of having one son has increased even more, which Guilmoto (2009) referred to as the "modernization paradox". A paper by Bhalotra et al (2018) found that in propertied, wealthy families with a firstborn daughter, the legislation of reforms such as equal inheritance rights for women in 2005 was in fact positively correlated with a 3.8-4.3% percentage point statistically significant reduction in the birth of girls, since the inheritance reform raised the costs of having daughters for richer families, exacerbating the historic son preference in the country and increasing instances of female foeticide across the country.

How does one begin to comprehend the complicated position daughters in relatively higher income households occupy within their families? Are they desired or not? Is the situation truly changing, or have only *conversations* about lovable daughters become more mainstream? Few scholars studying demographic trends have attributed the difference between *stated* and *revealed* preferences regarding daughters to changing societal ideals, which make it difficult to *admit* aversion to daughters, especially in elite social circles- even as the practice continues unabated (Goli and Singh 2024).

The provision of educational opportunities, investments in daughters' future careers and proclamations of love and equality between sons and daughters in such families similarly do not stand to scrutiny when analysed beyond superficial trends, revealing inconsistencies and contradictions. For instance, even though there have been tremendous gains in access to education for women from privileged families, progress on the gender equality front is far from near. The gains in women's education have remained restricted to certain sectors, such as IT, that have been coded as "feminine" and deemed "suitably respectable" for middle class women (Chanana 2006; Gautam 2015; N. Gupta 2020; Hebbar 2018), often within strict regimes of surveillance and control enforced by parents in conjunction with college and university authorities (Krishnan 2021; Patel 2017). Despite the large numbers of girls who are attending college and enrolling for higher education degrees in STEM and allied courses, the leaky pipeline of progress in the sector remains as rampant as it was decades earlier (Amirtham S and Kumar 2023; Gupta 2025).

Paid employment, most distressingly, has remained out of reach for most urban, educated, women, even those with professional degrees, many of whom choose voluntarily to *not* pursue careers despite being highly qualified (Chakrabarty 2023). A 2024 report analysing data from the last periodic labour force survey shows how the growth in formal, salaried jobs for women remains stagnant, and only 11% of urban women today are in regular salaried jobs (EPW Engage 2024; Ishaan Gera 2024). India today has among the lowest female force participation rates in the world, and in the 2025 Global Gender Gap Index, it ranked 131 out of 146 countries surveyed (PTI 2025).

Further, women's greater access to education or employment has not favourably affected dowry and marriage related expenditures either- leading instead to a "reverse marriage squeeze", where fierce competition for suitably educated, hypergamous grooms, combined with changing

consumption practices has substantially increased marriage and dowry related costs for educated daughters from relatively wealthier families (Bajaj 2024; Jeffery 2016; Kaur 2004; Kaur et al. 2016).

When it comes to material aspects such as property or inheritance as well, despite changes to legislations, daughters rarely, if ever, demand rights to parental property, are challenged in long winding legal cases when they try to do so by their own brothers, and in the rare instances where they proceed, receive share in joint family property in only half the cases they fight (Baruah 2010; Basu 1999; Chowdhry 1997; De Neve and Donner 2015; Donner 2015). The right to family property is not merely an issue of legality, but also of moral and ethical claims, which daughters from propertied families continue to be routinely denied even today, especially if they choose to marry.

Aim of the research: Understanding the flux, pushing the conversation

As the discussion above shows, it is evident that India today is witnessing a period of major change and flux with respect to gendered norms, between tradition and modernity, with different forces pulling it in opposing directions, in which are caught young, educated, professionally qualified women from urban city centres, who seek to make something of themselves in the world yet face numerous obstacles in their path. Despite purported claims of gender equality and increasing opportunities for expressing individual agency, these women continue to be severely restricted by norms of respectability, shame, honour and virtue among others, which places them in the unique position of being privileged yet highly constrained, often precisely because of the class position they occupy. As Henrike Donner (2015) argues, borrowing Lauren Berlant's (2011) formulation, in the current neoliberal scenario of urban change in India, "the promise of hope and better futures" that young women hold out in the

wake of their educational and career achievements, operates as a form of "cruel optimism" when contrasted with their lived experiences.

While gendered and class-based restrictions on Indian women are not themselves necessarily 'new' changes, what is novel in the current climate is the much greater awareness of gender discrimination as a problem, and the contradiction between publicly espoused ideals of equality when compared with the private lives led by them. In contrast with previous generations of middle-class women who had to *fight* for the *privilege* to be educated or employed, this is the first generation of Indian daughters who are demanding their *right* to be treated as equals. Having grown up in the aftermath of the economic reform process, these daughters have also, for the most part, been brought up in a position of plenty- of freedoms, opportunities, avenues for educational and professional growth that were previously inaccessible to Indian women. In consonance with their desire to access these opportunities is middle-class parents' increasing willingness to provide for their daughters in the same way as they would sons, amidst proclamations of love and equality between their children irrespective of gender (Da Costa 2008; Donner 2015; Kohli 2016; Mukherjee and Kibria 2024).

Yet, the assumption that the mere *provision* of opportunities to these young girls is sufficient to 'solve' the problem of gender discrimination is a misleading oversimplification, that takes away necessary scrutiny from the ways in which young, modern, highly educated and professionally qualified girls are attempting to ameliorate the many contradictory impulses in their lives, despite their own privileges. Without problematizing, questioning or deeply investigating their lives, it is difficult to understand the nature of not just son preference or gender discrimination, but Indian society in the current period as a whole.

Unfortunately, there continues to be a serious dearth of academic scholarship directed towards the lived experiences of daughters from more privileged families, and the ways in which they experience daughterhood and discrimination in their day-to-day lives. This omission can be attributed to the misplaced assumption that their privilege offsets any scope for discrimination given their classed status, and therefore is not worthy of analysis, or to the perception of *daughterhood* as a relatively inconsequential relationship within the family unit in a patriarchal context. As Elisabeth Croll suggests in her work Endangered Daughters (2000), the intergenerational contract in India has traditionally existed only between parents and sons- the *daughter* does not figure in these sociological imaginations, and has therefore merited little analysis. Thus, even though there have been numerous studies on the subject of gender and middle classness in the post 90s context, much of the existing literature focuses solely on the idea of the "New Indian Woman" (Radhakrishnan 2009; Thapan 2004) and her important role in constituting the new middle class, or on how she juggles competing responsibilities, but only in her capacity as a *wife* or *mother*[1].

There are, of course, some exceptions to this norm- most notably, Liddle and Joshi's work on "Daughters of Independence" (1989) which deals with the notion of gender and class among more privileged daughters in the post-independence era. The authors emphasised the tension between modernity and tradition in an evolving social, political and cultural landscape, and the role and that women's identity as daughters played in shaping, and being shaped by national and familial expectations in the immediate aftermath of the Independence. Pointing out the persistence of patriarchy as a constraint in their lives, Liddle and Joshi discuss how the

[1] See chapter II, section on gender in the Middle Classes for a more detailed discussion.

privileges afforded to young women by their class status are counterbalanced by the disadvantages of their gender in a specific historical context.

More recently, work by scholars like Alice Clark (2016) and T.V. Sekher (2007) discusses the evolving notion of "Valued Daughters", exploring the impact of first-generation career women in bringing about gendered attitudinal change towards daughters within their families. Others, like Tara and Ilavarasan (2009) have analysed the critical role of parental encouragement in furthering daughters' educational and professional ambitions in middle class families. Some scholars like Lessinger (2013), Percot (2006), Palriwala and Uberoi (2008) have also described changing perceptions towards daughters within lower-middle class families, where parents are relying more on daughters' remittances as part of familial strategies for upward mobility. These works build on the notion of the modern Indian, career woman and her lived experiences by looking at familial relationships through the lens of the parent-daughter relationship, discussing the possibility of daughters becoming a source of pride or resourcefulness for parents in the future, as indicated by Ahlin and Sen's (2020) study of "good daughters" in Kerala.

However, even though many of these studies are extremely useful in *opening* up the question of daughterhood, by and large, they seek to explore the changes within the family by looking at the world *external* to it- jobs, marriages, careers, and the world women inhabit once they come of age in the 'outside world'. Their emphasis still remains on the ways in which relatively privileged women are *using* opportunities that have been offered to them, without focusing much on the why and how these changes come to be in the first instance, and taking a largely unproblematized view of the opportunities that they have been provided. Their inner lives, experiences of gender discrimination *before* they reach a stage where they are capable of giving back in any way, meaning-making around daughterhood, or its evolution as an intergenerational relationship continues to elicit limited attention. For the most part, despite the significant role

that "doing family" (Kaur and Shruti 2016) plays in impacting the lives of these young women, the figure of the daughter, especially her lived experience and the ways in which her relationship with her parents directly bears upon her life, remains under-documented. It is significant to note, for example, that none of the studies mentioned above privilege the perspective of daughters themselves.

In the state or policy perspective on the other hand, a concern with "macrological issues", as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (2003) points out, has meant that much greater attention has been paid to economic analyses of the "girl child problem" as a cost-benefit issue focusing on the poor, preoccupied with resolving the birth of daughters and correcting skewed sex ratios. Here, the figure of the daughter is reduced to that of a child, her life only worth examining till the time she has been *allowed to be born*. Implicit in this approach is the assumption that any problem of daughterhood is at its outset, resolved by the good fortune of being born into a privileged household.

But what is the *reality* of the lives these privileged daughters are leading, once they *are* born? What does it mean for them to have been offered the opportunity to live, to be educated, and even to be loved by their parents? What are the kinds of expectations laid upon them? What is the kind of gender discrimination, however obscure, that they face in their day-to-day lives even today? What are its implications? What role do these young women, especially in their role as privileged daughters, play in the social reproduction of class and caste boundaries? What does it mean to be a daughter in this class today, in the face of competing narratives of gender equality and practices of discrimination? The unique and inherently contradictory position that daughters in middle and upper middle-class homes occupy in today's India find themselves merits serious discussion, with daughterhood as an important lens with which to understand change and continuity in Indian society as a whole.

This thesis tries to make this very attempt- by focusing not on the figure of the poor, uneducated, illiterate person as engaging in gender discrimination as a result of the economic burden posed by daughters, but by turning its attention to the hitherto under-explored phenomenon of continued gender discrimination in middle and upper middle-class homes in India, where increased parental investment in, and support for daughters' educational, professional and marital choices co-exists with traditional patriarchal norms, bias towards sons, and various forms of control and coercion over daughters' lives by parents. It demonstrates how the very provision of material resources and opportunities for daughters is intricately tied with the legitimization of various forms of control on their lives, even if encased in a language of benign protectionism, love and care. Elaborating on the interconnection between investments in daughters' education and gendered returns for middle class parents, it focuses on the role that daughterhood, especially in the middle classes, plays in the social reproduction and perpetuation of class and caste-based hierarchies. Finally, it attempts to shed light on the evolving intergenerational contract between parents and daughters in 'New India', and the ways in which expectations embedded can be harmful to daughters. An exploration of these daughters' stories, as I explain in subsequent chapters, is important not only to understand their personal experiences, but also to reflect more broadly on the evolving gender norms and relations in the country, and the role of middle-class moralities in tempering them.

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Research questions

Through a qualitative study that examines the lived experiences of daughters in middle and upper middle-class homes by privileging daughters' own voices, their narratives and the ways in which they make meaning of their lives, this research asks three sets of interrelated questions:

1. What does it mean to be a daughter in the modern, urban, well-educated, and professionally qualified strata of middle and upper-middle class India today? How do daughters respond to, and navigate the conflicting expectations of modernity and tradition, opportunity and restriction in a post-globalisation context?

2. How do class and gender intersect to produce ideas of 'good daughterhood'? What can the contradictions and complexities of daughters' lives tell us about change and continuity in middle class moralities and gendered social norms in India?

3. What are the ways in which the future-oriented intergenerational contract between middle class parents and daughters is evolving in 'New India'? What are its gendered implications, and how do these changes speak to wider shifts in gender norms and social relations in the country?

Thematic divisions: Thesis structure

In attempting to study daughterhood as a relational category through the stories of the young women I spoke with, I take a life course approach, dividing this thesis into four themes, each of which relate to a significant aspect of daughters' lives, starting from childhood until after they are married. Each larger, thematic, empirical section is further sub-divided into three parts, which focus broadly on recent shifts, challenges and contradictions within them. A brief explanation of these themes is provided below.

Theme 1: Becoming Good Daughters- Formative years

In this thematic section, I trace the socialisation of daughterhood from a young age, exploring how its many meanings are absorbed, internalised and contested as part of a gendered habitus (Bourdieu 2017). In the first part, I trace the role of stories of birth as playing an important narrative role in reaffirming a sense of exceptionalism, good fortune and gratitude in daughters, leading to an accumulation of moral debt towards their parents as a result of their privileges. Using the work of scholars like Sara Ahmed and Arlie Hochschild, this section explores the role of affective economies in disciplining daughters from a young age, through an expectation of what I call "good daughterhood", that is intimately tied with middle-class moralities. The second part delves into the contradictions of daughterhood- the everyday exclusions, differential treatment and discrimination that reminds daughters of their place within the family, leading to complicated and simultaneous feelings of guilt, gratitude and resentment towards parents. In the final part, I bring these ideas together to discuss the inherent paradoxes of being a good daughter, and the symbolic violence that such an expectation perpetrates. This theme is an important starting point for understanding how daughters make meaning of their lives, their motivations for future action, as well as for highlighting the role of daughterhood in the social reproduction of middle-class identities.

Theme 2: Education

The second theme focuses on education, which, as outlined above, is an important marker of distinction within middle class families today. Here, I focus on the increasing significance of education for middle-class families, that indicate shifting gendered norms, while also pointing towards the role that daughters' education, in particular, plays in reproducing class hierarchies. In the first section, I share stories of parental love support for daughters' educational and

professional goals, and how daughters perceive them. The second section complicates the provision of educational opportunities from a gendered lens, discussing its gendered returns and the costs of framing academic success as a means for "good" daughters to pursue moral worth. The final section elaborates on the numerous restrictions, limitations and sacrifices daughters are expected to make when it comes to educational choices, and the limits to support especially for their professional choices. In discussing restrictions on employment and the discomfort with daughters' money for even the most liberal parents, this section concludes by revealing the gendered limits of support for daughters' ambitions, highlighting how change is permissible, but only to the extent that it does not threaten gendered archetypes.

Theme 3: Love, Dating and Marriage

In the third thematic section of this thesis, I focus on the changing scripts of love, dating and marriage in the post-liberalisation Indian context, where the contradictory demands of modernity and tradition clash most noticeably for middle-class daughters who are simultaneously encouraged to be more assertive and agentive in their dating and marital choices, while being compelled to adhere to limitations of caste, class and religion in making these choices. As a key inflection point with respect to changing discourses on daughterhood, marriage marks an important turning point in the lives of daughters, who seek to continue a strong relationship with parents beyond marriage, but can do so only by acquiescing to parental wisdom in their choice of life partners. While the first section deals with stories of daughters who conform to 'collective' decision making on the subject of marriage for various reasons, subsequent sections focus on the aftermath of transgressions in these choices, whether by marrying against parents' wishes, or in daughters choosing to remain single. This theme points to the persistence of marriage as an important site for reproduction of traditional boundaries,

the important role daughters play in it, and the severe consequences for daughters who lapse in this responsibility.

Theme 4: Caregiving and the double duty of daughterhood

The final theme of this thesis deals with the changing intergenerational contract between parents and daughters in middle class families, and the critical role performed by daughters in providing care for parents over the course of their lives. I define caregiving here in a broad sense not merely as the provision of physical and emotional care, but its facilitation, its logistical aspects, its emotional and affective load, and the specifically gendered burdens it imposes on daughters. This chapter looks at the significance of new forms of caregiving by daughters, the stereotypes and gendered burdens it entails, and its repercussions for the lives that daughters are able to lead in order to accommodate demands for care by parents. I posit here the concept of "double duty of daughterhood" as an analytical framework in order to explain the tangible and material ways in which caregiving curtails daughters' lives and harms them, through the expectation of emotionally charged sacrifices that are expected only from daughters. The final section of this chapter elaborates on the existential dissonance of good daughterhood, elaborating on the cruel optimism (Berlant 2011) inherent in daughters attempting the impossible task of replacing sons within the family system, when the only work they are valued for is in their gendered capacity of being a daughter- highlighting the limits to change in gender relations in the middle classes.

Taken together, these four themes traverse the life course of daughters, from early childhood to middle-age, as they come to terms with what it means to be a daughter in their specific class context, in a 'New India'. The thesis concludes with an overview of the arguments presented in each of these sections, followed by a commentary on change and continuity in the middle

classes. I argue that the lens of good daughterhood can be used not merely to understand the experience of daughters themselves, but to reflect more broadly on evolving gender norms and relations in the country as a whole, as well as on the wider significance of this work.

Note on methods

This study has been conducted over the course of two years of field work in the region of Delhi-NCR, using in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and repeated informal conversations and interactions with friends, acquaintances and family members of select respondents, as I detail in the subsequent chapters. Delhi-NCR reflects only a small microcosm of the New India this research speaks to, and was chosen for familiarity, convenience and for its own status as one of the most poorly performing states with respect to sex ratios at birth in India, despite high rates of literacy and wealth- thereby emblematic of the contradiction this research sought to study. The subjects of this study largely belong to North Indian, upper-caste, relatively affluent, Hindu families, which largely reflects the composition of the new middle class in India today (Fernandes, 2000), as detailed in later sections. Nonetheless, given the contestation around definitions of middle class as a category in itself, the next chapter explains the approach of this thesis by delving into a short overview situating the middle class in India, its contemporary relevance, its relationship with gender and the significance of studying daughterhood within this class today.

The rest of the thesis is structured as follows:

Chapter 2: Situating the Middle Class in India: An overview

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methods

Chapter 4: Analytical Framework

Chapter 5: Good Daughterhood

Chapter 6: Education

Chapter 7: Love, Dating, Marriage

Chapter 8: Caregiving

Chapter 9: Conclusion

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II. Situating the Middle Class in India: An overview

Historical Background

The concept of the 'middle class', especially the "New Middle Class" in India has remained a fuzzy concept with vociferous contestation over who *really* belongs to this class category (Beteille 1991; Béteille 2013; Fernandes 2006; Jodhka and Prakash 2016; Ray 2010). Celebrated as the signifier of the "breathtaking ascent of New India", modern and progressive, competing head-to-head on the global stage on the back on its academic and professional achievements, the urban middle class Indian in particular has been portrayed as the face of the nation and as a globally mobile, cosmopolitan-yet-rooted, *Indian* class, with an outsized significance in dictating the moral and social zeitgeist of the nation (Fernandes and Heller 2006; Kaur and Blom Hansen 2016; Radhakrishnan 2013)

While historically, the "old" or "colonial middle class" was viewed a product of a growing section of the Indian population getting educated, primarily to act as an intermediary between the British government and the masses it governed, its relationship with claims to "modernity" have remained consistent despite its changing forms. In the late 19th century, middle classness, as Baviskar and Ray (2020) discuss, came to be understood in terms of a particular *orientation* towards modernity- it implied a propensity towards open-mindedness and egalitarianism, to following the law, living within ones means and embracing science and rationality in the public sphere, while setting aside primordial loyalties of caste and kinship, relying instead on professional identities forged on merit and hard work (2020:5-6). The growing education and language of these classes made them a part of a new "urbanized elite" (comprising largely of upper caste Hindus and Bengali *Bhadralok*), emerging at the end of the nineteenth century,

which was heavily invested in spreading new ideas around respectability, moral regeneration and social reform (Chatterjee 1993; Joshi 2011).

Despite its affinities for western ideals that the members of this class sought to emulate, the question of national pride, especially in Indian value systems and morality, and the drive towards Indian nationalism meant that at the time of Independence, middle-class Indians were informed by a desire to create an "Indian version" of modernity rather than to simply reproduce and replicate "Victorian ideals" (Chatterjee 1993; Joshi 2001; Kaviraj 2010; Osella and Osella 2000). Partha Chatterjee's (1993) work on the home and the nation has been for decades a seminal exposition of the thinking that informed this effort as well as the role that gender played in implementing it. He describes how, in the pursuit of creating this characteristically Indian modernity, the distinction between the "public" and "private" as spaces of intervention was neatly segregated, in which the public became the domain where western ideals were replicated, while the latter, the domain of the home was earmarked as the private sanctuary where culture and tradition could be preserved. Chatterjee discusses how this realm, which was delegated to women, eventually became the basis of a distinctive national identity and spiritual power, that sought to elevate and distinguish Indian value systems from all others, to save Indian civilisation from corruption through "Westernization" as well as to continue uninhibited the continuity of Indian traditions, inscribed on the body of the woman- in which vested honour, morality and respectability.

Post-Independence, the focus on Nehruvian ideals and a commitment to the project of nation-building meant that the middle class was characterised by a claim to morality which relied on self-denial, a puritanical work ethic, rejection of conspicuous consumption and emphasis on thrift, which continued well into the late 60s and 70s (Deshpande 1997; Fernandes 2006; Fernandes and Heller 2006; Gooptu 2001). William Mazzarella (2003:1) describes this class

as incorporating as a "Nehruvian civil-service oriented salariat, short on money but long on institutional perks". Despite the increasing size of this class in the decades that followed, including the addition of previously excluded people from lower castes, with rural or agrarian backgrounds who gained wealth and access to education, or those who were able to climb the ladder of social mobility through gainful employment, the idea of modernization was still deeply linked with the "national mission". The middle class, even when it did not participate in the project of politics, remained, for most part, concerned with the idea of the greater, common good (Deshpande 2003; Joshi 2017).

The 'New' Middle Class: The discursive shift in the 90s

Much of the traditional values of this class, however, were eroded in subsequent years, especially in the 90s, with the liberalisation of the economy marking a turning point in the thinking around Indian socialism. 1991 marks what Gooptu (2013) refers to as an "epochal shift", which marked the beginning of the emergence of a "New Middle Class" (Fernandes 2006). As a sociopolitical group, the new middle class was differentiated from the old middle class by its relationship to the state: while its predecessor was at the vanguard of the anticolonial struggle and asserted its leadership through the bureaucratic and managerial control of the postcolonial state, the *new* middle class (or at least the dominant fraction within it) exerted its moral and political leadership over the state through its support for policies of economic liberalization, marketization, and consumption (Chatterjee and Riley 2001; Ray and Qayum 2009).

A change in consumption practices and reframing of the ideal citizen in self-seeking terms implied a shifting morality of the middle classes, with a weak commitment to democracy and love of privilege (Varma 2007). In this new version, the middle-class subject was committing

to nationalism through partaking in conspicuous consumption (Srivastava 2017), or was viewed as a freed entrepreneurial subject who would innovate and boost economic growth, leading India to become a work power (Gooptu 2013). The gains of economic liberalisation meant that there was a burgeoning increase in the size of this class, accessed primarily through the massive growth in opportunities and access to education, employment and prospects for business ventures in a post-license raj era (Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase 2008; Roy 2018; Suter, Madheswaran, and Vani 2020).[2] This was the advent of a 'New India', in whose growth story increasingly more people could participate.

Having been relatively ignored in academic scholarship in the intervening period between the 50s and 90s, from the mid-90s, there was a veritable explosion of literature, ethnographic studies and analyses attempting to decode the nature of the middle class. They focused explicitly on the emerging or new local national and regional groups of relatively affluent people, looking at various markers through which to identify who constitutes the middle class- from consumption patterns (Lakha 1999; Mankekar 2002; Rajagopal 1999; Wessel 2004), engagement with modernity and gender (Dickey 2012, 2016; Oza 2012; Säävälä 2010), urban infrastructure and newly privatised spaces (Fernandes 2006; Srivastava 2009, 2023a) and even spiritual morality (Gooptu 2013; Upadhya 2013).

However, the broad consensus, repeated in every work on the subject has been that exactly *who* constitutes the 'new middle class' is a question with varying answers (Donner 2017). Despite best efforts from economists as well as sociologists, the boundaries of this class and its constitution have been notoriously difficult to define or delimit. This is primarily because

[2] According to Roy(2018), this is evidenced by the number of households in India with disposable incomes of more than US $10,000, which has risen twentyfold in twenty-five years, from 2.5 million in 1990 to nearly fifty million in 2015.

economic or income criteria are seen as vastly insufficient in describing the constituents of this class, with wide-ranging discrepancies placing the size of this class from anywhere between 15-85% of the population (Aslany 2019; Gooptu and Chakravarty 2018; Jodhka and Prakash 2016; Kaul 2025). This indeterminacy has prompted scholars to question whether definitional precision is either possible or analytically productive.

The middle class as a performative grouping

Recent scholars have therefore turned to characterising the middle class as a *performative socio-economic grouping*, rather than one restricted to a particular income bracket, since they believe that the *idea* of the middle class is more important than the actual parameters of the class itself (Mazzarella 2003) As Leichty (2003) also says, discussing the case of the class in Nepal, it is in any case more interesting to look at what the class *does* than what the class *is*.

For Leela Fernandes (2006), one of the foremost scholars on the subject, the "newness" of the middle class in India, especially post reform 1990s, is not about structural differences or social mobility, rather, it refers to a "culturally constructed category" that is *qualitatively* different from its predecessors. As Fernandes (2006:14) writes:

> "The new in the New Middle Class refers to both the novel and the recent- novel as in separate from the old Middle Class, and recent as in their social status has recent origin in the sense that they or their parents have experienced upward social mobility."

For some, like Islam, the "essence of the 'New Middle Class' can be captured through the figure of the young English-speaking Indian, with an MBA degree, dressed in shirt and trousers, employed at a multi-national company in a metropolitan city" (Islam 2020:10), whereas following Burris (1995), Säävälä (2010:7) defines the middle class as

> "White collar workers in public and private sector organisations who are neither in executive positions, nor possess sufficient capital to live on interest alone. They work in organisations, derive regular salaries, consider themselves middle class, are educated, do not possess decision making positions (apart from at the operational level)."

Fernandes and Heller (2006) have further disaggregated three major segments of this class: those with professional educational credentials; a petit bourgeoise made up of merchants and shopkeepers that attempts to emulate the professionals; and an educated segment in lower ranking, non-professional jobs. Across these formulations, the "middle" is defined relationally and negatively. As Leichty writes, "the word 'middle' in the concept of the new middle class is mostly defined by a *negation*: they are neither labourers nor paupers, nor are they elite, their social being is characterised by being in-between" (Leichty 2003, as quoted in Säävälä 2010:11. Emphasis added.).

Middle class moralities

Irrespective of the elements of its constitution, one of the most important aspects of the middle class has been discussed in Satish Deshpande's significant 2003 work where he argues that "the middle class is the class that articulates the *hegemony of the ruling bloc*" (2003:139). As Sneha Krishnan (2015:10) argues, while the middle class as a group may have little empirical validity, "it is definitive as a discursive space in contemporary India", carrying *analytical* value. Deshpande (1997) divides the Indian middle class into two fractions- an elite fraction, that produces ideologies; and a mass fraction, that consumes them, with the power of the middle class residing in its ability to present itself as a universal, unifying identity that speaks with legitimacy on behalf of the everyman, while favouring the elite (Baviskar and Ray 2020). As

Donner also (2017) suggests, what has changed is therefore not so much how the middle class constitutes itself, or the numbers involved, but the "explicit effort to promote a hegemonic politics" aligned with market-centred ideologies governing relations to the state, community, and self.

As Raka Ray (2019:214) also succinctly observes,

> "In a democracy, the cultural reproduction of inequality requires a public discourse of equality. The task of maintaining this paradox is accomplished by the idea of the Middle Class- a class which speaks *on behalf of all others*"

While a large section of scholars discussing the relationship of the middle class with inequality have focused on the economic aspects of its internal differentiation, calling attention to its practices of distinction and gatekeeping (Jaffrelot, van der Veer, and Carol 2008; Jodhka and Prakash 2016; Lakha 1999), scholars like Upadhya (2013, 2016b) have pointed out how it is the discursive and structural role of the middle class that is much larger. "To ignore the power of middle class", as Belliappa (2013:9) suggests, "is to unconsciously and uncritically adopt its worldview", and to overlook its significant role in promoting dominant discourses on gender, modernity and nationhood.

This is also what makes a study of middle class analytically central today. The middle classes have shaped contemporary morality in such *defining* ways that moral values have themselves become the defining characteristic of this class. For instance, in Minna Säävälä's work, class is approached as a socio-cultural phenomenon, as a "*culturally meaningful social process* rather than as a relation of production"- one that is a "field of social organisation of meaning", to paraphrase Friedman (1994, as quoted Säävälä :7. Emphasis added.). Säävälä suggests that people *define* themselves as middle class, or *not* middle class, on the basis of their ability to

follow certain valued practices (12). The middle classes, in her account, are a "social phenomenon in which moral propriety is central".

This is also the approach I take in this thesis, where middle class-ness is seen not only as an *economic* criteria of classification, but differentiated by the ability, and desire of the members of this class to follow certain moral practices- specifically those relating to gender.

Gender and the Middle Classes: The relevance of studying the new middle classes

In postcolonial India, as Bhatt and Ramamurthy describe, specifically the period after the late 1980s when satellite, cable television and print media exploded in unforeseen ways, social anxieties over the loss of national sovereignty were newly expressed and negotiated through "gendered articulations of the nation and gendered modes of national belonging" (Bhatt et al. 2010). In the fractured Indian modernity that developed in India in the 2000s, the body of the woman remained a key locus of control, since the aftermath of new opportunities and greater mobility available to the middle-class Indian women meant that the need to police their bodies, with a view to protect their purity from the sexual permissiveness of global cultures only increased. In order to ameliorate the competing concerns of a desire to modernize and a fear of modernity as a "corrupting force", a new discourse of belonging to India emerged, which, as Radhakrishnan suggests, was a "fundamentally gendered one", giving rise to the figure of the "New Indian Woman"- one who able to take on the demands of a globalising world while remaining firmly rooted in her Indianness (Radhakrishnan 2009, 2011).

This relied on the ability of the newly emerging, professional, working Indian women to embody a uniquely Indian femininity, which allowed her to seize the avalanche of opportunities available to her in a changing economy, while still enacting a form of "respectable femininity" and "appropriate modernity" that would not pose a threat to her national identity, class status,

or responsibility within the home. Sanjay Srivastava's (2017 2020, 2023b) conception of "retractable modernity" provides a valuable framework to understand why the emulation of Western ideals by Indian women did not fundamentally change the nature of public-private divide even in the case of the most well-qualified, liberal Indian woman, as it allowed women to return to access and traverse socially sanctioned spaces with "legitimate purpose and aim" (Phadke, Khan, and Ranade 2011), for a short duration, before returning to the traditional home once this role was over. In her work, Säävälä (2011) refers to the contradictory expectations that at once gave women freedom and restricted them, as "paradoxes of control" for the new middle class, where highly educated women were better able to strike the balance expected of them, but were also more restrained by concerns of respectability than ever before.

However, in the existing scholarship, these paradoxes seem to apply only to women *after* their marriage, when they come in sharp contrast with their domestic responsibilities in marital homes or with motherhood. Thus, studies of urban, educated professional women- whether in elite law firms (Ballakrishnen, Fielding-Singh, and Magliozzi 2019), as software professionals (Fuller and Narasimhan 2007, 2013; Radhakrishnan 2009; Valk and Srinivasan 2011) or more generally discussing work-life balance constraints (Belliappa 2013; Gupta et al. 2005; Gupta and Sharma 2003) seem to overwhelmingly discuss conflicts of migration, mobility, or child rearing faced by women after marriage, but rarely account for women's roles and responsibilities as *daughters* in these discussions.

Studies on younger, teenage and college going women on the other hand, even when they do account for the lived experiences of unmarried girls from the lens of the family, have remained focused on themes of middle-class respectability, sexuality, safety and concerns around marriageability of daughters (Bhandari and Titzmann 2017; Hebbar and Kaur 2021; Krishnan 2021; Lamb 2022), leaving daughterhood itself analytically underexamined as a site of study.

The changing significance of daughterhood

This thesis intervenes precisely at this gap. As noted earlier, the significance of the middle class, as a hegemonic, "chattering class" that deems to speak on behalf of the nation in setting the agenda on social change cannot, and must not be ignored. This thesis centres on upper-middle-class, urban, educated Indian daughters not *despite* their privilege, but precisely because of it. The privileged families under examination occupy a structurally powerful position in contemporary India: they are among the most vocal adopters of the language of gender equality, the primary beneficiaries of economic liberalisation, and the dominant producers of social norms around modernity, aspiration, and respectability. What happens within these households therefore does not merely reflect social change- it actively shapes how gender equality is imagined, narrated, and normalised in public discourse. A specific focus on *daughterhood,* rather than wifehood or motherhood, as this thesis takes up, is made even more urgent for three reasons:

First, the anxieties, tensions and contradictions that led to the creation of the "New Indian Woman" as a category of analysis have only significantly sharpened in the past two decades, with a new generation of women who have grown up in the aftermath of the economic reform process, who view opportunities for education and employment as part of their *right* rather than *privileges.* These daughters are much more aware, having grown up in an era where discourses of gender equality have been firmly established as aspirational for the educated classes, while also being codified in law. A 2025 High Court judgment, for instance, observed that daughters have an "indefeasible, legally enforceable and legitimate right" to secure educational expenses from parents within the limit of their financial resources (HT News Desk 2025). Simultaneously, a reconfiguration of educational equity and investment in children's education as a "sacred duty" (Kaur 2022), especially among the middle classes, has meant that parents

too, feel compelled to provide for their daughters today in ways that may not have been deemed necessary earlier.

In this scenario, daughters' endeavour to make the best possible use of these opportunities they have been provided, desires to exercise greater freedoms to dictate the course of their own lives, increasing practices of self-reflexivity and awareness of gender discrimination as a moral wrong sets the ground for them to more vociferously assert their right to lead their lives in accordance with their own desires. However, as Jyothsana Bellipapa suggests, the new-found agency of young Indian women is operationalised in complicated ways today- they seek autonomy, independence, and self-determination through individual effort, combined with strategic conformity to traditional norms and careful choices (2004: 5). A clash with pre-existing ideals of femininity and respectability is thus bound to be even more pronounced for this generation, necessitating a deeper investigation into how the contradictions they face are ameliorated. Studying daughterhood in this class is thus analytically indispensable for understanding how gender power operates in "New India," not at its margins, but at its normative centre.

Secondly, in contrast to previous perceptions of daughters as more transient members of their family, wherein ties with natal families were severed post marriage to facilitate an exclusive focus on a woman's domestic responsibilities in her marital home, daughterhood as an intergenerational relationship is undergoing significant transformations in the Indian context today. Not only are educated, earning daughters emerging as reliable old age support systems for middle class parents, providers of emotional support and material resources, they are also engaging in longer-term caregiving for parents even after marriage, facilitating a reconfiguration of daughterhood as a temporally constrained relationship in the Indian context. Some scholars, like Sharangpani (2010) have recorded daughters' strategic decision-making in

decisions around marriage to ensure continued relationships with their natal homes even after marriage; while others have recorded parents' increasing reliance on daughters as emotional support systems in their old age, reflecting a changed perception of daughterhood (Ahlin and Sen 2020). Structural shifts, demographic migration, technological changes and recent legal reforms have further precipitated this shift in intergenerational caregiving structures, especially among the middle classes, as a result of which the previously transitory and ephemeral relationship between parents and daughters is evolving to a more permanent one. However, the consequences of daughterhood as a longer-term relationship, the burdens it imposes, or the sacrifices it may entail have not yet been analysed from the perspective of daughters. This research reinforces the need for a study to evaluate daughterhood as a relationship in and of itself, along with new gendered role expectations it imposes.

Finally, moving beyond analysing the role that mothers and wives play in the reproduction of class and caste hierarchies, this research would analyse the important role that daughters can play as a node of intergenerational transmission and social reproduction. Given the changing significance of this relationship and its persistence over time, evolving notions of daughterhood can impose new forms of responsibilities, which facilitate the maintenance of class-based patriarchy in new ways. Studying daughterhood in this class is thus analytically indispensable for understanding how gender power operates in "New India," not just at its margins, but at its normative centre. This research will build on, and add to the existing literature on the subject to better understand the intersection of class and gender in India today, and its implications for the future.

Characterising this thesis' respondents

Born around the same time as India's economic reform process had been initiated, between 1988-2003, it would be apt to refer to the women I interviewed, as "Liberalisation's Children" (Lukose 2020), in that their transition into adulthood coincides neatly with India's own maturity as a nascent participant in the globalised world economy- their lives, future opportunities and destiny tied with India's own growth story and looming potential. They come from families which benefitted immensely from the new economic opportunities post liberalisation, and grew up as second-generation beneficiaries of their parents' association with the burgeoning service economy in the 90s and early 2000s. As such, their families represent the more privileged and "professional" subset of the middle class- urban, globally mobile, affluent, associated with corporate careers and professional trajectories, as opposed to migrants from smaller towns reliant on agricultural or smaller business incomes for their upward mobility. They view principles of meritocracy as sacrosanct, view 'hard work' and 'professionalism' as signals of class virtue, while willingly endorsing gender-equal ideals as a matter of pride. Most importantly, for them, education remains the "most significant and defining aspect of middle-class identity" (Kaur 2012; Kaur and Blom Hansen 2016). As a central moral and symbolic force in their lives, the pursuit of education functions simultaneously as a norm, a value, an ethical commitment and a matter of pride, operating as a key marker of class distinction (Säävälä 2010:11).

However, despite their relatively affluent family status when contrasted with India's median family incomes, their access to private schooling, university education from India's top colleges or access to Ivy league universities abroad, and own professional careers in some cases, these respondents strongly preferred to identify as "middle class", or at best, "upper-middle class", distancing themselves from the "elite" on ethical grounds, especially in how

they viewed and valued money. Such discomfort is consistent with sociological analyses that show Indians' obstinate tendency to identify as "middle class" irrespective of their actual socio-economic status (Ray 2019). For my respondents as well, their association with middle-classness had little to do with their families' economic status too. Rather, it was the *construct* of an imagination that was *internationally* comparative, both monetarily and culturally.

As Steve Derné (2005) writes, discussing the impact of cultural globalisation in India in the post 90s period, members of the newly emergent "*transnational* middle class" view themselves as being in the middle of an *international* and *locally* oriented middle class. They are defined, he writes, not only by their "urban locations, white collar jobs and salaries, propensity to speak English and watch Hollywood films", but also, crucially, Derné asserts, through their "willingness to accept new forms of gender relations" (122).

The young women I spoke with also located themselves in the "middle" of a spectrum- from financially "stable" but not "elite" families; "free" but not "spoilt" children of a new generation; fiercely feminist, globally connected, yet what Radhakrishnan (2011) calls "appropriately Indian" women. While some scholars, like Radhakrishnan (2013) would demarcate them as part the "global" Indian middle class, others, like Fuller and Narsimhan (2007) would refer to them as the "new-rich middle class"- both beneficiaries of a "gender revolution" spurred by Indian women's access to employment in IT and software companies in India and abroad over the last few decades. Nonetheless, irrespective of the way in which they are categorized, what is important to note in each of these classifications is that middle classness here is understood not merely as a socioeconomic indicator of status, rather, it represents a cultural and even moral claim, in which gender plays an important and constitutive role.

In this thesis, following scholars like Säävälä, Gilbertson and Donner, I approach middle-class ness as representing an *ethos* that is principled- more accepting of new forms of gender relations, at least symbolically, committed to ideals of hard work, professionalism and perseverance, with an ethical belief in education as one of the most defining aspect of their lives. My respondents self-identified as "educationally accomplished, professionally qualified young women, from middle or upper-middle class families from Delhi-NCR". Keeping in mind that all my respondents were firmly in the "secure", financially stable middle-class category, the economic differences between "middle-" and "upper-middle" class were less relevant for my research than their claims with respect to gender and how it was tied with their class status. Nonetheless, in this thesis, I have used these distinctions to denote relative degrees of privilege from a socio-economic perspective, as per my respondents' own assessment of their lives. In so far as they represent a distinction from both the poor and the elite in their way of thinking, these terms can be, and have been used interchangeably. The reference to "new" with respect to this class category is borrowed from Leela Fernandes' (2006) articulation as representing a break from the pre-1990s old middle class.

Approaching the middle class thus, as a performative and moral formation, rather than a fixed economic category, allows this thesis to foreground how gender operates as a constitutive element of class identity, and to make sense of its inherent contradictions. Rather than viewing gender inequality among the privileged as an anomaly or residue, this perspective highlights how claims to progress and equality are themselves embedded within gendered expectations and obligations. Middle-class daughters are not peripheral figures within this process, they are central to how middle-class families negotiate social change, manage uncertainty, and reproduce both material and moral forms of advantage. Examining their experiences therefore provides critical insight into how gendered power operates within contexts that are often

assumed to be sites of transformation rather than continuity, while studying daughterhood in this class offers a critical lens on how contemporary inequalities are reproduced not in spite of liberal values, but through them.

*

III. Research Design and Methodology

Thinking about daughterhood: Research Design and epistemological orientation

At its core, the research questions of this thesis emanate from one fundamental query- *what does it mean to be a daughter in a middle class, urban Indian context?* The supplementary questions that accompany this inquiry- the contradictions and affective tensions that shape daughterhood, the moral obligations embedded within family life, the practices of intergenerational care, and daughters' role in the social reproduction of class identities- are all oriented towards understanding this central concern. Throughout this research process, I returned repeatedly to this question, using it as an analytical anchor for the research design and process.

My foremost priority was foregrounding daughters' lived experiences- their words, silences, how they narrated their lives, made sense of the world around them, the meanings they attached to their relationships and the emotions through which they understood obligation and belonging. This commitment informed the research design of my project as a *qualitative* study, grounded in life history narratives. Rather than relying on structured questionnaires or surveys, I approached my conversations as narrative encounters, allowing women to tell their stories in their own terms, at their own pace, and according to the logics that mattered to them, while allowing room for more natural and reflective conversations. It also allowed me to attend not only to what daughters said, but to *how* they said it- what they emphasised, what they glossed over, and how they connected disparate moments of their lives into coherent accounts.

Using Narratives

Narratives, as Polkinghorne (1988:11) argues, are the primary scheme by which human existence is rendered meaningful". They are not simply reflections of lived reality but active interpretive practices through which people organise events, emotions, and identities over time As Souto-Manning also writes, "narratives are how we make sense of what we know, what we feel, and experience in the world in which we live" (2014:162). For Ochs and Capps (2001:2) stories are a critical window into the relationship between everyday talk and the social construction of cultural norms and institutional discourses. Analysing narratives then, allows one to connect micro-level experiences to broader discourses and contexts, using them as a means to understand the social construction of identities, experiences, and cultures more generally (Van Dijk 1993). In this study, daughters' stories thus became both method and material, sites through which the relationship between gender, affect, and class could be traced.

The design of this research was motivated by a social constructivist epistemological orientation, which understands knowledge as socially produced through language, interaction, and shared systems of meaning (Creswell and Creswell 2017). Constructivist scholars such as Bruner (2009), Knorr-Cetina (2013) and Gergen (1985) challenge the essentialist approaches to social enquiry that treat human experience as transparent or directly accessible to "neutral" observation by "rational actors". Instead, they emphasize that meaning is relational and perspectival, rather than existing "out there" to be discovered. From this perspective, the cognitive endeavour motivating research is not to "arrive at an accurate and comprehensive description of the real, readymade world" (Goodman 1978:163), rather, it is to investigate the *process* of world-making itself- how worlds are interpreted, narrated and made intelligible. While constructivists don't *deny* the presence of an ontological reality, they point out that we cannot in any sense *know* a "real" world, but only *how* it is understood in relational terms. As Gergen and Gergen (2000) explain, "accounts of the world take place within shared systems of

intelligibility", reflecting interrelationships among people rather than the expression of isolated inner states.

Approaching daughters' narratives through this lens meant treating each account not as a factual record to be verified, but as an *interpretive* act- a way of making sense of relationships, obligations, and constraints in conversation with me and with the social expectations that shaped their lives. From this perspective, daughterhood is not treated as a stable social role, but as an affective and moral formation shaped through relationships, expectations, and everyday practices. What mattered analytically was not whether particular accounts were "factually accurate" in an empirical sense, but how meanings were produced, justified, and contested within them.

This epistemological orientation is closely aligned with feminist standpoint theory, which emphasises the situated and partial nature of knowledge, and foregrounds women's lived experiences as analytically significant rather than epistemologically suspect (Gilligan 1993; Scheman 1995; Stanley and Wise 2002). Feminist epistemologies combine interpretive and critical concerns, emphasising how gendered social relations shape both experience and the production of knowledge itself (Cook and Fonow 1986; Riger 1992). They are concerned with portraying the "lived reality of women's lives", giving voice to their perspectives, and identifying the ways in which they create meaning and experience life "from their particular position in the social hierarchy"(Anderson 2024; Riger 1992:734). They argue that gendered social relations are most visible from positions that are structurally marginal to power, and that attention to women's narratives can illuminate forms of inequality that are normalised or rendered invisible within dominant accounts. Importantly, feminist approaches do not *substitute* discourse analysis for social analysis; instead, they insist on examining how material conditions and symbolic practices intersect in the organisation of women's lives.

This was also my own attempt. In this study, daughters' narratives are approached neither as transparent reflections of family life, nor as claims to be verified against external accounts, but as interpretive practices through which women make sense of their relationships, obligations, and constraints, read in conjunction with their material realities. Even though I spoke with various family members and friends of my respondents, I did not seek to resolve competing truth claims. My analytical focus remained on perceptions, feelings and emotions through which daughters understood their roles. Feelings of love, gratitude, pain, anger, and erasure often become my entry points into these conversations, informing how daughters made sense of their lives within their homes and dictating their conduct outside it. This orientation is particularly important given the study's focus on relatively privileged families, where gendered inequality often operates through subtle moral expectations rather than overt exclusion. Attending to narratives made it possible to capture these dynamics as they were lived and felt, rather than as they appeared in normative accounts of family life. The following sections detail how this epistemological and methodological orientation informed my fieldwork practices and, subsequently, how I worked analytically with the narratives I collected.

Fieldwork Design and Scope

The fieldwork for this study was carried out over a two-year period, between September 2021-September 2023, across multiple phases and sites, spanning both digital and physical spaces. Since data collection began approximately six months after the second wave of the COVID pandemic in India, conventional ethnographic possibilities were significantly reshaped. These constraints pushed me to imagine "the field" not as a bounded physical location, but as simultaneously virtual, relational and extended over time. The incorporation of digital platforms such as WhatsApp and Zoom into everyday work and social life therefore was not just a logistical adjustment but became constitutive of the research process itself. These

conditions shaped both my choice of respondents and the substantive direction of the thesis, ultimately orienting the study more specifically towards daughterhood within a specific socio-economic milieu- educated, urban, middle and upper-middle class families where sustained access and repeated conversations were most feasible.

Field Site

The choice of Delhi-NCR, specifically, as my field 'site' was motivated by a combination of familiarity, convenience and the region's social contradictions. As the nation's capital, Delhi's relatively high literacy and income levels and access to opportunity and exposure coexist with persistently skewed sex ratios (Agnihorti 2000; Economic Times 2024; Hussain 2022; Millennium Post 2015). Boundless opportunities for growth and mobility that bring women to Delhi, combined with fears of gender safety that have dubbed it the "Rape Capital" of the country (Rukmini. S. 2015; Sharma 2023) make the region a compelling site to examine the tensions between gendered modernity and patriarchal continuity.

The question of who 'truly' belongs to Delhi, however, remains unsettled. As a city shaped by migration, and further expanded through the growth of the National Capital Region, including Noida, Ghaziabad, and Gurgaon, the boundaries of who counts as a "Delhi-ite" remain fluid. Many who study or work in the city identify as "Delhi-ites" despite commuting daily from elsewhere, or having migrated only recently. In fact, some scholars have noted how cities like Delhi-NCR have enabled women's educational and professional mobility, loosening constraints on spatial mobility in the wake of opportunities, enabling migration from smaller towns across the country (Patel 2017). This made the idea of making Delhi as my field site analytically productive, even lucrative, rather than merely convenient, since it opened the possibility for interactions with women from diverse regional backgrounds who nonetheless

shared a broadly similar class location, offering a microcosm of the social world I wanted to study. Therefore, I kept the exclusion criteria deliberately flexible, including in my research women who were born and raised in Delhi-NCR and continued to stay there, those were born elsewhere but migrated to Delhi for education or work, and those who were born and grew up in Delhi but no longer resided in the region. As someone who had also been born and spent the first thirty years of my life in the city, Delhi was also very well-known to me, which made the process of snowball sampling that I followed relatively easier, through initial contacts who offered graciously to share my research call with others known to them.

Research Process and Recruitment

Between August- December 2021, I began with a series of informal conversations within my own social networks as a scoping exercise. To my surprise, what initially took the form of casual exchanges- shared exchanges, stray memories of discrimination, or everyday reminders about daughters' inferior position in society soon developed into more sustained discussions marked by recognition and solidarity. Many daughters articulated a sense of contradiction between the lives they had been promised and those they inhabited, alongside a persistent belief that they did not have the right to complain given their relative privilege.

These early conversations were analytically generative. In conjunction with the literature I had engaged with at that stage, they helped me identify a preliminary set of themes and questions that later served as guiding anchors for formal interviews.

Formal recruitment for participants began in late 2021, through a call for participants circulated via WhatsApp, Twitter, LinkedIn and personal networks (shared in appendix 4). The call was reshared widely, generating responses from numerous women, including those living outside India who nonetheless identified strongly with the theme of the study.

Primary respondents

The core data for this thesis comes from in-depth interviews conducted with 40 daughters, aged between 21-35, who self-identified as middle or upper middle class, and as highly educated, professionally qualified daughters belonging to what is described as "new", urban India. I refer to them as my *primary respondents*.[3] Each of them had lived in, or maintained strong ties to Delhi-NCR.

Interviews were conducted primarily online[4] in English, or in the colloquial "Hinglish", depending on the participant's preference. Each interview lasted between ninety minutes and two hours, and was subsequently translated and transcribed into English for analysis. Although these 40 respondents formed the core of the study, the sample evolved over time in line with an interpretive and iterative approach to qualitative research (O'Reilly 2025). In later stages, I included additional interlocutors where analytically necessary, as accounted below, while also including focus group discussions as part of my data collection.

Even as there were varying levels of comfort with sharing actual identities, to protect anonymity more generally, I chose to use pseudonyms for all respondents and obscured identifying details wherever needed. In a few instances I also employed composite characters drawn from multiple interviews to safeguard the privacy of my respondents, while preserving analytical coherence.

[3] Summary details and short biographies of the primary respondents are included in appendix 5.

[4] The mode of interview varied depending on the preference of the participants. In the initial stages, due to COVID restrictions, all interviews were remote and online on Zoom, except when participants preferred to speak only on the phone. Over time, I was able to meet participants in person, and these interviews were conducted offline. Details of interview type and location are provided in the appendix 5 against each interviewee.

Composition of respondents

Although the aim of my research was not statistical representativeness, respondents were invited to optionally complete a brief demographic questionnaire following their interviews to contextualise their narratives. My aim was not to make any causal inferences, but to develop a clearer socio-economic profile of the group as a whole, which I summarise briefly below.

Of particular note are the high educational qualifications of my respondents. With the exception of two respondents who had not studied beyond graduation, all participants had completed or were pursuing advanced degrees, many in professional fields such as engineering, medicine, law, management, finance, design, and academia among others. At the time of the first interview, nearly half were employed, and a bulk of the remaining were still studying. All respondents identified their households as either middle-middle or upper-middle class.

Of the 40 primary respondents, a majority (35) were Hindu, with smaller numbers identifying as Muslim (2), Christian (2) or Sikh (1), and two describing themselves as non-practising or atheist. Approximately 65% were single/unmarried at the time of the first interview, though marital status changed for some over the course of fieldwork. In terms of caste and community, the sample reflected dominant segments of the urban middle class in Delhi-NCR, including Punjabi, Baniya/Agarwal, and Marwari backgrounds, alongside Tamil Brahmin, Bengali, Rajput, Jain, and Jaat respondents. Slightly more than 50% of my respondents were either single daughters or belonged to families with only daughters, with gender composition of siblings offering interesting insights for the study.

Logic and Limits of the Sample

Despite the variety of women I spoke with, it is important to clarify that these respondents do not constitute a representative sample of daughters in middle-class India- nor was such

representation the aim of this study or within its scope. Rather, the logic of sampling was guided by convenience, as well as by conceptual relevance and information richness. As Gutterman suggests, "sampling is not a matter of representative opinions, but a matter of information *richness*"(Guetterman 2015:3), which should dictate the logic of selecting "in-depth, information-rich cases" that can yield insights about "issues of central importance to the purpose of enquiry" (Patton 2002:273), rather than attempting empirical generalisations (Staller 2021)

As a result, unsurprisingly, most of my primary respondents belonged to the Hindu religion, were upper-caste, relatively affluent and well educated, which reflects both the composition of India's new middle class today (Fernandes 2006) as well as the specific social worlds to which I had access. While this inevitably limits the ability of the study to speak to the experiences of daughters across varied social locations, the narratives gathered here nonetheless offer insight into the contradictions of modern daughterhood and the ways gendered norms are reproduced, negotiated, and resisted within privileged families.

Ethics of Intimacy and Digital Fieldwork: Reflections on the process

Two features of the interview process stood out early in my fieldwork. The first was the openness and emotional candour with which participants shared their life stories, particularly experiences of exclusion, neglect and gendered discrimination within their families. Many conversations were marked by vulnerability, and a willingness to share repressed memories, expressions of guilt, anger, resentment, and even at times, accounts of trauma which showed a level of intimacy and trust that was both surprising and humbling. Often participants would narrate stories relationally, interweaving their accounts with anecdotes about sisters, friends or cousins, creating a sense of shared experience and solidarity.

I would regularly prompt my interviewees to begin by telling me *why* they agreed to speak with me, and their responses were revealing. Many described the interviews as spaces of catharsis - opportunities to articulate grievances rarely voiced in a cultural context that shames them for "airing dirty laundry" in public. For others, participation prompted a recognition of micro-aggressions their privilege had rendered unremarkable. In several instances, there would be sobering realisations, and respondents reflected how our conversation itself had altered how they understood their own life.

The second notable aspect was the unexpected intimacy afforded by remote interviews, beyond their relative ease. While I had initially been quite hesitant about the depth that could be achieved over an online call, this relative distance seemed to enhance openness for my respondents. Many spoke from their private spaces, away from family members, allowing for unguarded reflection that may not have been possible in the presence of others, had these interactions taken place within their homes. The digital medium thus provided safety and distance while preserving immediacy.

In a few instances, comforted by the knowledge that they were partaking in a one-time conversation with a stranger, the relative anonymity enabled the sharing of difficult truths. Some of the most vulnerable conversations I had with my research participants, including experiences of domestic violence, or of abuse faced over a failed marriage, were shared anonymously over audio calls. While in such instances remote interviews limited opportunities for follow-up and constituted related disadvantages (Hillman et al. 2014; O'Quinn et al. 2024), they also facilitated forms of disclosure that might have been much harder in person.

Knowing fully well, however, that it would be difficult to share damning details about family members, especially parents, I was also cognizant of not pressing too much if my interviewees

ever got too emotional or silent, as was the case in a few conversations. As some scholars posit, the feminist emphasis on "voice" has sometimes neglected the gaps or silences found in narratives, which may themselves signal trauma or ambivalence (Ryan-Flood and Gill 2010). In these cases, I treated the silences themselves as data, returning to them cautiously or not at all, rather than extracting any admissions my participants were not willing to make. In general, I tried to play the role of the "therapeutic listener" (Oakley 1981:51) without passing judgment on any emotions that arose during the conversation.

Supplementary Engagements: Interviewing Parents and Extended Fieldwork

While daughters formed the primary interlocutors of this study, the fieldwork process unfolded in ways that necessitated supplementary engagements beyond these initial interviews. These additions were not planned as parallel data streams, nor intended to shift the analytic centre of the thesis from daughterhood. Rather, they emerged more cautiously, in response to both ethical constraints and analytic questions that arose during the course of fieldwork.

From the outset, most of my primary respondents expressed clear discomfort with the idea of connecting me to their own parents, or facilitating interviews with them. Besides the logistical constraints of interviewing parents online, which they were less comfortable with, many women expressed ethical and relational concerns about these conversations. Several daughters had shared their stories with me in strict confidence, especially in cases where they involved stories of neglect, discrimination or abuse within the family. In such cases, involving parents to comment on the same stories risked being perceived as a breach of trust, or an attempt to verify or arbitrate the "truthfulness" of their accounts, which was not my aim. Insisting on such parental involvement would also be a betrayal of the intimacy that had made these conversations possible, since confidentiality had been central to the willingness daughters

expressed to speak openly with me, particularly when they came from broken or dysfunctional homes.

There were also other, substantive analytic considerations. Daughters' narratives revealed considerable variation in how relationships with mothers and fathers were experienced and interpreted within the same household, as well as in the kinds of support or constraints associated with each parent. Given the small number of cases and the complexity of these dynamics, attempting to categorise parents as supportive or hostile, or to systematically compare parental perspectives with those of daughters, would have required a different research design altogether- one that risked becoming a separate project in its own right.

Given these apprehensions and concerns, I made a deliberate decision to centre daughters as the primary respondents of my thesis, rather than treating parent-child dyads as the unit of analysis.

This decision inevitably raises the question of whether a study of daughterhood that relies so heavily on the accounts of one generation, can meaningfully shed light on what is essentially a shared, social, intergenerational relationship. In unpacking this dilemma, rather than dismissing this as a simple limitation, I approached it as a question of analytic focus. While research on intergenerational relationships emphasises the value of including both parental and child perspectives, empirical evidence shows that one-generation accounts remain significant in their own right as well. In their meta-analysis of 4500 parent-children dyads across various studies analysing intergenerational relationships, Steinbach et al (2019) find that the inclusion of data from only one generation does not necessarily introduce statistical biases or weaken empirical validity. Instead, the scholars point out how parents and children tend to evaluate their relationships differently, shaped by distinct "developmental stakes" (Bengtson and Kuypers

1971). While parents often emphasise emotional closeness and continuity, children may be more likely to foreground conflict, ambivalence or distance, depending on various factors, ranging from age, familial structures, residential distance, educational attainment among others.

In this thesis, my analytic interest lies not in *reconciling* these perspectives or *adjudicating* between them, but in understanding how *daughters* interpret their own role expectations, obligations, and emotional responsibilities within family life. The emphasis, therefore, is on daughters' reading of parental actions and expectations, rather than on parents' self-understandings, while acknowledging generational differences. In this sense, the absence of direct parental accounts is not an oversight but a methodological stance, consistent with feminist approaches that privilege lived experience and subjective meaning-making over external validation.

Nevertheless, in order to provide a more holistic picture, I found it useful to engage with parents in a limited and carefully circumscribed way. In early 2022, I added a supplementary phase of interviews with 15 parents (mothers, fathers, or both) to my study, from similar class and regional backgrounds in Delhi-NCR.[5] These were not parents of my primary respondents, a choice that allowed me to avoid ethical conflicts around confidentiality while still gaining insight into broader frameworks surrounding daughterhood. These interviews were conducted with the help of a research assistant (RA) in India, while I was in the UK. The research assistant was a Masters' student and social science researcher, who I had met and worked with as part of another sociological research project on gender in India. Before conducting the interviews, we had multiple discussions on the topics to be covered during the conversation, the themes of

[5] List of 15 parents interviewed by the RA, along with brief profiles added as appendix 6.

the project, and a brief guide to direct conversations. Post every conversation, my RA would share transcripts and/or summary notes from the interview. After completing all interviews, in discussion with my RA, I categorised the conversations thematically, segregating parents' opinions on various aspects of daughters' lives- their education, work, marriage and caregiving expectations, and extracting relevant, direct quotes, where available, for inclusion in my thesis.

Although we found that most often, these conversations were still shaped by a degree of social desirability in the responses parents gave, they were useful as a means of benchmarking prevailing expectations from daughters, and I used these to situate daughters' stories within broader moral and generational discourses.

These interviews were complemented by more casual, informal engagements during the second phase of fieldwork in 2022 when I returned to India. These included conversations with parents, friends and family members of some of my primary respondents, where they were willing and comfortable, which added depth and nuance to my understanding of their lives. A smaller group of daughters then became sources of repeat interactions over time, with whom I was able to stay in touch more regularly through messages, follow-up conversations and occasional in-person meetings. Whenever I could, I met them in their homes, offices, cafés, or social settings, even attending significant life events, including two weddings, as fieldwork unfolded. Naturally, this also meant I got glimpses of the everyday worlds they inhabited and the many actors in it, often generating insights that formal interviews alone could not, while providing valuable context to their stories.

In 2023, once key themes had crystallised through ongoing analysis, I conducted a final set of online focus group discussions, each involving six to ten participants. These sessions brought together both previous and new interlocutors and served as spaces for collective reflection on

emerging findings around education, marriage, caregiving, and daughterhood. These discussions were invaluable as a source of empathy, shared solidarity and meaning making, while also providing a fertile ground for debate and dissent, allowing me to incorporate different perspectives.

Finally, throughout the fieldwork period, I was also involved in an ESRC-funded, University of Cambridge-Oxford project on gendered everyday violence in elite and middle-class homes in Gurgaon, called "The GendV Project". As part of this project, I got the opportunity to meet many women living in Gurgaon's high rises, interviewing them and recording their life stories to understand how the fear of the city, gendered norms and respectability attached to their class status affected their ability to live their lives fully. These interviews significantly shaped my thinking and sensitivity to the emotional textures of domestic life, respectability, and constraint among privileged women. The opportunity to be a part of this project, its many discussions and presentations broadened my horizons greatly, and its influence can be found in insights I incorporated in my own thesis, and in how I approached my own analysis of daughterhood.

Patchwork Ethnography as an Adapted Method

Looking back at the research process I followed, I am hesitant to describe this study as "ethnographic" in a conventional sense. Instead, it is best understood as a qualitative research project *inspired* by the ethnographic approach. The closest theoretical model to my process is perhaps found in the "Patchwork Ethnography" process, that has, in recent years gained credence as an alternative form of ethnographic research that expands what we consider acceptable materials, tools, and objects of our analyses (Günel, Varma, and Watanabe 2020; Günel and Watanabe 2024). The scholars define it as "ethnographic processes and protocols designed around short-term field visits, using fragmentary yet rigorous data, and other

innovations that resist the fixity, holism, and certainty demanded in the publication process" (Günel et al. 2020:3).

This approach does imply one-time, short, instrumental trips should count as research, rather, it asks for research efforts that maintain long-term relational commitments, without the expectation of continuous immersion. Instead of signalling methodological compromise, patchwork ethnography reflects an attempt to reconfigure what counts as "valid" ethnographic research under contemporary constraints. Recent attempts to adapt to fieldwork challenges through methods ranging from online research to multi-sited ethnographies, that attend to the changing needs of both the researcher and the researched in new and unique ways, accounting for various financial, environmental, political and temporal constraints have led to a recombination of "home" and "field" as subjective, fluid categories (Adams, Burke, and Whitmarsh 2014; Faubion and Marcus 2011; Harrison 2018). A consolidation of these shifts, in turn, has led to the conceptualization of patchwork ethnography as a new methodological approach, especially in the aftermath of COVID-19. I found this framing to be most useful in explaining the research process I followed, which, while acknowledging the limitations and constraints of my work, still allowed me to view it as analytically useful.

My fieldwork unfolded through phases of intense interviewing interspersed with reflection, transcription, and re-engagement. Between formal interviews, I maintained contact with several participants, following their life updates, and occasionally meeting them in person when restrictions eased. These repeated encounters, both digital and embodied, coexisted, produced a layered, temporal understanding of women's lives as they changed over time. Patchwork ethnography thus legitimised the hybrid form my research naturally took, while foregrounding an ethics of flexibility and care central to feminist methodology.

Modes of analysis: From Narratives to Themes

Ethnography, as Hoppe (1993) reminds us, is ultimately a written construct, whose authority and meaning are produced in the act of writing. The power of transcription, revision, and interpretation rests with the researcher, who determines what is recorded, how it is framed, and how it is ultimately written up. This authority, as Pandian (2019) and Jaju (2023) also note, enables the writer not only to amplify certain voices, but also, inadvertently, to *remake* reality itself. While narrators may at times resist this imbalance through acts of narrative agency (Collins 1998), the researcher's power to document cannot be fully dissolved. Making visible the process of analysis and writing, and introducing self-consciousness in the text, becomes therefore not only a methodological necessity but also an *ethical* one (Koobak and Thapar-Björkert 2014; Pillow 2003).

Though originating in literary theory, narrative analysis has been widely adopted within the social sciences to examine how individuals make meaning of their lives through stories. Rosenwald and Ochburg (1992:1) remind us that personal stories are not mere reflections but the very means through which identities are fashioned. Polkinghorne (1995) distinguishes between two analytic modes- the "analysis of narratives," which identifies patterns and themes across stories through paradigmatic reasoning, and "narrative analysis," which configures events into coherent wholes, attending to the texture and meaning of particular lives(Connelly and Clandinin 2006). The former seeks to generalize; the latter to understand.

In my own work, rather than treating these as competing approaches, I moved between them, allowing attention to individual stories to inform the identification of broader thematic patterns. Drawing on scholars like Braun and Clarke(2006), I first approached my data inductively, attending to each story in its individuality, asking what daughterhood meant to that person, how

she narrated her experience, and what emotions or contradictions underpinned it. Through repeated readings, I began to notice resonances across narratives- themes that surfaced repeatedly, such as early socialisation of daughterhood; support for education and employment; thoughts on love, dating and marriage; and concerns around caregiving. These resonances gradually crystallised into the central empirical axes of the thesis and informed the structure of the empirical chapters, which follow a loose temporal trajectory from early childhood to adulthood.

When it came to analysing my data, I followed an iterative and continuous process, revisiting my transcripts and recordings repeatedly, often listening again for tone, pauses, hesitations and silences or moments of emotional intensity. After each interview, I recorded initial impressions, noting themes and writing short sketches of my respondents in my fieldwork diary, which I returned to during the analysis process. These notes traced my own evolving thinking and became useful guiding lights for my analysis. In later stages, I drew selectively on Souto-Manning's (2014) framework of Critical Narrative Analysis (CNA), which combines the interpretive depth of narrative analysis with the political attentiveness of discourse analysis. CNA can help illuminate how personal narratives are entangled with institutional discourses, showing how people both inhabit and contest them, as Forgas and Williams (2003) and Kristeva (2024) argue. What appealed to me most about this approach was its refusal to treat narrators as passive bearers of ideology. CNA foregrounds agency and reflexivity, revealing how individuals can, through storytelling, inhabit, question, problematize and even resist the very norms they live within. As Manning suggests, such a process provides room for a "de-mystification of the social construction of reality, while reframing social interactions as places for norms to be challenged and changed" (2014:163). By identifying institutional discourses

intertextually recycled in their narratives and understanding them as separated from their own life experiences, they can start changing and challenging their own stories.

In my conversations too, I found repeated instances of self-reflexivity and shifts in the way in which my respondents were retelling their stories- small acts of narrative resistance, in which daughters re-evaluated their sense of duty, questioned family expectations and often, at the end of interviews, reflected on how our conversation had allowed them to rethink their own story. Such moments underscored what Souto-Manning (2014) describes as the potential of narrative inquiry to create "critical meta-awareness" (Friere 1970, as quoted in Suoto-Manning 2014). The research encounter thus became an ethical space of shared contemplation. The interviews were not just data, but also spaces of self-making and self-questioning, that allowed daughters to construct and challenge their own reality as they engaged in them.

Positionality and Reflexivity

A final question addressed in this chapter concerns that of my own positionality as a researcher. As a daughter from a similar social background to that of my respondents, how did my own identity, positionality and emotional proximity with my work shape the research encounter, the analytic process and the final outcome of this project?

From the outset, I was extremely aware of this proximity and of the anxieties it generated, particularly around whether I could ever be "distant" enough to conduct what is conventionally seen as "rigorous" or "impartial" research. I worried that my work might be seen as too personal, wondering whether I would be accused of projecting my own emotions onto others, and fearing that I might not be able to do justice to the stories I was told as a result. These concerns were not incidental. Older methodological and positivist traditions privileged ideals of distance, neutrality and emotional detachment in research, often viewing the role of emotions

in interviewing, analysis and writing as analytically suspect, forcing researchers attempting to suppress emotions in favour of 'professional detachment' during fieldwork and analysis (Kleinman and A.Copp 1993). In the initial stages of my work, I too, found myself trying to pre-empt such critiques by emphasizing my own *detachment*- to show that I had achieved critical distance from my work, through repeated engagement, reflexive checks, external critique and careful methodological justification. I wrote as though my positionality, while helpful in enabling me access to so many daughters and building rapport with them, was a liability that had to be managed or minimized. It was only in the final stages of my thesis that I came to see the impossibility- and futility- of this stance. As Oakley (1981) reminds us, knowledge does not involve the *removal* of the personal to produce a "sanitized" or "hygienic" version of the research process, rather, personal involvement *is* the condition under which people come to know and admit others into their lives (1981:41) My relationship to my material, then, was not something to be excused; it was the very condition of my research.

The process of undertaking this research was deeply emotional one for me, not only because I often resonated with the stories I was collecting, but because of the personal significance of the questions it raised. I was listening to daughters who, like me, navigated contradictory expectations of freedom and duty, of autonomy and obligation. Their ambivalence often mirrored my own. Conducting these interviews was thus intellectually generative but also personally unsettling, in that it demanded that I continuously confront my own my emotional responses and my own location within the structures I was analysing. Being introduced to respondents through shared networks meant that my identity as "one of them" shaped the research encounter in important ways. However, while it allowed me to build trust and intimacy more easily and quickly, this familiarity also carried an ethical responsibility- questions of reciprocity, to what extent could I share my own story and when, were ever-present.

Here again, I turned to Oakley's (1981) guidance. When the interviewer and interviewee share gender socialization and critical life experiences, ethical dilemmas do indeed multiply, but so too does the possibility of meaningful data. Non-hierarchical relationships and emotional investment, as Oakley suggests, are not methodological weaknesses, but conditions for authentic understanding which emerge when a researcher is "prepared to invest his or her personal identity in the relationship", with an aim not to uncover "the" truth, but remaining truthful and accurate in representing what has been said. Emotion, far from contaminating research, shapes how it is read, heard, and interpreted (Backett-Milburn 1999; Mauthner and Doucet 2003). Over time, I came to recognize my ability to foster empathetic listening and shared understanding as a strength.

In practice, this meant remaining attentive to how familiarity operated in the research encounter. During interviews, I shared aspects of my background when asked, without predetermined limits, allowing the degree of personal disclosure to be guided by the rhythm of each conversation. I avoided steering participants toward any presumed "correct" response and was extremely careful not to fill silences with my own interpretations. When respondents assumed shared understanding, with comments like "you know how it is" or "I'm sure you understand", I would make sure to clarify and ask for examples to ensure I wasn't projecting my own meanings or allowing familiarity to substitute for explanation. Familiarity became a tool for connection, rather than an impediment to my research.

In analysing and writing, too, I did not *aim* to produce a "neutral" or disembodied account. My task was not to erase myself but to remain faithful to the stories entrusted to me. As Geertz (1973), Haraway (1988) and Harding(1991) remind us, all knowledge is "partial"- situated, embodied, and necessarily incomplete. The truth of this project lies not in objectivity but in honesty- in acknowledging that my interpretation is one among many possible readings.

Haraway's (1988) idea of "situated knowledges" offers a way to understand this position, emphasizing as it does that that knowing is always stitched together through partial perspectives rather than produced from a view from nowhere. This thesis, then, is an interpretation stitched together through these partial visions- mine and my respondents'. It is not my story, though I am part of it. It is an account I have written in conjunction with my respondents, whose lives I had the privilege of discovering, however partially, and who believed in me enough to allow me to write about them.

In the next chapter, I outline the analytical framework through which these narratives were brought together, explaining what frames helped me answer the larger research questions that motivated this work.

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IV. Analytical Framework

To understand the evolving nature of daughterhood in contemporary India is to understand how young women navigate a complex terrain of expanding opportunities and enduring obligations- how they make sense of their lives, forge their identities, and act within the contradictory forces that shape their world.

In this section, I outline the analytical framework designed to answer these questions, approaching daughterhood as a gendered social formation, produced through everyday practices, emotional attachments, and classed expectations that organise women's conduct across the life course.

Accordingly, this framework is built around three interconnected conceptual lenses.

The first is a critical approach to agency and meaning making, that places theories of reflexivity in dialogue with a more gender-aware Bourdesian analysis. The second is a focus on the social life of emotions, with a view to understanding the affective economy of daughterhood; while the third is a focus on an intersectional analysis of class and gender, that highlights the continuous project of maintaining middle class respectability that women are often exclusively burdened with- focusing on the role of daughterhood in the social reproduction of class identities. Together, these tools allow for an interpretation of the life stories at the heart of this thesis at the micro-level, while also making connections with larger, macro-level structures.

Part One: The Dynamics of Agency: Reflexivity, Habitus and Gendered Subjectivities

A recurring feature of the lives of the women in this study is the presence of reflexive self-awareness- the capacity to think about one's choices, question inherited norms, and imagine alternative futures. Theories of reflexivity have been particularly influential in conceptualising it as a defining feature of contemporary social life, imbibing the expectation that individuals actively reflect upon, justify, and take responsibility for their choices (Askeland and Fook 2009; Fook 2011; Fook, Psoinos, and Sartori 2015). They emphasize the capacity of individuals to critically examine inherited norms and their own place within them, while developing the capacity to adopt alternative standpoints (Humphrey 2009).

Much of the sociological literature on reflexivity, particularly that associated with theorists of late modernity such as Giddens, Beck, and Lash, has emphasised the growing centrality of self-monitoring, choice, and identity construction in contemporary life, treating reflexivity both as a cognitive and moral practice (Archer 2003; Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994; Giddens 2023). In this perspective, social change is understood to arise from heightened individual awareness of social conditions, critical self-reflection, and agentive action oriented towards transformation. Reflexivity thus becomes both a means of understanding social arrangements and a potential site for their evolution.

While such accounts offer useful starting points for understanding the aspirations and self-understandings of the women in this study- many of whom articulated strong commitments to autonomy, self-development, and gender equality, the reach and effects of reflexivity must not be abstracted from its social conditions. As Jackson (2002) reminds us, while continuous self-reflection may be a necessary pre-condition for theorizing change, the reflexive construction of self-identity remains culturally mediated- dictating both the limits and scope for the exercise

of individual agency, especially when applied to non-Western contexts. Jyothsna Belliappa (2013:20), in her study of middle-class women in Bangalore's IT sector, similarly cautions us against the "implied universalism" of reflexive modernisation, arguing that it "elides the unevenness and contradictions" that characterise modernisation processes in postcolonial societies like India, "threatening to flatten the complexities of how such processes play out in different contexts".

In this thesis, therefore, I approach self-reflexivity not a generalised marker of modernity, but as a socially mediated, contextually emergent, uneven practice, inflected by class, gender, emotion, generational experience and social location. Such a reading offers an explanation for the persistence of "socially appropriate conduct", grounded in shared attitudes and modes of meaning-making, while still leaving room for the possibility of critique and change.

What further makes reflexivity an apt framing for this project is its relevance to the contradictory lives of my respondents. In the contemporary Indian context, particularly in the post 1990s era, forces of cultural globalisation and economic deregulation have created the *conditions* for the individualisation of the labour market, which in turn have strengthened the ideals of individualism, autonomy and freedom as *aspirational* for Indian women (Belliappa 2013). As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) also posit, in the new world of late modernity, life choices are no longer necessarily constrained by conditions of birth, and the individual is free to create identities from the diverse options offered to her. Within this framework, there is equality, or at least the *expectation* of equality between the sexes (2001:55–56). This expectation resonates strongly with the respondents of this study as well- urban, educated, middle-class Indian women who can be characterised, following Giddens, as "late modern individuals" for whom individual agency, freedom from constraint, and the desire to create the self as a reflexive project are central to self-identity. Here, self-reflexivity here offers a starting

point for understanding how these daughters make sense of change- how they reflect on available options, attach meaning to them, and translate reflection into action.

At the same time, however, particular tensions between the embrace of modernity and anxieties about the erosion of tradition have led to the emergence of uniquely *Indian* forms of modernity. As Singh (2018) argues, these are marked by the selective adoption of elements of Western cultures alongside a redefinition of indigenous values. In such a situation, as Belliappa suggests, the *framing* offered by reflexivity theorists, when combined with empirical evidence from the Global South and its unique perspective, allows for a more nuanced rethinking of its applicability in the Indian scenario. Analysing my respondents' narratives using this paradigm allowed me to see them as opinionated, thinking, self-reflexive women, who are keen to transcend the limitations of their gendered identities, critically reflect on the restrictions imposed on them and exercise some form of agency- whether through questioning, resisting or bargaining with existing social norms and structures.

Bourdieu- Habitus as a structuring force

Nonetheless, an *excessive* focus on reflexivity risks *overstating* the case for individual autonomy as a force of change, while neglecting the important role that social structures continue to play in shaping, and even constraining lives people are allowed to lead (Eagleton 2001). Among other things, as various scholars have suggested, the practical difficulties and unequal capacities for reflexivity across social groups(Collins 2022; Fraser 2009); inequitable distribution of resources, time, and freedom to engage in the process (Castel 2017); and differential impact of reflexive engagement on people are often ignored in theories that focus disproportionately on individual action as their locus(Held 1995).

In order to ground this analysis, and temper the *possibilities* of change with the complex, often complicated lived realities that people inhabit, I bring reflexivity as a framework in critical conversation with the work of sociologists who focus on the more determinative aspects of larger social structures in shaping individual lives, focusing particularly on Pierre Bourdieu.

From a theoretical standpoint, Bourdieu's work stands in sharp contrast with the apparent objectivism of the individualisation theses. His ideas of *habitus* and *field*, in particular, elaborated at length in Bourdieu's classic study of French society, Distinction(1984), demonstrate how the "social order is progressively inscribed in people's minds" through "cultural products", including systems of education, language, judgements, values, methods of classification and activities of everyday life" (1984: 471). Rather than treating individuals as freely choosing subjects, Bourdieu shows how social hierarchies are reproduced through deeply internalised dispositions.

Understood as "socialised subjectivity", the concept of habitus points to the embodied "ways of being", including interactions, orientations, values, and the way one conducts in public, which explains how individuals "become themselves". Habitus is not merely a framework for understanding change, but one that *visibilises* how systems of power play out in society. As Wacquant (2005) describes it, habitus is the way society becomes "deposited" in individuals, in the form of "lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them" (Wacquant 2005: 316, as cited in Navarro 2006:16). It is through habitus that histories become naturalised- what Bourdieu famously describes as "history turned into nature" (1977:78). Importantly, Bourdieu maintains that the habitus is neither entirely a result of free will, nor entirely determined by structures, but created by a kind of interplay between the two, over time.

"Fields" on the other hand, represent the various social and institutional arenas- familial, educational, professional, cultural, in which the habitus operates, where these dispositions are enacted and contested (Navarro 2006:18). They structure access to different kinds of capital and set the conditions under which action becomes possible (Gaventa 2003:6). For Bourdieu, the social world is comprised of *differentiated* yet *overlapping* fields of action (eg economic, legal, political, cultural), each of which operates on its own logic, and both informs as well as sets limits on practice.

As Gilbertson (2017) notes, habitus helps explain how agents *move* within a field, i.e., how they navigate, negotiate, manipulate and reproduce it through everyday practice. However, because practices are not *consciously* recognized by actors themselves, individuals remain largely *unaware* of the constitutive role of their actions in determining fields themselves. Habitus is thus created and reproduced *unconsciously*, "without any deliberate pursuit of coherence" (Bourdieu 1984: 170). As a consequence, from this perspective, reflexivity *cannot* be understood to concern an "objective, cognitive reflection on structure", since "knowledge of the world never concerns an external, *knowing consciousness*" (Adkins 2003:24). This places clear limits on the kinds of change that reflexivity alone can generate.

Applying these ideas to the daughters' narratives, a Bourdieusian framing offers valuable insight into how gendered norms are internalised and reproduced, not only cognitively but corporeally- through everyday practices, comportment, and emotional regulation (West and Zimmerman 1987). As Reay also argues, habitus is not only a mental schema, but is formed through the embodied accumulation and effects of dispositions- through ways "of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking" (Reay 1995:354). These processes lead to an unconscious acceptance of social differences and hierarchies, producing "a sense of one's place" and the normalisation of behaviours of self-exclusion (Bourdieu 1984: 471). Viewed

through this lens, it is easier to understand how daughters learn gendered rules through embodied practices, how they assess their value and worth within patriarchal social contexts and why they can face difficulties in exercising agency or resisting traditional norms, even as reflective, self-aware subjects.

Beyond Bourdieu: Feminist engagements

While Bourdieu's framing offers a powerful way of understanding the *power* of invisible social structures in setting limits to change, shaping even the most personal of aspirations and operating beneath the level of consciousness, it has also been subject to sustained feminist critique. The problem with his conception, as many scholars have suggested, is that they appear to take agency away from the subject, by presenting social systems as overly durable and unchanging, and blaming, in some ways, the subject of oppression for her complicity in her own subjugation. In this sense, his work has been criticised for underplaying the capacity of subjects to actively contest, negotiate, or transform the very structures that shape them and which they inhabit.

Judith Butler, in particular, has sharply criticised Bourdieu's lack of attribution of agency to individual subjects, and for reducing the complexity of how gendered selves are produced and reworked within normative structures (Lovell 2000; McNay 1999b). Butler suggests instead that gender identity is *actively* constructed and reiterated through performative acts, which, while constrained by norms, also carry the potential for their subversion and transformation through sustained acts of resistance (Butler 2002, 2015). Similarly, Nancy Fraser, while disagreeing with Butler on other aspects, critiques Bourdieu for his focus on the passive reproduction of social structures as "immutable" in his work, and for postulating a theory that essentially reproduces, and even *legitimizes* gendered power relations in the face of inequality,

while leaving little room for understanding how patriarchal structures might be disrupted or challenged from within by those who inhabit them (Fraser 1997, 2014; Lovell 2007).

As a result, an uncritical over-reliance on a Bourdesian framework can be as limiting as an excessive focus on reflexivity in understanding social change and individual action. Responding to these concerns, in recent years, feminist scholars have increasingly sought to rework and extend Bourdieu's concepts- particularly habitus and field- to better account for gendered agency, moving away from readings that foreground habitus primarily as reproductive, towards interpretations that emphasize contradiction, instability, and the possibilities of change embedded within existing formulations (McLeod 2005:17). Scholars like Beverly Skeggs and Lisa Adkins have referred to this attempt in their work "Feminism After Bourdieu" as an effort to "use, critique, critically extend and develop Bourdieu's social theory" in order to address both enduring and emergent problematics in feminist theory (2004:4).

It is to the work of these scholars that I turn to build a conceptual framework for my own thesis. Doing so allows me room to hold together structural and cultural constraint with reflexive thought and individual agency, without privileging one at the expense of the other. I summarise the key works I refer to in the section below.

Feminist engagements with Bourdieu: McNay, Adkins and McLeod

In her article "Gender, habitus and the field: Pierre Bourdieu and the limits of reflexivity", Lois McNay (1999a) points out how seeing identity as an issue of reflexive self-transformation fails to fully consider issues of gender. She acknowledges that some aspects of embodied experience, such as societally acceptable conceptions of femininity, although not entirely fixed, may be less amenable to reflexive reinterpretation and change- which can explain how

conventional gender arrangements can become more entrenched despite changing norms. However, she challenges the view that a gendered habitus forecloses the possibility of reflexive self-transformation and change. Moving beyond "pure" notions of reflexivity or determinism, McNay posits the idea of society as an "open and differentiated structure", which offers potential for destabilising existing norms. Specifically, McNay posits that as women move across social fields such as the labour market, private and public life, the existing binaries that shape their habitus are challenged, which produce varying and even contradictory effects of dispositions created in such fields. The movement of individuals across different fields in the contemporary era, specifically of *women*, into "traditionally non-feminine spheres of action", she argues, results in a "lack of fit" between the gendered habitus and field. The "resulting lack of synchronicity", McNay argues, is what leads to an "undoing of norms, rules and habits vis-à-vis gender", as can be witnessed in the "detraditionalizing" processes currently being expressed in the changing gendered divisions of labour, in women's increased entry into the market force, or in the opening up of negotiations in their choices regarding marriage globally (1999a:106-108).

McNay's account suggests a theory of "multiple subjectivities", where the interconnectedness, overlap of private and public fields provides opportunities for multiple disjunctions, conflict, dissonance and disjunction, which in turn produce change. Furthermore, this lack of "fit", she argues, leads to heightened possibilities for critical reflexivity, and an "awakening of consciousness", provoked by the conflict and tension of social forces operating within and across specific fields.

Seen this way, McNay counters the determinism of the habitus-field couplet by focusing on the *instability*, rather than *durability* of social norms, and pointing to the ways in which the emergence of critical reflexivity can lead to change.

While McNay's approach underscores the possibility of transformation, Lisa Adkins (2003:39–40; 2004:195–97) offers a more sceptical perspective, by arguing that while the *conditions* of reflexive consciousness may indeed be greater today, changed dispositions resulting from crossing different fields "neither necessarily signal, nor translate to a dramatic transformation of gender".

Instead, Adkins argues that a critical, reflexive stand towards gender, instead of indicating a "freedom" or "de-traditionalising process" or even an "insight into the self", arising from an experience of "field dissonance" can also be viewed as merely representing a *habit* of gender, or a way of *being* in the contemporary world- one that involves regarding and monitoring oneself more regularly (2004: 196-197). Critiquing reflexivity theorists for exaggerating the potential of change through increased consciousness, Adkins highlights how reflexivity in late modernity itself may in fact be tied into "new arrangements of gender" that represent a reworking, re-inscription, or *re-traditionalisation* of gender norms rather than new freedoms. Adkins also questions the "neat bracketing" of reflexive attitudes from other, more habitually rooted forms of social action, innately tied to the constitution and reproduction of norms and habits of gender, which can better explain the concurrence of continuity and change.

Bringing the accounts offered by McNay and Adkins into critical tension, Julie McLeod's (2005) work offers a productive synthesis of these positions, one that is especially resonant for the analysis developed in this thesis. McLeod suggests that the critical dilemma is not about choosing one side of a binary- between freedom from the field and determination by it, or conceptualising Bourdieu's framework in terms of cultural reproduction versus cultural determination. Rather, Mcleod writes, "the more pressing political and analytical challenge is attempting to theorize *both* change and continuity, invention and repetition, as complex, *simultaneous* processes that take place in ambivalent and uneven ways. The end result is both

a reiteration of traditional gendered relations of power co-existing with 'new-yet-familiar' figurations of gender" (McLeod 2005:21).

Focusing on the ways in which different contexts, locations, interactions can impact the field and habitus differentially, McLeod suggests, may allow feminist scholars to grapple with the subjective notions of change and continuity across time and place. She warns us against *a priori* thinking that is rule-bound or predictive with respect to how change occurs, while encouraging the application of theoretical concepts of field and habitus into the *practical*, *everyday* reality of life. Relying on such perspective allows for an analysis that takes women's reflexivity seriously without overstating its transformative reach.

It is with keeping these theoretical frames in mind that I proceed with this project, in which I attempt to unpack the contradictory, agentive yet constrained lived experiences of daughters among the new middle- and upper-middle class in India. Drawing on Danish Kandiyoti's seminal work in Bargaining with Patriarchy(1988), as well as later feminist interventions that attend to everyday negotiations rather than overt resistance (Abu-Lughod 1990; Dyson and Jeffrey 2022; Mahmood 2005; Sharma 2008), I conceptualise daughters' agency as relational, situated, and frequently non-oppositional, approaching it not as a *rejection* of structure, but as the way in which women work *within* moral, emotional, and relational constraints.

While Kandiyoti (1988) shows how women across diverse Global South contexts strategically negotiate patriarchal systems to maximize security and optimize their lives, subsequent scholarship on "conformist", "negotiated" or "entangled" forms of agency (Sharma 2008) further demonstrates how agency is embedded *within* dominant norms and social networks, rather than exercised against them. Dyson and Jeffery's (2022) formulation of "reformist agency" in the Indian context captures how young women work within and subtly reshape

norms by oscillating between relatively “boundary-pushing” and “more tightly conformist practices”, over long periods of time, layering new aspirations onto existing roles, indicating a kind of “creative conformity” with patriarchy (2022:1248). Central to this process is young women’s access to education, employment, mobility, and exposure, which enables new forms of reflexive consciousness and sustained, incremental challenges to gendered life trajectories that are more legible and acceptable within familial contexts.

For the daughters in this study, similarly, agency often takes the form of recalibration rather than refusal- modifying expectations, delaying decisions, or reframing obligations in ways that stretch familial norms while preserving relational ties. In analysing their narratives, I therefore treat self-reflexivity, mediated forms of agency and resulting gendered subjectivities as key analytical lenses for understanding how daughters navigate choice, constraint, and continuity in their lives.

The next section deals with the second pillar of this framework- the emotional economy of daughterhood.

Part Two: The Emotional Economy of Daughterhood

A key aspect of relational phenomenology, that underlies feminist approaches to analysing gender as a lived relation is the significance attributed to the study of *emotions* in mediating lives, both in the private and public realm. Scholars like McLeod (2005) highlight the importance of analysing emotions as a form of *social interaction*, which allows us to see both how emotions are *shaped by* latent social structures, and how invisible power dynamics are "made present within immediate experience". Keeping in mind that a daughter's life is moulded not only by social structures but also lived and experienced through a rich emotional landscape, this thesis treats emotions not merely as private psychological states, but as *socially constructed* and managed forces, that do important political and relational work.

To construct a framework for understanding the emotional, affective economy of daughterhood, I draw on the scholarship on sociology of emotions, particularly the work of scholars like Raymond Williams (1977), Arlie Hochschild (1979, 2003, 2012) and Saba Ahmed (2004, 2010) to illustrate the centrality of emotions in structuring daughterhood as a gendered relation.

In building his notion of *structures of feeling*, Raymond Williams ([1977] 2015: 132-135) discusses how the affective elements of consciousness and relationships operate as "structured formations" that can "exert palpable pressures", and "set effective limits on experience and on action". Unlike formal "structures" such as institutions or ideologies, which are often institutionalized and codified, structures of *feeling*, as Raymond describes them, are fluid and emergent, reflecting the dynamic and transitional nature of social life. They refer to the *emotional and experiential* dimensions that are not always fully expressed in language or official discourse, yet remain crucial for understanding lived experiences. Williams argues that

these structures, which he refers to as “the shared, yet often unarticulated, affective experiences through we engage with the world”, are difficult to capture in traditional forms of analysis because they exist in a space “between the individual and the collective, between private feeling and public expression” (2015: 132-134). Furthermore, for Williams, studying structures of feelings offers a means of interpreting the emotional undercurrents of social life, particularly in periods of historical transformation- providing insight into how new cultural forms, practices, and values emerge, often as responses to changing economic, political, or social conditions. Affect, in this sense, is not merely reflective of ideology but an active force shaping and shaped by social change (Williams 2015).

In ‘The Managed Heart’, Arlie Hochschild (2012: 55-59) similarly argues that emotions are not purely private or spontaneous experiences, but are socially regulated through cultural expectations. “Feeling rules”, as Hochschild argues, operate as a moral frameworks that define what it is appropriate to feel, how intensely, and toward whom- thereby linking personal affect to broader systems of social order and power. Through these rules, individuals internalize social values and reproduce them through their affective conduct, making emotion a site of both conformity and moral judgment. “Emotion work”, on the other hand is the effort individuals expend to align their inner feelings with socially prescribed expectations, and the high costs it places on them. The gendered distribution of affective responsibilities, for example, where women are often expected to sustain harmony, care, and emotional balance within families is a form of work that exploits emotions for sustaining existing hierarchies (Hochschild 1979; 2012:35–36).

In trying to understand what it means to be a daughter in the current period of generational and gendered change in modern day India, I turn to the work of these scholars as a means of understanding the interplay between affect and historical context, allowing for a more nuanced,

rich understanding not only of the personal lives led by these daughters, but also how societal shifts and contradictions are felt, experienced, and negotiated at the level of everyday life through affective responses. Within this context, I explore emotions ranging from gratitude and guilt to shame, pride, sacrifice, and selfishness, showing how they shape conceptions of good daughterhood by functioning both as motivations for transcendence and as mechanisms of constraint.

Hochschild's framing of "feeling rules", along with the work of scholars like Zimmerman and West (1987) on *doing* gender and Raymond's work on structures of feeling, is particularly useful for understanding early gendered socialisation, helping illuminate how daughters internalise "appropriate" emotional responses and behavioural expectations from a young age. Applying Hochschild's (2003) concept of the "economies of gratitude" to my respondents, I examine privilege and abundance shape daughters' conduct within families, rendering *gratitude* as a force of affective disciplining, moral obligation and control. In her work, Hochschild argues that gratitude functions as a form of emotional *exchange* within interpersonal and institutional relationships, operating as a kind of "currency" that reinforces social bonds and hierarchies, and I build on the operationalisation of this dynamic to better understand the obligations privileged daughters feel towards their parents.

Closely related are the emotions of guilt and shame, which have been widely studied as mechanisms of control that can elicit conformity to traditional normative roles. In my work, I draw on scholarship that conceptualises these emotions in different ways- as regulatory reactions, as atonement for perceived harm, and as significant in the pursuit of a moral self, especially within interpersonal relationships, in an attempt to understand how these shape the lived experiences of daughters (Abell and Gecas 1997; Klein 2002; Misheva 2006; Turner 2007). These emotional responses are even more exacerbated in an intergenerational context,

particularly when juxtaposed with the emotional value of *sacrifice*, which flows from parents (especially mothers) towards children, that has already been studied by many scholars as a form of emotional labour (Lareau 2003; Reay 2019); as well as an integral part of the larger social contract (Mauss 2024). In the Indian context, scholars have documented "motherly sacrifice" as a central emerging node of parenting, wherein "committed mothers" willingly sacrifice their dreams and ambitions in order to support their children's brighter futures (Donner 2006; Kaur 2022). A recognition of these sacrifices can in turn invoke an enduring feelings of debt and obligation.

I use a combination of the feelings of guilt, gratitude and obligation in conjunction with feminist reinterpretations of Bourdieu to understand how these emotional responses shape social subjectivities and a gendered habitus. Here, Sarah Ahmed's (2004) powerful conception of "sticky emotions" is extremely useful, in demonstrating how emotions can persist and endure in shaping actions, by their ability to "stick" to certain moral narratives and subject positions, binding individuals to social norms, identities and collectives. Ahmed explains how certain emotions- such as love, shame, pride or fear "attach" to particular figures or relationships, shaping how subjects come to inhabit their social worlds, and sustaining hierarchies and moral orders through affective attachments (Ahmed 2004: 90-92).

Taken together, these emotions constitute the emotional terrain of what I call "good daughterhood", that I build on this thesis. Ahmed's (2010) conception of "happy objects", which links happiness and social value with the pursuit of what is "good, right, and respectable" also serves as a guiding light, which positions daughters as emotionally charged subjects who are inducted into norms not through coercion, but through the pursuit of that which is *right* and *meaningful*.

In attempting to explain daughters' emotional responses thus, I do not mean to suggest that they operate merely as forms of oppression or control. The work of scholars like Saba Mahmood (2009), for instance, can allow us to reinterpret acts of sacrifice or deference (such as those that daughters make undertake) as forms of ethical self-cultivation and moral agency- thereby leaving room for viewing other-centric behaviour as agentive, and even strategic acts of maintaining kinship bonds. Nonetheless, at the same time, I also engage with daughters' *anger,* especially moral anger, as an emotional response to perceived injustice, and as a starting point for more conscious, reflexive behaviour. For this, I borrow from the work of scholars like Amya Srinivasan and Mukta Kulkarni, who discuss the "aptness of anger", and its role in initiating social change (Kulkarni 2024; Srinivasan 2018).

While I do not seek to attribute causality to any one set of emotions in order to explain behaviour, through this process, I hope to explore the motivational role of affect in explaining life choices of the young women whose lives I recount (Weiner and Graham 1989). I also briefly look at the psychological literature on gender role conflict to understand how deviation from pre-defined gendered roles and scripts can carry various kinds of negative psychological, emotional and material consequences for daughters (Alford and Harrigan 2019; Pildes 1978; Walker, Pratt, and Wood 1993), which can, in turn, allow good daughterhood to be read as a form of "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu 2001) or "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011), where the very attachments that promise fulfilment and moral worth also become modes of harm.

The next section explains the final anchor of the analytical framework- the intersection of gender and class.

Part Three: The Intersection of Class and Gender: The Currency of Respectability

A final aspect that this thesis looks at in its framing is the interlinked notion of gender and class as mutually reinforcing and involving similar processes of misrecognition. As Sherry Ortner writes, "the habitus predisposes a person looking at and evaluating the world, to feeling, thinking, judging and acting in ways as consistent with the limits of the structure- i.e. in ways that reproduce their class position" (Ortner 2006:109). Gender, like class, structures fields, facilitates access to resources and shapes capital conversion projects. Even as this thesis is not an analysis of class *per se*, it uses gender and performances of gender as a lens with which to study the social reproduction of class, in which respectability is a key criterion. To build an analysis of class and gender together for this work, I look to the work of Beverly Skeggs(1997, 2004, 2005), Diane Reay (2004, 2019) and Sherry Ortner(2006) conceptually, and to that of Nazia Hussein (2017, 2018), Henrike Donner (2016b) and Amanda Gilbertson (2017) in the specific South Asian/Indian context.

In her influential work on the interrelationship between class and gender, Beverly Skeggs (1997:1) discusses how "Respectability is one of the most ubiquitous signifiers of class- it informs how we speak, how we classify others and how we know *who we are* (or are not)". It is also closely linked with the formation of middle-class individuality. Skeggs writes "respectability has always been a marker and a burden of class, a standard to which to aspire" (1997: 3). She argues that the early mapping of class relationships on to what it means to be a worthy, moral individual provides a legacy and a framework for understanding the enduring significance of respectability as both a classed and gendered aspiration.

Historically, respectability was a "key characteristic of what it meant to belong, to be worthy and to be an individual" (ibid.). Respectability embodies *moral* authority- those who are

respectable have it, and those who are not, do not. Legitimate femininity and middle-class respectability are thus so closely intertwined that for a woman to be deemed legitimately middle-class she has to be "respectable", and for a woman to be deemed respectable, she has to be middle-class (Ortner 2006). Class informs whether and how respectability, particularly feminine respectability, can be taken up as a subject position (Skeggs 1997: 94). This form of public morality places women at the "centre", as middle-class women are constructed as *more* respectable than their working- or lower-class peers on the basis of their responsibility, the control of their sexuality, their care, protection and education of children in their roles as wives and mothers (Skeggs 1997: 5). In this process, gender and its performance of respectability appear self-evident as processes of legitimation, obscuring the social processes and structures through which gender is itself produced (Skeggs 2005: 23)

While Skeggs' works discusses the discomfort of lower middle-class women in navigating discourses of respectability that contradict their class position, for the daughters in this thesis, respectability, which becomes a significant aspect of performing good daughterhood, is inextricably linked with the social position they already occupy and seek to reproduce. It functions as a currency that must be carefully cultivated, displayed, and defended to maintain middle-class status, and I analyse it following Skeggs' framing of respectability as a continuous, often anxious, project of self-production. Parental investments in daughters- through their education, extracurriculars, and grooming- are therefore not just for the daughter's benefit but can be interpreted as strategies of class reproduction. As Diane Reay (2005) shows in the context of mothering, these investments are a way of accumulating cultural capital that can be converted into future success, securing the family's class position across generations, while also placing limits on what women can, or cannot achieve.

However, this framework does not assume an absence of agency. In her work, Skeggs (1997) discusses how few theories of subjective construction adequately explore how "real" women negotiate and understand themselves. It is through engagement with the lived experience of how women *inhabit* different social positions and cultural representations that one can understand this construction. In contrast to a more deterministic Bourdieusian account of habitus, Skeggs emphasizes that women are *active* producers of the meaning, whether they refuse, reluctantly or willingly inhabit certain positions. Women live and produce themselves *through* social and cultural relations, and the category "woman" is always constituted through classed processes which produce real, lived effects on a daily basis.

Amanda Gilbertson's work similarly insists on the need to problematize the class-gender interrelationship without erasing women's agency even within a confined habitus. In her study of suburban middle-class Hyderabad in India, Gilbertson (2017) demonstrates how class and gender are produced and reaffirmed through discourses of middle-class respectability and cosmopolitan open mindedness. She suggests that these moral discourses, and their associated tastes and practices operate as forms of misrecognition or symbolic violence- ways in which the middle classes distinguish themselves from supposedly culture-less and backward classes through practices of respectability, decency, exposure and open-mindedness. While for Bourdieu, misrecognition and inaccessibility of the habitus to consciousness ensures that the dominated have little agency or understanding, being convinced in the legitimacy of their subordination, Gilbertson finds evidence of subconscious negotiation, adaptation and capacity for reflexivity in her subjects. Following Ortner, she argues that although gender is critical to the reproduction of class and vice versa, individuals are not entirely reducible to their class position; their aspirations, desires, fears, and reflexive capacities allow them to live *within* and

against structural constraints, simultaneously reproducing and transforming them (Ortner 2003:205)

This lens connects directly to the previous two sections- by analysing how daughters narrate choices around careers, relationships, and lifestyles; how they negotiate "reformist" forms of agency, and how they adhere to "feeling rules", this framework reveals the ongoing labour of performing respectability and its role in class reproduction.

It helps explain why certain choices are deemed acceptable while others are considered transgressive, ultimately revealing how daughters' intimate, emotional lives are inextricably linked to the larger project of securing middle-class identity.

Evidence of this dynamic already available in other contexts. Nazia Hussein (2017), in her work on middle-class respectable femininity in Bangladesh, shows how normative conceptions of respectable femininity in South Asia have for long involved women prioritizing family above work through domesticity, caring and social roles along with moral propriety. However, in the present scenario, with women gaining access to higher education, high paid employment, capital, exposure among other things, they have the *potential* to change their gendered roles within family and society, adding value and legitimacy to their self-aspirations. Hussein argues that the professional achievements, careers and financial investments allow women "gendered power" to legitimize autonomy, even as they continue to occupy the inferior gender position in a patriarchal society and remain bound to perform conventional, middle-class, respectable femininity. Nonetheless, such reconfigurations, especially around new and emerging notions of women's respectability can enable us to "deconstruct the binaries of tradition and modernity, respectable and unrespectable, by carving out a third or 'other' site for women to bring improvement into their lives" (2017: 44)

In the final discussion, I bring together these different strands to examine how the pursuit of good daughterhood is a strategy of middle-class reproduction in New India, which allows for an amelioration between the adoption of progressive, gender-equal ideals by parents and availability of a multitude of opportunities for daughters on the one hand, along with continued control and restriction of daughters' lives on the other. Ultimately, it is the combination of the trifecta of self-reflexivity and mediated forms agency, emotional investments and costs of being a daughter, and the relationship between class and gender that come together to form the analytical foundations of this thesis.

The next section begins the empirical chapters of this thesis, starting with the becoming of "Good Daughters", detailing how early socialisation, embodied practices and gendered norms dictate the normative meanings associated with daughterhood over time.

*

V. Becoming Good Daughters- Formative Years

"Be loved, be admired, be necessary; be somebody."

— Simone de Beauvoir, Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter ([1958] 2005)

What does it mean to be a daughter? More importantly, what does it mean to be a *good daughter*? How does one learn to become one? And what is its significance?

In this chapter, I unpack the *becoming* of daughters in the middle classes in India, focusing on how the desire to become a *good daughter* surfaces in the first instance, how it is performed, cultivated, embodied and contested, and the numerous emotions this process evokes. In many Indian families, daughters grow into their gendered selves not through formal instruction, but through the slow sedimentation of stories, through a combination of positive affirmations, symbolic exclusions and strategic silences. These practices become part of their gendered habitus, shaping how daughters understand themselves, their relationships with their parents, and the kinds of lives they imagine as possible.

This chapter introduces *good daughterhood* as a conceptual lens for understanding these processes. I use the term to describe a specific gendered formation that is analytically distinct from broader ideals of femininity or womanhood. Unlike girlhood, often framed as transitional, or wifehood, anchored in marital relations, daughterhood is a uniquely non-exitable position within the family. It binds women into long-term moral relationships of obligation, gratitude, and care, structured by asymmetries of authority that frequently persist well into adulthood. Good daughterhood thus refers not merely to a set of behaviours, but to an affective and ethical orientation through which women are encouraged to continuously justify their place within the

family- often by minimising their needs, maximising their worth, and taking responsibility for familial harmony.

This chapter traces the making of good daughterhood across different moments and scales of social life. It begins with early familial narratives that shape how daughters come to understand their place within the family, before turning to the everyday practices through which these understandings are reinforced and embodied. It then situates these intimate processes within wider regimes of respectability, safety, and classed morality, showing how expectations of daughterly conduct are disciplined and sustained beyond the family. Taken together, the chapter shows how good daughterhood is produced not through isolated acts of control, but through a continuous process that links intimate affective life to broader structures of social reproduction.

Chapter Overview

Part One: Beginning at Birth- Origin Stories explores the early gendered socialization of daughterhood, tracing the important role played by the retellings of stories of birth in affirming a sense of exceptionalism and gratitude in daughters, binding them in a moral debt towards parents even when they were unwanted. Here, I explain how good daughterhood emerges as a normative, emotional and moral script, that conditions daughters to perform 'worthiness' in exchange for inclusion within patriarchal kinship structures.

Part Two: The Everyday Practice of Good daughterhood examines how good daughterhood is enacted in daily life through embodied practices of obedience, restraint, emotional regulation, and self-monitoring. Using the work of scholars like Bourdieu, Judith Butler, West & Zimmerman, Arlie Hochschild and Sarah Ahmed, I discuss the role that affective economies- built on emotions of gratitude, guilt and sacrifice- play in making specific kinds of social norms

intelligible and even desirable for daughters, even when they constitute a form of symbolic violence.

Part Three: Respectable Femininity and Middle-Class Moralities situates daughterhood within wider classed regimes of respectability. It examines how ideas of honour, shame, safety, and risk are mobilized to discipline daughters' bodies and mobility, revealing the role of good daughterhood in the reproduction of gendered and classed boundaries, as well as the longer-term consequences of internalising parental anxieties about protection and propriety.

As a whole, this chapter lays the groundwork for the analytic framework of good daughterhood that I develop across the thesis, using it to better understand daughters' lived experiences, their moral negotiations, and the enduring inequalities sustained in the name of love, duty, and care.

Part One: Beginning at birth

"When I was born, I was the first girl in the family in that generation. My mother reprimanded a relative for trying to offer consolation at the birth of a daughter, cautioning her to not to repeat such words in front of my father (to not incur his wrath)- he was busy distributing sweets. He had already picked my name from the lead character of a novel he was reading. My birth was a gift from God, I was told, no matter my gender. And that is how my parents saw it.

...I was told this story many times over the course of my life, each time with a hint of pride. It didn't really strike me as odd, just a way of showing me I was loved… It's only today that I realised no one even bothered with [sharing] the story of my ***brother's*** *birth. Probably because it was a given that it was a happy event, and no retelling was needed to prove it..."*

- Sreyasi, 30, PhD student

A curious aspect of interviews with my respondents was how stories of their birth would find their way naturally and repeatedly into our conversations, without any prompting. As anecdotes related by parents, stray comments by relatives, or retellings of the events preceding the day, they inevitably found mention in almost every interview.

Sometimes, these were distressing accounts of daughters who were acutely aware that their birth was not a happy event, recounted with some cynicism and a dose of dark humor- stories of angry grandmothers who had refused to look at the newborn girl child, of fathers leaving the hospital before they met their daughter, or mothers being labelled 'unlucky' by relatives for

birthing a second or third girl despite the 'potions' they had tried in the hope of a son. On other occasions, there were happy memories, (shared more often by parents), of how elated everyone had been with their daughter's birth, how the parents had always wanted a daughter, and how angry they had been if someone had suggested or hinted otherwise, such as in the case of Sreyasi quoted above.

Eventually, I began wondering why I had come across so many daughters who knew these stories, and why they featured so prominently in my discussions. Did they serve a narrative function? My skepticism was particularly prominent given the ubiquitousness of negative stories I heard- where daughters knew, and understood very well that they were unwelcome additions to their families. I wondered what possible reason there could be, to share these accounts with daughters? And what message did their sharing give me?

The emergence of gratitude

In her work on the '*Economies of gratitude*', Arlie Russel Hochschild (2003:116) discusses the different sources that lead to the emergence of gratitude emerging within the marital relationship. Discussing Hochschild's work in the chapter "Love and Gratitude", Margaret Nelson (2011:101) summarizes these sources succinctly into the three frames of reference that precipitate the emergence of gratitude in the relationship:

First- a *moral* frame of reference, in which one makes an assessment of their own situation viz prevailing cultural and social norms of honour (where one asks the question, "How lucky am I compared to what the cultural code leads me to expect?")

Secondly- a *pragmatic* frame of reference, which foregrounds ideas about reality viz the situation in which the person finds themselves (when we ask, "How lucky am I compared to what is available to me") and

Thirdly, a *historical* frame of reference, which compares precedents with the prevailing situation in order to feel gratitude (when we ask, "How lucky am I compared to people of my kind in the past?")

While Hochschild's work discusses economies of gratitude with respect to the marital relationship, such a framework can be used to shed light on the parent-daughter relationship my respondents described. In my conversations with young daughters, I found, to varying degrees, a combination of all three of these kinds of frames of references being evoked repeatedly, to express a sense of "luck" or "good fortune" they felt in the lives they had been afforded an opportunity to live. Especially as highly educated and professionally qualified women, who had received multiple opportunities, unwavering support and encouragement from their parents to pursue their academic and even career goals, my interactions with respondents would inevitably include a mention of how "grateful" they were to have had such opportunities, or how they "lucked out" in never being *denied* or *discriminated* against, from the time they were born. It is here that I found that their stories of birth played an extremely important role- as the *first recorded instance* of their good fortune, a reiteration of the narrative of exceptionalism that marked them from birth.

Of course, not all daughters saw themselves as equally fortunate. Interestingly however, *even when* my interviews were with extremely angry, resentful daughters who often shared complicated, strained relationships with their parents, the mention of such "luck", expressed most often through a comparison with the fate of "unfortunate others"- such as girls who had never been allowed to be born, or who were discriminated "very obviously against", denied opportunities to study or work, would still find its way into our conversations. Irrespective of the great differences in degrees of support my respondents received themselves, there was

always someone *worse off*, which made *their* situation warrant relative appreciation and thankfulness.

While in some cases, experiences of discrimination and negative stories associated with their birth occasioned a modicum of anger and resentment towards parents, in many others, daughters insisted on seeing the "positive" side of things- justifying their parents' attitudes in several ways, while still leaving room for gratitude towards them. Some pointed towards historical societal standards as justifications for parental attitudes, while others displaced the blame of negative emotions and reactions on extended family members rather than their parents. In almost every narration, even the most difficult ones, they very fact that they existed, was itself a sign of the daughters' good fortune.

Such comparisons made me wonder- at what point does one start to perceive oneself as "lucky" or "fortunate"? And under what circumstances does gratitude emerge? Does it get negated by discriminatory experiences, and if not, why? I wanted to understand if there was a gendered aspect to this emotion of gratitude the daughters were feeling, and the impact that this could have on what they felt their duties as daughters were.

In the following sections I argue that the self-perception of good luck and/or fortune felt by my respondents was in fact, a deeply gendered sentiment, which was closely tied to their identity as a woman, but more precisely as a *daughter*. Following Hochschild's framework, I suggest that these young daughters, whether implicitly or explicitly, were comparing their own life situation using moral, pragmatic as well as historical frames of reference to daughters around them and using such comparisons to reinforce the belief that they were in a much better situation than "many others". These "others" could either be young women in their own extended families, people they had seen around them, heard of, or been told about; or they

could symbolize the generic social situation of daughters in the Indian context, both historically as well as in the present, where daughters have been seen as a burden, disliked, and discriminated against by parents. In thus anchoring themselves through pre-determined and comparative ideas of what a daughter is *usually* allowed to do or be in India, my respondents would *begin* from a place of gendered devaluation and moral debt, which they would then seek to offset by sticking to conventional scripts of good daughterhood, accruing moral worth through good behaviour and by practicing "respectable femininity" (Radhakrishnan 2009)- in the process reifying both their gendered and class position.

Complicated, confusing beginnings: Sreyasi

In my conversation with Sreyasi, a 30-year-old political science PhD student from a well-to-do Punjabi family in Delhi quoted at the beginning of this chapter, questioning *why* she had been told the story of her birth in the first place was something that seemed to take her aback. It was something she had never given much thought to, especially as it was a happy retelling- what was there to think about?

Over the course of our conversations, however, a sobering realisation for Sreyasi was the difference in the way accounts of her birth were recited viz those of her brother. Despite hearing the story of the 'happy' reactions to her birth many times over, Sreyasi realised with some dismay that such a narration had never been deemed necessary in the case of her brother's birth, because it was *always known* that *his* birth was a happy event, and no retelling was needed to prove it.

During the interview, Sreyasi remarked that while there was no denying that she was extremely fortunate to have been blessed with the love of parents who did not discriminate against, or feel sad upon her birth, she questioned the purpose of the repeated retellings of her birth story-

especially the emphasis on her father's progressive credentials, her mother's reprimand directed towards unhappy relatives, and the stress on how the family had distributed sweets in the hospital, *despite* a girl being born. Although it was never mentioned in those words, the implicit, unsaid norm that Sreyasi had internalised was that her birth was *exceptional* for the joy with which it had been received, as against the societal expectations.

Sreyasi's parents' perception of her birth as a blessing, was, no doubt also attributable, to some extent, to the fact that she was born five years after her parents' wedding - a delay that had resulted in many taunts and accusations directed towards her mother from extended family members, who had questioned her ability to conceive, and offered well-meaning resolutions. Sreyasi's birth had signaled that all was well, and in fact, growing up, she recalled being deemed a "lucky omen" many times over by her mother, for bringing along her little brother, who was born less than two years after her, and thus "completing the family". However, Sreyasi had never stopped to think whether the birth of her sibling would have been viewed with as much joy once again, if it had been a sister. When asked, she wasn't sure she could say so with full certainty.

Even as we spoke, Sreyasi battled with guilt at what she perceived as "casting aspersions" on her parents' love for her. Many times, in a way reminiscent of Hochschild's (1979) "feeling rules", Sreyasi was at pains to clarify that her thinking out loud this way did *not* mean that she felt unloved, or less than in any way- she knew she was loved, cared for, and even spoilt, and did not wish to come across as "ungrateful" in verbalizing her mixed emotions about the stories she had grown up with. As a student of politics and society, however, she also wanted to acknowledge that societal norms had perhaps, somewhere, inadvertently affected her parents' thinking as well, unintentionally making it necessary for them to prove, again and again, both to her and to themselves, that they were happy with her birth, *even though* she was a daughter.

The mixed, entangled emotions Sreyasi had felt all her life, unsure of what her exact place was in her family were embodied in the story of her birth. While Sreyasi was deeply grateful for all the love that she had been showered with by her parents, the exceptionalism of her circumstance, and her knowledge of it became a subconscious reminder of her gender's inferiority, at least in Sreyasi's eyes.

Being a daughter, she was acutely aware of how easily her story could have been very different, and how fortunate she was to have the life she had. That her own family had not only *allowed* her to be born, but also *chosen* to treat her with love, meant that Sreyasi naturally felt a deep sense of obligation towards her parents, a desire to repay their kindness by proving her worth to them by being "the best daughter she could be". The simultaneous desire to want to be valued for her own sake, and the need to perform moral worth to earn it, was the root of Sreyasi's contradictory existence.

Although my conversation with Sreyasi was a deeply reflective one, demonstrating an awareness of the contradictions of her birth story, in most instances, I found many other daughters recounting the happy narratives of their birth uncritically, using them as proof to suggest how beloved they were from the day they were born. While I do not mean to suggest that these were *untrue* assertions, or betrayed any kind of dishonest emotions, it is important to note how the stories, especially when marked by joy, performed the affective function of legitimizing *gratitude* towards parents as a naturalized response to their (comparatively) privileged existence in the first place. Where these stories were linked with sadness, gratitude did emerge, although tinged sometimes by resentment and accompanying sadness, at times compelling daughters to strive even more to perform worthiness. Simran's story is instructive in this regard.

Luckily alive: Simran

Simran, a 25-year-old psychology student from a well-to-do, upper-caste Punjabi family, is the third daughter of her parents. She was born eight years after her elder sisters, who were both conceived within a year of each other, right after her parents' marriage. When we spoke, Simran frankly admitted to being very aware of the fact that her conception was a "last ditch" effort by her parents at having a son. She knew that her mother had visited many quacks and religious gurus, eaten potions, and done all kinds of exercises to make sure her third pregnancy resulted in a boy. On the day of her birth, many people had cried inconsolably, including her mother, Neelima. Although Neelima had already known that her third child was going to be a daughter and had expressed a strong desire to terminate her pregnancy thereafter, she was prohibited by Simran's grandmother, who considered abortion a religious "sin" and would not let her proceed with it.

In one of our subsequent conversations, Neelima shared how many relatives had offered her condolences and sympathies in the months leading to Simran's birth. A few had even asked her to let an extended family member adopt their third daughter, lest she be "too big a burden" for the family- something she had considered briefly. While Neelima was forthright in discussing these issues with me in the present, she confessed to being slightly ashamed to admit how she had felt back then, chalking it to regressive social conditioning and "not knowing any better". Simran was aware of each of these stories, having heard them in parts from different family members over the years.

Today, paradoxically, Neelima is incredibly proud of her third daughter, who has proven to be the most academically proficient of her three children. Simran is the first girl in the extended family, originally from a town in Uttar Pradesh, who has won a seat in a prestigious university

in England to complete her postgraduate studies abroad. She promises to have a very bright future ahead, pursuing a professional path as a clinical psychologist that none of the other daughters in the family have even considered. Her father has taken a loan to support his daughter's living expenses while she studies in the UK, thrilled to support her accomplishment. An unsaid truth during our conversations is that the daughter they did not want, has today become her parents' golden child, a fact that Simran acknowledged herself to me in half-jest.

Simran's story brings into question the relationship between the *negative* accounts associated with her birth that she heard growing up, and her desire to prove herself through her accomplishments. Was her parents' approval of their third daughter linked with Simran's eventual success in life, or would they love her so, even if she was not where she was today?

Her story reminded me of a Ministry of Women and Child Development Advertisement against female foeticide I had seen more than a decade ago, in which an unborn daughter pleads with her mother to not abort her, promising her that she will prove to be dutiful and obedient child, who will never give her an opportunity to complain, and will make her parents proud (Entertainment Adda 2021). The unjustness of such a barter had enraged me personally even as a teenager, where the opportunity for a daughter to be born was conditional upon her obedience and eventual success. Why was such a demand not made of sons, I remember thinking- is a daughter worth saving only if she would prove to be worthy?

When I asked Simran what she felt knowing these stories, or if she felt her success was an important aspect of her relationship with her parents, she responded by telling me that there was "no way" for her to know "what could have been"- she had "never allowed herself to fail." She knew her parents *did* love her, but she did not question the conditionality of it. What she understood was that she was "much better off" than the many millions of girls who had never

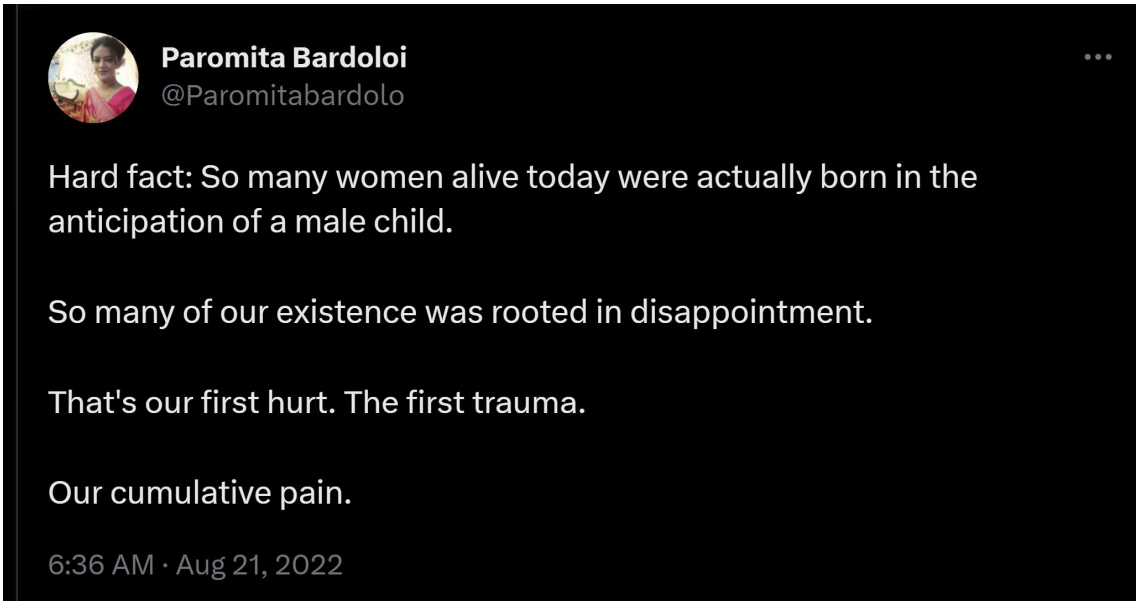
allowed to be born, especially with her kind of privileges, which left her with little room for frivolous complaining. Knowing that she herself narrowly avoided the same fate perhaps strengthened the argument that she should only focus on making best use of the opportunities that *were* given to her.

But does such post-facto justification, as Simran presented, erase the impact of knowing what the beginning had been? Did it not affect the way a daughter like Simran viewed herself, and her ideas about what she owed her parents?

In the case of Hetal, 24, an economics graduate and charity worker belonging to a Gujarati Baniya family from Gurgaon, the discovery that her mother had got an ultrasound and seriously considered aborting her after knowing she was again carrying a girl for her second-born had deeply impacted her mental health for many years, when she came to know of it as a teenager. She recounted it with some emotion during our interview:

> *"I could not put it out of my head- the thought kept coming back to me, and made me look at my parents in a different light, it made me see myself in a different light. I think I am mature enough to understand in theory, why that could be the case, them coming from a small town, how the world sees daughters, the generation shift etc. But somehow knowing it was about me* ***personally*** *as well hit me hard. I don't think I have processed it properly even now... being unwanted. I have just locked it somewhere at the back of my head."*

A few days after our conversation, Simran shared a screenshot from Twitter where a sociologist had written the following:



[P3: Screenshot shared from Twitter shared by respondent]

Like many of my other respondents, it became evident to me that Simran too, was carrying within her the pain of knowing that she had been an unwelcome child, and she was deeply aware that such pain was directly related to her gender. Most daughters I spoke with, who had known the unfortunate, sad or angry stories around their birth were still grappling, even hurting with the knowledge that the mere fact that they were born daughters had resulted in them being seen differently. While many had found ways to rationalize these stories, for others, who felt burdened with an endless exercise of justifying their existence to themselves and to others, there were often serious mental and physical consequences, as in the case of Ruhi discussed next.

Her father's son: Ruhi

For Ruhi, a 28-year-old postgraduate in economics (currently pursuing her PhD in an interdisciplinary course), the realisation that sons are "special" was mixed with her own desire to *become* one from a young age. Ruhi belongs to a well-educated, prosperous family from the

Kayastha community originally from U.P., that has been settled in Delhi for the past few decades. Her father was part of the prestigious Indian civil services as an administrator, having retired recently, and her mother is a biologist with a PhD degree, who has pursued an accomplished career as a scientist.

As the second born of the family, who was *not* expected to be a girl child, Ruhi's parents didn't publicly share their disappointment with their daughters or ever directly make them feel unwanted. However, from the time she was born, Ruhi was affectionately called "*mera payara beta"* or "my darling son" by her father. While Ruhi's elder sister was the daughter of the family, Ruhi was christened as "her father's son" from a young age. Over the years, through her father's repeated insistence in characterizing her as such, his pride in Ruhi's understanding of "male subjects", and his insistence on referring to her as the more "logical, level-headed" one in the family reiterated to Ruhi that she was special and more loved than her sister, *because* she was "like a son" to her father. As a result, in stark contrast to her sister, Ruhi subconsciously started adopting more "tomboyish" characteristics, refraining from "girly" things like pink and makeup, and deciding at a young age to seriously follow in her father's shoes to become a civil servant, in order to make him proud.

When she was ten, Ruhi was shocked to find out that her birth had been a disastrous affair for her parents, especially her mother, who had fallen into serious depression when she gave birth to a second daughter. Despite having grown up in an urban, cosmopolitan setting, being a working woman and belonging to a nuclear family, Ruhi's mother, by her own admission, had struggled to reconcile her publicly espoused gender-egalitarian views with the immense despair she felt at the birth of a second girl child. Unlike all her siblings, who had each birthed at least one son, Ruhi's mother was the only woman in the family with two daughters- a fate that she struggled to accept, even when her husband had been more ambivalent about the situation.

Ruhi recounted a story her mother had shared, of how, on seeing her immense sadness, one of her mother's colleagues had dragged her to a special ward in the hospital they were working at, pointing towards the many male babies in cribs who had been born either with terminal illnesses and/or mental/physical health issues, insisting that she should be grateful that her child, *even though* a daughter, was *at least* born healthy. When Ruhi heard the story, she remembered being angry at being compared to a sick, dying son to prove her worth as a daughter. The realisation also made her see her mother, and her relationship with her family in a new light, offering an explanation for why things had always seemed more strained in her case rather than her sister's.

While she did not know it then, the knowledge that she was unwanted, combined with a desire to please her father by becoming his "son" ultimately had a severely detrimental impact on her physical health for a long time. As she realised later, Ruhi had literally *embodied* the shame and guilt associated with being a woman, and especially a *daughter*, in her body. For many years, Ruhi shared, she struggled with depression, hormonal imbalances, PCOS (polycystic ovarian syndrome) and other gynecological issues- including experiencing male pattern baldness when she was merely in her twenties. Despite numerous medications, pills, diet changes, exercise, things did not improve until she started focusing on cognitive behavioural therapy, that unlocked childhood wounds. In her own words, Ruhi claimed that it was only then that she realised that her PCOS was "actually a lot of trauma stored in [the] body" that things changed.

> *"...When the body feels like it's not in a safe environment, it starts producing cortisol, deprioritizing reproduction, increasing inflammation, causing metabolic disorders, all of those things... My body felt like being feminine, but it started associating that part of me as unsafe, because it was associated with so much shame. Being a girl, a daughter*

was what had caused me shame…I had been told that I have to deal with things because I was a girl, and that was my problem. I had started disassociating with my feminine body, wishing I had not been born... Once I started working on my mental health, identifying my trauma and working on it, suddenly, my metabolic disorder seemed to vanish…"

In her late twenties, Ruhi began to actively detest the immense pressure of being her father's son, questioning whether her life choices until then had been her own or directed by a desire to please. She began despising the monicker of a 'son' or *beta*, asserting instead that she was her father's *daughter*, and that should suffice as her identity. She gave up the dream of pursuing civil services after failing twice, much to her parents' disappointment, and decided to become an academic. Reaching this stage of recognition, however, took nearly a decade of soul searching and mental health support. Although today Ruhi is much more forgiving of her parents for the pressures placed on her to be a son, the detrimental impact on her self-esteem that the knowledge of being unwanted placed on her, and the effort it took her to overcome her dissonance with her gender, has meant things are in a dynamic equilibrium but not resolved. Ruhi said she still struggles to *logically* understand why her otherwise well- aware, socially conscious and educated parents could harbor such negative feelings towards their own daughter, feeling a righteous sense of anger towards them. Their conformity to patriarchal attitudes, Ruhi argued, reshaped her own sense of self, forcing her to battle lifelong anxieties about who she is, and instilling a sense of insecurity and inferiority that she strove to overcompensate for through rebellious choices and educational achievements. Ruhi's story is an example of the far-reaching effects of "misrecognition" (Bourdieu 2000) and how it operates as form of violence on an everyday basis. Despite her unresolved anger, while ending our conversation, Ruhi expressed appreciation towards her parents for everything they *did* do and

provide for her. With age, she had learnt to see things with a more mature perspective, focusing on her identity *beyond* being a daughter as a way of "finding peace in life".

The difference in the way unwanted daughters reacted to the stories of their birth was telling. For Simran, the knowledge of her unwantedness was masked through indifference, while for Ruhi, it resulted in anger and rebellion. In the case of Daisy, however, it was a searing sense of guilt, emanating from the awareness that she was *chosen*, instead of a son, that shaped her desire to be a good daughter.

The chosen one: Daisy

Daisy, 35, an HR manager, gained the knowledge that sons are more important than daughters when she was six years old, after her younger sister was born. Daisy grew up in a joint family, with her grandparents, uncle and his wife (*chacha-chachi)* and her parents living in the same house. She was the first daughter in the extended family and remembers "the most being pampered, most loved kid" when she was a toddler. She was cute, chubby, fair, with brown eyes and recalls affectionately being referred to as "doll" by everyone around her. When Daisy was six, her mother gave birth to another daughter, Monica- who became the center of Daisy's universe.

Monica was a premature baby and for the first few months of her life, received everyone's undivided attention as her frail health meant she was frequently in and out of the hospital. While she too was doted upon initially, things started to change when the sisters' aunt gave birth to a son less than a year later. Daisy remembers noticing how once her brother [cousin] was born, everyone seemed to stop caring about her sister- especially her grandmother (*dadi)*. She recalls her *dadi* admonishing someone who came excitedly to wish the family on the children's birth, to speak in hushed tones and not with exuberance about Monica - it was not a

matter of celebration that there was a second daughter in the family. "*Dheere bolo, beti hui hai*", Daisy remembers her *dadi* insisting (Speak softly, it's a daughter)[6]. Despite her young age at the time, Daisy shared that the memory was seared in her brain, especially because of how protective she felt about her sister and how upset the comment made her. Hearing such remarks about Monica, Daisy also started wondering about the things that would have been said about her when she was born- "If they were saying all this for my sister, what must they have said when *I* was born?"

Soon after, Daisy started noticing the subtle ways in which her and Monica's devalued status in the family was reinforced. To begin with, Daisy's birthday stopped being celebrated in the family when she was seven (as soon as her cousin was born) - she was told she was "too old" for such silly things. For Monica, whose birthday was a week before her cousin brother's, the celebration was always held jointly - she was never given a party of her own or allowed to cut her own cake. When her mother tried to insist otherwise, she was reprimanded for not wanting to wait a few extra weeks and being wasteful in spending money on a daughter. Slowly, seeing the differential treatment that was afforded to her and her sister once there was a grandson in the family, both Monica and Daisy understood that daughters were supposed to be treated "differently".

While their father did not say it to them directly, both sisters were aware that he was repeatedly chastised by the family, sympathized with, or offered condolences for having two daughters

[6] The preoccupation with daughters' births not being moments of celebration in the Indian context, rather those of mourning has been well documented in scholarship on the subject (King n.d.; Patel and Sharma 2000; Sharma 2022; 1988). Governmental schemes to address aversion to daughters have also sought to address this problem. In 2025, for instance, the Haryana government launched the "*Beti Bachao Thali Bajao*" (Save the girl child, beat the drums/plates) campaign as part of the larger effort to change attitudes towards the girl child, by making the birth of a daughter through loud celebrations and congratulations- proudly announcing the birth of a daughter, as is usually the case only with sons(Tribune Reporters 2025).

and no son. His behaviour towards them was often passive-aggressive, his frustration evident even when unspoken. At times he would let it slip that he was worried about his lineage, the future of his family or his shop seeing as he had no sons. These sentiments were further reinforced in the stray comments directed towards the family by her grandmother, casual everyday conversations about their misfortune and the small ways in which Daisy and Monica's behaviour was policed even when they were children.

Daisy shared that she understood the underlying son preference in these actions well enough even when she was a young child, feeling angry at the inherent injustice. She recalled how she started acting out, behaving impulsively in a bid to seek the attention that she stopped receiving from the family after her cousin's birth, in the process gaining the status of the "problem child" of the family and further distancing herself from her father, while still craving his validation.

When she was barely fifteen, Daisy's mother made a confession that changed the daughters' lives and outlook towards life. She shared that in the six intervening years between their births; she had in fact been pregnant a second time - but with a son. On discovering her pregnancy, she had immediately opted for a sex determination test, and on finding out that her child-to-be going to be a boy, had undergone an abortion without informing anyone in the family- including their father. This was a fact he was unaware of till today.

The immensity of this revelation and the profound impact that it had on Daisy (and Monica) cannot be overstated. In a country when gender-biased sex selection is a commonplace occurrence to eliminate daughters, her mother's decision to eliminate a pregnancy *because* she was carrying a son went against every commonsensical shred of wisdom. Over the years, the daughters had frequently asked their mother, many times, with much guilt, why she felt it was necessary to *"do this"* to "*their brother"* (*"Tumne bhai ko kyun nikala?")*. According to their

mother, however, the step was necessary to protect them. As she had understood the extent of the deep-seated son preference in the family, the act of aborting her son stemmed from a desire to guard her daughter's interests. Knowing that the family (especially her husband) would discriminate, perhaps vehemently, *against* Daisy, if she had a brother, her mother had actively chosen to let go of a son, for fear that her daughter would live her life constantly feeling neglected- a fear that was eventually confirmed with the birth of their cousin.

Over the years, Daisy told me, she grappled with the complexity of feeling simultaneously wanted and unwanted as a daughter. Ironically, knowledge of the very act that was done in an effort to shield her, and to ensure she didn't feel undervalued, had the unforeseen impact of emphasizing her lower worth in Daisy's eyes. Despite knowing how loved she was by her mother, the *guilt* of being responsible for her brother's absence made Daisy want to prove herself even more, trying to gain worth in her father's eyes by becoming the son he never had. Here, guilt was mobilized as atonement for perceived harm, while simultaneously motivating the pursuit of a "better self" (Abell and Gecas 1997; Klein 2002). Many years later, when her father's business floundered, Daisy was the one who stepped up financially by giving up her own dreams to help with the family's finances and support her sister's law degree - an occurrence that itself invited much criticism and scorn from the family, as I discuss later. The fact that Daisy *wanted* to be a "like a son" to her father didn't mean society would accept her as such- especially when it came to accepting financial contribution, as she eventually found out. Nonetheless, this did not mean Daisy's attempts to prove her worth diminished. As she excitedly told me, one of her happiest days was when her father proudly proclaimed that his daughters *were* his sons.

Knowing one's place: the symbolic economy of daughterhood

Hearing these accounts, the inherently complicated and contradictory position occupied by daughters, and the important role that emotional responses play in gendered socialization of daughterhood becomes somewhat clearer. In their work, Berger and Luckman (2023) suggest that storytelling is central to the *social construction of reality*, in which the world becomes "real" through language and repetition. By functioning as legitimizing mythologies, these stories of birth, along with everyday symbolic exclusions, I found, operated as early socializing agents for daughters, institutionalizing societal scripts and orienting daughters towards their place in the social world. They became a part of what Bourdieu (1977) refers to as the "gendered habitus of these daughters"- a deep, pre-reflective internalization of social structures that conditioned them to devalue themselves, to be grateful for the privileges they were afforded, and motivating them to find ways to *earn* their worth. The birth stories traced in this section are thus not merely retrospective accounts; they are foundational narratives that orient daughters towards particular ways of feeling, judging, and relating to themselves and their families.

In absorbing these stories, combined with allusions to everyday violence against daughters in the world, not only did these young women learn to understand the world as it had been or currently operated- sexist and patriarchal, it led them, very often, to recognize it as the norm, tacitly accepting it, and even partaking in its perpetuation, both willingly and unwillingly. Furthermore, an acknowledgment of the "exceptionalism" of their birth often forced daughters to dismiss their own subsequent hurt or disappointment, compelling them to "think" and express differently from what they might be feeling as a show of their gratitude. In the process, it also delegitimized their right to complain about experiences of discrimination, which were seen as essentially trivial matters in the larger scheme of things.

As one respondent, a 31-year-old engineering graduate from one of the best institutes in Delhi quipped wearily, “when you know so many girls are being killed every day just for *being daughters*, your own day-to-day troubles start feeling very small.”

Such positioning, which places daughters in a moral debt towards parents for their own birth, in my understanding, forms the genesis of “good daughterhood”- both as an internalised ideal, and an affective orientation, produced through a combination of gratitude, guilt, pride, and obligation, among other emotions. Irrespective of whether they were motivated by a desire to seek validation, earn pride, to atone for the guilt of being a daughter, to transcend societal boundaries or simply the result of unthinking adherence to pre-determined scripts, what was clear was that these stories played an extremely important role in directing how daughters felt about themselves and the lives they wanted to lead, with their futures being shaped to a large extent by this relationship of daughterhood. Although the impulse to *do good* and *be good* was not always uniform, the ubiquitousness of the stories they heard, their constant repetition, the everyday exclusions undoubtedly became an important reflection of a symbolic economy, which made clear to daughters where they were positioned in relation to their family hierarchy, and how their gender, especially being a daughter, *mattered.*

Moreover, in each case, *because* they were never explicitly discriminated against, or always saw themselves as relatively *more* privileged, these narratives shaped an outlook that trained daughters to look for a silver lining, to minimize their hurt or disappointment, or even justify their own subordination. In the case of families associated with a business for instance, daughters often themselves normalised the unquestioned need for sons, pointing out the necessity for the continuation of family lineage, inheritance or property related matters. The devaluation of their own status within the family was directly linked, I suggest, to these early experiences, forced silences, negative reactions and everyday exclusions, which became an

important means through which daughters understood the contradiction between who they were and who they could be.

Of course, this does not imply that these daughters were merely passive agents who did not understand, resist or stand up against the social order that was being imposed upon them- especially when their awareness of discrimination was more explicit and overt, as I eventually discuss in the later chapters of this thesis. Nonetheless, the desire, or impulse, to perform worthiness emanated from these early experiences, and was crystallized further as daughters came of age.

In the following section, I examine how these early orientations are reinforced through the everyday practices of family life- through bodily discipline, emotional regulation, and the routine enactment of gendered expectations- showing how good daughterhood moves from narrative origin to embodied habitus.

*

Part Two: The everyday practice of good daughterhood

What makes an ideal daughter?

One question I consistently asked my respondents was how they would describe an 'ideal daughter' from their family's perspective, and the extent to which they felt that they themselves fit this ideal. While respondents did not always frame their lives around an explicit aspiration to become such daughters, the question inevitably prompted careful reflection on gendered expectations, middle-class values, and familial norms in the Indian context. These reflections were often accompanied by ambivalence- ranging from pride at being perceived as a source of familial honour to resentment at the emotional and behavioural burdens such expectations imposed.

What was striking, however, was not simply the content of these expectations, but the ease with which respondents were able to articulate them. Whether or not they had ever been *told* explicitly, each of these young women understood *precisely* what it meant to be a 'good daughter'. This understanding had been acquired early, through a process of observation, affective feedback, and repetition: through casual comments, moments of chastisement, differential treatment, and the subtle rewards attached to compliance. That these expectations were gendered, often uniquely or unequally applicable to *them,* as opposed to their brothers or other men in the family was a realisation that frequently emerged later in life, and in some cases, was not immediately experienced as unjust. That the rules *existed*, however, was, much less in dispute.

This was the beginning of the everyday practice of good daughterhood- which operated not as a clearly articulated set of instructions, but as practical, moral knowledge: a sense of what is

expected, what is permissible, and what is risky, learned gradually and absorbed into everyday conduct, until it came to feel natural, intuitive and self-evident.

Internalised rules

As Sheetal, 25, a psychology student from Delhi, who is currently pursuing her PhD poignantly reflected:

> *"I mean, as a psychology student, you probably know, but I feel like the way that… the things that you get praised for, are the things that, you know… you learn, are valued. And even as, as young daughters, the ones who dress modestly, the ones who listen to their parents, the ones who keep quiet, are obedient [are the good ones]. You get praised for those things. And then therefore, you implicitly learn that that is the right thing to do."*

Trisha, 28, who is currently pursuing a PhD in STEM from the US, shared the following, insightful comment, articulating her frustration with the gendered scripts she was expected to embody:

> *"As a girl, you should look a certain way to be accepted by society, you should speak a certain way, you should sit a certain way, you should wear certain types of clothes [especially] when men are visiting the house- no skin show, nothing like that. You should be sweet when you are speaking. You should always be a "yes ma'am" kind of person. God forbid, you say NO, and you are instantly labelled rebellious and problematic- without anyone [parents] even trying to understand where you may be coming from."*

Another respondent, Nayantara, 27, a social activist and development scholar from TISS Mumbai, spoke similarly of how the image of a "good girl" was explicitly tied to

marriageability and familial honour. From a young age, she was reminded that her behaviour would reflect the values of her family and determine her future prospects. Her response to the 'ideal daughter' question was as follows:

> *"For them [family], what matters is that we have to prepare you to get married from our community, and you [daughter] will be carrying the respect and honour of our house when you go there. The idea of the sundar, susheel, sabhya (beautiful, well-mannered, soft-spoken) daughter was followed very rigidly by my family. If I was overweight, it was an issue, my being dark was an issue, my not being polite was an issue. My laughing loudly is also an issue. I've been told a million times that I speak, walk too fast, I need to speak softer, walk slower…I've done so much in my life, but for them, I don't have saumyata (gentlesness) in my manner and that's a problem. Because ladkiyon ko saumya hona chahiye (because girls must be gentle, demure, timid). I've been told, if someone comes home, good girls should offer their guests water, be well-mannered, know how to be a host, serve them well. They should not sit with them and talk like equals like I do."*

Across these accounts, the expectations attached to good daughterhood converge around restraint, compliance, bodily regulation, and emotional discipline. Importantly, these are not enforced primarily through overt coercion, but through processes of internalisation, in which approval and belonging become contingent upon correct performance. Over time, daughters learn not simply how to behave, but how to evaluate themselves, measuring their worth against deeply gendered standards of respectability.

Fields of influence: Beyond family

In my conversations, while the family emerged as a central site of socialisation, it was by no means the only one. Notwithstanding the extent to which they were affected by it, the everyday practice of good daughterhood was reinforced through a range of overlapping social fields, including media, education, religion, and public discourse. Popular culture- from Bollywood films to television serials- continues to circulate idealised images of good girls and dutiful daughters, reiterating norms of modesty, sacrifice, and moral virtue among others (Baxi 2019; Kapur 1999; Narayan 2018; TOI 2024).

These messages are also echoed in public and policy discourse, particularly in moments of heightened attention to women's safety and representation. Debates following the 2012 Nirbhaya rape case, or discussions surrounding the 2023 Women's Reservation Bill for instance, were frequently accompanied by moralising commentary on women's clothing, conduct, and sexuality, implicitly reinforcing expectations of respectable femininity (Kanika Gupta 2025; Vashishth 2017). Educational institutions similarly function as early spheres of influence where these norms are internalised and reinforced (Chanana 2001; Kumar 2010).

As feminist scholars have noted, anxieties around Indian women's sexuality have intensified in the context of liberalisation and globalisation, producing renewed efforts to regulate women's behaviour, and even calls to "recolonize" them in the name of cultural preservation (Krishnan 2021; Phadke et al. 2011; Thapan 2004). Religion, too, has historically played a role in reinforcing such expectations, and its influence has been reinforced in the recent context of rising Hindu Nationalism and its messaging around preserving the virtues of Hindu women (Oza 2012). Interestingly, however, most of my respondents distanced themselves from

explicitly religious justifications as dictating their lives- a move that itself functioned as a marker of middle-class modernity, echoing Gilbertson's (2018) findings in Hyderabad.

Good Christian: Rosalyn

An important exception was Rosalyn, a 29-year-old Malayali Syrian Christian raised in Delhi, who spoke at length about how her ideas of being a good daughter were inflected by the expectation of being a good *Christian*, deeply shaped by the church-based moral instruction she had received. As she explained:

> *"I grew up in a traditional catholic family. I went to a convent school, and was very much part of that tradition growing up. We [my family] have a very strong connection with the church, and our social network is effectively through the church… So you really grow up imbibing a lot of these ideas…the family is also central to how the church operates... The aspiration of a good, urban, Christian daughter would be that I go to the church every Sunday, partake in all the prayers, be part of my evening family prayers, follow in the path of the Lord… Of course, it was important to stay away from all vices, everything the Bible says… be a virgin, marry a good Mallu (Malayali) guy. A good daughter must be prayerful, study well, listen to everything that parents have to say, everything that the Church has to say. …It was a very puritanical approach."*

Rosalyn's account revealed how religious institutions can operate as powerful sites of moral regulation, particularly when family, community, and church networks overlap. While acknowledging their influence in her life, Rosalyn spoke of how she found it difficult to take at face value all the rules and regulations that had been imposed on her. Her resistance to these diktats- manifest in her tomboyish behaviour and refusal to conform, resulted in her being labelled the "black sheep" of the family and disparaged as "rebellious". In contrast to her elder

sister, who had embodied the family's ideals of good daughterhood- marrying a Malayali boy from the same church, becoming a teacher and a mother of two all before she turned thirty, Rosalyn was a source of great worry and anxiety for her family. She admitted to being called "*awaaragardi karne wali*" (one who is a wanderer/loafer) by her father, because she was still finding her way through life.

Over the course of our conversations, Rosalyn recalled being chastised for a multitude of reasons while she was growing up- for socializing with friends, for wanting to wear heels, and even for not tying her hair properly:

> *"I have distinct memories of being bullied and mocked for keeping my hair open. Someone even call me a prostitute for wanting to do that, because that's how those girls did it…Apparently girls who keep their hair open are crying for attention…"*

The criticism Rosalyn faced for these small transgressions illustrates how seemingly minor bodily practices become sites of intense moral scrutiny. As she herself recognized, these rules were fundamentally about controlling sexuality and ensuring that daughters learn to stay small and remain small- both literally and metaphorically, in how they navigated life.

Although Rosalyn personally resisted these pressures, in nearly every conversation I had, the everyday practice of good daughterhood was repeatedly linked to the regulation of girls' bodies and sexualities. As the site where the rules of appropriate behaviour were most stringently enforced, an obsession with the female body- how it should move, how it should be clothed, and, importantly, how it should be 'hidden' away or 'preserved' was central to the inculcation of bodily discipline that could enable good daughterhood. In many instances, these early rules created long-lasting impressions and changed the relationship these young women shared with their own bodies.

Policing bodies and sexualities: Prerna and Rimjhim

In a story that Prerna, a 26-year-old postgraduate student shared, she was only around six years of age when she received her first lesson in sexual propriety. Prerna was visiting her maternal grandparents during the peak of summer vacations, wearing a frock and wandering about the house, when her grandfather reprimanded her for "roaming without clothes" and showing her legs. Prerna remembers the shock of the rebuke, feeling as if she were naked and running away crying in confusion and embarrassment. The sting of this moment left a lasting imprint- from then on, Prerna became constantly cautious of what she wore, to the point that the consideration of how *others* would perceive her clothes became her natural, go-to way of thinking about how to dress. She understood that her clothes were a reflection not just of her, but of her virtue, and she did not wish to experience that sense of shame ever again.

While in the case of Prerna, the sense of how she carried herself was oriented externally, for Rimjhim, 28, bodily shame extended even into private spaces. Rimjhim recalled that even as a five-year-old, she was extremely aware of the fact that she was a 'girl', and things were supposed to be *different* for her. Her mother's constant refrain- "*ladkiyon ke liye alag hota hai"* (It's different in the case of girls) was used to justify nearly everything that she was expected to do, especially when it came to practising modesty and behaving properly.

A stark memory Rimjhim had was being instructed, when she was still a child, to never bathe without clothing. When her mother found out that she was *bathing* naked, she scolded her, reminding her that "*A woman must always have at least one piece of cloth on her body"* (*Ek aurat ke upar hamesha ek kapda toh hona hi chahiye).* At the time, Rimjhim remembers soaking up the knowledge as gospel, feeling ashamed of her nudity, even following the advice for many years- something that instilled a deep sense of discomfort with her body. Over time,

however, she understood that the advice was nothing more than a way to estrange her, as a woman, from her own body and to ensure her "sexual purity" and modesty through this severed relationship. As she remarked,

> "*If you never saw yourself, you were probably not expected to have any 'bad' thoughts- there would be no possibility of touching yourself inappropriately if everything was always hidden… or even thinking about it. Maybe that was the idea."*

These accounts demonstrate how the female body turns into a site of constant vigilance, where morality is mapped onto visibility, concealment and restraint even before the meaning of these values can be adequately understood by girls.

Cultivating the right disposition: Embodying good daughterhood

Feminist theories of gender performativity and embodiment offer useful tools for understanding how such practices acquire durability. As Butler argues, gender is "not a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted through the stylization of the body" (Butler 2002:91). Crawley et al (2008) al discuss how daily performances of how women sit, speak, or occupy space, over time, become second nature, forming a part of the gendered habitus (Bourdieu 1977:78). In West and Zimmerman's (1987) formulation of "doing gender", similarly, gender is understood as a "routine accomplishment"- enacted through interaction and absorbed by repetition and reaction, rather than explicit instruction.

In the accounts presented here, daughters learnt to embody good daughterhood through precisely such routinised practices. Importantly, these practices were not only about *behaviour*, or about doing the "right thing"; but about cultivating particular moral and emotional

dispositions. As Hughes and Witz (1997) also suggest, embodiment is a "lived matter of gender", through which values are sedimented into the self.

Mahmood's (2001, 2005) analysis of the piety movement in Egypt further illuminates how repeated bodily practices can shape ethical subjectivity. In her work, Mahmood studies how the body, through training, becomes a site for the establishment of *morality.* In discussing the voluntary adoption of the practice of veiling within a religious context, Mahmood rejects the liberal feminist interpretation of the ritual as an abject submission to patriarchal forms. Invoking the notion of Aristotelian ethics, Mahmood argues that it is through repeated bodily acts that one trains "one's memory, desire, and intellect" to behave according to established standards of conduct, as part of a commitment to the creation of a *specific kind of self*. For the pietists, the process and bodily practice of veiling became the means through which they cultivated the *disposition* of shyness and modesty, which was critical to their normative vision of the self. Their desires and emotions were *created,* and issued forth *from* their actions, rather than from any "natural feelings".

While the daughters in this study were not necessarily engaged in conscious projects of moral self-fashioning, the link between *body learning* and *sense*, and the role of embodied emotions is significant in understanding what the daily practices of good daughterhood lay the foundation for. This was evident in the "stickiness" of emotions associated with certain practices, especially those of shame and guilt, even in moments of resistance. As Sarah Ahmed (2004) suggests, emotions are social and cultural practices, that move between bodies and signs, shaping how we relate to each other and to the world. Of their role in dictating lives, she writes (2004: 8):

> *"In affective economies, emotions **do** things…and they align individuals with communities—through the very intensity of their attachments. Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective."*

In many instances, despite not *wanting to,* the young women I spoke with similarly often found themselves struggling with emotional responses that exposing their body, engaging in sexual or forbidden thoughts or activities, or doing the purportedly "wrong" thing elicited in them. Nayantara's ongoing discomfort with wearing sleeveless clothes, despite her critical awareness, exemplifies this tension. Her struggle underscores how deeply embodied these norms become, often outlasting the contexts that produced them.

Sticky emotions and ongoing discomfort: Nayantara

In our chat, Nayantara shared that being "properly covered" was such an oft-repeated message she heard when she was younger, being shamed and mercilessly taunted for "showing off her body" that even today she can't see herself wearing sleeveless shirts, or dresses in which her legs are visible. While *rationally*, she understands that much of her hesitation in wearing such "western clothes" is rooted in problematic conditioning, she still struggles to shake off the feeling that she is "doing something wrong" by exposing her body in any way, instead seeing herself as "fat" or "ugly" when she tries to do so:

> *"There were insane levels of body shaming in my house. Like till date, I'm not comfortable wearing a one-piece dress, because I have bought into the code that I can only look good in Indian, you know…covered clothes. So if my feet, ankles, legs are visible in any way, I myself will start thinking oh no…my legs are fat.. ugly…I shouldn't*

be wearing dresses…it's not right. Internally it's just…in spite of having all the education that I have, in spite of being a social worker and giving therapy to other children...I have not been able to resolve this particular thing in my mind in all this time"

Nayantara's struggles were far from singular. Many other daughters I spoke with battled with similar anxiety and body image issues from unlearning or going against the scripts of good daughterhood from a very young age. As Bourdieu also (1990a) also notes, the strongest elements of the habitus are those that occur in early childhood, precisely because they are inculcated over time and through repetition. This is what makes an analysis of these early experiences significant as a part of the *personhood* of these daughters, and a critical lens for understanding their choices later in life. The daily practices they adopt and embody define how daughters learn, from a young age, to *mark* themselves- an exercise that has consequences for how they choose to judge their actions, and themselves for the rest of their lives. As Steph Lawler (2015:110) writes "it is not what you *do,* or what you *have,* that is marked as wrong, or right, normal or pathological, but *who* you are."

That is what makes the practice of good daughterhood powerful and enduring. Crucially, the dispositions that daughters learn to cultivate are not only about being good within the family; they are also intelligible within a wider social order that rewards certain forms of femininity while penalising others. To understand why these practices carry such force, and why deviations from them are so heavily sanctioned, it is necessary to situate good daughterhood within broader regimes of class, respectability, and moral regulation. The following section therefore shifts scale, tracing how the embodied discipline of daughters functions as a mechanism through which middle-class boundaries are reproduced and policed.

Part Three: Respectable femininity and Middle-Class Moralities

From the body to society: Gender, Class and Moral Regulation

The "socialised subjectivity" of the habitus, as Lawler (2015:111) reminds us, "is not merely a way of theorizing a self that is socially produced, it is also a way of analysing the role of the self in *constituting* social relations". For Bourdieu, the body is the primary site through which structural constraints are first encountered and made meaningful- children learn society not abstractly, but *through* embodied experiences deeply entangled with a child's physical and sexual presence, his or her bodily relation to others (Bourdieu 1990:52–54). McNay similarly describes the body as a "dynamic, mutable frontier" that rests at the "point of overlap between the physical, the symbolic and the social". It is the "threshold through which a subject's lived experience of the world is incorporated and realised" (McNay 2013:98).

Across my interviews, expectations around dress, comportment, mobility, and sexual propriety were not only gendered but unmistakably classed. What daughters were taught to hide, contain, or regulate about their bodies was intimately connected to their families' middle-class status and anxieties about maintaining respectability. Respectability, in this sense, did not merely describe a moral ideal; it functioned as a regulatory framework through which class position was asserted, defended, and reproduced.

As Beverly Skeggs famously argues, "respectability is one of the most ubiquitous signifiers of class". It is simultaneously a resource, a burden, and an aspirational moral standard that structures middle-class selfhood (1997:1-4). In the Indian context, female chastity has similarly long been seen as a fundamental aspect of both middle-class respectability and Indianness, particularly from colonial times, when the control of women's sexuality was seen as essential

for the maintenance of caste, kinship and social order (Chowdhry 1993:2797). The "chaste Indian woman", as Nazia Hussein (Hussein 2018:8–9) argues, is constructed simultaneously in opposition *both* to the sexually permissive Western woman, and to lower-caste women imagined as uncivilised or shameless. Within this paradigm, regulating women's bodies- how they are clothed, seen, hidden, or allowed to move- becomes a crucial means of marking class boundaries and sustaining social hierarchies.

Accordingly, scholars of gender and space have repeatedly shown how middle-class femininity is enacted through bodily containment and spatial restraint. Wessel (2004) has highlighted the significance of women's appearances- their dress, hairstyle, make-up, comportment and modes of speech as markers of class background. Lukose (2009), on the other hand demonstrates that over time, middle-class women learn to occupy public spaces through a carefully cultivated demureness. They adopt a "contained" position with their body while walking and moving publicly- looking down, clutching books and bags so as to not keep their body "open" as a means of displaying moral propriety. This containment, Lukose argues, is precisely what grants women conditional legitimacy in public spaces, thus circumscribing the female body even as it allowed access to the "outside" (Lukose 2020:80). Sanjay Srivasatava's (2017, 2020) work on "retractable modernities" makes a parallel point: the freedoms granted to middle-class women are reversible and contingent, dependent on continued displays of respectability and restraint.

Within this context, good daughterhood emerges as a crucial mediating formation. It is through daughters' behaviour- especially their bodily discipline and spatial compliance- that families negotiate their public standing, moral worth, and class legitimacy. Transgressions, even minor ones, therefore acquire disproportionate significance. Nayantara's story makes this painfully clear.

Being punished for transgressions

Nayantara, mentioned earlier, is a POSCO activist, educator and sexual health trainer from TISS, Mumbai. She shared a chilling, formative episode from her adolescence that illustrates starkly how classed respectability is enforced through gendered violence.

Nayantara was brought up in a town in UP, where local social networks were fairly strong, and gossiping about the neighbour's children was fairly common. As a child, she socialised freely with friends of all genders- walking home from school, attending tuitions, spending time in groups. These seemingly mundane interactions became the site of moral panic when, on one particular occasion, when she was in grade twelve, a neighbour remarked to her *chacha* (her dad's elder brother, with whom they shared a residence) that Nayantara had been "seen talking to boys near the house". The remark was intended as a disparaging comment on her upbringing and the moral values instilled in her by the family, and her behaviour was deemed "not respectable."

What followed was brutal. Before she knew it, Nayantara's uncle, who saw himself as the patriarch of the family and the keeper of the family's honour, returned home to mercilessly beat his sixteen-year-old niece, without any warning, justifying it as a "necessary act" to discipline her behaviour and protect the family's honour. Her father, whom she expected to intervene, stood by silently, having already sanctioned the punishment.

> *"He beat the crap out of me. It was the first time anyone had raised a hand on me like that. I was shell-shocked. My father, who I expected will come to my defence, just stood there, standing, doing nothing. And it was…brutal. Like I was bleeding. Properly bleeding. I thought my father will stop him, but turns out my uncle had already spoken*

to him before entering the house and my father had given him a free hand to do as he saw right. In fact, my dad was stepping towards me to hit me even more."

The violence did not end with the beating. Nayantara was placed under what she described as "house arrest" for three months- confined indoors, barred from school, cut off from friends, denied access to books or her phone. Instead, she was made to perform domestic labour and childcare, undergoing what she called "housewife training." The explicit aim was not only punishment, but moral correction- she was not allowed to laugh, enjoy herself, or display happiness, lest it suggest she had failed to internalize the seriousness of her wrongdoing.

"I heard my chacha tell my dad, we have to ***ensure*** *that she understands that she is being punished. We have to ensure that she doesn't laugh. She shouldn't be allowed to laugh- if she does, it means she is happy, [and] she hasn't realized that she is being punished for a wrong".*

As Gilbertson (2017) notes, strict rule enforcement around women's mobility is essential not only to ensure women's safety but their personal honour, and by extension, the honour of the wider family unit. Nayantara's punishment functioned as a public lesson- to her and to others- about the consequences of violating respectable femininity.

In the hundred days that she was under "house arrest", Nayantara was completely cut off from the rest of the world- her worried teachers and friends tried to contact the family, fearing that she had "dropped dead from the face of the earth". It was only after much cajoling from their end, and pleading from Nayantara ("*I remember going down on my knees, begging and crying to my family to let me continue my education*") that her father and uncle finally relented in letting her sit for her school leaving examinations. Although she eventually scored well in her exams and gained admission in Delhi and Mumbai's best colleges, Nayantara was only allowed

to pursue her degree under the strict supervision of familial guardians in the new city, with appropriate warnings to never repeat her behaviour or risk bringing shame to the family. Despite her extremely scarring experience, which she shudders to remember even today, Nayantara shared that she was thankful that she was ultimately allowed to leave to pursue her education- a fate she was mindful many others like her did not share. Nayantara's gratitude for her education underscores the moral bind produced by such discipline, where survival and opportunity are reframed as benevolence, not entitlement.

The spectre of the city

If Nayantara's story illustrates overt discipline, many others reveal a more diffuse but equally powerful mechanism- the internalization of fear. Unsurprisingly, in nearly every interview I had with young women, I found the themes of safety and protectionism emerge as an important aspect of how these women navigated their lives- from when and how long they were allowed to play in the park as children, to where they studied, what jobs they took, to who they dated and married eventually. Across conversations, narratives of safety and danger, the threat of harassment or sexual violation, and a fear of the city, especially in relation to Delhi-NCR, shaped how daughters understood their freedoms, normalizing strict curfews, constant surveillance and a general sense of anxiety about "stepping out". Delhi was repeatedly described as inherently unsafe, imagined through headlines, statistics, and circulating stories of sexual violence. These narratives were not merely informational; they functioned as moral technologies that justified gendered restrictions while shifting responsibility onto daughters to manage risk.

Thus, even though in many instances, daughters rebelled against or manoeuvred externally imposed restrictions strategically, what was intriguing to me was how the internalisation of

these narratives regularly meant that many daughters engaged in self-policing, regulating and monitoring their movements *by themselves,* and often in pre-emptively, in anticipation of parental anxiety. They externalized blame on the spectre of the aggressive, violent city and justified their circumscribed existence as the *only* way to be- deeming it reasonable, and even virtuous. Reetika's case shows an extreme manifestation of this tendency.

Confined freedoms: Reetika

Reetika, 31, an IIT Delhi engineering graduate working in a management firm, who I met as part of the GendV project and later spoke with for my project as well, described her life in NCR as one governed by the ever-looming fear of abduction and sexual assault:

> *"Gurgaon, Delhi- these are not safe spaces, everyone knows that. And then there are homegrown occurrences that one hears about- as in everybody you know has had some sort of experience. I mean we can say that confidently, that almost everybody you know either has been, or knows someone who has been sexually assaulted. So everyone is aware that this is always a possibility…*
>
> *…In NCR for instance, let me tell you, there are known incidences, where one hears of a girl coming back from school at 2.30 pm, in broad daylight, who is seen to be pulled into a moving car... The notion that a person was just "whisked away" just like that-* ***it makes you think of what can happen to you.*** *My two biggest fears living in Delhi are abduction and sexual assault...If you're abducted, you're helpless, a lot can happen to you- you may have to become a sex slave for someone maybe… After all, why else are they interested in you? It's a gendered thing, a sexual act."*

Reetika spoke of how she had lived her entire life navigating this fear of the city by ensuring that she was never, ever alone. A male member of her family would always be present to drive

or accompany her wherever she needed to go. Stepping out on her own was out of the question till her safety concern was resolved, and this requirement ensured that she went anywhere unless she really *needed to.* Independence was framed not as a right, but as a risk, while leisure was considered problematic in essence:

> *"It wasn't like I was completely helpless… Whenever there was a need, someone would make sure to find a way to find me company, and that onus lay with them. I think the problem was with leisure, freedom, being alone for the sake of it- that was not appreciated. In their [parents'] heads, nothing was a justification for being alone. For non-leisure related activities, somebody would make a compromise to accompany me, and I would likewise make a compromise to be able to fit that into my schedule."*

It was pertinent to note that in further conversations, I found that Reetika had tacitly accepted the premise that her safety was threatened by the mere act of living in Delhi-NCR. Her movements were carefully calibrated- company cabs, group outings in sanctioned spaces like CyberHub, online ordering instead of public markets. Her interactions with the outside world were thus limited to areas of permissibility and legitimate spaces, which she only entered with reasonable justification. However, these restrictions were not experienced by her as coercive but as pragmatic compromises- reasonable adaptations to a dangerous environment. Reetika saw her family as conservative but caring, protective rather than oppressive.

The control of middle-class women's sexuality, activities and movement has been variously analysed as a classed response, describing how "respectable women" from "good families" resort to "enclaving themselves" as a way of preserving their modesty- by voluntarily not travelling to certain places, not being outside of the house beyond a certain point, nor without "a specific and respectable purpose", thereby limiting their encounters with any "outsider" that

can be perceived as a threat (Singh 2023; Srivastava 2009, n.d.; Waldman and Ghertner 2023). As such, their privilege also facilitates the maintenance of these classed boundaries, since inevitably, it is the poor and lower-middle class man who is viewed with suspicion, interaction with whom is to be feared and avoided at all costs.

Writing about the case of the much-celebrated IT sector women in Bangalore, Carol Upadhya similarly shows how the elite circulate "spaces between home, work and new sites of consumption in cocooned transport vehicles along designated arteries, engaging directly with the rest of the population only through casual and fleeting encounters" (2009:264). These spatialized practices of distinction and avoidance serve, as Gilbertson also suggests, to reinforce and encourage the separation of different class fractions, legitimized through discursive moral notions of distancing (2017b). A key way through which this legitimation is achieved is by repeated discussions that emphasize the threat of sexual harassment, eve teasing or assault as evidence for the need for women "to always be on their guard" and to actively protect themselves, blurring the lines between commonsensical precautions and morally acceptable behaviour, often justifying the confinement of women as in their best interest.

This was exactly the response that many other women I spoke with had, in response to being asked about their confined freedoms. They spoke of the pragmatism of acknowledging that India, and Delhi-NCR, which was dubbed as its "rape capital" was not a safe space for a respectable woman to be- and the limitations imposed on them was merely the cost of accessing the freedoms they had been otherwise granted.

Here, good daughterhood operated through anticipatory compliance. Armed with the knowledge that many *other* women are controlled much more severely by their families or society served as a reminder for these young women to feel fortunate in the opportunities they

had been allowed- with some taking pride in behaving responsibly and never giving their parents "a reason to worry about". Knowing that their gender was a cause of "tension" (Gooptu and Krishnan 2017) for their parents, by behaving "responsibly," these daughters wanted to reduce parental anxiety, uphold family honour, and affirm their moral worth.

Sometimes, this did mean they lost out of opportunities- not being allowed to go on school trips, sleepovers, even parties where there would be other boys, but for the most part, these were accepted with a shrug, showing how gratitude can temper grievance.

The outsized impact of these restrictions on developing a sense of self, on having the courage to take difficult decisions and to have the confidence to navigate the world, however, did emerge later on in life. Some of the "angrier" daughters I spoke with, admitted how incessant policing and anxiety about safety and security had debilitated their ability to trust themselves, to take bold decisions which would require letting go of the protective cocoon they were brought up with, or to even to *imagine* different futures from themselves than what was the norm**.** As Reetika herself confessed to me later, she had "never let herself get lost"- it was unimaginable for her to think she could have navigated a city the way *men* did, to taste that freedom of living a life outside constant surveillance.

Reetika's story was not an isolated incident, although the degree of control within which she lived, and the extent of her fears was somewhat greater than the other daughters I spoke to. Nonetheless, even in cases where daughters understood that the fear of the city, or of the stranger was an irrational, exaggerated one, many women struggled with unlearning behaviours and anxieties regarding their safety that had been passed on to them when they were children- especially when these were intertwined with a sense of responsibility. Much like feelings about the body, these emotions too, became lifelong companions for these young women, making the

question of agency or willingness somewhat irrelevant in how they *thought* about safety. One such example is that of Preeti, whose story complicates the assumption that control always takes the form of restriction.

The burden of mature responsibility: Preeti

Preeti, 32, an assistant professor of sociology at a reputed university in Delhi is the youngest of three sisters, who had a somewhat unconventional upbringing. Preeti's family is native to a small town in UP, close to the capital of Lucknow. Both her parents had government jobs in their hometown, which made moving to a different city difficult for the family. When Preeti was in grade six, their parents decided that the three daughters should live independently in Delhi to pursue their education. Preeti's eldest sister was to start college, and the girls rented a flat to live on their own, which was a radical and unheard-of thing for the society they came from. Although they did have some distant relatives in the city who could step up as guardians, Preeti's mother thought it best that the daughters "didn't become a burden" to any other family member, focusing exclusively on their education.

Despite facing stiff resistance for "sending their daughters off to live on their own", her parents prioritized what they felt was in the "best interest of their daughters". However, even though their decision was a big vote of confidence in their daughters, the freedom they received was accompanied by an intense transfer of responsibility that had a counterintuitive effect on Preeti's ability to stay independent.

As she described, although the sisters learnt to manage the running of the house on their own- from cooking, cleaning, doing the laundry and dishes to negotiating with vendors, managing finances and taking care of themselves, the concern for the safety and security in a big city like Delhi manifested in an extreme form of anxiety. Ironically, Preeti told me, it was *because* her

mother had been very open with her daughters about her anxieties regarding the girls' "honour", constantly reminding them to "take responsibility" for "saving" themselves from the "big bad world", Preeti became hyper-vigilant and constantly fearful as a person. Thus, while giving them the freedom to pursue their dreams and encouraging their girls to be on their own, Preeti's parents had reaffirmed the message, without using those words, that the onus of being responsible was their own, with the honour of the family resting on their shoulders. As she shared:

> *"I won't mince my words, I think I was too young at that time to even decipher something like, you know, questions of safety or honour or things like that. I definitely think it had to do with the fact that my mother was having very open conversations about some of these things to me, right…but parents kind of alerting you to the possibilities that are there, the pitfalls…And once that is there, you become this basically this kind of hyper attentive person, a hyper sort of careful behaviour was really pushed on. It had nothing to do with me as a person or my own awareness of it…I think it was parental anxiety about protecting young women, it was essentially that, which then got of sort of transferred onto me"*

As a result, within the first few months of moving to Delhi, Preeti morphed from being a gregarious, friendly girl at her school in Lucknow to an extra-scared, almost isolated person who constantly feared for her own, and everyone else's safety, and found herself constantly stressed. Her mother's advice, for instance, that no one should find out that three girls were "living alone" in their rented accommodation meant that Preeti and her sisters went to great lengths to ensure that it always *felt* like there was a man or a guardian at their house to anyone outside. She recounted various anecdotes- the one time when stepping out of home at 8.30 pm to get some urgent papers for her exam felt like a terrifying transgression that made the sisters

shiver with fear; or the time when a promised scooty was denied to the girls because of their mother's fear that having access to a private mode of transport would allow them far more mobility and encourage "risky" behaviour that the parents couldn't control, as incidents that reinforced the concern with safety and restrictions on mobility.

Speaking about herself today, Preeti acknowledged that despite gaining critical awareness through her training in sociology and gender over the years, she has not yet unlearned these fears entirely. They resurfaced in her concern for her nieces, one of whom had just started going to college.

> *"I don't see that withering away… I'm not even a parent myself. And yet, I feel the same way towards my nieces... I'm more conscious of why it's problematic, but I know it's there."*

Stories like Preeti's demonstrate the mixed feelings that concerns about safety and security evoked in the young women I spoke with, and how early discourses of the right thing to do, the right way to behave had far reaching consequences for these daughters even in adulthood, framing the way they navigated life. Preeti's continued fear and concern for her nieces reveals how good daughterhood reproduces itself intergenerationally- not only as obedience, but as inherited vigilance. Her story also highlights the inherent contradictions in loving, doting parents' desires to provide the best possible lives and opportunities for their daughters, while simultaneously curtailing them by gendered concerns of safety, security and respectability. Given the emotional weight associated with the freedoms and privileges these women received, it was not merely the expectation that they act as good women, but as good, responsible *daughters,* that made this expectation an important part of the intergenerational contract between their parents and themselves. Emanating from a sense of obligation regarding what

they *owed* their parents in exchange for their freedoms, practising good daughterhood became a duty, that was undertaken both willingly and unwillingly by these women, a role that continued throughout life.

Good daughterhood as a framework for navigating life

This chapter has traced how good daughterhood is produced, embodied, and sustained through a continuous process that links intimate affective life to broader structures of social reproduction. Beginning with birth stories that generate gratitude and conditional belonging, moving through everyday practices of bodily discipline, emotional regulation and self-surveillance, and culminating in classed regimes of respectability and safety, I have argued that good daughterhood functions not an innate disposition nor a benign cultural ideal, but a socially produced formation shaped through affect, embodiment, and classed moral regulation, across multiple moments and scales of social life.

Analytically, good daughterhood is distinct from broader categories such as femininity, womanhood, or patriarchy because it locates gendered power within intergenerational relations of love, obligation, and care. It shows how control is exercised not only through prohibition or violence, but through gratitude, responsibility, and the desire to be good- particularly among privileged daughters whose opportunities are framed as gifts rather than rights.

At the micro level, good daughterhood shapes how daughters inhabit their bodies, regulate their desires, and evaluate their own actions, producing dispositions oriented towards restraint, self-monitoring, and emotional accommodation. At the macro level, it contributes to the reproduction of middle-class respectability, class boundaries, and gendered moral orders, using discourses of safety, honour, and protection as legitimating frameworks. The everyday compliance of daughters- often undertaken willingly, sometimes resentfully, frequently

ambivalently- becomes a key mechanism through which gender and class are mutually reinforced.

By foregrounding daughterhood as an analytic category, this chapter makes visible a form of inequality that is sustained precisely because it is naturalised as emanating from love, a desire for protection, or care. In the chapters that follow, I build on this framework to examine how good daughterhood continues to shape daughters' life choices around education, marriage and care over the life course. In doing so, this thesis seeks to demonstrate how gendered inequality persists not despite privilege, but *through* it- embedded in the very practices and relationships that appear loving, protective, progressive and enabling.

*

VI. Educated Daughters: From Promises to Paradoxes

Education- at least school education has become normative, if not compulsory for this cohort of children in comparison to their mothers…It is approached as the most positive aspect of contemporary life upon which everything depends."

- Mary John (2012: 17)

Introduction

Arguably, one of the most significant social transformations in India over the past three decades has been the normative shift in the value of education, especially for women. This is exemplified by the dramatic expansion of women's access to and participation in higher education across caste, class, and regional contexts, referred to by some scholars as the "silent revolution" in education (Caldwell, Reddy, and Caldwell 1985; Chanana 2001; Croll 2006a; Mehrotra et al. 2014; Sahni and Kalyan Shankar 2012; Tiainen, Leiviskä, and Brunila 2019). Mary John's (2018) fieldwork in Haryana and Maharashtra identifies education as "one of the most obvious indicators of change across generations," marked by strong parental aspirations for children's education *across social strata* and *irrespective of gender*, a finding echoed by others (Clark and Sekher 2007; Froerer 2012; Srivastava 2006)

As Vaughan (2013) argues, this shift has been facilitated as a result of the complex interplay of national and international development agendas, and sustained negotiations on the subject of women's education that have framed it as a key component of gender equality. Theorisation around the "multiplier effect of education" and its role in building "capabilities" further

concretised its developmental significance (Nussbaum 2003; Sen 2001). Since the 1990s, a significant government push for expanded educational infrastructure, renewed policy focus and mass media campaigns has been credited with facilitating a tremendous shift in the perceived necessity of education and a substantial increase in women's access to educational opportunities (Chanana 2011, 2012; Drèze and Kingdon 2001; Jeffery, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2006; Mukhopadhyay 2021). According to the most recent AISHE data released in 2021-22, female enrolment in higher education in India has now surpassed that of men in the country, with the Gender Parity Index increasing from 0.7 in 2006-07 to above 1 in the latest survey (Minsitry of Higher Education, Government of India 2023)- a tremendous feat for a nation with barely 8% female literacy at the time of Independence.

As the cultural vanguard of modernizing trends and the aspirational reference point for society, the middle and upper-middle classes have been viewed at the forefront of these changes. Unlike in the case of girls belonging to poor or lower-middle class backgrounds, where parents' acquiescence to educating daughters has been often linked with instrumental gains- in the form of increased opportunities for upward social mobility for their families (Belliappa 2013; Dickey 2012; Fernandes and Heller 2006), improved prospects for marital hypergamy or reduced dowries (Ramamurthy 2014; Srinivasan 2005; Still 2011), or as insurance against marital breakdown (Subrahmanian 1997), one of the dominant motivations for educating daughters in more affluent or educated families appears to be the intrinsic moral value associated with being educated itself (Säävälä 2010).

Recent academic literature has focused on the increasing desires and willingness of middle- and upper-class parents to educate their *all* their children equally, supporting their academic dreams and pursue professional ambitions as a sacred moral duty (Alice W Clark 2016; Clark

and Sekher 2007; Kaur, S. S. Bhalla, et al. 2016; Khalid 2023; Purewal 2010; Tara and Ilavarasan 2009). In the absence of expectations of any *economic* returns from investing in children's education, which were traditionally recouped by parents only from sons, the gender question appears to have become relatively irrelevant and most current accounts rest on the celebration of education as a critical aspect of middle-class identity, pursued as a goal "for its own sake" (Conger, Conger, and Martin 2010). The promise of success, especially through prestigious professional education is viewed as mainly rewarding such parents through accumulation of greater social capital and cementing their status, whether it is through their sons' or daughters' achievements (Conger et al. 2010; DiMaggio 1982; Kaur 2022; Upadhya 1997, 2008, 2016a).

Therefore, despite numerous studies exploring the role of education, especially English language in promoting the construction of this class (Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase 2008; Gupta 2022; Highet and Del Percio 2021; Nambissan 2009), the *gender* question has remained relatively unproblematized in these works. Although the significance of educated mothers and wives, and their role in the concerted cultivation of middle-class children addresses a part of this query (Donner 2006, 2011; Radhakrishnan 2009), the significance of educated middle-class *daughters*, and meaning making around it has received relatively scant attention. Does this enthusiastic support for daughters' education merely reflect changing social norms, or does it have any significance beyond it?

In this chapter, I unpack the relationship between parental support for daughters' educational pursuits and the lived experience of daughterhood in the middle classes. I examine the role that the provision of educational opportunities plays in constructing an ideal of good daughterhood, the burdens it enforces, and the potential contradictions that emanate from the pursuit of

increasingly ambitious, prestigious educational and professional opportunities by daughters from these families. In doing so, my aim is to illuminate the complex relationship between parental love and support for daughters' educational dreams on the one hand, and the gendered expectations that limit them on the other.

I also argue that contrary to professed claims of equality or neutrality, investing in daughters' education accrues *qualitatively different*, gendered returns for middle class families, playing a key role in the social reproduction of the class, while allowing and even *legitimizing* the perpetuation of gendered and patriarchal norms within the home. The chapter ends with the paradox that educated daughters represent in middle class families, the limits of classed ambitions they are allowed to pursue, and the inherent contradictions of daughters becoming "too educated" for their own good.

Chapter overview

The rest of the chapter is divided as follows.

Part One: Promises and Possibilities focuses on the significance of education among the middle classes, detailing daughters' stories of how they were supported in their endeavours to pursue educational dreams.

Part Two: Pressures and Performances elaborates on the specific gendered returns to investments in daughters' education for parents, the pressure to perform as trophy daughters, detailing how good daughterhood becomes intertwined with academic excellence and the harm it causes.

Part Three: Paradoxes focuses on the limits to parental support for daughters' education, especially when it comes to the question of employment, exposing the contradictions of educational support, the paradoxes it creates and the resulting confusion, anger and resentment it creates in daughters.

Part One: Promises and Possibilities

The centrality of education: defining oneself

One of the more intriguing aspects of the interviews I conducted with my respondents was the ubiquity of education in their narratives, one they identified as a cornerstone of their upbringing and presented as proof of their self-identified class status. As a generic conversation starter, I would often begin my interviews with young women respondents by asking them to "Tell me everything, from the beginning- Who are you? What's your story? What defines you?". To my slight surprise, I found that in nearly every case, my respondents would immediately delve into a detailed account of their educational qualifications, the colleges they attend and their current professional status, if any. While this was not an extraordinary introduction by any means, what was interesting to me was how rare it was for any of these young women to describe themselves in terms *other* than using these identifiers. Only once in a blue moon would any of them choose to define themselves by sharing anything about their family, their city, their relationships, hobbies, or passions, or even use any *adjectives* to identify themselves. The first time a respondent began by describing herself as a fierce feminist, I was taken aback by how 'different' her introduction was. In answering my question about what *defines* them, my respondents had chosen, seemingly involuntarily, to conflate what they had *studied* or where they *worked* with who they *were.* For them, their educational credentials were not merely representative of their sense of self and individual identity, but also a marker of their value system, ethos, even their sense of being.

As one of my respondents, Misha, 21, an economics graduate at Delhi University shared,

"I have always seen myself as a studious student, from the time I was in grade six. For me, education is something that is my first [primary] thing. No friends, no person, nothing comes above that. I have always been the person who has studied, who is always teaching others till the last moment. For me, it has been something that I feel…whether right or not… It is my identity. It is who I am. I am someone who gets good grades, who studies what she wants to. And I actually enjoy doing it. That's why I want to get into research or academia, because I know it fulfills me."

The pursuit of education as a middle-class morality project

Significantly, the importance attached to education for these young women was not just representative of their own sense of self, but also an expression of class identity. As most of my respondents were keen to assert when probed on their childhood and upbringing, theirs was a "typical middle-class family", where "education was the most important aspect of life growing up- "nothing else mattered." This commitment to education did not merely *co-exist* along with a certain socio-economic standard of living that qualified them as "middle-class". Rather, as my respondents clarified, they *were* middle class *because* of their commitment to education- irrespective of whether they were too rich or too poor to afford it. Middle-classness then, was a *moral* status for my respondents, one intertwined with a recognition of the importance of education. As Anusha, a Harvard-IIT graduate from Delhi also told me, it was not that she grew up in a house where money was "tight" [financially constrained], but as far as their family's value system with respect to education was concerned, they were "*as middle class as one could get*."

The aspect of morality in establishing middle class identity is not a novel premise- scholars have written extensively on the significance of respectability and moral propriety as an important aspect of middle-class identity, especially in India, as I have discussed in earlier chapters as well (Dickey 2016; Fuller and Narasimhan 2006; Purewal and Hashmi 2015; Varma 2007). However, while educational *choices* have been analysed as an important part of reproducing class advantages by many scholars (Ball 2003; A. Gupta 2020; Gupta 2023; Ray 1988), the focus on educational and professional qualifications as establishing *moral* supremacy is relatively scarce.

In her work on Middle Class Moralities Säävälä (2010:9) discusses how middle-class ness in the Indian context is about the representation of certain kinds of moral paradigms and value systems, rather than its material markers. By middle class moralities, she refers to the "norms, values and dispositions" that act as guiding principles for its members, as well as "conceptions of the good and desirable". Säävälä also makes an important claim while discussing the relationship between monetary expenditure and value in the middle-class context. She asserts that in the status-building project of the middle class, not everything expensive is regarded as prestigious- and conversely, what is considered valuable does not necessarily have a direct relationship with cost. "What is typically middle class", she writes, "are the claims of *high moral value* combined with the monetary means to practice *morally high standards*" (Ibid:12).

This is where the centrality of education is establishing middle class moralities that I encountered comes in. For my respondents and their families, the pursuit of education was, in many ways, the pursuit of goodness. Their educational trajectory was not merely a means towards securing an improved standard of living in the future, rather, their *commitment* to education was a demonstration of a value system and a moral paradigm, which was geared

towards becoming *good people.* Repeatedly, in my conversations, the centrality of education within families, the revered status afforded to it, and parents' willingness to spend on it was presented as a proof of this moral claim. It was not the *cost* of education that determined its worth (though of course, a good education was often very costly)- rather, as they claimed, a "good education" was directly associated with the creation of the "right" kind of people, who valued the "right things". It was this perspective, wherein education was valued for its own sake, that was seen as being most closely associated with a middle-class upbringing, and a value system that placed morality above instrumentality.

Sumati, 25, a Masters student studying sociology at JNU shared, speaking of the revered status of education that she grew up with, shared:

> *"I feel traditionally, in all societies, seeking knowledge is always put on a pedestal- there is always a version of that in all societies. Like Athena is the goddess of wisdom, or Saraswati in India- there is always a version of that historically. I think in middle class families, for the most part, say 60%, you study because studying is what makes you a better person…we value education so much, because education in itself, is valuable. And I don't just mean education, but the pursuit of knowledge- being able to understand different perspectives…of course, it does depend on what you're studying, but overall, education, in any shape or form is valid, it is an end in itself. It may be a means to an end for some people, especially those from the lower classes, or those seeking mobility or employment but in middle class families, education is valuable because it* ***is****."*

The instrumental use of education

This is not to suggest that education did not have *any* instrumental role to play in my respondents' lives, or was not spoken of in material terms, as a means of advancing life opportunities. Echoing the findings of other studies of middle-class Indian families (Kumar 2010; Mukherjee and Kibria 2024) my respondents, too, discussed growing up in homes that placed great emphasis on academic performance, where education was viewed as extremely important for improving future life chances. Scholars like Srivastava (1998) have pointed out how school choice is a primary way for parents across social classes to gain educational advantages for their children, while others like Achala Gupta (2023), Sara Dickey (2012), Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase (2009) and Donner and De Neve (2015) have discussed the important but precarious connection between the middle-class project and education- commenting on the everyday pressures and anxieties felt by parents who would like to ensure a better and enriching environment for their children than *they themselves* were exposed to. Further, while investment in education has increased manifold in the past few decades and opportunities abound, education is now viewed primarily as an arena of individual achievement and economic success (Michael Peters 2001), wherein new technologies of governance require individuals to be self-reliant, self-regulating and enterprising in managing their lives without state support (Chakravarti 2013). Preparing children for success then was an important part of the way that my respondents' parents discussed the subject with them. Often however, these conversations too, were encased in ethical terms, where the pursuit of education was seen as part of a sacred duty- for parents to provide better opportunities for their children than they had been afforded, and for children to recognize its worth materially, as well as emotionally.

Durga, 26, a practising lawyer at Delhi High Court, spoke with some emotion about how valuable education was for her, *especially* given her parents' background:

> *"Generally speaking, I would say it [education] has played 90% role in my life. It has been inculcated in both of us [siblings], from a very young age that education is the only thing that can sort of protect you, that can feed you, that can nurture you and that will make you. It's the only thing that can help you flourish in life…That attitude comes from my parents' background. Education was the thing that helped my father stand on his own two feet, coming from a humble background, a small village in Andhra Pradesh. He had a childhood where he didn't have books to read, there was no money to pay college fees, and there were eight brothers and sisters. My grandmother would loan whatever little gold she had to make her children study. Knowing this…That kind of thing moulds you in a way where you realise that education is literally the only thing you have.* ***You have to worship it."***

Against dependence: the gendered significance of education

The value of education as particularly important for women was also a recurring theme in my conversations. The message that *their* lives must be different from those of their parents, and they that they *must* make use of the opportunities provided to them was in fact, a gendered message, where daughters were repeatedly reminded that given the patriarchal context of their society, valuing education was an even bigger responsibility for daughters than for sons. Many of my respondents recalled stories of supportive mothers, often homemakers, who did not wish for their daughters to be dependent on their husbands in the future, and regularly went out of their way to support their daughters' educational dreams. Where they grew up with working

mothers, the focus on not being dependent on another man in the future was even stronger in the way daughters spoke about education and financial security.

Anjali, a 24-year-old B.Tech. graduate at the time of her first interview, had initially spoken to me about how important it was for her father, a professor at a reputed Central University in Delhi that she did well in her studies, *because* he was *there*, to guide her and help her in a way no one could for him. In later conversations, she shared that while her father's motivation for educating his children did not differentiate between her and her brother, it was her mother, herself a working professional, who constantly reminded her that it was important for *her,* as a woman, to make best use of the opportunities she had currently, so that she could exercise control over her life in the future.

> "*At the end of the day, it was always my mother…who was my biggest support system. She had friends who were housewives, unlike her, and she would always emphasize to me she didn't want her daughter to end up like that. She would tell me, I cannot tell you to be a housewife, I don't even want you to have a safe or timepass job. I need you to get well educated, work and earn money so you never have to go home and ask the male for money. I have never done that a single day in my life, and I don't want you to, either*."

Other mothers I spoke with reiterated the same message. Meenu, 47, an educator and life skills trainer and a mother of two daughters, spoke of the importance of education and financial independence for her daughters:

"*For me, education is very, very important for the simple reason that one, I want my daughters to be financially independent. The second part, where education comes in is that they should be able to follow what[ever] their dreams are, you know? I don't want them to think that because I did not have this [educational] opportunity, I could not do this."*

For other mothers like Shweta, 55, education was a necessary component of self-respect, since educational accomplishments and the ability to earn for yourself- to fulfil your own wishes and desires without having to look to a male partner was an integral aspect of living a fulfilling life. She shared why she felt it was important for her daughters:

"It's about self-respect, self-esteem for girls. There is a "feel" one gets when they earn. You get a confidence from within. Even if the family is nice and the husband earns, aap apni zaruratein khud poori kar sakte ho (you can fulfill your needs on your own)."

In many instances, having grown up seeing the lives and hardships that their mothers or other women in the family had endured because they had been denied such opportunities, my respondents would themselves emphasize their desire to create alternate futures for themselves, starkly different from what they had grown up seeing.

Dhara, a 19-year-old Political Science graduate from IP university, spoke of how important education and having her own career was for her, given the Baniya family background that she comes from, where women were always treated differently:

"We [women] are conditioned, since childhood, in some ways, to see ourselves as inferior to men. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't get to use our capabilities… Of

course, it's [education is] about financial security, but even if it's not, for me, it's about mental stimulation. It's about self-actualization. I've seen how women in the family, even my mother, weren't allowed to step out of the home…they don't get to experience the world at all, anything that can give a sense of identity to them. For me it's important to pursue education so I can do that."

In her work on gender, class and reflexive modernity in middle- and upper-class India, Jyothsana Belliappa (2013), elaborates on the importance of education and professional qualifications as an important aspect of self-identity for young women in contemporary India. Following Giddens' and Beck & Beck-Gernsheim's (2002; 1994) analysis of reflexive modernity, Belliappa argues that in a globalized context of "institutional individualisation and de-traditionalisation", individual members of society seek "biographical solutions to systemic contradictions" (Beck 1992; as quoted in Belliappa 2013:29). Such a process explains the increasing need for Indian women to seek agency through their professional accomplishments, as their access to economic opportunities becomes increasingly intertwined with their sense of self- "women seek autonomy, independence and self-determination through sustained individual effort and strategic conformity to traditional norms" (Ibid :5). Belliappa's analysis is consistent with the interviews I conducted, where women insisted on the need for education and career goals as significant to their sense of self, a critical aspect of their self-fashioning as "modern Indian women".

Such messaging was further compounded in situations where families were either separated, disturbed or had fostered abusive environments, or where fathers exercised complete financial control and often economic violence. Daughters were encouraged by mothers, or of their own accord desired to break cycles of generational trauma and build on the opportunities they had

been provided, distinguishing themselves from women of the previous generation. In such cases, education was seen not just as a fallback option, but as a path to freedom and a way to control their own destiny.

In the case of Palak, 22, a student of clinical psychology who was completing her MSc when we spoke, the desire to get educated and *become* someone came from wanting to prove a point to her father, who had hated the fact that he had only two daughters. Palak described how she had grown up in an abusive household, with her father regularly beating her mother and emotionally harassing and abusing her and her younger sister. Her mother had not yet completed her graduation when she was married off, and had lived as a housewife, without any familial support to walk out of the abusive marriage. One of the primary reasons her mother had endured the abuse all these years, was to ensure that Palak and her sister could complete their education and "make something of themselves". For Palak then, education and a career were non-negotiable, even more so *because* she was a girl who never wanted to follow in her mother's footsteps. She told me that her desire to finish her current degree and enroll in a PhD and start her counselling career was motivated both by a desire to prove her father, who felt daughters were good-for-nothing wrong, and to move out of her house as soon as possible. Fortunately for Palak, despite the generally toxic environment she had grown up in, her father or extended family had not stopped her from pursuing her education, something she was thankful for.

> *"Each time my father has a fight, he will mention how it would have been better for him if he had a son. Every time, it brings back a feeling of not liking him. I really dislike him for his thought process. But on the other hand, this has motivated me in wanting to be independent from a young age. Emotionally, I always was. Now I want to be*

financially independent also. I want to complete my education and take control of my life. Probably just to prove him wrong."

Parental sacrifices: good parenting and collective goals

Given the centrality of education in the households I was interviewing, a noteworthy but unsurprising aspect was the extent to which families' location, living and even household composition was determined by foregrounding children's educational needs. Scholars on the subject have recorded the lengths to which middle-class Indian parents today are willing to make compromises to ensure the best possible education for their children, often at great personal costs to themselves (Donner 2006; Herz and Sperling 2004; Kaur 2022; Subrahmanian 1997), a pattern which emerged in my interviews as well.

Anukriti, 30, a media studies PhD scholar I spoke with, who now teaches in London, shared how the centrality of education in her parents' worldview meant it dictated how they lived as a family:

*"Education was very, very, very important. That was a driver for many decisions and for many things that would happen in the house as well. My father would be responsible for teaching me Math and Science, and my mother would teach Hindi because that's what she was great at… My father would often travel for his job, but my mother stayed back in Delhi with me to ensure that my education was never interrupted…**their lives revolved around and were shaped by my educational priorities. Nothing mattered more, no matter what its cost."***

In their work on the sociology of money, Viviana Zelizer (1994) and Caitlin Zaloom (2019) have discussed how not all money is viewed with the same lens. In her book "The Priceless Child", Zelizer ([1985]2004) describes how expenditure on certain aspects of childcare, especially education, has become de-linked with potential returns to household income due to the changing nature of the parent-child relationship in the western world in the last few decades. Rather than viewing the child as an additional source of income for the family, investments in children's education are today associated with parental duties and obligations, which rest on providing children the "best possible life" without the expectation of returns for themselves. In this changed understanding of what constitutes "good parenting", expenditure on children's education has been demarcated as "sacred", never to be relinquished and even worth incurring debt (Rao 2022; Zaloom 2019). In the Indian context, while investments in children's education among poorer sections of society could be viewed as more instrumentally dictated by the expectation of future returns to parents, or being optimized for future additions to household incomes, in the case the middle-class respondents I was speaking with, boundless investments, both emotional and material, without the expectation of any tangible returns added an even more altruistic character to parental decisions.

Sacrificing mothers: the emotional labour of mothers

For mothers especially, a critical aspect of good parenting was outlining how they had put their children's needs before their own, for them to have a better future. Rachel Murphy (2022) in her work on Migrant Families in Rural China, discusses how mothers' commitment to their children's education operates through a practice of "revalorized domesticity", where their main task is to ensure conditions that can facilitate the pursuit of education for their children such that they could achieve educational mobility that would make the migrant workers' *sacrifices*

"worthwhile" (Zhou, Murphy, and Tao 2014). Leung and Shek (2011) in fact developed a scale to empirically demonstrate 'Chinese Parental Sacrifice for Child's Education'.

Similar ideas of sacrifice have also been entwined with the idea of motherhood in India. In her work on middle class families in Calcutta, Henrike Donner (2006) finds that since the mid-90s, such practices of "committed motherhood" have shaped discourses around modernity in India, where women fashion themselves as mothers of *future* white-collar workers, their lives revolving around catering to the upbringing of well-adjusted children who can achieve academic success in the future. Donner's study suggests that such mothering begins at the *pre-school* level itself, as a result of increasing competition in the educational landscape. At higher levels of education, where fierce competition for entrance into professional courses plays itself out most vividly, these elements of sacrifice are as high as the concomitant stakes. In her article on competitive exam preparation, Kaur (2022) elaborates on the practices of Indian mothers accompanying their children to coaching centres in cities like *Kota*[7] for years, away from their husbands and other children, in order to support their children's educational goals. In such families, a woman's motherly duties to facilitate children's education precedes her responsibilities even as a wife, further highlighting the normative significance of education for such families. I, too, repeatedly found stories of parents, especially mothers, quitting jobs, taking leaves or re-arranging familial setups completely, sacrificing in different ways to accommodate the needs of their children.

[7] City in Rajasthan, India, famous for being a coaching hub for entrance examinations especially for engineering colleges, operating on a intensive residential model of education.

Rekha, 57, a mother of two and housewife married for 35 years, described to me how prioritising her children's education reshaped her marriage. Originally from a small town in U.P., the family settled in Delhi after the birth of their second child. Her husband, who was on a touring job that involved postings in remote areas of Eastern India for weeks at a time, was rarely at home, while Rekha stayed at home with the kids so that their children could stay in good schools. The long-distance strained their relationship, and she half-jokingly compared her life to Urmila[8]'s in the *Ramayana*:

> *"Even Urmila's vanvaas (separation) had lasted only 14 years- her husband had returned to her after that. My vanvaas has been more than 30. You can imagine what kind of a marriage it can foster. The duty to bring up our children well has cost us a lot in lost time as a family. But the sacrifice has been worth it for the sake of our children. When I see them today, I am happy that my decision to stay back has allowed them the best possible opportunities which they couldn't have gotten anywhere else."*

Today, Rekha's children are both well-educated and settled abroad, earning well and married. This, for her, is her biggest vindication and a marker of success that makes all her sacrifices worth it. The language of sacrifice employed by Rekha was one that was a common refrain in my conversations with parents, who often spoke with some pride at the ways in which they had done "everything in their power" to ensure that their children received the benefits of a good education, including sacrificing their own lives, dreams and aspirations.

[8] Urmila is the wife of Lakshman, younger brother of Ram, who was left behind in the palace when her husband voluntarily decided to follow his brother on his banishment to the forest for 14 years. Her story of suffering and loneliness is often neglected or glossed over in various retellings of the epic Ramayana.

Supportive fathers and doting daughters

While mothers were often at the forefront of such confidence-building measures, they were by no means the only cheerleaders for daughters. Numerous studies have shown how fathers' support and encouragement is a critical aspect of facilitating daughters' higher education and careers, especially where daughters' choices may be in contravention of acceptable social norms or follow unconventional paths (Tara and Ilavarasan 2009). This was the case with many of the women I spoke with too.

As Pallavi, 29, a chartered accountant (CA), told me, she had never seen herself as a person with "high hopes and high dreams". But it was her father who insisted that she should be independent enough to fulfill all her dreams on her own. Her father, Pallavi confessed, was the one who pushed her to take up the CA route, despite extended family members harbouring reservations, becoming her biggest cheerleader, guide and confidante. He pointed out that pursuing "some mediocre degree" was not going to be good enough for his daughter, for her to "earn enough or stay happy enough". Pallavi credits her father with recognizing her potential, pushing her forward and teaching her to achieve her own dreams.

Simran, the 25-year-old Psychology student mentioned earlier, similarly spoke of how it was her father who had pushed her out of her comfort zone to apply for a degree, first in Delhi and then abroad, even when her own mother and other family members had been hesitant:

> *"It was my father who encouraged me to move first to Delhi and then to the UK, to pursue my education. I wouldn't have had the strength to go to a new city and live by myself while I attended college. But he not only supported me financially but also*

emotionally. Even when my mother was anxious, sometimes scared and emotional about me leaving, he was firm that I should move out of my small town to get a better education. In fact, he was heartbroken that I didn't even try sooner!"

In the case of Sasha, 25, it was the desire to fulfill her father's dreams that motivated her decision to pursue engineering. During our conversation, Sasha, who was pursuing a Masters Degree in Business Analytics from Columbia University at the time, spoke very highly of her father as her biggest cheerleader, who was both her role model and her inspiration for her educational accomplishments. She made it her life's mission to achieve what her father had not been able to, for his sake:

"My dad lost his father at a young age…he had a lot of aspirations, but he was not able to fulfill them. He wanted to become an engineering graduate at DCE [Delhi College of Engineering], but he couldn't. He had so many dreams that he could not reach while he was growing up, he had financial issues, he was working jobs, things were difficult politically in his hometown as well. But he had a lot of dreams. And somehow, they became mine. I just took it upon myself to fulfill his unfulfilled dreams. It's not like he even asked me to do it. But I was able to fulfill those aspirations for him."

As other literature shows, my interviews too revealed how, especially for those parents who had themselves only received a modest upbringing, or had been denied opportunities to study and work to their heart's content, supporting their children's educational goals was a means for parents, both fathers and mothers, to live their lives vicariously through their children (Khalid 2023; Srivastava 2020; Subrahmanian 1997). This, as Sasha's case shows, was a responsibility their children took very seriously.

Pride, prestige, and returns from education

It follows naturally from the perception of children's education as a collective goal in the family that its *returns* were also received at the level of the family. For many of the families I spoke with, this did, in fact, seem to be the case. Their children's achievements, including those of daughters, were a source of immense collective prestige within families. Most parents beamed with pride while discussing their children's academic accomplishments with me, pointing out how their success was a realisation of a collective dream. The biggest 'gift' their children had bestowed on them, parents told me, was that of *'izzat'* (respect)- the ability to hold their head high in society, as a direct consequence of their children's educational success. This success was critical not just in augmenting the status of the family and reaffirming its position as a part of a moral middle class, it also stood as demonstrable proof of their own triumph at successful parenting.

Rajiv Kumar, 62, a retired businessman, shared how he couldn't stop telling everyone that his daughter studies in an Ivy League University, because he enjoys the respect he gets when people acknowledge her achievement, and in turn his- as her father.

> *"I told my children many years ago, when they were still in school. The happiest day for me would be when I would be known not through my own name, but when people would recognize me as the father of my children. I want to be identified through them."*.

His daughter Sreyasi spoke of how it was sometimes embarrassing that her parents are constantly "showing her off" in front of the world, even as she declared she was happy that she had given her parents the opportunity to be proud of her:

"My parents visited me a few months after I had joined my university. In the week leading up to their visit, all my father could speak about was how he wants to take pictures in the university with me, feel proud that his daughter has 'made it' and make everyone in the family WhatsApp group jealous. My mother on the other hand, constantly finds ways to bring up my university in front of her kitty friends, and one of their children actually told me to please stop her because their lives were being affected with the comparisons being made with me!!"

The irrelevance of gender?

Reflecting on these accounts, it appears as though the question of gender was irrelevant as far as the commitment to education within the middle classes was concerned. Parental investment in, support of and encouragement for their children's ambitions appeared to be the same, irrespective of gender, as were the returns in terms of pride, prestige and status-enhancement.

Interestingly, a counter-intuitive finding from my fieldwork was that that *irrespective* of how patriarchal or sexist parental views may have been on *other* aspects of how daughters should live and be brought up, the mere *suggestion* that daughters should not be educated *merely* because they were girls was *never* supported by any of the parents I spoke with or was told about. Parents would repeatedly remind me how they had left no stone unturned to educate their children- sons or daughters; while daughters from such families would similarly attest to receiving all possible support for their education, notwithstanding any *other* difficulties they may have faced growing up.

In fact, e*specially* in cases where they had themselves tolerated other forms of neglect or abuse or discrimination, I found that daughters were quick to point out that *education* was the *one* arena in which they *never* faced gender discrimination at home.

An instructive story in this regard was that of Rimjhim, 28, who grew up in a small hill town with government-employed parents, and moved to Delhi for higher education. She shared that she always knew she was an unwelcome addition to the family because she was a girl, and throughout childhood experienced both subtle and overt discrimination, especially in comparison to her elder brother- whose needs were always put before hers, and everyday sexism justified as "just the way the world works". Yet, she was unequivocal that education was the *one area* where her parents *never* differentiated between the siblings. Despite tight finances, they never restricted spending on books, school fees, or coaching for either child. Recalling how bad things were at one point, Rimjhim described how her mother saved up for an entire year in a fixed deposit scheme, so that they could afford to buy "fancy" clothes to celebrate the children's birthdays each year, from a shop at the Mall Road. Yet, when it came to education, her parents always managed to find a way to go beyond their means:

> *"You can imagine the situation... We couldn't just buy whatever we wanted. But that was never the case with educational expenditure. You just had to name a book you wanted, which was deemed important, or even suggested by the teacher- and it would somehow be made available the next day. There were no expenses spared when it came to education, no matter what the cost, for either of us. It was actually because of my mother's insistence that both her children went to the best convent schools even when it was beyond the household budget. There was never any preferential treatment by her when it came to the question of education."*

Similar patterns emerged in other deeply troubled households, including those marked by abuse and violence, such as Palak and Nayantara mentioned earlier. Regardless of how discriminatory the family environment was in general; education remained a protected domain- one in which daughters' access was rarely curtailed or denied.

So how can we understand the co-existence of these apparently conflicting phenomena?

When thinking about the disproportionate interest in, support for, and control of their daughters' educational choices within middle class families even where discrimination was otherwise rampant, I was forced to consider the symbolism of educating daughters from a different perspective - as something more than just a dispassionate parental interest in furthering their children's futures. Of course, there is a case to be made to view the support for daughters' education merely as a reflection of changing social norms, in which the tremendous increase in the value of education for children of both genders has far outpaced change in the higher social status continued to be enjoyed by sons more generally. However, I argue that such an understanding may be somewhat simplistic. Scratching beyond the surface of some of these initial claims brought to light some important, nuanced and gendered differences.

In the next section of this chapter, I explore some of these hidden meanings, demonstrating how middle-class commitments to education are structured by substantive gendered constraints- in the ways educational aspirations are articulated for daughters vis-à-vis sons, and in how the returns on these investments are negotiated and realised within family life. Rather than constituting gender-neutral or purely altruistic support, I suggest that the provision of ostensibly equal educational opportunities to daughters generates *qualitatively different* forms of symbolic and social capital for parents, functioning as a mechanism of class distinction. I

further contend that the production of what I term “trophy daughters” enables families to perform gender-progressive identities while simultaneously legitimising other restrictive and disciplinary regimes imposed on daughters, with uneven and harmful consequences.

*

Part Two: Pressures and Performances

The privilege- and irony of support

In her analysis of the sociology of money, Aliya Rao (2022) argues that the microfoundation of economic transactions is inherently gendered, with everyday spending decisions encoding familial preferences, obligations, and hierarchies through choices about *how* and *where* money is spent. Rao contends that meaning making around expenditures offers a critical lens into the reproduction of gendered inequalities within the family. This, however, raises a conceptual question- do such expenditures reliably index intentionality, or can they also serve as strategic performances of intention in its absence?

One of the most interesting ways in which support for educational goals assumed a distinctive meaning in my fieldwork was through its instrumental use, as a demonstratable proof of progressive ideals within middle-class families- irrespective of whether such values existed or were practiced by parents at all.

Even in the most discriminatory households, I found that the *expenditure* on daughters' education was repeatedly invoked as *evidence,* both by parents and daughters, for establishing progressive *intentions* of parents and families at large, as proof of their commitment to gender equality- often in direct contradiction to daughters' lived experiences.

In the case of Rimjhim shared above for instance, her parents' willingness to spend beyond their means on *her* educational expenditure (despite her inferior status as home) was presented not just as a demonstration of their commitment to education, but also as a reaffirmation of her

parents' value system to me, to justify their attempts at performing "good parenting" in the way they "knew best". Although Rimjhim remained acutely aware of, and continued to wrestle with the discrimination she had faced growing up, she was also *proud* of her parents for not differentiating between their children in matters of education, despite facing severe financial constraints. Her parents' economic investment in her education thus became a way of cementing their social relationship, of asserting the gender neutrality of her parents' values, and a proof of their moral compass, at least as far as education was concerned- a trait Rimjhim continued to find praiseworthy. Similar justifications, where expenditure on education was used to reverse-engineer claims of equality or progressiveness, were used by other respondents as well.

This raises the query of what parents stand to gain from such claims, and why daughters continue to endorse them in the face of contrary realities they had lived? I answer this question in two parts, starting with the distinctive symbolic return of investing in daughters education- its role in signaling class distinction.

The gendered symbolic and cultural capital of educating daughters: trophy daughters

Following Bourdieu, scholars studying the cultural aspects of class argue that the process of class formation rests not merely on recognizing oneself as belonging to a certain class position, but more importantly, through *differentiating* oneself from others in a field (Bourdieu 1984). Although sociological work has already established education as a key source of social and cultural capital for middle class families (Beteille 1991; Bozick et al. 2010; Suter et al. 2020), it has not sufficiently distinguished between the *differential* symbolic returns from educating *daughters*, versus sons. Even the more recent sociological literature on the specific subject of

gains from children's educational success and its role in class reproduction in India (Kaur 2022, Gupta 2023, Mukherjee and Kibria 2024) does not address this question in explicitly gendered terms- does it matter whether it is sons or daughters augmenting familial status through educational accomplishments?

However, in a similar vein as Updhyay's (1997) thesis discusses the transformation of economic capital to symbolic capital for elite families through children's enrolment into the "right schools", the specific support for *daughters'* education, I argue, effects a further conversion of material investments into symbolic cultural capital *precisely* because it carries gendered moral weight. Supporting the "right gender", so to speak, enables middle-class parents to distinguish themselves from others in the field, even within their own class.

As Derné (2005, 2008) notes, a defining feature of the post-liberalisation middle class in India is its public endorsement of changing gender relations and a willingness to adopt them in daily practice. Goli and Singh (2024) similarly show that irrespective of whether or not gender equality is *actually practiced* within educated, elite Indian homes, declarations of son preference and publicly avowed discrimination against daughters is not acceptable within elite social circles, in accordance with prevailing societal ideals within these classes. In such a situation, where gender discrimination is rampant, and resource allocation remains highly gendered within families, the *very act* of supporting daughters' education can operate as its own, particular source of gendered symbolic and cultural capital. It allows families to make credible claims of gender equality, and to distinguish themselves from others in the milieu. By supporting and even pushing their daughters' education, parents from the middle classes can demonstrate not just a commitment to education as a core value, but one that is even more praiseworthy for its *lack of discrimination,* giving it further legitimacy.

Such claims would not be in themselves problematic, if they were restricted to providing support for daughters' education. The difficulty arises when this support is used to obfuscate, negate or dismiss *other* forms of gender discrimination that co-exist with it. Much as in the case of Rimjhim, her parents' lack of discrimination in educational investment was repeatedly deployed as proof that that they did not differentiate between their children, even when Rimjhim's own lived experience showed otherwise. Ultimately, this led to a situation where Rimjhim herself was unable to share her experience of discrimination without alluding to what her parents had already done for her, continually doubting herself as an "thankless" or ungrateful child. This produced a moral bind in which her grievances were continually overridden by reminders of parental sacrifice.

Encouraging daughters' education thus becomes a powerful mechanism through which middle-class parents accrue moral authority and symbolic capital. Because educational support is visible, measurable, and socially valorized, it functions as incontrovertible proof of progressiveness, enabling entry into elite social circles that would have otherwise remained out of reach, while simultaneously delegitimizing claims of discrimination. By framing their actions as *already* representing a departure from older patriarchal norms, parents can consciously position themselves as bearers of a 'higher' moral culture, which reflects a commitment both to education and to gender equality, irrespective of their actual intention or commitment to the cause. It is in this way that the cultural capital of daughters' educational success gets converted into symbolic capital- through public recognition and societal prestige, even as patriarchal controls within the home remain intact. Such an instrumental use of education to increase social standing was evident in the case of Shehnaaz, the elder of two sisters, belonging to a conservative Muslim family from Eastern Uttar Pradesh.

Trophy daughters: Shehnaaz

Shehnaaz, 29, is an ex-investment banker, engineer and MBA graduate who was pursuing a PhD in women's sexual health and behaviour in the US when I spoke with her. Despite what her brilliant academic credentials seemed to suggest, Shehnaaz described a deeply ambivalent relationship between education and gender that she had seen growing up.

From a young age, Shehnaaz was made aware that being a daughter was not looked upon favourably in her family- a situation which worsened with the birth of her younger sister. Although Shehnaaz's parents supported both their daughters' education, it was made clear to both of them from the very beginning that "expenditure on daughters" was not the norm in their society, and they should both be thankful that their parents were willing to spend on their education at all. Shehnaaz candidly acknowledged that her parents' decision to enroll the sisters in good neighbourhood schools was a way for their family to fit into a new, metro city once they moved from a small town. As she explained:

> *"My parents came from a small town in UP, where daughters' education was considered a waste of money. Many of my cousins, who are still in my hometown, got married pretty early and never even thought of studying longer or building career…Our religion also had a role to play in this, for sure. My sister and I were reminded again and again that we should feel grateful that our parents were ready to invest in our education, given what others around in my hometown were doing…"*
>
> *"…I'm pretty sure that if we hadn't moved to Delhi, my parents wouldn't have bothered with putting us in good schools or investing heavily in our education. It was important*

for them to feel like they "fit in", and because everyone around us was sending their daughters to good schools, so did they. They didn't want to stand out…."

In households like Shehnaaz's, where discrimination otherwise remained entrenched, it was through careful image construction around support for daughters' education that families were able to make claims to a higher moral standing, providing them with an additional benefit over and above the gains to social status as committed parents interested in their children's education- a proof of their being "one with the times". Shehnaaz's engineering and MBA degrees as well as her finance career was a source of pride for her parents. Her subsequent decision to switch to a PhD, in a controversial, arts-based subject like sexual health was, however, extremely contentious. Even two years into her PhD, Shehnaaz had not fully disclosed the actual subject of her research to her parents; they only vaguely knew that she was working on "something" related to women and health. Yet, despite her parents' exasperation that she left a good, steady job and career path in India, the mere *fact* that their daughter was pursuing a PhD in the US was a source of prestige for her parents- one that they ensured relatives in the extended family were aware of.

How can we understand this selective pride and support that daughters like Shehnaaz received?

In her analysis of gender in elite legal and consulting firms in India, Swetha Ballakrishnen (2021) argues that in recent decades, much of the apparent gender parity seen in such high profile organisations emerges not from feminist *intent*, but is a result of structural factors that incidentally come together to "do gender differently". She calls this process one of "accidental feminism", while questioning the role of intention in setting progress narratives. Read through this lens, parental support for daughters' education may also reflect a form of "accidental"

feminism, that is driven less by a commitment to daughters' long-term autonomy, and more by conformity to changing social norms that now necessitate a certain degree of educational investment in daughters.

Daughters like Shehnaaz are what I call "trophy daughters", who are used as a status symbol by middle class parents not only to derive prestige from their accomplishments, but to use the "freedoms" that they have been granted as demonstrable proof of progressive ideals. This is why I argue that the prestige derived from a commitment to daughters' education remains *qualitatively different* from that gained from supporting sons. It is markedly gendered, precisely because it has the potential to transform parental support into a more morally charged form of source of social, cultural and symbolic capital.

Daughters' education as exceptional: the invocation of gratitude

What then, does this instrumentalisation of daughters' education mean for daughters themselves? How does the provision of educational opportunities refract the experience of daughterhood in middle-class homes?

This is where the important question of *gratitude*, discussed previously, comes in, acquiring renewed significance. Across families where parents were both overtly supportive and openly dismissive of daughters, I found that education was repeatedly framed as an exceptional, even fortuitous, boon rather than as an unquestioned right. Much like narratives surrounding daughters' birth, the provision of education was positioned as something that demandingly called for acknowledgment, specifically through a performance of good daughterhood and the repayment of emotional debts. Parental narratives of sacrifice, claims of exceptionalism, and

comparisons with less "progressive" community members, I found, converged to enforce these obligations, often with uneven and sometimes harmful consequences for daughters.

In Shehnaaz's case for instance, while she understood very well that her parents' decision to educate her was shaped by instrumental considerations, designed to increase her parents' own stature and promote their inclusion in the professional middle class category, it is important to note how she interpreted her parents' decision. For Shehnaaz, her parents' *intention* was less relevant when she focused on the material gains that she had received from a good education that they provided for her- one which she had not expected to receive in the first instance. A good school, an engineering degree, an MBA degree, a fellowship, and now a PhD had not only consolidated her parents' symbolic prestige in their new social world but had also enabled Shehnaaz to secure a professional future that many daughters around her had never been able to imagine. In thus comparing herself with her extended family and girls around her (something her parents reminded her of often), Shehnaaz had been able to view her parents' investment in her education not as a parental obligation fulfilled, but as *her good luck*.

This reframing played a crucial role in legitimizing the terms of the intergenerational contract between Shehnaaz and her parents, both affectively and materially. Although her family did not rely on her income for daily survival, Shehnaaz was told, from the day she secured her first job, that she would be expected to contribute a sizeable chunk of her salary to the household. As she explained, this expectation was less about *running* the household and more about reminding Shehnaaz of her *duty* towards her parents, and a way of thanking them. The returns her parents sought were therefore not primarily financial, but moral and emotional, expressed with gratitude, and as repayment for having "allowed" their daughters to study and work. By repeatedly reiterating that Shehnaaz and her sister were "exceptionally lucky," especially as

daughters, in having received the opportunities they did, and by reframing their professional success as an outcome of parental generosity rather than entitlement, her parents positioned themselves as morally entitled to a rightful share in their daughters' earnings.

Shehnaaz's narrative captures the messy, contradictory nature of parental investments in daughters' education, and the costs that can be extracted from them precisely because education is rendered an exception rather than a norm. While Shehnaaz's account was one of explicit, monetized form of give and take, framed in gendered terms, for most of my respondents, the understanding that they "owed" something to their parents was much more tacit, based entirely on a recognition of their good fortune in having encouraging and supportive parents, or a desire to prove themselves.

Many daughters spoke similarly of feeling emotionally indebted to their parents and expressed a deep desire to "give back" in ways that would make their parents proud. Academic success thus became tied not only to self-worth and validation, but to moral worth as a daughter. Having internalised that their access to higher education was exceptional, many of these young women invoked Hochschild's framework of gratitude, feeling doubly compelled to justify the opportunities they had received by striving relentlessly to prove their worth, often at significant personal cost.

In the next section, I extend this analysis to cases where parents were explicitly supportive of daughters' education, showing how this drive for validation remained deeply entangled with performances of good daughterhood even in the absence of overt constraint.

Becoming good daughters through academic excellence

Limited imaginations: Priyanka

Priyanka, a 34-year-old engineering and IIM MBA graduate started our conversation by telling me how she was a "fairly diligent child growing up", and "all she really wanted to do growing up was to perform well in her studies." For Priyanka, growing up, education was always the most defining aspect of her life, one she never stopped to question. As an academically bright child, her performance in school and college was a means through which she established a sense of self- "who she was", but also one which mediated the blissful relationship she shared with her parents. When we began our interview, she casually mentioned how "lucky" she was that despite belonging to a small town in U.P., her parents had not stopped her from having professional goals, in contrast with other girls in her extended family.

Attributing the focus on education in her household to her working parents, especially her father, Priyanka also spoke at length to me about how she was an "ideal child" who was brought up in a world where the "only education mattered". That she was expected to "top" (stand first in) her class every year, no matter what, was a given, an expectation that she found neither "weird" nor "excessive". This was also Priyanka's way of "giving back" to her parents, and maximizing the prestige they derived from her accomplishments became her motivating factor to do well in school and college.

> *"I always wanted to do it for my parents, to show them how good I could be. Especially my father. My only question was, what can I do to make them prouder of me? And that was typically tied to my academics and my performance in school and college."*

In fact, she asserted that she never questioned the obsessive importance she associated with education as a child, unconsciously shaping her life well into her twenties and dictating her life decisions for many years after. Once she learnt that education was the key metric through which both her family and its wider social world evaluated her, Priyanka's life became oriented toward becoming the girl others would hold up as a "standard" to emulate. Education offered her not only parental approval, but also social capital, in the form of respect, admiration, and moral recognition. As a teenager, this became entangled with a keen awareness of gendered surveillance:

> *"When I entered my teenage, I realised all these aunts and uncles used to gossip about the girls in the extended family, making snarky statements about who was wearing what types of clothes, who was talking to boys, and who was cycling, roaming around here and there (ghoomna-ghaamna) … I just decided that I never want to be that girl [spoken of like this]. I wanted to be the girl where they say, 'look at her' (usse dekho), in admiration and as a model of good values… I wanted a certain social standing, which I got when I was celebrated every time for standing first in class…I was always the 'good girl'."*

Priyanka's life was thus dictated by a fierce motivation to perform well in school and to "stand out" as a "model daughter". This conflation, of being a *good student* with *good daughter* is important to understand how modern middle-class daughters like Priyanka think about educational opportunities. For many of them, the pursuit of being a "good girl" or "good daughter" blended almost unnoticeably with that of a "good student", as a means of proving self- worth or forming a deeper connection with parents, in a bid to gain their validation- even

when it came at the cost of lost dreams, troubled mental or physical health, and sometimes without even a realisation that any of these involved a sacrifice.

In Priyanka's case, the moral economy of education remained largely unquestioned, and she remained what Ahmed (2010) refers to as a "happy object"- for whom happiness and social value was linked with the pursuit of what was "good, right and respectable". The turning point in her life came when she turned 24, with the sudden passing away of her father. By this time, Priyanka had completed her schooling, moved to Delhi for engineering, finished her MBA at a top-tier IIM, and entered the advertising industry with a handsome salary package. She had followed the recognized trajectory of middle-class success, and her parents "couldn't have been prouder".

However, it was only after her father passed away that Priyanka questioned for the first time whether she was actually living a life of her own choosing at all. She had been so busy trying to impress her parents, especially her father, wanting to return the favour he had done by reposing his faith in her and investing in her education, that she had never stopped to think about her own dreams and desires. For the first time, Priyanka acknowledged, even to herself, that she had never desired a corporate career at all. Soon after, she pivoted towards stand-up comedy, taking up part-time gigs until she felt confident enough to quit her career altogether.

Today, Priyanka is a successful artiste, passionate about her career and earning more than she ever did in her corporate job. But she confesses that she could never have "dreamed" of being where she was, had her father still been alive. It was his death, she admits, which even gave her the courage to think about what she really wanted to do. Her mother, she claims, was "much more pliable". But had her father been alive today, Priyanka claims, she is sure she would be

living her older, inevitable life- likely married and with kids. Once she successfully broke out of her mould of being the "good daughter", she felt free to challenge other conventions as well- doing so with a sense of relief and happiness, rather than loss.

What was striking in our conversation was that despite her realisation that the strength to choose her current path had to do with her father's death, Priyanka didn't see her life choices as reflecting any kind of "sacrifice". When I suggested that becoming a "good daughter" through relentless academic conformity might have entailed loss, she seemed momentarily astounded by the idea- she had never even allowed herself to think in those terms. If she had not *dreamt* of another life, she asked, could it really be called a sacrifice?

This dissonance- between retrospective recognition and continued refusal of the language of sacrifice, was a frequent feature across my interviews. Many young women would become defensive, insisting that their choices to do as their parents pleased were agentive, even a reflection of their higher moral standards. For some, this took the form of pride, while for others, a recognition that it was part of a barter- "bargaining", as such, with patriarchy (Kandiyoti 1988).

In each case, however, becoming a good daughter through academic excellence had its associated costs to be paid, mostly through a loss of control over the direction daughters' lives *could* take when it came to education. Chief among these were restrictions on travelling to different cities or states for pursuing education, choosing disciplines that were considered "respectable", and ceding control to strict surveillance in exchange for the freedom to pursue education. However, these were frequently normalised as a "small price to pay", enabling the

justification of gendered limits that dictated when, where and what daughters could study. Anjali's case is instructive in this regard.

Anjali: Legitimizing control

Anjali, a 24-year-old B.Tech. graduate, described her father as the architect of her educational life, who constantly pushed her to strive for better as she worked her way up from engineering to a PhD in IIT Delhi. At the time of our first interview, Anjali discussed that very early on, she had blindly and voluntarily ceded "complete control" to her father to design her professional life as he saw fit. She spoke both about the pressure she felt, and the desire not to complain about it in the same breath:

> *"I **did** feel a lot of pressure to do well. But I can't complain about it. I gave him permission to design my life and everything. I told him to do it for me please, because I will be relieved of my own tensions. My brother is not like that, but I was, but I was very happy to do it then."*

Anjali's father is a respected professor in Delhi University, and she said she trusted him in making the right decisions for her because she simply didn't *know* any better than he possibly could. For her father, moulding his daughter's career was a way of ensuring that she could have the opportunities and guidance that he himself did not receive as a student. Today, thanks to his benevolent guidance, Anjali is pursuing a doctorate from one of the best technology institutes in Delhi, and is set on a path to a well-settled career in academia- a trajectory she acknowledged she might never have imagined independently.

However, even as she expressed gratitude towards her father for his desire to carve her career trajectory and his eagerness to see her growth, Anjali shared how this support came along with a strict enforcement of things she was expected to give up. At the same time as her father obsessed over her coaching, entrances, admissions, college selections and PhD applications, purportedly with the aim of fashioning the "best possible" professional life for her, he routinely rejected colleges where she was shortlisted for reasons such as location "suitability" and "culture"- which were code for how respectable any institute and Anjali's attendance there would look to *others* around them. Any college, discipline or pursuit that had a "bad rep" were thus not a part of the equation.

Further, it was a given that Anjali would stay only in Delhi while she pursued her B.Tech. and PhD, even if this meant she had to give up more lucrative streams and career opportunities in other, more prestigious colleges. She was also expected to stay at home and commute every day to college with a driver in her father's car, so colleges too far away or those that mandated residence on campus were also not considered. When she joined her college, her parents also discussed guidelines of expected behaviour, affirming that they "trusted her to never let them down". This of course meant no serious dating or participating in any college activities that could bring disrepute to the family. Anjali had a strict curfew, and any meetings with boys were only to be under strict supervision with prior approval.

As Anjali's case showed, support for her educational pursuits, while wholehearted, was mediated severely by concerns of respectability and gendered suitability-an envelope of moral conduct that required no explicit negotiation.

When I was discussing the restrictions that were imposed on her, Anjali insisted that they were "annoying but understandable", and "for her own good". She maintained that she herself had not wanted to live outside her home and was well aware that Delhi as a city was unsafe, so her parents' concerns were legitimate and well-intended. Anjali kept repeating, almost apologetically, that she was not *really complaining* about the fact that her father was pushing her career ahead, while admitting with some guilt that the degree of control and investment her father showed was sometimes stifling. Nonetheless, despite her curtailed life, from home to college and back, in a chauffeured car, with supervised dates and a curfew, she felt that it was a "small sacrifice" given everything her parents had done for her. Although she had tried to fight, unsuccessfully, for relaxation of some of the rules, she had been convinced by her parents that they were justified, especially in light of everything she *had* been allowed. Sticking to what she believed were acceptable codes of conduct and honour expected from a daughter was the "least" she could do for her parents, even when they had not *asked* her.

That concerns of respectability impose restrictions on the kinds of educational opportunities daughters are afforded is not new information. Scholars working at the intersection of gender, class and education in India have written extensively about how such imaginaries are used to constrain women (Gilbertson 2017; Hebbar 2018; Krishnan 2018; Twamley and Sidharth 2019). However, what was new in the way that these discussions were being framed by the women I spoke with was their desire to conform to these restrictions as a part of being *good daughters*, justifying their restrictions as emanating from their own best interests and their voluntary pursuit of good daughterhood. The newness of the contradiction faced by these women was that rather than being *imposed* as gendered limitations, these boundaries were often levied with the willing participation of daughters themselves, who saw their parents as their friends rather than foes in their educational pursuits, and the choices they made as emanating

from their own sense of obligation. Anjali's case reveals how educational support is not merely accompanied by control but legitimated through daughters' affective participation in it.

This is also why questioning intentions of parents who had sacrificed so much to help them achieve their goals came with much guilt and confusion on the part of the daughters, when it did take place. In a vulnerable moment during a conversation many months later, Anjali wondered out loud whether educating daughters had become a prestige issue for parents, less about daughters themselves and more about parents: *"It's great that educating daughters has become important today, and parents are supporting their daughters' dreams, but sometimes I think it is not for the right reasons, maybe?"*

While Anjali's questioning of her parents' motives and the impact of their choices for her was hesitant and cautious, perhaps owing to a sense of contravening "feeling rules" (Hochschild 1979), this was not the case for all daughters I spoke with. Many of my respondents were keenly aware of the immense pressures placed on them, some openly rued the paths they had chosen in their pursuit of good daughterhood, while others rejected them altogether. They wondered how different their futures, and even they themselves might have been, if they had felt less obligated to conform. The stories of the daughters shared below shed light on the consequences of such emotionally influenced choices to pursue respectable paths on their sense of self, with varying emotional and material costs.

The cost of seeking validation: Arpita

Arpita, 28, previously a medical student at AIIMS and now a doctor, reflected on her childhood with a modicum of sadness, speaking of how education was the only link she had with her

parents as she grew up, with very little space for discussions on anything else. Her parents both being celebrated doctors, she found herself feeling "naturally expected" to follow in their footsteps from the time she was six. Through most of her childhood, academic success became Arpita's primary way of proving her worth and sustaining a "bond" with her parents.

While she was able to crack the intensely competitive MBBS exams after failing them once and taking a "drop year", she felt that she had "lost herself" somewhere in the pursuit of chasing her parents' dream, one she thinks was never really her own. The toll of her initial failure, followed by years of relentless examination cycles, competition, and pressure took a devastating toll on her mental health. Her chronic stress started triggering repeated seizures and anxiety attacks, requiring multiple hospitalizations over the years and a formal diagnosis of a stress-linked epilepsy condition.

Despite these issues, the possibility of leaving medicine felt unthinkable to Arpita. Now that she had chosen this path, there did not seem to be any way "out" other than giving up everything- a choice she was not prepared to make, for fear of becoming a "disgrace" to the family and proving other people's beliefs that women can't "have it all". Her gender had become her debility, because her worth as a daughter had become inseparable from her professional success as a doctor.

In a subsequent conversation reflecting on her journey, she texted me the following ruminations:

"*Medicine is toxic. I should never have chosen it. It sounds good, and yes it gets you respectability, and I've done "well" with good "brands" attached to my name, but at an unbearable personal cost, in terms of my happiness and mental health…*

…It requires a certain level of gumption to be my true self (bold, brutally honest, critical of many things - A thinking feeling human being true to her roots), which I have lost because of just how drained and all over the place I've been [because of my profession]. I've chosen the easy way and just turned off my mind for sometime, and remembering that makes me really sad. I wish I had never done this."

Arpita's story shows how academic excellence, when tightly bound to filial validation, can become a moral trap- one that forecloses exit even when the costs to the self become unbearable.

When control turns violent: Anukriti

For Anukriti, 30, an only daughter from a middle-middle class family who is now an academic, the excessive control her father wanted to exercise on her life choices, steering her towards a "respectable" profession had the exact opposite effect to that of Arpita and Anjali.

Growing up, Anukriti shared, she was actually very interested in Science and Math as subjects, and very much *wanted* to become an engineer, exactly like her father. However, her father, who was responsible for teaching her these subjects at home, was a strict disciplinarian. He would not stand her being tardy or incompetent in math and would get extremely angry at the smallest mistakes. Regularly being made to stay up till late at night to solve her problem sets,

Anukriti's interest turned into a fear of the subject. She felt immense pressure to always be correct, knowing also that her parents had sacrificed a lot to facilitate her education.

In our chat, Anukriti recounted an incident that changed the course of her life. While she was a teenager prepping for her grade eight final examinations, her father was quizzing her about some math questions that she couldn't answer properly, even though he had taught them to her the previous night. In his impatient rage, her father beat her up, slapping her so hard across her face that the teenaged Anukriti peed on herself and wet the bed. Her mother had to intervene.

Years later, Anukriti finds this incident difficult to recount, admitting that it left her scarred for life. From that day on, she decided she would not pursue mathematics or become an engineer, nor would she share anything about what she was studying with her parents- "I just stopped. Everything." Most of her life choices thereafter, at least in academics, became an act of rebellion, an outlet for her rage, displaying a detest for the path her father had chosen for her.

> *"Anything my dad used to tell me, anything he suggested, I would do the opposite. Or I would just stop wanting to do it. Whatever it was…Yeah, I feel like if that incident had not happened, in all likelihood I would have actually ended up studying science only, probably become an engineer like my dad and I had wanted."*

Anukriti is a PhD holder today, with a degree in Journalism, and teaches Media Studies at a reputed university abroad. Although this achievement has brought her approval from her parents, Anukriti often reflects on how differently her life could have been unfolded if her father had not instilled in her such fear of something she had in fact loved. She doesn't "resent" her father's obsessive need to shape her career back in the day, but has never spoken up about

how his actions impacted her life course. She too, feels like she owes a lot to her parents, even if their actions completely altered her dreams for life.

Anukriti's case shows how the desire to have trophy daughters, an obsession with academic excellence can backfire tremendously- displacing aspiration with revolt, while leaving affective debts intact.

While for Anukriti, the gratitude for her upbringing exceeded her resentment against her father's controlling actions, in the case of Suhani, it led to a bigger rupture and greater resentment, altering her relationship with parents and almost wrecking her marriage. Hers is the final story of this section.

The harms of gender-neutrality: Suhani

A 34-year-old high-profile lawyer and mother of one, Suhani offered a different but equally revealing configuration of harm, speaking of the consequences of a purported "gender-blindness" in her parents' ambitions for their daughter. Suhani shared how growing up, she had initially felt really grateful that gender roles were reversed in her house, at least in the case of education. As the elder child and more academically gifted sibling in her family, Suhani claimed that she was the quintessential "*Sharmaji ka Ladka*" in her home- the obedient, diligent one was expected to model good behaviour. Her parents, especially father, always had extremely high expectations from her, since she was the academically proficient child at home. While her brother was allowed to pursue a career in music with little to no future career plans, *she* was always told that *she* was the one who was supposed to be responsible for bringing

name and fame to the family. For years, Suhani fulfilled this duty through an exemplary educational and professional trajectory.

However, at 29, Suhani's decision to marry her boyfriend and subsequently to continue an unplanned pregnancy early in her marriage was met with much dismay, because it meant that she might not be able to further her education or continue working for some time. Her decision to prioritize gendered roles- as a woman, wife, and mother was rebuked by her parents, who felt that they would have "nothing to show" for their well-educated daughter if she decided to give up her legal practice and sit at home nursing a baby. The very idea that she may not *wish* to pursue a demanding legal career endlessly was then seen as diminishing *their* prestige, and Suhani spoke of the immense pressure she faced from her parents to at least *do something,* pick up a degree or join academia while she was waiting to give birth.

Suhani was so acutely wary of disappointing her parents that she sat for competitive entrance examinations while she was eight months pregnant, and again almost immediately after giving birth- even when she herself did not want to. The pressure of parental aspirations finally culminated in a showdown when a few months after her child's birth, she decided to take some time off work and her parents disapproved strongly.

> "*My husband, he was so supportive- he was ready to do everything to ensure that I was comfortable, but my parents were not! It was not a question of money either; we were fairly well off. But I needed emotional support to be able to weather the disappointment in my parents' eyes when I decided to be a stay-at-home mother for a few years…*

> *...Law is not an easy profession, and the hours I was working were crazy. But it was so difficult to explain to my parents why I couldn't do it, especially when they would keep sending me stories of have-it-all successful women and mothers on WhatsApp, asking me why I was finding it so difficult when women in the rest of the world were managing just fine juggling home and careers! I felt incompetent and weak….My mother told me I didn't respect the opportunities I had been given. She reminded me that she had not raised me to be dependent on another person, or someone who just "gave up" without trying. For many months, I couldn't adjust to the idea that I didn't earn, and refused to see my husband's money as "ours". It nearly wrecked my marriage."*

It was only after many months of therapy and counselling post childbirth that Suhani was able to understand how the weight of expectations had ruined her mental health and even put a strain on her marriage, leading her to start taking antidepressant medications. She has a somewhat strained and distant relationship with her parents now, and has attempted to draw boundaries in life, even though their involvement in her life has not ceased. Even as we were conducting the interview, Suhani showed me text messages from her father suggesting options for her career switch, since she is now thinking of moving to academia, hoping that it allows her to manage her life as a working mother better. She told me she doesn't really want to, but feels like a failure every time she meets her parents and has nothing to say about her return to education or work - at least this will give them *something*.

*

Across these cases, academic excellence emerges as a central instrument through which good daughterhood is produced, disciplined, contested, and lived. Whether driven by gratitude,

validation, fear, rebellion, or precarity, daughters' educational trajectories become moral projects- sites where parental ambition, social respectability, and gendered obligation converge. Yet these trajectories exact heavy psychic, relational, and existential costs- stifled autonomy, mental distress, truncated selfhood, familial rupture, and hyper-disciplining of the self.

Furthermore, at first glance, it might appear that as long as these trophy daughters pursued the "right kind" of respectable education, and conformed to gendered norms while doing so, the pursuit of educational and professional goals would be linearly corelated with a performance of good daughterhood- the more accomplished the daughters, the more the prestige there would exist to be accrued from them and their achievements. However, this was not exactly the case, either.

In the next and final section of this chapter, I discuss how education and ambition themselves become a site of conflict between parents and daughters, especially when the pursuit of success or passion threatens to convene other, more important gendered norms daughters are expected to adhere to. This leads to what I call the "paradox of educated daughters", who are expected to follow their dreams, but only within prescribed limits.

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Part Three: Paradoxes

Following my passion: the curious absence of daughters' ambitions and money-talk

For all the incessant conversation around educational accomplishments that was a routine part of my interviews both with young women and their parents, one of the things that became conspicuous by its glaring absence was any actual mention of *money*. Although all my respondents spoke at length about their educational dreams- their degrees, disciplines, institutions, and effort, they rarely articulated concrete *financial* aspirations. Whether in terms of desired incomes, long-term economic goals, or even imagined professional trajectories and associated monetary ambitions, any *real reflection* on where they would like to see themselves *after* completing their education seemed largely absent from our discussions. Given that money is a sensitive subject for most people, this reticence is somewhat understandable. However, as my sample of interviewees consisted of highly educated, professionally qualified women, the near-total absence of money-talk seemed to suggest a deeper moral economy at work.

One of my respondents, Brinda, 21, one of two sisters (who had been outspoken about the importance of education in her home) characterised the awkwardness with discussing money as part of a middle-class ethos:

> *"I guess in middle classes, there is a weird awkwardness about money conversations. That is, for sure, a thing I've noticed… that talking about how much money somebody earns is not okay… we always make assumptions based on the lifestyle, that's all.. In terms of goals what is considered important is having* ***enough*** *money- being able to afford medical care or health care, living expenses. But not more than that…We are*

also made to understand the value of money like this. Like it's bad if you don't have money. But if you ***have*** *[a lot of] money, that's also bad. If you want more money, that's also bad. I grew up thinking that wanting money is bad. Till I started looking things about financial literacy on my own on the internet [in my twenties], I always thought it was unacceptable to* ***think*** *about money…"*

Although Brinda's characterization of the pursuit of money as an immoral choice was in line with the way most of my respondents expressed discomfort with the subject of money, I began wondering whether this hesitation or classed etiquette around money had anything to do with their gender, and their conditioning as daughters.

Over the course of many such discussions, I realised that while the need for *some* financial independence was mentioned repeatedly in my conversations by young women, with *a certain minimum amount* of money surfacing repeatedly as a *necessary precondition* both for gaining self-respect and individual fulfillment, ambition beyond this minimum threshold elicited visible discomfort and a sense of shame, as a kind of 'moral excess' that was best avoided. The following section explores the gendered aspect of these emotions.

The classed and gendered hierarchy of ambitions

In her seminal work on the intersection between gender, class, and education, sociologist Diane Reay (2004, 2019) has written extensively about how children's and parents' educational and career aspirations are deeply shaped by, as well as constrained by their social class positions. Discussing the case of England, Reay suggests that while middle-class families have both higher ambitions for their children as well as the resources to pursue those ambitions, in the

case of working-class families, ambitious hopes are often disconnected from social realities, as they clash with a lack of institutional support, financial insecurity and absence of adequate cultural capital.

More importantly, discussing the emotionally embedded, relational aspects of ambitions, Reay suggests that for working class children, ambitions are intricately tied up with questions of family loyalty, care obligations and anxieties about fitting in, which lends an *emotional character* to ambition itself. Girls, in particular, Reay notes, especially those from working class backgrounds, carry heavy burdens of ambitions that are framed, and even circumscribed by concerns of care, respectability and responsibility, rather than being motivated by a desire for individual self-realization, as is the case for women from middle class backgrounds. This, for Reay, reflects *the classed and gendered hierarchy of ambition* (Reay 1998).

Gendered freedoms: Financial success versus security in the Indian context

While Reay's work concerned itself with a very specific context of 1990s and early 2000s England, the theorization of classed ambitions and collective familial goals for working class children offers a useful lens to understand the Indian context as well. As scholars like Kaur (2019) point out, an ethic of "jointness" or "family collectivism", in which primacy of shared family interests informs the duties and obligations of individual members, is a key characteristic of *middle-class* family life in India. Mukherjee and Kibria's (2024) study analysing comparative educational expenditure between siblings in middle-class Indian homes similarly found that while monetary investments between sons and daughters may be equal, family cultures of collectivism, age and gender hierarchies significantly shaped distribution of resources, expectations and pressures between children. Within Indian families, at the same

time as sons were pressured in the direction of prestigious careers (with the assumption that they would assume monetary responsibility for family elders in the future), the authors found that daughters were provided relatively more "freedoms" to pursue their passions and interests, to study subjects of their own choosing, instead of being pressured to choose more economically lucrative options. Inevitably then, gendered concerns in these early decisions can shape the differential future trajectories that daughters took up viz sons.

In line with such arguments, in my interviews, I too found gendered concerns of care, responsibility and respectability playing an important role in tempering daughters' ambitions- the way they thought about money, career goals, the jobs they chose and how they defined a fulfilling life in the future. Early on, despite receiving equitable investments in their education from parents, sons were taught to internalize financial *success* as a goal, whereas for daughters, the paradigm of financial *security* seemed to overwhelmingly mediate how they spoke and thought of money. Although they repeatedly pointed out that it was important to have *some* money of their own- enough to fulfill their own needs and not be dependent, this was spoken of in terms of wanting to be and do *something,* as opposed to *nothing* that might have otherwise been a point of reference.

Such ideas were further compounded by prevailing societal norms that continue to frown upon daughters contributing monetarily to the financial security of the house (unless in exceptional instances of need), which further delinked the choice of their disciplines and professions from oversized economic returns. Daughters would regularly speak about "never feeling any pressure" to choose disciplines which would be *monetarily* rewarding, or to constrain themselves by a return-on-investment paradigm. While some saw the freedom to "study whatever they wanted", to uninhibitedly "pursue their passions" as a reflection of their class

status, or a signal of their family's progressive outlook (even insisting that their being daughters had nothing to do with it) others would frankly admit that these privileges and freedoms were intricately tied with their gender.

As Brinda herself admitted, as girls, striving for money was something they were never taught:

> *"We never had a formal conversation in our house about money. We (my sister and I) were always told to do well in our studies, the rest would work itself out. The expectation was only to do well. Now that I think of it, perhaps it was because we were girls… There was a sense of complacency, where we were taught to value money but not strive for it…"*

A natural consequence of this early distinction was that the unequivocal support that daughters received from parents for their educational pursuits was often in sharp contrast to the discouragement that they often faced when wanting to pursue anything ambitious, choosing a career that was not respectable, or a life path that contravened other gendered expectations. The stories that follow bring out this disparity more clearly.

Optional careers: Durga

Durga, the 28-year-old High Court lawyer mentioned earlier, described her disappointment at her career being viewed as optional or disposable by the same parents who had been so proud of her educational achievements. Although growing up, her parents had constantly reiterated the importance of *education*, she had known that having a *career* was fairly "optional" for her, something that was presented to her as a matter of *choice.* Her brother, on the other hand, was expected to bear the weight of financial responsibility in the home.

"Honestly, to tell you the truth, most of the pressure to think about money and career fell on my brother. He took the science stream, even though he was interested in art. He tried engineering too, but quit it midway, which my parents were really upset about. But for me, I never felt it. Maybe because I'm a girl, and then I became a lawyer, they thought, if she earns, well enough, if she doesn't, that's fine too…

…Nobody would have batted an eyelid if I wanted to quit, especially after marriage, because as a daughter, I had already achieved the good thing- I had done well in studies. After this, apparently because I didn't have to support anyone- my father, husband, brother, or anyone else monetarily, they wouldn't care if I quit my job and sat at home painting or singing, if I wanted to. It wasn't seen as important."

Interestingly, the fact that Durga *did* eventually choose to pursue her career as a lawyer after her marriage, for which she relocated with her husband from a smaller town (where her in-laws lived) became a cause of conflict for her parents. They characterised Durga's decision to uproot her *husband's* job to find better opportunities for *herself* in Delhi as selfish ambition, and were deeply disappointed that she would not live with her in-laws anymore. The fact that her husband would be dependent on *her* income for some time as they settled in Delhi was an even bigger source of despair, as it was seen as upsetting gendered boundaries in her marital home. Although the couple had mutually decided that a move to the city would eventually benefit them both, the discomfort with Durga's ambition was a cause of concern not for her in-laws but for her *own* parents, who worried that they had taught their daughter to prioritize the "wrong" things in life.

While in Durga's case the decision to pursue a career became a problem because it conflicted with her presumed marital responsibilities, this was not the only instance in which a daughter's professional success was deemed unacceptable. Anusha's case presented a starker version of this conflict, where the very choices her parents had coerced her into for the sake of financial security, become a source of tension in her natal family, as a result of her unexpected success.

Too much ambition, too much money: Anusha

Anusha is a successful mechanical engineer from IIT Delhi, who went on to pursue an MBA at Harvard Business school, earned sizeable income in her subsequent jobs, and is now a successful tech entrepreneur. Despite her prolific academic and professional success, which won her much acclaim from her parents, Anusha told me how her achievements became a bone of contention in her family once she started her job, especially when her own earnings significantly outsized those of her father.

Instead of feeling happy, she felt guilty and compelled to minimize *her* success so as to not hurt *his* feelings:

> *"It was weird when I started earning. I think in some ways, you're taught to underplay your capacity as a woman from a young age. It was ironic because my dad had been a government employee all his life, in a secure job, but because I was in the private sector, at the age of 25-26, I was making more money than my dad had ever made, or was making even at age 60. And for the longest time, I was very careful about not highlighting that at home…*

... It was only when we started having a lot of acrimony over my marriage question, with my dad telling me I hadn't seen the world and being condescending, that I ever spoke up and said, you know what, I've actually more of the world than you have. I've moved countries, I've worked in five nations, I'm financially independent, and I've paid off more than a crore in educational loans. Just because I don't say it doesn't mean you have the right to undermine me."

For Anusha, the money she earned became a shield, to protect herself and to regain control in a situation where she was feeling quite helpless in the face of familial pressure. However, the fact that she, as a woman (much like her own, homemaker mother), was not expected to "talk money" meant that declaring her own financial success in front of her parents was seen as a disgraceful act, one which hugely complicated her own relationship with money for many years. She struggled to spend money on herself, to "own her success" or talk about it, since she felt guilty and transgressive while doing so.

It was ironic, as Anusha told me, that she had actually been pushed into the field of engineering by her parents as opposed to the arts or literature that she was actually interested in *so that* she could earn money in the future and be financially secure. Anusha was also one of the few respondents I spoke with, who had introduced herself by detailing her love for history, sociology, anthropology, literature and classical dance, identifying herself as a "creative" person in her introduction. However, when it came to deciding what she should "do" in life, and who she could "be", Anusha was categorically denied the opportunity to build a future in the arts, because she was considered academically "bright" and therefore *had* to pursue engineering. She had a largely negative experience during her engineering years at IIT in a toxic male environment that she felt robbed her of her personhood. A combination of fear,

anxiety about the future and constant coaxing from her parents, she believed, conditioned her to always pick the "safe option" in life, to blindly "follow the trail" and not take risks. Her eventual success was also linked with this impulse.

However, paradoxically, the fact that she was now "too successful" meant that Anusha felt compelled to minimize her ambitions so as to not disturb a delicate performance of respectable femininity or good daughterhood within her home. She described her situation as being caught between "a rock and a hard place"- a series of compulsions that forced her on a path she did not want, to a place where she was not allowed to celebrate her own success.

Too little money: Varshali

Despite what Anusha's story seemed to suggest, the choice of a suitable career, limited ambitions and a simple pursuit of "passion" was not a guarantee of good daughterhood either. In contrast to the freedom to *study* what they liked, daughters choosing to *work* in an environment that paid "too little" was often considered *more* demeaning than having no job at all.

This was especially the case for daughters who came from slightly more affluent or business backgrounds, for whom *working* daughters were in the first instance a source of shame. In her work on urban, elite Aggarwal families, Ujithra Ponniah (2017) makes the argument that formal jobs are seen as unsuitable for women in such families, since they undermine the image of the family's prosperity. Instead, women, as central agents in reproducing caste, kinship and business networks are encouraged to engage in roles that are an extension of their domestic and

social position (such as charity or community work) that can reinforce their caste-class status, while remaining outside the realm of transactional or market-oriented work.

Varshali, 25, a sociology postgraduate from Delhi School of Economics, shared her story of her family being extremely unhappy that she was working for very little money in a job she enjoyed. Varshali belongs to an affluent Baniya family, which has been residing in Gurgaon for many years, where her father and brother have a flourishing business of their own. After completing her degree the previous year, Varshali had started working as a researcher in a development sector organization in Delhi, for a salary of 15-20,000 rupees. Although Varshali was quite happy with her work and enjoyed the research she was doing, she was well aware that her job was a source of shame for her parents, who were unable to fathom that their educated daughter was working for someone else for "such little money".

Varshali recounted a caustic remark from her elder brother that eventually made her quit her job, in the pursuit of further education, or an alternate career that would be considered more suitable. In a heated conversation, her brother had sarcastically reminded her that the *dehadi-walas* (perjorative for day labourers) in his factory earned more than she did, with all her education. If this pittance was all she was worth (*yahi aukaat hai agar tumhari)*, he told her, she might be better off doing manual labour in his factory- he could pay her more money!

A few months after this conversation, Varshali told me she had quit her job and was thinking of enrolling for a three-year degree in law. In the interim, her parents had started looking for prospective grooms in their community. Varshali's father had also spoken to a friend who had a law firm, where Varshali could eventually find a place to do pro-bono work after her degree, if she still wanted to work, pending her future in-laws and husband's approval.

Varshali's story illuminates the lower bound of acceptability when it comes to daughters pursuing their passion, exposing how daughters' earnings, already considered a superfluous indulgence, are evaluated not on economic terms, but through their ability to reproduce classed respectability. Any perceived threat to this critical function is immediately suppressed through a combination of guilt and shame, or an invocation of the obligations that good daughters owe their parents.

*

Neither dependent nor truly independent

The stories shared in this section bring to light an important nuance in the celebration of educational accomplishments for daughters in middle class families. While daughters' educational pursuits were, indeed, a source of symbolic capital and prestige within natal homes, it became clear that this was not necessarily the case with respect to *professional* goals, which were always expected to be subservient to other gendered, domestic roles daughters were supposed to follow. The moral prestige of education lay only in its symbolic premise, and not in the actual enabling of daughters to prioritize their own advancement by relying on it, especially when it came to the question of money.

As another one of my respondents very insightfully pointed out, there was a subtle yet extremely significant difference between bringing up daughters who would not be *dependent,* versus celebrating *truly independent daughters.* Although most of these daughters were regularly told the importance of money, the significance of not being dependent on other men in the future, and of having the *potential* to stand on their own two feet by their parents, they

were being prepared for the *worst-case* scenario, rather than being taught to endeavor for more, for themselves. Good daughterhood in the case of employment meant having the *potential* to work, basis prestigious educational qualifications, but not necessarily its *actual practice*, especially if this meant an assertion of too much independence or non-conformity to gendered roles.

Unsurprisingly, this meant that daughters were simultaneously being taught to want money, but not too much; to have jobs, but not careers; to harbour aspirations, but also be "flexible" (Vijayakumar 2013) in having them, so as to maintain the continuity of gendered norms. That the sacrifice of flourishing careers at the altar of these concerns, was very much a *part* of the practice of good daughterhood brings to light the inherent contradictions that these "modern daughters" contended with on a daily basis, where on the one hand, they were being prepared to succeed, celebrated for their accomplishments, and on the other, being chastised for being successful and wanting more for themselves.

The paradox of education: Too much exposure, too much awareness

It is through attention to these complicated stories that one can truly understand the paradox that educated daughters represented within middle class families. Routinely, I would hear daughters sharing stories of how parents would joke that they had "made a mistake" in educating their daughters too much, since now they seemed to have "a mind of their own". "*Zyaada padha likha ke galti kar di*" was often repeated humorously within families, to make point out the perils of too much education, since it could just as easily "corrupt brains" as it could help them grow. Simultaneously, I would speak with daughters who would discuss how their education had "broadened their horizons", taught them to see the world with new eyes,

and suffused an awareness of moral wrongs, of discrimination, of social evils that they otherwise might have remained oblivious to. As one of them shared:

> *"Reading sociology opened my mind to things I would never have seen earlier. I started thinking about my gender in new ways, how it affected my life in every little thing. It was like wearing a new set of glasses- I couldn't unsee it"*

This awareness, however, lay at the heart of the paradox that educated daughters in these families represented. The right to be educated, the support for increasingly prestigious degrees and a well-rounded education, often in cities and even countries far away from the places where they grew up meant that as a social field (Bourdieu 1977), education provided daughters with access not only to new ideas, ways of thinking and relating with others around them, but also exposure to new ways of *being*. This was facilitated not only through the institutional structures and curriculum they had access to, but also through living in new cities, exposure to new forms of art and culture, and new scripts of gender relations they were exposed to in places of learning and work.

In crossing these different fields, however, from private to public, from educational institutions to the labour market, their gendered habitus was refracted (McNay 1999a) in ways that were often at odds with the conditioning that they grew up with. They began thinking, questioning and complaining against perceived injustices within the family and outside, which regularly put them at odds with the expectations that they had grown up with. However, even as they felt immense gratitude and love for the support they had received, especially for their educational goals, on perceiving the limits to their support and realizing their gendered limitations,

daughters would be faced with much confusion, angst and even resentment about who they were expected to be.

As Rimjhim, (one of the few respondents who had been very vocal in acknowledging her experience of discrimination from a young age) asserted, the blame lay in the very exposure to the education that she had received. She admitted candidly that she grew up in a small hill town where a long array of traditional, sexist beliefs about girls were par for the course, and if she had stayed there, she would probably never have questioned them and accepted such ideas as "normal". However, her parents' *insistence* that she too study in a good convent, travel to Delhi for her graduation and expose herself to a new environment changed her thinking drastically. Today, she is angry with her parents for forcing her to acquiesce to regressive views about daughters when the very education they wished for her has taught her better. Hers is a form of moral anger (Kulkarni 2024; Srinivasan 2018), rooted in a perceived sense of unfairness:

> *"They shouldn't have educated me if they didn't want me to think for myself. If I had remained illiterate, living like a frog in the well in a small village in the hills, I would have perhaps found their sexist ideas easier to digest. But I can't be blamed for rebelling now. Maybe if all they wanted was an "ideal daughter" they should have never let me leave, never shown me books, never let me see the world. Perhaps they would have been happier then, and so would I."*

Rimjhim's defiance captures the paradox education produces precisely- the independence and critical voice that undermine good daughterhood. The very support that elevates daughters as symbols of progress also equips them with the tools to question, resist, and rebel. However, the gratitude associated with, and emotional predicament of educational provision for daughters

being viewed as exceptional or fortuitous, also makes it that much harder for daughters to raise their voice against any legitimate grievances they may have. The limits of "too much" education expose the gendered boundaries, and the tightrope daughters are expected to walk as they remain simultaneously grateful and defiant, learning to want, but within limits.

Taken together, these accounts show that education is not a neutral social good, but an affective formation deeply entangled with good daughterhood. Academic success produces prestige, but it also binds daughters through gratitude, discipline, and indebtedness, while simultaneously foreclosing ambitions that might unsettle patriarchal bargains or gendered hierarchies. Education thus becomes both gift and constraint- celebrated as the highest form of support, but always conditional, always tethered to the affective demands of good daughterhood- revealing the inherent contradictions of modern daughterhood.

The next chapter extends this argument through the domain of marriage, where these conditional freedoms confront their sharpest limit, revealing the pursuit of educational or professional goals as an even bigger liability. It is at this point that many daughters realize, often for the first time, just how fragile their standing is within the economy of good daughterhood, and how easy it is for them to fall out of favour with their parents, if their choices regarding marriage and dating are in any way outside the ambit of good daughterhood, much more strongly than in the case of education. This becomes what I refer to as the first "big betrayal" for these daughters, a stark reminder of the ways in which their gender continues to determine and restrict their lives in substantial ways, despite all their other accomplishments.

VII. Dating, Love and Marriage: The litmus test of good daughterhood

Love, marriage and gender in the new middle classes: evolving trends

Over the last two decades, a substantial scholarship has examined the shifting contours of 'love' and 'arranged' marriages[9] in India, charting the growing acceptability of romantic love as a criterion for marriage and the evolution of middle-class moralities around it (Bhandari 2020; Black 2017; Brosius 2012; Corwin 1977; Dickey 2012; Donner 2016a; Maqsood 2021; Twamley 2013b). With increasingly new forms of matchmaking, such as online portals, official matchmakers, dating websites and apps changing the traditional marriage process, scholars note how young women, especially from the middle classes, have gained new avenues to express desires and exercise preference in the marriage process-making the older, dichotomous distinction between 'love' and 'arranged' marriage increasingly redundant, at least for certain strata of society (Bhandari 2017, 2020; Kaur and Dhanda 2014; Osella 2012; Sharangpani 2010; Twamley 2013a; Uberoi 2001a).

This "affective turn" (Hirsch and Wardlow 2006) in relationships, marked by the growing acceptance of ideals of love, courtship, consent and choice in self-selected unions in the Indian context is closely interlinked with the "crafting of more modern, gendered selves" among the contemporary urban elite across South Asia, representing a break from the past (Ahearn 2001).

[9] The two categories- 'arranged' and 'love', represent different approaches to marriage in the Indian context. In the former, a couple is introduced by parents from among a shortlisted pool of class and caste-appropriate spouses for their children, and the couple is expected to decide whether or not to move forward with the alliance within the first few meetings. The setup is facilitated by and gives primacy to the family's wishes. In the latter instance, there is an implication of a clandestine courtship, romantic alliances and self-chosen spouses who may or may not conform to suitability criteria set by families. The strict distinction between these two categories is undergoing change, as I discuss later in this chapter.

Within the relatively liberal, middle-class families in India, as Donner (2016) also found in her work in Kolkata, the embracing of choice and consent is a critical component of traditional but "updated" matchmaking efforts, in stark contrast to the silence and shame associated with love marriages even a decade earlier. For many middle-class parents, being open to and accepting of love marriages for their children, and incorporating the consent (especially of daughters) in the formal matchmaking process has become a way of establishing their *own* liberal credentials (De Neve 2016; Grover 2011).

For the new-age, young, modern Indian woman therefore, the ideal of love is not merely a romantic aspiration- it is rooted in a desire for suitable companionship, a shared sense of understanding and support for each-others' personal and professional goals. Fuller and Narasimhan (2008, 2013) describe the rise of "companionate marriages" among upwardly mobile Tamil Brahmins in South India, where factors like education, employment and personal compatibility increasingly shape partner selection, replacing close-kin, sub-caste endogamous alliances. A 2023 WeddinWire poll similarly indicated that love marriages are on the rise in India, especially among urban, educated couples, with arranged marriages among survey respondents declining by nearly a quarter, from 68% to 44% over the preceding four-year period (Outlook Business Desk 2023).

These shifts changes, unsurprisingly, have also been linked to the changing patterns of socio-economic consumption and cultural transformation in the post 90s, neo-liberal, globalized and interconnected Indian economy. Expanded opportunities available for women to step out of their homes, study, work and socialize have provided an avenue for romantic relationships to flourish, and as many scholars suggest, the rise of a consumption oriented, middle-class leisure culture has provided greater room for romantic expression for young couples in the literal form

of spaces like malls, multiplexes and coffee shops which were completely absent earlier (Hirsch and Wardlow 2006; Osella 2012; Oza 2012; Srivastava 2020).

At the same time, changing consumption cultures have turned weddings themselves into spectacular sites of socially sanctioned extravagance. As Kapur (2009:225) writes, "while weddings have always been an extremely important family affair and a marker of a crucial event in an individual's life, a means of establishing class status and passing property in the form of dowry, what is 'new' in the post-90s, hyper-visible neoliberal Indian economy, is the *scale* of the wedding and the display of wealth accompanied by it". The Indian wedding industry reached an estimated USD 75 billion market in 2023-24 season, driven by rapid growth, increasing demands for destination weddings and more lavish expenditure during wedding ceremonies on stay, food and entertainment (Khosla 2024).

These changes mark a stark departure from the Gandhian-Nehruvian legacy that associated conspicuous consumption with shame or embarrassment (Varma 2007).Today, as many like Bloch et al (2004) note, the "incessant replays of spectacular weddings and happy families celebrating traditional rituals in plush homes, have turned *affluence* into a *spiritual* value". As Brosius observes (2012), consumption has become crucial to constituting culture, status and distinction, with weddings functioning as signifiers of new identificatioMclons and subjectivities.

These developments echo the broader analyses of the New Indian middle class (Fernandes 2006; Varma 2007), which detail how changing consumption practices have played an important role in the very *creation* of the middle-class citizen in new India. William Mazzarella (2003) has shown how liberalisation generated forms of aspirational consumerism, in which

the *duty* of the consumer-citizen to the project of nation building is performed through participation in the economic market. Sanjay Srivastava (2017) extends this to argue that "moral consumption" stabilizes gendered tensions by promoting a *morally and culturally correct* and *appropriate* way of consuming, which "fashions a mode of behaviour in line with the politics of masculinity" (Srivastava 2023b:138). For women, this provides a means of finding a balance between the 'home' and the 'world', by presenting an *'Indian'* way of being in the world (Ponniah 2017). The rising desires for grand, "Bollywood-like" weddings among Indian millennials, combining traditional symbols with images of confident, self-assured brides, can be read within this framework of aspirational and moral consumption(Vaidya 2019).

So what do these shifting trends indicate for changing conceptions of middle-class daughterhood?

Building on the changes outlined above- expanded freedoms in partner choice for women, and the changing spectacle of Indian weddings, in this chapter, I examine what it means to be a good daughter in contemporary India when navigating questions of love, dating and marriage. I show how daughters' choices around *whom* to love, *when* to marry and *how* to do so, remain central to the social reproduction of caste and class, mediated by expectations of good daughterhood and performances of respectable modernity. I argue that while daughters may exercise greater freedoms in choosing life partners today, they are expected to do so wisely and within bounds of acceptability, leading to the emergence of what I call "dutiful love". Failure to do so at the right time, with the right person has serious consequences, including the invalidation of all other achievements by daughters. In this sense, I suggest, decisions around love and marriage operate as the 'litmus test' for good daughterhood.

The rest of the chapter is divided as follows.

Chapter overview

Part One: Perfect Alignment- Dutiful Daughters: focuses on the newly gained freedoms for daughters to fall in love and marry "suitably", while staying within accepted paradigms.

Part Two: Shock and Betrayal – Disobedient Daughters analyses the consequences of falling in love outside of parental expectations, and shock and betrayal felt by "disobedient" daughters who choose this path.

Part Three: Elongated Waithood- Disappointing Daughters focuses on the daughters who are left behind- unmarried or single, and how this acts as a moral wrong that "undoes" good daughterhood and all its other accomplishments.

Part I: Perfect Alignment - Dutiful Daughters

Marriage as a collaborative familial goal

Although recent academic literature has rightfully celebrated the growing acceptance of love, respect and companionship as the basis of new age-relationships in the modern era, with elite Indian sensibilities seemingly evolving in line with the global "affective turn" of intimacies and the ideal of the "pure relationship" globally (Giddens 2013), there are significant differences in the way that these ideals have been realised in the Indian context.

While individual choice and autonomy in romantic life have no doubt expanded greatly, especially among the urban, educated, relatively affluent younger Indians I was studying, the 'modernization' of the marriage system in India, unlike in the west, has not entailed the *elimination* or *removal* of the family from discussions surrounding marriage by foregrounding individual choice. Instead, as Netting (2010) notes, the "Modern Indian Family" has reinvented itself to participate in the matchmaking process in "new and creative ways". Marriage remains, in the eyes of many Indian parents, "too important a subject to be left to the whims of youthful love" (Donner 2002).

Consequently, what has emerged is an ideal in which the family actively and collectively shape marital choices of young couples, often from *behind* the scenes, retaining influence while allowing young people to experience and narrate autonomy. In her work among the middle classes in Delhi, Parul Bhandari (2017, 2020) highlights how even as middle-class families today have become much more accepting of their children dating and even engaging in pre-marital relationships, parents continue to play a critical role in determining, and often changing

the course of romantic relationships for their children through encouragement, dissuasion, and subtle-boundary setting around "suitable" partners. Allendorf and Pandian (2016) similarly discovered that instead of displacing or diminishing parental authority, young women increasingly *collaborate* with their parents to choose husbands. This has led to the emergence of a specifically *Indian* form of hybrid, "arranged-cum-love marriage", that takes place with the willing consent of all family members, who treat marriage as a collaborative family project, while keeping in mind the choices of individual members (Uberoi 2006).

Contemporary media narratives, from Bollywood movies to media advertisements and marriage portals reflect this cultural shift through an evolving iconography of love. In contrast to the valorisation of "rebellious" love that defied caste, class or religious boundaries which was a dominant feature of Hindi Cinema in the 70s and 80s- where lovers would choose defiance and even death rather than giving up each other (Gopal 2011), the 1990s witnessed a redefinition of "true love" as that which secures parental consent. *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (DDLJ),* as an epoch-defining cult movie recast the romantic hero not as a rebel willing to die for love, but as one who can overcome the wrath of reluctant parents for the sake of his love. Patricia Uberoi (1998) argues that DDLJ "disciplined desire" by portraying Indian family values as portable, transnational assets and positioning the *family*, rather than the couple as the moral core of the romantic narrative. This script has been repeatedly evoked in movies in the post 2000s era- from blockbusters like *Kaho Na Pyaar Hai* in 2000 to *Two States* in 2014, and most recently in *Rocky aur Rani Ki Prem Kahani* in 2024 among others, shaping the moral landscape within which a generation of young middle-class women who grew up devouring this cinema understood ideals of love, romance, and marriage (Bhattacharya 2021; Dwyer 2014; Uberoi 1997, 2001b, 2006).

This reimagination of collective, family-centric decision making on the subject of love and marriage is now tacitly accepted as a hallmark of urban modernity. As one of my respondents joked, in India, "even *Tinder* involves mothers!" The reference of course was to Tinder India's first advertisement in 2016, where a mother-daughter duo interacts as the daughter dresses up for a date (Gupta 2018). As she is picking out accessories, her mother looks at her phone, and in a bid to encourage her daughter to go on her date, says, *'Meri taraf se right-swipe hai!'* (It's a right-swipe from me!). Although the advertisement generated a lot of internet discourse on stretching the limits of what Indian parents would be comfortable with, what it highlighted was an imagination of a new India in which parents are familiar and even comfortable with the idea of their children dating- but with their involvement and stamp of approval. Despite some panning the Tinder ad as "too forward", the underlying sentiment of marriage as a collaborative decision permeated all discussions on love and marriage I had with my respondents as well. When they did discuss the idea of love or romance, ensuring that the love they were speaking of was "appropriate" and did not transgress parental conditionalities was of prime importance- and if they chose for themselves, what was critical was ensuring that they had their parents' blessing.

While existing scholarship richly documents the *existence* of these changing aspirations, relatively lesser attention has been paid to how younger women (especially in their capacity as *daughters*), interpret these shifts as acts of agency, maturity and freedom, even when their choices remain highly circumscribed[10]. How do young women, as daughters, reconcile control

[10] There are exceptions to this norm- such as Sharangpani's (2010) work which shows how young women reinterpret arranged marriages as meaningful, strategic and even empowering, or that of Sahu et al (2016) that contextualise the operation of agency in marital negotiations, among others. However, the role of *daughterhood* is not foregrounded in these studies as the site of contestation, focusing instead on families as a whole or on post-marital futures of young women.

over whom they may date, love, or marry with the desire to see themselves as autonomous? How is "appropriateness" defined and justified, and what forms of self-limitation does it entail? What are its gendered contours?

In the sections that follow, I discuss how the promise of freedom- to love "as one's heart desires" gets redefined through the contours of duty, obligation and the need for parental validation, becoming yet another arena for practising good daughterhood. I argue that by redefining love and marriage as part of a sacred 'duty' towards the family, daughters are able to align their own choices with parental expectations long before conflict can emerge, specifically by *not allowing* themselves to fall in love with the wrong person in the first instance. They are governed, as Twamley (2013a), drawing on Hochschild, reminds us, through a labyrinth of *feeling rules* that teach daughters to learn to desire, but within boundaries, to interpret suitability as sensibility, and to equate obedience with maturity.

It is this emotional and moral calibration that I conceptualise as "dutiful love." By dutiful love, I refer to a form of romantic self-regulation in which daughters exercise choice, but only within the affective, moral, and caste-class boundaries that constitute good daughterhood. In the process, they fuse agency with obligation treat "appropriateness" as both practical and ethical, pre-empting misalignment long before conflict can surface. The stories shared below show how dutiful love is practiced in the first instance- through emotional self-regulation, anticipatory self-censorship, by invoking moral hierarchies and debts of gratitude, and through pragmatic rationalisation.

In later sections, I show how this concept also shaped how daughters responded when romantic relationships did generate tension at home. In such moments, dutiful love did not mean defying

parents, but *persuading* them- convincing parents of the seriousness of the relationship, waiting for their blessing, and bringing them to their side rather than "betraying" them. For many, this was the only imaginable path, because that is what good daughters do.

In its most demanding form, dealt with in section three, I show how dutiful love could also mean entirely relinquishing a partner who did not fit- although such choices were rarely narrated as coercion. Rather, they emerged as difficult but morally necessary decisions shaped by care, attachment, and the affective labour daughters undertook to sustain family harmony, even at considerable personal cost.

Marriage as sacred duty: Prerna

> "*It was just the constant conditioning around how important marriage was. It was absolutely normal. I was born with the idea that I just have to [get married]. It was specifically pushed on me more because I was fair skinned...which in India means I was 'good marriage material'. It was always equated with getting married with the best [person]. That was what I was supposed to do."- Prerna, 26*

In the case of Prerna, a 26-year-old social science graduate from a wealthy Baniya family who was now studying abroad, marriage had been framed as a given- almost a moral expectation. As a conventionally beautiful girl from a "somewhat" conservative business family, she grew up being constantly reminded that her fair skin and looks made her a valuable prospect- she "owed" it to her family to marry well. Relatives would routinely gush with glee that she was "*so beautiful"* that she was sure to secure the "*best, richest*" husband in the family- the highest compliment a girl from her community could receive.

The end goal of marriage also dictated how Prerna conducted her life in other spheres. She was frequently reminded to monitor her everyday behaviour- to speak politely to neighbours, to dress well and maintain impeccable manners because, as her mother warned, people "ask around" about a girl during marriage negotiations. Little things reflected her character and suitability for marriage, and Prerna should not be found wanting in any way when the time came. All her activities were judged through this lens. If she picked up a book, her mother praised her, encouraging reading as a habit that will 'look good' on her '*bio-data*'[11]. While her own education was also promoted as a good unto itself, its value was reaffirmed in terms of her future marriage potential, and what could aid her ability to "bring up good children".

Until she left home for higher studies, Prerna never *imagined* a future where she would not be married, and definitely not one in which marriage was optional. At one point, she confessed that she actively *desired* an arranged marriage, seeing it as something she could excel at, and as a way of validating her parents' faith in her.

This sense of duty shaped her dating life as well. When we spoke about her romantic past, Prerna shared that she had casually dated a few people in school and college, emphasizing that her parents knew, and even met her "boy-friends", even inviting them over for lunch or dinner. However, even though her parents were "open" about the fact that boys may be interested in their daughter and indulged the attention she garnered, the freedoms she was granted came with strict rules. She was allowed to go on dates, but *had* to maintain respectability, follow restrictions for her safety and security, and most importantly, to ensure that she only got

[11] Typically, a bio-data is like a resume circulated specifically for marriage purposes, which includes details like the prospective bride or groom's caste, class (income), community and other family details, as well as individual personal characteristics like age, height, weight, colour and hobbies among others.

"serious" with a boy that her parents approved of. She was not allowed to fall in "love" randomly or decide to get married to "just about anyone".

The limits of her freedom, and depth of control exercised by her parents became much clearer in an anecdote Prerna narrated with part-humour, part resignation. During her early college days, Prerna dated a boy from her own caste and community, who was rich and well-educated, but not "good enough" for her father to accept as a future son-in-law. Although her father allowed Prerna to continue seeing this boy, he made her sign a "contract" with which specified that she would *never* marry this person, and to swear that it was only a "casual" relationship.

> *"He literally got a pen and paper and made me write that, 'I WILL NOT MARRY KARAN GUPTA*. If I marry him, then I will cut off all my ties with my dad and I will get no money from him or have any relationship with him'. And he signed it, I signed it. He kept that in his locker, and I think he continues to, till date!"*

Even as Prerna related this anecdote as half-humorous memory, what was evident was her keen sense of understanding that marriage itself was no joking matter in her family. Her romantic choices and the seriousness of her attachments were both greatly determined by what she imagined her parents thought of them (even if they otherwise seemed acceptable).

During our conversation, Prerna repeatedly emphasised that she was in no doubt that her parents' concerns, even if they seemed excessive, came from a place of love and firmly motivated by *her best interest*. They had already supported her initial education abroad, at full expense (despite opposition from other family members), and had trusted her with freedoms that she believed reflected their love. Precisely *because* of this, Prerna felt very strongly that

she could not "betray" them by choosing the "wrong man". Marriage, unlike casual dating, was a matter of family honour, duty, and repayment.

When I asked her what would happen if she seriously fell in love with someone at her university and wanted to marry them (she had just started dating a white, American Christian boy in her class when we spoke), Prerna said that the love and support she had received from her parents, the gratitude she felt towards meant that she would do her best to help them understand her, rather than "go against them"- especially if marriage was on the table but her parents did not agree with her. Much like DDLJ's Raj and Simran, for Prerna, the "true test" for any couple's love was *convincing* their parents of their love, and not in taking the "easy route" of defying them and going against their wishes, even if they were ostensibly far enough and independent enough to do so.

> *"...I mean, like I can't just 'run away' with someone just because I can. If I wanted to,* ***really*** *wanted to, and they were not okay with me being with him, I would not just cut them [parents] off.* ***I would negotiate till they agree. My strategy would be to pester them till they accept."***

My conversation with Prerna exemplified a recurring theme among my respondents- the distinction between permissible youthful filtration and the far more serious business of marriage. While Prerna's parents' liberal outlook was expressed in their willingness to 'tolerate' their daughter casually dating in school and college, this freedom was offered in exchange for a barter that legitimized the expectation that she would choose *well* when it came to the question of marriage, keeping in mind the family's interests as a whole. This of course, meant

"choosing" a partner that would meet implicit criteria of class, caste, religion or regional boundaries, which were interpreted as legitimate exclusions.

Despite acknowledging some of the problematic restrictions and interference by her parents in her dating life during out chats, Prerna insisted that she was, in fact, "free" to marry who she wanted, *as long as* the choice did not dishonour the family. Importantly, the veto on her choices was not experienced by her as coercive, since she had already christened this a part of her *duty,* and what she *owed* her parents as a good daughter.

Marriage as increasing net familial happiness: Arpita

This sense of obligation towards parents dictated the choices of my other respondents as well. For Arpita, the doctor from AIIMS mentioned earlier, marriage was less about romance and more about preserving collective wellbeing and increasing net familial happiness. As she neared her 30s, Arpita described her decision to marry and "settle with" Aman, her long-term boyfriend, as shaped by pragmatism and an acute sense of responsibility toward her parents.

One of the key deciding factors for Arpita was simply that her parents adored Aman. She knew how easily he fit their lives and how well he got on with her parents. Among Arpita's deepest concerns regarding marriage was ensuring that she could continue being "fully present" for her parents in the future. Notably, Arpita was not an only child. Yet, she believed her deep emotional attachment, care and concern for her parents was "very different" from the relationship they shared with her younger brother. She wanted to ensure that *she* could have an independent and active relationship with her parents post marriage- to be able to visit them frequently, stay with them on weekends, travel with them, and remain intimately connected

with them in the future. “Daughterhood”, she clarified to me, “doesn’t end at marriage.” Aman, unlike many men, welcomed this thinking, and this reassurance became central to Arpita’s choice.

However, her decision to finally marry had not been entirely straightforward. At some point during her courtship with her boyfriend, Arpita confided, she had even harboured serious doubts, wondering if she truly “loved” Aman still, and if their relationship had dulled into something too stable, even too predictable over the course of a decade. But she ultimately convinced herself, with her mother’s advice echoing in the background, that marrying a “safe, stable guy”, who was a “good fit with the family” was the mature and responsible thing to do. As her mother advised her (and me) in one of our conversations*, “love and all is great, but one must not be foolish if they have found a **good** guy.”*

It also helped that Aman checked every box- he was a respected doctor from AIIMS, belonged to a dominant Hindu caste and came from a good, respectable middle-class family that had strong social standing within the medical community, along with excellent professional prospects in the future. Even though Arpita was nervous about moving into a joint family after marriage and staying at Aman’s family home, her mother framed this as an advantage- particularly when Arpita would have to juggle a demanding career along with children.

Arpita eventually married Aman in 2020, a month before turning thirty. Although she jokingly alluded in some of our later conversations to becoming a “cliché of a troubled *bahu (daughter-in-law)”* in her marital home, experiencing difficulty managing in-laws and long workdays and having “typical” disagreements, overall, she remained convinced that she had made the “right choice” in her life, “all things considered”.

It is important to note how Arpita framed this justification. For her, marrying Aman was not just about choosing a good spouse for herself, but one who could ensure her ability to remain a *good daughter* to her parents. In choosing Aman, she had fulfilled her parents' expectation of marrying suitably, while also ensuring a strong and continued bond with her natal family. Unlike other chauvinistic or regressive men, Aman was supportive of the deep emotional bond Arpita shared with her parents. This understanding allowed Arpita to more readily accept her present misgivings in her marital home as part of a barter.

Interestingly, even though there was little doubt, over the course of various retellings, that the marriage had been a collective decision with family interests at its core, the narrative that Arpita's family constructed around the marriage was also telling. Both Arpita and her parents proudly described it as a "love marriage" between two college sweethearts, which they had only been too willing to support. Among the small medical circle that Arpita's family moved in, her parents would proudly assert that she "had chosen well for herself"- a proclamation that was intended to use Arpita's agency to validate their upbringing, and cement their self-image as progressive.

Across families like Arpita's that I spoke with, parents were similarly eager to frame themselves as "modern" and "egalitarian", supporting dating and encouraging the "freedom" of daughters, even as they carefully guided them towards partners who preserved caste, class and family reputation. This allowed families to retain the critical social reproduction function of marriages, in effect reproducing hierarchies while still laying claim to a moral high ground.

Daughters, on their part, by reframing marital choices as part of duties and obligations towards parents and highlighting the importance of continued kinship post marriage, would participate

in this process of pre-emptive exclusion willingly, while still leaving room for interpreting their own actions as "agentive", especially when viewed from a relational, conformist or pragmatic sense (Sharma 2008, Sahu 2016, Dyson and Jeffery 2022). They rationalised their choices in various ways- through limiting imaginations on who they could love, rejecting "unsuitable" partners from a young age, internalising differences (of caste/class/community) as insurmountable, or by simply by presenting endogamy as culturally "preferable". In some cases, they spoke of deferring to parental wisdom in rejecting alliances that would *not* be deemed acceptable to society at large, in an effort to avoiding bringing shame and dishonour to the family. In each instance, a form of good daughterhood, specific to the question of marriage was at play, with emotional obligations guiding decisions as much as pragmatic considerations. Some of the following stories reflect these tendencies, and the complicated ways in which agency was expressed within these conditions.

Against shame: Rosalyn

For Rosalyn, the 29-year-old Malayali Syrian Christian from Kerala mentioned earlier, religious and community considerations shaped the marriage question from the outset. Her parents came from a small, upper-caste, highly regarded Christian community that prided itself on maintaining its lineage. Despite living in Delhi for all her life, Rosalyn was categorically forbidden from marrying outside her specific church and sub-sect. This of course presented a problem once marriage negotiations began- most alliances came from Kerala or from the very small Delhi Malayali community her parents socialised in, whereas Rosalyn could barely converse in Malayali. She struggled to find anything in common with most of these suitors, who seemed to belong to another world entirely. After two years of unsuccessful and frustrating conversations facilitated by her family, she decided to take control of the process herself. She

wanted to let things unfold "organically", but only among Malayali Christian suitors she could *herself* filter on matrimonial websites.

Rosalyn's case was in contrast with, and complicated the usual arguments presented by parents in favour of daughters marrying within the same caste, class and religious backgrounds, such as "familiarity" and cultural commonality, since her fundamental clash was with the lack of shared experiences with those who shared her background on paper. However, her parents' decision to allow *Rosalyn* the choice to find a suitor on her own, *while* applying caste-class-religion filters on selections in matrimonial websites or dating sites captured the hybridised form of family participation that now passes as modern, individual choice.

Although Rosalyn also understood, from a pragmatic perspective, that she may never find much in common with a person who had been born and brought up in Kerala, she did buy in to the argument that community support, anchored in religion, *mattered* in the long run- both for her, and for her parents. She could not imagine bringing shame upon the family, or risking their ostracization from the church simply because she hadn't *yet* found anyone good enough for her. She was convinced that she would be able to marry the twin interests of her family and her own desire for companionship by finding a Kerala Christian who was brought up in Delhi, who spoke Hindi, and loved eating *Chole-Bhature* or grooving to Punjabi songs as much as she did, no matter how hard or inconceivable it seemed at the moment.

Crucially, unlike traditional notions of timid daughters passively accepting the restrictions imposed on them by family, Rosalyn framed her decision to keep looking within this narrow mating pool as an *assertion* of her own identity, choice, and part of her filial duty. She candidly confessed that she had dated many men before, indulged in casual sex, smoking and drinking,

and various other activities for many years, that her parents would deem unacceptable and "un-Christian". However, she did not see any contradiction in leading this life, nor view it as a betrayal of her parents' trust. It was *her* way of experiencing a private life, undertaken with the confidence that as long as nothing harmed her parents' reputation, there was no cause for concern. However, *marriage* was a public matter involving families, relatives, respectability and faith. She had no desire to force her parents to choose between their community and daughter and hurt them- and was therefore happy to comply. The choice of her partner, as Rosalyn asserted repeatedly, was going to be *emphatically* hers, arising not out of compulsion but a natural culmination of morally "right" behaviour.

Pragmatics of obedience

While Rosalyn was a Catholic, I found similar patterns among Hindu respondents who justified their parents' fundamental rejection of inter-religious marriage through the lens of anxieties generated by today's political climate in the country. Compatibility, culture and "adjustment" were the standard vocabulary parents used to voice serious objections or shut down interfaith unions altogether. Some daughters, however, acknowledged a different layer- the sense that their parents' caution came from a "good place" and that there was merit in their hesitation.

One respondent, for instance, spoke of her elder brother's pragmatic argument that in "Modi's India", everything from registering a marriage to renting a house would be so difficult for an interfaith couple that that all love would wither in the face of daily difficulties and bureaucratic strain. Another spoke of the lack of *legal* protections for women marrying outside their religion, along with complications around inheritance, maintenance, and divorce, which made her feel that her parents' concerns were not entirely misplaced.

However, it would be naïve, if not farcical to assume that these young, well-educated women were oblivious to the religious bias and xenophobia embedded in such objections. Most sounded apologetic even as they relayed their parents' reasoning, but relatively resigned to religion being a red line that could not be crossed on the subject of marriage.

Some daughters, like Sreyasi, discussed how they had tried very hard to fight their parents' views, but unsuccessfully. Sreyasi recalled how her father had flippantly told her when she was sixteen, that he would never stop her from choosing who she wanted to marry, but he would not attend her wedding if she ever decided to marry a Muslim man. Gesturing to the fan, he added: "*it would be because I would not be alive. You will find me hanging from this very fan the same day*". Sreyasi confessed the "chilling effect" those words had had on her, internalizing the idea that the cost for her future, *imaginary* love could never be her father's life. She never once considered dating a Muslim, and although her best friend from school was Muslim, she introduced him to her parents as a "brother". When I asked her if she could have ever been romantically interested in him, she dismissed the idea as "entirely outside her imagination".

Caste operated similarly, although it was less vocally discussed and was perhaps even more entrenched as a barrier. A 31-year-old upper caste daughter from an affluent South Delhi family, Supriya, who I met through one of my respondents, described falling in love with a highly educated, middle-class academic she met at university, who happened to belong to a Scheduled Caste. She had been in a relationship with him for nearly a decade, but shared her *own* difficulty in accepting that the person she was in love with and wanted to marry was from a lower caste. She was terrified that she had let her parents down with her choice, ashamed on *their* behalf, and the imagined embarrassment they might have to endure. When we spoke, she was seeking therapy in order to first accept her own feelings of shame, and to confront her horror at

recognizing her internalised casteism before she could gather the courage to share her truth with her family.

These internalised feelings of shame and guilt were pervasive across my conversations, and profoundly shaped daughters' decisions. Pertinently, all but two of the married respondents I spoke with had chosen partners outside of their upper-caste or religion. Only one had married outside her regional community (though still upper-caste), while another had married a foreigner and had moved abroad. What emerged repeatedly was the powerful pull of emotional attachment, gratitude, guilt and the overarching fear of disappointing parents. While daughters continued to present these decisions in the language of choice and pragmatism, their justifications- whether of compatibility, culture, law or stability- remained firmly shaped by familial boundaries and a deep sense of filial obligation.

The internalised habitus of good daughterhood

The internalisation of these boundaries, the apparently 'neutral' and 'rational' justifications used to defend them, and the acute self-reproach extreme feelings of reprehension daughters felt for even *considering* a transgression of parental expectations all indicates that "good daughterhood" had become part of their habitus (Bourdieu 2020).

As Bourdieu (1977, 2016) argues, the becoming of particular *kinds of subjects* is linked to the internalisation of dominant social and cultural ideas, which in turn reinforce and ultimately reproduce the habitus itself. These dispositions feel natural, and self-chosen, and in turn reproduce the habitus and hierarchies that underpin in, thereby perpetuating the maintenance of status-quo. In the worldview that my respondents occupied, they saw themselves as agentive

and their parents as progressive, even as their choices routinely consolidated caste-class privileges and normalised differences as natural. What was perhaps distinctive was they language through which they presented their decisions and underlying motivations- as evidence of "standing their ground", asserting their own "independent thinking" and doing what was "right" even when their choices aligned seamlessly with the expectations of their milieu.

The critical takeaway from these stories is not just that marriages in India continues to be a largely family-mediated affair, despite the relatively greater choice that education and other opportunities have afforded young women in India- although remains true for most marriages. Rather, it is that *even when* otherwise independent, well-educated, professionally qualified young women from urban metros were actively engaging in romantic partnerships or choosing spouses, they were doing so *within* the affective, moral and caste-class boundaries that made certain choices unthinkable. It should come as no surprise then, as national level surveys on marriage patterns conducted by the institutes like IHDS reveal, that more than 95% of marriages in India, no matter whether chosen by parents or individuals themselves, take place within the same caste (Desai and Vanneman 2018). PEW Research data from 2021 indicates that 99% of all married people in India share the same religion, and more than two-thirds argue strongly in favour of stopping all interreligious marriages, especially for women (Sahgal et al. 2021). Even among highly educated women, 77% marry only with parental consent, and "self-choice" marriages, described as those in which daughters go *specifically against* parental wishes, remain below 5% overall, rising only to 9% for highly educated daughters (Banerji and Deshpande 2021).

This was the case with my respondents too, none of whom defined *love* as indicating an opposition to, or rebellion against their parents' choices. In the event that they (rarely) were, or

imagined themselves to be, in love with an 'unacceptable' partner in the future, their hopes were tied to the notion that they could persuade their families eventually to agree to their preference, as in the case of Prerna mentioned earlier. Here, *dutiful love* was redefined as the aspiration to show the sincerity of one's feelings, through endurance, negotiation, and the ultimate goal of parental blessing- something I discuss in more detail in later sections.

Ultimately, as Bhandari and Fitzmann (2017) also argue, reinforcing the earlier analysis of scholars like Fuller and Narasimhan (2008:11), my research also demonstrated that contemporary trends towards "companionate" marriages, instead of challenging older norms, in fact "play[ed] a fundamental role in reproducing both caste and middle class in contemporary India".

Wedding ceremonies as sites of social reproduction

A final, related point in the discussion on marriage and daughterhood is the role of wedding ceremonies in the social reproduction process, particularly when parents and daughters willingly came together on the subject of weddings. Although the stories above encapsulate how daughters negotiated, resisted, or co-opted parental preferences in choosing partners, this did not imply that these choices were always in *need* for alignment or adjustment at all. Some respondents, (especially younger ones) spoke to me enthusiastically and pragmatically of arranged marriages and their "many positives", while describing with equal enthusiasm their hopes and dreams about their big day- of ceremonies shaped by celebrity culture, mass media and the new aspirational aesthetic of Indian weddings.

In focus group discussions especially, Virat Kohli and Anushka Sharma's 2017 destination wedding in Tuscany emerged as shorthand for the "perfect fusion" of modern romance and traditional ritual. The controlled release of their picture-perfect, sun-kissed wedding photographs (that inspired countless imitators) helped solidify a template of the modern Indian wedding. Marked by the image of a happy, confident, modern-day bride who willingly pays obeisance to her cultural and traditional roots by partaking in religious ceremonies, the existence of ritual and conformity here co-exists comfortably with an emphasis on her agency, love and choice (Bhandari 2018; Kumari 2024; Raniwala 2023; Sarvaiya 2020). The imagery of the "Sabyasachi bride," in particular, decked in traditional bridal wear, donning symbols like *sindooor* and *designer mangalsutras*[12] have in recent times emerged as aspirational markers of rootedness, elegance, and class distinction, that have rebranded tradition as 'cool'.

Such trends of course, cannot be divorced from the broader social context in which they have been popularised. India has, over the last decade witnessed the rise of conspicuous consumption along with the deepening of religious and social conservatism. Since 2014, when Narendra Modi's right wing Bhartiya Janata Party first won a sweeping majority, scholars have noted increasing tendencies towards authoritarianism and heightened protectionism, particularly around Hindu women's sexuality in the wake of discourses like "Love Jihad" have produced both stricter regulation of intimate life and a public culture that celebrates ritualised Indianness. (Naaz 2023; Oza 2012; Strohl 2019). In this context, reclaiming *Hindu* traditions, religious practices, symbols of marriage and wedding rituals through glamorized ceremonies and

[12] Sindoor or vermillion is added to the hair parting of married women as a symbol of their marital status. Recent trends by celebrities have brought the tradition back in vogue for many millennials. Priyanka Chopra famously announced a partnership with global designer brand Bulgari for her *Mangalsutra* (wedding thread) which similarly sparked a new fashion trend (Navlakha 2021)

refashioning them as *Indian* is also an important way in which discourses around moral consumption are being promulgated in India today. As Sanjay Srivastava writes (2023b:139), "the moral life of the nation now finds expression through consumer culture rather than against it", and the lifestyles deemed emblematic of modernity "co-exist with an efflorescence of Hindu religious ritual activities that take their cue from a national mood marked by Hindutva politics".

These dynamics surfaced in my conversations as well. In one informal chat I had, a respondent defended her right to wear a *chooda* (wedding bangles) or change her name after marriage, as a mark of her own agency and pride in her cultural traditions. In another, a wedding planner and dating coach I spoke with, echoed these "choices" as signs of empowerment, describing how Indian brides increasingly sought to make weddings "their own"- whether by requesting female priests, reinterpreting regressive rituals, or blending traditions across communities. Arpita, the doctor whose story I mentioned earlier, described with glee her desire to have the grandest, ritual-perfect wedding ceremony that honoured her Bengali and Marathi heritage, while still letting her individuality "shine". Even in the midst of COVID, her family organised a five-day celebration complete with two *sangeets*, a *mehendi*, a cocktail night, and a full wedding ceremony, one that she thoroughly enjoyed.

Marriage as the site of reciprocal negotiation: promise and perils

As Desai and Andrist argue, upper-caste/class Indian families are "increasingly torn in two directions- status attainment through gender performance, or status attainment through the performance of modernity" (2010:682). While "doing gender" in the Indian setting involves displays of modesty, decorum, piety and control over women's sexuality, "doing modernity"

would entail adhering to the demands of a global, modernizing culture, motivating parents to educate daughters, delay marriage and allow them greater freedoms- presenting a dilemma (Desai 2017).

However, in my research, I found that families such as Arpita's were able to *effectively combine* these scripts- highly educated daughters chose partners their families approved of, while wedding ceremonies enacted both modernity and tradition. Marriage thus became a site of reciprocal negotiation, aided by a public culture that eulogized "dutiful love" as aspirational and labelled tradition as beautiful. Good daughterhood further facilitated this cooperation even when opportunities for disagreements arose, resulting in eventual perfect alignment.

Anjali, one of my interviewees who eventually got married during the course of my fieldwork insisted that it was important for daughters to recognize that in India, unlike the West, the wedding day was "as much about the families, parents, and their dreams for their children as about our own". When Anjali differed in her opinion from her parents about the scale of her wedding, the rituals or ceremonies they wanted to have, she was hesitant to voice her objection precisely because of her belief that she could not see her parents' dreams about their daughter's wedding be crushed. Despite wanting a smaller ceremony, she agreed to a lavish farmhouse wedding, expensive gifts for her husband's extended family, and an international honeymoon funded entirely by her parents. For her parents, the wedding was a way to demonstrate their own class status, as well as signal their love for their daughter, and Anjali's objections, she claimed, would have broken their heart.

When similar tensions surfaced for Trisha, a PhD scholar who objected to the ritual of *Kanyadaan,* she relented when her parents insisted that the ritual was non-negotiable and

mattered to them emotionally. In Sreyasi's family, a compromise was reached by modifying the language of the ritual instead of abandoning the ritual itself. Across discussions, daughters, especially those on the verge of marriage, sought "middle ground", believing it their duty to balance feminist discomfort with filial obligations. As daughters, this was an important part of how they defined "doing family" or kinship (Oza 2012).

Undoubtedly, there was a mutually beneficial process at play here- by refashioning these weddings as agentive, conceding to certain modifications or by adopting religious rituals, both parents as well as daughters were able to perform the important function of presenting themselves as accommodating, modern and progressive, while being simultaneously respectful of cultural traditions. The lavish wedding ceremonies along with their "modern" modifications were ultimately an important status-signalling project, which attempted to position families as belonging to a certain class, and establish their distinctive identity. Concurrently, daughters' pragmatic justifications for aligning with parental wisdom were often optimized for ensuring their own good lives- continued familial support, social legitimacy, and emotional security, both in the present and future. In so doing, daughters became both beneficiaries of love and validation from parents in their choices and recipients of the lavish wedding ceremonies they were desirous of.

The unfortunate consequence, however, was that these choices and ceremonies reproduced highly gendered and age-old patriarchal, casteist customs which many daughters *willingly* adhered to, with their consent becoming key to recharacterizing them as "empowering" choices. As one respondent's elder sister, a senior MNC executive in her 40s told me, she was dismayed that young, empowered girls of today seemed more willing than those of her generation to embrace the very rituals they had fought so hard against- willingly spending

millions in extravagant weddings funded by parents, wearing wedding markers and adopting their husband's name after marriage as part of tradition, when they could in fact easily refuse to do so.

While she struggled to make sense of this inherent contradiction, my own reading suggests that these practices made sense in the context of daughters' desires to fashion a specific kind of neoliberal, class-conscious, empowered-yet rooted self (Gooptu 2013); and within the emotional economy of good daughterhood, which foregrounds gratitude, obligation and relational continuity. As an affective formation, good daughterhood can also help explain why gendered hierarchies endure even as (and perhaps because) the language of choice, empowerment, and modernity saturates the landscape of contemporary Indian weddings. Daughters' subjective experiences of autonomy and "acceptable" desires are thus critical to the reproductive labour of caste, class and family continuity.

But what happens when this mutually beneficial alignment breaks down? When daughters refuse to conform to familial expectations around love and marriage? How does this impact the parent-daughter relationship?

In the next section, I discuss the "shock" and "betrayal" many daughters experience, when the marriage question exposes the limits of what they believed was 'unconditional' parental love- and how quickly disagreements on the issue can turn *good, dutiful* daughters into *disobedient* or *disgraceful* ones, threatening ruptures in the continuation of their relationships.

*

Part Two: Shock and Betrayal- Disobedient Daughters

"One of my closest childhood friends, when she was getting married, told me that it was as if she suddenly didn't recognize her father anymore- the socially liberal man she had known all her life, who she had had her first drink with, who loved her, spoilt her, and never made her feel less than. But when it was time to get his daughter married, he suddenly turned into a character from one of those traditional Sooraj Barjatya[13] *movies, bowing his head and folding his hands in front of her in-laws, because he was the father of a daughter…"*

- Anusha, 32, startup CEO, engineering and MBA graduate

The (restricted) freedom to say no: Anusha

When I met Anusha, she was 32, a Harvard graduate, engineer, and successful entrepreneur- someone who, by all conventional metrics, had done very well for herself at life. However, she revealed that her biggest concern for the past few years had been her inability to find a good match for herself, and the many stressful conflicts this had resulted in at home. Having grown up in an otherwise friendly and supportive household, Anusha had always known her parents held fairly conservative views on marriage and dating. Describing herself as a "miss goody-two shoes" she shared that she had never dated in school or college, nor thought about finding

[13] Sooraj Barjatya is a prominent Indian film director who is known for directing 'family' movies representing the strength of traditional Indian values and valorizing the large, happy, middle-class joint Indian family (with its conservative outlook) as an ideal in his filmography. His most famous film, the 1995 blockbuster *'Hum aapke hain kaun' (HAHK)* has been the subject of sociological studies for its impact on society (Uberoi 1996, 2001b). The reference here is a shorthand to the sexism that Barjatya's movies propagate and normalized.

"love" on her own. The idea of an arranged marriage had seemed both inevitable and unproblematic- until she experienced what she called the "ordeal" herself. Over the course of our conversations, Anusha described to me the emotional wreckage that the question of marriage had resulted in for her, causing a great amount of emotional turmoil, distress, anger and self-hatred, spoiling her relationship with her parents and exposing to her the hypocrisy and sexism the entire process was rooted in.

When Anusha turned 25, her parents began shortlisting prospective grooms from within the *Kayastha* community they belonged to. When she first agreed to the process, her parents had assured her that at the end of the day, she would have "complete autonomy" over the final selection of her groom, and would be at liberty to say no to anyone she herself did not find compatible.

However, the reality of the arranged marriage system came as a shock. Rather than the friendly, organic introductions she had imagined, Anusha found that the arranged marriage process left little room for her to actually get to know a person- it was instead very much like a business transaction, in which quick questions and quicker rejections were the order of the day. She would be directly asked her views on living with in-laws, children, working after marriage, money all in the first meeting, and felt immediate pressure to declare whether she "liked" the boy after meeting them.

Even more upsetting and unnerving was Anusha's discovery that in the arranged-marriage market, her academic credentials and professional experience quickly became liabilities. Men expressed surprise at her rapid success and level of involvement in work, were keen to

"mansplain" her own ventures to her, and often reacted defensively to her "strong" opinions on things ranging from politics to religion.

Although her consent was still a part of the equation, Anusha soon understood that there were serious caveats involved. While it was easy to "reject" the outrightly misogynistic or sexist men, she found that it was much more difficult to deal with men who *weren't* outrightly problematic, but may have raised other red flags during the negotiations. One of her prospective matches, who she had considered "suitable", kept nonchalantly assuming that she would relocate to wherever *he* was in the world after marriage, and spoke to her in a condescending, almost paternalistic tone. But when she tried explaining to her parents what felt "off", Anusha struggled to articulate her hesitation- the fear that he wouldn't treat her as an equal in the future.

She finally said no to the match, much to the chagrin of her parents, who insisted that in fact it was *she* who was the actual problem, because she kept rejecting men for "frivolous" reasons. Underlying Anusha's parents' anger at her refusal was the perception that radical ideas like feminism had "spoilt" or "corrupted" young women's minds, making them stubborn and uncompromising, desirous of unrealistic standards and ideal companions that *could* not exist in real life. "*This feminism and all of yours is complete bullshit*", they told her. "*No one can find a family who will be okay with it*".

While the arranged marriage process would start off with the premise that daughters would have "full freedom" to choose their partners, in reality many young girls found it difficult to exercise this freedom without antagonizing their parents or crossing perceived boundaries of good daughter behaviour. As one of my respondents put it, the system was "rigged" at the outset- instead of explaining *why* they liked a guy, they were forced to justify why they didn't.

"*Am I expected to marry the first person who comes along then, just because he did not advocate for the mass-slaughter of homeless people*?" Anusha asked me, recalling one suitor who had flippantly suggested a "final solution" for resolving homelessness around the world.

After many intense arguments and angry fights with her parents, repeated rejections that left her feeling objectified and devalued, and a steady erosion of her self-esteem, Anusha realised that the process was not for her. She even began questioning her own sanity at one point, going back years in time and rethinking every decision- had she been too picky, too demanding? At one point, Anusha said she had a reckoning with her own "ingrained patriarchy", when she asked herself why she was putting herself through something that was actively harming her- why could she not refuse? The answer, perhaps, lay in the *guilt* Anusha felt in saying no, when her parents had done so much for her. The opportunities her parents had given her- education, freedom, support- hung around her neck as an albatross. She felt she was "failing" them on the subject of marriage, despite having been such a good daughter all her life until then. It took her three years to finally gain the confidence to tell her parents she was opting out of the arranged marriage system, at least temporarily, to focus on her career.

While her parents were obviously devastated with her decision, it was Anusha who felt that her entire perspective on her parents shifted in the aftermath, rupturing her relationship. For the first time, she no longer saw her parents as invested in maximizing *her* happiness. Instead, she began seeing them as members of a society for whom it was a grave sin to have an unmarried daughter. Their standards for who Anusha should be with lowered in line with their increasing desperation.

The arranged marriage process ultimately revealed the "worst, most toxic side" of her parents and her extended family, and the great lengths to which they were willing to compromise to make a marriage happen. One of the things that upset her the most was realising how naturally and easily her own parents turned into caricatures of a "daughter's parents"- deferential, subservient, willing to compromise on anything, and unquestioning of patriarchal norms. Despite years of publicly decrying the ills of dowry, her purportedly "progressive" parents saw no contradiction in the expectation that they would foot the *entire* bill for the wedding, or present lavish gifts and jewellery, or perhaps even a car to her future in-laws as part of the wedding. For them, this was not "dowry" but tradition. They also "naturally" expected Anusha to be a trailing wife. Despite her great success at work, arranged marriage conversations revealed that her parents expected her to quit her job and move wherever her husband was, and to re-start her life from scratch in a new city. These observations led Anusha to feel extremely disillusioned, struggling to come to terms with a reality that was very much at odds with her imagination.

The final nail in the coffin came from watching her closest friend go through something worse. This friend- a brilliant engineering student, her senior in college and an Ivy League MBA admit with full scholarship, was actually coerced by her parents to get married before she stepped out of the country for her future studies. The transformation of her friend's father in her front of her own eyes, from the "cool uncle" that she had always known him as, to the most regressive, controlling, emotionally manipulative parent for whom his daughter's immediate marriage superseded every other consideration was jarring. Despite the immense privilege her friend came from, it was evident that she did not feel she had an option to say no to her parents. The marriage was hastily arranged, and went from the first meeting to the wedding ceremony in a short span of a three months. Many of the bride's friends were not invited, and she left

immediately after the wedding to live in the US. Although her husband turned out to be a "decent man" eventually, her friend confided in Anusha that her wedding day was "the worst day of her life"- because her parents, who had been her "biggest champions" all her life, turned into people she could no longer recognize. Even though they had themselves been the ones supporting her educational dreams, encouraging her to apply to universities abroad, they would not entertain thoughts of an "unguarded" and "unaccounted for" young girl living alone in a different country- *she* had to be married so her *parents* could feel at ease about discharging *their* duties.

> *"… We all had a hard time accepting that our parents were not who we thought they were. The patriarchy had never been as obvious in the immediate family, as it was in the extended one. Till it was time to talk marriage…"*

Anusha spoke to me at length about the disillusionment she felt in the aftermath of her failed arranged marriage process, and seeing similar stories such as that of her friend around her- of well educated, professionally qualified, supposedly "independent" daughters giving in to immense emotional pressures by parents on the subject of marriage. They would either marry sooner than they were ready, agree to marry men they did not love, giving up on their relationships without even informing parents, or remain in unhappy marriages, all in order to perform their roles as "good daughters". Anusha understood belatedly that the façade of freedom and collaboration masked how conditional the so-called "right to choose" actually was.

This *conditionality* of choice and its restricted contours regularly came up in other stories of disobedient daughters I collected as well, who would realise only when the "time" to get

married *actually* came, that their "freedoms" were heavily circumscribed, especially when they threatened existing caste-class hierarchies.

This was the case with Ragini, a 29-year old lawyer from the Tamil-Brahmin community, who was the only child of her parents, in love with a man from another caste.

The (restricted) freedom to say yes: Ragini

My first conversation with Ragini took place when she was in Canada*, where she was then pursuing her LLM degree and working part time as a paralegal. Ragini started by telling me that although she was born into a Tamil Brahmin community, she had been born and brought up in Delhi and saw herself as a "Delhi-ite", treating her Tam-Brahm roots as primarily a cultural identifier, which shaped her family's interests in food, arts and music, rather than a structure that governed her life. She thought of her upbringing as much more cosmopolitan, influenced by Delhi's cultural field. Her parents- a doctor father and home maker mother had always prioritized education and encouraged her ambitions. As an only child, Ragini had felt cherished, indulged and loved, and never had any reason to believe that her parents would ever stand in the way of her happiness. Their pride when she left for Canada for her degree seemed to support this confidence.

However, two years later, that belief shattered. When Ragini disclosed that she was in love with a North Indian classmate from a different caste-community, and wanted to marry him, "all hell broke loose". Her mother, in particular, was beside herself and interpreted Ragini's choice as a personal betrayal of the trust they had reposed in her.

Things exacerbated further when COVID-19 struck and Ragini was unable to visit home due to visa restrictions. Isolated in Canada, Ragini watched as her mother's health declined, her parents blamed her for their misery, and accused her of abandoning them to live her own "selfish life" in a different continent. They were extremely angry that Ragini had even *considered* choosing a boy from outside the Tam-Brahm community, and could not see beyond the disgrace Ragini's love interest would bring to the family. For nearly a year, Ragini's mother refused to speak to her, and when she did, conversations quickly devolved into heated arguments and name-calling from her mother's end.

Ragini's shock was visceral. She spoke to me in the midst of this turmoil, bursting into tears while recounting her situation, and in utter shock and disbelief at her parents' reaction. While she had always kept her dating life private, believing it not "respectful" to discuss such matters with parents, she had never imagined that marriage would trigger such vehement resistance, especially on the subject of caste. As a progressive, liberal thinker, Ragini was aghast that something like caste could matter so much to her educated parents in the 21st century.

Her boyfriend, Rohan, was most sympathetic, and even tried making efforts to gain favour with her parents, trying to convince them of the sincerity of his intentions, but her parents refused to relent. Her mother called her ungrateful and shameless, blamed her for bringing dishonour to the family and cast aspersions on her character- all of which deeply hurt Ragini, who herself spiralled into depression.

This was also the first time in her life, Ragini told me, that her parents brought up the fact that they *regretted* having only a daughter as their single child. All her life, Ragini shared, her parents had never made her feel less than in any way for being a daughter. However, in the

midst of flaring tempers and angry fights, her mother reminded her of what she owed them, *because* she was their only *daughter*. In her parents' logic, had she been a son, marrying "out" would not bring the same disgrace to the lineage. However, as a daughter wanting to marry into a different, non-Brahmin (although upper caste) community, she was letting down not just her parents but her entire extended family and circle of relatives. They also feared becoming tainted by association, as they might face ostracization from others in the community for allowing their daughter to marry beneath their caste.

The emotional blackmail and unrelenting pressure Ragini faced to call off her engagement for nearly eighteen months to break up with her boyfriend was colossal. Her *physical* distance from Delhi, Ragini confided, became the only buffer that enabled resistance. She began searching frantically for a job in Canada as soon as her degree ended, and decided to apply for a permanent residency without informing her parents- she wanted to be financially independent of their support in order to stick to her stance. Therapy helped her confront her fear, and she finally told her parents that she would not call off her relationship, but she would also *not* marry without their blessing. For the next year, both Ragini and Rohan kept making efforts to win over her parents' trust using every possible means to cajole them.

It was the eventual intervention of a Delhi-based spiritual *guruji*, who both families incidentally reposed great faith in, that shifted her parents' stance. Nearly three years since the time she first discussed Rohan with her parents, they finally agreed to the marriage- but not without conditions. The couple agreed to have two sets of religious wedding ceremonies, honouring both families' traditions to keep the parents happy, along with various *pujas* that neither of them believed in, but were deemed important by Ragini's parents to ward off the evil luck the marriage might bring. While Ragini had wanted to do a simple court registered marriage

ceremony herself, she told me that after "giving her parents so much grief" with the choice of her husband, these were "small sacrifices".

What struck me was how a sense of guilt took over Ragini once approval was granted. Even though she had initially believed her parents were entirely in the wrong for opposing her marriage, Ragini was wracked with guilt for putting her parents in a position of subservience and shame in front of the extended family. This feeling, and a desire to "compensate", became the paramount emotions that dictated how her wedding proceeded, sometimes even at the cost of her own, and Rohan's comfort. Ragini did not discuss much about her wedding day other than mentioning that it was difficult, dismissing it with an *'all's well that ends well'*.

Ragini's story was one of eventual triumph- she managed to convince her parents of her love and used the fact that she was their only child to secure their blessing for her union by practising a form of 'dutiful love' that proved its sincerity through persistence and perseverance. It was a difficult, emotionally draining process, but one in which eventually things worked out, through Ragini and Rohan's desire to "not give up". However, even though the ordeal ended happily for the couple, the process did disillusion Ragini to a large extent about the way she *thought* her parents were, viz the harsh reality, taunts and reminders about her gender she experienced. She emerged a changed person, one who couldn't relate to her parents in the same way any longer. She had uncovered a new, unfamiliar and deeply conservative side to her parents, which she found extremely hard to justify or rationalise.

This disjuncture, between daughters' perceptions of their parents as progressive and the sudden reassertion of caste-class norms during marriage negotiations constituted a recurring rupture in my conversations, though it did not always come as a complete surprise. Many daughters

anticipated this possibility throughout their lives- they had internalised deeper anxieties long before marriage negotiations actually began, and had been pre-emptively adjusting their choices in an effort to avoid confrontation for years. This is because even the most loved, supported and encouraged daughters recognized that their parents' latent conservatism and orthodox views- especially regarding caste, class and religion- could erupt at any point, especially when it came to the subject of marriage. Marriage, as they understood, was an intensely public, reputation-bearing social event with collective consequences- not just one concerning only them or their individual desires.

This is why, many "good daughters" either "chose well" in the first instance, picking carefully curated partners who would fit parental expectations, or laboured so intensely to convince their parents of the "sincerity" of their love and the "appropriateness" of their choices. In most instances, the "shock" or sense of "betrayal" felt by daughters like Anusha and Ragini was that of *degree*, as they recognized, probably for the first time, just *how* regressive or patriarchal their parents could be. Wanting to exercise even *slightly* more agency than expected (rejecting a "suitable" arranged match, loving someone outside their caste or religion, or insisting on a partner parents deemed unsuitable) carried the legitimate risk of rupturing the relationship entirely.

For most daughters, this emotional calculus foreclosed the possibility of outright defiance. The knowledge that in a competition between their *individual* happiness and societal expectations, parents would almost always choose the latter came as a sobering realization. Having grown up with the belief that they were equal to sons in every aspect, it was in the course of *marriage* negotiations that daughters often faced an existential crisis, struggling to make sense of their parents' worldview, (which was so far removed from their own), and of the contradictory

messages about their value and worth, which were tied with even more sharply with performance of good daughterhood in marriage than in educational pursuits.

Given the high stakes and intense emotional pressures associated with the marriage question, it was unsurprising for me to find that there were rarely, if *ever*, *any* young women I met who had married *against* their parents' wishes, in their absence, or without their (eventual) blessing. This pattern of course has class-related inflections- the idea of an elopement is decidedly at odds with the norms of respectable femininity- stigmatized, risky and virtually unimaginable with the middle classes (Allendorf 2013; Donner and Santos 2016).

In all my years conducting fieldwork, I met only *one* exception- Gina, an upper-caste IT consultant, whose decision to elope marked a rare breach in this landscape of compliance. Yet, even her story, while atypical, reveals the limits of defiance and the extent to which even "disobedience" ultimately returns to the logic of social reproduction. I recount Gina's story of elopement (and the elaborate process of obfuscation and class-appropriate re-branding of her wedding that followed) not because it stands outside these norms, but precisely because it illustrates how powerful the gravitational pull of good daughterhood remains, even when daughters momentarily step beyond its bounds.

Post-facto approval: Gina

Gina, 31, is a software engineer and product manager based out of London. She grew up in a close-knit, conservative family from a small Brahmin community from Jharkhand. Although Gina's parents were relatively well-off, and she grew up all over the country before settling in Delhi, thanks to her father's elite government job, Gina knew early on that her parents held

rigid views about marriage, respectability, and even daughters in general. Like many other daughters mentioned earlier in my study, Gina too, grew up being told stories of her birth being mourned by the family, being asked to cook and clean when her brother was not, and being repeatedly reminded to behave like a "good girl"- dress modestly, avoid male friends, never date, and focus on studies. Like Nayantara, she too recounted a story of how the slight suspicion that she had "too many male friends" had led her to be banished to her grandmother's home for two months when she was in grade ten, only being allowed to return home when her exam results reflected that she was in fact doing well at school and not "distracted".

By the time she turned eighteen, conversations around her impending wedding became serious. Gina was expected to get married as soon as her engineering degree was complete, and relatives had started discussing her arranged marriage proposals already. A well-timed stroke of luck intervened: Gina secured a coveted placement at a major IT firm in her final year, that required a short training stint in the UK. Convincing her parents that she would return to get married to a boy of her choice after her "last hurrah" in a new country, Gina left for UK soon after graduation.

As luck would have it, in the UK, Gina ended up befriending Jack, a British co-worker who expressed an interest in dating her and, in Gina's words, "opened her eyes" to a completely "new way of thinking". Jack's care, gentleness, emotional intelligence and consideration for Gina was radically different from all the men she had grown up around. Their relationship began cautiously and covertly, and Gina was hesitant of labelling it as a "serious" since she knew very well that someone like Jack would never be accepted by her family as an actual suitor.

When Gina returned to India for a brief break from her training, she was immediately overwhelmed by a conveyor belt of arranged marriage suitors her parents had lined up. In their anxiety to get Gina married "as soon as possible", they did not even wait to reach home from the airport before listing out all the people she was expected to meet during her India visit. Gina described the weeks that followed as "extremely suffocating"- being forced to meet men she found entirely incompatible, being chided when the proposed alliances didn't work out, and even being rejected by some men for her "dark colour" or for disclosing prior relationships. She described each man she met as a "little worse than the other", and soon realised that the kind of marriage such alliances would lead to was not what she wanted. This phase also cemented her feelings for Jack- she realised she had truly fallen in love with him, but had been unable to accept it for fear of what it might mean. When she tried confiding in her younger brother about wanting to marry for love, he berated her for bringing disgrace to the family name and threatened to tell their parents about her unscrupulous desires.

Gina returned to the UK, armed with the conviction that the only way out of a forced arranged marriage was to formalise her union with Jack without her parents' knowledge. In her words, it was "extreme desperation" and a "sense of claustrophobia" when imagining her future, that gave her the strength to take the bold step she had feared. She requested for an extension in the UK through her office, buying time for herself as she gathered her courage. A few weeks later, with Jack's unwavering support, the couple got married quietly in a civil ceremony with only two close friends for attendance. Gina shared that she was so guilty in what she was doing by excluding her parents, that she requested Jack to not invite *his* parents to the wedding either, despite their consistent encouragement of the alliance and them living in the same city. This was her small way of showing allegiance to her family even in the act of disobedience.

Once the ceremony was complete, Gina confessed everything to her parents in an email (she said she did not have the guts to do so in person or on call). Their reaction was explosive. As predicted, her parents were horrified and indescribably angry. They flew to the UK immediately, with the intention of forcing Gina to annul her marriage and to take her back home. Gina spoke of the awful fighting that ensued, where she was confident her own father would physically *strangle* her to death, in her own home, had her husband had not intervened and threatened to call the police. Gina's mother told her that "she wished she had poisoned her daughter the day she was born", so they would not have to witness this shame. Her statement, more than the actual violence or threat of it, Gina told me, has remained seared in her memory even today.

When Gina's parents realised that the situation was not in their control any longer, they returned to India and came up with a plan to legitimize the wedding and manage the fallout. Gina was given strict instructions to not disclose her wedding to *anyone,* to delete her social media and make sure there were no pictures of her and Jack on the internet anywhere. They devised a plan to have a Hindu wedding in a temple ceremony as soon as possible. Unfortunately, things got delayed due to the pandemic and Gina could not return to India for nearly two years due to visa restrictions- during which time, her mother's constant concern was to ensure that Gina did not accidentally get pregnant and spoil their plot. The charade was kept up for the intervening time, with Gina and Jack pretending only to be co-workers in their office so that word of their relationship did not accidentally leak.

In December 2022, finally, the couple returned to India, and a wedding ceremony was held in the local temple of their village deity (Gina joked that her parents overcompensated for the wrong credentials of the groom by being *extra* religious in everything else). Coincidentally, the

local media even covered the wedding, presenting it as a matter of honour that a white man embraced Hindu rituals so beautifully- something that Gina's parents capitalised on in presenting Jack as an ideal groom for Gina to the rest of the family. Even though some extended family members still boycotted the wedding, Gina's parents were able to publicly proclaim that they were willing and progressive parents who did not want to stand in the way of their daughters' dreams, thereby refashioning her "love" marriage as pre-arranged with their consent after all. Things were salvaged publicly, even as many costs were paid in private to successfully enable this.

Gina's case reveals how transgressions can be reabsorbed into normative frameworks when they serve class mobility. Although her parents initially experienced marriage as an unforgivable rupture, what ultimately enabled them to accept and publicly reframe the union was hypergamy. In the Indian context, hypergamy in marriage- marrying "up" in ways that secure or enhance class and class status- remains central to matrimonial expectations, especially for daughters (Kaur, S. Bhalla, et al. 2016; Mohanadoss 1995). For families like Gina's, moral boundaries could be bent if the outcome still consolidated social capital. While marrying a foreigner violated the cultural and moral norms she had been raised to uphold, it simultaneously offered a transnational form of upward mobility for Gina.

As scholarship on the "transnational middle class" discusses (Constable 2010; Derné 2005; Radhakrishnan 2013; Upadhyay 2004), migration, Western residence, and access to foreign labour markets continue to function as powerful and even aspirational status symbols for affluent, upper-middle class Indians. Jack's whiteness, professional stability, and British nationality could thus be re-coded as evidence that Gina, as a member of this transnational middle class, was not bringing dishonour to her family, because she was effectively *not*

marrying *down*- a key criterion for acceptable daughterly conduct. Her parents' eventual acceptance rested not on recognising romantic love, but on finding a socially legible way to narrate the marriage as hypergamously advantageous.

Today, Gina has a complicated and strained relationship with her parents. Although she hasn't forgiven her parents for how they initially reacted to her wedding, she is happy that she was able to assuage some of her guilt by the wedding she had later on, which allowed her parents to "save face" in front of society. Gina is still regularly reminded that she transgressed her boundaries in her choice to marry Jack, and routinely guilted into being an *even more caring* daughter as a way of atoning her wrong- to which she "willingly" consents. Overall, though, she is happy that she at least *has* a relationship with her parents even today, despite some of the underlying resentment on both ends.

Gina's story underscores a pattern that ran through all the narratives in this chapter- even when daughters disagreed with their parents, resisted arranged marriages, or chose partners independently, they continued to orient their behaviour toward *good daughterhood.* Although her case is an important outlier in method, it is not necessarily so in meaning. Here too, marriage ultimately reaffirmed the centrality of daughters in maintaining family honour and social reproduction. Even in transgression, Gina worked to minimize "betrayal", restore her parents' public standing, and felt deeply obliged to fulfill her filial obligations- a reminder that the emotional architecture of dutiful love extends far beyond the boundaries of compliance.

*

Going through the cases discussed in this section, including those marked as disobedient or disgraceful, it becomes amply evident that even moments of shock, betrayal, or resentment did not release daughters from the moral demands of good daughterhood. These ruptures were instead absorbed through the continued practice of dutiful love- whether by persevering in persuasion, consenting to delay, or reworking their choices to remain intelligible to their parents. However, despite the negotiations and assertions of agency that unfolded around partner choice, one interesting insight from all these stories was that the question of *marriage itself* was never treated as optional. Notwithstanding their differences, the ultimate line that daughters did not cross was the *refusal* of marriage altogether- for most, it was not even a subject of debate. But what happened when daughters *could not*, or *would not* marry? How does this "choice" get interpreted within the family? What are its consequences?

In the next and final section on this theme, I discuss the case of the truly *disappointing* daughters- the unmarried, single or divorced daughters, who, with time, came to the unfortunate realisation that all their educational accomplishments, professional success and emotional care meant precious little to their parents, if they failed the ultimate litmus test of good daughterhood- that of *being married*.

This realisation is also when the ephemeral and temporal limits of daughterhood come most sharply into view. While the relationship of daughterhood was seen as permanent and enduring by all my respondents, their physical *presence* in the natal home was tolerable only temporarily. Contravening the expectation to "leave" in time, overstaying their welcome in their natal homes, some found, endangered their status as good daughters- *irrespective* of whatever else they did or accomplished in life. I detail some of these instances and their implications in the following pages.

Part Three: Elongated Waithood - Disappointing Daughters

> *"Hi. I'm Monica. I'm 29. My elder sister Daisy is just turning 36. We are a nuclear family- parents and two daughters. And before you ask, yes, both of us are unmarried. I think this was the thing- the questions we faced, the remarks we faced in normal life- from society, from everyone, even in job interviews. That was what made me reach out when I read about your research. I wanted to talk about it. I felt I could help with your work because it was linked with our life."*

Monica began our first conversation this way. Her introduction foregrounded what she felt was the most relevant fact about herself for a study of daughterhood- not her education, occupation, interests, but the fact that she and her sister were "*still unmarried"*. She felt this is what made her a "good candidate" for my research. Like many other daughters I spoke with, especially those who were slightly older, the marriage question inevitably evoked strong responses, often being the source of much conflict within their homes, becoming a defining part of their relationship with parents.

Incidentally, Monica's elder sister, Daisy, who I spoke with separately, had also introduced herself similarly, albeit with a mixture of pride and resignation at her "exceptional" status. Daisy was aware that she was an anomaly even before we started speaking. A good-looking, educated, professionally qualified, working young women from a respectable middle-class family, who was 36, and still unmarried? She was bound to be asked "what went wrong", and the answer was not straightforward.

Monica and Daisy were not wrong in presuming that their age and exceptional unmarried status would be of interest to a project on modern daughterhood and its contradictions in contemporary middle-class India, a country where singleness is not just unusual but also seen as socially unintelligible. From a purely statistical perspective, Daisy was undoubtedly an outlier in a country where the percentage of women aged 35-39, across all classes, who had never married was less than 1%, having grown only from 0.54% in 1971 to 1.01% over a fifty-year period from 1971-2011(Yadav, Singh, and Vishwakarma 2017).

In her book, *Being Single in India*, Sarah Lamb looks at the perplexing question of single women in India- and why it remains so difficult for women in India to *exist* without a partner. Notwithstanding the ubiquitous assumptions around universality of marriage prevalent in public and media discourses, and the significance of marriage as a source of respectability for women, or its critical role in social reproduction, which many other scholars have discussed for long (Chacko 2003; Kaur and Palriwala 2014; Radhakrishnan 2009; Thapan 2009), Lamb makes the argument that "an easily overlooked feature of Indian patrilineal kinship systems that makes being single so challenging for women is that women have essentially *no secure kinship without marriage* - and in India, secure kinship is crucial for life itself" (Lamb 2022:6 Emphasis added). While many of the young women I spoke with were well educated, professionally qualified, working and financially independent, the idea of lifelong singledom scarcely featured as a liveable future for an Indian woman. "*Everyone eventually needs a life partner*", I would hear often in my interviews, "*and if you want to live in India, marriage is the only way you can have that*."

So far removed is the idea of the single, never married woman from normative familial structures and cultural permissibility, argues Melisa Butcher (2022), that this *specific* kind of

never-married singleness constitutes a "category of difference" onto itself, operating as a form of stigma, and a cause of "incommunicable pain that reconfigures women's subjectivities and their relationship with the outside world" (2022:00). Based on her fieldwork among single women in Delhi, Butcher points out how in India, being *single* is synonymous with being *wrong.* In such an articulation, the unmarried status of young women does not merely signify their unattached situation, rather, it becomes a *moral* affliction, representative of a *failing*, one which society demands answers for- both from women *and* from their parents. Marriage, or the lack of it, then plays an important role in shaping the lives of young girls and in re-defining the parent-daughter relationship.

Among my respondents, I found that marriage emerged not just as a means for single women to secure kinship in their marital homes as a future-proofing strategy, but also given its key significance in social, cultural, symbolic terms, it was crucial for ensuring the maintenance and survival of daughters' kinship bonds with their *own* parents, both in the present and in the future. As earlier sections show, among the middle classes, the "right kind" of marriage was critical as a daughterly obligation, part of what good daughters "owed" their families for years of parental investment.

Such a perception of marriage reformulates it as a responsibility and duty, one which places immense pressure on the young girls I interviewed. Not only were they expected to marry as an *inevitability* (only one of my respondents seriously spoke of eschewing marriage as an option- but after nearly a decade of trying unsuccessfully to get married), but it was critical for the parent-daughter relationship that the daughters married *well* and to the *right* kind of person. The importance accorded to the issue of marriage was so extreme that it predictably became

the biggest bone of contention between parents and daughters, one with the potential of fraying and uprooting the very kin relations that daughters were once very proud of and grateful for.

This section deals with the aspect of singledom as a moral "wrong" that Butcher outlines, and its attendant consequences. In my conversations I found otherwise well-to-do and independent young women distraught with their single status, who were battling low self-esteem as a result of their unmarried status, despite their many accomplishments in other areas of life (Thapan 2003:77). As Sassler & Leichter (2020) point out, within the dominant gender discourse, marriage is seen as a life achievement, a mark of status and a reason to celebrate for women as well as their families. For otherwise accomplished women who had failed to marry within "respectable" time limits, I found them contending with a feeling of failure both at an individual as well as familial level- that they had *let down* their parents by failing in this "game". Their unmarried status was a blot not just on them, but on their *parents' reputation*, since it reflected something going wrong with their parents' upbringing or a fault in their character which could also be perceived as such. Their sense of shame, pain and stigma was shared by their parents as well, sometimes more than by the daughters themselves.

This made marriage a key defining aspect of the intergenerational contract, one I argue is explicitly gendered, since the rules, even as they did exist for sons, were far stricter for daughters. Their continued presence at home beyond an acceptable timeline swiftly turns from being perceived as a rational, conservative and praiseworthy approach followed by young women on the serious subject of marriage, to being seen as representing stubbornness, choosiness and an uncompromising attitude that is unbecoming of a good daughter- one who has clearly overstayed her welcome in her affinal home. Shalini's story captures this feeling.

Overstayed welcomes: Shalini

For Shalini, a 32-year-old management consultant, the realisation that she was doing something wrong and that her relationship with her parents was worsening took a long time to admit. Shalini is the only daughter of her middle-class parents who have been living in Delhi since the 1980s. Her father has retired as a high-ranked government employee in a PSU, and her mother was a schoolteacher until a decade ago when she took a voluntary retirement. They belong to a Hindu upper-caste, moderately liberal family. Much like others from her age, class and caste background, Shalini grew up with what she describes as middle-class values- good education, professional achievement and a taboo on dating. Shalini was always taught that engaging in relationships with boys was not what girls from "respectable families" did. She followed every rule, attended a girls only college, enrolled in coaching immediately after and secured admission to a prestigious MBA programme right after graduating.

Her parents were extremely proud of her and permitted her to pursue her degree far away, reminding her as she left of the "trust" they reposed in her to not to do anything that would "bring the family shame". They also expected her to get married to a boy of their choice once she completed her degree, in accordance with the "deadline age" of 25 that her parents had set for her wedding.

On campus, Shalini led the "dual life" that characterised many of my respondents' college years. She began secretly dating a classmate, a finance major from a well-to-do Marwari family, a chartered account who was eventually offered one of the best banking jobs in the summer placements. Even as she was transgressing some of the boundaries her parents had set for her through engaging in this relationship, Shalini insisted that it was much more like an "arranged

marriage courtship" to begin with- she was not interested in youthful experimentation or "timepass" relationships. Her own Baniya caste background, her father's own CA background and the prestigious educational as well as professional qualifications of her boyfriend made Shalini confident that this was a match her parents would approve of, even though her partner was Maharashtrian. Minor community and regional differences, Shalini told me, would not have been a problem, if the couple conducted themselves well and respectfully approached parents for approval as soon as their degree was over, as they had initially planned to do.

Unfortunately, however, by the time they graduated, the couple called off their engagement due to irreconcilable differences regarding future living arrangements. It was in fact, Shalini's desire to live independently with her husband after her marriage, *so that* she could take care of *her* parents as much as her in-laws, that eventually became the death knell for her relationship. Shalini said she was not completely averse to a joint family setup, and even expressed willingness to be an ideal *bahu,* but once the couple had got a footing of their own, together.

However, her boyfriend Shantanu was adamant that he could "never leave his old parents alone" and interpreted her desire to be in a nuclear setup as a "sign of selfishness". When Shalini, who identifies herself as a feminist, pointed out the hypocrisy in Shantanu's stance, given her own aging parents had only one daughter, he dismissed her argument on the basis that "*girls' parents are already conditioned to expect loneliness in their old age*". The argument escalated into larger questions of the kind of relationship Shantanu expected Shalini would have with her parents post marriage, and the two parted ways.

Ending this relationship constituted Shalini's first major, though invisible, act of dutiful love- in which she readily and silently sacrificed her romantic love to ensure she could remain a good daughter to her parents, without them ever knowing.

On returning to Delhi after her MBA, Shalini poured herself into her work, building a stellar consulting career over the next few years- getting promoted thrice, switching firms, and spending a large amount of time travelling across the world. Today, she is extremely successful at her job, earning nearly a salary that places her in the top 0.01% of India's paid workforce (PTI 2024).

However, her parents' initial pride at her accomplishments has turned into dismay, and increasingly anger, especially since Shalini entered her thirties unmarried. Her parents tried everything- from matrimonial websites, family networks, astrologers to brokers- to find a suitable groom for their daughter, but each failed match only intensified their frustration, eventually leading them to blame Shalini for not having found someone *herself.*

> *"It is quite ironic, that the same parents who told me all my life not to date anyone, are now so disappointed with me that I don't have a boyfriend. What about all the rules I was told? And if this is what they wanted, they should have conditioned me differently… The one relationship I have, I called off for* ***their*** *sake, and they don't even know. And now I am treated like a pariah for not being like "other girls". How is that fair?"*

Shalini's transition from 'Good Daughter' to a disappointing one was slow yet steady. With every passing year, the fights between Shalini and her parents only grew, and her birthdays became a stark reminder of her unmarried status rather than a reason to celebrate. She started

fleeing from home every opportunity she got, even resorting to hiding the news of her friends' engagements or marriage ceremonies from her parents to avoid showdowns. Each time Shalini's mother saw pictures of a wedding, laments about Shalini's misfortune, bad *karma* or fears about her future would start again. As a headstrong person who disliked such labels and resisted them vociferously, Shalini's parents' attempts to have *'hawans'* or *pujas* to ward off her ill-luck also became a bone of contention. Her fights with her father, who had approached many astrologers to help with Shalini's marriage were even more intense, with the two of them going months without talking after each outburst-often preceded by a failed match.

The pandemic intensified everything. Trapped at home, she cycled through anger, guilt, shame and frustration. To make matters worse, Shalini did not have a fair complexion, and her weight also grew in these intervening years, becoming the subject of passing remarks by her mother, who Shalini felt could only view her worth through the prism of marriageability. This further destroyed Shalini's self-confidence. The pressure to find a "good match", she told me, had become counterproductive, and her parents' insistence to find someone who would want to get married *immediately* was making things worse. Some of the men who she had started speaking to, through dating and matrimonial websites saw the urgency as a mark of desperation or some kind of "defect" and never got back after their "meetings". By 2022, overwhelmed by spiralling emotions and passive suicidal thoughts, Shalini entered full-time therapy and started considering moving out.

What had triggered the avalanche, Shalini confessed, was a taunt her father made in one of their arguments, about the "extra" years he had been feeding and paying for his daughter. Although this was said in passing in a fit of anger, the remark stung Shalini terribly, and she offered to pay her share of rent and household expenses, which was summarily refused by her

parents and further escalated tensions. Shalini felt like she was trapped in an endless, hopeless, helpless situation. As a daughter, she was not being allowed to contribute to the family income, because that would affect her father's pride. But she was also continually being reminded that she had overstayed her welcome, without being allowed to leave and live separately.

Exhausted, she shared with me this message she had written in her diary in mid-2022, a few weeks before her 32nd birthday-

> *"I am tired of fighting. I am tired of hearing people shout at each other. I am tired of being told to get out of the house. I am just tired of so much conflict around me. I am tired. I don't think I can take it in life anymore. I don't know how I will survive in future. Because I have had my quota of fighting and abusing and a toxic environment. If being with someone means more of this then I am happy alone. I have my own back. But I don't think I can take anymore unpleasantness around me. And this scares me. Because I don't think it is possible for life to go on without any conflict."*

By the end of the year, Shalini shifted to a separate flat in Gurgaon, despite her parents' protests. Although the distance has helped reduce some of the strain between her and her parents, her singlehood is still very much a cause for concern. In one of our later meetings, Shalini's mother asked me if *I* could suggest any good boys for Shalini, or convince her to try harder to find a boy. In an emotional voice she admitted,

> "*Shalini has been such a good girl all her life. She has never ever given us any trouble. Only in this one thing [marriage], she missed the mark somehow (chook ho gayi usse) ... We don't know what happened…"*

What Shalini's mother told me, and what conversations with Shalini also indicated is the extent to which Shalini's failure to get married "in time" was intertwined with her failure to measure up as a "good daughter". It was not just Shalini's own future that her parents were worried about (which was obviously an important factor), but the notion that Shalini had become a source of humiliation for *them*- demonstrated by their constant exhortation to Shalini that it had become difficult for them to "step out and show their face to others" in public gatherings, where they were constantly asked about their unmarried daughter.

While young, unmarried daughters being a source of anxiety or worry is not a novel phenomenon in the Indian context, what makes the situation of young girls like Shalini peculiar is the *unexpected change* in the metric with which their worth is measured in parents' eyes, combined with the specific set of circumstances that facilitate such a situation.

For many of my respondents, who had spoken of extreme levels of support for their educational and professional goals from their parents growing up, the sudden fall from grace for not being married in time was astonishing, forcing them to re-evaluate what the way in which they had been performing "good daughterhood" all their lives. Like Shalini, they began questioning what their degrees and professional accomplishment amounted to, if eventually everything had to be disregarded in the face of their unmarried status by parents, and by society at large. This, in some ways, is part of the inherent contradictions of modern daughterhood in India today- where despite doing everything right, daughters could not be *more* wrong.

Waithood and gendered worries

In their book *Waithood in the 21st Century*, scholars Inhorn and Smith-Hefner (2020) discuss the experiences of young people all over the world, who voluntarily and otherwise are living in a state of "waithood"[14], most often as a result of global trends of delay and decline in marriage and childbirth. Some scholars have even christened these trends developments of the "most fundamental social changes" in human history in the 21st century (Roser 2014).

For many women however, this waithood is not unintentional, but *aspirational*, deliberate, and a proclamation of their refusal to settle- where young women *choose* to put off their marriage and childbirth to complete further education, build careers, travel, or pursue growth. It is in some ways viewed as part of a conscious decision of investing in oneself, motivated by women's desire to "make something of themselves" before committing to an institution like marriage. Parents, too, encourage their daughters to "become something" before marrying (Alice W Clark 2016). Most of my respondents were also similarly inspired, and even assisted by their parents in these endeavours, as the previous chapters noted.

However, in the Indian context, this waithood is precariously balanced and heavily gendered.

While initially welcomed, and even celebrated, when this period extends past an invisible threshold (most often late twenties), it transforms swiftly from a source of pride, an assertion of independence, to one of anxiety, disappointment, frustration and eventually stigma.

[14] The concept of "Waithood" was developed by political scientist Diane Singerman (2007) to describe the expanding period of time between adolescence and full adulthood as young people wait to secure steady employment and marry. In many instances, it is perceived as a period of forced stagnation, but this is not necessarily the case for everyone, especially women entering waithood voluntarily.

Extended singlehood can easily be perceived as "dangerous", especially for women (Rashi Bhargava and Chilana 2020; 2020), marking their behaviour as "deviant" or a "social concern". The explicitly gendered aspect of waithood is revealed in its transgression beyond socially acceptable timelines. Unlike young men who can inhabit "timepass" as a tolerated pre-marital phase (Jeffrey 2010), young women's waithood is scrutinized and morally policed to a far greater extent. Consequently, even though singlehood is not merely restricted to women, it is disproportionately *women*, whose life choices are questioned for not following the traditional path that is expected of them (Parikh 2018; Phadke 2007; Ronald and Nakano 2013).

For my respondents, this elongated waithood reflected an inherent contradiction between the dreams and aspirations that they had been told to pursue on the one hand, and the expectations around marriage that became an overwhelming concern as soon as they crossed a specific, and in their minds sudden, age threshold. Inevitably, this negatively impacted daughters who began to view themselves as a burden in their own homes, as unwelcome reminders of what they could not achieve.

Pertinently, the excessive focus on daughters' marriages that I found among *parents*, is not to suggest that they were operating in an insular bubble and were merely preoccupied with the "image" of an unmarried or single daughter, only working to diminish shame or embarrassment at a societal level or against the wishes of their daughters. Conversations with parents and family members repeatedly demonstrated pragmatic as well as emotional concerns, along with deep-seated anxieties about "leaving behind" unmarried daughters, or those who may not have a companion to put them through life. Some would speak of the risks that inherently associated with a single woman wanting to live a life on her own terms in a country like India, pointing to the extreme difficulties they anticipated their daughters to find themselves in if they were

alone. Concerns about safety and security, unsurprisingly, also featured prominently. Despite references to "happy single women" and "new-age", "empowered" Indian women becoming much more commonplace in public discourses and media representations, parents shared their apprehensions about their daughters living unfulfilling lives in the absence of a partner, presenting their views as only logical. As Kranti Sharma, a 55-year-old mother of two daughters asserted, "*har kisi ko ek jeevansaathi ki zarurat hoti hai- akele Jeevan kaatna aasaan baat nahi, khaskaar aurat ke liye" (everyone needs a partner in life, it's not easy to live life alone, especially for a woman).*

However, notwithstanding these sound arguments, it is undeniable that much of the worry that parents were carrying was a *gendered* worry, which existed despite daughters' proving their competence to lead their lives convincingly, of their own accord- the same rules, pressures, and anxieties, it was evident, did not apply to the case of sons and *their* marriages. Even when parents were extremely supportive of daughters who may wish to leave unhappy marriages, a similar conundrum of the single, unaccounted-for daughter in the home would ensue. Underneath lay the persistent expectation of patrilocality- daughters *must* eventually leave, and they *must* leave at the right time.

For some daughters, like Shalini, this realisation fractured the parent-daughter relationship, which could only be salvaged by moving out of their parents' houses altogether and finding their "own" space. In other instances, it led to daughters acquiescing to marriages arranged by parents, often to simply find a respectable exit out of their own homes, while in rare cases, it led to the abandonment of marriage as a goal altogether. However, in my research, I found that the latter was *only* possible through a renegotiation of the daughterhood contract itself,

conceivable only in cases where daughters were able to stand in the place of sons, and behave as *sons* would.

Voluntarily single: Anukriti

Anukriti, the 34-year-old, Bengali, upper-caste academic from the UK mentioned earlier, was among the very few who spoke of consciously rejecting marriage, although this had not always been her intention. Over the past decade, Anukriti had engaged in a string of romantic relationships, each of which had left her heartbroken. She had pursued various arranged matches that her parents had proposed, and had also briefly considered marrying one of them, before discovering extremely disturbing details about their past. At the age of thirty, desperate to get married, she found herself being strung along in a toxic, emotionally abusive relationship for three years, which she had struggled to get out of- until it escalated to physical violence. During all this time, she battled being labelled an outlier, and struggled with being unable to share the details of her romantic relationships and failures with her parents, even as they blamed her for not "trying hard enough".

Like some other daughters I spoke with, the combined pressures of being "respectable" and *not* pursuing love, while also "magically" being asked to shore up a suitable partner at the time of marriage meant that daughters often lived contradictory lives as a matter of routine- punished for engaging in romance, and punished for not having done so. They also feared being open about any disturbing or difficult situations they found themselves in, as they could never truly anticipate how parents would react to the knowledge that their "good daughters" were romantically (or sexually) active. As one of my younger respondents Hetal also shared, the confusing standards of "convenient liberalism" that parents espoused meant that daughters

could never really approach them if they found themselves in danger, or had actually undergone any kind of violent or sexually reprehensible trauma, since by design, they were expected to be "unaware" and "distanced" from these concerns- until of course it was time to get married. Questions or thoughts regarding alternate sexualities were, of course, not even admissible.

In Anukriti's case, years of such toxicity and abusive relationships had led her to the conclusion that the institution of marriage was stacked against women, and that she was perhaps better off without being married at all. She was also one of the only people I spoke with, who had mentioned wanting to stay *voluntarily* single, questioning the very foundation of marriage. Others, even when they critiqued the patriarchal aspects of marriage, would often reach the conclusion that marriage was an inevitability, if they wanted to remain a part of "society". Anukriti confessed that she too had, at one point, been obsessed with the idea of marriage. However, the experience of the past few years had left her emotionally and physically exhausted, and she had made her peace with abandoning the idea altogether, choosing instead to commit herself to academia.

The journey from obsession to acceptance has not been easy, either for Anukriti or her parents. But in Anukriti's case, her "exit" from the marriage conundrum was made possible by her taking up the role of the breadwinner in her family, becoming the proverbial "son" to her parents. For the past few years, Anukriti had been regularly sending a portion of her salary to maintain her parents' living standards, especially after her father's retirement. And in some ways, it was this dependence, on the financial support she gave to the family, that allowed her to continue on her path as an unmarried daughter, without much resistance from her parents- despite their grave disappointment in her choices.

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In each of the cases presented above, what is striking is the all-encompassing significance of marriage as a project for both parents and daughters, and the ways in which its success or failure can determine the fate of familial bonds. More particularly, it sheds light on how the place of a daughter within the family home remains precarious, despite claims of the middle classes towards practising a more gender-equal and progressive parenting.

Across the chapter's sections-whether in dutiful beginnings, redefined notions of love, or elongated waithood- marriage emerges not simply as a life stage but as a moral horizon that organises daughterhood itself. Parents may *encourage* daughters' education and careers, but this support is provisional, with marriage as its expected culmination. When that transition falters- through delay, refusal, or alternative arrangements, daughters' worth is recalibrated, with pride curdling into shame, and parental anxieties spilling into conflict. Asserting themselves against this horizon is made possible for many of these daughters only through financial independence- either through moving out, or by becoming the "son" of the family, as Shalini and Anukriti's cases revealed. Yet even this autonomy was not recognised as such, often recast as disappointment, selfishness, or over-qualification. Marriage thus crystallises the asymmetry between sons and daughters- while sons are bound by duty to remain, daughters must leave "on time." Failure to do so unsettles parental expectations and social standing alike.

Thinking about marriage related concerns in this way perhaps helps us understand the contradictions of modern daughterhood, and the inherent tensions in the evolving parent-daughter relationship among the middle classes more clearly. My fieldwork demonstrated that that even as parents were eager to support daughters in numerous ways, bringing them up with

the conviction that they are the "same" as sons, unresolved expectations of patrilocal residence for daughters ultimately meant that a daughter overstaying her welcome at home was bound to become a liability, irrespective of the strength of affection between her and her parents.

Parents struggled with not knowing how to rationalise her existence, and as a consequence, these daughters started finding themselves alienated in their own homes, reinforcing the stereotype that a daughter was in fact, a form of *paraya dhan.* Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates how an unmarried daughter becomes a litmus test for the limits of modernity in the middle classes- a reminder that even in families committed to equality, a daughter's life is still structured around a departure that must happen on time.

In the next chapter, I extent this argument further, outlining how the contradictions of daughterhood come to the fore on the subject of caregiving, where daughters are expected to simultaneously occupy an insider/outsider position- to have the responsibility to care, without any rights.

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VIII. The Double Duty of Daughterhood: Care & its Contradictions

"Caregiving for me has meant very different things in different ways. So from things like medical care, which is hospital appointments, doctors, medications, blood tests, following up on diet and nutrition, but it has also meant making sure she [my mother] is okay… parallelly, the thing that one needs [someone for] … like assisting for basic activities, like walks, to help her carry out basic functions for things that one may need or not need. Some entertainment also has to be a part of this, so some recreational activities [as well] … It has been a very big basket… Personally, I think it's a lot to unpack. If you ask me what, how to define this care, it's very hard, because it's a bunch of activities, schedules, routines, timelines, medications and more- there is a lot to do and to look after. I'm struggling to explain it, but when I think about it, I feel that there is so much to so much in terms of activities that I do in the form of care, it's overwhelming."

- Razia, 29, social worker and researcher, on being asked to define caregiving

The many facets of care

Despite the abundance of recent scholarship highlighting the significance of caregiving and its centrality to social, economic and cultural reproduction, care remains a notoriously difficult theoretical concept to define. Traditional economic conceptions excluded caregiving from market-based notions of work, relegating it to the private sphere of the family and justifying it as altruistic or biologically driven human behaviour that did not necessitate sustained analytical examination (Becker 1991). The close association of care with emotional engagement and personal connection further complicates its conceptualisation, as care motivated by a genuine

concern for the well-being of another person is often implicitly assumed to not constitute "work", particularly when it is not remunerative (Tronto 1995; Bertram and Ehlert 2011). Such an understanding is most evident in expectations surrounding *maternal* care, where caregiving becomes fused with a morally transcendent, biologically innate and naturalised conception of femininity- either as a quality that women uniquely possess, or one that caregivers acquire through the act of caring itself (Poole and Isaacs 1997; Stimpson et al. 1991). Carol Gilligan(1993) and Ned Nodding's(1995) influential work developing a feminist ethic of care since the late 90s, advocating for women's unique voice and their ability to care differently challenged dominant male-centric and competitive moral frameworks by foregrounding women's relational ethics. Yet, this body of work has also been critiqued for reifying gendered stereotypes about women as inherently caring and altruistic (Hoagland 1991; Tronto 1995; Barnes 2012; Bertram and Ehlert 2011; Elana D. Buch 2015).

In contrast to this more emotionally situated understanding of care, feminist political economy approaches emphasise care as structured by institutions, cultural norms and material inequalities that reinforce pre-existing patriarchal traditions and systematically transfer burdens of care primarily on to women (Braunstein and Folbre 1999; England and Folbre 1999; Folbre 1983, 2012, 2014). As Nancy Folbre (2014)suggests, framing care in *ethical* rather than *economic* terms, where virtue is viewed as having its own reward, is to miss the larger picture about the actual *work* that caregiving involves. Consequently, recent feminist scholarship has foregrounded the economic, social and emotional penalties of care work, including the commodification and outsourcing of emotional labour itself to those with fewer resources (Garey and Hansen 2011; Hochschild 2003, 2014). Longitudinal analyses, such as Claudia Goldin's work on women's labour force participation in the US, demonstrate how unpaid domestic labour contributes to reduced lifetime earnings and persistent gender wage gaps

between men and women (Goldin 2021; Goldin and Katz 2008). Globally, caregiving continues to produce marriage and motherhood penalties for women (Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007; Wood 2023), even as anthropological scholarship highlights its indispensability to familial and social reproduction (Bakker 2007; Kofman 2012; Razavi 2015).

A crucial distinction across this literature regards the *kind* of care that is being analysed. As scholars like Buch note, 'care' simultaneously connotes both *affective concern* (caring about) and *practical action* (caring for); this duality sustains the assumption that caring labour is most naturally motivated by caring feelings (2015:279). Accordingly, scholars working on care have increasingly attempted to incorporate both these dimensions in their work (Kleinman 2012; Zimmerman, Litt, and Bose 2006). In her work, Tronto usefully divides the act of caring into four different constituent dimensions- "caring about", "taking care of" or "caring for", "caregiving" and "care receiving", each associated with distinct ethical values of attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness (1993: 127). In order to fully understand the scope of what caregiving entails, *which* aspect is being examined has now become as important a question as *who* the carer is.

While these are noteworthy advances that have greatly expanded how we understand care and its gendered dimensions today, both in terms of what it constitutes and what its costs are to the caregiver, much of the existing scholarship continues to look at caregiving with respect to women's capacity as *wives* or *mothers.* Little, if any attention, has been paid to the notion of *daughters* as caregivers even in the case of intergenerational discussions on care (Sandra O'Connell 2023). But why is this the case? And what are its implications?

The Indian scenario

In India, discussions of caregiving for elderly parents by children have, for the most part, focussed on the *practical* or *material* aspects of care, in which *sons* have traditionally been understood to "take care of" parents by residing with them in the same house, providing financial support and enabling their lives as a part of their religious or moral duty, and the "right way" of doing things (Croll 2006b). This is so because patrilineal belief systems, conventional family norms and the expectation of co-residence with sons in joint family systems are the most important means through which filial obligations towards parents are culturally effected (Croll 2006b; Gupta 2009; Lamb 2013; Ugargol and Bailey 2021). This emphasis, on the largely economic, practical aspect of intergenerational care is further shaped by a context of inefficient state and market systems, high income uncertainty and limited reliance on public welfare, which compels parents, especially from poorer backgrounds, to depend heavily on their sons to provide for them in the future- even explaining persisting son preference in the Indian context (Kadoya and Khan 2017; Tafuro 2020). When combined public narratives that position families (especially sons) as primary providers of elder care, legal frameworks that codify filial obligations, and co-residential arrangements that enable their enactment, it is unsurprising that discussions of caregiving with respect of sons in India have largely centred on their reliability as future "old-age support systems", rather than on affective or embodied dimensions of care.

Gendered divisions further entrench this separation. "Caring about" or "caring for" parents in emotional, physical or intimate ways, has rarely been considered the domain of sons. Even where elder care *has* been examined beyond its material provision, scholarly attention has tended to focus on the figure of the *daughter-in-law*, rather than sons, discussing how women in marital homes are expected to manage the everyday physical and emotional needs of ageing in-laws, and the difficulties faced by them (Samanta 2019; Vera-Sanso 1999).

But where does this leave *daughters* in conversations on elderly care?

Although the lack of focus on, and marginalisation of daughters as caregivers is not unique to India, its effects are particularly pronounced in a context shaped by patrilocal residence norms. Thus, at the same time as sons are considered the *budhape ka sahara* for Indian parents, whose futures are intimately tied with parental concerns for security, daughters are viewed as transient members of the family, who will leave for their "real homes" upon marriage (Sekher and Hatti 2007; Vatuk 1975). While some scholarship has documented daughters' roles as temporary or supplementary caregivers for their parents, (especially during periods of crisis), these contributions are typically characterised as episodic and unreliable in the long term (Grover 2009, 2011). As *paraya dhan,* daughters are expected to prioritize their marital families, and parental dependence on daughters, particularly *financial* dependence, is often stigmatized as a moral failure.

Recent shifts

In recent decades however, sweeping structural changes have precipitated shifts in cultural norms around elder care and reliance on sons (and their spouses) as primary support systems. Scholars have examined how processes such as urbanisation, migration, rising educational mobility, changing consumption practices and the perceived influence of "western values" eroded long-standing filial obligations, particularly those of sons (Dhar 2012; Gupta 2009; Lamb 2019a; Li and Guo 2022). In the last three decades, one of the most significant of changes affecting the Indian family has been the decline of large multigenerational joint households, spurred by the increasing occupational mobility of the young, greater urbanization, housing constraints and rising costs of living among other factors, which has weakened co-residence as the norm through which filial piety is operationalised in practice (Rajan and Balagopal 2017).

These trends are particularly pronounced in the urban context, and in families shaped by migration for education or employment (Latif and Kumari 2025). In India's cities, nearly 70% of the urban population is now estimated to live in nuclear households, albeit with considerable regional variation (Ambwani 2023; Chakravorty, Goli, and James 2021; Singh 2003). NFHS-5 data similarly reports nuclear family structures in 58.2% of households surveyed, with declining average household size (Open Government Data (OGD) Platform India 2022).

Alongside these shifts, growing generational tensions and resistance to co-residence, particularly among younger, working women have further unsettled established norms. Sons and daughters-in-laws are increasingly refusing to live lifelong with parents, who are often deemed to be authoritarian, "out-of-touch", "steeped in old ways" and more inclined to impose patriarchal restrictions that are unacceptable to modern couples (Croll 2006b:474; Goyal 2022; Khare 2022). Survey evidence reflects the disenchantment with elderly care- a 2019 nationwide study by the NGO HelpAge India found that a substantial proportion of urban, middle-class respondents between the ages of 30-50 reported low satisfaction, high fatigue and significant emotional strain associated with elder care, with 12% respondents categorising caregiving for parents or in-laws as a "severe burden" (Ram 2019). Publicised cases of elderly neglect and abuse, especially by sons in this class, have further fuelled public anxiety and prompted legal interventions mandating the maintenance of ageing parents.[15] A 2022 study stated that 35% of Indian elders suffered domestic abuse at the hands of their sons, while 21% reported abuse by

[15] In 2007, the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act was promulgated with the aim of providing financial security, welfare and protection for senior citizens, directing children to provide maintenance for their elderly parents and ensure their medical care (PRS n.d.). In 2019, an amendment to the act was promulgated in parliament to expand the scope of the act, focusing not just on essentials but on provision of healthcare, safety and security by children so as to allow senior citizens to lead a life of dignity, keeping in mind the physical and mental well-being of a parent (PIB 2022)

daughters-in-law, with the leading cause being disputes related to property and financial matters (Bureau 2025; Govil and Gupta 2016; Vats 2022).

In this context, emerging evidence suggests that it is *daughters,* both married and unmarried, who are emerging as future care givers for parents, especially in contexts where it is *emotional* well-being, rather than financial security that parents are looking for. Among urban, elite Indian families, declining fertility rates, decreasing son-preference and the rise of daughter-only households have further disrupted son-centred models of old-age support (Bhatnagar 2023). This shift in intergenerational caregiving structures, towards daughter care, which became more noticeable since the late 90s, has gained significant pace especially at the turn of the millennium (Sudha and Rajan 2003; Visaria 2023). Ugargol and Bailey's (2021) study in Kerala found that in situations where conventional support systems were disrupted, such as in the case of adult sons emigrating abroad, married *daughters*, more than daughters-in-law, were likely to take on greater parent-care care roles, effectively handling multiple commitments as they accommodated the needs of their own children as well as their parents. Technological mediation has further reduced the constraints of distance, enabling sustained involvement across households and cities. Supreme and High Court rulings in the past five years have also recognized the statutory and moral duty of daughters to care for parents in their old age as well as pay for their maintenance (Service 2023; Upadhyay 2024).

These changes suggest that at least among urban, educated and affluent Indians, daughterhood and its concomitant responsibilities are perhaps becoming a much longer and continued relationship than was expected in the past, extending beyond marriage and migration. As one of respondent daughters I interviewed poignantly remarked, "*Daughterhood is forever. There is no beginning or end. Once a daughter, I will always remain one… I won't stop being my parents' daughter when I get married*."

But what does this shift in expectations imply for these newly emerging "forever daughters" as I christen them? How are the demands of eldercare experienced, negotiated, and sustained by them, and what role does their gender have to play in shaping them? What are its consequences?

In this final chapter of this thesis, I discuss specifically the role of *daughters* as caregivers for elderly parents in India, situating their experiences in the face of changing intergenerational contract especially among neo-nuclear, urban, middle-class families. Through accounts of parental expectations, caregiving practices and their constraints, I analyse what it means for young Indian women to be 'good' daughters, keeping in mind the specific emotional and physical needs for caregiving parents have come to expect from their children, and its associated penalties.

Crucially, I acknowledge the kind of caregiving that *daughters* describe, which encompasses *both* emotional and material labour, distinguishing it from the traditional expectations placed on sons. Across my interviews, following this characterization, caregiving emerged as an expansive, demanding, and difficult-to-define practice, as illustrated by Razia's quote above of managing her mother's medical, emotional and everyday needs. For the purposes of this chapter therefore, I use care to refer to a set of ongoing, relational practices through which daughters attend to the physical, emotional and everyday needs of aging parents. Rather than treating these dimensions as analytically separable, I approach care as it is lived and described by daughters themselves- as a wide, often overwhelming set of responsibilities that unfold over time, and are deeply shaped by the gendered and changing expectations of daughterhood.

I argue that while the caregiving has emerged as an important site for the preservation, maintenance and even strengthening of the parent-daughter bond in the new middle classes, it

also entails an invisibilization of labour, reinforcement of gendered stereotypes, and the imposition of new, unrecognized burdens on daughters. Rather than indicating a shift in the value-worth associated with daughters, I suggest that care is the site where the contradictions of good daughterhood are most acutely revealed- cementing its status as a form of "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011) that daughters cannot escape.

The rest of the chapter is divided as follows:

Chapter Overview

Part One: Duty and Devotion discusses the *practice* of caregiving, how it is operationalised within middle class families and accounts of how daughters interpret them.

Part Two: Problems and Pressures sheds light on the gendered stereotypes that are reinforced through these practices of care, tying performances of good daughterhood with femininity.

Part Three: Dissonances and Paradoxes highlights the consequences of these changing role expectations, exposing the harms of caregiving beyond stereotyping. In this process, I bring out the limits and paradoxes of good daughterhood as a project of accumulating moral worth.

Part One: Duty and Devotion- The practice of caregiving

The practice of care

In line with the larger scholarly debates on what exactly encompasses care, in my discussions as well, despite an intuitive understanding of caregiving, most respondents found it difficult to *define* or *limit* care to a certain set of practices. Did it involve the mere physical act of looking after an ageing parent? Did it include emotional, affective aspects of ensuring well-being? Was it about financial support? Or was it a mixture of all of these things, to varying degrees?

In focus group discussions on the subject, most participants emphasized the *emotional labour* of caring over material provision. The financial aspect of care was not the primary concern highlighted as monetary considerations were, at best, a future anxiety (in a majority of cases they were even irrelevant due to the financial position of the families I was interviewing). However, most accounts seemed to suggest that caring was less a discrete set of tasks and more an ongoing orientation- one that required attentiveness, anticipation, and emotional availability over time. It was in discussing its smaller, constituent elements that the gendered dimensions of caring also became most apparent. Daughters described learning to care for their parents, especially mothers, from a young age, often without explicit instruction, explaining how this learning was woven into their everyday interactions and expectations, naturalised as a part of what it meant to be a daughter. I describe some of these accounts below.

Mothering my own mother: Razia

As Razia, herself a single daughter, explained, the societal expectation of being a daughter was intertwined with the "spirit of mothering", even when daughters were themselves children. For Razia, caring involved not merely the *actual act* of doing something for her mother, but also

included anticipating, thinking of, pre-empting and actively working to support her mother's needs in various ways- exactly as a mother herself would do. By way of example, Razia spoke of how she felt responsible not just for ensuring that her ailing mother took her medicines on time or exercised regularly, but also making sure she was never bored or lonely. This meant being responsible for regularly updating her mother's TV and streaming subscriptions, making sure their bills were paid on time, thinking of and recommending movies and shows her mother would like to pass the time, and even ensuring her mother had enough visitors by coordinating regularly with her relatives. Despite the fact that these small, everyday tasks required significant emotional and cognitive effort that was often overwhelming, it was assumed that these caring attributes would come "naturally" to a daughter, which Razia described as another kind of "mothering".

> *"I'm an only child. But apart from the burden of being an only child, it is also being the burden of an only daughter, where everybody expects that just because I am the daughter, I will be…caring, and nurturing should come naturally to me... The spirit of mothering is not just [expected] for any potential children I may have, it is also for mothering my own mother."*

The idea that women make inherently better caregivers, or have instincts that allow them to feel, care for, or provide good care especially to those who are ailing has for long been a part of popular stereotypes that conflate what it means to be feminine with being caring or nurturing, or having a "maternal" instinct (Cancian and Oliker 2000; Taylor 2014). It was therefore not surprising to hear from my respondents that especially when it came to the subject of taking *physical* care of elderly or ailing parents, inevitably, daughters were expected to step up and take charge as the accepted caregivers. However, as Razia also noted, caring here extended well beyond assistance in everyday tasks, it involved emotional companionship, mental health

support and the work of enabling parents, especially mothers, to feel valued, secure and capable of navigating their lives.

Being my mother's best friend: Richa

For some daughters, the act of enabling took the form of friendships they developed with their mothers over the years. Many respondents spoke to me of becoming their mother's confidant, best friend and partner-in-crime from a young age, often describing this as one of their first acts of care. In some cases, these friendships emerged organically, rooted in feelings of intimacy and trust between mothers and daughters who saw each other as allies and emotional anchors. However, in other cases, this practice of friendship often emanated from social and class-related concerns, a sense of obligation necessitated by a recognition by daughters of the greatly restricted lives their mothers were allowed to lead.

Within middle class Indian homes, middle-aged women having "friends" is regularly frowned upon or seen as an anomaly, leaving little room for self-expression or emotional support outside the confines of the home. Scholars such as Lamb (2022), Phadke and Kanagasabai (2023) have discussed how the concept of female friendship is nearly absent from middle-class women's lives, especially in later years, deemed secondary to romantic heterosexual relationships and married lives. In many instances, it was through a conscious recognition of the absent spaces of friendship, care and love for mothers that daughters recognized their duty to care. When combined with anxieties around honour and respectability, which required especially that stories of marital discord, violence, or abuse remain "hidden" within the "four walls" of the home, this often placed daughters in the position of sole emotional interlocutors within their homes.

As one respondent, Richa, 21, a graduate student, noted in a focus group discussion on care:

> *"In our kind of families, 'good' married women only care about their family. They are not supposed to have friends. When I saw my mother in an abusive marriage, her own parents not being supportive and her having no friends or support system around her, I felt responsible for being there for her. I knew, if I didn't stand up for her, she doesn't have any one else who will. Even as a teenager I understood she did not deserve this."*

Another participant in the discussion, Adhya, 24, a public health professional, concurred:

> *"Everything a mother faces… you have to be there throughout this struggle...you have to take care of everything, not just physically, mentally and otherwise she won't be good…The daughter becomes like a best friend that she [a mother] can talk to."*

Richa and Adhya's motivation in being their mother's friend was far from exceptional. In fact, it was to my slight surprise that in group discussions on the practice of caregiving, the subject of dysfunctional marriages emerged organically very early on, becoming a focal point of the discussion and evoking emotional responses from participants. Participants described growing up in homes animated by the "persistent chaos" of unruly, bitter or resentful "marriages of convenience" between their parents, that could not be exited due to the shame associated with divorces in the Indian context. Inevitably, in such a scenario, care became less a choice than a moral compulsion, shaped by silence, stigma, and the imperative to protect family honour (Bhattacharyya 2019).

Here too, the gendered aspect of caregiving was evident. Across conversations, I found that even when they *did* have siblings, it was almost always the *daughters*, rather than sons, who were deemed competent and empathetic enough to be their mother's friends, to be their sounding board, responsible for listening, advising, and absorbing emotional distress that could not be voiced elsewhere. Of course, much of this friendship was also built on a level of intimacy

that mothers felt that only they could share with their daughters. However, in various instances, this was the result of naturalised divisions, where alternatives were not even considered, even when they represented logistical or other such constraints.

Empathetic listeners: Gina

In Gina's case for instance, caring for her mother meant learning to become the "empathetic listener" - anticipating her mother's need for support in a difficult time, recognizing when to offer her space or reassurance, being able to say the right thing at the right time, and holding space as she gave vent to her frustrations. This expectation persisted despite the fact that her brother lived in the same house, while Gina was in a different country, across time zones.

> *"Emotionally, definitely, yes [I have to be there], because I have now become the listener of the family…who just listens and listens, and I can just listen to my mom, you know, go on about my grandma, or my brother or my dad…I think there is a level of [comfort]… I can say that I can provide emotional care, which my brother even though he's there at home, he's not available, he's not, he's not willing to listen to her issues that she's going through day to day. It has to be me."*

Within academic literature, some of these gendered expectations have been attributed to the power of daughters to be able to provide "attentive love" in a way that sons cannot, tying such capacity to their innate feminine abilities (Ruddick 1995). Allen and Walker (1993), drawing on Ruddick's framework suggest that daughters attend simultaneously to the *preservation* (physical care) and *growth* (maintain autonomy) demands of aging mothers in the same way as mothers could do for infants, even when these demands conflict with their own lives (Bhowmick 2024; Dariotis et al. 2023; Irfan et al. 2024). For many, these demands are not perceived as a burden but as part of filial responsibility and gratitude for the care mothers took

of them when they were young. While such framings resonated with how daughters spoke with me, these expectations are not necessarily "new" trends, nor novel expectations in the Indian context. What, then, distinguishes the contemporary practices of care in India?

Care as an enabling force: present shifts

One important shift lies in the reflexive awareness with which daughters approach caregiving. Rather than simply reproducing gendered norms/conventions, many of the women I spoke with framed their caregiving as emerging *in response to* and *from an explicit awareness of* the ills of patriarchy. Their desire to care for their mothers was often motivated by a wish to *contravene, resist, mitigate or compensate for* the injustices their mothers had endured, to offer solidarity in impossible situations, and to enable their mothers to lead better lives- particularly in light of the opportunities that they themselves, as daughters, had been afforded. Their degree of exposure, education, mobility and opportunity somehow made these daughters feel *even more* responsible for caring for their mothers, *even when* they felt ambivalent towards these duties or resented the burdens this imposed on them.

Complicated burdens: Palak

Palak's account illustrates this contradiction strongly. A 23-year-old clinical psychologist in the making, Palak grew up in a violent home where she was acutely aware of the extent of her mother's suffering, yet deeply resentful of the emotional responsibilities that had been placed on her from a young age. As a child, Palak's father's dispreference for daughters, his constant abuse directed towards her mother and continual belittling of his daughters had resulted in serious mental health issues for both sisters, who grew up with extremely low self-esteem and various anxiety disorders. Acknowledging their mother as a victim of domestic abuse, they had remained her main support system for many years, Palak more so as the elder daughter, who

often felt responsible for intervening between her parents, de-escalating their fights, saving her mother from being beaten, or tending to her thereafter.

While Palak understood the difficult situation her mother found herself in, eventually she began resenting her mother's decision to stay married to her abuser, blaming her for placing herself and her children in harm's way by not choosing to find a different life of herself, especially after the children grew up. She recounted having numerous arguments with her mother, debating the merits and demerits of staying in the marriage, practical discussions about their finances and her own willingness to support her mother monetarily, but remembered hitting a brick wall of public perception, reputation and the shame of two unmarried daughters stopping her mother in her tracks.

Palak described the mixture of anger and resentment she felt towards her mother for many years, along with intense shame and self-hatred for herself being the reason her mother was forced to stay in the marriage. Recognizing that it was the curse of having "only daughters" that shaped her mother's choice to tolerate the abuse and violence, Palak felt extreme guilt and obligation to do right by her mother, along with a sense of gratitude, that she, herself, was offered a different life path. Even though she saw her mother as somewhat complicit in extending her own suffering, Palak was indebted to her mother's sacrifices for her present situation in life.

A combination of these feelings dictated what care meant for Palak. She saw it as her duty to enable her mother to stand up to her father, to make her more resilient, and eventually persuade her to leave the marriage altogether. Palak's decision to become a psychologist was also motivated by these concerns, and she spoke vividly of her desire to end the cycle of abuse by making something of herself and taking her mother along with her.

Palak's account shows the emotional embeddedness of caregiving for daughters, the entanglement of multiple sentiments that motivate it, and the burden imposed by exposure, awareness, and opportunity. In her analysis of the adult relationship between daughters and mothers in literature, Ira Raja discusses the significance of a daughter's innate ability to put herself in her mother's shoes, to understand her suffering, to "retrieve the sense of her mother's marginal life as she herself approaches her mother's perspective" (Raja 2016). In my conversations as well, the desire to enable mothers through care was a recurring theme, driven perhaps by daughters' recognition of how easily their own futures could have been like their mothers', had they not been privileged enough to be born in a different time and place. This knowledge only sharpened daughters' desires to create better lives for their mothers, now that they were aware enough, and could afford to do so.

Money as an enabler, as a form of care: Anusha

A second, related and significant difference in contemporary caregiving practices by daughters today concerns *access* to *financial* resources. As a result of their privileged positions, many of the daughters I spoke with were capable not only of providing emotional support to their mothers, but also of supporting them financially in ways that may not have been possible in previous generations. Consequently, they sought to use their educational and material resources to "give back" to their mothers, and to strategically use money as a way of fostering their independence and sense of freedom.

This was the case with Anusha, the IIT-Harvard graduate mentioned earlier. Anusha spoke at length about her difficult relationship with money, shaped by a household in which her father exercised complete control over financial decisions, using money as a means of control over both Anusha and her mother. Growing up, Anusha had watched her mother depend on her father

for even her smallest desires, with her lack of independent income becoming a frequent source of tension within the home. From a young age, Anusha had resolved that once she was able, she would care for her mother in the ways her father had not.

When Anusha began earning well, she was eager to buy things for her mother, give her money from her own salary, and make purchases for the house without waiting for her father's permission. Among the most significant of these was buying a second car for the household and appointing a driver- both of which were primarily used by her mother, and by Anusha when she visited home.

Anusha recalled an incident that brought home the importance of this purchase. A few years ago, when her mother was stepping out using the car and driver, her father objected and began questioning her. In response, Anusha's mother firmly told him that she was not using *his* car or *his* driver, but her *own*, paid for by *her daughter*- and that he had no right to stop her. For Anusha, this moment was deeply meaningful. It was a rare assertion from her mother, and one that filled her with pride. Anusha described feeling elated that she was able not only to provide material support, but also to enable her mother to assert herself in ways she had been unable to do earlier.

What is important to note here is that although Anusha's money fulfilled a crucial material role in her mother's life, this form of care was directed toward meeting an *emotional need* that Anusha identified- her mother's need to feel secure, independent, and enabled. As Sara Ruddick notes, adult daughters often see it as their responsibility to help ageing mothers "feel independent," to remain socially acceptable in the face of mental and physical decline, and to sustain their confidence in the world (Ruddick 1984). The earning daughters I spoke with, including Anusha, articulated similar desires- to use their money to support their mothers'

unfulfilled dreams, and to help them rebuild themselves in their twilight years. Particularly in contexts of domestic, financial abuse or want, daughters' abilities to provide small forms of financial support emerged as a crucial form of care- where money was an enabling instrument, as opposed to merely a material offering, motivated by a desire to be "good daughters" not just within the paradigm of normative gender roles but also transcending them.

Caring for fathers

Although an awareness of patriarchy and its ills imbued the daughters I spoke with a heightened sensitivity towards what their mothers experienced, this did not mean however, that they *only* shared a caring relationship with their mothers. Some spoke of caring deeply for their fathers, particularly recognizing the emotional costs of masculinity within patriarchal structures. The same awareness that made daughters more empathic towards their mothers also resulted in a desire to recognize the ways in which their fathers had been constrained, rarely being allowed the freedom to express their emotional needs.

Daddy's little girl: Arpita

Arpita, the 30-year-old doctor discussed earlier, raised the issue of emotional neglect fathers experience in Indian families, and the ill-effects of the absence of tenderness, care and affection. She pointed out how an excessive focus on the mother-daughter dyad as the locus of caring deflects much needed attention from the care that fathers deserve and very much crave in Indian society. In fact, she argued that fathers may need *even more* care than mothers, given how the pressures of masculinity make asking for such care even more difficult for them.

As a daughter then, Arpita felt it was *her* responsibility to provide the emotional tenderness that patriarchy had denied her father, by always being "his little girl" and "his happy place".

Reflecting on her parents' difficult marriage, which was marked by a lack of familial support for their inter-caste union and subsequent ostracization from the extended family, she described how her father's isolation shaped her sense of duty towards him. Arpita wanted to allow him space to express vulnerability, share emotions and feel reassured that someone would care for him, both in the present and the future.

> *"I think the basic point I wanted to make was that I've come to realize that my parents had no one, especially my father, my father had no one who was gentle with him. Although my parents married outside of community rules for love, but somehow it never felt to me that they knew each other, or they knew each other…there was no sweetness in [their relationship] in front of us [kids]. It really hurt in the beginning. ..But because I think my dad never saw that kind of love himself…he didn't know how to…There was so much pressure to show themselves as successful, there was no time for emotions, for gentleness. I wanted to be that presence for him. I have no qualms in accepting that I am a daddy's girl all the way and will always remain one."*

One of the most interesting things that Arpita shared later was her desire to eventually have a child, even though she was unsure of motherhood itself, as a way of "giving back" to her father the family that was taken away from him when he married her mother. As his daughter, she felt that it was within her power to give him this "ultimate gift", that would undoubtedly be a source of immense joy. This was a striking confession, particularly because Arpita was dealing with significant health issues at the time. Yet she spoke of wanting to prepare her body for childbirth in the coming years, for her father's sake.

“Forever” daughterhood?

Stories like Arpita’s speak to the changing conceptions of caregiving, in which the primacy of *daughterhood,* rather than wifehood or motherhood comes to frame women’s life narratives. Even as a married woman, Arpita articulated her future reproductive plans as an obligation she owed her *father*, rather than her husband or marital relatives, underscoring how care, duty, and gendered responsibility are being reworked in deeply personal ways, and the role that awareness of patriarchy is playing in shaping it.

While scholarship on the Indian family has long noted that daughters’ intergenerational obligations are expected to end at marriage (Basu 1999; Croll 2000; Vatuk 1975), my conversations suggested a different temporal imagination of daughterhood at work. Across life stages and marital statuses, daughters continued to imagine care for parents as an enduring commitment, one that shaped their choices, relationships, and sense of self well beyond the natal home. I conceptualise this as *forever daughterhood*- a reworking of daughterhood as a lifelong moral and emotional role, no longer bounded by co-residence, marriage, or conventional life-course transitions. Crucially, this form of daughterhood is sustained not only by affect and obligation, but also by new material conditions that make ongoing presence possible despite distance.

Caring from a distance, digital kinship and technology

A final aspect that has further cemented this shift in caregiving practices and that deserves elaboration, is the important role played by *technology* in reducing distances, both literally and metaphorically between parents and daughters, reducing the significance of *co-residence* as the underlying principle on which the ability to provide care is predicated. In her work on the changing intergenerational family in Asia, Croll suggests that structural changes in the form of

an increasing number of people from younger generation living far away from their parents in separate, as well as the rise of nuclear households has facilitated the spread of *daughter care much* between both parents and parents-in-law (2006: 481), leading to an "emerging consensus" on daughters being a "largely untapped potential for support" that is being "increasingly appreciated". What distinguishes the present moment, is not simply the expansion of daughters' caregiving roles, but the ways in which such care is operationalised through everyday technological practices.

It is here that the concepts of "digital kinship" and "caring from a distance" also become significant. In their study on the proliferation of various kinds of new media technologies, such as service robots, AI devices or automated vehicles, which have become an important and novel way of supporting healthy ageing for the super-aged in Japan, Hjorth and Lupton discuss the evolution of "*digital kinship*", mediated co-presence and care relations over time, arguing that in the face of "disruption of face-to-face forms of health care and family relationships, the maintenance of casual, familial communication remains central to parental health and wellbeing" (2021:599). Technologies, they argue, do not *replace* caregivers; rather, they mediate forms of co-presence in which caregivers continue to function as overseers, emotional anchors, facilitators, and coordinators of care.

For daughters like Razia (whose quote on caregiving I shared earlier), the thinking, planning, and daily coordination of caregiving towards her mother was operationalised through digital technologies, irrespective of where they were *physically* living. Razia relied on regular WhatsApp calls and messages to manage her mother's needs, sending her repeated reminders, videochatting with her on a daily basis to check-in with her and being always available to guide her with any task she was unable to do herself. Technology, in her account, functioned not as a substitute for care, but as the medium through which care could be enacted across distance.

In her book *Care at a Distance*, Pols (2012) similarly notes that while practices of digitised forms of caring have arisen in various societies (and can be seen as emerging in contexts like India), it is in their use at the level of the *everyday*, the *mundane* and the *routine,* that provides the elderly any comfort, converting it to a form of care, even from a distance. Merely *finding* digital or technological solutions cannot replace the warmth that parents expect their children to provide for them. Absent sustained human involvement, technological interventions risk intensifying feelings of isolation rather than alleviating them. Across my conversations as well, parents regularly pointed out that neither money nor technology could replace the "feeling of concern" that they craved from their children, the "little things" that they valued, the everyday attentiveness that signalled care. And for this, it was inevitably *daughters* they turned towards, rather than sons.

As Gayatri, in her early 60s and a mother of two, a son and a daughter, pointed out, while her son was earning well and was ready to *buy* her anything that she needed or would ask for, that this feeling could not replace the love and care her daughter showered on her without being asked- checking in habitually, showing concern and being available in times of need. Gayatri admitted that it was not a question of *money*, since spending money was far easier than sparing sustained thought- and that was something only daughters seemed to be able to do, no matter where they were. Across distances, it was always daughters who were able to reach out to parents in ways that expressed emotional availability.

These findings resonate with Ahlin and Sen's (2019) analysis of transnational families from Kerala, where daughters are today expected to not just provide financial support, but also to enact filial responsibility towards parents through calling, visiting, and mediated presence. Apart from remittances, the increasing use of *communication technologies* to discharge filial duties, they argue, is an important part of the changed normative expectations of "good

daughterhood" and good elder care in practice (1397). Although migration and remittances were not central to the intergenerational obligations articulated by the families in this study, the reconfiguration of filial duty was nonetheless evident. Regular contact, emotional responsiveness, and everyday monitoring were widely understood as defining features of good, caring daughters.

Although the expectation of migration and remittances was not framed as a significant part of the intergenerational obligations among the families I spoke with, primarily owing to their relatively stable class status, the changed filial duties were reiterated across conversations, as the comments from Gayatri and Razia above show, and many others confirmed.

Inevitably, a direct consequence of such digitally mediated presence was that daughters were able to foster much closer, deeper and intimate bonds with parents, irrespective of how far apart they may be residing. However, while digital technologies have made *forever daughterhood* far more feasible across distance, they have also intensified expectations of constant availability and affective labour in ways that were deeply gendered.

In the next section of this chapter, I examine how these gendered constructions of care produce new pressures and constraints for daughters, even as they expand the scope of daughters' moral authority and relational centrality within the family.

*

Part Two: Problems and Pressures: The stereotype of the good daughter

The perils of caring? Selfish sons vs loving daughters

One of the most striking takeaways from my conversations with parents was not simply an increased appreciation of daughters, but the specific *moral language* through which this appreciation was articulated, almost always in comparison to sons. Parents frequently explained why they felt that *daughters* were *more* 'precious' by invoking gendered expectations around caregiving. Sons were routinely described as distracted, emotionally unavailable, or oriented towards their own nuclear families, while daughters were appreciated for the generosity of their love, their attentiveness, emotional investments in parents' lives and the perceived durability of their bonds.

This moral contrast echoes a broader cultural trope that has gained traction in recent years- that of the "selfish son". Popular media representations frequently lament the erosion of filial values, portraying sons as unreliable carers, reifying a nostalgia for a past where values of respect and care held more meaning for children and sons could be relied upon more favourably (Dey 2016; Samanta 2019; Sharma 2014). Sarah Lamb's (2000; 2019a) research on ageing among the lower middle classes in Kolkata documents the lamentations of mothers mourning the loss of their sons' sense of duty and responsibility, while studies among the propertied classes has highlighted how fears of abandonment and future neglect have led parents to withhold assets as a form of security for receiving future care (De Neve and Donner 2015; Donner 2022; Kodoth and Rajan 2008). Daughters' love, on the other hand, is often characterized as "purer", rooted in a more sincere affection towards parents, since it is perceived as less transactional, not tied with expectations of inheritance or material gains and aligned with feminine ideals of emotional investment (Chun and Das Gupta 2022; Lamb 2019a,

2019b; Ugargol and Bailey 2021). This contrast was evident among the parents I spoke with as well.

Rajiv Kumar, a retired businessman from Delhi, articulated his sentiment through an adage he considered self-evident: *"A daughter is a daughter all her life, a son is a son, only till he gets his wife."* Rajiv referred to the family drama *Baghban,* a popular Hindi film starring Amitabh Bachchan and Hema Malini that released in the mid-2000s, which has since become a cult phenomenon emblematic of parental anxieties around ageing and abandonment to make his point. Referencing the movie, whose plot revolves around four ungrateful, money minded and selfish sons who abandon their parents when it is their turn to take care of them, Rajiv rejected the misconceived notion that sons were a reliable "guarantee" of old age support, instead emphasizing the "inherent difference" between sons and daughters in their "*capacity* to love". While he too, had a son, who was affectionate towards him, Rajiv acknowledged that he could never be fully certain whether his son's concern for him was "untainted" by future expectations of inheritance. His daughter's care, by comparison was visible in her everyday attentiveness and emotional presence- of *her* lifelong devotion, he was completely certain.

Other parents also echoed similar praise in favour of daughters, highlighting the differences in daughters' motivations and capacity to love compared to sons, and speaking of the value they attached to it. However, this elevation of daughters came with consequences.

As several of my respondents pointed out, framing sons as "expected disappointments" paradoxically protected them from moral failure, while raising the bar for daughters. Sreyasi, Rajiv's daughter, noted that sons' presumed inadequacy often absolved them of responsibility altogether, while daughters were expected to continually *earn* their place through care.

Nayantara similarly interpreted her parents' assumption that she would "be there" for them less as a compliment than a form of "gendered exemption" for her brother, who was allowed to remain a "good son" regardless of his actions, while *she* bore the burden of "proving herself" in the future by showing her love. Their expectation was particularly ironical given the extreme bias her parents had shown towards their son throughout their life- which allowed Nayantara to see the differential expectations as yet another form of moral absolution that favoured her brother.

Through numerous conversations, I found that caregiving emerged as deeply shaped by gendered stereotyping. While the rise of "forever daughterhood" across time and distance indicated a shift in the strength of emotional bonds between parents and daughters, positioning daughters as the only legitimate or competent caregivers for parents meant that their moral worth was increasingly tied to their willingness and ability to care, leaving little room to acknowledge reluctance, exhaustion, or incapacity. The expectation that daughters would simply "rise to the occasion" in times of need not only typecast daughters in gendered caregiving roles, it also foreclosed the recognition of any vulnerabilities. Often, the pressures of being a "good daughter", built on the painstaking effort required in innumerable everyday acts of care had severe consequences. I share some of these cases below.

Caring even when you can't: Caroline

In the case of Caroline, a 21-year-old student from Delhi, the expectation that she would 'already know' how to care took hold at an exceptionally young age. When Caroline was eleven, her mother was diagnosed with a rare and debilitating mental disorder, schizophrenia, which made her prone to bouts of psychosis and hallucinations. Although she received some medical treatment, she continued to live at home, and the responsibility for managing her day-

to-day needs fell largely on Caroline, as the eldest daughter. Her father, she explained, was often abroad at work, leaving Caroline to care for her mother while also shielding her younger sister from the effects of their mother's illness. Caroline described the experience as overwhelming and frightening, marked by confusion and fear as a teenager trying to make sense of her mother's condition. What intensified her distress, however, was the societal expectation that she should intuitively know what she was doing- leading her to feel extremely pressured and out of depth.

> *"I was learning things by doing, at my own pace. I was essentially a teenager asking a 40-year-old woman to take control of her mind. I had no idea what I was doing…But I remember a lot of people blaming me for not doing it right. They told me you are a girl, you are supposed to know this… I was shocked and confused- I was literally doing whatever I could."*

The complex feelings that Caroline underwent were a mixture of incompetence, guilt, shame and anger, especially during times when her mother underwent bouts of sickness which Caroline blamed herself for. She questioned whether she lacked some essential nurturing quality expected of daughters, measuring her worth in gendered terms- should she have known better? Would it be different if she was more emotional, more caring? Over time, however, the self-doubt gave way to anger at the unfairness of the burden placed on her, particularly the assumption that her caregiving labour required neither any training, nor any recognition, even when it lasted more than a decade. She was expected to do it simply because it was her "duty" to do so, no questions asked. As she said:

"I never got any thanks for it. Never, in all these years. It is now more than a decade. Not once did my father say, I am proud of you. That you dealt with all this. Instead, it was just this subconscious thing that they expected of me. When I took over, everyone around me was just like…of course, who else is going to do it?"

While Caroline's case was somewhat extreme, both in the intensity of the caregiving expected, as well as the tender age that the burden of doing so was placed on her, the assumption that daughters would naturally assume responsibility for caregiving, particularly in contexts involving illness or nursing was a normalised expectation, not just by parents, but by extended family members. Manmeet's case shows how this had the effect of "naturalising" gendered distinctions and disproportionate burdens.

Natural distinctions: Manmeet

In our conversation, Manmeet Suri, a law lecturer in a reputed university in Delhi, spoke of how caregiving was organised in her maternal family through a clear, gendered division of labour, reaffirmed through everyday family practices. When her grandparents fell sick for a prolonged period, Manmeet was designated all the caregiving tasks "inside" the house- taking care of medication, dealing with attendants, speaking to visiting relatives, maintaining food and nutrition logs, and sitting with her grandparents for long stretches. Her male cousins, by contrast, were in-charge of taking care of things in the "outside world", such as visits to the hospital, or running small errands outside the house. Manmeet pointed out that even though she was perfectly capable of performing these tasks herself, she was never asked, nor allowed to do so when she requested. Her brothers on the other hand, never helped with things she was expected to manage.

This “spatial” distinction, Manmeet noted, not only served to reinforce gendered hierarchies in the family, but also redistributed time and effort unevenly. While the “outside” tasks were irregular or episodic, the type of attention that Manmeet was expected to pay was continuous, with no clear boundaries or “time off”. Like the unrecognized labour of motherhood, it was unpaid, ongoing and unremarked. “Taking care” was not viewed as a separate responsibility at all- it was normalised as a part of the larger gamut of things that they were naturally expected to do. As she remarked, within her family, *“Caregiving as a distinctive concept just doesn’t exist, I think. Because it just is what it is- things you do, especially as a woman.”*

Mixed feelings: The “Elder Daughter” syndrome, early parentification and ambivalence

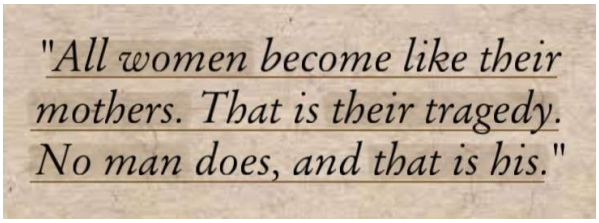
An awareness of these conundrums led many daughters to contend with deeply ambivalent emotions about caregiving. Some expressed great pride at their being recognized as the “mature” or “responsible” child, valuing the emotional closeness and trust that developed through caring relationships especially with their mothers. At the same time, especially among elder daughters, there was growing reflection on the costs of early “parentification”, and its consequences on their lives (Bhowmick 2024). In between sharing jokes about “eldest daughter” memes and the “trauma” being one results in an Indian family during focus groups, they spoke of the toll such caring for abused, lonely, unheard or friendless mothers took on their own mental well-being, referring to themselves as the “unpaid therapists” of the family. Many even wondered about the extent to which growing up in such toxic households impacted their *own* ability to be in healthy, equitable and caring adult relationships in the future, given the templates that they had seen around all around them.

With age, some daughters even began to view the closeness with their own mothers more sceptically, recognizing its gendered asymmetry and inherent one-sidedness in terms of

understanding and empathy. Aishani Marathe, a 26-year-old early career researcher currently in Hyderabad, pointed this out in a group discussion, commenting on how the space she held for her mother might not be made available to her, if she herself was in need at any point.

> *"I think the one thing that I feel is wrong is that elder daughters like I have learned to listen, empathize with my mom's problems, her situations and be her kind of ally in the family… But you know, that, that ally ship, I feel sometimes is very one way…. I'm not sure if my mom can also listen and empathize to the same degree...even if she had the intent... the kind of care that we provide as daughters to moms…I don't know if we can ever expect to receive that back."*

Many of the other daughters in the discussion agreed with Aishani, discussing how such thinking was intimately tied to an understanding of "good daughterhood" as "innately selfless" in the same way as motherhood has been viewed traditionally. They spoke of the strong element of early socialisation and conditioning that trains daughters to be sensitive and understanding from a young age, by repeatedly validating such behaviour, while also acknowledging the role conflict and dissonance such expectations created. They reflected on how a combination of obedience, emotional restraint, and modesty that is celebrated early on helps them internalise selflessness as the benchmark of good daughterhood, and compels them to repeat these patterns in the future. Another respondent, Shalini, even wondered privately whether learning to be a good daughter meant it was only a matter of time before she turned into her own mother. She shared the following Oscar Wilde quote with me over WhatsApp, which she published as her status for many months thereafter:



- *Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest. P5, Shared by a respondent*

The stories I collected repeatedly pointed to the serious emotional toll that caregiving, or the perceived failure to care sufficiently, takes on daughters, who are expected to be there for their families in the ways sons rarely are. It could be seen, as Hochschild suggests, as a form of "emotion work", that exploited daughters' emotions for sustaining prevailing hierarchies within families.

Furthermore, such expectations, outside of being highly specific and deeply gendered, also served as a lesson in how moral worth for daughters was to be earned- through a repeated affirmation of stereotypical roles of selflessness, emotional attentiveness and endurance. The conditional nature of this worth becomes particularly visible when care moves beyond emotion to material support.

It is at this juncture- when daughters' *money* enters the picture, that the limits of caregiving are most starkly revealed. The following section examines how daughters' financial contributions become a site of tension and negotiation, exposing the gendered boundaries of care and the ways money is mobilised to reproduce, rather than unsettle, familial hierarchies.

The complications of money

In her work discussing the sociology of money and its associated meaning-making, Viviana Zelizer foregrounds the gendered nature of money, and the role social relations play in infusing it with specific moral and cultural meanings ([1985]2004, 2000, 1994, 2017). Building on

Zelizer's insights, Supriya Singh (2013) identifies three core insights underlying the sociological study of money- first, that money is shaped by cultural values and social relations; second, that "special monies" refer to qualitatively distinct sub-categories of money marked by their intended purpose; and third, that money is not merely a quantitative measure of *calculation* but a site of cultural interpretation (Singh 2013; Singh, Robertson, and Cabraal 2012)

My fieldwork strongly echoed these insights. I found that money received by parents from children, particularly daughters, was imbued with layered, often unspoken meanings that were culturally and socially coded in deeply patriarchal ways. The very idea of taking money from daughters, whether married or unmarried has historically not been a part of conversations around intergenerational obligations within Indian families, in part because women's exclusion from formal employment was long framed as a matter of family honour(Chakravarti 1993, 1995; Dube 1988; Uberoi 1993) Dependence on daughters' or wives' earnings has conventionally been viewed as shameful and even taboo, especially within middle-class contexts(Agarwal 1994; Donner 2011; Jeffery 2018). For married daughters especially, expectations of curtailed ties with their natal families after marriage have further entrenched resistance to imagining daughters as legitimate financial support systems for parents (Lamb 2000, 2019a; Palriwala and Uberoi 2008).

These perceptions are undoubtedly changing in today's day and age, especially in resource-constrained contexts, where daughters' earnings have become central to family survival. Scholarship on women's migration and remittances documents how daughters, particularly in lower and lower-middle-class families, are increasingly being relied upon as financial contributors to natal households. In states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, women's employment in manufacturing, IT and factory work has been accompanied by parental support

for daughters' mobility and income generation (Clark and Sekher 2007; Lessinger 2013; Veltman and Piper 2014). Similarly, work on migrant nurses sent to Gulf countries demonstrates how daughters' labour is often embedded in family strategies, with expectations of regular remittances closely mirroring those traditionally based on sons (Kaur and Palriwala 2014; Palriwala and Uberoi 2008; Percot 2006; Ramamurthy 2014). Although Agrawal (2006) acknowledges that much of this migration remains concentrated in feminised sectors of care and reproductive labour, she nevertheless argues that its "structural ramifications" are far-reaching, reshaping household divisions of labour, and enabling shifts towards more gender-equal norms over time.

However, among the *middle- or upper middle*-class families such as the ones I was interviewing, where money was not a *need,* daughters' money occupied a far more ambivalent, even contentious position. Parental reluctance to accept money from daughters emerged as a recurring source of tension, revealing the narrow and conditional terms on which daughters could perform material care. Across my fieldwork, I found three broad strategies through which the issue of money was negotiated- it was either sidestepped altogether, rendered socially acceptable only through careful re-marking (for instance as gifts), or legitimised through the symbolic re-characterisation of daughters as "sons". In each case, these strategies ultimately reinforced gendered hierarchies and revealed the inherent limits placed on daughters to replace sons within the family. I discuss each of these in detail below.

Sidestepping the question of money

To begin with, among the families I spoke with, caregiving was overwhelmingly articulated in emotional rather than financial terms. Given that my respondents' and other parents I interviewed were securely middle or upper-middle class, almost always financially secure or

confident in their ability to support themselves through pensions, savings or investments, they almost never *required* material support from their children, either in the present or in anticipation of old age.

This class position offered a convenient way to sidestep the question of whether parents would accept money from daughters at all, and most would refuse to engage with the subject. For many daughters, the issue was dismissed as a "hypothetical scenario", which allowed them to claim a presumed sense of gender equality without ever confronting its limits. In several conversations (especially with younger women), I found that daughters would vociferously insist that they were treated as equal to their brothers, and would be equally capable of supporting their parents financially in the future *if required*, even while acknowledging that such a situation was highly unlikely to arise. The lack of necessity or a *desperate* situation, (which many women recognized as the only situation where parents would be accepting of their earnings) enabled both parents and daughters to gloss over the gendered hierarchies embedded in assumptions about future support.

The limits of these presumptions were, however, tested severely when the question of money *did* arise, when daughters' financial contributions to the family income threatened to transgress gendered role expectations, giving rise to various conflicts. While daughters' money was acceptable as a gesture of care or generosity, *depending* on it was unacceptable. Reliance on daughters' earnings was repeatedly described as inappropriate, emasculating, or insulting, revealing the sharp boundary between symbolic care and material dependence.

Too much money: Anusha

Anusha's story illustrates these boundaries starkly. As discussed earlier, Anusha's discomfort about earning more than her father had led her to greatly minimizing her success and even

hiding her salary from her parents. The joy she felt at the prospect of being able to help her mother achieve some financial independence or buying small gifts for her, stood in stark contrast with her ability to use her income for broader household needs, which was sharply curtailed by gendered limits. *Precisely* because of the tension that her ability to be financially independent had caused in her house, Anusha confessed that she found it extremely difficult to use her money for her family's needs more generally, even when it was easy to do so. As a result, even though Anusha was at home for over a year during COVID, she was unable to contribute meaningfully to household expenses. Her father experienced the suggestion of financial contribution as a *personal affront*, accusing her of trying to "show off" her money and belittling him, undermining his authority as the family's provider. The distinction between purchasing occasional *gifts* for her mother (even if expensive ones), and contributing regularly to household expenses was critical in how money was perceived- while the former was permissible, even appreciated, the latter was intolerable.

As Anusha later reflected, the expectations of good daughterhood had *never* been framed in *monetary terms.* Her earnings were therefore not seen as a reflection of her duty or an expression of reciprocity or obligation towards her parents. Rather, they were experienced as an offensive, even threatening assertion of autonomy, that was *not* appreciated by her father. Anusha's inability to use her money to support her parents was therefore emblematic of the gendered boundaries of good daughterhood and caregiving- even she *could* afford to, Anusha was *not allowed* to use her money, since her money was "tainted" in a way that a son's would never be.

Gifts, not aid: Durga

While Anusha reacted with anger and frustration to this expectation, in Durga's case, whose experience with marriage and careers I discussed earlier, the response was marked by resignation. A 26-year-old lawyer from Delhi, had early on made peace with the fact that her parents' discomfort with accepting her money was unlikely to change, and she had not made much of an effort to challenge their sexist views. What troubled her most, however, was the irony of the situation. Durga admitted that for a period of time, her parents were not entirely well off, and the extra income she wanted to provide would have allowed them to live far more comfortably. However, her parents actively chose to regularly express disappointment in their *son's* inability to contribute to the household income, constantly complaining about how *he* had been derelict in his duties towards them by not working in a stable job and contributing to the household, while simultaneously steadfastly refusing to accept any money from their daughter, who was a high-profile lawyer with a well-paying job.

Any time Durga tried to buy something for them or for the house, they would insist on paying her back, or engage in meticulous '*hisaab'* (bookkeeping), much to Durga's chagrin. The stigma attached with Durga's money intensified even more after her marriage- financial support to her natal family was now framed as "disloyalty" towards her marital home, marking her money as even more "inappropriate".

Eventually, Durga had to concede that paying a significant amount from her salary would simply not be acceptable to them. As a result of these emotions and having understood and accepted her parents' reticence, Durga resorted to creative ways to contribute to her natal home without offending her parents' emotions. She transformed her income into socially acceptable forms- buying small gifts for her parents, facilitating online purchases, or acquiring modest

household items that did not signal "dependence". These strategies allowed her to demonstrate care for her parents, while respecting the boundaries they imposed.

In our chat, Durga spoke of how she continues to be bothered by the sense of shame her parents associate with simply taking money from her, confessing that turning her money into "gifts" appears to be the only socially acceptable "middle ground"- one she is trying to tread with caution. However, despite these efforts, she was acutely aware that she would never be seen as a "breadwinner" for her family- that role remains reserved for her brother, regardless of his actual contributions.

Durga and Anusha's cases exemplify Zelizer's theorisation of "special monies" in practice. Daughters' earnings were not simply rejected; they were carefully *reclassified*. Given that "daughters' money" is marked specifically as "unavailable" or "unacceptable" to parents as a source of income among middle-class families, converting this income into gifts allowed daughters to remain caring without transgressing patriarchal norms, revealing both the limits of material caregiving and the constrained forms of negotiation available to daughters. To what extent this resistance was related to concerns of daughters eventually "claiming" a stake in family property, inheritance, or feeling entitled to more than their "designated" or "assigned" share in their natal homes in the future was not clear, as this was not a subject that ever come up in my conversations naturally. However, it is not unlikely that such apprehensions further cemented parental aversion to accepting monetary support from daughters, especially in the broader context of changing Indian laws that are perceived to favour or benefit women, and fears that daughters might rely on them to further disrupt gendered norms (Agarwal 1994; Baruah 2010; Chowdhry 1997; De Neve and Donner 2015).

Becoming the son of the family: Monica and Daisy

It is pertinent to note that parental reluctance to rely on daughters, and their apprehensions of how such assistance would be perceived were not purely speculative or hyperbolic- instead, they were rooted very much in their own experiences or of others around them. In fact, I found that in the rare cases where parents *did* agree to take substantive assistance from daughters, the associated shame and stigma did in fact affect their families negatively- a situation which appeared be legitimized only through the symbolic masculinisation of their daughters.

In the case of Monica and Daisy for example (the two sisters mentioned in the previous chapters) when they decided to become the proverbial "sons" for the family, their parents were at the receiving end of various brickbats, including allegations that the parents had intentionally delayed the sisters' marriages so as to "milk financial gains from them" and exploit them "because they were the golden geese of the family".

Recalling their story, the sisters spoke of how their father had been working in a private company for many decades when he unceremoniously lost his job as the company shut down suddenly, following which he got entangled with his elder brother in a property dispute that drained the family's finances. Thereafter, he attempted to invest in multiple small-scale businesses, each of which unfortunately failed to take off. As a result of the financial constraints the family was facing, their eldest daughter, Daisy, decided to forego her post-graduate study and instead applied for a job as an air hostess in a recently launched airline- initially against her father's wishes, and without his knowledge. Over time however, Daisy became the family's primary earner, shifting jobs, relocating to Delhi to be close to her parents, and eventually even financing her sister Monica's expensive legal education through a loan taken on her own income. Today, Monica is also a contributor to the family income.

Both the sisters described their efforts as motivated by a desire to protect their father from the stigma of having "failed" as a man. Raised in a joint family headed by a matriarch grandmother, their lack of brothers was a source of open disappointment, and the sisters were acutely aware of the social meaning attached to sons, which pushed them further to "prove themselves". They did not want their father to feel alone in his troubles, nor to feel the absence of a son in helping him overcome his financial difficulties.

Despite being extremely proud at how they had been able to bring the family together, the sisters shared how their single status and advanced age was a topic of much gossip and rumourmongering in the society, with their father being jeered at for relying on his daughters' income. One of their extended relatives had taunted their parents at a wedding, telling them that "bad days" had befallen them because of which they had to rely on their daughters' income.

> *"Unki beheno ne bola hai ki beti ki kamai khaayega (His sisters taunted him that now you will eat off of your daughter's earnings)... He used to feel horrible. You know, being the father, being the man of the house…[that] I am not able to do anything for my daughters."*

In the wake of such social censure, the sisters managed to convince their father to accept their support by reframing it in explicitly masculine terms, encouraging him to see treat his daughters "just like he would a son". This symbolic shift was crucial in assuaging their father's guilt from the perceived "sin" of taking his daughters' money, while helping him overcome his perceived failures as a father. Another aspect that worked in their favour was the perceived temporality of their assistance, and the overt insistence that relying on them was a "phase."

> *But humne phir unhe pyaar se samjhaya ki (We then convinced him with love that), see, you don't have sons. If she's [Daisy] is becoming your son even as a daughter, accept*

her that way. Don't keep it to your ego or your attitude that "I am the man, I'm not earning, I cannot take from her." This is a phase, it will pass. But it will only pass, if we are going to be together."

Reflecting on her situation, Daisy shared how she felt it was extremely unfair that despite her education, qualification, earning capacity and unbounded love for her parents, society as a whole makes it so difficult for daughters to take care of their parents. She spoke of how it was a child's responsibility and even *right*, whether son or daughter, to contribute to a household income, to take care of their parents, and to provide for them.

Although the family eventually recovered from their losses, what was interesting to me was how it was important for their family to view her in masculine coded terms, *as a son,* in order to *legitimize* the income that they were accepting from her. Daisy shared that today, when asked about her delayed marriage or why she is still living with her parents at the age of 36, her parents proudly declare to the society that *their daughters are their sons- "Ye mere betein hain"*- inherently asserting their right to remain in the parental home and contribute financially just as a son would- without moral scrutiny.

In multiple other conversations, I found such a neat differentiation of gender roles and expectations to be a recurrent pattern, in which financial care was coded strictly male and emotional care viewed as strictly female, along with any associated aspects. Curiously enough, this was true *even when* there were *only sisters* in a family, and there was a difference in the outlook between sisters themselves, which mapped on to the way they distributed caregiving responsibilities amidst themselves. In the absence of sons, one daughter was informally assigned the role of "son" (responsible for "taking care of" things) while another performed normative daughterhood, by being christened the one who "cared about" people.

Brothers among sisters: Krithika and Surbhi

In the case of Krithika and Surbhi's family for instance, caregiving responsibilities were similarly divided along stereotypical lines in a division that mirrored broader gender norms rather than individual preference alone. While Surbhi, the elder daughter of the family and an HR manager living close by to her parents in Delhi was deemed the "listener" of the family, Krithika, the younger daughter was living far away in Bangalore practising law like her father was christened the "doer". Although they had both been married a few years ago, but their interactions with their parents and responsibilities for caring had taken greatly different trajectories.

Between the two of them, Surbhi was responsible for checking in on their parents more regularly, taking care of their physical and emotional health, meeting them every week or fortnight in person, taking them to dinners or movies, and helping them with day-to-day things like managing electronic payments, helping with gardening or arranging house help. She was also the "peacemaker" of the family, who intervened to explain things patiently to her father when her mother was unable to do so, which was often the case after a fight between her mother and grandmother.

Krithika, on the other hand, was much more distant in her interactions with her parents- she spoke with them once in a fortnight or a month, did not visit home more frequently than once in six months, and never more than a few days at a time. Her relationship with her parents was much more "professional" - discussing investments with her dad, legal cases or other such related conversations, and updating everyone's health insurance policies on a regular basis. As for her mother, Krithika shared that her discussions with her were usually much more antagonistic, as she rarely had the patience for family drama or gossip, and she would regularly

get irritated at her mother's inability to speak up for herself within the home. She was available for "practical advice", if and when needed- for the rest, there was Surbhi.

Although Krithika joked with me about how the current dynamic works well for the two sisters, and was much more in tune with their natural characteristics, I wondered about the extent to which their gendered roles had to do with the lack of sons in the family. This 'natural split' between sisters in girls-only families was also evident in at least four other sets of sisters I interviewed, including Monica and Daisy outlined above; Ruhi and her elder sister mentioned in chapter one, and Rosalyn and her elder sister Ramona. In each case, interestingly, I found that it was almost *always* the *younger* daughter who became the 'son' of the family, while the elder daughter performed the more traditional daughter role. While this could be a pure coincidence among the sample of people I interviewed, one of the sisters, Rosalyn, when asked to comment on the observation, spoke of how it was perhaps because the first-born child would be expected to follow a more traditional path, with greater (and more) traditional expectations, while the younger was allowed to walk a path more of their own choosing.

My own perception was that such a distinction was an indication of the expectation in the family that the second born child (after a daughter) would be a son, knowledge of which would lead to the younger daughter to espouse much more son-like characteristics, as a way of 'compensating' for the lack of a son in the family, which seemed to be the case for Krithika, Ruhi as well as Rosalyn. However, as Ruhi's story in chapter one showed, while being labelled the '*beta* (son)' of the family initially felt empowering, it only later revealed significant psychological and bodily costs.

Thinking about these stories, it is evident how expectations of care from daughters reinforced gender stereotypes, intricately linking the performance of good daughterhood with scripts of

femininity. Irrespective of the *kind* of care that daughters were engaged in, whether through the use of money or emotional handholding of parents, in most cases, daughters' caregiving was re-interpreted through the lens of gendered tropes to reinforce the stereotype of the altruistic, selfless and caring daughter who was much more emotionally available for parents than sons could be, and whose monetary contributions were also saturated with emotions. While such arrangements may foster intimacy and closeness, they also impose narrow conditions on daughters' belonging.

In the next and concluding section of this theme, I explore the paradox of accruing moral worth through selfless care and the practice of good daughterhood. I argue that despite creating greater intimacy between parents and daughters, such expectations were harmful not only for re-iterating that the only way daughters could accrue moral worth was through emphasising their femininity, but also because they placed impossible bounds on daughters' ability to *replace* sons as old-age support systems for parents. In the process, the care daughters *do* provide is simultaneously invisibilized and normalised, while the costs they have to pay are ignored.

*

Part Three: Dissonances: The limits of good daughterhood

"You know, I was just thinking. It seems like there is one right way to be a good daughter to your parents- a set script and path you have to follow. But there are so many ways to be a bad daughter and let them down, that it's hard to keep count. Even if I do one thing right, there is always something I'm doing wrong."

- *Ragini, 31, lawyer*

Becoming bad daughters: Ragini

In a stark contrast to the praise, validation, love and closeness that *was* accessible to daughters when they were emotionally present for parents lay the sheer number of ways in which daughters could let parents down when it came to caregiving- paving the way for them to be labelled "bad daughters" just as easily as they were appreciated for being "good". Across my interviews, good daughterhood, while presented as a stable moral identity, proved to be remarkably fragile. Decisions made by daughters were routinely subjected to a heightened gendered scrutiny, where even the slightest departure from the expected script risked accusations of selfishness, egotism, ingratitude or disobedience.

This fragility was made evident in the case of Ragini, the Tamil-Brahmin daughter mentioned previously, who fought to marry the man of her choice from a different community. While this decision had already strained her relationship with her parents considerably, Ragini had eventually earned their approval by persuading her parents of the sincerity of her affection and acceding to a series of demands regarding the wedding. What ultimately cemented her fall from

grace as a 'good daughter', however, was not her choice of partner, but her decision to settle permanently in Canada.

When Ragini informed her parents, a few months after her marriage, that her application for permanent residency had been approved alongside a promotion in a prestigious legal firm, her parents' reaction was gut-wrenching and their rebuke unmistakable. The support that they had earlier extended towards her education turned into resentment once proximity and caregiving were no longer guaranteed. As their only child, Ragini's parents had been counting on her to be available and close by for supporting them in old age, and experienced her decision as a betrayal of this obligation. Despite not actually expecting Ragini to live *with* them in the future, they characterized her ambition and desire to settle abroad as selfish and thankless, much worse than her decision to marry Rohan. In a particularly angry fight that followed soon after, Ragini's mother remarked angrily that she felt it would have been better if she had given birth to a son instead of a daughter- *"what was the point of having a daughter,"* she asked, *"if she, too, was going to abandon her parents and not care for them in times of need?"*

This moment is analytically significant. It reveals how the prototype of the caring daughter is not merely aspirational but *disciplinary*. Daughters accrue moral worth only so long as they meet exacting and often unspoken standards of availability, sacrifice, and the prioritisation of parental needs at all times. When these standards are breached, particularly through *career* choices, the fall from 'good' to 'bad' daughterhood is swift and unforgiving. Ragini's parents' framing of their disappointment in explicitly gendered terms further highlights how such transgressions are read more harshly when committed by daughters rather than sons. The degree of frustration appears to be disproportionately higher when it is *daughters,* rather than sons who choose to pursue what are seen as 'selfish' lives- prioritizing their own futures and happiness rather than centering parental concerns.

In a later conversation, Ragini asked me a question that lingered throughout my discussions on elderly care- would a *son,* choosing to pursue a career in a lucrative field abroad have been judged with the same severity, or his actions interpreted as equally selfish and uncaring? Would he be charged with allegations of egotism as Ragini was, or would his decision be viewed as pragmatic and judicious, even eliciting pride?

The sacrifices of good daughterhood: material costs and gendered harms

As the earlier chapters on education and employment showed, good daughterhood is premised on a careful, pre-emptive selection (and often sacrifice) of educational and career opportunities that fall outside the norms of middle-class respectability, which helps explain many daughters' desires to pursue what Reay (2004, 2019) calls "classed ambitions". However, what Ragini's story demonstrates is that this expectation persists in the domain of caregiving as well- where daughters were not just expected to be *emotionally* available, but also to materially sacrifice careers at the altar of good daughterhood. Professional aspirations were thus perceived as hindrances both to gendered ideals *and* to intergenerational obligations.

In various discussions I had, daughters' sacrifices of educational opportunities, high flourishing careers, migration to different cities or countries, and even leisure time spent on hobbies, passions or personal relationships, were regularly normalised and even valorised as evidence of being a 'good' *caregiver*, both in the present and in the anticipation of the future. However, the extent of these material sacrifices and their longer-term repercussions never seemed to be acknowledged as *gendered harms*. What was the cost of caring for daughters?

While existing scholarship on the obstacles to women's constrained labour market participation has discussed at length women's tendency to drop out of lucrative careers in terms of systemic and institutional barriers that prevent their progress, much of this literature has focused on the

burdens of marriage, motherhood and caregiving within marital homes by way of sociocultural explanations (England and Folbre 1999; Folbre 2012; Gupta et al. 2005; Wood 2023). In her lifelong work tracking some of these trends for example, Claudia Goldin has discussed how the difficulties of managing a career and family simultaneously have been one of the biggest issues women face worldwide, where they are often forced to choose pass up on the "greedy jobs" that pay well, in order to accommodate the needs of family members (Goldin 1990, 2021; Goldin and Katz 2008). In India too, the declining and low female labour force participation of women, especially that of urban, educated has been attributed to discriminatory social norms, lack of flexible work options that do not allow women to fulfill their competing obligations at work and marital homes, leading to a specific kind of "Indian paradox" where education and employment are in a U-shaped relationship rather than linearly correlated (Chatterjee, Desai, and Vanneman 2018). Many scholars have characterised these in terms of the "triple burdens" faced by women- of being mother, wife and worker, combined an inability to be a "superwoman" that have held them back (Bhalotra and Cochrane 2010; Bhowmick 2024; Gupta et al. 2005). As a result, unsurprisingly, India remains a country with some of the lowest labour force participation rates in the world that is in sharp decline- with less than 19.2% of women in the formal labour force as of 2021, a decline from 32% in 2005 (Chakrabarty 2023).

While this work is crucial, it has rarely, if ever, attended to the costs that being a *daughter* places on women in terms of lost opportunities, sacrificed careers or earning potential. My findings suggest that long before women encounter the wifehood or motherhood penalties, many have already absorbed the costs of gendered obligation through expectations of availability and care for *natal* families.

In this sense, daughters like Ragini were not simply choosing 'ambition' over family, they were perceived as violating a moral economy in which daughters' futures remain tethered to parental

needs. While appreciating the changing gender norms and evolving expectations form daughters to care for parents, I suggest that it is equally important for us to understand the material consequences of adherence, both conscious and unconscious, to the norms of good daughterhood, in terms of foregone earnings, stalled careers, and narrowed mobility among others. These costs of good daughterhood are not just emotional, but a tangible, material form of gendered harm that deserves more recognition.

Choosing their own burdens: the double duty of daughterhood

One factor that further complicates these dynamics in the present scenario, is that caregiving expectations are not experienced by daughters solely as imposed gender obligations, flowing from the older to the younger generations- rather, they are also being *actively claimed* by daughters themselves, especially in India. In a changing societal context, where daughters increasingly seek recognition as being *equal* to sons, most daughters I spoke with framed caregiving not just as a *duty,* but also a *right.* Earning daughters, in particular, vociferously asserted their ability, desire and capacity to care for their parents, emphasising their ability to replace sons in both emotional as well as practical terms.

In other instances, daughters would frame their responsibility to care for parents as part of a more "natural" practice of care, distinct from the obligation-bound care expected of daughters-in-law or paid caregivers. In her work on the ethics of care, philosopher Nel Noddings makes an important distinction between "*natural"* and "*ethical"* caring, in which the former arises from desire and innate emotional attachment (I "want" to), while the latter is motivated by duty, moral compulsion or obligation (I "must" care). Noddings claims that when one is performing acts of care for a person out of love and feeling, one engages in *natural* caring, while *ethical* caring is based on a recognition of the *appropriate* way of relating to another person, or an

ideal of what a carer is expected to be (Noddings 1995:7–9). In my discussions, daughters similarly described care for natal parents as natural and emotionally grounded, while care for in-laws was framed as ethical, imposed, and qualitatively different. The responsibility to be emotionally available for her parents rested with a daughter, they would argue, *even if* the daughter-in-law was residing with them.

This distinction was also an important part of their identity as "forever daughters", which enabled them to assert continued belonging to natal families after marriage- an especially meaningful and precious claim, given its historical denial. In fact, many daughters spoke of consciously choosing partners who understood this paradigm and strategizing relationships in accordance with this expectation, as Arpita and Shalini's cases also showed. Caregiving thus became central to their self-identity and a marker of modern, gender-equitable relationships with spouses, in which daughterhood as a relationship remained an extremely significant.

However, such optimisms often had a price to be paid. Razia's story illustrates the contradictions that emerge when daughters insist on caring for their parents without a corresponding shift in expectations surrounding marriage and marital loyalty.

Unchanging norms? The costs of caring: Razia

Discussing the "clear arrangement" she and her husband had arrived at early on in their marriage, where they split finances, care, and logistical responsibilities equally, Razia spoke of the couple had decided that they would each assume individual responsibility for their parents' care in the future. To Razia, this expectation was part of a gender-equal partnership that she shared with her partner, as much as an emotional decision. Accordingly, when mother fell seriously ill, Razia moved back to her natal home to care for her, emphasizing that her presence

was not only practical but emotionally irreplaceable, while highlighting her own desire to be there for her mother.

> "*My mother has a certain sense of comfort with me that she wouldn't have otherwise. She likes having me around for essential needs like, for example, she can't go to the hospital alone, she would want me to be there. And I don't just feel obligated to sign up for these things, I* ***want*** *to be there."*

However, despite this arrangement being mutually agreed upon within their marriage, Razia faced persistent taunts from her in-laws and extended family members for prioritizing her mother over her mother-in-law. Her care towards her mother was not read as responsible or loving, but excessive and inappropriate, and in violation of her duty as a good daughter in law. Razia spoke of how she found it difficult to imagine that she could feel the same "natural" love for her mother-in-law, deeming the expectation both impossible and problematic. However, she described experiencing "a sense of hostility" from relatives, extended kin and even neighbours, who repeatedly reminded her that if she did so much for one set of parents, she should be doing *more* for the other. Speaking of the pressures she was facing in balancing both households, Razia said:

> *"In my mother-in-law's case, she has an entire support system…still, there is a certain sense of jealousy that I do caregiving for my mother living with her, and I don't do it for her… she feels that I prioritize my mother over her…But then I tell her, she is my mother, she will always come first, I cannot replace my own mother with somebody else's mother…*
>
> *…There is a certain sense of entitlement that she [MIL] has, because she thinks that the relationship that I have now, going forward with her with my husband, with his family,*

whatever, should take like a certain level of importance in my life. It should show in how I choose to prioritize my time and my effort and my labours. ...I feel a sense of hostility from the people around me, they constantly feel like this is something that I should be put down about…because I'm not doing enough [for my in-laws]..”

Razia’s story reveals the incongruities of daughters wanting to practice caregiving for parents in the absence of any transformation in *other* gendered expectations from women, especially after marriage, when their primary loyalties are expected to be towards their marital homes. In an era of shifting norms where daughters like Razia were contesting these pre-conceived notions, it was telling that they had to bear the brunt of societal displeasure and brickbats for wanting to do so. Unlike previous generations, the women I spoke with did not see their responsibilities towards parents as ad-hoc, convenience based or secondary simply because they were married. But what did they have to forsake in order to balance the responsibilities daughterhood imposed on them, while *still* being held accountable for their other duties?

It is this unique predicament that these educated, working daughters with a newfound and enduring sense of loyalty towards their parents find themselves in, that I refer to as the “double duty of daughterhood”. It indicates the condition in which daughters are simultaneously expected to remain primary emotional caregivers for their natal families, while also fulfilling the gendered obligations of marriage, wifehood, and domestic responsibility, *without* any corresponding redistribution or relaxation of either set of expectations. It requires daughters to perform care *additively* rather than *substitutively*- caregiving for parents does not replace or reduce expectations within marital families, but is layered on top of them, producing intensified emotional, temporal, and material labour that remains largely invisible and unacknowledged.

What distinguishes the double duty of daughterhood from other forms of gendered labour is that it is not anchored in a single institutional role, but unfolds across family locations and life stage. Unlike sons, whose caregiving is typically episodic, delegable, or mediated through women, daughters' care is expected to be intimate, affective, and continuous. At the same time, unlike daughters-in-law, daughters' labour for natal parents is rarely formalised, recognised, or legitimised as a primary responsibility. The result is a form of care work that is simultaneously demanded, moralised, and disavowed. This concept captures thus captures the paradox through which daughters are encouraged to "care like sons" while continuing to live under gendered expectations that sons are not subject to.

Further, in contrast to the motherhood penalty or domestic burdens typically imposed on wives, the labour performed by daughters, both before and after marriage, remains largely absent from discussions of gender and change in India, despite it being a significant feature of shifting intergenerational relations. Through my interviews, I surmised that the pre-emptive and ongoing sacrifice of professional opportunities, and adjustment of careers and workloads to remain available to parents was one of the most important ways in which these expectations were being juggled by young women. Since it would be impossible to take on these different kinds of duties - in their natal homes (as daughters), marital homes (as wives, mothers and daughters-in-law), *and* in the workplace simultaneously without failing at *something.* becoming, and *staying,* good daughters meant it was almost always careers that got left behind.

However, what this effort was costing them, both emotionally and materially, remains under-theorised and difficult to name, ironically because of daughters' *own* demands to claim caregiving as a moral right and marker of equality with sons. In In the absence of any corresponding transformation in other gendered expectations, I posit that the pursuit of good

daughterhood continues to impose substantial, yet largely invisible costs that are borne by daughters, even as responsibility for them is individualised and blame is internalised.

Limits to caring: The existential dissonance of daughterhood

A final dimension of these conversations is questioning whether daughters' willingness to *be there* for parents even at the cost of these sacrifices, ridicule, shaming and guilting in fact meaningfully changes the place that they occupy within their families. Do daughters' desires and willingness to replace sons allow them to take up that space?

Unfortunately, it is here that the limits of change become visible in its starkest form, proving that no matter what costs they paid, daughters could not, in fact, "become" sons.

To this effect, one of the most intriguing discoveries during my discussions on elder care was the parental *hesitation*, and even *reluctance,* or *anger*, when the support offered by daughters transcended perceived gendered boundaries of social conduct. Just as daughters' money was often marked as "tainted", daughters' caregiving was rebuffed when it threatened established hierarchies. In many cases, daughters wanted to *fight* to *have* the right to care for their parents, but were being *denied* these claims, due to fear of societal backlash, regressive thinking, or simply a refusal to see daughters' role as the same as that of sons. Preeti's case demonstrates this.

Successful aging and appropriate dependence: Preeti

Preeti, a 32-year-old professor at Delhi University and one of three sisters mentioned in chapter five, spoke with anger and disbelief about her parents' *outright* refusal to live with any of their daughters in old age, despite significant health challenges faced by their mother, who was diagnosed with a chronic disease. Their reluctance, Preeti felt, stemmed not from a lack of

need, but from fear of social judgement. As she told me, what troubled her most was not simply the decision itself, but the way it rendered her care illegible, especially by a mother Preeti had considered fairly progressive. Speaking of her parents' attitude, she said:

> *"They raised us to be independent, educated us, made us self-reliant… But suddenly, when it **actually** comes to being there, for us to show up, they won't even consider it. Because **log kya kahenge** (what will people say)."*

Frustrated that she was unable to convince her parents to reconsider living with her despite multiple requests, Preeti instead found herself resorting to expending emotional and logistical labour at a distance- monitoring her mother's medical care, cajoling and reprimanding her father on a daily basis to take care of her, forcing him to participate in housework, and managing her parents' anxieties without ever being fully allowed to take responsibility for them, in person. It was not an ideal situation, and in fact required *more* than necessary work managing emotions, tiptoeing around' egos and insecurities, while also coordinating the logistics of their medical care remotely. Yet, what this pattern showed was that daughters' care was welcomed only so long as it did not *openly* challenge dominant gender scripts around dependence, residence, and propriety.

In Razia's case as well, a few months after our first conversation, she mentioned that she was moving back to her marital home despite her mother's continued sickness, because of her *mother's* insistence and *her* continued discomfort at making Razia her full-time caregiver. While the initial severity of her mother's health condition had allowed Razia's exceptional status as a daughter-caregiver-in-residence to be legitimized, Razia spoke of her *own mother* eventually being displeased at her ignoring her marital duties for her mother's sake. Such a

reluctance to *receiving care* showed how important it was parents to accept change, but only within "appropriate" and non-disruptive levels of dependence on daughters.

The gendered nature of these limits was especially evident in parental invocations of "successful aging". Drawing on Sarah Lamb's (2014, 2019b) work, which describes the contemporary obsession with "ageing well" as an important part of western perspectives on living healthily, where parents deem to take "radical responsibility" for their health so as to not become dependent on their progeny, many parents of daughters framed their insistence on 'independence' as modern, responsible, and progressive.

In various conversations I had, daughters as well as parents spoke of saving for old age and maintaining good health as ways of deflecting concerns about *who* would care for them, particularly when they had no sons. However, over time, I found that the parental insistence on "planning prudentially" for their futures, while presented as a feature of successful aging and embracing modern paradigms, in fact obscured a deeper reluctance to admit that daughters were neither expected nor viewed as *actual* replacements for sons. Rather than acknowledge the possibility of daughters being "just like sons", parents who had only daughters, were often prepared to *accept* or *tolerate* care from them in extreme situations, but were hesitant to *expect* it.

As one respondents, Rani devi, a mother of two daughters put it:

> *"The most important gift I can give to my daughter is to take care of myself, and to not be a burden to her in the future. I don't want to put her in a place where she feels compelled to take me in [to her marital house]. If it is an extreme situation, maybe. Then it is not in my hands- if I can't walk or talk. But not otherwise."*

The presence of a *son* in the family (even when there was one or more daughter), however, seemed to dramatically change these conversations, with the unsaid expectation that parents could or would rely on *him* in the future, eliminating the need for narratives of successful aging altogether. Where they had brothers, sisters I spoke with too acknowledged this as the 'expected' norm, implicitly placing themselves in the position of the 'backup' carer, especially on the question of co-residence. The contrasting nature of these expectations pointed to parental willingness to accept care from daughters, but only within "acceptable" paradigms. Similar to the rejection of financial assistance from daughters, the insistence on individuality and independence by parents can also be viewed as a gendered response, that accommodates patriarchal considerations while presenting itself as emblematic of modernity.

Overriding exemptions and dispensable labour: Caroline

The disposability of daughters' caring labour and the pre-eminence of patriarchy could be seen not just in expectations of patrilocality. When "more important" aspects of daughters' lives, such as getting married at the right time or to the right person, were in direct competition with the expectation of caregiving, here too, the primacy of adhering to societal norms overtook all other considerations, even eliminating the need for daughters to be present as caregivers for parents at all.

In the case of Caroline for example, who had spent a decade caring for her schizophrenic mother at significant personal cost, the expendable nature of her care came as a shock once she turned twenty-five and conversations around her impending marriage intensified, leading to the abrupt disappearance of her caregiving role from family negotiations. Caroline expressed her extreme surprise when she heard her father say that once she gets married, she would not be expected to be her mother's caregiver at all, while also declaring that this responsibility

should not even be mentioned during marriage talks, lest it "scare off" any potential suitors. He proposed hiring a full-time nurse instead.

For Caroline, this was a deeply destabilising and hurtful moment. Her years of emotional investment, daily labour and intimate care suddenly appeared so interchangeable and expendable, and she was not even consulted in the decision. As she asked herself, if indeed it *had been* possible for her family to have cared for her mother without her, why had it not been done before, when she was a teenager? And if it was not, then how would it suddenly become possible now, just because she was expected to get married? How would it mysteriously become acceptable for her mother to be dependent solely on a "paid" caretaker now, which had been deemed selfish and wrong earlier?

Caroline spoke of feeling simultaneously exploited as well as erased in her role as a daughter- needed when her labour was convenient, but easily replaced when her marriageability took precedence. Her story captures the existential uncertainty that many daughters expressed- *what exactly is my place in this family?*

The existential dissonance of modern daughterhood

The difficulties in understanding their place within their families, the insider/outsider position they occupied, and the ever-changing expectations from daughters placed many of the women I spoke with in a state of existential dissonance, where they struggled to understand what their worth was within their families. Were they important, or were they not? Who decided what care they could provide, and till when? Why was it, that despite their best efforts and sincere intentions, they were not allowed to do what sons could?

During the focus group discussion, one of the participants, Adhya, seemed to summarize the feeling that the group was coming to terms with. She said, concluding an emotionally difficult

speech about "not knowing" who she was to her parents or how she could convince them to let her take care of them the way a son would:

> *"I sometimes wish I was born a son. At least that way, it would be clear what is expected from me, and what I can do for my parents. At this point, I don't even know where to begin, and I don't have the strength to fight them so I can take care of them!"*

The paradox of good daughterhood: Final reflections

The stories shared in this chapter point to the difficult paradox of performing good daughterhood when it comes to the question of eldercare. While it is evident that change is taking place, as the above accounts show, not only is the pace of change slow in accepting daughters as equivalent to sons as caregivers, but it is also evident the changes that *are* taking place continue to essentialise daughters in specific ways, and limit their actual capacity to replace sons within the larger family system.

In her work on home ownership among the middle classes in Kolkata in India, Henrike Donner (2022) also finds a similar tendency within "modern" families in contemporary India. Although there is growing evidence, she argues, that single daughters are increasingly being encouraged to marry close to home, or to move to their natal homes, bypassing cohabitation with in-laws, and becoming rightful recipients of family homes and inheritance, as captured in the parental insistence that *'daughters are just like sons now',* such change hinges very much on the perpetuation of serial debt relations with parents, and a kin morality that promotes women's dependency on family. Donner argues that for many young women, access to home ownership is dependent on them performing gendered roles as daughters, reproducing ideals of middle-class femininity, while remaining perpetually in a liminal state of immaturity and continued

dependence. As she writes, for such daughters, "*care work becomes the glue that sets off credit against kin dependencies*" (2022: 471).

Donner further suggests that the figure of the "empowered, liberal, agentive and professional" woman among these classes obscures the lack of actual "transformative agency" (Kabeer 1999) effectively available to women, especially as daughters, since they remain entangled in webs of interdependence and care work that reify their gendered identities and continues to promote older and regressive family values and ideals (Donner 2022: 470). While daughters may be entitled to certain rewards for partaking in the specific kind of care that is expected of them, they continue to be viewed as outsiders who do not have an automatic *right* to a place in their parents' homes, especially after marriage, but may earn proximity through servitude and obeisance.

Among my conversations as well, it was apparent that while daughters *were* allowed to care and earn their place in the family, but only in very specific ways, and only up to a point. They were not invited to support parents financially or in material terms, to live with them, or even to prioritize them post marriage. These considerations were further muddled when it came to more "serious" discussions, such as those of property or inheritance, where daughters, especially married ones, were routinely excluded, reinforcing the precarity of their position within natal families. Despite all their efforts to remain "forever daughters", their involvement remained conditional, precarious, and reversable- subject to withdrawal that turned them from insiders into outsiders at will.

At the same time, the expectation that they *would* give the type of *emotional* care that was demanded of them remained persistent- and it was this very characterisation of the care daughters provided, that added to its perceived insignificance. This labour was built on the

back of heavy emotional investment, as well as substantial material sacrifices that retained existing hierarchies. Yet, there was no room for acknowledging the very real ways in which women's lives were being held back in order to make room for the task of caring.

The task of recognizing this double duty of daughterhood, I suggest, is urgent and important in a country where the intergenerational contract is undergoing seismic shifts, in order to understand the tangible, material costs that being a good daughter levies on these accomplished young women.

Unfortunately, in many ways, these women seemed to have been caught in a paradox of their own making, which makes the burdens they carry and the inconsistencies they face even more difficult to call out, because they have been choosing, even *demanding* the right to care for their own parents, while simultaneously remaining largely within the confines of expectations marriage, motherhood and domestic responsibilities extended families were levying on them. The question of sons, in fact, remains completely unattended to in this entire discourse, since the framing of caregiving as a right for daughters does not raise the question of what *sons* are expected to do- especially when it comes to the emotional burdens of caring. When scholars like Croll, Donner or Lamb discuss the changing intergenerational contract between parents and daughters, with daughters becoming more like sons, where is the question of *sons* becoming more like *daughters* (or daughters-in- law)?

In this sense, I determine that the aspiration to good daughterhood itself becomes a form of "cruel optimism" for daughters (Berlant 2020). While it promises recognition, equality, and belonging, it ultimately does little to alter underlying gendered arrangements in the status quo, instead adding a multitude of responsibilities onto daughters' shoulders without relieving existing burdens. Moral worth is accrued only at their own expense- through the curtailment of

their dreams and ambitions, foreclosed opportunities and narrowed prospects of living more fulfilling lives, ultimately becoming an obstacle to daughters' own flourishing.

Recognising the pitfalls of such caregiving, and of good daughterhood itself, is therefore crucial- the stereotypes it reproduces, the burdens it lays, and the real harms that follow from the emotionally charged sacrifices that are expected only from daughters, even as their ability to replace sons remains circumscribed. Rather than signalling a transformed intergenerational contract, these expectations reveal how continuity and change coexist, how the promise of good daughterhood is contrasted with its many paradoxes- expanding daughters' responsibilities and moral worth, but only within persistently gendered terms that leave the deeper structure of inequality intact.

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IX. Conclusion

About the study

This thesis began with a set of exploratory questions- What does it mean to be a daughter in "New India", within urban, educated, middle and upper-middle class strata families? What are the conflicting experiences of modernity and tradition that being a daughter imposes on young Indian women, and how do they navigate their newfound freedoms from within a sense of responsibility and obligation towards their families? What are the consequences of these expectations, and what can their life stories tell us about gender and social change in contemporary India?

By focusing on a social group that often positions itself as progressive, modern, and gender-equal, this study deliberately shifts attention away from dominant narratives that locate gender discrimination primarily among the poor or uneducated. While existing scholarship on the Indian middle class has examined women extensively as wives and mothers, this thesis foregrounds daughterhood as a formative gendered relationship- one that shapes women's moral responsibilities, life choices, and sense of self well before, and often beyond, marriage.

The significance of this project lies both in the relative neglect of daughters within sociological accounts of middle-class India, and in the changing position of daughters within families in the context of structural and discursive shifts in post-1990s India. As noted earlier, processes such as increasing urbanisation, migration, declining fertility rates, nuclearisation, and the growing visibility of daughter-only households have begun to transform the intergenerational contract, as norms of filial responsibility shift alongside technological and social changes that reduce traditional dependence on sons as old-age support systems. At the same time, expanded

educational and professional opportunities for women, coupled with the growing normative force of gender equality, has altered how parents perceive the value of daughters- materially, emotionally, and morally.

Reflections of these shifts are visible across both public and private domains- in media narratives that celebrate daughters as the "new sons," in policy initiatives promoting the education and survival of the girl child, and in legal frameworks that emphasise daughters' responsibility for parental care. Among the educated urban elite in particular, daughters increasingly appear to occupy a more valued and visible position within families. Yet, these developments coexist with persistent gendered moralities that continue to regulate daughters' desires, movements, and futures. This contradiction is especially acute for women born in the late 1980s and early 1990s, who grew up amid discourses of empowerment but now confront the gendered boundaries that structure their adulthood. It is this tension, between promise and constraint, that this study sought to examine, from the perspective of daughters themselves.

Guided by these concerns, this study drew on qualitative interviews with daughters, and in some cases their families and parents, to explore how young women make sense of their lives, opportunities, and obligations as daughters. Rather than treating daughterhood as a transitional or residual category, the thesis examined it as a sustained and consequential gendered relationship that shapes daughters' self-understandings and family roles across the life course.

The scope of this thesis is necessarily limited by the small and relatively homogenous (upper-caste, relatively affluent, and disproportionately Hindu and North Indian) respondents of the study, the type of research conducted, and the specific location of Delhi-NCR as its site. While these experiences are not intended to be generalisable, and this study would have indeed benefited greatly from a more diverse, intersectional set of respondents, the respondents of this

study nonetheless represent an important microcosm of the privileged, professional middle-class daughterhood in contemporary India that is worthy of analysis. The narratives presented here should be read as *signifiers* of key tensions and contradictions, rather than representative of daughters within the Indian middle class more generally, whose experiences, undoubtedly, would vary significantly across the country. With an acknowledgement of these limitations, I now proceed to the key insights that emerged from this work.

Insights from the field

This thesis examined daughterhood as a lived, emotional, and moral relation, tracing how daughters in urban, educated, middle- and upper-middle-class families come to understand their value, responsibilities, and place within the family across the life course. Across four empirical chapters, I showed how "good daughterhood" is produced, internalised, and negotiated through everyday practices, aspirations, and relationships, and how emotions such as guilt, gratitude, anger, resentment, and dissonance play a central role in sustaining gendered inequalities even within families that articulate egalitarian ideals. The following sections present a brief summary of the empirical chapters.

Chapter One: Birth, Exceptionalism, and the Emotional Origins of Good Daughterhood

The first empirical chapter investigated the *becoming* of daughterhood and its early socialisation. I began by examining the significance of birth stories as a key narrative site through which daughters first learned to make sense of their gendered position within the family. Whether framed as accounts of disappointment, reluctant acceptance, or exceptional celebration, these stories encoded value and difference, positioning daughters as deviations from a presumed norm. Being wanted *despite* one's gender produced an early awareness of conditional belonging, where daughters internalised the idea that their existence required

justification. Irrespective of how their birth was received, daughters learnt, early on, to mark themselves by an *absence* or *negation*- the most significant aspect of their birth in some ways became the fact that they were *not* sons. This symbolic positioning was reinforced over time through everyday exclusions, enforced silences, or a disregard to their opinions when it came to important matters within the family, becoming an important part of their gendered habitus and operating as a form of "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu 2001) that normalised their inferior status within the family.

Despite this, an awareness of their relative privilege- of being allowed to be born, educated, and invested in- produced what Hochschild (2003) refers to as "economies of gratitude". Daughters began their lives in emotional debt toward parents who had given them "better lives" than many other could expect. This gratitude worked to delegitimise daughters' complaints about discrimination, including coercive control and emotional or physical abuse. Many struggled to reconcile proclamations of love with preferential treatment toward sons, persistent gendered norms, coercive control or more explicit forms of abuse.

An important insight from this chapter was how daughters' own emotions- gratitude, guilt, resentment and the desire for validation, played an active role in reproducing their subordinate position, becoming central to how daughters learnt to govern themselves. In their desire to prove themselves equal to or better than sons, to invalidate the misfortune of their birth, or to accrue moral worth within their families, daughters themselves conformed to a performance of what I call "good daughterhood". Good daughterhood here is not just an internalised ideal (of what daughters believe they *must* be) but also a regulatory apparatus (what others *expect* them to be). Through the course of this thesis, I argued that it operates as a *gendered and classed affective formation* that affects daughters over the entire course of their lives in deeply significant ways. Daughters' desires to please their families, not disappoint them, to minimize

their perception as liabilities, or to receive endorsement as good daughters, plays an important role in explaining how gendered roles are replicated in the social realm, through emotions originating within the private realm. This chapter shows how emotional debt becomes an early mechanism through which gendered and classed hierarchies are reproduced within families.

The latter part of this chapter focused on how notions of good daughterhood were inextricably intertwined with class-appropriate ideals of respectability and femininity, shaped by notions of shame, honour and virtue- gendering the body from a young age through a series of repetitions and reactions in middle class households. Using theories of gendered embodiment and narratives of disciplining in their childhood, this section demonstrated how the gendered habitus of daughters is shaped through years of micro-socialisation - dictating how they are expected to sit, stand, dress, speak, laugh, cry; who they can meet, when and why; what are they allowed to do and be- with serious consequences for transgressions. A focus on this corporeal performance of good daughterhood also explains how class hierarchies are reproduced through gendered bodies- learning to fear the city for instance, or internalising a sense of shame in dressing "immodestly", are closely tied to middle class concerns around controlling the sexuality of women. Even when daughters *know* and *understand* some of the restrictions they adhere to as problematic, they struggle with the "sticky emotions", as Sara Ahmed (2013) writes, that "attach" to the body, shaping social relations in important ways. By focusing on the role of emotions in reproducing social, class-based hierarchies and reinforcing gendered norms, I suggest that the framework of good daughterhood provides an important lens through which one can better understand the push and pull of social norms, gender and change in the lives of daughters in India today.

Chapter Two: Education, Gratitude, and the Limits of Empowerment

The second chapter extended this argument through an examination of education, a domain where emotions of gratitude for the opportunities daughters received were among the strongest. I began by situating daughters' educational trajectories within shifting middle-class moralities, where education has become a normative ideal and a key marker of class belonging. Many daughters spoke of being supported, encouraged, and invested in by parents who framed education as a means of ensuring independence and self-respect. Educational and professional qualifications were an important aspect of self-identity and a means of self-actualisation for most of my respondents, echoing the work of scholars like Belliappa (2013).

However, the encouragement and support daughters received, while positive, was not without conditions. The chapter showed how educational achievements became a key way through which daughters accrued moral worth within the family, blurring boundaries between being a *good student* and *good daughter.* The rise of what I called "trophy daughters", within the middle classes, I argued, is problematic for many reasons, not least for reinforcing the idea that daughters feel should feel compelled to "earn" their place within the family through their academic excellence, often at significant emotional and mental cost. Stories of daughters like Arpita, Anukriti and Suhani revealed the pressures that daughters faced to remain high achievers, as "compensation" for the privileges they had been afforded that others were not, and their associated penalties.

Framing educational opportunities as a "privilege" granted to daughters also had other important consequences. Not only did it greatly limit daughters' imaginations, "naturally" aligning their educational and professional dreams in accordance with gendered and class-appropriate expectations, it also allowed for greater parental control over daughters'

educational choices, legitimizing gendered restrictions on the disciplines, colleges, degrees and jobs they could pursue, while justifying these limitations as "small sacrifices" that daughters must partake in exchange for the "freedoms" they have been afforded, as Anjali's case showed. Another insidious aspect of this transactional logic was its role in obscuring *other* forms of gender discrimination, where it existed within middle class families. Thus, while trophy daughters served an important role in the social reproduction of middle classness, by helping families accrue symbolic and cultural capital from the pride and prestige associated with the educational and professional accomplishments of *daughters*, they also enabled parents to claim gender-equal and progressive ideals publicly- irrespective of whether they were actually practised within the household. This section showed how education functions as a key site of class reproduction, allowing families to appear progressive while extracting emotional compliance and reaffirming gendered limits.

The final section of the chapter revealed the limits of educational empowerment when daughters' ambitions threatened gendered boundaries. Here, I elaborated on how the enthusiastic support for daughters' educational trajectories is *not* reflected in concomitant support for their *professional* goals, since the latter can very easily violate gendered and class boundaries, especially if daughters choose to pursue careers at the cost of other, "more important" life accomplishments, such as getting married at the right time and to the right person, or choose professions that are deemed problematic or dishonourable. Building on Diane Reay's (1995) work on classed ambitions, the concluding section highlighted the many difficulties well-educated, professionally qualified daughters faced in pursuing *careers,* rather than *jobs,* as they were expected to, with too much success or money or ambition becoming as much a source of conflict as too little. Despite purported unconditional support for daughters' educational and professional goals, parents chiding their daughters for being "too educated for

their own good", for being overly ambitious or career oriented, and chasing success at the cost of other expectations revealed the gendered and classed limits of ambitions within modern, middle-class families. Ultimately, this chapter showed how the pursuit of education emerged as a double-edged sword- the very education that allows daughters to develop a heightened sense of awareness and critical thinking, pushing them to question taken-for-granted norms becomes a source of friction within the family, when it threatens to destabilize existing hierarchies through the pursuit of true independence.

Chapter three: Marriage, Dutiful Love, and the Moral Limits of Choice

The third chapter turned to love, dating, and marriage, revealing marriage as the most explicit and emotionally charged site through which good daughterhood is tested and evaluated. While contemporary middle-class Indian families increasingly endorse narratives of choice, companionate marriage, and modernity, I showed how daughters' romantic autonomy remains tightly circumscribed by concerns of suitability, caste, religion, class, and timing. Within this context, I defined *dutiful love* as a form of relational attachment in which daughters learn to prioritise parental approval and familial harmony over personal desire, even when doing so entails sacrifice or emotional harm.

In the first section, I presented a collation of stories of such dutiful daughters, who were willing participants in the social reproduction process of marriage. Building on cinematic and media shifts in recent memory, I found that the "freedom to love" in this generation was often reconfigured such that *parental acquiescence* became the "true test" of romantic legitimacy. Such a reconfiguration forced daughters not only to pre-emptively select future spouses their parents would approve of, but also valorised the sacrifice of romantic love that does *not* meet parental acceptance as a form of duty or emotional maturity. In the characterization of a

daughter's marriage as a collective familial goal, as Prerna or Arpita's cases showed, parental feelings about a future groom were *more,* if not as important as a daughter's own desires, both for her own happiness as well as for the continued security of her relationship with parents. Daughters' own desires to celebrate "their special day" through spectacular weddings and acquiescence to suitable appropriate, class, caste and religion compliant weddings (often framed as modern, celebratory, and consensual) was as much a strategic manoeuvre that legitimizes past customs as it was a part of being a good daughter in the future. Here, their desire to be good daughters allowed for the justification of and adherence to regressive traditions, from sexist rituals to dowry practices, both as part of a classed performance and moral obligation towards parents.

The latter sections of this chapter detailed the case of daughters who *did not, could not,* or *would not* adhere to parental rules and regulations on the subject of dating and marriage, and the high costs they had to pay for it. For many of my respondents, marriage represented that important life stage, where they first come to terms with their markedly gendered position within the family, comprehending how their worth was entirely reducible to their marital status and conditional upon them choosing the *right* partner. Instead of the love, understanding and support they had expected, daughters like Ragini and Gina spoke of the shock and betrayal they experienced when their romantic choices contravened parental expectations. Not only were they immediately labelled disobedient, ungrateful and reprehensible for wanting to break boundaries of caste and religion, they were punished severely and forced to undergo painful processes of atonement and over-compensation in order to maintain their ruptured relationship with their parents. Others, like Anusha and Shalini, realised with dismay how their single status was an *even worse* outcome than marrying the "wrong" person, as they came to terms with the

fact that *all* their other accomplishments meant precious little to their parents, if daughters were not "married off" by the "right time".

The final section elaborated the stories of these "disappointing daughters", revealing marriage as the ultimate-litmus test of good daughterhood, against which the worth of daughters was measured. The concepts of "elongated waithood" and "gendered worries" I describe also alluded to the paradox of high-achieving daughters delaying marriage in order to pursue academic and professional ambitions (with parental support), while simultaneously being penalized for it and becoming a source of gendered worries and anxiety within the family.

Finally, the parental discomfort and disappointment with single and unmarried (even if happy and independent) daughters reveals that despite claims to the contrary, the "rightful" place of daughters in Indian families, no matter how educated or affluent, continues to be seen as *outside* their natal homes- especially past a certain "expiration date". Overstaying their welcome in their childhood homes beyond this time, or waiting for too long to get married- whether willingly or unwillingly, is a guaranteed way for "good daughters" to fall from grace, and a reminder of their position as "temporary" or "transient" members of their birth families. This chapter ultimately reflected on the intersection of class and gender in the creation of these good daughters, while demonstrating the boundaries of change and continuity in gendered social norms.

Chapter four: Care, Forever Daughters, and the Double Duty of Daughterhood

The fourth and final empirical chapter examined caregiving and the evolving intergenerational contract between parents and daughters, revealing both the expanded emotional centrality of daughters in contemporary middle-class families and the persistent, gendered limits of this inclusion. As demographic shifts, nuclearisation, migration, and changing expectations of old-

age support reshape family life in urban India, daughters increasingly emerge as primary emotional anchors and reliable caregivers for ageing parents within the middle classes. Parents I spoke with frequently articulated greater emotional dependence on daughters than sons, valuing daughters' attentiveness, empathy, and availability, particularly in contexts where financial need was not the primary concern. Daughters themselves often embraced these caregiving roles, driven by love, moral obligation, and heightened awareness of the gendered harms their parents, especially mothers, had endured. Emotional caregiving extended well beyond moments of crisis, encompassing daily emotional regulation, mediation, logistical coordination, and the management of family well-being.

I conceptualised this shift as the rise of *forever daughterhood*- an understanding of daughterhood as a lifelong, affectively charged obligation that does not end with marriage, physical distance, or with the formation of one's own household. While this reconfiguration has, in many cases, deepened intimacy and sustained parent-daughter bonds, it has also intensified gendered expectations that naturalise daughters' care work as an extension of love, rather than labour. The second section of this chapter revealed the deeply gendered assumptions underpinning caregiving expectations, exposing daughters' their care work was naturalised, rendered invisible, and treated as an extension of their *moral* character, rather than as labour involving sacrifice and cost; while resistance or refusal was met with disappointment, resentment, or moral reproach.

Crucially, the final section of this chapter showed that daughters' increased emotional value within the family does not translate into structural or material equality, or full familial inclusion. Daughters were expected to give care generously and continuously, yet their contributions remained carefully circumscribed. Financial support was symbolically constrained, often rendered acceptable only when framed through gendered exceptions or moments of crisis,

while questions of inheritance, property, and long-term security continue to position daughters as secondary or temporary members of their natal families. This produces what I describe as a gendered existential dissonance, rooted in what Hochschild (2012) terms "emotion work"- daughters are deeply needed, relied upon, and morally burdened, yet repeatedly reminded of their outsider status. Guilt and gratitude compel them to continue giving, even when caregiving obligations conflicted with personal aspirations, professional goals, or well-being.

It is within this contradiction that I located the *double duty of daughterhood* as a central analytic of this chapter. As daughters sustain caregiving obligations toward natal parents over time, they are also expected, particularly after marriage, to fulfil intensive responsibilities as wives, daughters-in-law, and mothers within marital families. Rather than *replacing* sons, daughters are required to stretch themselves across kinship domains, absorbing cumulative emotional and practical labour without a corresponding redistribution of responsibility or recognition. The rise of forever daughterhood thus does not *displace* older gendered expectations, instead, it layers new obligations onto existing ones. In this sense, the double duty of daughterhood is not an unintended consequence of social change but an inherent feature of contemporary middle-class family arrangements- one that deepens daughters' emotional centrality while intensifying the gendered burdens they bear.

Final reflections: contributions to existing scholarship and wider significance of research

This study, as an exploration of daughterhood in new India, in conversation with the existing literature on gender and class in India makes a contribution to the field in a few important ways, that I briefly outline below.

First, it shifts attention to the figure of the *daughter,* who has received comparatively less sustained attention in conversations on gender and class in India, especially in the more affluent

context. Moving away from the characterisation of gender discrimination as a problem of the poor, and challenging the simplistic, celebratory narratives of daughterhood in middle class India, this thesis forces an acknowledgment of the contradictions of being a daughter in a privileged context, where the very provisioning of material resources and opportunities to daughters can also become a disciplining force for the kind of lives they are allowed to lead. In doing so, the thesis builds on scholarship on middle class women's lives in contemporary urban India, which has demonstrated how education, marriage, motherhood, consumption and domesticity are central to the production of middle-class femininity, by asking what becomes visible when daughterhood, rather than wifehood or motherhood, is placed at the centre of analysis. It provides new insights into the everyday practice of gendered norms in privileged contexts, especially from the perspective of *daughters*, who feel a sense of moral obligation to conform to patriarchal norms, in exchange for the opportunities they have been offered- including the very privilege to be born in a position of plenty. The legitimization of covert gender discrimination, small acts of everyday violence, and a sense of inferiority that such a barter can instil in daughters forces a reconsideration of the relationship between privilege and patriarchy that has not yet been explored in detail in the Indian context.

Secondly, this thesis introduces the concept of "good daughterhood" as an analytic- a way of understanding how gendered subjects navigate the contradictions of privilege and patriarchy- while also investigating its significance as a gendered and classed performance, produced at the intersection of family, education and broader sociocultural expectations. Analytically, good daughterhood is distinct from broader categories such as femininity, womanhood, or patriarchy because it locates gendered power within intergenerational relations of love, obligation, and care. It refers not merely to a set of behaviours, but to an affective and ethical orientation, through which women are encouraged to continuously justify and earn their place within the

family. The thesis also highlights the important role that emotions of gratitude and guilt play as a form of affective governance in these daughters' lives, becoming a part of their gendered habitus, while helping reproduce class-based hierarchies in the process. Here I also argue that gendered socialisation, relational respectability and intergenerational obligations borne out of emotional and moral debts come together to make daughters self-monitoring agents of class reproduction, where agency is exercised, but for the most part from *within* the symbolic boundaries determined by good daughterhood. I use this construct to explain the perpetuation of gendered stereotypes and the convergence of class and gender norms in the Indian context even among the purportedly 'progressive' sections of society, showing how the use of emotions such as guilt, shame, and gratitude act as discipling mechanisms in middle-class families, teaching daughters to practice 'respectability' in class-appropriate ways. This formulation adds a new insight to the existing work on the feminist anthropology of gender, and to affect theory in discussing the important role that emotions play in *governing* gender relations in society.

Furthermore, by suggesting that good daughterhood operates simultaneously as an internalised ideal and a regulatory apparatus, this thesis shows how the desire to be good daughters, or the pressure to follow norms that are valorised within its framing, can explain daughters' life choices across various domains, from education to marriage and employment. Using good daughterhood as a lens with which to understand daughters' lives, for instance, can better explain why daughters choose to study the subjects they do, where they pursue their higher education, why they prize educational accomplishments so highly, yet not necessarily pursue financial independence with the same vigour; or why they choose to fall in love with, or marry only those partners that they know their parents would approve of- each as a means of establishing moral worth within families that would otherwise be inclined to designate them inferior to sons. Concepts like "trophy daughters" and "dutiful love" that I introduce in the

thesis also establish the strong connection between good daughterhood and the reproduction of class hierarchies, explaining how daughters' life choices constantly align with, or are actively mobilized for the maintenance and reproduction of class hierarchies. In this sense, the framework of good daughterhood offers a potentially transportable analytic for examining women's lives in other patriarchal contexts, not because the specific expectations attached to daughterhood will necessarily be identical, but because it draws attention to how intergenerational obligations, affective attachments, and classed expectations may shape women's apparently agentive choices even before they are married or leave their natal homes.

Finally, challenging the temporal closure of daughterhood that has dominated previous conceptions of daughterhood in India, this thesis recasts it as an extended, affectively "sticky" (Ahmed 2014) and spatially dispersed gender relation, which I refer to as an emerging form of "forever daughterhood"- a reworking of daughterhood as a lifelong moral and emotional role, no longer bounded by co-residence, marriage, or conventional life-course transitions, and sustained by a combination of affect, obligation and changing cultural and material conditions that makes daughters' ongoing presence in parents' lives possible despite physical distance, and beyond marriage. While feminist ethnographies or urban India have thoroughly documented the moral and emotional labour of motherhood, the figure of the *daughter* still remains comparatively underexamined as an enduring gendered relationship, with insufficient attention paid to the significant emotional and material consequences of 'doing daughterhood'. This thesis offers a complementary optic that brings into focus the figure of the *daughter* as a node in intergenerational transmission, especially in a situation where the intergenerational contract between parents and children is evolving, and brings attention to its attendant gendered penalties.

Here, I articulate the "double duty of daughterhood" as an important and missing aspect of existing analyses, which merits further attention. The double duty of daughterhood, in this work, indicates the condition where daughters are *simultaneously* expected to remain primary emotional caregivers for their natal families, while also fulfilling the gendered obligations of marriage, wifehood, and domestic responsibility, without any corresponding redistribution or relaxation of either set of expectations. The gendered care burdens that these expectations impose disproportionately on daughters rather than sons unfold across family locations and life stages, yet remain invisibilized, or naturalised as a performance of altruistic love, rather than recognized as labour with material costs. Such costs may be incurred not only through ongoing caregiving, but pre-emptively, as daughters make decisions about partners, careers, mobility and residence in anticipation of their future responsibilities.

In the Indian context especially, where the historically low rates of labour force participation even among urban, educated women have long been explained using concepts such as motherhood penalties and ongoing domestic burdens, the role of *daughterhood* in shaping women's decisions about work and labour force participation remains analytically underexamined. The findings of this thesis suggest that obligations towards natal families need to be considered alongside the demands of marriage, motherhood and domestic labour when examining women's educational, professional and employment trajectories. Daughterhood may shape not only whether women participate in paid work, but the kinds of work they pursue, the opportunities they are willing or able to take up, the adjustments they make to their careers and workloads, and the extent to which they can remain geographically mobile. Future studies exploring these subjects in India and beyond can benefit from exploring the role that *daughterhood*, and the evolving nature of responsibilities associated with it, plays in affecting

women's decisions about education, marriage, and work, as well as the losses accompanying these choices.

The final, larger takeaway of this thesis regards the paradox of good daughterhood, captured by the limits of daughters' incorporation into familial roles historically reserved for sons, despite their sustained efforts to inhabit the role of the good daughter. While leaving room for acknowledging the emergence of daughters in urban-elite families as the affective, moral and logistical centre of family life, and acknowledging the richness of parent-daughter relationships in contemporary families, this thesis questions whether contemporary changes truly constitute feminist progress, or reflect a reconfiguration of patriarchal labour through the aesthetics of love, aspiration and obligation. In discussing the role of the moral and emotional scripts of good daughterhood that bind daughters to act in certain ways in order to accrue moral worth or gain validation from parents, I ask whether such a pursuit does not effectively constitute a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 2001)? The conformity expected from daughters relies on their ongoing self-negation, or an essentialisation of their gendered characteristics, with their relatively privileged existence simultaneously leaving little room for complaint. However, it is the misrecognition of this dynamic as "empowerment" that further intensifies existing contradictions. Moreover, the continued preference for sons, or the inability of daughters to 'replace' them fully within the family structure, reveals the impossibility of their pursuits to be valued for their *own* sake, suggesting instead that good daughterhood operates ultimately as a form of cruel optimism (Berlant 2011)- an attachment that promises security, belonging, and moral worth, yet ultimately forecloses the very flourishing it appears to enable.

It remains to be seen whether truly 'transformative' change with respect to the position daughters occupy in Indian society will ever be achievable, so long as contemporary shifts in women's education, work and aspiration are absorbed into enduring familial and gendered

hierarchies rather than unsettle them. What is nevertheless clear, is that daughterhood, as a category of analysis in scholarship on family, sociology, gender and class in India will only become more pertinent as India continues to negotiate profound reconfigurations in gender relations, family life, and classed aspirations in the future. This project is a small effort in contributing to that endeavour.

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Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet

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3 Mansfield Road, Oxford, UK OXI 3TB

Taanya Kapoor, DPhil International Development
E-mail: *taanya.kapoor@sant.ox.ac.uk*

Conceptualising Modern Daughterhood in Educated, Middle Class and Elite India: A case study of Delhi-NCR (Working Title)

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) Approval Reference:

1. ***Why is this research being conducted?***

This research project is a qualitative study trying to understand the experiences of daughterhood among middle and upper middle-class households in India through a case study of Delhi-NCR. The research is particularly geared towards understanding the aspirations and experiences of educated, professionally qualified daughters and the struggles that they may or may not continue to face in their family lives from a gendered perspective. It will also look at questions of financial security and how the capacity to earn money (where daughters are earning members of a family) may have altered familial expectations and gendered norms or stereotypes of daughters as economic liabilities. Finally it will try and understand the daughters' own experiences of agency and autonomy in their day-to-day lives and how that is impacted by the capabilities that they have developed.

2. ***Why have I been invited to take part?***

You and/or your household members have been invited in your capacity as an educated, professionally qualified daughter belonging to a middle/upper middle-class family presently or previously residing in Delhi-NCR to share your life history, thoughts and experience of daughterhood in modern India. You may also have been contacted as an as an official involved in designing, implementation or monitoring of schemes related to the girl child in India, or as a civil society member with interest in the larger concerns of this project. Your views and opinions on this issue as well as your experience with the on-ground translation of such schemes will contribute greatly towards enhancing the scope of this project.

3. ***Do I have to take part?***

No. You can ask questions about the research before deciding whether or not to take part. If you do agree to take part, you can withdraw yourself from the study, without giving a reason, and without negative consequences, by advising me/us of this decision at any point. You can refuse to answer

any questions that you do not wish to answer, and you can also withdraw any information you have already contributed to the research by 7 October 2023. At the point of withdrawal, the data will be physically destroyed according to University guidelines. If you do not wish to be identified, any information provided by you will be written under a fake name or anonymized and will not be traceable to you at any point.

4. What will happen to me if I take part in the research?

You will be either be invited for a meeting in person, or to attend a remote session either by video conference or over the telephone where I will be asking questions regarding the project as described above. You will be asked to either sign a consent form, or provide oral consent for the interview to begin. If you are happy to take part in the research, you will be interviewed remotely. The interview/session should take approximately 1 hour. You can ask to pause or stop the interview at any time, or refuse to answer any question that you do not wish to. If you would be comfortable, with your consent, I would like to record the discussion via audio in order to facilitate transcription and so we can have an accurate record of your thoughts. The audio records and personally identifiable information of any kind will be deleted as soon as the research is completed. If you do not wish to be identified, any information provided by you will be written under a fake name or anonymized and will not be traceable to you at any point.

5. Are there any potential risks in taking part?

The only potential risk in getting involved in this research is the possibility of breach of confidential data. In order to minimize any such risks, I will guarantee data protection and confidentiality by writing your information under a fake name (pseudonymizing), or entirely anonymising individual identities (where there may be any chance of tracing any information to you). The data will be encrypted and safely stored using password protection and any published details which may be used in order to identify research participants will be modified. Personal data such as name, age, or location of residence, will be pseudonymised (Arun (i.e. false name), Male, Delhi) or anonymised (i.e. a government official) as appropriate.

6. Are there any benefits in taking part?

There will be no direct or personal benefit to you from taking part in this research.

7. What happens to the data provided?

The information you provide during the study is the **research data**. Any research data from which you can be identified (name, age, residence, audio recording etc) is known as **personal data**. Your personal data may be transferred to, and stored at, a destination outside the UK and the European Economic Area. Identifiable data will be removed whenever possible and any data transfer will be done securely and with a similar level of data protection as required under UK law.

Personal / sensitive data will be kept in an electronic format will be encrypted and stored safely on an encrypted computer as well as backed up to Oxford University's Hierarchical File Server. In line with University policy, I will keep the date for 3 years and then it will be destroyed.

Other research data (including consent forms) will be stored for at least 3 years after publication or public release of the work of the research. The researcher supervisor, collaborator / translator / transcriber will have access to the research data. Responsible members of the University of Oxford may be given access to data for monitoring and/or audit of the research. I would like your permission to use direct quotes, or against a pseudonym, in any research outputs. I would like your permission to use anonymised data in future studies. All personal information that could identify you will be removed or changed before information is shared with other researchers or results are made public.

8. Will the research be published?

The research may be published in academic publications and websites. The University of Oxford is committed to the dissemination of its research for the benefit of society and the economy and, in support of this commitment, has established an online archive of research materials. This archive includes digital copies of student theses successfully submitted as part of a University of Oxford postgraduate degree programme. Holding the archive online gives easy access for researchers to the full text of freely available theses, thereby increasing the likely impact and use of that research. The research will be written up as a student's thesis. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University archives to facilitate its use in future research. If so, the thesis will be openly accessible. The research will also be used for the purpose of publishing academic journal articles. However, participants' personal information will be stored under a fake name (pseudonymized), or anonymized entirely (changing their personal details such as age, gender, location to make it more difficult to place them) in order to ensure that the research does not directly identify anyone. Direct quotes will only be published with the explicit consent of participants, and they will only be identified as themselves if they wish to do so. Once the research is published, the participants will be notified of the key findings from the research through a written summary of the study should they express interest in the same.

9. Who has reviewed this study?

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee (Reference number: C1A_21_026)

10. Who do I contact if I have a concern about the study or I wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please contact Taanya Kapoor (Taanya.kapoor@sant.ox.ac.uk) or Nandini Gooptu (nandini.gooptu@qeh.ox.ac.uk), and we will do our best to answer your query. I/we will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint at an escalated level, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible: Oxford Department of International Development Research Ethics Committee, or the department through Dominique Attala: Email: Dominique.attala@qeh.ox.ac.uk; 3 Mansfield Road, Oxford, UK, OXI 3TB.

11. Data Protection

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the study. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/councilsec/compliance/gdpr/individualrights/.

12. Further Information and Contact Details

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

Taanya Kapoor
Department of International Development
3 Mansfield Road, Oxford, OXI 3TB
Taanya.kapoor@sant.ox.ac.uk

Appendix 2: Oral Consent Script

ORAL CONSENT SCRIPT

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) Approval Reference: C1A_21_026

Conceptualising Modern Daughterhood in Educated, Middle Class and Elite India:
A case study of Delhi-NCR (Working Title)

Part One: Introduction to Study

[**Note:** This information will be relayed in as accessible a language as possible to the research participants in the local language. Given the educational and class background of intended beneficiaries (below poverty line families in rural Haryana), some of the information will be modified or detailed further to increase their understanding]

- ***Introduction****:* Hello, my name is Taanya. I'm doing some research and I wondered if you'd be interested in being involved. I'm currently doing a DPhil at the University of Oxford in the Department of International Development, in UK. Can I tell you more about the study? *[Await confirmation].*
- ***Project details and aims:*** In my study, I want to investigate experiences of educationally and professionally well-qualified daughters belonging to middle/upper middle class families, residing in Delhi-NCR. My aim is to understand their experiences as daughters in modern India and the different ways in which their gender enables or limits them, and how their education, jobs and access to income impacts gendered expectations for them. If you choose to be a part of this project, here is what will happen:
- ***Interviews/surveys/ tasks description:*** I will have a conversation with you, for an hour/two hours today, remotely or at your home or office, and if you are comfortable, follow up interviews after that, where I will ask a range of questions about your own experiences growing up as a daughter in India.
- ***Data sharing/access/confidentiality:*** The answers you give will form the basis of my DPhil thesis.
- ***Data storage:*** I will store your information/data safely and confidentially on an encrypted device and will keep the research data for 3 years after publication.
- ***Anonymity/pseudonyms/identifiable data:*** In any publications a fake name will be used (i.e. a pseudonym), and you will not be identifiable for the purpose of my work to others.
- ***Risks****:* The following risks are involved in taking part- I will be discussing sensitive topics like societal discrimination against daughters or the pressure on mothers to have sons. (If you find any of these questions distressing you can choose to stop the interview or not answer anything.) In order to minimize any risk of data breaches, I will be securing your data confidentially on an encrypted device.

- ***Rights:*** You don't have to agree to take part; you can ask me any questions you want before or throughout; you can also withdraw at any stage without giving a reason. You can withdraw your information/data until 07/10/2023
- ***Audio/video recording/photos/notes/keeping contact details:*** With your permission, I would like to make an audio/video recording of our discussion to make sure I'm getting an accurate record of your thoughts / photograph you / video record you. Instead of recording you, I can take notes in my notebook. Which would you prefer? I may want to re-contact you to clarify information you gave me in your interview.
- ***Publication plans:*** The project will form the basis of my thesis and may be published in an academic journal/ academic book / academic website. A copy of my thesis will be deposited both in print and online in the University archives.
- ***Complaints/concerns procedure:*** If you have any complaints or concerns please feel free to contact me in the first instance. My mobile is [research mobile phone]. You can also reach me at Taanya.kapoor@sant.ox.ac.uk. If you wish to further raise any concerns, you can also contact my department at the University of Oxford, at +44 (0)1865 (2)81800, or email my supervisor, Dr. Nandini Gooptu at Nandini.Gopptu@qeh.ox.ac.uk.
- ***Ethics review details:*** This research project has been reviewed and approved by an Oxford University ethics committee. If, after contacting me with any concern, you're still unhappy and wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the ethics committee. Their email address is ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk
- ***Questions/concerns?*** Do you have any questions?

2. Oral consent seeking stage, after participant has had sufficient time to think about whether s/he wants to take part

- Do you give your permission for me to interview you/audio record you?
- Do you give permission for me to re-contact you to clarify information?
- Do you give me permission to quote you directly using a fake name?
- Are you happy to take part?

Ok, thanks, let's start.

Appendix 3: Written Consent Form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) Approval Reference: C1A_21_026

Conceptualising Modern Daughterhood in Educated, Middle Class and Elite India:
A case study of Delhi-NCR (Working Title)

Purpose of Study: This research project is a qualitative study aimed at understanding the experience of daughterhood in middle and upper class families in India, and to uncover the reasons for persisting son preference and gendered attitudes towards daughters. The study focuses on experiences of educationally and professionally well-qualified daughters belonging to middle/upper middle class families, residing in Delhi-NCR, and the various ways in which gender enables or limits them. Given the lack of resource-constraints, the study tries to understand how access to high quality education, job opportunities and incomes in the professional formal sector can affect parental perceptions and attitudes towards daughters, as well as daughters' own sense of agency and autonomy. The role of cash/incomes in particular will be investigated as a means of mediating tense familial relations, asserting agency and challenging perceptions of daughters as economic liabilities and sons as breadwinners in the family.

		Please initial each box
1	I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	☐
2	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without any adverse consequences or penalty.	☐
3	I understand that research data collected during the study may be looked at by authorised people outside the research team. I give permission for these individuals to access my data.	☐
4	I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.	☐
5	I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	☐
6	I understand how this research will be written up and published.	☐
7	I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.	☐

8	I consent to being audio recorded	☐
9	I understand how audio recordings will be used in research outputs	☐
12a	I agree to the use of direct quotes, attributed to my name, in research outputs **OR**	☐
12 b	I agree to the use of pseudonymised quotes in research outputs **OR**	☐
12 c	I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in research outputs **OR**	☐
12d	I do not wish to be directly quoted	☐
13	I agree to take part in the study	☐
Optional:	I agree for research data collected in this study to be given to researchers, including those working outside of the UK and the EU, to be used in other research studies. I understand that any data that leave the research group will be anonymised so that I cannot be identified.	☐
Optional:	I agree that my personal contact details can be retained in a secure database so that the researchers can contact me about future studies.	☐

	dd / mm / yyyy	
Name of Participant	Date	Signature

Appendix 4: Recruitment Call for respondents

Recruitment Call for respondents

Study on Modern Daughterhood in Middle/Upper-Middle Class India

Taanya is a PhD scholar at the University of Oxford, Department of International Development. Her main areas of interest are gender and social policy. Currently, she is researching for her project on the experience of daughterhood among middle and upper middle-class families in Delhi-NCR.

She is particularly interested in understanding the aspirations and experiences of educated, professionally qualified daughters and the struggles that they may or may not continue to face in their family lives from a gendered perspective.

Questions could also revolve around financial security if/where daughters are earning members of a family, and how the capacity to earn may have changed their familial expectations and gendered roles, career and marriage plans, etc.

Respondents can be 18-35 years of age, married/unmarried, working/resigned/not allowed to work and should have resided in Delhi (even if currently situated elsewhere).

Conversations will be via Zoom/Skype (around 1-2 hours), semi-structured and open ended. Respondents can choose complete anonymity or pseudonymity if they wish. All findings will be worked into a DPhil project on modern daughterhood.

Thankyou in advance for your consideration,

Contact
Phone/WhatsApp: +91xxxxxxxxxx
Email: taanya.kapoor@sant.ox.ac.uk

Appendix 5: List of Primary Respondents- Daughters

Pseudonym	Details/Background Information
Aanchal	24, Jain, UC. Unmarried. Born and brought up in Delhi. Currently pursuing Masters in Public Health from Public Health Foundation of India. One younger brother. Interviewed online.
Anjali	24, Hindu, Punjabi. Single during first interview, now married. BTech from DTU (Delhi Technological University). Currently pursuing PhD at IIT Delhi (Indian Institute of Technology). One younger brother. Interviewed online, then met in person.
Anukriti	30, Hindu, Upper Caste (UC), Bengali. Single. Born and brought up in Delhi. Teaching Media and Cultural Studies, currently in London. Interviewed online.
Anusha	32, Hindu, Kayastha. Unmarried. Born and brought up in Delhi. Engineering from IIT Delhi, MBA from Harvard University. Tech Entrepreneur. One younger brother. Interviewed online, then met in person.
Arpita	29, Hindu, Marwari-Bengali UC. Born and brought up in Delhi. Married during fieldwork to Arpit, fellow doctor. Doctor from AIIMS, Delhi. One younger brother. Interviewed online, then met in person.
Bindu	29, Hindu, DNS. Divorced. Came to Delhi for higher education. Engineering graduate. Working as a management consultant in UK at the moment. One younger brother. Interviewed online and then met in person.
Brinda	21, Hindu, Punjabi. Single. Came to Delhi for Higher education. Pursuing MA Economics at Delhi University (DU). One elder sister. Aspiring academic. Interviewed online.
Bulbul	29, Hindu, Thakur. Married. Came to Delhi for higher education. Engineering graduate from DTU. Pursued M.Des (Deisgn) from Columbia University subsequently. Currently runs own business. Interviewed online.
Daisy	35, Hindu, Punjabi. Unmarried. Born and brought up in Delhi. Currently working as an HR manager in a corporate firm in Delhi. Elder of two sisters- Monica, her younger sister was also interviewed separately. Interviewed online.
Dhara	19, Hindu, Baniya. Born and brought up in Delhi. Pursuing B.A. Political Science from Indraprastha University, Delhi. Interviewed online.

Durga	26, Hindu, DNS. Married. Born and brought up in Delhi. Lawyer at Delhi High Court. One older brother. Interviewed online.
Gina	31, Hindu, Brahmin. Originally from Jharkhand, grew up across the country. Shifted to Delhi for engineering degree and work. Btech + Mtech graduate, Computer Science. Married to Jack, a British National. Currently working in an IT firm as a product manager in UK. Interviewed online and then met in person.
Hetal	24, Hindu, Punjabi. Born and brought up in Delhi. BA political science, DU; MA internationnal relations, JNU. Pursuing Masters in Development in UK. One elder sister. Interviewed online and then met in person.
Krithika	31, Hindu, Tamil Brahmin. Married. Born and brought up in Delhi. Completed law from a private university in Delhi. Currently practising as a corporate lawyer in Bangalore. One older sister, Surbhi. Interviewed telephonically and then met in person.
Lilly	29, Christian, ST, Munda Tribe. Shifted to Delhi for higher education/work. BA, MA in Applied Psychology from Delhi University. Only daughter. Working as a corporate trainer. Interviewed online.
Manmeet	25, Sikh, UC. Unmarried. From Punjab, moved to Delhi for higher education. Pursuing PhD in Psychology from university in the UK. Only daughter. Interviewed online.
Misha	21, Hindu, Baniya. Born and brought up in Delhi. Pursuing MSc in Economics from TERI, Bombay. Undergraduate degree in economics from Delhi University. One older brother. Interviewed online.
Monica	29, Hindu, Punjabi. Unmarried. Born and brought up in Delhi. Currently pursuing law from university in Delhi. Younger of two sisters. Interviewed online.
Nayantara	25, Hindu, Marwadi. Came to Delhi for higher education. BA sociology, DU; MA Social work from TISS Mumbai. Currently social worker and POSCO activist in Delhi. Interviewed online.
Palak	22, Hindu, Punjabi. Single. Born and brought up in Delhi. Curently pursuing Masters in Clinical Psychology. Elder of two sisters. Interviewed telephonically.
Pallavi	28, Hindu, Baniya. Born and brought up in Delhi. Professional Chartered Accountant. Married, currently separated. One younger brother. Interviewed online.
Preeti	34, Hindu, Brahmin. Originally from UP. Shifted to Delhi for higher education. Married. One of three sisters. Currently professor of sociology at reputed university in Delhi-NCR. Recently gave birth to twins. Interviewed online then met in person.

Prerna	26, Hindu, Baniya. Belongs to a business family. Born and brought up in Delhi. Studied at Delhi University, pursued masters in UK. Currently pursuing PhD in development abroad. Interviewed in person.
Priyanka	34, Hindu, UC. Single. Originally from UP, shifted to Delhi for higher education and work. Engineer, MBA student from IIM. Pivoted to a career in comedy. Interviewed online then met in person.
Ragini	31, Hindu, Tamil Brahmin. Married to Rohan. Born and brought up in Delhi. Completed law from university in Delhi, followed by LLM in Canada. Only daughter. Currently practising at law firm abroad. Interviewed telephonically, then met in person.
Razia	29, Muslim, OBC. Born and brought up in Delhi. MA, Mphil, JNU; BA, Delhi University. Development practioner and researcher. Only daughter. Married recently. Interviewed online.
Reetika	31, Hindu, Baniya. BTech Graduate from IIT Delhi. Currently working as a management consultant in Delhi NCR. Unmarried at the time of first interview. Interviewed in person.
Rimjhim	28, Hindu Brahmin, Single. Born in a small hill town, shifted to Delhi to pursue BA in literature from Delhi University. Works in Outdoor Education. One elder brother. Interviewed in person.
Rosalyn	29, Syrian Christian, Unmarried. Born and brought up in Delhi. Studied BA, MA Political Science at Delhi University. One elder sister. Interviewed online.
Ruhi	27, Hindu, Baniya. Single. Born and brought up in Delhi. Studied at Delhi University, pursuing PhD in economic development abroad. One elder sister. Interviewed in person.
Sasha	25, Hindu, Punjabi. Single. Born and brought up in Delhi. BTech, EE from DTU. Worked as a software engineer. Currently pursuing Masters in Business Analytics from Columbia University. Interviewed online.
Shalini	32, Hindu, Baniya, Unmarried. Born and brought up in Delhi. Gold Medallist from Delhi University, MBA from IIM. Management consultant. Only daughter. Interviewed in person.
Sheetal	24, Hindu, Punjabi. Single. Came to Delhi for higher education. Psychology student from Delhi University. Pursuing PhD at JNU. Interviewed online.
Shehnaaz	29, Muslim, DNS. Unmarried. Came to Delhi for higher education. Btech, MBA graduate. Previously finance consultant and investment banker. Now pursuing PhD in sociology from the US. One younger sister. Interviewed online.

Simran	22, Hindu, Punjabi. Originally from UP. Shifted to Delhi for higher education, student of psychology. Single. One of three sisters. Completed Masters degree at reputed university in the UK. Currently working with an NGO in Delhi. Interviewed in person.
Sreyasi	30, Hindu, Punjabi. Married. Born and brought up in Delhi. Political science graduate from Delhi University, JNU. Currently pursuing PhD in sociology from Ivy League University. One younger brother. (Composite character)
Suhani	34, Hindu, Brahmin. Married. Came to Delhi NCR for higher education. LLB, LLM from University in Delhi. Has one child. One younger brother. Interviewed online.
Sumati	24, Hindu, Punjabi. Single. Came to Delhi for higher education. BA, economics from DU. Pursuing MA economics from JNU. Only daughter. Currently applying for economics PhDs in UK and US. Interviewed online.
Trisha	28, Hindu, Punjabi. Born and brought up in Delhi. Currently pursuing PhD in STEM at US University. One of two daughters. Unmarried at the time of first interview, married during fieldwork. Interviewed online.
Varshali	25, Hindu, Baniya. From a business family. Single at the time of first interview. Now married. Economics student from Delhi University. Currently pursuing law through distance education. Interviewed in person.
Vritti	22, Hindu, Jaat. Born and brought up in Delhi. Curently pursuing Masters in Psychology from Bombay. One older brother. Interviewed online.

Abbreviations used:

UC: Upper Caste
DNS: Did not specify
Age as on the time of first interview
Single: Not partnered/not looking for marriage at the moment
Unmarried: Looking for marriage/In the process
Community specification as noted by respondents themselves.
Interview type reflects first interview. Selected participants were contacted repeatedly where feasible.
Current status/updates have been added to the table where available.

Respondent details at a glance: (*At the time of first interview)*

- Age: 18-24 (8), 25-30 (19), 30+ (13)
- Religious distribution- Hindu (33), Muslim (2), Christian (2), Sikh (1), Did not specify (1)
- Caste – General/ Upper Caste Hindu (34), OBC (1), Scheduled Tribe (1) Did not specify (4)
- Educational status/Highest degree: Graduate (2), Postgraduate (18), Professional Graduate (8), MPhil (2), PhD pursuing or completed (10)

- Relationship status: Married (11), Committed partnership/Live-in relationship (2), Single/Unmarried (28), Divorced (1)
- Employment status: Currently studying (12), Employed or interning (26), Not working (2)
- Self-classification of class status: Middle-Middle class (21), Upper-middle class (19)
- Sibling distribution: 1 Brother, older (5), 1 Brother, younger (14), Single daughter (10), Two sisters (9), Three sisters (2)

Demographic Details Questionnaire

(Was optional for respondents to fill, to the extent they were comfortable. Where not filled/questions missed, these were filled using details shared during the interview.)

1. Name (Will be replaced by Pseudonym)
2. Age
3. Religion
4. Caste (General/SC/ST/OBC/Other/NA)
5. Community (e.g. Punjabi, Sindhi, Qureshi)
6. Marital Status
7. Have you been born and/or been brought up in Delhi NCR? [Options: Born and brought up in Delhi-NCR/ Born elsewhere but grew up in Delhi NCR or here from a young age/Came to Delhi NCR for schooling/graduation/Living in Delhi-NCR due to job or other reasons]
8. Current Residence, if not in Delhi NCR
9. Educational Background- Highest Degree Achieved [Graduation, Postgraduation, Professional Post Graduation, PhD pursuing or Completed]
10. Details of Educational Background [Please provide details of higher education and schooling (School/College(s), Degree(s) and Year)- Highest degree first]
11. Do you have any siblings? [Please specify gender, birth order and age gap (e.g. younger sister, 5 years gap/elder Brother, 2 years gap)]
12. Please provide details of your siblings' highest degree and their profession [short response acceptable]
13. Father's Educational Qualification, Occupation
14. Mother's Educational Qualification, Occupation
15. Which of the following economic strata would you place your family in? [Lower Middle Class, Middle-Middle Class, Upper-Middle Class]
16. Family Annual Income Bracket [Parental/Natal Family, excluding your income]
17. Are you currently employed?
18. Years of professional work experience, if applicable
19. Please provide a brief history of your professional life
20. Annual Income [personal]
21. Number of Years Married, If applicable
22. Husband/Partner's educational qualification and profession, if applicable
23. Details of children, if any [Number, Age, Gender]
24. Additional Comments: Please specify anything that you may think was missed in the form/any additional information that may be useful to understand you better

Appendix 6: List of Separate Parent Respondents

No.	Pseudonym	Details/Background Information
1	Jayesh	Early-mid 50s, Hindu, upper-middle class and upper-caste family. Jayesh is a salaried postgraduate with a high managerial position in an MNC, lives in a gated society in Delhi. Two children, one girl, one boy. Daughter is 25, graduate, unmarried, and currently working.
2	Reetika (Wife of Jayesh, separate interview)	Early-mid 50s, Hindu, upper-middle class family. Postgraduate degree, used to be in a salaried position, but currently works as a freelance consultant for market research. Two children, one girl, one boy. Daughter is 25, graduate, unmarried, and currently working.
3	Bhavya	Mid-late 40s. Upper-class Hindu, Bengali community. Described herself as an entrepreneur with a content writing business, and family status as upper-middle/elite. Most friends settled abroad, family wanted to relocate but couldn't. One daughter only, 16, currently in school.
4	Lajjo	70s. Upper-caste Hindu. Khatri community. Described herself as middle class, came from a small town and was educated only till middle school. Not employed. Family owns rental property. Has 4 children, Three boys and one girl. Daughter is a graduate, married and works as a teacher.
5	Shreya	Mid-Late 40s, Hindu, Khatri (upper-caste), middle class joint family. Graduate and working as a teacher. Two daughters, 16 and 19. One is in school and other is pursuing graduation. Shweta, her sister-in-law, was interviewed separately.
6	Shweta	Mid-50s, Hindu, Khatri, middle-class, joint family. Graduate and also working as a teacher. Two teenaged children, one girl, one boy, both in school. Shreya's SIL.
7	Medha	Late 50s, Hindu, upper-caste. Identifies as upper-middle class. Postgraduate with a IT degree, used to work in tech. Now works in an NGO supporting elderly people, also uses salary from NGO to run own charity for girls' education in Delhi slums. Two daughters, 26 and 30. Both pursued education abroad, younger daughter also completed her undergraduate degree from USA and is now pursuing Masters, while elder daughter is a PhD candidate and TA.
8	Gayatri	Early-mid 60s, Hindu, upper-caste, Middle Class. Graduate, teacher in private sector. Two children, one girl and boy. Daughter is 27, postgraduate, unmarried, and currently working while family is actively seeking a groom for her.
9	Vivek	Early-mid 50s, Hindu, middle-class. Salaried employee in a company. Gayatri's husband, interviewed separately. Family details as above.
10	Meenu	Late 40s, Hindu, Punjabi, Upper-Middle Class Family. Postgraduate. Housewife. Two daughters, twins, 15. Both in school.
11	Deepika	Early-mid 50s, Hindu, Upper-caste, middle-class family. Housewife. Two children, one son, one daughter (18-19), both pursuing graduation, umarried.
12	Saumya	Early 60s, Hindu, Upper-middle class, upper-caste family. Postgraduate, Housewife. Husband has retired from Navy. Two children, one boy and one girl, both adopted. Ages 18-19. Both pursuing graduation.
13	Piya	Mid-late 40s, Hindu, upper-caste, middle-class family. Maths teacher with postgraduate degree. Two children, One boy, one girl. Daughter, 26, is a postgraduate, currently employed. Unmarried but parents are looking for a groom.
14	Swagata	Early 40s. Hindu, upper-caste, middle class family. Postgraduate, housewife. Husband works in an MNC. Two girls, 16/17, both in school.
15	Aparajita	Late 30s/Early 40s. Hindu, upper-caste. Self-identified as middle-class. Postgraduate, housewife. One daughter., age 9, in school.