Articulating a Life Worth Living: The Affective Morality of Married Women's Suicide Tales in Delhi-NCR

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Abstract

Indian women's suicides account for over a third of female suicides globally, yet this phenomenon is mostly unknown and has yet to enter mainstream discourses within the country (India State-Level Disease Burden Initiative Suicide Collaborators 2018; Mayer 2016a). Through an ethnographic study set in the country's National Capital Region (NCR), this thesis analyses urban women's narratives about observed or known instances of suicide. Such suicide narratives act as a space for women to reflect on the worthwhileness of gendered lives.

Paying attention to 'what moves' women emotionally and 'what matters' to them in recounting their stories of life and wilful death, the thesis traces how women deploy specific affects such as desire, care, and feelings of precariousness in narrating both suicide stories and their lived experiences (Lutz 2017). The use of such affects enables them to make ethical comments on public discourses about what constitutes 'good' middle-class Indian womanhood. Such affects also become a medium through which women subvert, critique, or uphold dominant narratives that either strip worth from or bolster the meaningfulness of the lives they are living. Moreover, the use of emotions, sentiments, and sensations, in women's suicide stories, can draw attention to gendered suffering or obscure it. The suicide story, thus, emerges as a space where women can exercise their agency to make moral claims about their lives that question existing gender relations, evaluate prevailing social ethics, and comment on gendered suffering.

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This thesis's central preoccupation with emotion dates to a class taught by Nancy Eberhardt at Knox College. Her introduction to the anthropology of emotion and her challenge to understand what makes us human continues to drive my approach to research. Many of the ideas within this thesis are extensions of the discussions I had in her classroom with Emily McKendry-Smith and Sean Dowdy. Sean Dowdy, particularly, remains not just a good friend and intellectual interlocutor but a core member of my family.

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Above all, I owe an immense debt to the women who generously shared their stories and time with me. If it was not for how they allowed me into their homes, families, and lives, this thesis would not have been possible. I have strived to do justice to their stories, and to capture their nuanced viewpoints.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis explores how middle-class married women in Delhi and its surrounding urban areas live with and make sense of the suicides of women like them. Each year over 20,000 married women commit suicide in India, yet this phenomenon has not entered mainstream narratives in the country (NCRB 2020; Mayer 2016a). In this dissertation I seek not to ask *why* women commit suicide, to understand *how* is it that suicide can emerge as a possibility for so many women. I do this using ethnographic methods which interrogate the stories married women recount about the suicides and suicidal impulses of women like them. These are suicide stories of the narrator's friends, family members and neighbours. The thesis seeks to contextualise these stories by focusing on their emotional content and their linkages to cultural discourses on gender, family and marriage.[1] By focusing on how women articulate sentiments such as desire, care and precariousness in both the suicide stories they narrate and in their own lives, this thesis analyses how such emotions can either instil meaning in, or strip worth from, women's lives.

Ethnographic field work for this thesis took place in the National Capital Region (NCR) over twelve months in 2018 and 2019. It was supplemented with several follow-up telephonic interviews in 2021. During this time, I interacted with married middle-class women, their families and, for a few, their colleagues. I also conducted interviews with suicide prevention professionals such as lawyers, psychologists, social workers and law enforcement officials. This dissertation, however, centres on the suicide stories told by the married women with whom I interacted.

[1] This understanding of emotions undergirding public discourses borrows from the Public Feelings Project. This project asserts that everyday emotions are embodiments of global inequalities such as sexism, racism, homophobia, and poverty. Hence, emotion, or 'affect,' become not only an object of study, but also a methodology through which the global inequalities can be experienced and examined (Cvektovich 2007 and 2012; Carmody and Love 2008).

My interactions with these women were guided by the methodology of evocative ethnography, which aims to convey the emotions, feelings, and sentiments circulating within a particular cultural context (Skoggard and Waterson 2015). In such a methodology, I paid particular attention to how emotions were depicted within women's suicide stories, questioning them about how they felt at different moments in their stories and their feelings towards the dead woman. To do this, I built up relationships with these women over the course of a year with most of my initial interactions occurring in the group settings of gated communities and offices before gradually transitioning to one-on-one interviews in their homes. Forming these close ties was essential for women to feel comfortable enough to share these stories as well as their emotions. Hence, this thesis is very much shaped by who I was able to develop these relationships with. As I discuss in more detail in *Chapter 3: Situating the Married Woman* I gravitated women 'like me;' middle and upper middle-class women who were either the products of or within inter-caste marriages. I was able to leverage my 'insider' status with these women, who treated me as a 'girl' figure to be instructed about adult life. Suicide stories were told to me in this context and were often used to illustrate the pitfalls that women encountered in married life.

Hence, the observations of this dissertation are based on the specific life experiences of a subset of middle and upper-middle class, urban women in North India who are mostly upper caste and Hindu. As such this thesis cannot be said to be representative of Indian women in general. Moreover, the observations of these women replicate urban, upper-caste patriarchal understanding of gender relations, which is apparent within their assumptions around how marriage, motherhood and divorce work in India. In delving into these women's suicide stories and their concerns about living worthwhile lives, this thesis inevitably replicates these urban, middle-class, and upper-caste gender norms and marginalizes other understandings of gender relations that circulate within the Indian

context. Nevertheless, the gender norms discussed in this thesis are aspirational and dominate the mainstream media. Investigating how these comparatively privileged women's narrations of suicide stories challenge and problematise aspirational gender relations is hence productive, as it reveals the complexities of women's everyday life under these hegemonic gender norms. Still, it cannot be emphasised enough that this thesis looks at just one subset of understandings around what constitutes 'Indian womanhood.;

Throughout this thesis, I argue that these women's suicide stories are ethical commentaries on the public discourses around what constitutes 'good' middle-class, upper-caste Indian womanhood. These commentaries question the ethics of the socio-cultural and moral norms that structure so much of these women's lives, experiences and subjectivities. By articulating emotional and moral narratives within suicide stories, women subvert as well as crystalise cultural norms. Yet, they also adjudicate the ethical validity of these norms and their underlying values, demanding, in the process, that they shift and be more responsive to women's experiences. Simultaneously, these stories of suicides are full of omissions that both ignore and delegitimatize certain forms of suffering. They, hence, render the women who experience these types of suffering invisible, and perpetuate the conditions behind this gendered suffering. To make these arguments, this dissertation focuses on answering two research questions: Firstly, what did the women with whom I interacted recognise as a life worth living? And secondly, why and how is it that married women's suffering is overlooked and ignored not just in the media and national narratives, but by married women themselves? In delving into these questions, this thesis aims not just to contribute to the ethnographic understanding of gender relations in urban India, but to also shed light on the role of emotions in shaping gendered ethics, ideas of worthwhile lives and the recognition of suffering.

This chapter starts by providing background information on the suicides of married women in India. It then goes on to explore how I approach the study of married women's suicide stories through my use of affect theory, detailing how this shapes my investigations into the thesis's research questions. The last section provides an outline for the rest of the thesis.

1.1 The Invisible Suicide

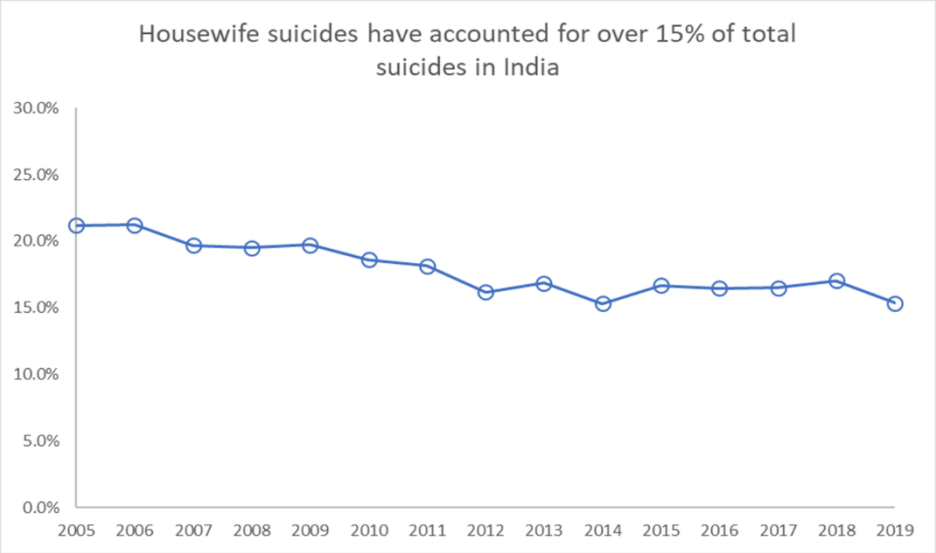
Every year the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) publishes the latest statistical figures on accidental deaths and suicides (NCRB 2020). The publication is hotly awaited, the figures within it cited in the political discourse on the human costs of the country's rapid growth (Mayer 2016a)[2]. Despite the influence this publication enjoys, the NCRB's statistics on the suicides of 'housewives,' one of several occupations used to categorise people who commit suicides, are rarely discussed or covered in the Indian media (Mayer 2016a). Yet, 'housewives' have consistently had the dubious honour of being the occupation with the second highest number of suicides, surpassed only by the suicides of self-employed persons. The lack of media coverage of the suicides of housewives, and women in general, effectively allows their experiences to fall by the wayside.[3]

Yet, the numbers involved in women's suicides are large – a 2018 Lancet study found that more than one-third of women who commit suicide globally are Indian, the majority of whom are married (India State-Level Disease Burden Initiative Suicide

[2] More recent media coverage of suicide data treats it as a proxy indicator for the suffering experienced in the COVID-19 pandemic. See, for instance, coverage in the *Indian Express* (Sharma 2021) and *India Today (*Shrivastava 2021).

[3] It should be noted that not all 'housewives' in the NCRB's statistics identify as women. In 2020, two housewives who committed suicide were categorised as transgender (2021). It is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this thesis to consider their experiences.

Collaborators 2018; Mayer 2016a). Given that India accounted for approximately 17% of the world's population, women's suicides disproportionately occurred in a larger number in the country than the rest of the world. Moreover, the high rate of suicide for the occupation category of housewives, in particular, is a longstanding trend – between 1995, when records began disaggregating suicide victims by profession, and 2019, housewife suicides have consistently accounted for over 15% of total suicides every year (NCRB 2020). In the latest NCRB report on suicides in 2020, suicides by housewives dipped below 15% and accounted for 14.7% of total suicides (2021). The absolute number of housewives' suicides had, however, risen during this year and their fall in proportion to other suicides suggests a substantial increase in suicides by other occupation groups (NCRB 2021).



The NCRB's suicide data is beset with problems of underestimation and misclassification (Mayer 2016a; Rane and Nadkarni 2014; Patel et al. 2012; Parry 2012; Radhakrishnan and Andrade 2012; Joseph et al. 2003). One study finds that the NCRB underestimates the nationwide female suicide rate by 36% (Patel et al. 2012). This underreporting has been linked to the concealing of suicides by family members, due to fear of prosecution, police harassment and family stigma (Parry 2012; Patel et al. 2012). Much of this fear stems from the legal status of suicide in India. The abetment of suicide (interpreted as the instigating or encouragement of a suicide) is a crime under Section 306

of the Indian Penal Code. Attempting suicide is also illegal in India under Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code, although the 2013 Mental Health bill (passed in 2017) explicitly forbids the prosecution of persons under it. These laws, as Parry (2012) demonstrates, can prompt families and people who attempt suicide to disguise the suicide or the attempted suicide, going as far as not seeking medical treatment, because they fear prosecution.

The underreporting of suicide statistics is also linked to how difficult it is to empirically identify suicide. There is considerable slippage between the categories of 'murder', 'suicide' and 'accidental death' with police and often, family members and friends, unable or unwilling to piece together enough evidence to concretely identify a death (Chua 2014 and 2012; Parry 2012; Waters 1999). Studies on dowry deaths[4] find that women frequently alter their dying declaration based on their relationships with their natal and marital families at the time of their deaths (Belur et al. 2014; Shaha and Mohanty 2006). A dying declaration is an official statement given to the police by the person dying, which declares the cause of the death, and is used to ascertain whether a death was a murder, suicide or an accident. As per both Belur et al. (2014) and Shaha and Mohanty (2006), dying women can be persuaded to change their testimony on what led to their fatal injuries by their natal and marital family members. Moreover, once the woman dies, her case is expected to be championed by the natal family who, in turn, can be constrained from pursuing cases of suicide or murder by social and financial concerns, such as who will raise and support the woman's children or pay the extensive monetary, emotional and social costs involved in pursuing justice (Belur et al. 2014; Shah and Mohanty 2006). Thus, the suicide needs to be managed to protect both natal and marital families' social status, particularly if the families involved are middle class (Chua 2014; Waters 1999). Despite

[4] Dowry deaths include both the murders and suicides of married women over disputes around dowry.

these constraints limiting whether deaths are labelled 'suicides' by women and their family members, medical, forensic and police officials normally accept what are termed 'victim-led narratives' fitting evidence to support these accounts and ignoring contrary indications, especially when the woman or her natal family declares the death to be accidental (Belur et al. 2014). Thus, there is considerable pressure on women and their natal families not to label deaths as suicides, making statistics of such deaths suspect and prone to underestimations.

Nonetheless, despite these issues with the data, it is clear that there are a significant number of suicides amongst married women in India. The persistent silence around these suicides' points to an erasure of these women's voices and their suffering. While the NCRB does try to arrive at *why* these women commit suicides by collecting the causes of suicides, these statistics are extreme oversimplifications, effectively reducing the decision to end a life to one single concise reason (such as 'marriage related issue,' 'illness' or 'impotency/infertility') based on the testimony of those left behind (NCRB 2020). Thus, the NCRB statistics effectively masks *how* is it that suicide emerges as a possibility for so many women, and they also fail to shed light onto why married women's suicides and their associated suffering remain so persistently absent in the mainstream discourse. Women's experiences of suicides are, thus, not captured by these statistics and instead their deaths are flattened to anonymous, underestimated numbers.

1.2 My Approach

Suicide is imbued with a potentiality to critique the status quo and can function as "a kind of social action, communication and protest" through which socio-cultural norms, assumptions and practices are called into question (Parry 2012; Staples and Widger 2012,

194; Chua 2014). Those living with suicide, or potential suicide, must wrestle with not only how to understand the actions and motivations of the person committing or threatening to commit suicide, but also on how to contain or to harness the social discord implicit in their death. It is this afterlife of the suicide – how stories about suicide subvert or reassert hegemonic narratives around gender relations – that is the subject of my thesis.[5]

As second-hand tales, suicide stories are incomplete, biased and fragmentary accounts about why the individual woman chose to contemplate or commit suicide. Yet, they are nonetheless valuable as they shed light on what the women telling these stories understand about gender relations in the aftermath of the suicide. By examining how these married women articulate or dismiss their encounters with suicides of women like them, I reject the notion that suicides are singular events, caused primarily by an individual pathology of psychological factors (Shneidman 1996; Manning 2020). Instead, I understand suicide to be a social fact and to have a cultural dimension; when those left behind tell stories about the suicide, they are not just talking about the death but commenting on the social and cultural order in which this death took place (Canetto and Lester 1998). Furthermore, I contend that these commentaries are articulated through the affective; the emotions, sentiments and sensations expressed or missing within a suicide story, critique and bolster prevailing public discourses. In the process, these commentaries uncover the social ethics of everyday life which determine the worthwhileness of lives and allow for certain forms of suffering to be obscured.

[5] My use of the word "hegemonic" is based on anthropological interpretation of Gramsci's use of the term, where "hegemony refer[s] to that order of signs and practices, relations and distinctions, images and epistemologies – drawn from a historically situated cultural field – that come to be taken-for-granted as natural and received shape of the world and everything that inhabits it" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 23). In this definition, resistance to hegemony is rarely direct but it is "intrinsically unstable, always vulnerable" consistently being made and remade (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 27)

This understanding of social ethics is derived from Das's contention that morality is not just based on "an abstract, nonsubjective vantage point position from which we can orient ourselves in the world" but is developed and performed in the everyday through the "notion of nextness" (2010, 337; 2012). For Das (2010), this "notion of nextness" is a moral striving "to inhabit the everyday and to perform the labor of discovering what it is to engage with the other" (397). Using the example of how a Delhi family received the inter-faith marriage between their Hindu son and Muslim daughter-in-law, Das demonstrates that such moral striving is affective in nature, possible through the deployment of emotions such as love which allow for the "labor of opening oneself to a different vision of what it might be to receive the other" (2010, 397). Notably, in her case study, this 'different vision' overrides the structural bias towards Hindu-Muslim polarisation by forming new "intimate aspirations" for the family as they accommodate their daughter-in-law (Das 2010, 378). Similarly, Mazzarella's discussion of how affective forces such as sympathy and empathy mediate and determine the ethical, further show how such ordinary ethics are formed and performed through the emotional realm (2017). These ordinary ethics are located in the everyday, and are understood to be intrinsic to social activity, regardless of whether the person involved in these activities is recognised as being 'good' or 'ethical' (Lambek 2010). Such ethics spawn their own affective compulsions through "'feelings' of obligation, duty, and responsibility" (Zigon and Throop 2014, 3). Thus, in paying attention to the affective within women's suicide stories, I am acknowledging "the role sentiments and sensibilities play in everyday moral experience and in moments of moral breakdown" (Throop 2012, 152).

My focus on the affective stems from its ability to bridge personal, often highly intimate, experiences of suicide to the broader ethical narratives circulating in Indian society around gender, worth and suffering. I use an understanding of affect that conceives

of it as both an organisational category and an analytical orientation towards "momentum and force" (White 2017, 178). Such a definition borrows from Cvektovich who uses the term 'affect'

> …as a category that encompasses affect, emotion, and feeling, and that includes impulses, desires, and feelings that get historically constructed in a range of ways (whether as distinct specific emotions or as a generic category often contrasted with reason)—but with a wary recognition that this is like trying to talk about *sex* before *sexuality*.
>
> 2012, 4

Core to such a use of affect is that it is primarily composed of emotions, sentiments and sensations and that it is oriented towards understanding and documenting "what *moves* and what *matters* in human life" (Lutz 2017, 182). In such a definition, the emotions, sentiments and sensations within a suicide story gives it salience and currency. These affects perform as a shorthand invoking broader cultural discourses at an intimate level.

Understanding how the women telling these stories are moved by and what matters to them is, thus, central to how I 'read' these suicide narratives. Once the affective flows within these stories are established, I contextualise them, not just through an examination of how they are encountered in cultural discourses around gender relations but also by tracing how they are invoked in the storytellers' biographies. These dissections of women's biographies and how they echo the affects depicted in suicide stories are in no way intended to be quasi-psychoanalytical descriptions of the woman who narrates the suicide story and should not be read as such. Instead, they centre on how women, as agentive storytellers, encounter, experience and understand the affective flows they highlight in suicide stories, and how this both moves them and shapes what matters to them (Lutz 2017). This documentation of how women *feel* the suicides of women like them, moreover, looks at what bolsters or strips worth from women's lives and how their suffering is obscured and

ignored. Such an understanding reveals much about how gender relations are shifting, and social ethics are being reconceptualised.

My affective approach to suicide stories is shaped as much by attempts to avoid the shortfalls of affect theory as it is to take advantage of the benefits of it. As a term affect is vague, contradictory and considerable debate rages as to what exactly affect is. Two components of this debate revolve around whether affect is separate from emotion, and whether it is asocial or pre-social (Massumi 2002 and 2015; White 2017; Lutz 2017; Martin 2013; Watkins 2010; Stewart 2007; Skoggard and Waterson 2015). In my use of affect, I take my cues from the anthropology of emotion which establishes that the display and experience of emotions is culturally rooted, constructed and performed (Lutz 2017 and 1988; Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990). Within this canon, emotions are neither "objects of discrete and linguistically coded meaning" nor purely psychobiological phenomenon (Lutz 2017, 182). Instead, the anthropology of emotions contends that emotions have "social relational, communicative, and cultural aspects" and are at the core of social life (Lutz and White 1986, 405). Hence, this foundation leads to the rejection of the affective realm being conceptualised as one solely of interiority and instead asserts that affect is core to social life. It dismisses the belief that affects are somehow pre-social, private, individual and separate from emotion (Martin 2013; Lutz 2017). As Lutz convincingly argues, definitions of affect which stress that it is a separate entity from emotion, and that it is asocial risk reproducing reductive, Enlightenment-era dualisms such as mind versus body, reason versus emotion, civilised versus primitive and self versus society (2017, 188).[6] Moreover,

[6] From a social psychological perspective, Wetherell makes similar critiques to uses of affect that separate it out from emotion and consider it to be asocial, pointing out that these interpretations can risk being 'anti-humanist' where "The person becomes a kind of semi-intelligent, hormonal ape – already kitted out with basic emotions and drives" (2015, 149; 2012). Instead, Wetherell (2015) suggests a culturally and social-based understanding of how affect operates where "social actors engaged in affective practice are embodied beings for sure, but are also usually sentient, bathed in cultural practice like fish in water, usually reflexive, engaged with others in negotiating their worlds, and constantly talking and making sense." (152).

such a pre-social, non-emotion definition of affect cannot account for my ethnographic context where phenomena that I identify as affective is neither non-emotional nor beyond the social realm.[7] Instead, these culturally-specific concepts are socially transmitted, mediated and experienced through emotions.

In observing these limits of affect in the Indian ethnographic context I follow in the footsteps of anthropologists such as Mankekar and Gupta (2016), Mankekar (2015) and Govindrajan (2015) who similarly wrestle with such definitions of affect, leading them to adapt, edit and expand affect so that it can account for the Indian social realm.[8] In this ethnographic context affective flows are directed by subjectivities and are in a constant state of movement, their circulation lending meaning to some subjects and objects by sticking to them, while sliding off others and rendering them emotionally and socially invisible (Ahmed 2004). This circulation of emotions, sentiments and sensations create a culturally-specific intersubjective space where communal understandings of social concepts such as ethics and gender relations are forged and reforged through shared affective experiences (Skoggard and Waterson 2015; Ahmed 2004). As these understandings compete, contradict and complement each other, they obtain varying degrees of hegemonic acceptance through the medium of affect (Mankekar 2015; Stewart 2007). While the act of writing down the suicide story artificially fixes it into a dead and static object, throughout this thesis I try to demonstrate that the affective flows within these stories are in a constant process of becoming, evoking past histories of the women involved

[7] See for instance, the *rasa-bhava* manner of storytelling (explored in *Chapter 4: Recalling the Suicide: Affective Storytelling and the Ethics of Gender*) or the interplay between *izzat* and *lajja* in an ethics of honour (*Chapter 7: Die-vorce and Suicide: The Unmaking of the Middle-Class Wife*

[8] These anthropologists' definitions of affect differ from mine, particularly when it comes to whether emotions can be placed under affect. Nevertheless, the fact that they also come up against the limits of certain definitions of affect in the Indian ethnographic context provide evidence for Navaro's contention that dominant understandings of affect are based on Western genealogies and that there is a need for more diverse inspirations to theorise affect (2017).

in its narration, hinting at potential ways of valuing life as well as suggesting changing social consensuses around gender relations and social ethics (Stewart 2017).

This use of affect shapes how I approach the question of what women recognise as a life worth living? In this microcosm of suicide stories, women who narrate suicide tales must confront a statement intrinsic in the act of suicide – that the woman who committed suicide did not consider her life worth living. How the tellers of suicide stories consider or dismiss this suggestion in their storytelling, reveals where there is ethical consensus around whose life is considered to have worth, and what constitutes this worth. As Chua (2014) observes, narrators' decisions on how the dead woman is "gendered, sexed and classed" in their tales are capable of both politicising the death, or rendering it inert and harmless, unable to be scaled up to be a comment on the social order in which it occurred (11). I expand on this observation by looking at not only how dead women are characterised, but how the emotions circulating within the suicide story either imputes meaning to or strips value from the imagined life of the dead woman. When these storytellers empathise with dead women, they are exploring which conditions make life bearable and which let the act of suicide emerge as a possibility. When they dismiss and downplay her suffering, on the other hand, they are invalidating certain ways of being a woman and performing womanhood. As such this thesis is not so much attempting to answer how women understand *whose* life is worth living but *what* they recognise as making a life worth living.

Looking at how women feel the suicide story of women like them, thus, opens a window into how gendered suffering is recognised or ignored. The suicide stories told by married women are ambivalent narratives, focused as they are on uncertainties of what exactly led to these deaths. Yet they are both optimistic and courageous acts of storytelling, as the women who narrate them reveal so much of their own vulnerabilities when they try

to reconcile, subvert and imagine the suffering of the dead woman they knew. As such these retellings of suicide tales are commentaries on gendered suffering. While some of these commentaries downplayed this suffering, most were never quite able to smooth away the discord within them, finding resonance between the dead woman's story and the narrator's own experiences of having her suffering dismissed and ignored. This resonance means that suicide stories are often revisited and retold, their storytellers never quite able to resolve them into a neat storyline. Thus, the suicide story is an experience of 'stuck-ness,' where each retelling is a repeated "moment of contact" between the dead woman's life and the living person's narration of it, invoking not just the memory of the dead woman but the gendered histories of both women's encounters with certain types of suffering (Ahmed 2004, 194-195). Such a moment leads to an uneasy "alignment" between the subject and the narrator, engendering an articulation of the suicide story that is as much an emotional critique of the prevailing cultural order as it is an accounting of what happened to the dead woman (Ahmed 2004, 196).

1.3 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is organised around my research questions, which each empirical chapter aims to answer by looking at specific affective aspects encountered within the suicide stories I heard. Chapters 2 and 3 provide a backdrop for this thesis. *Chapter 2: Understanding the Suicide: Suffering and a Life Worth Living* surveys the literature on gender and suicide in India to contextualise this research. In the process, it assesses how certain forms of gendered suffering continue to be dismissed and remain unseen. *Chapter 3: Situating the Married Woman* introduces the women with whom I interacted and provides brief overviews into their socio-economic situations. It also delves into my methodology of an evocative ethnography, focusing on my positionality and experiences

of the field. *Chapter 4: Recalling the Suicide: Affective Storytelling and the Ethics of Gender* forms a bridge between the chapters that set up the backdrop of my research to the empirical chapters. It examines how women narrated suicide stories, paying close attention to the affective flows in their retellings. It argues that when women use emotions in their stories it is to either build empathy for or to overlook the suffering of the women whose deaths they recount. In the process, much is revealed about what they recognise as a worthwhile life, and what makes life unbearable.

Chapters 5 to 7 focus on the invocation of specific affective flows in suicide stories. In *Chapter 5: Desire and Disdain: Depictions of Attraction in Suicide Narratives***,** I focus specifically on desire, and how in suicide stories dead women's desires are simultaneously understandable but a source of disdain. In the process, this chapter pinpoints how women are devalued and lose worth, as well as explores how certain types of suffering associated with women's sexual desire remain unacknowledged. *Chapter 6: Sacrifice and Selfishness: Suicide and the Caring Mother,* examines care and how women use suicide as a metaphor for motherhood, the cessation of one identity to take on another. In this chapter I turn the examination of suicide storytelling on its head, instead looking at narratives of motherhood, and how they implicitly and explicitly invoke the possibility of suicide. As women re-interrogate questions of identity, work, and family, the flow of received care becomes evidence of a worthwhile life, yet women find themselves often in situations where they are expected to provide care, but their own suffering is ignored. In such a situation, suicide becomes a dark undercurrent in their daily struggles around motherhood and ageing. Experiences of precariousness are the subject of *Chapter 7: Die-vorce and Suicide: The Unmaking of the Middle-Class Wife*. This chapter looks specifically at what suicide stories reveal about women's complex negotiations for being valued within the family and how this is mediated through the ethics of honour. Central to this chapter is a comparison of the

parallel narratives of suicide and divorce, which demonstrate how the precariousness of the wife as the subservient woman, is being diffused across the family through divorce and how this is being resisted. As gender relations change through divorce, new ideas of what a worthwhile life is and what constitutes bearable or unbearable suffering emerge.

The concluding chapter synthesises this dissertation, highlighting its contribution to understandings of gender relations, social suffering and suicides, while also suggesting possibilities for further examination.

Chapter 2: Understanding the Suicide: Suffering and a Life Worth Living

A quarter to five and I was running to catch the Delhi Metro, knowing that I was just minutes ahead of the rush-hour crowd and desperate to avoid the sweaty crush that came with it. Jumping into the nearest car, I found myself in the women's compartment. All the seats were taken, unfortunately, and I resigned myself to standing for the rest of my journey, holding onto the overhead handle just two feet away from the seated passengers. As I settled into the commuter's sway, I looked around. Directly in front of me was a woman speaking softly into her phone, her tone slow and intimate, a giant backpack cradled protectively on her lap. Perhaps, I speculated, she was talking to a lover, or, noting the thick red *churras* on her arms – a sign of a newly married woman – her husband. Next to her another woman listened to her headphones, her tapping foot suggesting it was a particularly catchy song. The other women in the compartment appeared to be the standard commuter fare - most of them busy with their phones, one or two of them asleep, some of them blankly staring out of the windows into the darkness of the metro tunnel. I took out my phone, looking to pass the minutes of the hour-long commute.

Several stops in, I looked up, the formerly soft-spoken woman was now no longer speaking quietly. Instead, she was agitated, her speech increasingly being peppered with curses. As more and more people had come into the car, I had been crammed closer and closer to her, and was now standing directly in front of her. "*Khud ko maar daloongi*," [I will kill myself] she said loudly. The woman next to her looked up startled and our eyes met, but no one else reacted to this declaration that she will kill herself. I tilted my head in the direction of the crying woman, a silent plea to the startled woman for help in dealing with her. But she shook her head, broke eye contact and busied herself in her phone. Meanwhile the woman who had just said so loudly that she will kill herself, was still on her phone, no longer speaking but just sobbing quietly. The train seemed to be running

unbearably slow. By now we had emerged into the light, there was Qutab Minar on the horizon, but I could not get lost in the landscape, her soft sobs distracting me. I wondered what I would say to her when she finally got off the phone, but everything I could think of seemed unforgivably presumptuous or simply nosey. Finally, I just left the women's compartment, leaving the train five stops early. In the forced intimacy of the Metro train, I had felt terribly voyeuristic, witnessing her distress, unable to offer her either comfort or privacy.

What happened to this woman - did she actually go through with her threat? Why did I, and the other woman in that compartment, freeze in the face of her distress, ultimately ignoring it in the hopes that it would just go away? If we had paid her attention and taken her distress seriously, could we have helped her? These are the types of questions, I encountered over and over again in the course of this dissertation on the suicide stories told by married women. Such questions were asked, partially answered, revisited, revised and sometimes, altogether dispensed with in these suicide stories. Undergirding these questions is the issue of suffering and how it can repel as well as elicit empathy from those exposed to it. It is this uncomfortable paradox that complicates the social ethics around married women's suicides; where the moral impetus to comfort, is at odds with the need to ignore and move on. This chapter looks at how is it that married women's suicides are ignored, not just in the interpersonal realm but also more broadly in public discourses and how, despite the significant numbers involved, the silence around this manifestation of gendered suffering goes by unknown (Mayer 2016a and Mayer 2016b).

This chapter explores existing studies on gender, narratives on suffering, and suicide in India. It starts by contextualising married women's suicides by looking specifically at how the media covers them and the limited literature around women's

suicides in India. Following this, the chapter considers how the reception of married women's suicide fits into the broader historical pattern of how gendered suffering in India is handled. The chapter concludes by looking at how these historical narratives around gender relations are invoked in one of the binaries that is commonly invoked when describing middle-class women's everyday lives – housewife versus working woman. Throughout this chapter I argue that gendered suffering has been instrumental in defining what it means to be 'Indian' – and by extension, ideas around the nation-state and sovereignty. Yet this understanding of being Indian has primarily relied on depicting women as passive victims, effectively silencing them and hiding away evidence of their agency. Although the country has moved on from these historical narratives around gendered suffering, such narratives are implicit in the assumptions that undergird gender relations. This effectively shapes what is a life worth living and how certain forms of suffering are recognised while others are ignored.

Ideas around what is a life worth living, and whose suffering is recognised are closely related. Borrowing from Butler (2004), I understand that the ignoring of certain people's deaths, as in the case of married women's suicides, effectively suggests that they are not worthy of care, and these lives are essentially negated, made 'unreal' and ungrievable. Furthermore, it is not just *who* dies but *how* they die, that shapes how lives are valued and if they are recognised. The literature on the politics of death establishes that, in Mbembe's words, "sovereignty [is] expressed predominantly as the right to kill" manifesting through Foucault's concept of biopower and how it allows the state "to 'make' live and 'let' die" (Mbembe 2003, 16; Foucault 2003, 241). In such a conceptualisation, the act of the suicide emerges both as an outcome of biopower and as a potential threat to it. On one hand, as Cvektovich (2012) observes, the underlying affective states in suicide, such as depression, can be seen as "another manifestation of forms of biopower that

produce life and death not only by targeting populations for overt destruction, whether through incarceration, war, or poverty, but also more insidiously by making people feel small, worthless, hopeless" (13). In such an understanding, suicide can be read as a sign of women being devalued; so much hope stripped from their lives that they choose death. On the other hand, if suicide is considered to be "an expression of free will," then when a woman kills herself, it is an act that damages the state's biopower, creating a situation of disorder, as it undercuts ideas on who has the power to make whom live (Chua 2014, 11). Such a wilful death can be understood as an act of protest and rebellion against the prevailing systems of order, rendering such deaths particularly intolerable to those invested in reproducing the current social order, such as the state and those married women whose lives are invested in social reproduction (Staples and Widger 2012). These actors are thus invested in ignoring the suicide and leaving it effectively "effaced and depoliticized" (Murray 2006, 197).[9] By examining what is revealed about women's positions in the gender hierarchy by the dual nature of these suicides, this chapter attempts to obtain a more nuanced understanding of how an act of suffering can be considered too intolerable to be acknowledged.

2.1 The Failure to Read Up: Silly Suicides and Disregarded Statistics

A few days after my incident with the woman on the Delhi Metro, I recounted it to a friend. This friend laughed, telling me that if you travel in the woman's compartment you are bound to see a crying woman on her phone. It was not a statement I could argue with,

[9] This Janus-faced understanding of suicides as being both a product and a threat to liberal society applies more widely than to the suicides of married women, as the literature on suicide bombings aptly demonstrates (Asad 2007; Murray 2006; Mbembe 2003). While a comparison between the suicides of married women and suicide bombers is possibly more provocative than productive, the fact there are points of commonalities between how the two are effaced, suggests that it is suicide, itself, and not just the suicide-homicide that is intolerable.

as in my trips on the Delhi Metro the 'crying woman,' had become a stock character to be encountered. She was just like the 'aunty' who would insist that you move up and make room for her if you were lucky enough to get a seat, or the woman who would enthusiastically sing along with her headphones, often out of tune. These were women I noted because they disturbed, interrupting the regular flow of station after station, forcing me to react and take note of them, even as I tried to ignore them. Yet, the intensity of this woman's suffering made her exceptional even amongst these women, and I pointed out to my friend that she had threatened to commit suicide. This was dismissed; my friend suggested that the woman would have said "it just like that," speculating that it was a ploy to get her husband/lover to buy her something or to take her side in an argument or to just get out of trouble. Anyway, my friend added, perhaps recognising that I felt guilty over my helplessness, the woman's suicide threat was not my problem. As a mere bystander, I had no stake in the issue and there was nothing I could do, she elaborated. It was up to the woman's family to manage the issue. My friend bought the conversation to a close by laughingly telling me that if women were committing suicide whenever they threatened to it would be all over the media.

But women do commit suicide, sometimes on the very metro tracks that I had travelled on that day. Such deaths, however, can be hardly said to be 'all over the media.' In this section, I argue that while the statistics show an overwhelmingly large number of married women's suicides, a multitude of factors conspire to keep it from being reported, discussed and understood as signs of gendered suffering. Such factors almost always come down to the fact that understanding the woman's death and her suffering are a lower priority than the living's everyday concerns around selling newspapers, getting clicks on news stories, closing cases, protecting middle-class status and raising the dead woman's children. Suicides by married women, thus, are rarely understood on their own terms, downplayed

and subsumed into broader narratives around aspiration, risk-taking and changing gender relations.

Given the dearth of coverage around married women's suicides, paradoxically, a study which surveyed media professionals on their coverage of suicides found that those in the media were eager to cover the suicides of women and featured such stories prominently (Mayer 2016a, Armstrong et al. 2020, 6). Women's suicides were considered to be more "newsworthy," particularly if the woman involved was understood to be a member of the middle-class or wealthier (Armstrong et al. 2020). Such suicides were covered as individual incidents, reported as part of the crime beat, but rarely made it to the front page of a newspaper, or to the headlines of a news show, unless the person involved was a celebrity (Armstrong et al. 2020). Notably, even though women's individual suicides were covered, they were not depicted as part of a broader social trend. Moreover, there was a tendency to simplify the motivations behind these suicides and give more coverage to suicides that can be described as "silly" (Armstrong et al. 2020, 9). In this context, the attribute of 'silliness' is associated with the feminine and the irrational, an association that suggests that both the suicide act and the person committing it are not to be taken seriously. Armstrong et al. (2020) refer to an example of such a 'silly' suicide, in which a woman committed suicide after her husband refused to buy her tickets to see a movie (9). The journalist who reported this story admitted that their coverage of this suicide was done in a "simplistic manner" but explained that this 'silliness' would lead to greater viewership and could lead to the story going "viral" (Armstrong et al. 2020, 9). As such the media is incentivised to downplay and simplify the stories behind suicides, which further obscures not only the individual woman involved and her motivations, but the seriousness of suicides by women in general.

This obscuring of the seriousness of women's suicide, is also apparent in routine articles that do not aim to sensationalise the suicide, as can be seen in an article on an online news website, about the suicide of a woman on the metro tracks in September 2018 (India.com News Desk 8 September 2018). This article was published just a few days before I saw the crying woman on the same metro route. As with other reports of this nature, the details were sparse, with the article just stating that a woman had committed suicide on the metro tracks. Instead, it was primarily devoted to the busyness of the metro station and the inconvenience experienced by other commuters due to the delays caused by the woman's suicide. Unsaid but highly implied in the article is that the woman was inconsiderate in choosing the metro train as her suicide method. The article did not identify the dead woman and there was no speculation around her motives or attempts to link her death to other suicides by women. Instead, the article noted that two other people, both men, also committed suicide by jumping in front of a Delhi Metro train. As such the woman's suicide is de-gendered and her death is co-opted by a narrative around aspiration and its dark side. Such a narrative does prompt introspection, but not around gender relations. Instead, the emphasis is placed on the Delhi Metro, which competes with the woman as the subject of the article. The Delhi Metro is read as a sign of how the capital, and by extension the country, is reaching an aspirational 'world-class' status (Sadana 2018). Yet by discussing it in the context of suicide a narrative is formed which illustrates that the Delhi Metro has not just made new ways of living possible by mobilising a population and opening new opportunities, but that, in its passive role as a means of death, it has also let new ways of dying emerge. Thus, the woman's suicide is subsumed into a broader narrative around the costs of economic growth and aspiration.

The media coverage of married women's suicides is at odds with how suicides, in general, are 'read up' from individual experiences and seen as evidence of gendered macro

social trends (Chua 2014). In contrast, 'farmer suicides' have emerged as a discourse with immense social and political power, shaping narratives on rural livelihood and government policy decisions (Parry 2012; Münster 2012). This was particularly true during my time in the field when political campaigns had singled out the suicides of farmers as one of the key issues before the 2019 Indian elections. During this time, the opposition parties' critique was loud and easily understood – how could the government in power let farmers, who made life possible by feeding India's gigantic population, die? Married women's suicides, on the other hand, cannot be said to have sparked the same type of collective introspection on gender relations, despite the significantly larger numbers involved.

In the legal context, married women's suicides are "taken to be nearly synonymous with domestic abuse and dowry violence" (Chua 2014, 166). In such an understanding, Berti (2018) demonstrates that the legal process is not as much oriented around the woman's suffering, as it is directed towards the question of whether the husband and the marital family should be punished for this suffering. Courts ascertain the 'legal evidence' of a woman's death on a one-dimensional metric around whether the woman faced domestic violence or if there were dowry demands, disregarding other reasons around why she may have committed suicide (Berti 2018). Thus, the woman's death fits neatly into the cultural script of the woman as a victim within her marriage, and there is no attempt to further nuance this depiction or restore the woman's voice in her death, effectively negating her agency. Instead, the woman is treated as a suspicious figure; her suicide note scrutinised over whether it is authentic and valid (Berti 2018). Outside the legal aftermath of death, Waters (1999) finds that suicide remains ambiguous as families' and communities' accounting of women's deaths strategically and situationally changes. The status of the family often emerges as a higher priority than the dead woman and "[r]umours do the work of redeeming middle-class morality and family life" by either deriding the woman,

downplaying her suffering or coming up with alternative interpretations of her death (Waters 1999, 544). Suicide, thus, cannot be understood as a stable, uncontested description of a death but is in effect, an ambiguous term that is dynamically and strategically deployed. Thus, while these women's deaths live on in the stories told by their neighbours, friends and relatives, circulating within these intimate domains as ambivalent, constantly changing tales, they rarely inform broader narratives around gender, marriage, and suffering.

This dearth of coverage of married women's suicides in India can be seen in the limited academic literature on the topic. What literature is present is dominated by public health professionals such as psychologists and epidemiologists who understand suicide to be a manifestation of mental disorders exacerbated by risk factors and their scholarship is aimed primarily at creating better prevention strategies and advocating for greater attention to mental health (Mayer 2016a; Vijaykumar 2015). Nevertheless, these authors hesitate to attribute the suicide of married women primarily to mental illness: for instance, a systematic review of psychological autopsy studies for both male and female suicide found the surprisingly low prevalence of just 34% for mental disorders as the cause of death (Rane and Nadkarni 2014). Moreover, this body of literature differs from studies conducted in the Global North about the role of marriage, finding that women in India are vulnerable to suicidal ideation within the marital home due to risks such as dowry demands, domestic violence and marital disharmony (Narang, Mishra and Mohan 2000; Srivastava and Kumar 2005; Gururaj et al. 2004; Radhakrishnan and Andrade 2012). Substance abuse (predominantly alcohol) when practised by male family members also emerged as a key risk factor in women's suicide, as it is associated with increased domestic violence (Rane and Nadkarni 2014). Thus, this canon of literature establishes that female suicides are closely interlinked to a socially entrenched gender disadvantage, that places women as

subservient to their male relatives in a gender hierarchy that is routinely enforced through violence. Suicide is, as such, seen as within the umbrella of crimes against women like murder, domestic violence and rape, and the woman committing suicide is assumed to be an agency-less victim driven to kill herself because of mistreatment.

When this body of literature does note acts of agency by women, it is to find that their attempts to break gender norms by exhibiting increased autonomy leads to a heightened risk of suicide (Pillai, Andrews and Patel 2008). One study on youth in Goa, for instance, finds an association between female suicidal ideation with factors such as independent decision making and pre-marital sex (Pillai, Andrews and Patel 2008). Sociologists on married women's suicides develop these conclusions further, suggesting that the problems of women's greater gender disadvantage are heightened at a time of globalisation, high economic growth and social change. Examining housewife suicides, in particular, Mayer hypothesises that they arise out of the clash between women's expectations around love and marriage versus the traditional roles they are expected to fulfil as wives (2016b). Such expectations are based on women's roles as consumers of Bollywood romances and other media in the rapidly globalising Indian media marketplace, and Mayer (2016b) suspects that this has led to women being exposed to ideas such as the companionate marriage and having careers outside the home. He supports his argument by finding a strong correlation between states with higher female literacy, smaller families and greater female media exposure and a higher housewife suicide rate (Mayer 2016b). The NCRB, albeit clumsily, also links women's suicides to changing gender relations amidst economic transition:

> …the submissive, patient, tolerant and pious Indian woman has come out of her cocoon giving men stiff competition in all fields including 'Suicides'. Noticeable rise of 41 per cent female suicidal deaths due to 'Bankruptcy or sudden change in economic position' and 70 per cent rise

> due to ‘Dispute over property’ during 1994 over 1990, are indicative of this trend.
>
> NCRB 1994, 65

Yet the evidence behind these conclusions is weak; the NCRB is overemphasising the role of economics in women’s suicides– neither ‘Bankruptcy or sudden change in economic position’ or ‘Dispute over property’ are major causes of female suicides, accounting for less than 2% of deaths at time of this statement (NCRB 1994). Similarly, Mayer (2016b), does not address how regional variations in under-reporting of suicides may negate his argument that housewife suicides primarily occur in states that score relatively higher in the UNDP Human Development Index (HDI). A study by Patel et al. (2012) demonstrate that this is a real issue, finding that underreporting of female suicides exceeds 60% in states with low HDI like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Even after accounting for this underestimation, Patel et al. (2012) do find a regional variation with more female suicides occurring in the comparatively wealthier Southern states (Supplementary Appendix: Web Figure 2). However, this variation between the higher number of suicides in the South and the rest of India is all the more pronounced when suicides of men and boys are examined, suggesting that difference cannot be simply explained away as a change in gendered aspirations. Moreover, if Mayer’s hypothesis of housewife’s suicide being linked to new ways of living at a time of economic growth held true, then the NCRB data should have correspondingly shown an increase in the number of housewife suicide. It does not – as a proportion of total suicides, housewife suicides have decreased from 19.4% in 1995 to 15.4% in 2019.[10] Nevertheless, married women’s suicides still account for the greater part of India’s already large female suicide statistics, and it is a matter of concern.

[10] These numbers must be accepted cautiously as there are significant yearly variations. Nevertheless, looking at this data, it would be incorrect to say that housewife suicides have increased during this period. Instead, it

Both canons of public health and sociological literature default to seeing women as passive victims who commit suicide out of no other option, and the cultural role played by suicide or by women's suffering is only perfunctorily considered. In contrast, anthropologists studying suicide in India, while also documenting how gender relations and aspirations are changing at a time of rampant economic growth and shape experiences of suicide, additionally capture the intentionality underlying suicides and how it is experienced by those left behind (Chua 2014 and 2012; Parry 2012; Staples and Widger 2012). Parry (2012), for instance, describes how suicides can be purposeful and performative, with many being "transparent acts of accusation and revenge, others of atonement or expiation" that consciously comment on and react to their social and cultural order (162). Meanwhile, Staples and Widger (2012) reaffirm a commitment to using the ethnographic method "to engage with suicide from our informants' own points of view" (183). In the process, they conclude that suicide has its own form of sociality, suggesting that suicide is "a way of making and breaking social relationships, and experiencing, thinking about, and ultimately explaining and shaping the world around us" (Staples and Widger 2012, 200).

Viewed from this lens, the ethnography of suicide sees the suicide act as not just borne out of a pre-existing social and cultural order but also continually interacting with it in a manner which can both reify and undercut conventional ways of understanding and moving through the world. This literature finds a link between aspiration, gender and suicide but it deploys suicide to nuance how these terms are understood, as can be seen from Chua's understanding of aspiration (2014):

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would be more accurate to say that housewife suicides have persistently accounted for a significant share of suicides.

> Mobility and the rapid growth of communication technologies are expanding and reshaping the virtual and actual worlds in which people dream, dwell, work, and love. As experiences of space, time, and possibility transform dramatically, so, too, do people's relationships to ideas of a livable life.
>
> Chua 2014 190

In such a conceptualisation, the idea of a liveable life is centred, and aspiration emerges as an orientation towards achieving a 'good life' or one which is understood to be worthwhile (Chua 2014). In this context, a critical examination of suicide "leads us to confront our own judgements about the conditions and circumstances under which life 'should' be worth living and for whom." (Chua 2014, 194).

This confrontation can be seen playing out in Krishnan's ethnography of suicide prevention measures in a hostel for college-attending women in Chennai (2019). Krishnan (2019) finds that female aspirations, in the form of higher education, are associated with risk-taking and the lives of young women increasingly becomes defined by discourses on risk and gender. Such discourses implicitly or explicitly promote so-called 'traditional' gender relations that limit women's movements and opportunities by suggesting that if women have autonomy, particularly sexual autonomy, they are more at risk from bad outcomes such as rape, murder, abduction, and suicide (Krishnan 2019; Kapur 2012; Phadke, Khan and Ranade 2011). As hostel administrators, and some of the students themselves, understand that a woman's life is worth living only if she conducts herself "responsibly" and keeps her "social reputation" intact, young women are understood to be vulnerable and in need of protection from themselves and their desires (Krishnan 2019, 1520-1521). Hence, Krishnan finds that anti-suicide interventions such as the removal of fans, the barring of windows and balconies as well as subjecting female students to heightened surveillance are put in place not just to stop students from committing suicide but also to keep their social reputations intact (2019). Such practices, Krishnan concludes,

result in a “slow death” for the women concerned, “suffocating them” as they perform the labour of “good womanhood” (Krishnan 2019, 1517-1525).

The context of young, unmarried, female college students in Chennai is, of course, different from the married, middle-class women in the National Capital Region (NCR) with whom I interacted. Nonetheless, many of the same themes of aspiration, risk and surveillance reappear in the suicide stories told to me, as does the question – what does suicide reveal about how people understand a life worth living? One notable difference, however, is that there is not a discourse around married women’s suicides in Delhi-NCR. Instead, I found that even the suicide prevention professionals I spoke to were taken aback at the high number of married women suicides.

This examination of the context of married women’s suicides reveals that there is a double silencing of women, as both the individual and collective experiences of suicide are amended and hidden. This is often at the expense of the woman and her death which can be depicted as ‘silly’ in the media, her suicide note scrutinised for authenticity in the courts and the persistent understanding of the woman as a victim who has little to no agency in her suicide in the statical and epidemiological works on suicides. In this context, where women’s voices have been effectively effaced, those left behind are able to re-tell suicides, reframing the deaths, motivations and relationships involved (Parry 2012; Waters 1999; Chua 2014). Suicide, thus, has an aftermath, and the anthropology of suicide suggests that by examining this aftermath, insight can be gained into the lives of those who live with suicide and how concepts like gender relations, suffering, and family shape their everyday experiences.

2.2 Gendered Suffering and the Intolerable Suicide

Under the whirring fans of the Delhi High Court canteen, Arjun,[11] a prosecutor, spoke movingly about the 2013 Mental Health Bill, which explicitly forbids the prosecution of persons attempting suicide. He explained that over the course of his career, before this bill was finally passed in 2017, he would have to prosecute people who had attempted suicide, even though he felt that what they needed was help, not punishment. "It should not be illegal," he said vehemently, "If someone is committing suicide that means that they have been so frustrated that they are willing to take their own life. They have already so many problems – the court doesn't need to add to them."

With some hesitation, I asked if amongst the people he had prosecuted for attempting suicide there were married women or housewives. He nodded. After a prolonged pause, I tried to prompt him for more information – asking him if he could tell me about any of these cases. To this, he answered: "There are so many cases – lots of them. Dowry deaths as well." At this point, he started listing the various laws under which a suicide could be prosecuted. Further questioning revealed that it was not that memories of these cases were painful, as I had previously suspected, but that he could barely remember the individuals who he met while prosecuting these cases. Instead, he was fluent in how the Indian Penal Code understood the legal consequences of their suicides, able to quote the statutes verbatim and discuss in detail the type of evidence necessary to successfully prosecute such cases. At this point, I asked the question that had been bothering me ever since he told me he had encountered lots of cases with suicides of married women: "Why is there so little coverage of these housewives' suicides, especially when so many more women die when compared to something like farmer's suicides?" To my surprise, Arjun

[11] All names have been anonymised in this dissertation.

started laughing, he then explained "It's a political issue. Housewives' suicide is not political – it won't get anybody's support."

Yet, in actuality, the suicides of housewives, and married women in general, are very much political. The construction of gender relations and sexualities are deeply linked to ideas of what it is to be Indian; invoked in colonial and post-colonial discourses on who constitutes the Indian citizenry and how they should be governed (Puri 2016; Radhakrishnan 2011; Das 2008 and 2007; Keating 2007; Sundar Rajan 2003; Agnes 2001; Alter 1994). Today, gender relations continue to be invoked by Hindu nationalists, who use them to configure the state as pre-dominantly serving and protecting Hindu citizens, thereby asserting that the country is primarily for Hindus and consigning the rest of the populace to second-class status (Gupta 2016; Srivastava 2015; Anand 2007; Banerjee 2005). As Puri (2016) demonstrates in an examination of the Indian State's everyday practices of governing sexualities, the state is able to "sustain the illusion that states are a normal feature of social life, unified and rational entities, intrinsically distinct from society, and indispensable to maintaining social order" through its regulation of sexualities and gender relations (5). The narratives, policies and governing practices around gender and sexuality become ways in which the Indian state, across time and political regimes, can continually re-establish its relevance to its citizenry, shaping, in the process, what it means to be Indian (Puri 2016).

This section examines two narratives which have shaped ideas of what it is to be Indian and revolve around women and their suffering. These are, one, the idea that the woman's place is at home and, two, the discourse that the woman is vulnerable and in need of protection. While both these narratives have deep historical roots and do not go unchallenged in present social discourses around citizenship and gender, they still circulate

and influence both how gender relations operate and how ideas of what it means to be Indian are conceptualised. Through my examination of these narratives, and how it shapes the reception of married women suicides, I argue that current and historical understandings of what it means to be Indian have rested on ignoring married women's suicides, denying women's authorship of their suffering and devaluing the lives of Indian's female citizenry.

The silencing of women's voices in recounting their suffering has an entrenched record in Indian history, as observed by both Das (2006) in her discussion on abducted women in the aftermath of partition and Spivak (1988) in her exploration of the subaltern in colonial-era depictions of *suttee.* Both authors observe that in erasing women's voices from the historical record, women's suffering has been seized by other actors to put forward competing ideas of national identity and to make claims as to what it means to be Indian. Such ideas were initially aspirational visions, coming into prominence during the freedom struggle and the first few years of Independence, when visions of an independent India were still being actively and explicitly negotiated. They can be, thus, said to be at the basis of the post-colonial nation state, and have proved to be both foundational and enduring influences on how the concept of India is understood and performed.

The narrative that the woman's place is at home can be seen in the literature on the emergence of *bhadralok*, or the respectable middle class, in Kolkata during the late colonial period (Chatterjee 1989; Sarkar 2001; Donner 2008). At this time, those in the nationalist movement used a "system of dichotomies of inner/outer, home/world, feminine/masculine" to understand gender relations (Chatterjee 1989, 632). This effectively established the home "as a spiritual seat of power, with women as its caretakers and sources (Donner 2008, 50). By explicitly tethering women to the home and embodying them with "the spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity, and so on", women became

symbolic of the spiritual and moral core of the post-colonial nation, their place within the home apparently insulating them from foreign, colonial influences (Chatterjee 1989, 630). Such a conceptualisation of womanhood was steeped in elitist, classist and caste-ist assumptions, describing middle-class, Hindu, and upper-caste women at the expense of other identities (Chatterjee 1989: Joshi 2001).

In locating the 'pure' and 'self-sacrificing' women within the home, women's suffering became integral to conceptualisations of Hindu womanhood:

> …there fortunately remained a locus of unconquered purity: the body of the Hindu woman. This body was disciplined by the Shastras alone and proved its capacity for pain and suffering, and herein lay the redemptive hopes of the whole community. The Hindu woman's body was moulded from infancy by a shastric regimen of non-consensual, indissoluble, infant marriage and by iron laws of absolute chastity, austere widowhood and a supposedly proven capacity for self-immolation.
>
> Sarkar 2001, 143

This narrative around gender, by so clearly separating out male and female spheres, confirmed the "social subordination and submissiveness" of women and placed them firmly on the lower rungs of the gender hierarchy (Sarkar 2001, 7). By highlighting the "supposedly proven capacity for self-immolation," a reference to widow-burning, suicide became a sign of women's capacity to endure terrible conditions and suffer for their families, thus asserting their spiritual superiority (Sarkar 2001, 143). Attempts to improve the conditions of Hindu women were firmly resisted by this segment of the Hindu national movement as it "would not only spell the ruin of the Hindu faith, but also of the Hindu nation, for there was no one else fit enough to be its future subject" (Sarkar 2001, 144). The woman's life and her suffering thus became privatised, hidden within the intimate realms of the family and home, and the national project reframed attempts by Indian and British

reformers to alleviate her suffering as attacks on the spiritual core of the soon-to-emerge nation state and the moral legitimacy of its citizenry (Sarkar 2001).

Such conceptualisations of a spiritually pure womanhood as being contingent on a capacity to suffer did not go by uncontested, and hybrid models of gender relations flourished which allowed greater mobility, literacy and opportunities for women (Joshi 2001; Walsh 2004). The banning of widow-burning or the introduction of the Hindu Code Bill which guaranteed a set of legal rights for women, for instance, were ways in which the newly-formed nation state could showcase itself as being committed to gender equality, as it sought to assert itself as a 'modern' democracy (Mani 1998; Newbigin 2013). The state continues to champion women's rights and gender equality (which it treats as synonymous) as part of its development agenda, although much of this is paternalistic and configures women as passive victims of patriarchal gender relations (Menon 2009).

Nonetheless, the historic valorisation of female suffering as being integral to being Indian, can be still detected in current debates around women's rights. This can be seen in the state's continual rejection of the demand to criminalise marital rape. The Indian State, across multiple administrations, has insisted that criminalising marital rape will hurt the Indian understanding of marriage as being 'sacrosanct' as opposed to the 'Western' understanding that marriage is a contract (Mandal 2014). In this refusal to criminalise marital rape, the state effectively expects a woman to keep her marriage intact even while suffering within it. Such suffering is lionised and understood to be an essential feature of 'Indian' culture, and the move to alleviate her suffering by criminalising marital rape is depicted as a threat to husbands, the institution of marriage and the country, itself (Mandal 2014). Similar rhetoric is found in the Men's Rights Movement (MRM) attacks on domestic

violence laws and divorce proceedings.[12] Notably, these attempts to protect the gender hierarchy rest on deriding the woman as being "foolish," with the State arguing that "what 'may appear to be marital rape' to a wife 'may not appear so to others'" (Nair 30 August 2017). Thus, just as how suicide notes are scrutinised for authenticity and 'silly' suicides receive disproportionate media coverage, women's own testimonies are not considered to be reliable evidence of their suffering.

Similarly, the narrative of the Hindu woman as being vulnerable and needing protection, conceptualises women in terms that deride their intelligence and conceives them as being at the mercy of their unruly desires. Discussing the Love Jihad movement that became particularly prominent in the 2014 election campaigns, Gupta (2016) observes that it "overwhelmingly portrayed women as 'foolish,' easily 'lured' and 'brainwashed' into the 'trap,' with no mind or heart of their own" (296). This discourse is aimed at the Hindu man, based on the assumption that "safeguarding" the Hindu woman's virtue is his "exclusive prerogative" and part of his role as a 'good' citizen protecting the nation state (Gupta 2016, 297). The narrative of the woman needing protection is continually invoked throughout post-colonial Indian history to deride women's intelligence, limit their autonomy and unite Hindu men in enmity against the male, mostly Muslim, other, who seduces women away, corrupting the 'purity' that is at the root of independent, Hindu India (Sarkar 2001; Gupta 2016, 2011 and 2009). This discourse is at the core of right-wing Hindutva, where it is used to justify the aggressive chauvinism of "Modi masculinity" and the conflation of nationalism with Hindu masculinity (Gupta 2016; Srivastava 2015; Anand 2007; Banerjee 2005).

[12] See *Chapter 7: Die-vorce and Suicide: The Unmaking of the Middle-Class Wife* for a more in-depth exploration of MRM, divorce and suicides.

The suffering woman is once more at the root of the narrative; "The 'love jihad' campaign, while focusing its anger on Muslims, received its emotional bonding from the 'victimized' Hindu woman" (Gupta 2016, 297). Yet, the woman's suffering does not require her testimony, and often has no actual basis in her lived experience only recognising 'suffering' when it is occurring at the hands of the other: "It is … assumed that the mere act of marrying and staying with a Muslim ensures that the woman will lead a dreadful life and her unhappiness will be assured" (Gupta 2016, 298). There is no acknowledgement, as Krishnan (2019) noted in her study on suicide prevention measures in hostels in Chennai, how the actions taken to ostensibly 'protect' women lead to their 'slow deaths' of greater surveillance, further restrictions in autonomy, or the consequences of "the threat of physical, emotional and religious harm to women's bodies" (Gupta 2016, 290). In its treatment of gendered suffering, this narrative dovetails with the discourse that a woman's place is at home, and the two work in tandem to co-opt women's suffering in order to promote the political agenda of "a cohesive Hindu unity, camouflaging the deeper social tensions around the issue of caste" and redefining India as a Hindu nation (Gupta 2016, 294).

While both discourses explicitly speak about Hindu women, these gendered discourses of Hindutva and nationalism have also led to the bodies of other women to effectively become battlegrounds for the creation of a monolithic, Hindu state: "Minority and lower caste women are perceived as symbols of their ethnic, religious, and racial community, and are targeted with gendered and sexualised violence to devastate and fracture the community" (Chatterji 2019, 410). Such violence is also accompanied by a silencing of marginalised women's voices, agencies and sexualities in order to "maintain the patriarchal illusion of unsullied pure and untainted womanhood" (Pandit 2013, 37). Thus, national discourses on gender and the nation do not just selectively co-opt women's

suffering, they also sweep away differences, conceptualising Indian women as being vulnerable, passive and silent victims, unable to recognise women's own testimonies of suffering or differences in life experience (Kapur 2012).

This analysis of the discourses around gender and the nation demonstrates that when women's suffering does, undeniably, come into the public eye, such as in the case of suicide, the management and negation of this suffering is not just the project of the individual actors such as the family, community, police and media but a national project. Andriolo (1998) observes in a cross-cultural study on gender and suicide, that women tend to be associated with constructions of 'bad' suicides, which are highly stigmatised and hidden in their societies. Such suicides are considered 'intolerable' as they shine a light on otherwise privatised and hidden forms of suffering that call into question the existing social order. In the Indian context, stories do exist which valorise women's suicides, but these stories are subsumed within narratives that support the perpetuation of the current social order. This includes situations where the woman is understood to have killed herself in order to protect her chastity, and, by extension, the nation state's spiritual purity. Examples of such suicides include stories about women during Partition who committed suicide rather than be abducted, or those whose self-immolation was understood to be a means to resist the foreign invader (Das 2006; Spivak 1988). Such suicides are heralded as a way in which the powerless were part of the resistance to colonial and other hostile forces, thereby contributing to the formation of both the nation state and the national identity. These stories continue to circulate today, selectively uplifting some suicides, while rendering the rest intolerable, especially when those suicides uncover testimonies of suffering that lead to introspection on how Indian women are treated within their own families, communities, and country. Thus, to go back to Arjun's original assertation that housewives' suicides are not political, the current and historical treatment of suffering women suggests that the

ignoring and stigmatising of the majority of women's suicides is a political act in of itself. By silencing women's own account of their suffering, ideas of what it means to be Indian are perpetuated without challenging patriarchal social norms that are embedded in these definitions and performances of Indian citizenship

2.3 Housewives, Working Women and a Life Worth Living

Throughout my time in the field, Rakesh, a lawyer who specialises in mediating 'matrimonial disputes,' had been phlegmatic, discussing details of domestic violence, divorce proceedings and protracted legal battles with equanimity and dispassion. Somehow, in the last of a series of interviews, the conversation had turned to the types of suicides women commit. In it, he suggested that more than domestic violence, it is 'social circumstances' that determine if a woman commits suicide. I asked him to elaborate. Rakesh was silent, before stating "Suppose there are four sisters, and the father is not well off. Maybe he is ill, or maybe he just never had much money to begin with." He looked up at this point and I nodded to show that I was following the story. "If the eldest girl gets married and after some time, she finds she is not happy in her marital house. She may not want to tell her father because the family will be disturbed." At this point, Rakesh became uncharacteristically animated. "If she gets a divorce it will lead to stigma for the whole family.[13] Her sisters' marriage may not be able to be fixed. Out of this type of fear she may take this step of suicide." To my shock, Rakesh appeared to choke up, as he continued to

[13] It is notable that Rakesh, a lawyer who often works on divorce cases, considers suicide to be less stigmatised than divorce. This is probably because in suicides, the bulk of the stigma is normally directed towards the marital family who are suspected to have caused the married woman to commit suicide. In comparison, less ire is directed at the dead woman or her natal family than if the couple gets divorced.

discuss this hypothetical suicide: “To save her father she will take this step. This type of social circumstance causes women to commit suicide.”

The suicide Rakesh describes appears to be the rare type of married woman’s suicide that is valorised and admired. The woman’s suicide is depicted as an unselfish act, a way in which the loyal daughter can save her father from the consequences of her own suffering, by taking part in a process that obscures this suffering at the cost of her own life. Yet Rakesh is not angry at the injustice of this death, instead he finds it poignant and moving that the woman would decide to kill herself to help her father. He goes on to say “This happens in the village. If a girl has three or four sisters – her behaviour becomes an issue. In rural areas, there’s a different type of thinking, a different culture. She will commit suicide because of honour and fear. In the city, the reasons are different for housewives. They will do it if there is no parental support, in-laws support, no personal capacity to deal with stressors…”

Suicide, and the fact that it collapses the binary between victim and culprit, has a way of turning the rigid dichotomies that organise understandings of social life into an unstable landscape of collapsing contradictions (Münster and Broz 2015; Staples and Widger 2012). In the aftermath of suicide, however, Rakesh re-asserted these unstable binaries in his suicide narrative. In this instance, Rakesh bifurcated how he thinks rural and urban women understand what is a life worth living. For the rural woman, in Rakesh’s analysis, a life worth living rests on her ability to be recognised as being honourable, and her motivations to live and die revolve around her natal family – her father and her sisters – and how her actions may affect them. In contrast, the urban woman, is depicted as needing familial support and she is a receiver of care, but not necessarily someone whose

motivations are shaped out of care for the family. Her ability to live or die is individualised and medicalised, based on her 'personal capacity to deal with stressors.'

The binaries Rakesh uses are an oversimplification – there is a wealth of literature suggesting that middle-class, urban women are also concerned with the ethics of honour and that they make life decisions to uphold their own and their family's social reputation (Donner 2008; Radhakrishnan 2011; Krishnan 2019). Instead, Rakesh's use of the urban-rural binary is a shorthand for two differing ethical viewpoints on how womanhood should be performed and what constitutes a 'good' or 'bad' suicide. This section examines another binary – housewife versus working woman – that is routinely invoked to signal differing moral orders through which married women's everyday lives are parsed and shape ideas around what is a liveable life. While the housewife/working woman binary is not the only dichotomy at work in middle-class Indian women's lives, I focus on it as a contradiction that is collapsing both in the present moment, and within the suicide narratives I heard. Moreover, it functions as a shorthand for a moral order that devalue certain ways of living, while holding up others as examples on which women should model their lives on.

In my analysis of the housewife-working woman binary I specifically look at *middle class* women, drawing upon the literature of the middle-class in India to understand how gender relations are changing and gendered assumptions of lives that are worth living are shifting. The middle class has a hegemonic presence in India, establishing norms and values beyond those who self-identify as middle class (Baviskar and Ray 2011). It should be noted that "a very large number of groups, with quite different socio-economic characteristics, describe themselves as 'middle class'" (Srivastava 2011, 364). Who constitutes the middle class is empirically murky, but as a social category it has tremendous political and cultural power, particularly as it claims to encompass all Indians within it (Deshpande 2003; Joshi

2001; Baviskar and Ray 2011). There are multiple middle classes with different regional, caste, language identities, yet there are also commonalities, particularly related to gender relations and the centrality of the family in women's lives which characterise the middle-class experience in India (Donner and De Neve 2011).

Middle-class women are expected to "play a specific role in middle-class constructions of identity because they are not only markers of boundaries between different groups... but are also active agents in the reproduction of these boundaries in their everyday lives" (Donner 2008, 59). Yet, the demands for middle-class social reproduction have shifted in a time of economic growth and increased globalisation. With this shift gender relations have also evolved, adapting to changing historical trends. The most recent shift in gender relations can be linked to the economic reforms of the early 1990s, which led to an expansion of the type of employment activities available to the middle class. This shift in middle-class realities has led scholars to herald the rise of the new middle class, one which is unabashedly entrepreneurial, globalised yet still rooted in regional norms, values and relations (Upadhya 2011; Gooptu 2013).

The nationalist conceptualisations of vulnerable womanhood and the gendered home, however, have continued to influence the everyday performance of gender relations. Specifically, for women, the moral ideals around self-sacrifice, devotion, religiosity and self-discipline as well as the centrality of home and family continue to shape behaviour and be reinforced in the new middle class (Donner 2008; Radhakrishnan 2011). Increasingly, women have the ethical task of "balancing" between traditional/Indian/spiritual and the modern/Western/material ways of living:

> New gendered 'balances' recreate older strategies of cultural preservation that seek to prevent the feminized private sphere from becoming *essentially* Westernized. Since it is women who are responsible for this task of cultural

> preservation, efforts to 'balance' work and home effectively possess deep cultural valances, and a successful 'balance' participates in the everyday production of a new Indianness.
>
> Radhakrishnan 2011, 147

Women are, thus expected to walk a tightrope between these two poorly defined and consistently shifting poles of 'modern' and 'tradition.' Binaries such as housewife/working woman do not just categorise women's life choices and experiences, prescribing restrictive gender roles for them to fulfil but also morally condemn them for being too closely allied to either extreme of the modern versus traditional binary, in the process devaluing their ways of living.

The binary of housewife-working woman was disliked by most of the women I met and understood to be an unproductive over-simplification, even though they, themselves, would use it to categorise the women in their lives. There was considerable debate on who was a 'housewife' – on the one hand, there were women who did not appear to be engaging in paid work who resented being described as a "housewife," taking offense at the implication that they did not 'work' or were 'stuck' at home all day. On the other hand, there were women who worked full-time who considered themselves both to be "working women' and "housewives," arguing that they were 'respectable,' that their work was for their family's good, and that they prioritised the family over their careers.

Moreover, the difference between housewife and working woman was one that the women I encountered had difficulty in applying to their own lived experiences. Most of them had moved in and out of work throughout the course of their adulthood, depending on their family's economic and social needs, and so there was confusion over whether they are, were, or will be housewives. Normally, these women would work a few years before marriage and leave their jobs once they either married, or, more commonly, had children.

Some women would then return to work depending on their family's economic circumstances and whether they wanted to pursue a career outside the home. Those who would not go back to work would still take part in opportunities that are typically considered to be 'work' which would often need them to leave the home, such as being tutors, running small, part-time businesses, or managing the family's property. The older their children grew, the more time women devoted to these activities and a common refrain from women of all ages who were ostensibly 'housewives' was how busy they were. The dichotomy of 'housewife-working woman' does not capture this dynamic flow in and out of the workplace.

The mutual dislike of the binary of housewife-working woman, suggests that middle-class women find it a devaluing dichotomy. Women who spend most of their time within the home, have to contend with the fact that when they are labelled as "housewives" they are assumed to be not working and their domestic labour is devalued and goes by unrecognised as 'women's work' (Qaymun and Ray 2010: Gooptu and Chakravarty 2014). This devaluation leads to the belief that women's thoughts, experiences and views are of little interest to those 'outside' the home (Waldrop 2011). Moreover, even though the housewife's domain is that of the home, it is very much under the control and authority of affines and the husband (Donner 2008; Sarkar 2001). Within this setting, not only is the housewife in a subordinate, dependent position where her work is devalued but there is immense pressure on women to be the primary caregivers in the family and the burden of care is disproportionately borne by them. Yet, at the same time, being a housewife signifies that a woman is respectable and protected, enmeshed in socially ideal relations and the position of 'housewife' is aspirational for many women (Donner 2008; Qaymun and Ray 2010; Waldrop 2011). For Qaymun and Ray's female domestic servant respondents, for instance, the fact that they must work outside their own homes, is a tragic one that signals

the failure of their male relatives to take care and protect them, thereby upsetting ideal gender relations (2010).

The woman's burden of care is particularly heavy when it comes to rearing middle-class children. Mothers are expected to closely guide their child's education, investing not just in terms of the long hours needed to educate the child, but in considerable caregiving: "The mother…would bear every discomfort in order to give support to the child. The child knows he is special." (Kumar 2011, 229-30). Mothers put in enormous efforts to further the child's educational achievements: sacrificing monetary resources, their own time, leisure and even the prospect of future children to maximise the child's chances of success (Donner 2008; Kumar 2011). In the competitive global marketplace, such caregiving is not as simple as providing support to the child and extends to intimate aspects of the child's life ranging from their daily routines, diet and friendships (Donner 2008; Kumar 2011). Increasingly, the mother fills an "enterprising maternal role as motivator, coach, trainer, and partner, far beyond being a mere carer or nurturer" even though decisions around the child's schools, coaching centres and career paths are normally taken by men (Gooptu and Chakravarty 2013, 150: Sancho 2013). Furthermore, the child's success or failure in education are reflected onto the mother, and she is held accountable for their performance: "Her own self-worth and sense of fulfilment, then, depend on helping the child to succeed on the terms set by the family and wider society" (Gooptu and Chakravarty 2013, 149).

Women who work outside the home contend with many of the same struggles around social reproduction and caregiving but are additionally viewed with suspicion and must constantly prove their 'respectability' (Twamley 2014; Radhakrishnan 2011; Bhandari 2020). The working woman's career is considered to be at odds with her performing the caregiving duties of wife, mother and daughter-in-law and being a "bearer

of culture" for Indian values (Radhakrishnan 2011, 153). Furthermore, the women with whom I interacted found that their status as earners was seen as a direct threat to their husbands' position as the head of the household, and the act of working outside the home is understood to undermine his authority. Thus, women who work outside the home have to perform what Radhakrishnan (2011) terms as "respectable femininity" which includes demonstrating that they prioritise the family over the career, take part in "[c]onsumption patterns that uphold, reinforce, or add status to the family" as well as rigorously restrict their 'exposure' to the spaces outside the home, in order to limit sexual opportunities (158). Such displays of 'respectable femininity' conceptualise women's lives as ones that are oriented towards the family and judge the 'worthiness' of women by their ability to balance the needs of their career with their commitment to the family. Hence, as with the so-called 'housewife,' working women's bodies, behaviours and movements are subject to scrutiny and are a source of anxiety, as the woman becomes symbolic of the family's middle-class status and functions as the bearer of 'Indian' culture.

Given this context of the collapsing 'housewife-working woman' dichotomy, the understanding of married women's suicide data from the NCRB is problematised (2020). NCRB data shows that 'housewife suicide' makes up the bulk of women's suicides, yet Kamla, a retired senior law enforcement professional who I interviewed, was convinced that the term 'housewife' would be filled in suicide reports as a matter of course for most married women (2020). She explained that the police reports, on which the NCRB data is based on, would be gathered by policemen who would write down the occupation based on their interviews with the deceased's family members and neighbours. The occupation of 'housewife' then becomes a way through which families could reclaim 'respectability' for the dead woman by assigning her the socially sanctioned role of the housewife. Yet it also becomes a way to retroactively isolate the dead woman, limiting her ties to the ones within

the family, and effectively erasing those that she may have met out of the home. Thus, if the categorisation of a death as suicide is a socially embedded act, so too is the labelling of the dead woman as a 'housewife.'

The binary of housewife-working women demonstrates the centrality of family and caregiving within women's lives, whether they are understood to be housewives or working women and is a metric through which their lives are valued. Yet, women strategically use suicide fantasies to undercut these narratives that so narrowly define and devalue their lives and labour (Chua 2014). Such suicide fantasies often become a part of the care-seeking and care-giving performed regularly by wives, mothers and daughters (Chua 2014). The discourse of suicide is strategically used by women to

> …produce themselves as moral subjects, mobilize others to respond with heightened care and attention, shift dynamics in the household to make domestic situations more habitable for a time, or serve to enhance the lives of family members.
>
> Chua 2014, 145-146

As such the idea of suicide, in the form of threats and fantasies has become "part of the everyday grammar through which women negotiate family life" (Chua 2014, 144). On one hand, these suicide threats and fantasies are an extension of the self-sacrificing behaviour prized so highly in Indian ideals of middle-class femininity, manifesting in reaction to a new economic order that places so heavily the burden of social reproduction on women (Chua 2014). On the other hand, sacrificing life on the part of women is not just considered as a means to demonstrate care but to also call attention to a lack of care and seek it. Thus, such fantasies and behaviours are an attempt to gain power over seemingly hopeless situations and to communicate injustices within the grounds of prescribed ideal behaviours for middle-class women (Chua 2014). 'Suicide' as a discursive element, thus, has tremendous power in middle-class women's lives.

This chapter demonstrates how my research builds on existing studies on gender, narratives on suffering, and suicide in India. It shows that stories of the suffering undergone by women who have committed suicide, remain marginalised and invisiblized, especially in comparison to the attention given to more visible suicide trends in India such as farmers' suicides. Instead, married women's suicides emerge as particularly intolerable deaths, functioning as critiques to the status quo. This thesis cannot reclaim the voices of women who have committed suicide, but by looking at how women like them narrate their suicides studies, an understanding can be arrived at how suicide emerges as a possibility for so many women.

Chapter 3: Situating the Married Woman

The core impetus of this thesis is to capture how women *feel* the suicides they recount to understand how suicide emerges as possibility for so many women. In this chapter I explain how methodologically I centred this research on women and their affective response to suicide. I introduce the women with whom I interacted, and account for the conditions in which that interaction took place. These women's stories do not just provide the source material for this thesis. Instead, an evocative ethnography dictates that this analysis occurs through them: their suicide stories are contextualised through their lived experiences, their affective responses and their own assessments of what happened and why. In this chapter, as I introduce these women, I situate them in the context of Delhi-NCR and provide an explanation for the methodological choices I made while carrying out an evocative ethnography of suicide.

The chapter starts by considering what it means to conduct an ethnography of suicide stories, and how my focus on affect has shaped my methodological approach and lead me to use evocative ethnography. Next, I introduce the women whose life stories, as well as their tales of suicide, inform so much of this dissertation. These descriptions are built on in the next section, which describes how these women understand their shifting economic and social status. The final section considers my positionality as an 'insider,' describing the nature of the ethnographic experiences which made up my 'interactions' with these women.

3.1 An Evocative Ethnography of Suicide

"Why are you studying *this?* Couldn't you have chosen a *nice* topic?" Aarti's exclamations were nothing new. I had met her at a small get-together hosted by Shiuli, one of the women with whom I had been spending considerable time for this dissertation. I had

been mulling over approaching Aarti and asking her to take part in my research as well. Newly returned from Kenya, Aarti was in her late fifties, and she had slowly been settling into the role of 'housewife' in Gurgaon. I was interested to hear about how she thought things had changed in between her return and her childhood spent in Delhi. Yet, before I could approach her, Shiuli had already told her about my thesis and Aarti was horrified at my topic. Defensive, I explained that a lot of women have been affected by suicide. She interrupted: "But what about you? How is it affecting *you*?*"*

Studying suicide through ethnography is immensely challenging. Parry (2012) for instance, documents how he was only able to do so because of the extended time he had spent on his field site, which allowed him to witness suicides first-hand. Staples and Widger (2012), in turn, reflect on the difficulty of getting enough 'cases' of suicide, even in areas of high prevalence, within the typical ethnographic time period. They move beyond the specific event of the suicide and instead advocate an examination of its context, laying out a series of queries to interrogate while conducting an ethnography of suicide:

> how suicidal behaviours are imagined, talked about, and practiced; how they relate to other kinds of behaviours and other kinds of institutions; when and under what possibilities different people in the communities we study think suicide might arise and when it might not, when it might be 'acceptable' and when it might not; and how suicidal behaviour does not begin with the 'precipitating factor' and end with the 'suicidal act,' but extends deep into individual and collective pasts and future.
>
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Likewise, Chua (2014), turns from the question of "what happened?" to looking at "the ways individuals and loved ones laboured to make meaning in the wake of the death… [a]ttending to the ways suicide is folded into the everyday" (23). Similarly, my examination of suicide tales, is not as much as a factual accounting of each suicide case but is instead

an examination of what suicide stories reveal about the women telling them and how they understand what constitutes as suffering and what is a life worth living.

Such understandings are intensely felt and communicated through affect-laden narratives.[14] As Aarti's reaction to my topic showed, suicide engenders strong, complex and contradictory reactions from the living. In Aarti's case, despite her dismay at my topic, she chose to take part in my research. Her desire to discuss the difference in gender relations between Kenya and India and how that may explain why such a high number of Indian women committed suicide outweighed her dismay and shock at my research topic. Throughout my time in the field, many of the stories about suicide that I heard were short on words, facts, and events but were brimming over with emotions, sentiments and sensations both said and unsaid. Suicide is not just observed, catalogued, dissected, but it is *felt* by those left behind. As Pinto (2014) observes the "narrative is unstable, stories are loaded, and often, if not always, insufficient, especially in the places where they mean so much" (31). In the face of such uncertainty, the evocative ethnography, which aims primarily to convey "the emotions, feelings, and sentiments" circulating within a particular cultural context, is not just appropriate but provides a vital tool for grappling with these insufficient stories, that convey feelings about, more than they impart information on, the suicide (Skoggard and Waterson 2015).

[14] As a reminder, my use of affect is that it is an organisational category encompassing emotions, sentiments and sensations. By understanding affect as a category, methodologically, I am attempting to achieve two aims. Firstly, I'm trying to move away from the western-centric connotations around the emotional (such as the emotional being primitive, irrational, feminine) and secondly, I'm trying to use a term that better captures the complexity of affective concepts in my ethnographic context (Lutz 2017). This complexity is encapsulated in the Hindi term for emotion, *bhava* which can be just as easily translated as sentiment, mood or becoming. This is not to argue that *bhava* is the same as affect, which has its own connotations related to psychology, but instead to state that the term 'emotion' oversimplifies the culturally-specific affective phenomena that I describe in this thesis. Furthermore, affect, as a methodological device is also an orientation towards and a focus on 'what *moves and* what *matters'* to the people the ethnographer is interacting with, a force that is at the core of how I approach this topic (Lutz 2017, 182).

An examination of suicide stories complicates understandings of who is the ethnographic subject; these tales are told by women with whom I interacted and came to know well, but these suicide stories are ostensibly about someone else. Someone, moreover, who is, by definition, dead, voiceless and unknowable. The 'interlocutor' is an unstable entity in my research, composed of the dead woman and the woman telling her story, making it difficult to discern where one begins and the other ends. Similarly, *subjectivities* are complex and hard to untangle. Ortner's definition of subjectivities as being "complex structures of thought, feeling, reflection, and the like, that make social beings always more than the occupants of particular positions and the holders of particular identities" became a productive point of departure for me (2005, 37). In this conceptualisation of subjectivities, the object of ethnographic inquiry is not necessarily individuals with a particular set of identities, but on women whom I encounter in a specific interaction – namely, their act of telling me a suicide story. It is what moves and matters to the woman within this situation that structures my inquiries and ways of understanding. I 'see,' 'feel' and 'understand' the dead woman through the eyes, affects and experiences of the woman telling her story and it is her layered subjectivity which I explore in this ethnography.

I also move away from the terminology of 'interlocutors,' 'respondents' and 'participants', as they either minimise the influence these women have in shaping my ethnographic inquiry (they are not passive individuals whom I just interviewed and observed) or they overstate the scope of this inquiry – this is not an in-depth ethnography of a particular group of women as they go about their everyday lives over an extended period of time. I do draw on those interactions which occur outside the narration of the suicide story to contextualise these tales, just as I trace how the affective flows within these suicide narratives are present or absent within their discussions of their everyday life. Yet,

it is the affective flows of these suicide narratives that is the focus of the dissertation. In other words, this thesis is not to be read as an ethnography of a specific set of women, but as an ethnography of women in the specific situation of contending with and reflecting on the suicides of women like them.

The act of contending with the suicides of women like them is not a one-time event. Instead, the suicide stories I heard were often repeated to me several times over the course of my fieldwork, by either being fully recounted to me in one sitting, or by being invoked repeatedly and embellished or amended after the initial story was told. These stories were works in progress with the women improvising continuously in the course of their narration, each new way of telling leading to different affects, chronologies and even facts of the suicide to emerge. As such they are always narratives in the process of becoming:

> Becoming occupies its own kind of temporality that un-folds in the present: a dynamic interpenetration of past and future, actual and virtual. Distinct from potentiality and not reducible to causality or outcomes, becoming is characterized by the indeterminacies that keep history open, and it allows us to see what happens in the meantimes of human struggle and daily life.
>
> Biehl and Locke 2017, 6

The aftermath of the suicide is, thus, constantly playing out as narrations are in flux and the women voicing them are also in a process of change. As such neither is the question of what happened during the suicide nor how the women telling the suicide story feels, ever fully answerable. Instead, these narratives point to potential answers to these questions, which, as incomplete and contradictory as they may be, still provide insight into how these narratives form and reform around what matters and moves the women telling these tales. Thus, when I ask why is suffering ignored or what do women telling the stories understand to be a life worth living, I am not looking for a comprehensive, unchanging, objective

answer but searching for affective cues on the processes through which suffering can be ignored and lives can be understood to lack worth.

Key to this ethnography was my own presence, which, as a wealth of ethnographic research demonstrates, determines so much of what is seen, understood, and noted about the women with whom I interacted and how they interacted with me in turn (Behar 1996; Davies 2010; Spencer 2010; Della Rocca 2019; Walter 2019). Further complicating this was my identity as an 'Indian woman,' operating within the same middle-class milieu of the NCR as the women with whom I interacted. Thus, there were no clear boundaries between home and field or researcher and subject. What followed was a complex process of selectively disengaging and engaging. To listen to these women, I had to quieten my own identity, allowing their stories to take centre stage in our interactions, suppressing my own experiences of commonality or contradiction. Yet to do an evocative ethnography, I had to not just build intimacy and trust through shared affective experiences, but also heed my own affective cues to understand what to see and note, where to ask and where not to push. My time in the field was accompanied by feelings of intense anxiety on whether I should share more, or talk less, my decisions guided by nothing more than my ability to understand or "read" affective cues.

As such, setting out to do an ethnography of suicide stories meant making several methodological decisions, namely, to focus on the aftermath of the suicide, to define the ethnographic object of inquiry as a situational one rather than focus on a group of individuals and to recognise that the aftermath of the suicide is in a process of 'becoming.' Moreover, by attempting to do this through an evocative approach meant a focus on the affective. This lead me to go beyond an examination of what moves and matters to the women telling me these suicide stories, but to be hyper-aware of my own affective

influence on how they told these stories or, in other words, to account for what moves and matters to me. The rest of this chapter attempts to give a more thorough introduction to the women with whom I interacted, and how my positionality as a researcher shaped this dissertation.

3.2 Introducing the Women

Mrs Chaudhary handed me a cup of tea and as I thanked her, she sat down on the large silk-covered armchair which dominated her living room. Rather than leaning back, she held herself tall and spread her hands on the arms of her chair, allowing herself to occupy the full space of it, like a king on a throne, and exclaimed, excitedly, "This is the first time anyone's wanted to interview *me*."

I was taken aback and completely charmed by Mrs Chaudhary's frank admission. Sitting in her lavishly furnished living room, it would have been all too easy to dismiss her as a being of privilege. Instead, as we talked, it became apparent, that I had to put aside my preconceptions of elite and non-elite women and engage with this woman on her own terms. After the interview, as I made my way back home, I found myself feeling strongly that people should be interviewing her, listening to how she framed and understood the world. In this dissertation, the topic of who has voice, who is heard, who is silent by choice and who is silenced is never far from the surface. As the ethnographer, when it came to interacting with the women who shared their time, stories and experiences with me, listening to them was never a passive act. In this section I outline how I found these women and introduce several who are particularly prominent in this thesis.

Throughout my fieldwork I was painfully aware of the trauma my questions around suicide could inflict on the women I spoke to. Talking directly about suicide was all but

unfeasible. Winning access to these women was often hard fought and I was reluctant to lead with such a volatile topic. Instead, with most of women, I told them, honestly, that I want to know more about gender, domesticity and marriage. This would be met with perplexity, at best, and outright hostility, at worst. I quickly learnt that these women did not want to be engaged with as members of 'middle-class womanhood.' My research, thus, soon came to a standstill, even though I would go through the motions of meeting women, and spending time with them. At this point, I switched directions and rather than asking them to comment generally on gender, I inquired specifically on how their experiences were different from their mothers, and, if they had them, their daughters. This opened a rich vein of information, as women were eager to reflect on how gender relations had changed and are changing. They were rarely nostalgic about the past, and, in fact, were extraordinarily blunt about how problematic the lives of their mothers or mothers-in-law were, in the process, reflecting on their own situations and their hopes and fears for their daughters. In these interactions, I came to realise that suicide, for many of these women, was not just an event to be reacted to, but a pervasive fear to be contended with in the everyday (for more on this see *Chapter 7: Die-vorce and Suicide: The Unmaking of the Middle-Class Wife*).

In prioritising these women's comfort, I created a study design where it was all too possible that suicide would never come up in my interactions with them. To hedge my bets, I used newspaper reports to identify neighbourhoods where a married woman had committed suicide and tried to talk to women from these neighbourhoods. I reasoned that if a woman's neighbour had committed suicide, it was more likely that she would bring it up. Of course, neighbourhoods in NCR are densely packed and vast – it was all too easy for the women with whom I interacted, to overlook the suicide of one woman out of the thousands they lived near. Here, it was an advantage that I was looking at the middle class,

as these neighbourhoods tend to have fewer residents, and are more closely covered by the news media, making it easier to identify specific enclaves within the broader neighbourhood. This strategy did not always work, as it was very difficult to prove that I was 'respectable,' and the few women who were willing to speak to me rarely mentioned these deaths – either out of genuine ignorance, or from a desire to not discuss it. Over time, I shifted away from such a strictly geographic way of finding women. Instead, I moved alongside with women as they went about their lives and met other women in their social networks. As I spent time with them, I formed bonds with their families, particularly their adult children, whom I would interview as well, expanding the people to whom I spoke to a wider set of women. At the end of my fieldwork, I had worked primarily with three groupings of women.

Firstly, I interviewed women who lived in the same gated community, Chandan Apartments, in Gurgaon.[15] From newspaper reports I knew that two suicides of married women had taken place in or around this apartment complex within the last decade, and I hoped to find someone who would be willing to tell me about them. No one ended up discussing these specific suicides, probably because the turnover in this apartment complex was quite high and most families would move out within two or three years. I also found it difficult to convince these women to take part in individual interviews. Instead, they accepted me in a communal setting; most of my interactions were either at condominium-wide events, such as the celebration of festivals, or more usefully, informal gatherings with several women in the complex's courtyard during winter afternoons. These occurred on weekdays, when women, after the chores of the day, would come out to sun themselves, snacking on *samosas* and oranges while discussing their lives, the latest TV shows and their

[15] Place names, as with the names of people, have been altered to protect the anonymity of those I interacted with.

ever-present worries over their children. I distinctly got the sense that they were indulging me in these group settings, the questions that I put to them were a break from the normal gossip. When the temperature started rising, these afternoon meetings stopped and with that my interactions with these women also came to a close.

The women at Chandan Apartments can be broadly said to be living in the "new India" of privatised, globalised workplaces. Their husbands, and, in some cases, sons and daughters-in-law tended to have mid-level corporate jobs. Several lived on their own or with their husbands, their children working abroad and visiting annually. These women did not engage in formal full-time paid work. This is probably because most of my visits to Chandan Apartments took place in the afternoon, when women employed outside the home would be at work. Although I spoke to five women at Chandan Apartments repeatedly, only two consented to giving one-on-one interviews. Of these, the dissertation is influenced most by Mrs Garg, a widowed woman in her late sixties who lived with her son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren. She was a former professor, who had retired early to raise her grandchildren and allow her daughter-in-law to continue her job. Mrs Garg is a Jain who had an arranged marriage to an upper-caste Hindu man. She was proudly religious, spending long hours volunteering with under-privileged children as part of her *seva* (roughly translated as selfless spiritual service) at her ashram. I discuss her experiences of motherhood and old age in *Chapter 6: Sacrifice and Selfishness: Suicide and the Caring Mother*

Secondly, I interviewed a group of married women whose life experience mirrored the transition India is going through from the public sector to the private. These women used to be neighbours in a gated community that was primarily populated by employees from the same Public Sector Unit (PSU). Over time, many of their husbands left the PSU

to join other corporations, yet the women remained friends even though they have dispersed across India, though most are concentrated in several neighbourhoods in NCR. These women tended to be wealthier than those at Chandan Apartments, but most of them have had to work to support their families.

Key amongst these women was Tina, a vivacious self-declared '*ghar ki rani*' (queen of the house) who lives with her husband and father-in-law in a Gurgaon gated community. Tina's two sons were in college and would frequently visit during my fieldwork periods. She entered the workforce for the first time in her late thirties, because of her family's precarious financial situation. Although she enjoyed her career in sales, she had to leave it when her eldest son was in 10^{th} class, the year in which the crucial board exams take place. From what I saw, Tina was always extraordinarily busy, going on weekend trips to oversee the family's inherited farmland in rural Haryana, taking part in a hectic social life that revolved around furthering her husband's career and frequently visiting her friends in other parts of India. During my time in the field, Tina turned fifty, which she celebrated with a holiday abroad. Tina and her family, by extension, made it a point to show how well-off they were.

Tina is a Jat, and her parents had migrated to Delhi from their village in Haryana. She was married right after college in an arranged marriage. There are very few women born in her natal and marital families, something that, Tina strongly hints, is due to sex-selective abortions and female infanticide. Her husband is a member of the local chapter of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a right-wing Hindutva group that is closely affiliated with the BJP. I could see no sign that Tina shared his religious and political proclivities, and in fact, her house had fewer religious paraphernalia than the homes of other women I visited. Tina was also the only woman I met who would normally be found

in short dresses and had blonde highlights in her hair which she would wear open instead of the traditional hair bun. I discuss her views on suicide, desire and gender in *Chapter 5: Desire and Disdain: Depictions of Attraction in Suicide Narratives.*

Tina took me under her wing, introducing me to several women who had been her neighbours when they all lived in the same gated community. Of these Rekha and Ritu have significantly influenced this dissertation. Rekha lives with her husband, daughter and son in a gated community in Gurgaon. She was in her mid-fifties and her daughter was in her late twenties, while her son was in his early thirties. I spent time with both Rekha and her daughter. Unlike the other women in this group, they live in a large joint family home, where the top floor is taken by Rekha and her family, while the ground floor houses her husband's brother's family. The family is Rajasthani Marwari and Rekha expected both her children to have arranged marriages within this community. Rekha was initially a 'housewife,' but when her children left for college, she started a part-time business and has subsequently encouraged her daughter to be independent, travel abroad and pursue a full-time career. Her experiences with gender relations and 'living deaths' are discussed in *Chapter 7: Die-vorce and Suicide: The Unmaking of the Middle-Class Wife*.

Ritu lives with her husband and son in another gated community in Gurgaon. She also has a daughter, to whom she is very close. Ritu is in her sixties and retired as a schoolteacher. Although she is an upper-caste Hindu, Ritu explained that she primarily identifies as coming from a military family, with both her father and husband having served in the Indian Army. Although, she had an arranged marriage, Ritu is not comfortable with such marriages when it comes to her children, Her daughter worked full-time and is in an inter-caste love marriage, both aspects that Ritu approves of. She was reluctant to find a match for her son, finding the process demeaning to the prospective bride, even though her

son wanted an arranged marriage. I look at her experiences with motherhood and how suicide is implicitly invoked within them in *Chapter 6: Sacrifice and Selfishness: Suicide and the Caring Mother*

My last group consisted of a mix of women with whom I interacted closely during my time in the field. Several of them can be labelled as 'working mothers.' They tend to be located across Delhi-NCR. Many of them have jobs that would put them in the creative class – working in NGOs or as researchers and journalists. Others are affiliated with suicide prevention professionals whom I interviewed, as either their wives or research assistants.

This group has the largest number of women who significantly influenced my dissertation – seven in total. Of them, Shruti is the most prominent, featuring in most chapters of this dissertation. She was in her early forties at the time of my fieldwork and had a senior role in an organisation that works on social welfare issues. While I was in the field, she was finalising her PhD, and is comparatively, more educated than the other women I spoke to, whom have completed a master's degree. Shruti lives with her husband, daughter and son. Her children are in their teens. They live in a two-bedroom flat in an up-market apartment complex in South Delhi. Shruti's job provides the family with much needed stability, her husband is a freelance journalist, and so her earnings provide the family with a consistent income. Both Shruti and her husband are first generation migrants from Bihar, though they had a long association with Delhi before moving; her father and husband attended college there and she would frequently visit the city before moving to it. The couple have an arranged marriage. Upper caste in Bihar, Shruti's caste and regional identities do not translate easily in the context of Delhi, as her caste has no local equivalent and in general, Biharis are looked down upon by the Delhi middle class as being of lower class and caste. As such, although unquestionably middle class and 'respectable,' Shruti

understands what it means to be an outsider and has empathy for those who do not quite fit. Both Shruti and her husband consider themselves to be proudly progressive and leftist, especially on gender issues, determined that their daughter will have access to the same opportunities as their son. Moreover, they want their daughter to be confident and be able to voice her opinions, impatient with the gender norms that advocate women to be passive, silent and agreeable. I discuss Shruti's neighbour's suicide in *Chapter 4: Recalling the Suicide: Affective Storytelling and the Subversive Lens.* Her maid's suicide story is a key component of *Chapter 5: Desire and Disdain: Depictions of Attraction in Suicide Narratives.* Shruti's experiences of motherhood and how they are tied to suicide are also discussed in *Chapter 6: Sacrifice and Selfishness: Suicide and the Caring Mother*.

Closely following Shruti in prominence in this dissertation, is Kanchan. I met Kanchan through her boss, Divya, a judge and former lawyer who specialises in legal approaches to gender. Unlike the other married women in this dissertation, all my interactions with Kanchan occurred at her workplace. At the time of my fieldwork, Kanchan was in her mid-thirties and had just had a new-born daughter. Her struggle to transition into 'working mother' status is discussed in *Chapter 6: Sacrifice and Selfishness: Suicide and the Caring Mother*. Kanchan is not as well-off as the other women in this dissertation, living with her husband, parents-in-law, new-born daughter, brother and sister-in-law in a two-bedroom flat in West Delhi. Yet she identifies herself and her family as middle-class, although she spent her childhood in and out of school as there were times her family could not afford her education. Nonetheless, Kanchan has experienced the greatest economic mobility of the women I met, and she earns twice as much as her husband. This gap in income has led to considerable precariousness in Kanchan's role within the family which is discussed in detail in *Chapter 7: Die-vorce and Suicide: The Unmaking of the Middle-Class Wife.* Like Tina, Kanchan does not identify as upper caste. Her understanding

of caste hierarchies are based on Rajasthani understandings of caste, although she was born and has lived her whole life in Delhi. Nevertheless, she maintains close ties to Rajasthan and identifies as belonging to her family's village, visiting it with her daughter as soon as the child could travel. Her natal and marital families have, what she considers, conservative values. Her natal family insisted on arranging her marriage, and she is in a forced marriage. Her husband and father-in-law do not approve of her working. In *Chapter 4: Recalling the Suicide: Affective Storytelling and the Subversive Lens,* I discuss how her marital situation is mirrored in her recounting of her neighbour's suicide.

Like Kanchan, Preeti is also a new mother in her late twenties. She lives in a three-bedroom house in an upmarket neighbourhood of Gurgaon with her father-in-law, husband, and son. Preeti is in an inter-caste love marriage with her college boyfriend. Even though her marriage was the first inter-caste love marriage in her natal family, it was approved of, perhaps because her husband was also upper caste and had a lucrative and promising career in the IT sector. At the time of my fieldwork, she had happily quit her job to raise her son, but by the time I finished she had taken on a new job. I discuss her experiences with motherhood and work in *Chapter 6: Sacrifice and Selfishness: Suicide and the Caring Mother*.

Unlike Preeti, Priya had to elope with her husband, who I also interviewed, as her family did not approve of the inter-caste nature of their marriage, despite both of them being upper caste. Priya was in her early sixties, at the time of my fieldwork, and had just retired as a schoolteacher. She and her husband lived in their own two-bedroom house in East Delhi, while their son and daughter were working and studying abroad. Priya's husband was a doctor; he, unfortunately, died in the COVID-19 pandemic, shortly after my fieldwork. The couple have strong political views, opposed to authoritarian rule. I discuss

Priya's retelling of a woman's suicide and her husband's accidental death when he tried to rescue her in *Chapter 5: Desire and Disdain: Depictions of Attraction in Suicide Narratives.* Priya's understanding of women's subordinate position and how they live (or do not live) with such precariousness is also discussed in *Chapter 7: Die-vorce and Suicide: The Unmaking of the Middle-Class Wife.*

Anita is married to Rakesh, one of several lawyers who I interviewed as a suicide prevention professional. I interacted with them and their son, Lakshman, a law student in his late twenties, multiple times over my time in the field. The family lives in West Delhi, in a three-bedroom apartment in a gated community. Anita and Rakesh have an inter-caste, love marriage. Anita is proud to be a 'housewife', and additionally gives astrological consultations on the side. Rakesh specialises in matrimonial disputes and is often appointed as an arbitrator in these disputes or represents one of the parties in divorce cases. The couple work together often with Rakesh providing legal advice and Anita, astrological. Both are first-generation Punjabi migrants, though as with Shruti, their families have deep ties with the capital. During my fieldwork, Anita was in her late fifties and a proud supporter of the ruling *Aam Aadmi Party* (AAP) in Delhi. She was suspicious of women who work or get divorced despite her husband's occupation. I discuss Anita's retelling of her neighbour's ambiguous death in *Chapter 4: Recalling the Suicide: Affective Storytelling and the Subversive Lens.* I also cover both Anita's and Rakesh's opinions on divorces, marriage and gender roles in *Chapter 7: Die-vorce and Suicide: The Unmaking of the Middle-Class Wife.* Lakshman's understandings of gender roles and how they are changing are discussed in *Chapter 5: Desire and Disdain: Depictions of Attraction in Suicide Narratives.*

Shiuli and Mrs Chaudhary are the two wealthiest women I came across. Shiuli is a Bengali woman who was widowed while I was conducting my fieldwork. She lives in a

prestigious neighbourhood in Gurgaon in a five-bedroom house. At the start of my fieldwork, she lived with her husband, and her two sons were working abroad. Shiuli turned seventy while I was in the field. She was married young, at nineteen, by her parents to a man who was much older than her. The couple's marriage was unhappy, and Shiuli disliked her husband. At some point, in her forties, when her children were raised, she moved in with her parents in Delhi, ostensibly to take care of them. When they died about ten years ago, she reluctantly moved back in with her husband and oversaw his health, supported by a staff of nurses, doctors and physiotherapists. Due to this, Shiuli has spent most of her life taking care of family members – first her children, then her parents and finally her husband. Shiuli is extroverted and was looking forward to life on her own at the end of my fieldwork. She has always worked, sometimes in full-time jobs but more commonly through part-time arrangements such as being a tutor. Shiuli is an upper caste Hindu, her family prominent in their native Bengal but from what I could tell she has never actually lived in Kolkata, apart from annual visits. I discuss her niece's suicide in *Chapter 6: Sacrifice and Selfishness: Suicide and the Caring Mother*.

Mrs Chaudhary is in her mid-fifties. She lives in a palatial house in one of the oldest and most upmarket neighbourhoods in South Delhi. At the time of my fieldwork, she lived with her husband, daughter and son. Mrs Chaudhary had an arranged marriage to another Punjabi Sikh. Both she and her husband are children of refugees, who fled what is now-Pakistan during partition. As with Tina, there are hints that sex-selective abortions and infanticide are practiced, though the fact that her eldest child is a daughter, suggests that Mrs Chaudhary did not take part in these practices.[16] I discuss her mother-in-law's suicide threat in *Chapter 6: Die-vorce and Suicide: The Unmaking of the Middle-Class Wife.*

[16] As per several of the women with whom I interacted, the gender of the first child is critical, and women are often forced to have abortions if they are pregnant with girls. Once a son is born, the pressure for the

Additionally, I interviewed psychologists, lawyers and police officers. These include Rakesh, Anita's husband, and Divya, Kanchan's boss. In many cases, although I would be asking about their professional experiences, they would answer based on their personal experiences, especially when they were women. As such the discussions in these interviews would blur between strictly professional interviews, they were set out to be, to the more free-flowing interactions I had with married women. The insights I gathered from them, thus, cannot be neatly placed in a category separate from the insights I gained from married women.

I determined the influence these women had on my thesis, based on whether I had repeated interactions with them and how much prominence I gave them in this thesis. The prominence they receive in the thesis, in turn, depends on whether we discussed specific cases of suicide or not. Apart from the women mentioned above, there are women like Aarti, who I would meet once or twice. While these interactions are rarely explicitly discussed in this dissertation, they have helped shaped my interpretation of the suicide stories I was told.

3.3 "People like us"

I had accompanied Shruti and her children to a mall near their neighbourhood. As her daughter tried on clothes at the local H&M, the rest of us sat on the plush red leather sofas outside the store. Her son was soon immersed in a game on his mobile phone, so Shruti and I started to talk. "I don't know what will happen to this generation," she said, unprompted. I asked her what she meant? She went on to describe a conversation she had

next child to be another son is less and so it is quite common to find families where the older child is a boy and the younger child is a girl.

with her husband, where they were discussing what to do with their extra income once they had finished paying off their mortgage in a few months. At this point, their daughter interrupted had them. "She said, 'It's *high* time we get a proper car,'" Shruti recounted, rolling her eyes as she stressed the 'high'. "Can you believe it she actually wants us to take the same loan amount to buy an Audi or something?" Shruti sighed and lamented over the gap between her and her daughter's generation: "This generation, it just doesn't have sense, they see what their friends have, and they must have the exact same things."

In this section, I look at women's understandings of their social and economic situations. In it, I argue that their narrations of suicide stories are influenced by how they negotiate several paradoxes of identity. These women must contend with being simultaneously outsiders and insiders, economically well-off but precarious, and their occupation of the contradictory role of "consumer-citizen" (Srivastava 2014, 170). In the process, this discussion attempts to move beyond the dichotomy of modern versus traditional, which these women would use as a shorthand to frame their gendered experiences.

As a collective, the women with whom I interacted are a heterogenous mix of caste and regional identities. This is in keeping with the cosmopolitan nature of the NCR, where there is a constant churn of migration in and out of the Delhi and its suburbs. Most of these women identify as migrants, even if they have never lived outside of the NCR, their region-specific identities continuing to be reproduced over the generations. As a result, even if women were not in inter-caste marriages, they were exposed to other ways of living. These women did not assume that their way of living was the norm, and a common refrain I would hear is "*hamare mein aise hota hai*" (Amongst us, this is how it happens). This was particularly true for gender: there was an understanding that even though women were on

the lower rungs of the gender hierarchy across Indian society, the specific gendered experience of this hierarchy was embedded in their regional and caste identities.

The desire to live more equal lives was presented as in conflict with the struggle to hold on to these regional and caste identities. Rekha, for instance, was willing to let go of the traditional hours-long prayer practices of her mother and mother-in-law, finding them incompatible with her daughter's and her own 'modern' life of work and study. However, she found the prospect of her children having love marriages unfathomable. This was not just because she believed that marrying for love would mean losing 'respectability' and lower the family's status within the community, but also over concerns over her children's happiness. In the case of her daughter, for instance, the family, including the daughter, had decided that she would move abroad, believing that she would have more opportunities there. Having decided that her daughter would live outside the country, Rekha insisted that a carefully chosen arranged marriage within their community would ensure the daughter would be cared for in a strange and alien culture. The ties of communal obligation, reified through the arranged marriage process, would ensure that the daughter would have a ready-made support system in the marital family. Her friend, Ritu, on the other hand, celebrated her daughter's love marriage as a progressive step that would allow her daughter to be happy. Yet at the same time she felt there was no point in trying to stand up for herself in the patriarchal environment of her family, explaining that in her military family, the men had to be 'aggressive.' Aggression was thus, not just a characteristic of the individual men, but a part of the family's understanding and performance of masculinity. Such gradual negotiations between the cosmopolitan 'Delhi' culture and their regional and caste identities were dynamic and occurred in the everyday. They resulted in a hybrid identity that left these women feeling isolated, unable to either see themselves as part of the broader NCR, or, increasingly, recognise themselves in their relatives' ways of living.

The category of ‘middle classness’ was also not stable. Although, at the time of my fieldwork in 2018 and 2019, India was experiencing one of the highest economic growth rates in the world, only a few of the women I interacted with were, like Tina, delighting in spending their wealth. Instead, while they would all say that they were born middle-class and remain so, many of them had experienced times of economic precariousness. As noted in my description of these women, for many, their household incomes had shifted from public sector salaries to private sector earnings, fixed term contracts and freelance gigs. While the money made through this shift had exponentially risen, there was a sense that these gains were ephemeral. This suspicion was borne out by how the possibility of unemployment always hung over them and the perks of public sector jobs such as pensions, employer-provided homes and generous health insurance schemes were no longer on offer. Some, like Mrs Bhardwaj, a woman who I met at Chandan Apartments and who was in her mid-sixties, would be blasé in the face of this saying “*Lagta hai nahin ho payega. Par paisa aa jate hain*” [It looks like things are not possible, but then the money does come]. However, others, were quite concerned about whether their middle-class status could continue, particularly when it came to their children. Several women noted with dismay that their children were receiving a poorer quality of education than they or their husbands had got, as they were unable to afford their *alma maters*. Preeti was unhappily surprised when she realised that, despite her husband’s well-paying job, they could not afford a second child without her re-entering the work force, and having three children, as her parents did, was completely out of the question. Those with teenage children, like Shruti, were worried if their children could be intelligent consumers, able to discern between short-term pleasures and long-term investments.

In hindsight, these women’s suspicions over their economic conditions, unfortunately, proved true. The Pew Research Center has found that all classes except for

the poor have shrunk during the pandemic in India, suggesting downward economic mobility (Kochhar March 18, 2021). Those women with whom I maintained contact, would note that the loss of family members, high health costs and, to a lesser extent, cut back in job opportunities had forced them to scale down their lifestyles. While they still hold on to the label of 'middle class,' for many this has come at the cost of selling beloved ancestral land, moving in with adult children or having to severely economise. Moreover, the tinge of loneliness that I had seen while in the field – born out of the paradox of feeling isolated based on their caste and regional identities but longing for interactions with 'people like us' – had now become full-fledged. Women were now mourning lost loved ones and coping with the lockdown conditions of limited social interaction.

During my fieldwork, concerns over the social reproduction of class status loomed over these women and there was an understanding that with the change in earning patterns, their consumption practices also had to alter. Most of the women I met were born before the economic liberalisation of the 1990s and were raised in an era characterised by limited consumer choices. The convergence of market liberalisation and a flourishing online retail industry meant that, while these women were in the process of redefining themselves as Indian members of the global elite consumer class, they were also overwhelmed by an exponentially increased range of consumer options, complaining to me of the exhausting work they had to do to figure out the best consumer choices (Searle 2016). While there was certainly a palpable desire to live a 'good life,' there was a near uniform criticism of 'excessive' materialism. Consumption, is thus, morally ambivalent (Wessel 2004). Women were deeply suspicious that status signalling consumer choices such as expensive foreign holidays or cars could end up getting in the way of living economically stable lives by depleting savings and preventing more prosaic long-term investment.

Consumption thus became a fraught moral realm as women struggled to understand how they should spend. For instance, Tina, who had a highly consumption-oriented lifestyle, told me that while she loves to dress up, experience new places and spend money on luxuries she could not do so openly. People are jealous, she explained, they make snide remarks and argue that since she and her husband are doing so well, they do not need to be given the proceeds from their ancestral property. Her materialism, in this case, threatened her family's middle-class status by positioning them as 'undeserving' of their inherited wealth. It also threatened her status as a 'respectable' woman, with relatives deriding her clothes and make-up. Yet, at the same time, her consumer choices established the family's social status, particularly amongst her husband's colleagues and their neighbours. To combat this, Tina had a Facebook page for her relatives, that was curated to show her as an 'ideal' wife and a separate WhatsApp group composed of other women "like her" where she posted pictures of her holidays and new dresses. This splintering of her social media was a sign of how women struggle to balance between moral orders around consumption – on one hand, there is a need to display 'modesty,' discernment and self-discipline, on the other, the performance of an entrepreneurial self rests on the "moral and virtuous quest" of "individual self-maximization" embodied and displayed in consumer choices (Gooptu 2013, 7).

In response to this uncertainty, women would turn to each other for cues about how they should spend. They eagerly dissected their friends, neighbours and relatives' consumer choices, not just to determine if the other person was 'respectable,' but to understand what their particular slice of the middle-class could consume. Thus, they became increasingly inward-oriented and insular; advocating living class-segregated lives, moving around in circles of "people like us" with similar consumer habits. Moreover, they hoped that surrounding their children with others 'like them' Would limit their exposure to hyper-

consumerism and foster responsible spending habits. Mrs Garg's explanation on why her family lived at Chandan Apartments is an example of this:

> We preferred it because it's middle class. We wanted to live with people like us. It is difficult if you are not like those in your surroundings. Then the children become competitive. For example, we have a Maruti Esteem but then they see their friend is driving a BMW and they say "*hum kaab lenge?*" [when will we get it?] This "*hum kaab lenge*" is very bad. The financial gap, it directly and indirectly causes a lot of frustration.

The neighbourhood, thus, plays an outsized role in how women understand, perform and reproduce their middle-class status. Almost all of the women I met lived in gated communities or within neighbourhoods that have been retrospectively gated.[17] As instruments of global capitalism, gated communities commodify the idea of a secure, global, exclusive and often elite lifestyle, selling it by rendering unsecured public spaces as unsafe and dangerous (Calderia 2000; Adham 2005; Murray 2008; Flazon 2004). They represent a retreat by the government from the usual acts of 'making life,' allowing for the pseudo-governmentality of RWAs to fill this absence, providing not just security but other services, that typically fall under the mandate of the state, such as round-the-clock electricity and water, or reliable garbage disposal (Srivastava 2014; Dupont 2016).

Srivastava (2014) discusses how, in gated spaces within NCR, the circles of 'people like us' are cemented in "new sociality" where a "sense of community" is inculcated through a mix of "private governance, camaraderie, and sanctuary" (180-181). In such spaces, he argues, women are "offered the 'freedom' of public spaces in tandem with the demand to demonstrate the ability to return to the 'home.'" (Srivastava 2014, 166; 2007). In practice, this means that the gated community offers women the possibility of moving between the 'traditional' and 'modern,' through their consumption choices. Srivastava

[17] For an account of the gating of an originally open neighborhood in Delhi see Waldrop (2004).

gives the example of how women's activities in the gated community include "new 'arts' of the body—gym cultures, dancing in public alongside men, exercises of running and walking, for example—[and] are combined with 'older' practices of religiosity, household duties, and participation in 'women-oriented' customary rituals that are also part of gated community life" (2014, 167). From what I saw and experienced, this movement between 'modern' and 'tradition' was hardly smooth, instead the gated community became a space where the woman was always watched and judged.

This was all too evident at Chandan Apartments, where women, including me, had to think twice before we would move through this space, knowing that we would be stopped and quizzed as to where we were going and who we were meeting. For me, anxious to protect the anonymity of the women I was meeting, this scrutiny was unwelcome and it led me to end my visits to Chandan Apartments prematurely. For these women, in turn, this questioning of movements was one of several impediments that kept them at home, unless they were going out with a family member or for work. This along with the prized 'self-sufficiency' of gated communities effectively kept women on its premises; the ones I visited, contained at least one grocery store, an ATM of a major bank and a small shrine on the premises (Dupont 2016). Bigger gated communities would have restaurants, a hall for screening movies, gyms, swimming pools and a golf course (Srivastava 2014). As several women noted, with a degree of wryness, they had no reason to ever leave. These women can and do, of course, choose not to use these facilities. However, women who were seen to be going 'out' too frequently were criticised in the courtyard gatherings for their constant 'marketing,' a sign, at best, that they are spendthrift, and at worst, that they are not quite 'respectable.'

Thus, the gated community provides new avenues for social life within its confines, while at the same time increasing the surveillance and policing of women's movements. These new avenues are open to those willing to conform to the moral and social order of the gated community; for instance, the lesbian daughter of one woman told me she would never live in one, because the heightened scrutiny could potentially expose her to homophobic neighbours. Similarly, a lawyer in her late forties, who was single, complained that she had to rent a separate office, apart from her chambers at the court, because if she had clients visiting her at home after work hours it would be gossiped about in her gated community. Other women simply refused to be aggrieved by this surveillance. Malini, a psychologist, for instance, relished that she could go 'outside' at two in the morning, without worrying that she would be molested in the environs of her apartment complex. When I asked her whether the neighbours' comment on her movements, she scoffed, saying that it was none of their business and that she has as much a right to this space as them. In this statement, Malini displays both identities – the citizen of the community who is safe within it, even at two in the morning, and the neoliberal consumer, entitled to the space she has paid for, without question.

At their core, gated communities are precarious, resting uneasily on this tension between the individual consumer who has bought security and is thus, entitled to it, and the resident who is a citizen of a community, and whose cooperative behaviour is all but essential for there to be a community. This tension reflects a broader anxiety over how the globally-oriented consumer performs as a citizen with obligations to other members of the polity (Srivastava 2014; Lukose 2009). Suicides expose the cracks in these tensions between the dual identities of consumer and citizen. This can be seen in Tina's story about her (male) neighbour's suicide attempt. Before this neighbour attempted suicide, he phoned his father, who was in another city, and told him that he was going to kill himself. The

father called the security guard of their gated community, entreating him to help. Although this guard had the keys to all the apartments, he experienced a crisis of identities – as 'a protector' he had to intervene, as an employee he could not just enter the employer-resident's apartment uninvited. The guard asked several neighbours to come with him, hoping that they would give his social norm violating entry into the neighbour's house legitimacy, but they refused. Tina, who lived in the floor above and was not an immediate neighbour, was his last resort. They arrived just in time to save the neighbour, their desperate race to help him demonstrating how this paralysis, as identities and responsibilities are negotiated, can have devastating consequences. When Tina recounted this story to me, she told me that her neighbours thought "she was crazy" to help and wondered why she was risking being "involved with the police" for a man she barely knew and disliked. The neighbours, thus, framed the issue as consumers who were in no way responsible for other consumers' behaviours, particularly disruptive ones like the man who attempted suicide. Tina, on the other hand, asserted the identity of the citizen-community member, saying "I couldn't just let someone die," pointing to a moral understanding of the obligations between neighbours.

The women with whom I interacted, thus, inhabited precarious social and economic identities and much of their gendered experiences revolves around managing these instabilities and paradoxes. Their quests to live 'good lives' were increasingly about stopping the erosion of regional and caste identities, maintaining middle-class status in a new system of earning and consuming as well as negotiating through the moral contradictions inherent in being both a consumer and a citizen. These struggles could be captured under the umbrella of the modern versus traditional binary, but doing so risks perpetuating the myth that the modern and the traditional are oppositional choices that women can and have to choose between. Instead, I found it more productive to think of

these struggles as exposing the competing moralities that add value to women's lives and how none of these ethical frames can fully account for a rapidly changing set of socio-economic circumstances. This is not to deny women agency, but to see agency as occurring not just in women's navigation of 'modern' or 'traditional' consumer choices but in how they reconceptualise and knit together moral narratives to find value in their lives. It is against this backdrop of patchwork and shifting moralities that women told me their suicide stories of women 'like them.'

3.4 Navigating the Field

I had noticed Chandan Apartments long before I ever entered it. Composed of two cream-coloured towers, separated by a small central courtyard of a perpetually green lawn and manicured *Ashoka* trees, from the road it appeared like any one of the standard gated communities that flourish in Gurgaon. What set it apart were the colourful sarees that were hung out to dry from several of its balconies. They would billow out in the breeze, streaks of bright colour across an otherwise beige cityscape of sun-bleached residential towers and scraggly brush. This oddity made the complex appear to not just be 'lived in' but living.[18]

The first time I visited Chandan Apartments it was during the monsoon and deep puddles littered the gated community. I had pulled up my salwar as I traversed in, unwilling to get wet and dirty. After being introduced to several women in the courtyard, and telling them about my research, there was an awkward silence. Mrs Bhardwaj broke it by pointing to my legs, "Your salwar" she gestured. Looking down I could see that one leg was about an inch higher than the other. I quickly bent down to adjust it. As I did, Reema interjected;

[18] This was an oddity, as many RWAs expressly forbid the drying of laundry that is visible from the roadside.

"You've painted your toenails *black*!" What followed was a dissection of my looks; the women asked me a litany of questions such as when I last had a pedicure, why I wore glasses and not contacts, whether I knew that laser eye surgery was available. I found the experience demeaning, the slew of questions all cutting me down. Yet I felt obligated to stay and answer them with self-deprecating humour. These women could have potentially told me suicide stories after all, and I needed their cooperation. Moreover, it appeared that with each question, the women surrounding me gained confidence and were becoming more comfortable with my presence.

As Anand (2017) comments: "Fieldwork has been frequently and justly criticized for the unequal relationship between the ethnographer and her all-too-often marginalized subjects." Power operates in complex flows within the ethnographic field, the ethnographer decides whom to speak to, how they are heard and how they are depicted. Yet while in the field, the ethnographer is also at the mercy of those around them; whether they choose to interact with her, how they treat her and what they share with her. For me, these power flows were vividly felt in experiences such as my introduction to the women of Chandan Apartments. This section is an examination of those flows of power that I registered, a reflection on how they shifted my positionality within the field and an accounting for what got included in this dissertation and what was left out. Such an examination is by its very nature incomplete, resting on my ability to register power flows, including those that I may have inadvertently set in motion, and to be aware of what is missing. It is, thus, a partial accounting of how my thesis took its current shape.

My introduction to the women of Chandan Apartments, as demeaning as it was, set the tone of the rest of our interactions. These women had configured me as a "daughter"-figure, on the edge of settling down, needing guidance and advice on how to be an adult

Indian woman; adulthood being a status, as Mrs Garg told me, only given to those who are married. Other women, though much more kindly, also positioned me as a figure in transition – moving from girlhood to adulthood, a status they occupied, even if they were younger than me, by virtue of being married. Our interactions were for them exercises in giving me advice on how to be a 'respectable' Indian woman, rather than 'interviews' or 'participant observation.' For them, there was no 'field.'

I did not attempt to change this positionality and in fact played into it. Eager to establish that I was a 'respectable' person who they could talk to, I would mention that I was living with my mother, showing that I was similarly enmeshed in a network of family ties, and inadvertently positioning myself as a daughter. Questions on their mothers' and daughters' gendered experiences and how it compared to their own, did nothing to contradict women's assumptions about me needing advice. Yet I found this positioning problematic and claustrophobic. Having decided that I was a 'daughter-like' figure, women would often decide that I needed to be protected, as can be seen by Aarti's concern over how my collecting narratives about suicide 'was affecting' me. Later conversations with Aarti had her referring to Hindu ideas of death as polluting, particularly 'bad deaths' like suicide. For me, young in her eyes and moreover at 'childbearing' age, to study this subject was inappropriate, and she worried how it was 'staining' me, darkening my mind and closing off opportunities for life-making (understood to be literally the act of reproduction in the socially acceptable context of marriage). As such talking about bad deaths was inappropriate for them and even those women who were not aware that I was explicitly looking at suicide would censor themselves, telling me that they did not want 'to disturb' me. In such encounters, the emotions and sentiments projected by me became a minefield, if I appeared too shocked or upset, the women would cut herself off, but if I was not 'affected' I would be dismissed as insensitive and uninterested, and the conversation would

grind to a halt. It was all but impossible to control for this, the interpretation of my emotions not just determined by what I thought I was projecting but also by how it was interpreted by the woman I was interacting with. With mixed success, I would reassure them that I had worked on gender issues, and they did not have to 'protect' me.

My attempts to reassure women, took place in a context where I felt their efforts to 'protect' me by effectively limiting what I could hear, do or think about, were hypocritical. Through the course of my fieldwork, I found that so many of them carried the "poisonous knowledge" of atrocities committed to them and the women in their lives (Das 2006). Although I admired how they excavated worth, meaning and pleasure in their lives with resilience and determination, it did not escape my notice that they were locked in a daily struggle against indignities, restrictions and limits that belittled them and obstructed them from living the lives they wanted. Moving amongst them I was subject to the similar daily constrictions and indignities, sometimes, as with my introduction to the residents of Chandan Apartments, at the hands of these women themselves. In this context, I could not appreciate their purported desire to 'protect' me from conducting the research I wanted to do, seeing it as just another way women are stopped from pursuing the lives they wanted, while not being protected from the conditions that oppress and limit them.

In hindsight, I have chosen to understand Aarti's and other women's reservations on the topic of my research as a culturally coded concern around the mental and emotional toll collecting stories of suicide takes, articulated in a manner that prioritises the woman's prospective family rather than the woman herself. In that light, it was akin to concerns of 'vicarious trauma' or 'compassion fatigue.' Both share the belief that empathy and compassion are "finite resources" and that the trauma of one person can "infect" another (Backe 2018, 474). What Aarti did not know, and I did not either until I embarked on my

research, was that most of the suicide narratives I heard were attempts at moving on from the suicide, often at the cost of dehumanising the dead woman. Chua (2014) notes that the act of telling second-hand suicide stories:

> fails to account for the complex local worlds of individual and interpersonal suffering… By reducing the act of suicide to one (or several) discrete social ills, speculative tales and rumors fracture the realm of everyday social life and suffering into discrete attributes
>
> 105

Both while in the field and in the writing of this dissertation, I gravitated away from the stories that were blatant reductions of the dead women and their deaths. Most of these were told by suicide prevention professionals, but even the most empathetic woman would have moments where she clearly distanced herself from the woman whose stories she was telling. While such moments were not the dismissive reductions of the dead woman that I would otherwise observe, they did work to limit the traumatic impact of the suicide story. They were also moments of respite for me as a researcher, as they revealed that the dead woman and the woman telling her story were different entities, providing me with a reminder that I was hearing about the dead woman through the narrator's subjectivity and that the suicide story was not so much about what happened, but how the woman telling the story lived with the suicide of a woman like her.

Thus, while stories of suicides certainly weighed on me during my fieldwork, I was not particularly affected by the vicarious trauma from them.[19] Instead, while I was in the field, my emotions were primarily those of frustration. I would be annoyed at how some suicide prevention professionals cruelly and unjustly tried to underplay the trauma of their

[19] Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the process of writing this thesis. During this time, the weight of thinking about and considering these stories was overwhelming, particularly as I was doing so during the COVID-19 pandemic.

suicide stories by reducing and demeaning the dead woman. This frustration was echoed by the women telling me suicide stories, and they would often share their anger at being overlooked and dismissed. It was a constant presence when I conducted this research, struggling to prove my 'respectability,' and contending with the fact that I was always being positioned as a 'daughter-like' figure in need of guidance. I understood, of course, that, in a context where every act is scrutinised for respectability, if not by the woman's family members and neighbours, then by herself, it was easier for women to take part in a daughter-like figure's 'school project,' than a full-fledged study. Yet at the same time, I felt that my sense of self was getting lost in the daily grind of fieldwork and that in the interests of getting women to cooperate with me I had compromised too much of what makes me who I am.

The reverberations of these angers bounced off each other, to create a state of exhausting fury over women (dead, living, myself) who are not allowed to be. Evocative ethnography as methodology became a way to cut through this senseless noise. Asking women how they thought the characters in their stories felt or whether they liked them, instantly demanded that they empathise with the dead woman or at the very least consider her as a being with whom they were in a relationship with. While some resisted this, others went down this path with me. Similarly, asking myself to centre how the women telling these stories were feeling, engendered emotions of empathy from me, allowing me to inquire about why they were making certain narrative choices, instead of blindly reacting to them. The fact that I was partaking in women's emotions as they discussed their issues, allowed for a greater level of intimacy to develop between us and I found that slowly they were not only telling me more, but that some of them were seeing me as more than a figure seeking advice.

My falling in this position of a 'daughter-like' figure, is because in many ways I occupied similar demographic characteristics as the women I met– we were all middle-class women who lived in NCR. While I had my life abroad, they too had lived globalised existences; all of them had family members who had 'settled' abroad and were familiar with the idea of going abroad for higher education. Most had gone abroad for summer vacations and in a few cases, had worked or studied abroad themselves. As such I had expected that I would not encounter much resistance in the field, as I was, after all, one of them.

Instead, I was surprised and discomfited by the amount of suspicion I received. In multiple instances, I would schedule an interview and meet with a woman, only to be subjected to a battery of questions about where I was from, who was my family and what did they do? This litany of questions would leave little room for my inquiries, and I found myself often being defensive. Soon I realised that their questions sprang from concerns around caste. In the Indian middle class, there is a silence around caste, and asking out-right someone's caste is taboo, a feature that has allowed caste to be underplayed as an outdated holdover of 'traditional' Indian social life (Jodhka 2015). Nonetheless, caste prejudice is highly active and is a major driver in whom people choose to work and socialise with (Jodhka 2015). In my case, my last name does not reveal my caste identity and women were anxious to establish it before interacting with me further. When I realised this, I would tell them my father is a Punjabi Brahmin. As soon as I revealed this caste identity, the questions would stop, and they would be more forthcoming and willing to engage with me.

I, on the other hand, would dread these encounters and found myself avoiding women who interrogated me on caste. I do not identify either as a Brahmin or Punjabi, but I feared revealing my inter-caste identity, something that I am quite comfortable with,

would lead to these women refusing to talk to me. This was based on an incident at Chandan Apartments where I asked a few of the women if I could speak to them individually. Instead of answering, one of them commented on my last name, and I explained that I was inter-caste and that my grandfather had specifically chosen a last name that does not reveal our caste. Although the rest of our interaction went by politely, she made it clear that she was not interested in further contact. On another occasion, when I observed that a woman and my maternal grandfather shared the same last name, and hence, caste background, she noted that my parents must have had a love marriage. She then assured me that she had nothing against love marriages, and that 'even' some of her family members had such marriages. She mused that love marriages were a "new trend," but it seemed like some of them worked, although she preferred arranged marriages. I was bemused, not sure whether to tell her that not only did my parents have a love marriage, but so did my grandparents in the early 1950s. Afterwards, the conversation was stilted, and I chose not to contact this woman again.

By the end of my fieldwork, I found most of the women with whom I had meaningful, repeated interactions with were ones who while unquestionably privileged, did not fit neatly into the upper-caste Hindu orthodoxy. Either they were the products of, or were themselves in, inter-caste relationships, had caste-identities that are not typically thought of as upper-caste, were not Hindu or primarily identified with other group identities – such as being from a military family, a leftist, or a migrant family. Some of these women were perplexing hybrids – such as Tina, the Jat woman who defies gender norms around 'modesty' in her clothing, ways of speaking and unabashed pursuit of the 'good life' yet is married to a man who is in the RSS. Yet it was preciously this type of fractured identity that made it possible for us to interact.

I regret that I did not interact with any Muslim, Christian or Scheduled Caste women. This was not intentional, but my primary means of finding women was through snowball sampling, which in turn was determined by whom my gatekeepers socialised with. A recent Pew Center Report has found that while Indians' value religious tolerance they also live religiously segregated lives, particularly Hindus (Evans and Sahgal June 29 2021). The gated community also fosters insular lives and with their conflation of Indian identity and upper-caste Hinduism they are hardly welcoming spaces for those who do not fit these identities (Srivastava 2014).[20] In Chandan Apartments, for instance, although there were Muslims and Christians, none of my gatekeepers felt that they knew them well enough to introduce me to them.[21] They, understandably, did not attend the Hindu festival celebrations where so many of my friendships were struck up. Thus, it is not surprising, during my fieldwork, I came across very few non-Hindu women, though I could have tried harder to reach them by using a different set of gatekeepers. My concern with omitting these voices is not just one of diversity and representation, but also a recognition that this absence counts towards the systematic reshaping of middle-class Indian life as upper caste Hindu.

My ethnography was also shaped at the spatial and temporal level, where everyday movements shaped my interactions with women. Gal (2002) argues that the binaries of private and public are reproduced in ever smaller spaces – repeated in micro fractals. This

[20] Such residential segregation has deep roots in India – whether through the caste-based segregation enshrined in *vastu* architectural conceptualisations of the city, or the colonial-era British practice of dividing cities into 'white' and 'black' (native) divisions (Dupont 2016) Nonetheless, such divisions have never been rigid, and even in the most exclusive of gated communities there is an intermingling of lower caste, religiously diverse, service and security staff with upper-caste Hindu residents. As such spatial arrangements do not as much divide the population, as they privilege one group over the other, and in the process, make interactions on an equal social plane all but impossible.

[21] The taboo around talking about caste made it difficult for me to ask about Scheduled Caste women. The few times I was able to ask a gatekeeper, they had the same issue – there were women who they thought may be scheduled caste but did not know how to ask their caste identity. I did interview some of these women but was never able to confirm their caste identities.

pattern of micro-fractals can be seen in the gated community, which is a private space set against the public setting of the city. Within the gated community the binary of public and private is repeated; with the public spaces of parks, lobbies and gyms juxtaposed against the private residential apartments. Similarly, within the apartment, the open-planned public spaces of the living and dining rooms were placed against the private spaces of bedrooms. For me, each transition into a new binary of public and private, reflected closer relations with the woman with whom I was interacting.

My early interactions with women would start in the living room. These rooms were the public centre of the home; impeccably furnished, they were a point of pride, particularly those who lived in gated communities, who would point to the new floor tiles, paint schemes, and soft furnishings. These were not necessarily welcoming spaces, intended more to display social status than to be spaces of comfort and ease. The ones in gated communities were regularly renovated to reflect the latest decoration trends. They would appear quite generic, and I would find myself exclaiming "oh it looks like a hotel lobby," which would be received as a compliment. Photos of family members were normally missing and 'decorations' tended to be feng shui-dictated crystals, bamboo plants and wind chimes. Most women were uncomfortable with this space, clearly not used to occupying this area, constantly adjusting cushions and chairs, and our interactions would be stilted.

For other women, however, the living room was very much part of their habitat. Following standard international architectural trends, most apartments within gated communities were open-planned, and their residents had to invest heavily in an exhaust system that could make these spaces compatible with the daily reality of Indian cooking. In this layout, the living room functioned as a watch tower of sorts, the furniture strategically positioned so that the woman could survey the rest of the house. During our

interviews, rather than looking at me, they would often be staring straight into the kitchen where the part-time maids would be cleaning and cooking. If they had young children in the house, the children would normally be either watching TV or playing video games, their screens very much within their mother's or grandmother's sight. Hence these initial conversations were distracted, with the woman's attention divided. These discussions would be conducted in fragmented Hindi and English, depending on the proximity of the maid and the sensitivity of the topic being discussed. As such we would use language to construct privacy within this relatively public space.

When women would invite me to talk to them in their bedrooms, I would know that they were comfortable with me, and it was in this space where we had the most productive conversations. The bedroom specifically became a space which, unlike the formality of the living room, with their beautiful, if generic, furnishings, were often highly personalised. Preeti, for instance, had a photo collage of her friends on one wall, while another had a measuring stick marking her son's height. Tina had her magazines stacked high on her bedside, while Shruti had the notes for her thesis and laptop in this room. It was in this space, that women were able to share suicide stories with me and reveal their vulnerabilities. For instance, it was in the bedroom that Shruti told me about her worry that she was somehow responsible for her former maid's suicide, where Preeti discussed her deep ambivalence to the prospect of going back to work now that she was a mother, and where Malini discussed her struggles to get over a former relationship.

I would try to accompany women during the day. Normally this would be to the mall where women were happy to talk to me, a break from the desultory business of scrolling through WhatsApp messages or praying. Others would strategically schedule meetings with me when they had the least to do; normally during the late mornings, after

the chores were done but before the afternoon soaps. I realised that in these interactions, talking to me was “timepass” for these women, a relatively meaningless activity, whose primary benefit is that it staves of boredom (Jeffrey 2017). Family members, particularly children, were often fleeting presences in these interactions, normally just stopping to say hello and exchange pleasantries before retreating to their own spaces. With a few women, however, I came to know their families quite well and would end up having in-depth conversations with them as well. The setting of these conversations mattered, when they happened in the semi-public spaces of the living room the woman would often be distracted, continually getting up to make tea or get snacks. If, however, I was talking to the woman and her family in the bedroom the woman would hold court, taking control over the conversation.

In this recounting of the affective and the spatial and temporal interactions I had with women, my status as an insider both allowed certain experiences to happen and prevented others. Regardless, this status has shaped how I understood and encountered the ‘field.’ By situating the women with whom I interacted, and accounting for my own positionality in the field, this chapter provides a backdrop for the rest of this dissertation. It outlines what I understand to be an evocative ethnography of suicide, explaining both my methodological decisions, positionality, and my encounters in the field. Moreover, it introduces the women who told me suicide stories, providing context to their struggles in a rapidly changing India. It is against background that I understand the process of narrating a suicide story can act as a way in which to reflect on and critique women’s gendered experiences.

Chapter 4: Recalling the Suicide: Affective Storytelling and the Ethics of Gender

In the aftermath of the suicide, women's deaths live on in the incomplete and fragmentary stories told by their neighbours, friends and relatives. Such stories do not just account for the dead woman's death but imagine and mitigate it. This chapter examines how three middle-class women tell the stories of suicides and deaths that may be suicides committed by women like them. Women whose narratives are discussed in this chapter have witnessed parts of the events that they narrate, which they string together with the second-hand testimony they have come across about the woman and her death as well as their own lived experiences. As Chawla (2014) notes, such oral stories "come into being in the telling," performed not just for but "alongside" the audience, each repetition unfolding new affective, subjective and material dimensions (55-56). As such these tales are never quite complete, always in the process of 'becoming' and some are more fragmentary than others. The very incompleteness of these narratives means that they are

> an ethnographic space [which] can reveal details about specific times and places, specific ways people think about themselves as entities in relation to others, and particular human interactions that defy spectra of separation and togetherness, agency and constraint.
>
> Pinto 2014, 6

While ethnographically rich, the act of pinning these stories to paper is a reductive and violent act, freezing in time what is constantly shifting and evolving. To partially mitigate this, I have placed these stories in dialogue, not only with each other but also with the narrators' biographies, which, in turn, are based on the piecemeal details that I gathered about them through the course of my fieldwork. In juxtaposing their stories of suicides and their lives against each other, I demonstrate how the plurality of affects around gender, marriage and class are experienced, sensed and felt by the women I interacted with and how this, in turn, shapes their understandings of why the women in their stories died.

In this chapter, my focus is specifically on how emotions, sentiments and sensations drive these narratives or are absent from them. In doing so, I look at how the affective sentiments within the stories are mirrored in the experiences of the woman narrating it. I argue that by examining the affective within these suicide stories, access can be gained to a wider debate on how women think about, recognise and understand the worthwhileness of their lives. Taking Brennan's (2015) observation "that passions and affects are themselves judgments" as a point of departure, I argue that in telling these suicide stories, women are formulating a moral response to prevailing cultural narratives related to gender relations, marriage and family (5). As such, their storytelling choices with regards to the affective, allows these women to make ethical claims on society; interrogating the hegemonic norms that position women at the lower end of the gender hierarchy, with the value of their lives indexed to how well they serve their families. As narratives of worth, these suicide stories raise the question of who, ultimately, assigns worth to a life and what are the ethical ramifications of this? In such a critique of power, it needs to be noted that both the narrators of these suicide stories and I, as the author of this work, are operating from positions of privilege, able to determine which ideologies of worth are engaged with and which are dispensed with. Yet, such power is undercut by the very nature of the stories being discussed; these women are telling tales about women who have decided that their lives are not worth living and both they and I are responding to declaration.

At the heart of these ethical claims, is a response to suffering and an articulation of whose suffering can be acknowledged and whose can be ignored. In this regard, I found that storytelling choices with regards to the affective were able to either contain and reduce the impact of the suicide or use it to critique and subvert prevailing social narratives. This chapter starts with the suicide stories told by two women who are at opposite ends of this

continuum: on one hand, there is Kanchan who tries to minimise emotions in her retelling of her neighbour's suicide and on the other hand, there is Shruti who uses empathetic retellings to vividly narrate the suicide of her neighbour. I follow these cases with a discussion of the storytelling of a third woman, Anita, who stands outside this continuum, as she refuses to categorise the ambiguous deaths of the women she recounts as suicides. My selection of these women was determined by whether I had enough awareness of their lives to draw parallels between them and the types of suicide stories they told. Coincidentally, I have a range of voices not just in types of suicide stories told but also in terms of life stages, economic trajectories and types of marriages. Kanchan is in her thirties and a newly married working mother who is in a forced marriage; she is, also, optimistic about her families' economic outlook. Shruti, in contrast, is not as optimistic, but believes that they will get by. In her forties, she is also a working mother to two school-going children. Her marriage was arranged but functions as a companionate marriage. Anita is the oldest woman discussed in this chapter and is in her fifties. She is in a love marriage and is the mother of a son in his twenties. She was also the most pessimistic about the family's economic future.

4.1 Truncated Emotions and the Non-Empathetic Suicide Tale

During my fieldwork, I would often come across descriptions of suicide that were simple, short, vague sentences. People would make statements like "She walked into the lake," "She jumped in a well," "She was upset and –." When I would inquire why the person committed suicide, they would simply shrug and say that they could not say or they would speculate that there was, in their words, "something wrong with the person's family background' or their "mental capacity." These reasons, the dearth of details, and the

apparent lack of emotion around the suicide was used to rarefy the suicide and box it in the category of the exceptional, the strange and the rare, thereby allowing it to remain unknown and irrelevant.

As discussed earlier, the silencing of women's voices in recounting their suffering has an entrenched record in Indian history (Das 2006; Spivak 1988). By paradoxically acknowledging gendered suffering, but omitting women's own accounts of their suffering, such suffering has been relegated to the domain of the private and the intimate. When women's suffering does, undeniably, come into the public eye, as it does in the case of suicide, it is associated with a loss of status for the family and the community, and those left behind end up working to limit its impact (Chua 2014). The truncated suicide stories I was told work to delegitimise both the suffering experienced by the woman, and the woman herself. By refusing to acknowledge any but the most basic of facts in these stories, the narrator can bypass the task of imbuing the two-dimensional character of the dead woman with motivations, emotions and socially recognisable experiences of suffering. Furthermore, when pressed regarding the motivation of the woman committing suicide, explanations of "bad families" or "mental capacity" served only to characterise the woman as deviant and different, her story unable to be scaled to the broader experience of women in India.

Kanchan's story of her neighbour who committed suicide, attempts to be such a matter-of-fact suicide narrative, yet she ends up slipping in her retelling and rather than suppressing the affective undercurrents of her story, she becomes emotional. In the process, her suicide story shows that far from being exceptional but irrelevant acts, suicides disturbed the women narrating them and they had to work hard to limit its potentiality for destabilising the ideas around social worth which they ascribed to. When Kanchan narrated

her suicide story she had been married for just over a year and had a newborn daughter. Her marriage was fraught as Kanchan had not wished to wed, and was earning significantly more than her husband, who had expected her to quit her job once the child was born. Such struggles over women's working outside the home are not unusual, as demonstrated by the rich literature showing how working women are viewed with suspicion (Donner 2008; Twamley 2014; Radhakrishnan 2011; Bhandari 2020). In Kanchan's case, her working outside the home led to accusations from her husband that she was not properly performing her 'duties' of caregiving as a new mother. Furthermore, Kanchan was concerned that since she earned so much more than her husband, she would be understood to be emasculating him and undermining his authority. Yet, Kanchan hoped that her job would cement the family's rise to middle-class status and she would light up as she discussed her dreams to obtain her status-enhancing commodities such as privatised schooling for her newborn daughter. Such commodities would enable her daughter to live a "good life," which she defined not just in terms of material well-being, but as a life where the daughter was acknowledged and respected. As Kanchan discussed these dreams, her sentiments of determination and resolve to create such a life for her daughter were vividly communicated. Her use of discourses on aspiration and class mobility not only justified her continuing to work, but also infused her life as a working mother with meaning and value.

Kanchan has herself lived through this story of class mobility and aspiration, having transitioned from the lower rungs of middle-class status to being what she considered to be solidly middle-class. She was born in a former resettlement colony which underwent gentrification during her childhood. Resettlement colonies are planned spaces where residents of razed *jhuggi-jhopdi* clusters and unauthorised slums are moved to once they are evicted (Bhan 2013). These spaces tend to be composed of migrants who have land titles but not the right to either sell or rent their land (Bhan 2013). There is often a lag

between when a resettlement colony is settled and when it is provided civic services and transportation connectivity to the rest of the city; they are as such often poverty traps, the residents hemmed into these spaces with little opportunities for mobility. By the time Kanchan lived in her neighbourhood, however, the rapidly expanding city had enveloped it, increasing both property prices and density as landowners informally rented, sold and rebuilt their houses. This gentrification benefitted her family, as her father is in the building trade and was able to find work through the rapid expansion of their neighbourhood. Nonetheless, Kanchan and her natal family struggled with economic and social insecurity due to her mother's ill health, and she recounts how her education was disrupted by her having to leave school for extended periods as there was no one at home to take care of her mother and younger siblings. Nonetheless, Kanchan persisted with her education, and she was able to get a master's degree, the first in her family to do so. This success has shaped her expectations that if she is able to continue with her job, despite her husband's objections and the turmoil in the marriage, she will be able to achieve her dreams for her daughter having a similar rise in class status.

Kanchan describes her neighbourhood as a series of thin apartment buildings, four or five stories high, all crammed together, and separated by narrow alleyways which can accommodate a motorcycle, but not a car. Her suicide story is set in this neighbourhood. In it her neighbour, a married woman, sets herself on fire. She then comes out to the balcony crying for help. The neighbours were unable to rescue her, as the newly constructed apartment buildings with their separate staircases were too difficult to navigate in time to save her. They were, thus, forced into being bystanders, helplessly watching as she burned to death. Kanchan's narrative ends with her saying about the suicide: "I don't know. The whole neighbourhood saw it happen, but I was scared, and I didn't want to know."

Initially, Kanchan attempted to give short descriptions of the suicide, merely saying her neighbour set herself on fire, before elaborating when questioned further.[22] For most of her narrative she stuck to the material facts of the suicide, focusing on the mechanics of it – where it happened, what type of oil was used, even the fact that the woman was South Indian, putting her at odds with her North Indian neighbours. By reciting these material facts, she highlights the particular of the suicide, thereby distancing herself from it. Nonetheless, Kanchan assumed that she knows the motives and the emotional state of the woman involved – saying with certainty that the woman attempted suicide due to an issue in her marriage and that she "did it out of anger." This suggests that despite all her attempts to distance herself from the suicide, Kanchan can still tap into the affective aspects of the woman's situation, and through them link the suicide to her own concerns around marriage. Kanchan uses the term "husband-wife *ke beech mein baath thi"* or 'a matter between the husband and the wife' to refer to the issue of the woman's marriage. Such a phrasing enshrouds the woman's motivations for the suicide within the intimacy and privacy of the marriage, unable to be accessed by outsiders. By rendering it unknowable, Kanchan, as the narrator, can divert the story from looking too closely at the parallels between her marriage and the dead woman's.

Instead, in Kanchan's retelling the emotion that drives the story is the woman's intense anger, which she describes as instigating the suicide. By highlighting this emotion, her story works to portray the death as lacking any intention on the woman's part and her agency is denied; in her anger, the woman has lost control, unable to realise the consequences of her actions until it is too late. Nor is anyone to blame for her death: the

[22] Self-immolation remains a highly gendered way of death, with it typically being Indian women who use it to commit suicides, rather than Indian men (NCRB 2021; Kanchan, Menon and Menezes 2009). Women are also more likely to perish in accidental deaths caused by burn injuries. Women's deaths by immolation are usually associated with marital disputes and dowry deaths (Kanchan, Menon and Menezes 2009; Bhate-Deosthali and Lingam 2016).

husband is physically not present, other family members are not mentioned, the neighbours are helpless, and Kanchan passes no moral judgement on the woman for attempting suicide as it was a "thoughtless" act, borne out of anger. The lack of a culpable perpetrator leads to the suicide being portrayed as more an accidental death than an intentional killing. As such it emerges as a random, unfortunate occurrence, which effectively limits its scope as a critique of the collective social sphere.

Nonetheless, this short fragment about the woman and her death haunts Kanchan. The emotion of fear is infused within her narrative. In the story, the woman is afraid of what she's done when she sets herself on fire, and there's an unexpectedly vivid picture painted of her set alight, at the balcony, calling out for help. Yet in narrating the story the woman turns from being a subject of fear, into the object of fear, Kanchan conflates the vileness of the woman's death with the woman herself, and her fear of the suicide translates into her being terrified of the woman. Kanchan has an overwhelming desire to not witness or know more about the suicide, one that she carries through into our conversation; getting more and more upset as we spoke, particularly in response to my questions about the dead woman. In the end, she cut our conversation short by declaring "I don't know… I didn't want to know," an action which demonstrates her active need to leave the woman and her death in obscurity. The fact that the woman so visibly suffered is no longer a point of compassion, pity or sympathy; instead, her burning body transforms her into something that Kanchan must, quite literally, look away from.

As an object of fear, Kanchan is no longer able to recognise either the woman or her suffering. As Butler (2004) and Kapur (2015) argue the death of a dehumanised 'other' has little or no implications for society to wrestle with, allowing it to be shunted aside and moved on from. In this case, by reducing the woman to the status of a frightening being in

her story, Kanchan is neither able to mourn her nor consider the validity of her suffering and what may lie behind it. Yet there is still, implicitly, a moral response to her death. Even though the woman and Kanchan come from the same neighbourhood, the neighbour's suicide runs counter to Kanchan's experience of class mobility and hopes for further fulfilling the aspirations of a good life. Unlike the dead woman, Kanchan has chosen to, as she did in her childhood, persist, embracing the difficult conditions she found herself in. She is invested in both her marriage and her career, juggling the two, in the same manner as she juggled her natal family's care needs and her education. The woman's decision to commit suicide, even if it may have been spontaneous and thoughtless, not only scares Kanchan but also effectively lowers the woman's moral worth, understood as someone who did not choose to persist.

This lack of mourning means that the woman is never fully given the status of victim in Kanchan's suicide story; she comes across as foolish and out-of-control at best and at her worst, she appears like a character out of a tale of horror; a monstrous, terrifying woman. As such the story has neither an easily identifiable perpetrator nor a grievable victim. Instead, the emotions in the narration of the story are primarily limited to fear, and it is through this emotion that the suicide story's scope to comment on society is also curtailed. The horror of the suicide, thus, itself becomes a barrier to communication, one that Kanchan cannot overcome, even when she tries to tell me about it, years later. She is, therefore affected by the suicide, but rather than scaling this affect to make a moral critique of the social sphere, it alienates her, so much so that she is unable to articulate how she feels.

Given her own fraught marriage, it is all too easy to understand Kanchan's reluctance to examine the suicide too closely. Yet after she told me the suicide story, her

marriage was the topic she brought up. At this point she told me that her decision to stay in her job, despite her husband's disapproval, is not just to provide a better life for her daughter but also for her own sake. The job is good for her mental health, she explained, as it brings her peace to have something other than the home in her life. As such the career itself becomes a source of meaning and pleasure in her life, as opposed to being just an instrument to achieve her hopes for a 'good life' for her daughter. In highlighting the importance of work to her, Kanchan is subverting the cultural norm that persists in understanding women in terms of their family. In doing so, is Kanchan also making a subtle rejoinder to the suicide story she recounted? If in her story, the woman's reasons for setting herself on fire are based on a marriage that is emotionally-charged but private and inaccessible, then Kanchan, through her insistence on working outside the home, may be suggesting that by living a more public life, where she is understood to be more than whom she is married to, she can ward off whatever circumstances caused the woman to take such a drastic step. Yet Kanchan does not frame it as such, and she was reluctant to revisit the story in the rest of my interactions with her. Instead, the suicide story is a half-remembered, fear-filled fragment from her childhood, filled with unknowables that are not to be thought about or mourned for.

4.2 Subverting Narratives in the Empathetic Suicide Story

If Kanchan is reluctant to tell her suicide story, unwilling to delve on the emotions or recognise the woman and her suffering within it, then Shruti was eager to tell me about her neighbour's suicide, revisiting the story several times over the course of my fieldwork. These were long, ruminative tales imbued with a deep pathos that transformed the woman being discussed into someone vividly real. Through them, Shruti made the case that the

affective conditions around the neighbour's suicide are intimately familiar to middle-class, Indian women like her and that the possibility of suicide is all too understandable for them.

Over a decade after her unnamed neighbour's death, Shruti, her husband and their two teenage children still live in the apartment directly below her neighbour's. The neighbourhood they live in is known to be exclusive and upper-class; the home to politicians and celebrities, close to elite malls and upmarket private schools. However, the section that Shruti and her neighbour resided in consists of comparatively smaller two-bedroom apartments in multi-storied buildings that are mostly allocated to the employees of public sector companies like Shruti's neighbour or are rented out to middle-class professionals such as Shruti and her husband. The neighbour and Shruti shared the stairwell in their apartment complex. When the neighbour was alive, Shruti would hear her moving around upstairs and catch snatches of arguments. The two women were not particularly close, their interactions limited to exchanging greetings. This changed, however, once the neighbour became pregnant and they bonded over their children. As such Shruti was the most familiar with the woman whose suicide story she narrates than either of the other women discussed in this chapter.

In Shruti's narrative of her neighbour's suicide, the actual incident of the suicide is not the focus of the story. Instead, Shruti is more interested in the events that led up to the suicide. She told me that the woman raised eyebrows in the neighbourhood by entering a live-in relationship with a lower-caste man. Shruti admired her neighbour, citing her high level of professional success, and how she "knew what she wanted," in her romantic life, willing to defy social norms to achieve it, demonstrating, in the process, a level of individual agency that is emblematic of the 'modern' progressive self (Abeyasekera 2016). Eventually the neighbour married the man she was living with, and his mother and sister

also moved in. Soon after the couple's marriage turned sour, and Shruti would hear fights from the upstairs apartment. In retrospect, she suspects that these fights were physically as well as psychologically violent, with the neighbour receiving beatings and abuse. Her suspicions are founded on the fact that when the woman was cremated, there appeared to be bruises on her face. Shruti speculates that the husband and his family colluded against her neighbour, violently trying to reduce her to the dutiful wife and daughter-in-law living to serve her marital family, rather than acknowledging her professional successes. Shruti links this isolation and degradation to the traditional mother-in-law clashing with her progressive daughter-in-law. The neighbour threw out the husband and his family, but eventually took them back. Shortly after it became apparent that the neighbour was pregnant. From here the narrative takes a distinctively emotional turn – the neighbour loved her newborn daughter ferociously, telling Shruti that she "would not let one tear fall from her eye." Thus, when the neighbour committed suicide a few months after giving birth, it was sudden, unexpected and devastating.

Das (2007) reflects that the "poisonous knowledge" left in the wake of a violent event such as suicide is dealt through "the patient work of living with this new knowledge—*really knowing* not just by intellect but through the passions" (77). The work of "recovering the everyday" in the aftermath of suffering involves engaging with and shaping a future where the violence that prompted this suffering is either 'sealed' off, or it is acknowledged and recognised within larger social narratives (Das et al. 2001, 5). In Kanchan's case, she was reluctant to gain this knowledge around her neighbour's self-immolation, leading to her refusal to engage too closely with the suicide and shaping her narrative choices. The suicide, thus, remains an individuated event, with little to no context grounding it as Kanchan's story tries to 'seal' it away. For Shruti, though, it is these "passions" which guide the multiple retellings of her neighbour's suicide. Her stories delve on, to borrow

Das's word, the affective "tentacles" of the suicide, examining how they reach out to her, common strands of shared affects that bind the two women together despite their disparate situations (2007). Hence, in her stories around the neighbour and her suicide, Shruti is strongly empathetic with the neighbour, focused on depicting her affective state and scaling it up to comment on her experiences as a woman.

In Shruti's retellings of her neighbour's suicide, the lines between narrator and actor are blurred. It would often appear that she was not just a witness to the woman's suicide, but that she was feeling the same emotions that the neighbour had felt in the months before her death; she would fiercely glare to illustrate the neighbour's anger, her voice would choke when recounting the sadness of her death and there would be extended silences with downturned eyes to indicate the sense of futility that she believes this woman must have experienced. The concept of *rasa-bhava* can be used as a lens through which to understand the affective nature of Shruti's storytelling. In the tradition of *rasa-bhava* as outlined in the Sanskrit text *Natya Shastra*, the aim of performances, whether they be dance, music, theatre or storytelling, is to transport the audience into the affective reality being performed as opposed to the one inhabited (Schechner 2001; Hogan 2003; Jones 2010; Chakravorty 2009).[23] Performances are intrinsically relational – the meaning within them formed through the affective state of the audience, with the performer working to thin the walls between the recounting of a story to the actual experience of the emotions within the story. Thus, the performance is not just about conveying a series of facts and events, but primarily about creating and maintaining empathy between the audience and the performer (Hogan 2003). As such, *rasa bhava* operates against the Enlightenment-era assumption that

[23] It is impossible to state how intentional Shruti's use of the aesthetic of *rasa-bhava* was when narrating this story. Certainly, as a middle-class woman who consumes Bollywood and watches Indian TV sitcoms she has been exposed to the *rasa-bhava* aesthetic, as it is the dominant form of storytelling in these media. Thus, she may have considered it an appropriate way through which to convey the intense emotionality around the suicides she narrated, but how intentional this consideration was cannot be known as I did not ask.

emotions are contained within an individual, but instead is based on the idea that they flow between actors and objects to create an affective atmosphere that both encompasses and extends beyond the individual (Brennan 2015). In *rasa bhava* emotions are never fully realised until they are shared through social consumption and performances are not just in the control of the performer but shaped by audience reaction as well. I use the word consumption deliberately; *rasa* translates to 'juice' and the act of watching/listening to a performance is understood to be like the act of eating; emotions are taken into the body and sensually experienced, in the same manner that food is tasted and digested (Jones 2010; Schechner 2001).

In Shruti's case, the material facts around her neighbour's death would often be unclear, and she would caveat her stories by saying she did not know exactly what happened the night the neighbour died; just that she woke to the news that the police were outside and that the neighbour had been found dead, hanging from the fan in her bedroom. The frame of *rasa-bhava* explains away this apparent shortcoming; suggesting that Shruti's stories of the neighbour should be seen as an attempt to conceptualise how the woman who committed suicide must have *felt*, rather than to string together the sequence of events around her death. Thus, through a *rasa-bhava* lens, Shruti's emotionally-charged storytelling can be seen as a way through which she can access the 'passions' within the story, allowing her to arrive at a different type of knowledge than a simple awareness of the event. Meanwhile, the unknowability of the neighbour's death means that questions of agency and intentionality become irrelevant in Shruti's narrative; instead, the focus is on the affective and moral implications of the death.

This knowledge of how the neighbour felt is undeniably based on conjecture, with Shruti drawing on her own affective experiences to derive parallels between herself and her

neighbour. It is also highly relational; Shruti presented affects as if they are felt not just by the dead woman, but also by herself and the audience. As the listener, her storytelling required my active participation; it would not progress unless I demonstrated that I was on the same affective page as her – often through minute, micro-expressions that I could not fully sense, but would determine their existence through absence: if the correct emotional cue was not provided, Shruti would stop and ask me if I understood what she said, thereby reframing the story based on the cues I provided. Hence, as Shruti narrated the story, it appeared that Shruti and I were simultaneously partaking in similar sensations of sadness, confusion and exhaustion. Such a transmission of affects, particularly in research, is historically understood to be suspect and I worried that I was imposing my own feelings and views onto Shruti (Brennan 2015). Yet, this doubt does not account for the possibility of 'empathy' – the ability to recognise how another is feeling and join them in those feelings, thereby experiencing a social affective experience which is actively fostered by *rasa-bhava.* In any case, *rasa bhava* calls for the vivid portrayal of emotions, and Shruti's storytelling involved explicit declarations of what she was feeling such as "I was so shocked," or "I didn't know what to think." I am, thus, quite sure I knew how she felt.

Yet, the declarations of emotions were only part of Shruti's storytelling, which was broadly focused on experiencing the story affectively. One particularly vivid way in which Shruti did this was by suddenly switching the point of view from the third person to the second person, particularly at the more emotional parts of her narrative. For instance, she said the following about her neighbour:

> She married this guy thinking everything will be fine, and they will be together. But it happened otherwise. The guy had a support system. But for you [the neighbour] being with his family, even though you are living together, you felt left out. You feel there was no hope for you in this relationship…The guy has to side with the wife. If his mother and sister

were there, if he sides with his own family, then a woman would feel left out.

As the above quote shows, although Shruti starts by ascribing emotions to her neighbour (she thinks everything will be fine), she maintains a third-person voice. Her shift to the second person was abrupt and followed by a slowing down of her voice – by using the word 'you' she was not only reliving the emotions she speculates her neighbour must have felt, but also prompting me to partake in the same emotions, putting myself in the neighbour's place. The emotionality of her narrative peaks when she says, "you feel there is no hope for you in this relationship" and the pause (as shown by the ellipses) that follows is accompanied with her being noticeably sad, her eyes lowered and her face downcast. The above quote ends with her coming back to herself when she insists, that "the guy has to side with his wife." As a listener, I recognised that at this point she is no longer communicating what the neighbour felt but is commenting on the situation as herself. It is still emotional (Shruti appears angry and frustrated) but the emotions are Shruti's own, not a hybrid of the neighbour-Shruti-me. As the narrator, Shruti, thus, maintains multiple identities; that of the neighbour, herself as a bystander witness and herself as a narrator trying to convey an affective reality to her audience. Each of these identities has their own affective viewpoints and such retellings are, thus a chimaera of affects, a patchwork assembly made in coordination with a silent other (the dead woman), the speaking self (Shruti) and the listening, occasionally interjecting, audience member (me).

It is this potential for scaling the affective state so that it can encompass multiple perspectives in the *rasa-bhava* aesthetic tradition that prompts Hogan (2003) to call it not just a theory of aesthetics but also a theory of social ethics. He points to the central role empathy plays in *rasa-bhava* performances, and how the resulting collective social recognition of an affective reality prompts an examination of the society that allowed for

this reality to arise. For Shruti, the ethical impulse underpinning her story is clear: she is railing against the exploitative gender relations that she feels saps worth out of the lives of Indian women and were at the root of her neighbour's suicide. These are gender relations that make suicide not an extraordinary act but a temptation that, she insists, "all women struggle with at some point in their life." This infuses her retellings of the neighbour's story with a sense of urgency; the possibility of suicide is all too immediate when she narrates the neighbour's story. Thus, when Shruti would revisit the neighbour's suicide, she was not only trying to identify the places of convergence between herself and the neighbour, but also, perhaps more importantly, seeing if there were any points of divergence.

Shruti finds this point of simultaneous convergence and divergence when it comes to the *saas-bahu* (mother-in-law versus daughter-in-law) trope. In this trope, the warring mother-in-law and daughter-in-law fight fiercely within the family for the attention and affection of the son/husband. Although ostensibly about women, the *saas-bahu* narrative effectively cements male power – the son/husband is in a position of authority and the woman he favours gains power, while the woman he does not support suffers, courting the risk of loss in status, neglect, abandonment and, particularly in the daughter-in-law's case, violence, murder and suicide. This cultural trope has complicated affects around it; on the one hand, there is sympathy for the daughter-in-law and an acknowledgement that her dependence on a comparatively unknown family leaves her vulnerable, on the other hand, there's also sympathy for the mother-in-law and her fears of being outmanoeuvred in her home. Moreover, the trope is often depicted in TV comedies, memes and jokes, which play up the ridiculousness of the women's arguments and the helplessness of the husband, thus giving it (and the women) a whiff of the comic and ridiculous.[24] Nonetheless, it acts as a

[24] For an overview of the *saas-bahu* trope in Indian pop culture see Pande (2019)

shorthand, one that can be obliquely referred to conjure up a broader cultural understanding of women's subordinate and precarious roles within the marital family.

In her retellings of the neighbour's suicide, Shruti displays the most pathos when it comes to this trope, revisiting the woman's experiences with her mother-in-law on multiple occasions. Yet, she is not an uncritical consumer of this trope, and she represents it not just as a fight between two women for a man's attention but as primarily an issue of an older, poorer, lower caste mother-in-law imposing outdated patriarchal norms on the younger, educated, high caste daughter-in-law. In doing so, Shruti borrows heavily from her own life. Like the neighbour, Shruti has a mother-in-law who is comparatively under-educated, conservative and comes from a small town. Furthermore, Shruti shares the same progressive feminist urban values of autonomy and agency that she ascribes to her neighbour. In this framing of *saas-bahu* what it means to be middle class is being debated. As Säävälä (2010; 2006) notes, the Indian middle-class defines itself as morally separate and superior to rest of India and the 'West,' by demonstrating fidelity to 'Indian values.' Notably, being middle class is defined by negating the others as "the 'uncivilized' labouring class …. the 'morally corrupt' elite… as well as the phantasm of the 'degenerate' though attractive West" (Säävälä 2006, 394). Through Shruti's suicide story she suggests that as gender norms of the mother-in-law are regressive, spawning from "backward" thinking around gender relations, that place the daughter-in-law as subordinate to other family members.

Instead, in both her own case and her neighbour's, Shruti blames the mother-in-law for failing to "adjust" to her daughter-in-law. A common term in Indian-English, when Shruti uses the word 'adjust' she is not just referring to "making do" in a difficult situation but also finding "an ingenious way to get by" (Dyson 2017, 274). In the context of

relationships with affines, “adjust” is often used as a shorthand. The ability to adjust is seen as a quintessential Indian trait, and the daughter-in-law’s display of her willingness to adjust is crucial for her to win the support of the affines, a sign that she is dutiful and willing to adapt to the marital family’s values (Dyson 2017; Twamley 2014; Uberoi and Singh 2006). Several of the women with whom I interacted explained that by ‘giving in’ to the demands of the marital family, it is not just collisions between the daughter and mother-in-law that are avoided but that it allows the daughter-in-law to stake a moral high ground by showing her willingness to sacrifice her comfort for the marital family. She can then leverage this sacrifice to articulate her own desires at a later date and advocate that she is deserving of for their fulfilment. Adjusting, thus, can be understood to be a form of lateral agency, one through which there is not “self-negation or self-extension” but “self-suspension” (Berlant 2011, 116). The daughter-in-law is thus, understood to be operating in a temporal frame, where the act of deferring (in both senses of the word) opens up the possibility for fulfilment.

In this case, however, Shruti turns the question of who must adjust, who must defer and who must suspend desire on its head. It is the mother-in-law, she insists, who should have adjusted, showing herself to be able to adapt to her much better off daughter-in-law’s way of living. Key to this contention is the idea that the daughter-in-law, by being ‘better off,’ not only has more power and privilege than the mother-in-law, but that she is the basis of the family’s status. Shruti points out how, in the family, women are expected to suspend and sacrifice their careers to raise the family rather than the husband, as the husband generally earns more. She argues the same sacrificial acts should apply to the marital family when it is the woman who earns more. Shruti does not blame the mother-in-law for having what she considers to be “conservative” ideas of gender relations and her inability to understand that in her son’s family, the daughter-in-law is the head of the household. This

is only "natural" she comments, as it is "the way things were done." However, Shruti does blame the son for failing to educate his mother on the new set of gender relations that are operational in his marriage. She thinks he should have been sensitive to his wife's circumstances, and "take the side" of his wife. Instead, she fears he was not only unsupportive, but beat his wife for the perceived slights against his mother and himself. This is particularly problematic for Shruti, as she points out that the neighbour had little support from her own family, as her relationship with the husband, a lower caste man, had led her to be disowned. Thus, despite all her privilege and success, within the family, the neighbour was highly dependent on her husband.

The husband's behaviour is a point of departure between Shruti and her neighbour; unlike her neighbour, Shruti is emboldened to resist her mother-in-law as her husband supports her and shares her views on gender relations. Despite the traditional nature of their marriage – they had an arranged marriage, and they are from the same caste and community – Shruti is affectionate when speaking about her husband, openly declaring that she is in love with him. As multiple scholars (Bhandari 2020; Donner 2002 and 2016; Srinivasan 2020; Fuller and Narsimhan 2008) observe the dichotomy between arranged and love marriages is increasingly becoming problematic, as the rituals of courtship and the expectation of falling in love are becoming present in arranged marriages as well.[25] Shruti's marriage, while it has the social approval and acceptance given to arranged marriages, is in practice a romantic relationship based on the couple's shared progressive values, particularly with regards to gender. Their marriage, thus, could be said to be closer to a companionate marriage founded on principals of fairness, "emotional closeness" and aimed

[25] This is not always the case. For instance, Kanchan's marriage, while also an arranged marriage, did not have a courtship period. Meanwhile, Anita, who is discussed later in this chapter, is in a 'love marriage,' but does not make public displays of emotional closeness the way Shruti does. Donner's (2002; 2016) definition of "love marriage" as being initiated by the partners and not the parents, is more useful in determining the difference between love and arranged marriages than looking for 'love' or the lack of it.

at "individual fulfilment and satisfaction, rather than (or in addition to) social reproduction" (Wardlow and Hirsch 2006, 4). By emphasising the companionate nature of her marriage, Shruti can position herself as being not just an equal to her husband but also as an individual, who has both the autonomy and agency to desire and fulfil those desires (Donner 2016; Wardlow and Hirsch 2006). These are the very characteristics that Shruti admires about her neighbour and believes she demonstrated through her decision-making around her marriage. However, as both Donner (2016) and Twamley (2014) observe, companionate marriages rarely translate straightforwardly into gender equality in practice. In Shruti's case, she does most of the domestic work in the house but considers herself lucky in that her husband is supportive of her pursuing a career and is invested in the children's lives.

Shruti's mother-in-law threatens the companionate nature of their marriage. As Das (1976) observes in her study of Punjabi kinship, the procreative tie between the son and the mother is considered to be stronger than the tie between husband and wife, as the wife is considered to be replaceable (a man can have children with multiple women, but he can only have one biological mother). In this understanding of *saas-bahu,* the idea of romantic or companionate love between husband and wife is viewed with suspicion, and the wife is always understood to be an 'outsider' of the family, tolerated based on how useful she is to it (Das 1976). While the social mores of Punjabi kinship do not map neatly onto Shruti's lived experiences, this way of thinking about *saas-bahu* resonates in her narratives about her mother-in-law.[26] Shruti's mother-in-law does not live with them but when she visits, she blatantly favours her son and grandson at the expense of Shruti and her granddaughter.

[26] Most of the Punjabi women I met would also contest this understanding of gender and the family, regardless of whether they currently identify as daughter or mother-in-law. Yet, this is a framework of gender that they recognise and, like Shruti, explicitly position themselves against, suggesting that it does have broader purchase.

They are thus, positioned as 'outsiders,' in Shruti's case, by having married into the family, and in her daughter's case, by the expectation that she will eventually marry out of it. To contradict this framing of them as 'replaceable,' Shruti contends that as earning members of the family, she and her husband are equally at its core and she is not economically dependent on him, they are economically inter-dependent. Yet it is Shruti's status as a working woman that makes her vulnerable to implicit and explicit criticisms of her either not being a 'good wife' or a 'good mother' (Radhakrishnan 2011). Her mother-in-law problematises Shruti's and her daughter's participation in capitalist life. She insists on elaborately cooked breakfasts when Shruti is running late for work, she calls away the granddaughter to do domestic chores when she should be studying and makes snide remarks when Shruti takes work calls at home.

Yet, Shruti's descriptions of her mother-in-law's behaviour go beyond inconvenient interruptions to working life; instead, she draws attention to how it is characterised by a cruelty which, is itself unethical, designed to inflict unjustified suffering onto the female family members. This is particularly the case with Shruti's daughter. In Shruti's practice of motherhood she understands her daughter and son to be equally deserving of the family's care, attention and love. Yet, the mother-in-law positions the daughter in a separate and inferior category. Shruti uses the example of how the mother-in-law will lavish praise at the grandson, promising him his favourite foods, while pointedly ignoring her granddaughter who is sitting with them. The sting of the mother-in-law's disregard is made all the sharper by the intimacy between the two; the granddaughter shares a bed with the mother-in-law during her visits and does extra chores for her comfort. Shruti worries that her daughter may consciously or unconsciously internalise her mother-in-law's ideas of gender roles and consider herself to be subservient to the male members of the family, replicating a set of hostile and unjust gender relations.

By demonstrating that the male members of the household are favoured, and the females are inferior to them, Shruti's mother-in-law is thus able to create situations of indignity which Shruti and her daughter must endure. Shruti, is thus, reluctantly forced to 'adjust' and wait out her mother-in-law's visit. In this affective space of 'adjusting' and self-suspension, the everyday interactions of the family become fraught and volatile in the mother-in-law's presence. They take a toll on Shruti, who cycles through emotions of being appalled, offended and defeated when she recounts incidents from her mother-in-law's visits. Shruti applies her affective understanding of this situation to her neighbour, believing the devaluing affects that she struggles to 'adjust' to would be exacerbated in her neighbour's case. Shruti points out that the neighbour's mother-in-law lived with her and there was no "escape" from her. Moreover, she argues that the mother-in-law's lower caste status meant that she was working off a different caste-specific understanding of gender relations. Yet, above all, she emphasises that the neighbour's husband did not intervene on her behalf. In contrast, for Shruti, her negative experiences with her mother-in-law are allayed by the fact that her husband actively resists his mother's attempts, gently correcting her when she is being discriminatory and making it clear that Shruti's and their daughter's wishes are to be respected. He, thus, reconfirms the companionate nature of their marriage. In identifying this crucial material difference and its positive affective impact on her, Shruti can create distance between her neighbour and herself, even while empathising so closely with her.

Shruti does not limit the blame for the neighbour's death to the husband, instead she reserves her angriest attacks for the neighbour's natal family. She faults them for not supporting the neighbour before her death, stating that their disowning her just because she entered a live-in relationship and then married a lower caste man, are not valid reasons to stop supporting her. Instead, she suggests that had they been supportive, their daughter may

not have committed suicide and would have divorced her husband, being able to rely on her natal family as she negotiated the socially difficult process of divorce. Shruti was also angry that after the woman's death the natal family did not step in and fight for the neighbour's much-loved daughter's custody, allowing her to be reared by the husband. In the newspaper reports of the neighbour's death, the neighbour's brother does say that they will fight for the daughter's custody though Shruti dismisses this as just "acting for the cameras."[27] By focusing on the natal family, Shruti's narrative differs from typical depictions of the *saas-bahu* trope, where the blame for the wife's situation is apportioned between the husband and mother-in-law with other family members and the natal family, being rendered peripheral and immaterial. Furthermore, it demonstrates that Shruti does not think the neighbour could be an independent 'strong' individual who seeks her desires without the supportive scaffolding of family, whether marital or natal, around her. This dovetails with her broader point that a new social ethics is needed, in which the moral impulse is behind families supporting their female members and not subjecting them to restrictions.

The emotions of frustration, betrayal, unfairness and anger all 'stick' to the neighbour in Shruti's narrative (Ahmed 2004). This effectively fits the neighbour into another familiar cultural archetype, that of the abandoned woman. She is abandoned and betrayed by her husband who beats her in order to 'put her in her place' as the subservient wife. She is further abandoned by her natal family, who do not intervene to protect and support her or, after she dies, her child. Through this focus on the affective experience of her neighbour, Shruti can circumvent patriarchal cultural tropes like *saas-bahu*. Instead, by cultivating empathy for the neighbour's experiences, Shruti is able to create an alternative

[27] To protect both Shruti's and the neighbour's anonymity I am not citing these reports, as the neighbour's name and address is given within them.

narrative, one that instead of dictating the roles women play in families, asks the moral question of "How do families fail women?" Such a question is powerful, as it resonates strongly within a broader debate amongst the women I met. This debate is around the question of whether the *samskaar* is out of date, especially with regards to views on women, and needs to change.

Samskaar has multiple, context-dependent meanings which revolve around the idea of 'perfecting' or rites of passage marking the transition of one life stage to another (McGregor 1993, 970). Marrow, in her North Indian context, suggests that *samskaar* "is similar to what is meant by the concepts of psychological influence, mental imprint, or even education" (2019, 90). Amongst the women with whom I interacted, *samskaar* was shorthand for the norms, morals and values that they were nurturing and promoting in their families.[28] When a woman marries into a family, she is expected to adapt to their *samskaar* or their way of living, bringing up her children within the marital family's *samskaar*. Hence, a common objection voiced towards marriages across community-lines is that it would be difficult for the woman to adjust to a *samskaar* that is different from the one she was brought up in (Donner 2002). *Samskaar* exists across multiple levels, encountered and negotiated within the individual family, but also present within caste and regional spheres, as well as a generalisable *samskaar* that is invoked within discussions on what it means to be Indian. *Samskaar* is rooted in Hindu philosophy and is invoked by Hindu right-wing politicians who allege that the Indian and Hindu *samskaar* is under attack by the forces of

[28] *Samskaar* plays out in the sphere of the everyday: one woman, for instance, told me in her family, their *samskaar* is that guests are greeted with a glass of water, while her husband's family always ask guests what they would like to drink first. This may seem like an insignificant quirk of etiquette, but it is underlined by competing moralities – for the woman, the guests should not have to ask for something as basic as water, for her husband's family, the guest must be given the freedom to choose whether they want a drink.

"Westernization."[29] However, as the usage of this word by women across the political spectrum suggests, this argument that "Indian" culture is being assailed under conditions of globalisation, is increasingly being accepted as a matter of fact across middle-class society.

In narrating her neighbour's suicide story, Shruti illustrates that while she accepts that the broader Indian *samskaar* is changing, this is a good thing. She contends that the *samskaar* values women on how well they serve the male members of the family and is incapable of accounting for either women's autonomy or their successes outside the family. She is thus calling for a new social ethics of how families conduct themselves, one which explicitly recognises women as equals and worthy of care. In doing so, she frames traditional gender relations, which position women as subservient, as immoral, and by extension, considers them to be an inferior, outmoded *samskaar*. Instead, the *samskaar* Shruti embraces in her suicide story, is based on an social ethics where the neighbour's qualities of being "strong," "intelligent" and "good at her job" are compared favourably against her "illiterate" mother-in-law and "less intelligent" husband. As such, worth, in this social ethics, is indexed to merit, a hegemonic understanding of people's value that, as Upadhya (2007) points out, both papers over caste differences and urban-rural divides while reproducing class privilege.

Yet, meritocracy is also exclusionary in terms of gender, with institutions that are supposed to signal merit (such as the Indian Institutes of Technology) disproportionately favouring men and concepts of merit intimately tied to ideas of masculinity and how it is

[29] An example of Hindutva's usage of *samskaar*, is the nationwide promotion of "*garbha sanskar*," a series of medical and religious practices derived from interpretations of Hindu scriptures that are aimed at pregnant women. These practice, ostensibly work to create a 'perfect child' and disciplined Hindu citizen who can resist the temptations of the 'West' (Sur 2018).

recognised and performed (Subramanian 2019; Varma and Kapur 2010; Henry and Ferry 2017). Women are mostly excluded from meritocracy, their value instead judged by how well they serve their families, even if they have meritocratic successes outside the family. It is this facet of how gendered value is assigned to people that Shruti challenges and she insists that women should be valued based on meritocracy as well. By advocating for both men and women to be valued on the same scale, Shruti is thus, asserting gender equality in how worth is allocated to individuals.

Yet, it would be over-simplistic to assume that just because Shruti admires her neighbour's agency and autonomy, as well as rebels against how the practices of *saas-bahu* infringes on *her* autonomy and agency that she is advocating for the emergence of a modern, liberal, individual female self that finds worth through her participation in capitalist life. While this is certainly the case, Shruti's storytelling of her neighbour's suicide shows that she is sceptical about the individual's ability to flourish in a hostile environment. She's haunted by the idea that her neighbour committed suicide as it destabilises her understanding of the neighbour as a strong woman fighting against patriarchal structures and social norms to get what she wants. While she does suggest that the neighbour may have possibly been murdered by her husband, she caveats this by saying she has "no way to know what happened." In either case, both possibilities lead to her advocating not for a change in women's behaviour, but a social ethics that recognises and is responsive to women's affects, merits and ambitions. This advocacy rests on the idea that women's affects can be transmitted and partaken of within the social sphere of the family, leading to the creation of familial feelings, subjectivities and identities that incorporate women's experiences. Thus, she does not see a clash between the family and individual (female) autonomy but moves the woman to the core of the family; her affective reality incorporated within the family's. As such this ethics rests on a non-Western and non-

modern understanding of affects and their roles within families (Brennan 2015). It suggests that it is limiting to try to understand women's efforts to gain autonomy and exercise direct agency through the lens of individual versus society or traditional versus modern. Instead, Shruti's storytelling about suicides suggest that women want families themselves to change, evolving from pure social reproduction towards, not individual fulfilment, but something more akin to familial fulfilment, where women are seen as being at the core of the family.

4.3 Recounting the Ambivalent Death and the Masking of Suffering

Kanchan's narrative choices in recounting the suicide story are all the starker when contrasted to Shruti's storytelling. The two women share similar views on gender, *samskaar* and the need for society to recognise and accommodate women's affects, achievements and desires. On the other hand, Anita, an astrologer-housewife[30] in her late fifties, does not share these views, insisting that the change in *samskaar* has emboldened women that they are "taking advantage of" marital families, leading to divorces and broken homes. For her, the *samskaar* has been compromised to such an extent that social order is on the verge of breaking down. Anita has extraordinarily little sympathy for women, who she portrays as spoilt and manipulating a system that is predisposed to be sympathetic to them as it views them as victims.

Somewhat surprisingly, given her conservative views on women, Anita and her husband have an inter-caste love marriage. They live in a West Delhi gated colony that consists mostly of Punjabi migrants like them. Of the three women whose stories are

[30] Anita does not charge money for her astrological services

discussed in this chapter, Anita is the wealthiest, and she lives with her husband and son in a large three-bedroom apartment. A large portion of the family's wealth is inherited. This puts Anita at odd with Kanchan and Shruti, whose main sources of income are their own earnings. It also means that if Kanchan tends to see the world as an individual, and Shruti approaches it as a member of a couple, then Anita's lens to view the world through is that of the multi-generational family. Despite their comparative wealth, Anita and her family are economically insecure. The family had lived in her father-in-law's house but after his death they had to sell it and divide the proceeds with Rakesh's siblings. This led to a downfall in their fortunes; while Rakesh has a steady source of work as a lawyer, he's not earning as much as they would like, and the family could not continue their previous lifestyle while paying rent, and later, a mortgage. They have significantly scaled back their expenses, much to Anita's dismay, as she loves to entertain, wear jewellery, and buy the latest fashions. It has also deepened their economic stagnation; they are no longer able to participate in the type of social networking that is essential to Rakesh's career, as they cannot afford the expensive gift-giving which not only showcases status but also creates ties of obligation in these circles. Unlike Kanchan's optimism that her daughter's future will be better than her own present, or Shruti's belief that times are difficult but that she and her husband will manage, Anita is uncertain if her family will ever regain their position within the stratum of the middle class to which she is accustomed and aspires to.

In this economically insecure context, Anita is concerned about her son's prospective marriage She expects that once her son marries, her daughter-in-law will move into their apartment, which is bigger than they currently need so that it can accommodate

the son's eventual family.[31] In a nod to his prospective status as the head of the household, the son resides in the master bedroom. Uncertain about her son's romantic life, Anita suspected that he was dating someone who he has met either through his university or his work as an intern for a law office. Anita was dismayed at the thought of such a prospective daughter-in-law, as she would almost certainly be working. From a familial standpoint, another earning member would go a long way in easing their economic insecurity. From a personal standpoint, however, Anita was unenthused at being the only 'non-working' member of the family, suspecting that the domestic chores would fall on her and her ability to negotiate for luxuries would be further diminished. She would prefer to be able to choose her daughter-in-law, but her son has made it clear that he wants a love marriage of his own choice.

Anita's fears were further crystalised by her work as an astrologer who examines the birth charts of potential couples. While describing this work she complained about "ambitious" daughters-in-law, who are "spoilt" and unwilling to share their full earnings with their marital families. Her criticism is couched in terms that privilege the family and suggest that daughters-in-law are not a true part of the family, unless they demonstrate that they prioritise it over themselves. While her severest criticisms are reserved for working women, she also extends them to *aaj-kaal ki larkiaan,* or today's girls, who she thinks are "pampered" and have unreasonable expectations of their place within the marital family. Such an understanding of women and marriage, reproduces Punjabi kinship ideas of the woman who marries into the family being an 'outsider,' yet, Anita does not consider the

[31] In contrast, Shruti does not assume patrilocality for her children and is looking forward to a retirement with just her husband. Kanchan, whose child was an infant at the time of my fieldwork, was not contemplating her daughter's living arrangements as an adult.

wife to be easily replaceable, pointing to costly divorce cases (Das 1976).[32] Given her experiences with economic insecurity, these concerns around 'greedy' daughters-in-law who can destabilise already precarious family wealth, are particularly pressing. As such her understanding of gender and the *saas-bahu* relationship runs counter to Shruti's and demonstrates how she finds the prospect of a daughter-in-law to be threatening to not just her status within the family, but to the family itself.

These concerns about the threat daughters-in-law pose form the backdrop to her story of her neighbour's death, which may have been a suicide. Anita had told me that while she could talk to me, she would not be able to help me because married women did not commit suicide. I took her statement seriously, aware that as an astrologer she had a considerable clientele of married women who sought her advice. Furthermore, as I got to know her it became clear that her astrological work exposed her to a large range of gendered suffering, with her referring to psychological abuse, violence, sexual abuse, and murder. Anita suggested that the housewife suicides reported by the NCRB were actually murders, miscategorised as suicides. I asked her if she had come across any such murders, and she told me about the following incident:

> Yes. Ten-fifteen years ago. A few houses down our street there was a couple. They had a big wedding, with lots of functions. Both families were very rich. We all liked the girl very much – she was very popular in the neighbourhood.
>
> Anyway, one and a half months later, there were a lot of police cars on our street. I went down and found out from the neighbours that the girl had committed suicide. Later we found out the boy had killed her in their car. He had taken her body and hung it to make it look like suicide… They must have got into a fight or something. They were in the car, and he had hit her, and she died immediately. So, they tried to make it look like a suicide.

[32] See *Chapter 7: Die-vorce and Suicide: The Unmaking of the Middle-Class Wife*, on how the possibility of divorce has shifted the flows of precariousness in the family

> The media made a huge fuss. They were covering it all the time. The reporters found broken *churis*[33] [bangles] in the car and said that since she was five feet five inches, so she was too tall to be hung.
>
> The boy's family had to sell the house and leave the neighbourhood. They had to give a lot of money to the girl's family, and they gave one *crore* [ten million] rupees to the police. It completely ruined their lives. But these suicides, they are normally murders only.

As with Kanchan, Anita's narration of this tale focuses primarily on the material – she points to how elaborate the couple's wedding was with its multiple events, the physical signs of the police and media presence, the 'hard evidence' of broken *churis* and dead woman's height that prove the death to be a murder and the concrete signs of loss of status for the marital family such as the selling of their house. Yet this focus on the material is not to stress the particulars of her death, but rather suggests a different way to narrate a story, one which resembles the legal art of building and arguing a case. In this instance, Anita strategically lines up the facts to reveal her perceived truth of the woman's death – that it was a murder, a point that bolsters her broader argument that women's murders are covered up as suicides. Yet, when I looked at the media and court records of this woman's death, it turns out that the woman's death is not as clear-cut. While initially the media reports it as a murder, the interim court judgement calls it a suicide by hanging. The final judgement dismisses the case of dowry death against her husband and his relatives, and vaguely refers to her death as an 'unnatural death' – a description that can cover murder, suicide, and accidental death. The nature of this woman's death, thus, remains unresolved.

Yet, unlike the suicide stories told by Kanchan and Shruti, there are no uncertainties in Anita's narrative. By recounting the woman's death in a manner that focuses on the facts, the humans involved in Anita's story never emerge as fully-fledged characters, especially

[33] In Punjabi families, newlywed women often wear special bangles for the first year of their marriage.

as she does not empathise with them. This is particularly true for how the woman is depicted; despite Anita's insistence that "we all liked her," she reveals nothing of her own relationship with this woman, leaving the listener with a general impression of popularity. Hence, the woman emerges as little more than a cypher, and while most of the narrative effectively revolves around the woman, it is her dead body that is the object of the story, rather than the woman herself emerging as the subject. In contrast, by insisting that the woman's death is a murder, Anita treats the man as an agent and focuses on him by speculating as to how he killed his wife and his actions in the aftermath of her death. There is no attempt, however, to either excuse or condemn his apparent killing of the woman. Instead by choosing to refer to the couple as "girl" and "boy" she effectively juvenilises both, undercutting any intentionality in both their actions and effectively trivialising a serious act. The woman's suffering is, thus, swept away in Anita's narrative.

Yet Anita is occasionally affected while recounting this story, particularly when it comes to discussing the social status of the "boy's" family. The narrative around their wealth and social status forms a downward arc; the marital family's success is signalled by the wealth on display at the marriage, but in the aftermath of the death, the bribes paid to the police and the girl's family lead them to be "ruined." Accompanying this downturn in the family's fortune is Anita's regret and dismay, the only tangible affects that she displays during her telling of this story. This loss of fortune and status, appears to be a point of empathy for Anita, perhaps because it resonates with her own experience of lost status after her father-in-law's death. Anita's regret over the lost wealth, contrasts sharply with the lack of mourning for the woman's death in her story. Her sympathy for the 'they' of the story, the boy's family, feeds into her broader moral argument that as the rapidly changing *samskaar* empowers daughters-in-law and seeks recompense for their suffering, the marital family's wealth, social status and well-being are endangered. This narrative is further

developed when Anita recounts an episode of *Crime Patrol* that she had watched the day before I interviewed her.

Crime Patrol is a popular true-crime TV show which dramatizes high-profile crimes, in a highly melodramatic style, emphasising the emotional over the material story.[34] Anita's reaction to it can be understood through the *rasa-bhava* aesthetic tradition. She is highly affected in her retelling of the episode's story, vibrating with anger, kicking out her feet and stamping her fist down on the table at the more emotional points of the narratives. As the listener, I found the complicated sequence of events to be confusing and difficult to follow. I have attempted to summarise its basic plot here – a successful police officer's wife and son are kidnapped.[35] Despite the husband's occupation and the power within it, he is unable to find out what happened to his family. The man is furious – Anita describes him angrily accusing his in-laws of being behind his wife's disappearance, carrying out the extrajudicial killing of his wife's former lover (who, in a pathos-heavy death scene, is found to be innocent) and fighting with his supervisors who want him off the case. Despite these anger-fuelled actions, the husband is unable to find his wife and son. Instead, he is sent videos of his wife being gang-raped by felons from the local prison. Eventually, it emerges that the husband's colleague was behind the kidnapping and rape.

There is now a switch in the narrative focus of the story and Anita recounts the rest of the story from the perspective of the husband's colleague, whom she labels as the 'villain.' As the villain is jealous of his more successful colleague, he approaches the wife

[34] Although the TV show claims to be based on actual events, most of the episodes are based on several crimes, and is not a faithful recreation of them. As with other *rasa-bhava* media, the show aims to convey the affective nature of the story, and the publicity materials describe the crimes shown on it as 'mindless' and 'passionate'

[35] Law enforcement is an aspirational career for Anita, and her son had been attempting to take a competitive, nationwide exam to enter it.

to have an affair with him, hoping that her betrayal would destroy the husband. When she refuses, he mocks her for being a *sati-savitri,* a term that uses the names of two idealised wives in Hindu mythology – Sati and Savitri – to signify a faithful and devoted wife.[36] This shocks Anita, who gasped and shook her head when recounting it, asking me what has the world to come when *sati-savitri* is an insult? In his fury at being rejected, the villain kidnaps the woman and her son while they are out for a walk and pays the felons in the prison he oversees to rape her.

Through a *rasa-bhava* lens, Anita is transported into the affective reality of this story when she retells it, struggling to differentiate between the representation and the reality of the story. For instance, she commented on how beautiful the wife was, apparently forgetting that the actress portraying her may have not resembled the original woman. Anita is less successful than Shruti at transferring her audience (me) to the affective reality of the story she narrates. Like Shruti, her vivid displays of affects were accompanied with declarations of how she felt (for instance, "I was so surprised" or "I was so angry I couldn't sit still!"). Yet Anita is so caught up with her emotions that she was unable to see that while I was reacting affectively, my affects did not match hers. Anita is a *rasika* or connoisseur of the types of *rasa* on display in *Crime Patrol*, having the skill and aesthetic sensibility to discern, taste and savour the emotions portrayed (Butler Schofield 2015; Ali 2004). She thus, relished the affects in the story, even when they were negative, and was enlivened and excited as she moved from one emotion to another. Unlike me, who rarely watches *Crime*

[36] In Hindu mythology, Sati is a goddess who self-immolates when her husband is insulted by her father. This mythological suicide is often referred to in discussions of widow-burning (Courtright 2012). One of the versions of this myth has Shiva, Sati's husband, maddened with grief. In his fury he starts the dance to end the world while holding onto her body. The other gods chase him and cut up her body, in the process calming him down. This version of the story resonates with Anita's own understanding of women's suffering as destructive and the need to minimise it by (literally in the myth) cutting the woman down, thereby rendering her and her suffering immaterial.

Patrol and thus lack the sophistication to consume the particular types of *rasa* it showcases, she showed no distress at the suffering of the woman. The discordance between our affective understandings of the story came to a head at the end of her narration when she turned to me and asked me what I thought. Drawing from my own affective response, which was a mess of confusion, distress, and revulsion, I asked if she found *Crime Patrol* upsetting? Anita was taken aback at this and insisted that the TV series was "very good."

The discordance between Anita's and my affective reactions, stems from the fact that I did not immerse myself in the story but was instead critically examining it from the point of view of the dead woman. As such we were empathising with different characters. This revealed itself when I asked Anita whether the story reminded her of the infamous 2012 Delhi gang-rape? Anita was surprised at this reading of the story she narrated, and I had to point out that both women were brutally raped. While she acknowledged this parallel, she insisted that the story was not about the gang-rape but about the husband and his career. In her narrative, her focus is on the affective flows around the husband, who she considered to be the 'hero' of the story. She described in detail his anger; the way he upbraided virtually everyone he comes across and his frustration at being unable to solve the case despite his past successes. She lamented that the 'villain' ruined this man's career, family and life through his jealousy, barely being able to sit still in her frustration with both men. For her, the tragedy of the story is that both men, who had prestigious career paths ahead of them, had spectacularly self-combusted. As such it echoes her earlier story of her neighbour's murder/suicide; they are both, at heart, stories about the downfall of successful men. For her, keeping in with the *rasa-bhava* aesthetic, the *Crime Patrol* story has an ethical message; one which ironically warns against emotionality, particularly around "negative" emotions like jealousy and anger which are portrayed as driving the men's actions. Anita, thus, uses the *Crime Patrol* story to formulate a moral response to the death

of her neighbour – through the lens of the TV show, she suggests that the financial ruin of the family could have been avoided if the husband had been able to control his temper. As such she advocates a disciplined emotional self who can set aside what she labels as "the ego" and work for the greater (familial) good.

Anita is practiced in this form of emotionally disciplining. Drawing on her experiences with her natal family, she shared her disappointment with her brother and his inadequate care of their mother in her final years, but said firmly that while she was angry, there was no point in ruining her relationship with him. She explained that as her mother was gone, she only had her brother left and to destroy that tie would cut her off completely from her natal family. She, thus, must swallow her considerable anger, and discipline her 'ego' that is affronted by how badly he treated *her* mother. Instead, she engages in emotional work to "be nice" to him and his wife. Such a suppression is as an act of lateral agency, allowing her to privilege her position as a member of the natal family, at the cost of her position as a loving daughter. Doing so allows her to maintain access to her natal *samskaar* which is a source of comfort and familiarity for her. In her inter-caste marriage, a hybrid *samskaar* is nominally being formed and performed but, in practice, Anita constantly privileges her husband's ways of living.[37] This is, thus, not a space of familiarity or comfort for her and keeping the natal family ties intact is all the more important. Hence, in the quest to live the 'good life' of idealised and intact multi-generational family ties, gendered suffering is seen as a threat as it can destabilise the family. Anita's understanding

[37] I, inadvertently, got drawn into Anita's and Rakesh's negotiations over the *samskaar* of their inter-caste marriage, when Rakesh mentioned how he enjoyed certain caste-specific foods. Anita responded, somewhat angrily, that she disliked these foods and did not know how to make them. As some of my caste identities overlap with both Rakesh's and Anita's, I mentioned that my family would occasionally eat these delicacies but that, like Anita, I did not like them. To my surprise, Anita excitedly asked me to find the recipes so that she could make them herself. She, thus, put aside her dislikes for these foods, to recreate an aspect of her husband's *samskaar*

of morality dictates that such suffering must be ignored, even when it is being endured by those she loves deeply (her mother) or herself.

This moral response explains why, in Anita's stories, women (and the son, in the second case) are little more than objects around which actions by men are taken. I had to ask Anita what happened to the wife and son in the *Crime Patrol* episode – her original narrative left this out. She speculated that the wife must have died, a death that she interprets as a murder by the villain even if the physical act of killing may not have been done by him. She had no recollection as to what happened to the son but suspects that he, too, died. Neither of these characters' outcomes captures Anita's interest. While focusing on the actions of the men in the story (both the villain and hero), she can ignore the woman's experience and suffering. Thus, in Anita's narrative, as far as women figure at all, they are represented as passive beings whose suffering is merely an instrument through which men can hurt each other and self-destruct.

Instead, her focus on the ordeals of the men within her stories can be understood by her broader orientation towards the multigenerational family. In such an orientation, men become extensions of the family, and their negative outcomes are automatically passed onto their broader, invisiblized family. The effects of women's suffering are, thus, mediated by how men react to it. To limit the negative impact of women's suffering, for Anita, it must be ignored, and just as she set aside her mother's suffering to maintain a relationship with her brother, in her storytelling, gendered suffering is also disregarded. This is done affectively, even at her most moved, Anita ensures that all the affects in her narratives stick to the men in her stories and slide off the women involved. No mourning of them is articulated, and their suffering is never acknowledged as more than a material fact. Hence, the empathetic storytelling method in this case, rather than building empathy for women and their suffering, works to mask them by making them affectively invisible.

Instead, Anita sees women as outsiders who can (as in her stories) destabilise male hierarchies based on wealth and status, through their suffering. Crucially, it does not matter that the women involved did not actually take any action to hurt the men in her stories. Instead, it is their very vulnerability to victimhood that trips up the men in their lives and exposes them to ruin – even if it is the man, himself, who victimises the woman. Moreover, although, these women are depicted as having socially idealised traits like popularity, beauty and being a *sati savitri,* these threats do nothing to decrease the threat their mere presence represents to men.

This conceptualisation of women as being innately a 'threat' to the family's well-being, regardless of their actions, is one invoked when Rakesh discusses Anita herself. He observed that Anita does not get along with his siblings, especially as she wanted her family to receive a bigger share of the inheritance, resulting in a cooling of family ties. Moreover, when they were struggling to make ends meet, Antia refused to sell her jewellery, even though they could have used the money.[38] Instead, she told him that it was *her* jewellery, and it was *his* work to fix the family's economic situation. While such observations could be understood as criticisms of Anita, Rakesh does not frame them as individual failings on Anita's part, but attributes them to her being a woman. He stated that no woman would willingly sell her jewellery and was sceptical when I contradicted him. In holding onto her jewellery and insisting that it is her husband's role to provide for the family, Anita asserted a strict gender division in their roles, which Rakesh recognised and ascribed to. For the couple, it is men who accumulate wealth, while women turn wealth into status, by, for instance, showcasing it as jewellery or gifts for higher-ups. Thus, although the couple is

[38] Historically, jewellery is property that women can own by themselves, and it is often gifted to her. As such it becomes a way to demonstrate status as a cared for and valued wife as well as becoming an extension of the woman's identity (Doniger 2017). Jewellery is affectively and socially charged; it is also an important way for women to assert financial independence from their spouses.

dependent on each other, they are not partners working towards a common aim, and have separate roles that can come into conflict – such as when Anita holds onto her jewellery.

For Anita, when she discusses "today's" daughters-in-law, this division in gender roles is muddied by their entry into the workplace and demands for greater equality within the family. She recounted an incident where one of her clients overheard her daughter-in-law telling her mother that she has not eaten her favourite dish in months. This seemingly innocuous complaint to Anita was a sign that the daughter-in-law had an undisciplined emotional self, unable to exert the sort of lateral agency and self-suspension of desires that Anita believes is necessary to hold families together. Anita lamented that the client did not confiscate her daughter-in-law's mobile, blaming it for allowing the daughter-in-law to be in touch with her mother and be "spoiled" by her. Hence, in Anita's moral frame, disciplined emotional selves require women to be restricted and their access to love and care to be limited. Instead, by being forced to 'adjust' women become affectively tamed, their desires and emotions only allowed to emerge when they will not disrupt family life. The working woman, however, has access to other ways to be valued, such as meritocracy, reducing her dependence on the family, and breaking down the gender roles that Anita ascribes to.

Yet, there is a curious amnesia in Anita's discussions of emotional disciplining, daughters-in-law and her own concerns about the family's future. Unlike her two stories of dead women, it is men who do not figure in these discussions. This is even though it is her husband's inability to either earn enough or secure a larger share of his inheritance that has led to the economic insecurity that Anita currently struggles to adjust to. Similarly, it is her son's desire for a companionate marriage to a working woman that is at the root of Anita's fears for the future. Yet, even though the men in her life have created these situations, she

does not advocate for their being more disciplined in their desires or work habits. While this may be because she did not want to criticise her husband and son to me, she also does not advocate for the disciplining of the generic man, the way she does for the generic daughter-in-law. Hence, although she concludes from her non-suicide stories that the men involved should be less (negatively) emotional, when it comes to real life she only advocates for the emotional disciplining of women.

Through her non-suicide stories of women who have ambiguous deaths, Anita reverses Shruti's arguments which blame gender relations for devaluing women's lives and causing them to suffer. Instead, she suggests that it is women's suffering that destabilises patriarchal power. The only way to combat this destabilisation, as per Anita, is to subject women to intense emotional disciplining. Yet, it is not clear if Anita could make this argument if she accepted the possibility that the stories of the deaths that she narrated could be suicides. This is pertinent, as in both stories how exactly the women died is unclear and the possibility of suicide is evident. The *Crime Patrol* series particularly, regularly features women committing or contemplating suicide. Anita's refusal to acknowledge the potential that the deaths that she narrates could be suicides reflect the power of suicides to confuse accepted cultural narratives around women. By fusing 'culprit' and 'victim,' the suicide story suggests that women can suffer and be agentive rather than passively continuing the status quo. It, thus, rejects the understanding that women's suffering is passive and silent. Instead, the suicide act suggests that women can resist both this state of suffering and the powers that allow for such suffering to flourish (Kalpagam 2000). This ripples across other binaries that structure women's lives, overturning accepted ideas around gender relations by demonstrating that women can be directly agentive and resistant to the flows of patriarchal power. Moreover, the possibility of suicide, raises the question of whether the 'good life' of increased familial wealth and status is all that good for the women involved?

Thus, by insisting that these women died through murder Anita can keep the binaries between victim and culprit intact, and by privileging the experience of the culprit, she can silence these women and mute the question of whether this 'good life' is actually worth living?

4.4 Conclusion

The affective choices that these three women made when narrating stories of women's deaths, have dramatic implications on how they invoke hegemonic cultural narratives around gender relations, formulate moral responses to these deaths and determines how they choose to categorise the death.

Both Kanchan and Shruti are haunted by the suicide stories they recounted to me, albeit in significantly different ways. While Kanchan struggles with trying to limit the impact of her suicide story by deliberately reducing the affects in her story, she, nevertheless, can recognise that the woman's suicide is based on a marital reality that may have parallels to her own. Her lack of knowledge about the details of the woman's suicide, thus simultaneously protects her from the horror of the suicide, while trapping her in a state of uncertainty over why exactly the woman committed suicide. Nevertheless, when this suicide story is paired with her lived experienced, an incipient moral response emerges that questions how the value of women's lives are determined through their family ties.

In Shruti's case, she engages closely with the affects around her neighbour's suicide and can, through a highly empathetic retelling of her suicide, find both points of convergence and divergence between her own life and the neighbour's journey to suicide. As with Kanchan, Shruti sees her suicide narrative as a comment on marriage and the discourses that circulate around it. These discourses delineate strict gender roles that are

exploitative towards women, as per Shruti. Her narration of the neighbour's suicide is, thus, a call for action and a moral argument that if the affective circumstances around her neighbour's death are recognisable to other women, then a change is needed in gender relations. Shruti is calling for this shift in gender relations at a time when the *samskaar* is rapidly changing, having to adapt to late-stage industrial global capitalism where worth is primarily assigned through the rhetoric of meritocracy, yet gender relations are slow to shift and women are still valued primarily through their usefulness to the family.

For all that Shruti admires and likes her neighbour, the act of her suicide is in no way depicted as heroic. Instead, the pathos in Shruti's story stems from the fact that she considers the suicide a tragedy, one that morally implicates patriarchal practices such as *saas-bahu* relationships The neighbour's act of suicide is thus, recognised as an act of destructive agency, which, ultimately in Shruti's narrative, does nothing to shift the patriarchal power hierarchies that she is devalued by. Instead, Shruti's social ethics calls for a change in gender relations through the recognition of the affects around women. Through the transmission of these affects, their affective realities can be incorporated within the family's collective affective environment and, thus, help drive the family's subjectivities, identities and actions.

Anita's moral response in her stories clashes with this social ethics. Instead, by citing how vulnerable women's suffering makes men, she suggests that women not only need to be controlled and restricted but is suspicious of any direct agency on their part. Such a framing of gendered suffering rests on the assumption that women are prone to being victims, a trope which has been used to justify draconian and arbitrary norms limiting women's movements in order to 'protect' them from men outside of their community and their own sexual autonomy (Gupta 2016 and 2011; Kapur 2012; Phadke, Khan and Ranade

2011). Anita, however, is not just calling for a restriction of women's movements, but also advocates that women have disciplined emotional selves, managing their affects so that they do not disturb pre-existing family relations. This philosophy is reflected in her storytelling, by refusing to attach affects to the suffering of the women's whose tales she narrates, Anita effectively normalises and dispenses with it. Her primary focus on the family and the failures to reproduce its status, in turn, works to reduce women; they are understood and judged only in terms of their usefulness to the family. The act of suicide, itself, seems to be incompatible with this understanding of women's worth, as it forces onlookers to consider the woman as being directly agentive, working to resist social norms rather than 'adjust' to them. The ignoring of women's suicides, thus, can be understood to be more than just an ignoring of gendered suffering – it is also an ignoring of a specific type of gendered agency and resistance.

The affective choices that women make when narrating stories of women's deaths, have dramatic implications on how they invoke hegemonic cultural narratives around gender relations and frame a moral response to these deaths. Thus, the use of emotions, sentiments and sensations not only links these suicide stories to broader cultural narratives around gender and married life but can also destabilise them, by positing alternative narratives that work to confuse and muddy prevailing social ethics around gender. Such confusion, is nevertheless, productive, in that it allows women to both partake in mainstream narratives around gender, but also to stand outside them and critique them simultaneously. The two moral responses towards women's deaths embedded in Shruti and Anita's narratives are in opposition – one calling for a greater recognition of women's affective presence within the family and the other advocating for the restriction and marginalisation of this presence. This oppositional binary reappears in the other chapters

of this dissertation, shaping women's understandings of what is a life worth living and their ability to recognise certain types of suffering.

Chapter 5: Desire and Disdain: Depictions of Attraction in Suicide Narratives.

This chapter examines how women invoke or skirt around desire within their suicide tales. Desire is intrinsically connected to the question of what is a life worth living; the pleasures and meaning embedded within it create aspirational futures that coalesce to form the 'good life' which women strive for, even if this striving is accompanied with anxieties that such a future might not occur (Chua 2014).[39] Desire is, by its very nature, illusive, concerned with, as Brennan (2015) points out, what is imagined as opposed to what is present. In suicide narratives, desire, particularly sexual desire, exists on an affective level, hardly ever outrightly acknowledged but very much sensed and experienced. The suicide stories I discuss in this chapter, are stories of desire, yet they are also inexplicable stories – the suicides within them sudden and seemingly over, what Priya describes, as "*chhottee si cheez"* or a small matter. In looking at these stories through the lens of desire, I argue that the women who told these stories by privileging some desires, while looking down on others, end up recognising some forms of suffering, while obscuring others.

These suicide narratives are, at their core, stories of curtailed and rejected desires. In them, the curtailment of desire is mediated through disdain, the literal denial of worth.[40] Disdain operates at multiple levels in these stories but always in concert with desire. It is present within the core suicide act through which the dead woman denies her desires for a future and thus concludes her life is not worth living. It is apparent within the actions of those around the woman who deny her desires and relegate her as unworthy of their

[39] At its core desire is defined as the longing for some object, person or event. It does not necessarily refer to sexual desire though it is often understood to be a proxy for it. (Oxford University Press 2010).

[40] Etymologically, disdain is a compound word, originating from "*de*" which reverses the original meaning and "*dignari"* that refers to being "worthy" (Oxford University Press 2010). Hence to disdain is to deny worth to an object, person or event.

fulfilment. And it is prevalent in the act of recounting the seemingly inexplicable suicide, in which the narrator struggles to understand why the woman committed suicide, while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge her desires and the suffering provoked by the denial of these desires. As such an examination of this interplay of desire and disdain within suicide stories, reveals much about how the women telling these stories experience and understand desire and worth.

Before a discussion of desire can be embarked on, it is necessary to contextualise it within the present cultural moment. Mankekar (2004), notes that middle and working class urban Indian women rarely talk directly about their desires, instead they "expressed their erotic longing via their yearnings for certain commodities" (174). Material aspirations and desire are thus deeply intertwined; with the desire for commodities particularly, emerging as a new "genealogy of erotic" in India, infused with the intense affects of longing and anxiety (Mankekar 2004, 175). Moreover, such aspirational desires are associated with a changing, global economy, in which new ways to index and perform middle-class identities, particularly through the articulation of aspirational selves and the consumption and display of material wealth, have emerged (Gooptu 2013; Fernandes 2006; Donner 2008; Donner and De Neve 2011; Mazzarella 2003; Srivastava 2014; Kaur and Hanson 2015). The aspirational and consumer experiences of middle-class women, particularly, are key to producing and sustaining discourses around what it means to be middle-class (Donner 2002).

Women's consumption choices extend beyond themselves, shaping their own and their families' class identities. Furthermore, they must be made carefully: balancing between the 'traditional' markers of middle-class femininity such as modesty and "respectability", traits that inherently require the curtailment of desire, and the consumerist demands of a 'modern' global lifestyle and individual self-maximisation (Donner 2008;

Mankekar 2004; Radhakrishnnan 2011; Gooptu 2013). This balance, in the form of self-discipline, becomes the basis on which moral claims to heightened material desires can be made, for all genders, and the aspiring self is intrinsically, a disciplined self (Gooptu 2013; Fernandes 2006; Mazzarella 2003; Radhakrishnnan 2011). Similarly, the link between the unfulfillment of aspirational desire and suicide is a dominant cultural narrative, as Chua (2014) describes. In this narrative, suicide emerges as the dark side to India's story of dizzyingly high economic growth; a consequence of the process of striving for the much-touted 'good life' and either failing to attain it or struggling to 'adjust' to the new ways of living associated with it (Chua 2014; Mayer 2016a and 2016b). Less well-explored, however, is what the suicide tales narrated by women reveal about their experience of desire, and how that, in turn, plays out in existential and moral questions about what is a life worth living and what desires are worthy to be fulfilled.

When examining suicide stories through the lens of desire, they can be read as commentaries on the economic conditions of the day, and the struggle to reproduce class identities at a time of significant social and cultural change. These issues of social reproduction are, however, contextualised through women's position at the lower end of the gender hierarchy. The women in this chapter are explicit about the complexity in attaining desires; suggesting that the possibility of direct agency in pursuing desires is rarely possible, yet the fulfilment of desires is not just a source of pleasure but also an indicator of worth. Hence, these women delve on lateral agency, the indirect and self-described "underhand" tactics that can attain desires while minimising the disruption of the status quo. They suggest that women have to be both discerning and disciplined in their desires. Meanwhile the possibility of sexual desire is elliptically referred to, clad in an ambiguity that obfuscates not only the proximity of sexual desire to sexual vulnerability but also the motivations, actions and identities of the very women whose stories they tell.

When confronted directly in suicide narratives, desire is understood to be in reaction to concrete, material objects of desire which, while they may be proxies for erotic desire, are generally engaged with as aspirational, status-marking objects. In narrating stories about the transition from the desiring, hopeful agent to the absent and dead self, the women telling these stories vividly illustrate that women are not just passive beings on whose bodies and lives the clash between old and new economic systems is being played out. Nor are their desires merely proxies for this battle. Instead, the messiness of desires in suicide stories and in their own lives, comes from the fact that desires are a dialectic through which women engage with and shape their world, while simultaneously being engaged with and shaped in turn. Such a dialectic has a moral dimension, and through their suicide narratives, women engage with and critique prevailing moralities around sexualities, class performance and gender. They thus, interrogate ideas around what it means to be "respectable" or "spoilt," "modern" or "traditional," and "global" or "Indian."

In this chapter, I explore how desire is invoked in suicide stories. It starts by looking at the objects of desire within Priya's suicide story and whether she consider these objects worthy of being desired. This, in turn, links to the idea of disdain and how the reception of desires establishes women's worth, cementing prevailing heteronormative gender norms and experiences. The next section looks at the process of attainment of desires, contrasting the identity of the *triyacharitra* as the woman who seeks her desires, against the familial interactions of *samjhaana* (to make one understand) aimed at helping women 'adjust' to their subservient position within the family. Again, attention here is paid to what women consider appropriate ways to gain their desires, and how this minimises the visibility of certain forms of suffering, while also subjecting women to harsh and devaluing regimens of self-discipline. This section is followed by an exploration of sexual desire and how there

is a slippage between experiences of sexual desire and sexual vulnerability. As such sexual desire remains ambiguous in suicide narratives and is prone to slip by unrecognised.

5.1: Disdain and the Object of Desire

> Desire does not seek a singular, decontextualized object, but a broader world or set of relations in which the object is embedded and becomes meaningful.
>
> Biehl and Locke 2017, 6

Priya, a retired schoolteacher in her early sixties, told me the suicide story of her friend's brother and his wife that occurred in the late nineties. The brother was a well-known writer and journalist, who would often work from home. One day, while he worked, his wife came to him, dressed in a new saree. Priya tells of how the woman had been shopping and was excited to show her new purchases of sarees to her husband, including the saree she was wearing. Yet, despite her entreaties, he paid no attention to her, perhaps, as Priya speculated, because he was engrossed in his work. The wife became angry and told him "If you don't look at me, I will set myself on fire." In response, the man told her "*Kar lo,"* or "do it." Priya winced when she recounted his words. In anger, the wife does this – setting herself on fire in front of him, her new, "cheap" nylon saree instantly catching aflame and spreading over her. The man ran over to try to save her, but he also caught on fire. They both ended up dying from their burns, in what must have been extraordinarily painful deaths.

For Priya, this was an impulsive suicide, where the woman was so "caught up" in her anger over her frustrated desires that she was willing to threaten suicide over a "*chhottee si cheez"* (small matter). She was convinced the woman did not mean to commit suicide or cause her husband's death. Instead, Priya argued that the cheapness of the woman's nylon

saree meant that she caught on fire faster than she intended.[41] As such, Priya does not consider the suicide as a declaration from the woman that her life is not worth living, but instead as a threat to "frighten" her husband in to giving her the object of her desire - his attention. As such the suicide narrative transforms from a story of frustrated desire, to one that is a commentary on the flows of power within a marriage and the (limited) means through which women can shift them to their favour.

Yet even in this framing of the suicide story, desire still underlies the narrative, never fully explored, but driving the action within it. The saree worn by the wife is both an object of desire, as well as a means through which to get the husband's attention. Similarly, the husband's attention is also an object of desire in its own right, but also a means through which the wife is recognised to be desirable in her new saree. As such objects of desires are not stable entities and each fulfilled desire leads to new avenues for desire to flow into, leading to continual imaginings of shifting aspirational futures (Biehl and Locke 2017). In this suicide story, the woman's desires flow towards her being seen and valued. Each individual object of desire forms part of this broader cascade of desires to be seen; her saree promising to provide her a visibility that is otherwise absent, her husband's attention infused with the potential to acknowledge and transform her into a desirable being, and her identity as a desirable being, in turn, infusing her with worth and power. As such desiring is an optimistic act and the woman "leans toward promises contained within the present moment of the encounter with her object" (Berlant 2011, 24). We know, however, that those promises are never fulfilled. The husband's blatant refusal to see the woman, harshly strips value from her. It cuts off the potential futures embodied within her desires, futures

[41] While there is a clear gendered pattern to deaths by burning in India, with women much more like to die from burn injuries than men, it is not always clear if these deaths are accidental, due to suicide or an act of murder (NCRB 2020; Kanchan, Menon and Menezes 2009; Bhate-Deosthali and Lingam 2016).

that shape her "sense of what it means to keep living on and to look forward to being in the world" (Berlant 2011, 24). Moreover, his response acts as a pivot, shifting the narrative from being one about the desires of the woman to her (apparent lack of) desirability. Ideas around a life worth living and desirability are thus melded together throughout this narrative.

For Priya though, her focus is on how the wife's blatant display of desire leads to her being disdained. By actively seeking attention for her dressed-up self, the wife is depicted as an agent, one who demands to be recognised as desirable. In doing so, the wife challenges traditional conceptions of women as being passive recipients of desire (Puri 1999). Yet the wife is met with disdain from the husband when he tells her to go ahead and set herself on fire. The wife's decision to directly seek her desires, is thus portrayed by Priya as leading *her* to losing worth, rather than her life to lose worthwhileness, although the two cannot be easily pulled apart. This understanding of the suicide, or rather the suicide threat, sees it as a desperate act uttered by someone in a diminished status, the indignity of her situation unbearable.

The interplay between desire and disdain is gendered in Priya's narrative, with the risk of being disdained disproportionately borne by the woman. This uneven distribution of risk can be seen in Priya's own story. Priya eloped in an inter-caste love marriage; an act for which she was disowned by her natal family for most of her married life. How transgressive this marriage was can be debated – Priya and her husband are from middle-class, upper-caste Hindu families that resided in the same neighbourhood. However, they had different caste and regional identities, although both were raised in Delhi. It was based on these differences that Priya's parents, particularly her father, opposed her marriage. Her sisters, on the other hand, supported her throughout the marriage, and her brothers, after the initial fallout over her marriage, also reconciled with her. Conversely, her husband did

not encounter any objections from his family and continued to enjoy their emotional and material support. As such the opposition to the marriage was disproportionately borne by Priya and it fell on gender and generational lines; the older and male members of her family having a harder time in accepting Priya's acting on her desires. This is a rejection of the couple's "love marriage," which bypassed parental approval. As Donner (2002 and 2016) points out the act of falling in love and marrying on their own, is seen as a rejection of parental authority and a risky act, particularly for the woman, who must 'adjust' to a household that has not been vetted by her parents. Caste, however, does play a role in the opposition Priya faced in her marriage – as a high caste Brahmin, she was seen to be marrying beneath her caste.

Priya did not talk about her elopement, instead I heard about it from her husband and his male friends. He was nostalgic about their courtship and marriage, telling me how he was instantly smitten by Priya when he met her on the bus that ran from their neighbourhood to the city centre. His friends and he laughed when they talked about how he would go all the way to her college, just so that he could spend more time with her, despite his university being at the opposite end of the city. The two eloped in a Bollywood-worthy tale of angry parents and brothers, supportive friends helping the runaway couple, and a hasty wedding at the local temple. More broadly, the tale was one of a series of stories that her husband and his friends used to describe a near decade-long period that started with the 1975 Emergency and ended with the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984. These stories depict these men standing up to traditional forces of authority whether it be government agents putting pressure on people to report their neighbours during Emergency, parents holding on to outmoded notions of caste and marriage or political mobs looking to kill Sikh friends and neighbours. In retelling them, the emotions of fear, anxiety and anger are missing, replaced by an over-brimming pride in their brashness and ability to 'game'

the system to achieve socially just, happy endings. Thus, for this generation, the divide between the 'traditional' and 'modern' is clear. Priya's husband and his friends embraced their identities as 'rebels' – moving away from the newly independent India of their parents' generation with its rigid hierarchies, to forge a more egalitarian version of the country. In this historically situated understanding, desiring itself becomes empowering and a way to articulate and access a morally, rather than a materially, aspirational future. For Priya's husband, the reconfiguration of his decision to elope as a moral statement, allows access to an ethical identity. This identity was perpetuated throughout his life, informing actions such as his decision to work as a doctor in clinics for the poor or providing medication for free to his more impoverished patients.[42] His acting on his desires by eloping with Priya, thus, were to him a pivotal moment in his life, leading to the emergence of an identity that he could embrace.

In contrast, Priya's silence around her marriage suggests her experience of acting on her desires did not lead to the same moral aspirational future as her husband. De Neve (2016) and Grover (2009) demonstrate that love marriages can lead to a loss of kin support. This loss of material and emotional support means that women cannot rely on their natal families to provide them 'refuge,' or practical support such as childcare and instead, must wrestle with the stigma attached to love marriages. In Priya's case, she continued to live in the same neighbourhood that her natal family resides in. When I walked through the neighbourhood with Priya's husband, there were constant reminder of how their courtship and elopement panned out, as he pointed out the bus station at which they would meet, the temple in which they married and other personal landmarks. While for him this was a fond reminder of falling in love, for her it must also be a reminder of being disowned. This

[42] Tragically, Priya's husband passed away in the COVID-19 pandemic.

disownment, thus, was an everyday experience, as Priya must have encountered her estranged family members regularly while making her way through their shared neighbourhood. Indeed, several of the landmarks pointed out to me were her relatives' shops and homes. Priya's elopement can be seen as her attempt to act on her desires and then having these desires disdained by her family, who first tried to stop the marriage and then disowned her. Hence, Priya's family depleted her worth, refusing to acknowledge her as either an agentive desiring woman or later, as a family member. Thus, while her experience of the elopement and acting on her desires was also a pivotal moment in her life, it did not just lead to an emergence of a new identity as a married middle-class woman, it also came with her being rejected as a daughter and a sister.

This ambiguity around desire is on display when Priya discusses another suicide, that of a woman who was in love with Priya's cousin. This story has strong parallels to Priya's own elopement. In it, the woman's parents had arranged her marriage to another man, and she begged Priya's cousin to elope with her, pleading with him even as the *baraat* (the groom's wedding procession) came for her. He refused to do so as, Priya explained because at that time, in the late 1960s, "one could just not do that - it was just not okay." The woman committed suicide several days later by jumping into a well. Just over a decade later, Priya and her husband did just "do that" when they eloped. Yet Priya does not make this parallel or reflect on what changed that made it possible for her to elope, but not her cousin. There are multiple temporalities on display in this suicide tale; the promised romantic future conjured up by the woman's desire for Priya's cousin, strip value from the traditional, arranged marriage that she is expected to embark on. Yet, these desires do not operate in isolation, they are reified by the woman's fears and anxieties, affects that are also temporal – projecting forward negative futures and ominous warnings rather than promises. Priya does not dwell on this, but it is notable that the woman commits suicide

only after she's been married for a few days; clearly something about those days made her believe that this new married life could not be borne.

Instead, Priya focused on how destructive her cousin's desirability was. She described him as being "smart"' a reference not necessarily to his intelligence, but a description indicating that he was well-dressed, sophisticated and handsome. As a trait, "smart" has an aspirational element to it, suggesting the ability to be socially mobile and being able to pass as a member of a higher class. It, hence, welds both sexual and material desires together. As a result of the cousin's "smartness," Priya recounts, there were many girls who were infatuated with him. Crucially, she uses the phrase "*marti hain uske upar*" which literally translates to "die for this person" to describe this infatuation. While this term is commonly used to describe attraction, and it is often how the English term "have a crush on" is translated into Hindi, it takes a sinister turn when used in a story about suicide. The word *marti* or 'to die,' suggests that the type of attraction described by this phrase, while perhaps fleeting, was an intensely violent one. The woman who committed suicide, Priya points out, was just one of the women who felt this way about him. His desirability then becomes a highly disruptive force, linked not just to the woman's suicide but to the heartbreak of several women. Thus, by focusing on the object of desire (her cousin) in this suicide narrative, rather than the object of fear (the arranged marriage, which admittedly, Priya knows very little about having heard about the dead woman through her cousin), this story becomes primarily about the dangers of the desiring self. It is, as such, similar to the narrative of the woman and the unappreciated saree.

This concern over desire is evident in how public views of love and desire tend to be understood negatively (Mody 2008). There are primarily two gendered understandings of love that circulate in Delhi: Associated with women is *adhyatimik pyar*, which Mody describes as a "spiritual love" and is understood to be destined and beyond material

considerations, while men are associated with *sharirik pyar*, or "bodily love" that is more focused on erotic desire (2008, 106-107). Similarly, Donner (2016) discusses how the use of Bengali and Hindi words for love bifurcate it into moral archetypes. The Bengali *bhalobhasa* refers to a long-term prosaic, companionate love, while the Hindi *prem* is associated with lust and sexual desire in her ethnographic context of middle-class Kolkata (Donner 2016). As such the social ethics around love strip worth from those relationships and people associated with the inferior 'desiring' love; the display of their sexual desire stigmatising them as undisciplined and "spoilt." In Priya's suicide story of her cousin and the woman who was in love with him, there are strong implications that it was the latter type of love the woman felt for him, based as it was on her cousin's attractiveness, rather than a spiritual or companionate bond. As such the story invokes the *adhyatimik-sharirik* binary, yet also transcends it. In it, she's cognisant of how much the woman who committed suicide must have suffered; using the vivid description of the woman begging the cousin to run away with her, even as the *baraat* came for her. While her anger is mostly directed at the girl's parents for forcing her into an unwanted marriage, and she places the moral blame for the suicide on them, she is resigned to their actions as the way things were done at that time. Instead, while not blaming her cousin for his attractiveness, she narrates the story as simultaneously a warning against both romances borne out of the intense erotic desire of "*marti hain*" as well as the suppression of these desires through the forced marriage.

When it comes to marriages in general, however, Priya does not mention love at all subscribing to more "traditional" ideas around relationships and gender roles. She describes unsuccessful marriages as ones where the man does not uphold his side of the patriarchal bargain, by either not earning enough or refusing to share those earnings with his wife because of issues like alcoholism. For her this is the type of situation that is most likely to drive women to suicide, and one that she considers commonplace, as most women are not

encouraged to earn their own incomes. She argues that when woman do earn it does not lead them to be respected or valued for but instead increases the likelihood of mistreatment by a jealous husband. Hence, she believes that most married women earn significantly less than their husbands and are dependent on them to fulfil their material desires. This gendered dependency has escalated under the current economic climate, as per Priya, because it actively fosters desires: "There is so much competition. Other women have all these things... Everyone wants a lot. *Woh hamesha maangti hain* [she is always asking/begging.]" Priya is visibly affected when she says this, closing her eyes as if in pain. There is a recognition that the economic dependence of women on their husbands creates situations of indignity for the woman to endure. To desire, is thus, devaluing and the possibility of having the objects of desires being rejected in harsh and disdainful ways make desire all the more perilous and depleting. In this context Priya asserts that women, in general, struggle with the 'desire' to commit suicide: "I used to think women were *shaant* [peaceful] but now I realise that they are *ashaant* [troubled/disturbed]. They will not do anything, but the desire is there."

Suicide, then, is a desire itself, opening possibilities for women to escape the indignity of always having to ask for their wants and having to risk rejection. Thus, the type of situation Priya described in her suicide tale of the wife fighting to gain her husband's attention through sarees is commonplace as is the temptation to fantasise, threaten and commit suicide (Chua 2014). Yet, Priya asserts that while women might be tempted by suicide, they "will not do anything." For her, the everyday nature of these depleting situations that desires place women in, means that they adjust to them, by demonstrating '*akal'* or intelligence/discernment in their desires and only seeking those objects that are truly worthy of the risk of being rejected. Contextualised through this understanding of

desire, the suicide story of the woman and saree works as not just a reflection on gender and desire but also as an economic and class commentary.

For Priya, the wife shows a lack of *akal* or discernment in attempting to use the nylon saree to obtain the husband's attention. She fixates on this, understanding that the saree as an object of desire is not just a saree in itself, but has "proximity to the cluster of things that the object promises" (Berlant 2011, 23). In this case nylon sarees have a cultural history that makes them particularly apt as symbols of the 'new' Indian economy and the 'new middle class.' These sarees were first introduced to the Indian market as an inexpensive and low maintenance alternative to the traditional silk saree. In the process they introduced a new aesthetic of convenience, affordability and excess that ran contrary to independence-era ideals of modesty. Subsequently, the parent company that manufactured these sarees, Reliance Industries has emerged as one of the largest companies in India. As such, nylon sarees are not just cheap sarees[43] but are symbolic of the 'modern,' entrepreneurial, aspirational India experiencing unprecedented economic growth. Unsurprisingly then Priya with her commitment to social justice and left-leaning politics, disdains the saree as literally low in worth, describing it as "cheap," and making the wife's pride and delight in it appear foolish and lacking in 'taste'.

In looking down at the saree, Priya is judging the appropriateness of the wife's consumer choices as a 'respectable' middle-class woman and finding that she falls short. The nylon saree is symbolic of the issues that Priya finds problematic about the "new" economic culture: it is representative of the over-zealous pursuit of short-term desires that do not enrich the family, but the individual (Uberoi 2006). Priya's disdain draws a line between Priya, a "respectable," middle-class married woman with good taste and the wife

[43] In fact, some of these sarees can be quite costly, festooned with expensive crystals and embroidery.

who, while she may be middle-class, lacks taste and *akal*. Priya ascribed to a different aesthetic sensibility than the one found in the gated communities. Dressed in a starched salwar-kameez, her make-up limited to a large *bindi* and kohled eyes, she contrasted sharply to the women in gated communities who would experiment with the latest trends. In refusing to embrace current fashions, Priya's performance of middle-classness hinged on being modest, neat, and unabashedly Indian, unlike the more ostentatious displays of wealth associated with the 'new' middle-class. This aesthetic sensibility is reflected in the suicide story, which acts as a warning against 'new' consumerist practices that turn out to be cheap and dangerous to pursue. In this disdain of the woman's object of desire, Priya devalues not only the wife's desires and the aspirational futures embedded within this desire as foolish, but also her subsequent suffering when she burns to death. The wife never emerges as fully sympathetic character in her narrative and her death, while shocking and tragic, does not elicit feelings of outrage. It is, thus, not surprising that Priya portrays the story as inexplicable, in focusing on the material shortcomings of the saree, she shifts focus away from the woman's other object of desire – her husband's attention – and does not consider what may lie beneath this.

When Priya's suicide narratives are contextualised by her life story, the fusion of romantic and material desires becomes apparent. While desires open new possibilities for aspirational futures and are actively fostered at a time of high economic growth, in her stories, women disproportionately bear the risk of being disdained and losing worth as they are dependent on men for the fulfilment of these desires. They, thus, must be discerning in their objects of desire. This, in turn, shapes Priya's response to the suicide stories that she narrates, in which worth is understood in terms of the dead woman's discernment and how appropriately she performs her class status. As such she can circumvent the idea that the

dead woman's suicide indicated that she did not consider her life worth living and the frustrated desires underlying this conclusion.

5.2: The Attainment of Desire

> Almost all women's narratives of their life experience is a mix of strategies – of acquiescence, subservience, resilience, resistance, manipulation, dominations, pretensions, subversions, simulations and so on; it is never a linear narration of victimisation, even when the women themselves at some point begin to feel that they are indeed victims of male oppression.
>
> Kalpagam 2000, 170

In Priya's narration of the suicide of the woman seeking her husband's attention, it is not just the object of her desires that is a source of her disdain, but the strategies that the dead woman deploys while attempting to attain this desire. Attaining desires does not just provide the pleasure that these desires innately promise but also confers status to a woman, signalling that she is well-loved in her family that willingly caters to her wants. Yet, Priya suggests that women's material desires cannot be given too easily; scathingly describing "*chalaak"* or clever and manipulative women, who have all their wants met, not because they deserve them, but because their husbands are "*gadhe"* (donkeys). Thus, if the fulfilling of desires occurs too easily, rather than the wife gaining worth, it is the man who loses it. Instead, women not only have to prove themselves to be discerning in what they desire, but also that they are disciplined in how they go about attaining that desire to keep the status of male family members intact. Such discipline is akin to "adjusting," the act of deferring to allow for the possibility of certain desires to be fulfilled.

This disciplining and 'adjusting' occurs in the affective sphere – as much about managing the emotions around the desires, as the desires themselves. In Priya's story of the wife seeking her husband's attention, the actions of the wife show that she is *ashaant* or

troubled. It is in this state that her anger blooms out of her control and drives her to commit an unintended suicide. Priya is concerned by how the wife refuses to "let go" of her desire for her husband's attention when she does not get it. Instead, in threatening to commit suicide to obtain her desires, the wife use the feature of, what Priya terms, "*triyacharitra*." Priya describes *triyacharitra* as the characteristic that woman, while apparently powerless, are able to use to obtain her desires, an almost immoral trait that makes her willing to make the men in her life "dance on her fingers" (*"ungali par nachaatee hai*"). In this case, the threat of suicide, is a way for the woman to "use her wiles" and "make a drama" to get her way. As the quoted phrases suggests, Priya is disparaging of the woman's strategy of threatening suicide to attain her desires. She is disturbed and shocked by how quickly the woman transitions from, what Priya considers to be commonplace, the affective state of being *ashaant* or troubled, to taking on the *triyacharitra* characteristics that put the pursuit of desires over other considerations. This escalation demonstrates to Priya that the woman's desires were too powerful, and she faults her for failing to manage her emotions. She comments "This *triyacharitra* is a very dangerous" – in other words, that this state of determination to obtain one's desire can easily backfire on the woman

The desiring woman determined to get her way contrasts sharply to the 'begging' wife who understands the fulfilment of her desires as being at the mercy of her husband. Instead, through *triyacharitra*, in Priya's usage, the woman sees the husband as a means through which she can obtain her desires. In our discussion, Priya struggled to define *triyacharitra*. She called in her husband to help explain the term and the three of us went through various definitions of the word on our mobile phones. The one that appealed to Priya the most was "women's wiles," though she told me that a strictly accurate definition would be "the three characteristics of women" a reference to the idea that every woman takes on the roles of "*ma, bahen aur veshya*" (mother, sister and courtesan/prostitute) in

her relationship with her husband. Other women I spoke to disagreed with these specific three characters of *triyacharitra*, substituting *beti* (daughter) for *bahen* and 'lover' for *veshya,* although they agreed with the general idea that *triyacharitra* means "women's wiles." The idea of "women's wiles," while disparaging, suggests an agentive and subversive being, while the three characters definition appears as a way in which women's desire-seeking behaviour is categorised, rather than understood. No wonder then that the *Manusmriti*, the ancient legal text which has influenced Hindu law in India, uses *triyacharitra* to proclaim that the character of women cannot be known (Agnes 2001)

Yet for Priya, this "unknowability" of women's characters as well as definitions of *triyacharitra* that are reductive and pejorative towards women, are symptomatic of a patriarchal structure that ignores women's desires. She explained using *triyacharitra* is not necessarily a good or bad thing but borne out of the fact that women are dependent on others, particularly the husband, to have their desires fulfilled. In such a situation, where desires abound yet the means to attain them are limited, a woman who uses *triyacharitra* effectively insists that her desires should be fulfilled and is willing to pursue them even if it is through "underhand' means. It is thus, an identity borne out of a lack of power, resting on women's ability to use the 'soft' skills of persuasion to get their way. Priya also rolled her eyes at definitions that described the term as "the power of a woman" or the "mysteriousness" of women. For her, *triyacharitra* describes an everyday characteristic women find themselves taking on, and these terms over-romanticised it by ascribing an almost otherworldly power to women.

To better understand the subversiveness of *triyacharitra*, it is useful to contextualise it against the act of *samjhaana* or "to make one understand" (Marrow 2019, 72). *Samjhaana* is used by those higher in the family hierarchy, such as men or elders, to help those below them 'adjust' to the family environment (Marrow 2019). As Marrow points out, *samjhaana*

involves making the hierarchically junior person understand the elders' views, desires and affects, but does not include the elder listening to or empathising with the junior person (2019). Instead, the elders are supposed to draw on their experiences to imagine how the junior person is feeling. *Samjhaana* is, nevertheless, understood as an interaction infused with mutual love, respect and caregiving; the elder shows their love by taking the time and effort to explain, while the junior, is understood as being respectful by being willing to listen and understand the elder (Marrow 2019).

Samjhaana is particularly important for women as it creates a moral understanding that while the married woman is both expected to, and wants to be, part of the marital family, this process of adjustment should be done "with love" from the elders (Marrow 2019; Raheja and Gold 1994). It is, as such, a softer, "benevolent" paternalistic form of emotional disciplining, than the strict, restriction and punishment-orientated style that women like Anita advocate (Marrow 2019, 71).[44] Yet, in terms of desire, *samjhaana* shows how difficult it is for married women, as junior members in their family,[45] to articulate and seek their desires outright – they are, after all, expected to listen, not tell. In this context, *triyacharitra* describes the traits a junior woman, who does not meekly match and 'adjust' her desires to those of her elders, utilises to attain her desires.

This sort of desire-seeking can be seen in Tina, who is currently a housewife[46] in her late forties and lives with her father-in-law, husband, and two college-going sons in a gated community in Gurgaon. She believes that her family is more patriarchal and conservative than the norm. She attributes this to the fact that the family is Jat, pointing out

[44] See *Chapter 4: Recalling the Suicide Affective Storytelling and the Ethics of Gender* for more on Anita's views on daughters-in-law

[45] As long as the husband is alive, the woman is considered junior to him

[46] Like many of the women I interacted with, Tina has gone in and out of employment, depending on the financial circumstances of her family.

that in her extended natal family, she's the only daughter in her generation.[47] In her marital family, her father-in-law, whom she describes as "rigid," has most of the authority. She told me, and I observed, that she asks her father-in-law permission before going out or having guests over. Yet, Tina has more freedom than the other women I met – she wore western-style dresses, had a busy social life, and regularly visited her friends for months at a time in other cities, hosting them in turn, when they came to Gurgaon. Tina credits this freedom to her ability 'to get along' with her father-in-law; "My husband, brother-in-law and *bhabhi* [sister-in-law] – they are all scared of him, but Papa and I get along very well." Getting along with her father-in-law, however, requires Tina discipline her desires, as she explains:

> I never tell him no. If he tells me to do something I don't want to do – like going somewhere - I don't say no, I say "Okay." Then on the day I'm supposed to go, I say to him "Papa should I go there?" And then he says "No, you stay". The trick is making him think it is his own idea.

The language of "tricks" and "making him think it is own idea" resonates with Priya's description of *triyacharitra* as a way to subversively control more powerful male figures to achieve desires. In Tina's case, she can do this in a manner that allows her desires to be fulfilled but does not upset patriarchal authority.

When Tina pretends that she is okay with doing what she does not want to do, she is not just 'making a drama' (in Priya's words) for her father-in-law and but is taking part in a reality where she denies herself her wants by not articulating them. She is as such keeping the interaction of *samjhaana* intact, refusing to challenge her father-in-law's authority, by imagining an alternative future where her desires are unmet and pretending to

[47] Tina's family is from Haryana, which has a sizable Jat population, and the sex ratio for this state is one of the lowest in India. As per the 2011 Census, there were 861 females per 1000 males (Census 2011). For more on gender relations in Jat communities in Haryana see Chowdhry's *Contentious Marriages, Eloping Couples: Gender, Caste and Patriarchy in Northern India* (2009).

be fine with that outcome. This must be done delicately, however, if Tina appears to be fine with her father-in-law's wants, then it is unlikely that he will change his mind. Instead, she must suggest that while she does not want to do what her father-in-law wants, she will bow to his authority, displaying a disciplined, undesiring self who gives into patriarchal strictures. This in turn, allows him to take on his role as the compassionate elder who is attuned to his daughter-in-law's situation and can change his mind at the last moment to ease it. Tina employs this delicate balance of actual wants and acts of compliance to create the moral conditions where both parties can save face and a loving relationship based on *samjhaana* can flourish. Through this indirect route, Tina minimises the depleting affects and indignities of having to ask for what she wants as well as the risk of having her desires met with disdain; as she never articulates her desires, they cannot be blatantly rejected. Similarly, her father-in-law never has to cede his authority and give into her desires, as his authority is never challenged. Thus, Tina can gain her desires, not through being an agent and taking ownership of her desires, but by performing in a series of highly passive acts that reify her subservient status and her dependence on others. Understanding this performance as the use of *triyacharitra* shows that agency is involved on Tina's part despite her attempts to hide it.

Yet, it is never clear if Tina will succeed in gaining the specific object of desire that she is seeking and she recounted how, initially in her marriage, her desires were often ignored. In those days, Tina felt resentful and angry leading to fraught familial interactions. She reflected that neither her father-in-law nor she were happy with the situation and that they have "both changed" by prioritising harmonious relationships within the family over individual desires. Thus, the two are united in the pursuit of a common object of desire, the promise of a 'happy family' where emotional discipline occurs through *samjhaana*. Meanwhile, Tina has found that invoking lateral agency and self-suppression has led to

increased autonomy and rise in status for her, within this larger framework of a collective desire to achieve harmonious family relations

> I can go to Bangalore, Bombay but I don't want my father-in-law to have any troubles. So, I have taught our maids to take care of his things and then see to ours. …. [laughs] Now we sit and criticise my husband. He [her husband] is the *bahu* [daughter-in-law] and I am the *ladka* [boy].

By placing her father-in-law's needs over her family's, Tina cements his authority as the patriarch of the family. In turn, the father-in-law treats her as the favoured child, and thereby empowers her. The fact that the gender reversal between herself and her husband is comic underscores the oddity of the idea that the father-in-law could favour his daughter-in-law over his son. Yet, at the same time, it proclaims that she is one of the family, and that she has assimilated into the marital home (Marrow 2019). Moreover, her hinging her high degree of autonomy on her being a good and caring *bahu* or 'daughter-in-law' is emblematic of Brosius's (2010) observation that the new forms of middle-class pleasure rest "on rigid forms of control over the self" in favour of the family (264).[48] Thus, in Tina's case, her autonomy and attaining desires is founded on her self-disciplined self as the good *bahu*.

Notably though in the above quote, Tina draws a line between her father-in-law and her family of her sons, husband and herself, even though they live together. She is happy to perform as dutiful daughter-in-law, because for her this performance is limited to her interactions with him. In discussing her relationship with her husband, Tina suggests that they have a relationship based on equality and that it is more akin to a companionate marriage. While her husband is currently the breadwinner of the family, working in a lucrative job at a multinational corporation, this has not always been the case and she has

[48] This disciplined desiring self is gendered and is reproduced in popular Bollywood movies as Anwer (2019) demonstrates. In such movies, the female consumer and her desires are understood to be dangerous, particularly when they do not stem from her role as the wife or mother.

worked in the past to make ends meet. As per Tina, the couple acknowledge that she is the more 'competent' of the two and that they would have been wealthier had she been better educated[49] and been able to work full time. Although her marriage appears to be organised through traditional gender roles with him as the breadwinner and her as the housewife, Tina has more economic and social power than this division would suggest. It is she who decides where they vacation, which social events they go to, what colleges and internships the sons undertake and manages their investments. Tina can make these decisions because she is 'competent' and knows how to showcase the family's wealth and advance it further. The couple operates in a partnership.

The security of this partnership appears to translate into how Tina expresses her desires. Of all the women I interacted with, she was the most blatant in her desires, telling me how much she enjoyed sex in our first meeting itself, stating: "I like sex and I say it. My husband finds it a little shocking but why should I hide it?" Her confidence in her desires, lets her ignore her husband's "shock" and probable disapproval. This openness extends to her other desires, and she was vocal about the pleasure she found in everything ranging from her expensive new watch to the act of eating sweet oranges in the winter sun. A common refrain from her was "*Yeh hain maaza, Yeh hain zindagi"* (This is *fun*. This is *the life)*. Within her family, Tina attains her desires by openly stating them as aspirational as can be seen below:

> Our 25th Anniversary is coming up and my husband said, 'Let's go to Switzerland.' I said 'No, I've been to Europe and seen it all. Why waste money? Let's go to Vietnam.' He said, 'But everyone goes to Switzerland, Vietnam is a *sasti* [cheap] country' So I said, "So I can go to other places." Now that affordability of travel has increased you can go abroad to show others, yes, we are earning well.

[49] Tina is bitter about her lack of education, blaming it on her father not being able to understand why she, as a girl, needed to be as educated as his sons.

> Maybe initially I was like this also. But now, I think we should see other places – I want to go to Norway, Kashmir, Kerala, Assam. Let's explore with minimum things, minimum cost. It should not be about money. We can still have fun with little money. I'm a little adventurous that way.

Tina can dismiss her husband's concerns of how going to a '*sasti'* country will reflect on their social status, by presenting the idea of Vietnam as new and aspirational, replacing the idea of consumption for the sake of it, with the pursuit of pleasure. She, thus, suggests that they have moved beyond the stage where every major consumption choice is scrutinised as evidence of their class status. Instead, she implies that by going to Vietnam, they are showing that they are secure enough in their class status that they no longer need to prove it and can do as they want. No wonder then, that her husband agrees with her choice, framed as it is in such aspirational terms. Her success in convincing him is bolstered by the fact that she is the trendsetter amongst their social group. Other women who I met through Tina would look to her and her consumption patterns when deciding on their own spending choices, confident in her taste and ability to discern the correct aspirational choice. Tina, for them, is a role model, someone who knows "how to consume" rather than simply consuming for the sake of it, as she can construct a narrative around her desires that make them aspirational (Brosius 2010).

The openly desiring but discerning self that Tina displays amongst her family and friends contrasts sharply with the disciplined persona she presents to her father-in-law. Tina is masterful in her ability to juggle these two identities, able to read social situations and deploy the appropriate one. Yet the process of attaining desires has it costs. Tina, although she is successful in achieving her desires through this switching between the presentation of a disciplined self and the pleasure-seeking one, chafes at doing so. The quiet dejection at imagining negative futures where her desires go unmet, contrasts sharply with her excitement in conjuring up aspirational futures with her husband. It also means that for all

her performance as a dutiful and loving daughter-in-law, she does not understand her father-in-law to be a core member of the family. He is instead an inconvenient presence who she must navigate around and manage delicately.

Priya similarly shares stories about women who take on the characteristic of *triyacharitra* not to attain desires, as much as to manage disappointing husbands. She gives the hypothetical example of a miserly husband, who is unwilling to pay the expensive private school fees for his child. In this situation, she asserts that it is the wife's duty to use *triyacharitra* and through a combination of cajoling, shaming, pleading, squirreling away of household funds and threats of suicide gain the fees. This, Priya argued must be done, even if it means that the woman is beaten by her husband. In narrating this example, Priya shifts the focus from individual desires to desires aimed at enhancing the collective family's well-being. In taking on the family's costs for attaining such desires the woman is depicted acting simultaneously from a moral high ground and from a position of powerlessness. Her suffering at the hands of her husband reifies her moral status, while devaluing his. Suicide, or the threat of it, then becomes a way in which she can call attention to shortcomings of her husband while gaining moral worth. Thus, in Priya's understanding of how to attain desires, desire is sublimated into performances of good womanhood and articulations of a family-oriented moral order.

Tina, who is more pleasure-oriented than Priya, has been able to pair this family-oriented moral order with increased independence and material consumption. Nevertheless, in her pursuit of pleasure, Tina can lack empathy as is seen in her story of her neighbour's attempted suicide.[50] In this story, she tells how her neighbour attempted suicide after his

[50] See *Chapter 2: Situating the Married Woma*n for a more detailed description of this suicide.

wife left him. Tina was instrumental in saving this man, getting the guard to breakdown the door to his apartment and call an ambulance. Yet she is incredibly impatient with him:

> …he kept trying to talk to me. Finally, I let him talk - he had some problems with his wife. He told me all about the people in his life and that they did this, and they did that. (Rolls eyes).
>
> I just told him it's better to be friends with your wife and live apart. Then all will be happy. He cried and left.
>
> Now when I see him, I get very angry. I keep telling him, if you do something like this again, I'll push you off the balcony and no one will catch me because I was the one who saved him before.

Committed as she is to being forward-looking and seeking pleasure, Tina cannot fully recognise or sympathise with her neighbour's unhappiness at his dissolving marriage. For her, it is his suffering that is a source of disdain and a sign of his foolishness which she demonstrates through her dismissive summarisation of their encounters, her rolling eyes and her immense anger at him. In attempting suicide and making his suffering visible, the neighbour punctures through Tina's fantasy of a pleasure-filled, middle-class lifestyle. Rather than reflect on this, Tina just wants him to move on from his marriage, stating that "then all will be happy" and is impatient when he cannot easily do this. Thus, despite their radically different suicide stories, both Priya and Tina disdain the persons involved in their suicide stories and can successfully ignore or minimise their suffering.

5.3: Desire and Vulnerability

When I told Aarti, a woman newly returned from Kenya, about my research, she eventually asked why were women committing suicide? Before I could reply, however, she answered her own question saying, "It's sexual repression, isn't it?" I found that I could not quite answer her, my thoughts going to women like Tina, who would declare they liked sex and were sexually fulfilled. Yet these statements were made defiantly, as if the woman

felt that she was breaking a social norm by saying them out loud. Similarly, when I thought of the suicide stories, I was aware of how there was a silence around the experience of romantic or erotic desire. Women like Priya would tell suicide stories where the woman's sexual and romantic desires were at the heart of their stories and would willingly discuss issues around the object of desire and the attainment of it when such desires were material but were elliptical when it came to sexual desire. Multiple scholars have observed this reluctance on the part of women to explicitly discuss sexual desire, astutely pointing out that they use the rhetoric of material desires as a proxy for it (Mankekar 2004), that the historical construction of women as 'pure' and in need of protection effectively negates the social recognition of their erotic desires (Gupta 2002; Das 2006 and 1976) and that the very way in which women choose to speak about sexual desires is often ambiguous and non-verbal (Puri 1999). In this context, it is not surprising that frank discussions around women's experiences of sexual desire are absent in the suicide stories I heard. Instead, such erotic or romantic desire emerges as a slippery and elusive concept. Much of this silence, I argue springs not just from the reasons outlined in the scholarly literature above, but also because for the women with whom I interacted there was considerable slippage between sexual desire and sexual vulnerability.

When I conducted my fieldwork, it had been seven years since the Jyoti Singh rape case. Yet, it remained present in the narratives I heard, no doubt as the case was grabbing headlines during my fieldwork –Jyoti Singh's mother was battling for the rapists to be hanged, and there was considerable debate on the slow functioning of the legal system and the appropriateness of the death penalty for rape. Yet, few of the women with whom I interacted were interested in the specific legal aspects of the rape. Instead, the gangrape

haunted them, shaping how they understood sexual aggression[51] and vulnerability but also by how they understood the experience of sexual desire. Priya, for instance, grimly commented on the fact that the man who accompanied Jyoti Singh, rather than being a protective presence, ended up getting beaten and almost losing his life. For her, the case reflected a narrowing of women's freedom and their opportunities to experience erotic desire, as well as an increase in patriarchal power. To be safe, she argued, women now have increased *bandish* or restrictions as they can no longer safely access public spaces even if accompanied by husbands, boyfriends or brothers. For Priya, *bandish* means following the rules set by the "father and the husband, like don't go outside, don't go out after dark*."* As such, these restrictions innately circumscribe women's freedoms while reaffirming patriarchal power. Experiencing erotic and romantic desire, the way Priya did when she eloped with her husband, then becomes associated with breaking the rules prescribed for a woman's safety and experiencing increased sexual vulnerability.

The media coverage of the Jyoti Singh rape and other high-profile rape cases are primarily focused on the 'illegitimacy" of these acts conducted by strangers, instead of looking at questions of woman's autonomy and consent (Krishnan 2016). However, the women with whom I interacted rejected this coverage as *bakwas*, or rubbish in Priya's words. Instead, these rape cases opened a dialogue on women's experiences with sexual aggression, in which the home emerged as a space where both sexual desire and vulnerability circulate. Tina, for instance, told me "In every house, child abuse is 90%. In every house so many crimes happen." She connected this overblown statistic with the need

[51] As Puri (1999) suggests the term 'sexual aggression' is more useful a concept for analysis then specifically speaking about acts such as rape or sexual abuse. Sexual aggression refers to a continuum of aggressions that women must contend with, and thus encapsulates incidents such as rape, workplace harassment, and everyday censures on the woman's sexuality such as restricting her movements or her clothing.

to talk more openly about sex. The reticence around sex, the fact that "to talk about it is like a crime," Tina argued, allows for women's sexual vulnerability to be entrenched and crimes against them to occur. For Tina, this issue is both personal and urgent. She explained that given the high gender asymmetry in her family, her sons have no sisters, female cousins or even aunts to who they are related to by blood.[52] Such a lack, she is convinced means that they, like the other men in her family, are not socialised to "respect" or "understand" women. As the only woman in their lives, she feels that it is important for her to address this, haunted by the idea that she may be raising rapists and abusers.

Sexual aggression is strongly hinted at but never confirmed in the discussion above. Tina never specifies that she means sexual abuse when she talks about 'child abuse' but the fact that she immediately starts discussing sex after making her statement suggests that this is the type of abuse that she is referring. Similarly, Tina does not come out and say that female foeticide is behind the gender asymmetry in her family, but it is heavily implied. Speaking about her own birth, Tina commented how she is the youngest, her parents being only able to afford the "luxury" of a girl once they had their sons. She spoke longingly about how she had wanted a daughter and had convinced her husband to adopt one after her sons were born, but that their economic condition was too precarious to go through with this adoption. This legacy of never-quite-alive sisters, aunts and daughters is disturbing, as is the suggestion that sexual abuse and rape happens within her family, composed as it is of men who do not 'respect' women. Despite her advocacy of 'frank talk,' Tina only alludes to these acts of sexual aggression, coating them in an ambiguity that makes it possible for her to move on from them and embody her forward-looking, desiring self.

[52] Tina's refusal to consider aunts and cousins who have married into the family as 'related' to her sons reflects the marginal position occupied by those marrying 'in' to the family within Indian kinship structures.

This forward-looking, desiring self is evident in her approach to socialising her sons around sexual desire and sexual vulnerability. She explained that she talks about sex openly so that her sons can understand that sex can be pleasurable for women and that there is a 'good' and a 'bad' version of it. She worried that they were deriving most of their sexual knowledge from their male relatives and peers, who do not share her concerns about consent and violence within romantic relationships. In trying to create an alternative understanding of sexual desire for her sons, she involved her husband, trying to model their relationship as an aspirational, healthy and loving marriage. Furthermore, she effectively juvenilises her sons, showering them with love and affection; joking how, when they are back from college, she insists on cuddling with them despite them finding this highly embarrassing. Doing so, she believes strengthens the familial ties, not only ensuring the sons' loyalty to their parents but also putting pressure on them not to "embarrass" the family by "misbehaving." This form of parental love resonates with the idea of *samjhaana* where junior family members are bought into the family and 'made to understand' through love., Tina also tries to control her sons, scrutinising their time carefully and insisting that they keep busy. She told me how worried she was about her younger son, because while his weekdays are busy with his college courses and an internship, he was free on the weekends. This freedom, she feared would lead to the "bad habits of drinking, drugs and girls."

Tina's approach to managing the sexuality of her sons, is not unique and most of the women with whom I interacted share her concerns about their male relatives' behaviour towards women. Preeti, a housewife in her late twenties, for instance, used her relationship with her husband as a model for how marriages ought to work with her younger brother. Worried that her brother was taking their mother for granted and mistreating her by expecting her to do his chores, she told him that if her husband behaved in that manner, she would leave him. She thus fed on his anxieties about maintaining a successful marriage

(her brother was not worried about getting married, as he knows that his parents can arrange a marriage for him). Similarly, Mrs Garg, a widowed woman in her sixties, believed that rapes were rising in India because men were spending more time away from their family and their sexuality was undisciplined. Hence, when her son was offered a lucrative job opportunity that would have meant moving cities, she encouraged him to continue with his job in the Gurgaon and stay with his family. This idea that male sexuality needs to be disciplined through institutions like the family is one that has historical roots: "The husband was aggressive, forceful and promiscuous; the wife was nurturing and maternal. The onus to control the male's potentially rampant nature rested mainly on her." (Gupta 2002, 127). Yet the role played by female relatives, who are not in a sexual relationship with the man concerned, in disciplining his sexuality is less well-explored.

There's a sharp contrast in the way Tina, Preeti and Mrs Garg go about disciplining the sexuality of men with how women's sexuality is controlled and monitored. Much of the literature on gender in India is concerned with how women's behaviours and desires are aggressively monitored and regulated through ideas around class appropriate behaviour (Donner 2008; Joshi 2001; Baviskar and Ray 2011; Krishnan 2019; Radhakrishnan 2011; Phadke, Khan and Ranade 2011). Narratives of female 'respectability' are routinely invoked to shape norms around women's behaviour and "women are encouraged to self-monitor and manage their behaviour according to normative gender and class-based standards of respectability." (Puri 1999, 101). For Tina, such encouragement is itself violent and sexually aggressive. She recounts an incident early in her mother's marriage, where her mother and *bua*[53] (father's sister) were beaten by her father for walking past an all-boys school. The trauma of this beating lives on in the family lore, outlasting both

[53] Like Tina, her *bua* was the youngest child and only girl in her generation, born after several sons.

women. The gap between Tina's loving, sex-positive, *samjhaana*-based disciplining of her sons' sexuality and her father's use of violence and fear to control his wife's and sister's sexualities is stark. It reveals a gendered difference in how male and female sexualities are understood and how patriarchy operates with men "enforcing" gender norms upon women, while women conform to them (Chakravarti and Maithreyi 2018). In this case, Tina does not see her sons as sexually vulnerable and is primarily concerned with getting them to uphold, what she considers to be, appropriate sexual practices where desire operates within the heterosexual relationship consensually and in ways that does not endanger the family. As I could not speak to her father, it is difficult to understand his motivation for beating his wife and sister. Yet, it does seem to be a textbook 'crime of honour,' where it is not so much the women's sexual vulnerability that is a concern but the fact they may feel and act on sexual desires which threatens patriarchal power that elicits such a violent response (Chowdhry 2009; Abu-Lughod 2011).

Thus, sexual desire when felt by women is itself socially transgressive, countering ideas of idealised "Indian womanhood" which conceptualised "women [as] self-sacrificing, dutiful, honourable, heterosexual, and most importantly, chaste." (Kapur 2012, 5). Other women I met recounted be similar displays of violence and censure when caught in what they thought were innocuous acts such as a meeting of eyes, a passing smile, or juvenile confessions of 'liking' someone. These acts, however, were read by their relatives as evidence of them having 'undisciplined' sexual desires and they were similarly aggressively and violently dealt with. No wonder then that sexual desire and vulnerability to sexual aggression become conflated. This conflation is further encouraged by the prevalent understanding that for women "Sex is articulated through the discourse of violence and the careful avoidance of expressions of sexuality as affirmative and pleasurable." (Kapur 2012. 5)

While this discourse is not the only one circulating around sex and women, it undergirds many of the suicide narratives I heard. For instance, in Shruti's story of her maid's suicide, both sexual desire and vulnerability were conflated while there was a silence and ambiguity around the affective impacts of sexual trauma and pleasure. Both Shruti and her maid are from Bihar, but while Shruti is an upper-caste urbanite, the maid was a scheduled caste villager. Shruti's story about her maid's suicide unfolded before me, as the maid had committed suicide in her home village during my time in the field. As a result, I saw first-hand how Shruti struggled to understand the maid's death in its immediate aftermath. Much of this confusion about the death was around the figure of the maid herself – was she a desiring woman beset by material and sexual desires that were out of her reach? Or was she the latest tragedy in a line of women who had been sexually abused and traumatised? Shruti could not make up her mind and the suicide tale she narrated is ambiguous, downplaying the maid's sexuality and her desires. The basic facts of the story are such: The maid, Pooja, was about to get married and had got into a fight with her family over the size of the *pandal* (marquee) for the wedding. When she saw that the *pandal* was smaller than she wanted, she was furious and thrashed the one-room house she shared with her great aunt, who had raised her. She locked herself in, telling the great aunt: "Now all your money will be saved." When the family finally broke open the door, she was dead.

Shruti agonised over Pooja's death, shocked that it could be over just the size of a *pandal*. She wondered if she was to blame for the suicide, asking me: "Do you think it was my fault that she committed suicide?" I found this question perplexing as it had been several years since Pooja worked for Shruti, and while Shruti kept in touch with her family she was hardly a significant presence in Pooja's life. Yet Shruti feared that by inviting Pooja to work for her in Delhi, she had "spoiled" her by exposing her to an atmosphere of rampant consumerism. She recounted how Pooja quickly assimilated, taking on the dominant tastes

and material desires: “She wanted to wear the clothes actress wore, she wanted to do her hair like they do in Bollywood.” Shruti was taken aback by these material desires but let Pooja work for her for five years. During this time, Shruti taught Pooja to read and write as Pooja took care of Shruti’s children. Yet, Shruti suddenly decided to send her back to her village, a decision triggered by the realisation that Pooja’s desires were not just material in nature but also romantic.

Pooja had begged for a mobile phone, asking Shruti to buy her the cheapest one in the marketplace and not to bother with putting in a SIM card as she was just going to use its radio to listen to music. However, Shruti found out that Pooja had placed a SIM card in the phone and was using it to make phone calls to a man in Delhi. This scared Shruti: “I had to throw her out. You never know she may elope with the guy, and then what will I do.” While Shruti is not prudish about sex, supportive of her neighbour who had a live-in relationship, she felt responsible for Pooja and was worried that she would be blamed for “spoiling” her if she eloped. Losing her job and being forced to go back to her village, away from the cosmopolitan city life that she aspired to and her lover, must have been traumatic for Pooja, yet Shruti does not delve on this. Instead, she again used the language of ‘spoiling’ to lament that the exposure to Delhi instilled desires in Pooja that were not appropriate, in Shruti’s opinion, for her class identity.

In the immediate aftermath of her death, Shruti interpreted Pooja’s demand for more lavish wedding arrangements as her way to fulfil her dreams of a Bollywood wedding, an aspiration that was out of her family’s financial reach.[54] Weddings are sites for performing class, with the amounts spent and the taste displayed being crucial to how the status of the families (particularly the bride’s family who tends to pay for the actual wedding ceremony)

[54] At this time, several Bollywood actors were getting married in elaborate and ostentatious weddings that were covered incessantly by journalists and a routine topic of gossip.

is read (Brosius 2010; Uberoi 2008). For the bride, this ritual extends from status performance to also life marking, a social acknowledgment of her shift from girlhood to adulthood, where familial affection is embodied within the consumer choices on display in the marriage (Kapur 2009). Thus, Pooja's suicide is not simply borne out of disappointment with the material arrangements of the wedding but can be understood as her feeling rejected by a lack of familial affection embodied within these arrangements. For Shruti, Pooja's expectations were out-of-sync with her family's socio-economic reality and led her to expect more than they could give her.

In framing the suicide as one about frustrated aspirations and material desires, Shruti rejects the possibility that Pooja's romantic and erotic desires could have a role in her suicide. She disagreed vehemently when I asked her if Pooja may have committed suicide because of despair from her curtailed romance in Delhi, or the possibility that she may have loved someone else. Shruti could not fathom that Pooja could have such desires or be 'in love.' For her Pooja's Delhi lover, was someone who Pooja exchanged sexual favours with to obtain her material desires (like the SIM card). In this framing, Pooja's agency and pleasure fall by the wayside. Instead, her relationship with the man is depicted, at best, as a prosaic means to Pooja's material desires that she could otherwise not afford, and at worse, as being coercive and exploitive with Pooja as a hapless victim. It is in the latter framing that Shruti blames herself – by invoking the cultural myth of the "innocent" from the village arriving at the corrupt and greedy city which takes advantage of her, Shruti wonders if she should have been "stricter" with Pooja, curtailing her consumption of Bollywood and other media, and restricting her movements. As such, even though Shruti, in her own life, values her autonomy and longs for fewer restrictions, when it comes to Pooja, she suggests that her 'innocent,' rural, scheduled caste and poor identities leave her too vulnerable to access this level of autonomy.

At the same time, while Shruti insisted on Pooja's sexual vulnerability, she downplayed her desirability, telling me that she was less attractive than her sister. This lack of attractiveness, according to Shruti, meant that she had little value to her family, apart from what she could earn. While her sister was married to a man with a comparatively high social status, Pooja was sent to Delhi, to be Shruti's maid. Shruti sees this as evidence of how little the family cared about Pooja, willing to put her in the socially and physically precarious position of being a maid in a strange city. Considering this background, Shruti thought that Pooja would be happy to get married and escape her uncaring natal family who never really valued her. Moreover, her lack of desirability meant that Pooja was unlikely to find a better husband (Pooja's prospective groom, Shruti assured me, was quite well-off) and the practical option for her was to go ahead with whatever marriage her family could arrange for her. Once again, there is no room for Pooja to be a sexually desiring agent in Shruti's narrative, she must always be practical, seeking security over love or sexual pleasure. Nor, despite Pooja's life on her own in the city, can Shruti imagine her outside the environs of the family; her worth, pleasures and identity inexorably determined within it. Thus, the suicide could not, as per Shruti, be due to the frustration of Pooja's romantic desires and she blames her death on the obstruction of her 'unreasonable' material desires.

Several months later, I asked Shruti about Pooja's suicide again. This time Shruti told me that she no longer felt that she had any hand in her death. Instead, she blamed her suicide on the family's "colourful past" which included extra-marital affairs by her female relatives, abandonment of husbands and children and even an attempted murder. As per Shruti, Pooja's grandmother had an affair and was driven away from the village with her lover, never to be heard from again. This decision had a knock-on effect on the economic prospects of her children and grandchildren. Without their mother to advocate for them, the children were raised by the great aunt and effectively disinherited when their father died.

Their poor economic outlook meant that Pooja's mother was not able to marry into a well-to-do family and was unhappy with her husband and his poverty. Like the grandmother, Pooja's mother also had an affair with a wealthy, high caste man and in the process abandoned her children, including Pooja. In Shruti's account the affair was turbulent, violent but ultimately, short-lived:

> [The mother] was so involved in that relationship that she was willing to kill her husband. The man [her lover] got some friends together and they tried to kill him, but he survived. Of course, because her lover was high caste, he couldn't marry her, and she had to return to her husband.

After the mother was persuaded to reunite with her husband, the family went to Patna to earn a living. Pooja, however, was left behind with the great aunt. Again, Shruti connects this treatment to Pooja's lack of looks, as apparently even at the age of five it was obvious that Pooja was not as good looking as her sister. For Shruti, Pooja's being left behind was akin to being abandoned "to die," explaining that she had been left "in such poverty to be reared by such an old lady [the great aunt]" that her survival was questionable. She argues that it is this past and how the women in Pooja's ancestry traded sex for the fulfilment of material aspirations, that was behind Pooja's suicide:

> That was the family's culture – whatever their means were, they tried to live beyond them. Even her mother, when she returned to her husband, she would have extra-marital affairs for money. The girl [Pooja] was like this as well. She had that affair here and even when she was back, she wanted to marry someone else, but his mother did not agree. I feel the aspirations these children have – big cars, good facilities – there are so many aspirations that they have.

In the above quote, while Shruti discusses the sex lives of Pooja and her mother, she is careful not to engage with the possibilities of their sexual desire. Instead, desire itself is ambiguously presented – do these women desire their "affairs", or were they conducted because of a coercive mix of economic and sexual vulnerability? Shruti does not know and thus, her suicide narrative is constructed in such a way that both sexual desire and

vulnerability are written out of it. Moreover, the narrative has overtones of caste prejudice – both women are depicted as being undisciplined, fitting caste stereotypes of them being 'promiscuous' (Gopal 2012 and 2013).

It is unclear why Pooja committed suicide. In Shruti's narrative, the trauma of multiple abandonments and rejections devaluing Pooja, the intersection between the Delhi culture of consumerism and Pooja's "family's culture" of living outside their means, and the possibility of being sexually vulnerable and exploited are suggested as forms of suffering that made her suicide possible. The amorphous nature of these intersecting reasons, none of which are fully able to account for the suicide, reflects on the complex, unknowability of a suicide. Yet at the same time, this complex narrative coexists with the short factual description of Pooja's death: "She committed suicide because of the size of the *pandal*." Like Priya then, at the core of narrative Shruti struggles to explain, is an inexplicable suicide that has occurred over an apparently 'small matter' like an unappreciated saree, or the size of a wedding *pandal.* In denying these women's desiring selves, Shruti and Priya are effectively denying these women's agency giving these women's actions a heightened air of inexplicability. This can be seen in the difference between Shruti's first recounting of Pooja's death and her second one. In the first recounting, Pooja was acknowledged to have material desires, and even though Shruti denied that her sexual desires had a role in her suicide, she did not deny that Pooja had them. As a result, Pooja emerged as an agent in this story, and Shruti always referred to her by name. In the second recounting, however, Shruti was more concerned with the actions of Pooja's family and how they affected Pooja. As a passive character, Pooja becomes flattened, her actions attributed to her family ("she was like that as well") rather than her own desires. Hence, it's not surprising that in this retelling, Pooja is called either as "the maid" or "the girl," reduced to a description rather than a person.

The conflation of sexual desire and vulnerability reveals much about women's reticence to discuss the experience of sexual desire. I cannot answer Aarti's original question about whether the reason why women commit suicide is because of sexual repression. What I can say, however, is that sexual desire is repressed in women's suicide stories, and those telling these tales struggle to distinguish between sexual vulnerability and desire.

5.4 Conclusion

In my final meeting with Anita and Rakesh, a married couple in their late fifties, they told me how they found daughters-in-law to be spoilt, as they made unreasonable demands on their marital families, while being unwilling to give up their careers, or limit their social circles of friends and family after marriage. Also present in this interaction was their son, Lakshman, who was in his twenties. Lakshman was notably quiet throughout the discussion, something that did not surprise me as he had earlier declared that a middle-class lifestyle was impossible on one income, a statement that his parents and I interpreted as his declaring that he wanted to marry a 'working woman.' When I left, Anita and Rakesh insisted, as they had throughout my time in the field, that Lakshman escort me out of their apartment complex, even though they lived in an ostensibly safe gated community. While we stood in the elevator, Lakshman said to me: "*Didi* [older sister], it's not like that. My friends and I, we don't want to be married to a housewife, a woman who always says yes… They [women] say yes out of duty. You never know if they really mean it or not."

There was a lot to unpack in Lakshman's remarks, for one, his mother self-identified as a housewife, and I could not help but see his words as a rebuke to her and his parents' marriage. For another, his observation of "the woman who always says yes" contrasted

strongly against Tina's pride in being a woman who never says no, in the context of her dealings with her father-in-law, undercutting her assumption that the only way in which she could acquire her objects of desire was to demonstrate her willingness to cede to his authority and go along with his wants. For Lakshman, however, such ceding is reconfigured as not just undesirable but a source of insecurity. Instead, his remarks showed that the desire to marry a 'working woman' was not just a financially prosaic decision, but one borne out of aspirations around the intimate experience of marriage. In making these comments, thus, Lakshman was critiquing the gendered ways in which desires are expressed and acknowledged within marriages and by extension, calling for a shift in how heterosexuality is performed (Butler 1993; Richardson 2000)

The desires within the suicide stories discussed in this chapter, have been narrated by Priya, Tina and Shruti as being inappropriate, at best and illegitimate, at worst. This illegitimacy is determined primarily in terms of class performance. While this may be blatant, as in the case of Priya's story of the woman with her sarees who lacks taste, or in the story of Pooja, Shruti's maid, whose desires are not appropriate for her social stratum, it is also mediated by terms such as "respectability" and "aspiration." In Priya's story about the woman who wishes to elope with her cousin, no one, not even the cousin, himself, acknowledges that that her desire for him are valid for a 'respectable' woman. Similarly, in Tina's case, her neighbour's desire to mourn his failing marriage is portrayed as also inappropriate through the lens of class performance, as it is out-of-sync with the aspirational, pleasure-seeking lives of his neighbours. Moreover, it is not only the objects of desires that are inappropriate in terms of class, but also how those desires are (unsuccessfully) sought which upturns accepted ideas around gendered desires. In Priya's stories, the women are not passive but blatantly desire men and express this desire. Similarly, in Tina's story about her neighbour, the man is devasted by his failed marriage

and the wife who leaves him is in no way 'replaceable' to him, as women are understood to be within dominant Punjabi kinship narratives (Das 1976). Meanwhile, the inexplicableness of Pooja's story hinges on the fact that in committing suicide, she demonstrates that she does not value security over pleasure, as Shruti expects her to. As such class and gender performances are intertwined in these stories, and the impropriety of the desires is adjudged on rigid understandings of class performance and heteronormative gender relations within marriages.

Yet when, I spoke to women about their own lives and marriages, it was the recognition and fulfilment of these seemingly 'inappropriate' desires that heralded a shift in their relationships, infusing them with meaning and pleasure. One woman, whose pseudonym I am purposely withholding, told me how she had not wished to go through with her arranged marriage, and she went through the wedding ceremony terrified, particularly of the wedding night. She felt that her wish to only have sex when, how and with whom she chooses to, was considered invalid – by her new marital family, her own family and friends and by herself, as well. To her relief and surprise, her husband told her that they would not have sex until she wanted to. Such a statement subverted her ideas of how her husband would conduct himself and led her to "fall in love" with him. Consent, in this case, was not just about saying no to the sex act, but a device through which this woman could own her sexual desires and assert an identity as a desiring agent. It shifted the power flows within the marriage – both the husband and wife simultaneously operating as desired beings and desiring actors, rather than falling into a gendered binary.

For this woman having the ability to say no, allowed her to not just have a "happy marriage" where she felt respected, but also to embrace an identity as a pleasure-seeking, desiring agent, informing, in turn, how she performs her class identity. The couple's economic decisions and life choices, stem from the fact that they are "in love;" noting that

she was "bored" at home, the husband encouraged this woman to go back to work and she now has a well-paying job through which she derives much of her identity from. Her return to work, thus, is framed as an act of love between the couple. Similarly, she encouraged and supported him economically when he quit his job and sets up his own business. Being in love, for her, meant that they "shared dreams," and "encouraged" each other in the pursuit of their desires. As Mankekar (2013) observes this is part of the shift in which "enterprise culture and romantic love are depicted as co-implicated and mutually dependent" (31).[55]

Priya and Tina, as well, see themselves in these romantic and entrepreneurial marriages. While both marriages outwardly had traditional gender roles, within them the man was, to quote Priya, the "biggest support" to his wife, a term that indicates a relationship that goes beyond the provider-dependent tie of arranged marriage. Crucially, this type of marriage is portrayed in material terms that mirror the language of work and entrepreneurship. The couple "work in partnership" so as "to succeed" in the current economic climate and raise a "successful" middle-class family.[56] It is as such linked to a rapidly globalising and growing Indian economy. Desires in such a marriage are not pursued by the individual woman but formed by the couple in concert, who navigate together a dizzying array of consumer choices to create aspirational futures for the family to strive towards. Disdain, meanwhile, is now a source of collective familial anxiety over how the family's desires are received. While the family is thus privileged, it does little to help women attain those desires that cannot be framed as benefiting the family.

[55] A similar phenomenon is observed by Ahearn (2001 and 2003) in the very different setting of Nepal, where desire itself becomes desirable, as it is associated with narratives of development and progress.
[56] While Priya and her husband were skeptical of many of the aspects around the 'modern' middle-class aesthetics of status-signaling consumption, they shared entrepreneurial ambitions to be part of a global, upwardly economically mobile society for their children, investing heavily in sending them abroad.

Nevertheless, the rise of these companionate-traditional marriage hybrid allows women a greater set of opportunities to openly desire and attain those desires.

Thus, the range of 'appropriate' desires and strategies to attain them is constantly shifting, in the process, creating new moral narratives of worth and depletion. As women narrate their suicide tales, then, they are both reacting to and reifying moral orders around the objects of desires and how they are attained. As such the suicide story is not just a moral commentary on what is a life worth living, but a reflection on how the current socio-economic conditions validate or deplete the narrators' own desires, aspirations and lives.

Chapter 6: Motherhood, the Circulation of Care and Suicide

Perhaps inevitably the women who told me suicide stories would reflect on their own lives and, in the process, consider what is a life worth living for them. While I would hesitate to categorise any of these women as 'suicidal,' many had experienced situations in which they felt depleted, highly vulnerable and believed that their circumstances were untenable. In such moments, suicide was a possibility for them, something that they openly admitted to. While most of the suicides I was told about focused on the married woman who would commit suicide early in her marriage, (see *Chapter 5: Desire and Disdain: Depictions of Attraction in Suicide Narratives* for a discussion of suicide, desire, and the negotiations for a life worth living), when it came to discussing their own situations of extreme vulnerability, women would typically describe scenarios revolving around motherhood.[57] As such this chapter differs from the rest of this dissertation – rather than contextualising the affective narratives that circulate within suicide stories, it examines women's narratives of motherhood and how they link back to the experiences of depletion and loss that are so prevalent within suicide tales. In the process, I argue that non-romantic alliances also play a role in the suicides of married women and that the positioning of women primarily as mothers effectively undervalues their identities and achievements that are unrelated to motherhood. As such, this chapter sheds further light into how women understand the role of child-rearing in shaping identity, the circulation of care within families, and what constitutes a life worth living.

There is, in general, limited data on the linkage between female suicides and motherhood, particularly in India (Mallon et al. 2016). Nonetheless, sociological studies on urban India, which look at motherhood and mental health, found that motherhood did

[57] All the married women I encountered were mothers, leading to a dearth of discussions on the consequences of infertility or choosing not to have children. As such this discussion on motherhood and suicide is limited, as it does not consider the experiences of married women who do not have children.

coincide with issues of mental health such as depression and in some cases, suicidal ideation (Rodrigues et al. 2003; Travasso, Rajaraman and Heymann 2014). Yet these studies, in general, focus on experiences during the early years of motherhood, and primarily identify factors around the circumstances of motherhood, such as intimate partner violence, poor economic circumstances or ill-health of children, as stressors, instead of looking at the affective experience of motherhood itself and how it can both deplete as well as fortify the meaningfulness of women's lives. As such, these studies fail to challenge "mother-centered models of caretaking" which present motherhood as a 'natural' part of the female lifecycle and expect a deeply-committed mother to be the primary caregiver of the child (Donner 2005, 36; 2008).

Crucially, this conception of committed motherhood rests on the expectation that the mother is willing to 'sacrifice' her well-being for the child: as Kumar observes ""The mother…would bear every discomfort in order to give support to the child. The child knows he is special." (Kumar 2011, 229-30). Pregnancy is seen as the initial 'sacrificial' act and subsequent bodily acts of motherhood such as breast-feeding and the caregiving practices that are performed as part of child-rearing are also conceptualised as extensions of it (Das 1976). Thus, the idea of sacrifice is intrinsic to motherhood, as is the belief that the mother, through these sacrificial acts, shapes the child's personality and character (Das 1976). Hence, this conceptualisation of motherhood means that the child's success or failure is reflected onto the mother, and she is held accountable for their performance (Gooptu and Chakravarty 2013).

Thus, this ideology of 'committed motherhood,' is built around the concept of self-sacrifice and is the dominant identity through which women with children are recognised. The roots of such an ideology of motherhood can be traced to the politicisation of middle-class women as embodying the 'home' and the mother, in particular, emerging as an icon

of nation in the late colonial era, responsible for inculcating middle-class and national values in the child; a formulation that continues to circulate in the present political discourse (Chatterjee 1989; Sarkar 2001; Gupta 2002; Donner 2008; Weaver 2016). As such, committed motherhood builds on the cultural beliefs that the "procreative tie" between child and mother engenders a spontaneous, "pre-social" tie of "unalienable affection between mother and child" allowing the mother to have "an instinctive understanding of the child," (Das 1976, 4). However, committed motherhood is a not the only way in which motherhood has been and is performed in urban North India. As Das (1976) notes, in Punjabi joint-family kinship traditions, there has, instead, been a "moral" impetus for "de-individualizing the mother-child relation" which emphasises that the mother is *not* the sole caregiver of the child (15). Instead, the child is understood to be belonging to the whole family and receiving care from all members within it. Similarly, Seymour (2019) finds that in her ethnographic context of Odisha, the need to inculcate in children "a sense of interdependence" and belonging to the family unit, leads to "exclusive mothering" being discouraged (52-53). Amongst the women I met, in practice, a "shared parenthood" flourished, with child-rearing work performed by the mother, female relatives such as her mother-in-law or mother, and domestic maids. Nonetheless, the ideology of committed motherhood is dominant, and the care work of women other than the mother, particularly the maids, is invisiblized and taken for granted, with the moral responsibility for the child understood to lie at the mother's feet.

In my interactions with women, two phases of motherhood emerged as moments when they felt particularly vulnerable. The first of these phases was right after they became mothers, where women struggled with the pressures to fulfil the expectations of committed motherhood and felt that their other identities were being discarded. The second phase was once their children 'settled down' into lives which had little space for these women. In both

phases, women were never passive recipients of the ideologies of committed motherhood and worked to challenge and undercut them even while selectively deploying these ideologies to legitimatise their life choices. Furthermore, in these narratives, care, both the receiving and giving of it, emerged as a central emotion through which women determined how worthwhile their lives were. These women's experiences belie key assumptions in the sociological literature on motherhood and mental health, such as the idea that it is the early years of motherhood where women primarily deal with parenting stress, that caregiving in the mother-child relationship is unidirectional and perhaps most importantly, that it is not just the individual circumstances of motherhood but also the culturally hegemonic ideologies of motherhood that determine women's experiences as mothers.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section looks at women's experiences around pregnancy and birth, examining how they experience a loss of identity when they become pregnant. In it, I primarily trace the experiences of two recent mothers, Preeti and Kanchan, and how they have negotiated the ideologies of committed motherhood and dealt with their new identities as mothers. The next section examines the experiences of these two women during the first few months of motherhood, and how they have adjusted to the shifting circuits of care, and used, or not used, the ideologies of committed motherhood to find worth in their lives. The third section shifts to look at the experiences of older women, and how they use their relations with their children as a barometer of the worthiness of their lives. It explores the phenomenon of the 'noble death' where women refuse medical treatment if they feel that they are burden to their children.

6.1 Committed Motherhood and the Loss of Identity

Throughout my fieldwork, I would often talk to Shruti, a married woman in her mid-forties who had a teenage daughter and son. Shruti, like many of the women I met, had been going in and out of the workplace for most of her life, quitting her job in the social sector after she gave birth to her eldest child and then returning to work once she finished her PhD and her children were in school. While currently she was working and relished her work, she struggled with balancing the long hours of her job with her children's needs. Midway through my fieldwork, I had the following conversation with her:

> **Anjali**: I've been wondering, sometimes the women [in your stories] have really suffered but suicide isn't something that they consider. Why do you think that is?
>
> **Shruti**: It depends - either it's your support system, or you yourself are mentally very strong, very tough. Or I would say, there are people, like for me, if I am going through a period of great stress... My way to cope with it is to consult an astrologer. He would give me some hope and I would cling onto that…
>
> **Anjali**: I wanted to ask, you were working before marriage and then after marriage. But when your daughter was born you stopped working. Was it difficult to -
>
> **Shruti** (interjects): Very difficult. Initially you like the space to do the things you want to do. But after a while, when you've had children, you're already going through those hard days of not getting enough sleep and doing this and that. And all the time working, working, working. It was then, I remember I had this feeling. "Oh, so my life is all about this person. I'm only supposed to keep looking after that baby, clean her potty, clean her diapers, change her diapers. That's all I am supposed to do." So, at times there were bouts of frustration. But the way I dealt with it was I started my higher studies. I knew I couldn't work. Because I had no support system, my parents could not come, my in-laws could not come and stay with me. So, I thought I might as well do something where *I* am feeling like I am doing something worthwhile.… Because otherwise, I would get these bouts of frustration. I would get angry at nothing, angry at small things. I wouldn't want to do things...

Shruti's description of her experiences right after giving birth to her daughter strongly echoed her earlier answer to a question on why some women do not commit suicide despite suffering greatly. The conditions that she identified that acted as protective factors against suicide – a support system, "strong" mental fortitude, and a sense of hope – are all factors that she identifies as missing or diminishing during her early experiences of motherhood. Instead, she describes this time as one where she was isolated with her daughter and lacked her normal support system of parents and in-laws, when her temper was getting increasingly short, and a phase where she did not feel like what she was doing was "worthwhile." Furthermore, while she was very much aware of the expectations of committed motherhood – "so my life is all about this one person" – she rebelled against them, pointing out the mundane and tiresome aspects of child-rearing. Shruti's decision to enrol into higher studies did not end the drudgery of childrearing, indeed she decided to do a PhD precisely because it could be done while taking care of her daughter. Instead, what appears to have appealed to her about enrolling into higher studies, was that it was a way for her to assert a more "worthwhile" life, and reclaim her identity as a studious, hard-working and intelligent woman.

The experiences of new mothers – Preeti, who was in her late twenties and Kanchan, in her mid-thirties - echoed and further nuanced Shruti's descriptions of motherhood. Preeti had a one-year-old boy, while Kanchan had given birth to a girl at the start of my fieldwork. While both women were working at the time of their pregnancy, they came from very different social circumstances. Preeti, her husband and father-in-law live in an up-market neighbourhood in Gurgaon, while Kanchan's residence with her parents-in-law, brother-in-law, sister-in-law and husband is in a lower middle-class neighbourhood in Delhi. Similarly, despite earning about the same salary, Preeti earns the least in her family, candidly telling me her husband earns "three or four times" what she does, while Kanchan

earns the most in her family with a salary that is approximately double of her husband's. Preeti and Kanchan also have very different marital relations: Preeti, is in an inter-caste, love marriage with a man who she had dated for several years before her marriage; Kanchan, on the other hand, had been forced to marry a man who is from the same caste and ethnic background as her. She first met her husband on their wedding day, and even after marriage, the couple was rarely on their own, living in a two-bedroom house with two other couples and a baby. The two women also worked for very different organisations, Preeti in a small social consultancy where she was the first woman to get pregnant, and Kanchan in a large government court, where she is one of many sub-contracted employees. Despite these differences in class, marital relations and work environments, Preeti and Kanchan have had similar struggles with the ideology of committed motherhood.

Both Preeti and Kanchan had difficult pregnancies. Kanchan, who was underweight at the time of her pregnancy, struggled with morning sickness, and lost a dangerous amount of weight during her pregnancy. Moreover, she became highly anaemic and had to be admitted to hospital several times through the course of her pregnancy. The physical effects of the pregnancy, she told me, were excruciating and led her to conclude that she could not subject her body to another pregnancy. The HR department at her workplace was unsympathetic to her plight, and refused to sanction her taking days off, despite her illness and certificates from her doctor. Instead, they tried to fire her for the days when she could not go to office because she needed a blood transfusion or other hospitalised care. As per her colleagues, the HR manager would openly talk about wanting to fire her because she was pregnant: telling people that despite her strong performance reviews, now that Kanchan was to be a mother, she was "useless" as an employee as she would "always be running home to her child" and become pregnant again. Despite Indian laws prohibiting the firing of women for becoming pregnant, Kanchan's status as a sub-contracted employee meant

that she did not benefit from these protections, as her organisation could end her contract with no reason.

Kanchan's colleagues and supervisor rallied around her and prevented her from being fired during her pregnancy, though it was often unclear if their efforts would succeed. They were supportive of her, allowing her to take naps and covering up for her when she left work early or came in late when she was sick. Nevertheless, Kanchan's pregnancy meant that her work was highly precarious, and she told me she spent most of it wondering if she should "quit first or wait to be fired?" This phrasing suggests that there was more at stake than just her finances, but also her dignity and understanding of her own identity. Given that her work was praised and that she had been acknowledged as a reliable worker, Kanchan was understandably furious that she was suddenly being cast as being an undependable '*kaam-chor'* (literally a work thief, or someone who idles away time at work) just because she was pregnant. Moreover, her ill health meant that the pregnancy and at times, her life, were also precarious, creating a highly stressful environment for Kanchan. Fortunately, Kanchan was supported at home, as her in-laws were very happy with her pregnancy. They provided her with delicacies, while insisting that she rest instead of doing the normal household chores that would be expected of a new daughter-in-law. The pregnancy gave her the status of the favoured daughter-in-law, as she became pregnant within months of the wedding. Her positive reception within the martial family was surprising to Kanchan who had not wanted to get married.[58] Apart from her fears that in the marriage she would be harassed and abused, Kanchan had worried that if she got married her marital family would deter her from pursuing her career, particularly once she became pregnant.

[58] See *Chapter 7: Die-vorce and Suicide: The Unmaking of the Middle-Class Wife* for a more detailed discussion of Kanchan's forced marriage.

For Preeti, her pregnancy was unexpected and poorly timed, as she and her husband had just taken a large mortgage to buy their family home. They had originally planned to have children when they were more financially secure. Unsure of how they could afford to take care of the child, the couple considered an abortion and for much of the initial pregnancy it was uncertain if they would go through with it. Nonetheless, they informed their respective workplaces of the pregnancy, where they were met with very different reactions. While her husband was congratulated and instantly given a sizable promotion, which made it possible for them to afford having a child, Preeti was terrified to tell her workplace about the pregnancy. When she did tell her boss about the pregnancy, she felt guilty and compelled to explain that it was an accident. The lack of encouragement from her employer, played a role in Preeti's decision to go ahead with the pregnancy. She explained that the way things were going in her office she knew it would be difficult for her to keep her job after becoming a mother but that she felt that the only thing at stake with going through the pregnancy was her career and "What career was that?"

Preeti's disdain towards her career belies the fact that she had worked very hard to achieve her status as a senior member of staff in her organisation – she told me that she was the first person to arrive in the office and often the last to leave, priding herself in being a reliable and experienced member of the organisation. [59] Yet Preeti felt that her work was unappreciated and had considered quitting before becoming pregnant. These feelings of being unappreciated were heightened during her pregnancy. Instead of getting her legally mandated maternity leave, the company's HR Manager tried to convince her to take a shorter month-long maternity leave. Meanwhile, her responsibilities at work were increased and she was expected to work longer hours than her colleagues as well as given

[59] From Preeti's description it appears her workplace's culture fostered its employees' insecurities, and that praise and credit were scarce. Nevertheless, Preeti has been promoted several times, suggesting that her work was valued.

a gruelling travel schedule. She felt no provisions were made for her pregnancy, such as a place for her to rest. When she tried to negotiate more favourable work hours such as arriving early and leaving early, she was shamed for not being "stronger" and "making a fuss" over a "natural part of life." Hence, Preeti felt that she was being punished for becoming pregnant and that, as with Kanchan, the management in her office did not accept her pregnancy.

It is easy to classify the pressures that Preeti and Kanchan encountered under headings such as ill health, non-supportive workplaces and financial hardship. But underneath these categories, both women were wrestling with how their status as soon-to-be mothers overwrote their identities and accomplishments as working women. The assumption that they would be "committed mothers" instantly wiped away any recognition of agency on their part on how many children they wanted to have, or whether they wanted to keep working the same way as they had before their pregnancies. Moreover, as the management in their organisations considered motherhood to be a "natural" part of life, changes in their health due to their pregnancies were easily dismissed. This was even though both of their organisations were primed to be sympathetic to women and their plight. In Kanchan's case, her job at a court, meant that the HR Manager's open plans to fire her over her pregnancy were understood to be against the spirt of the law, a fact noted by her direct supervisor, a judge. Similarly, Preeti's job in a consultancy firm that advised on social welfare issues, particularly those pertaining to women and child health, meant that their attempts to deny her full maternity leave and refusal to make provisions for her pregnancy, were against the work of the organisation. Both women, were thus cynical; Kanchan doubting the law's ability to protect women, and Preeti, scathing of "women's welfare" initiatives, suggesting that they were merely paying lip-service to women's rights and gender equality.

Preeti and Kanchan had different reactions to being pigeon-holed as ‘mothers’ as opposed to workers: while Kanchan insisted that it was “her fundamental right to work,” Preeti internalised the criticism that mothers were unreliable workers. Already insecure about her work at the time of her pregnancy, she contrasted her experience in the workplace to her husband’s, reflecting that after becoming a father, he was considered “responsible” and “reliable” as he had a family to support, while she was treated with suspicion ever since she announced her pregnancy. She suggests that this suspicion is not unfounded, commenting that:

> It's a major factor if you have a child or not. It does take away from your productivity a little bit. Your mind is in two places, my mind is in two places and my husband’s mind is not in two places. I don‘t know if that’s social conditioning or DNA … but at work I was always calling and asking ‘Did he [the baby] eat lunch? How much did he eat? The full bowl or the half bowl?’”

I asked Preeti, if she thought that she was ‘distracted’ by her son because she was his primary caregiver? Preeti admitted that despite her husband’s and her commitment to equality within their marriage, and her husband’s desire to be involved in raising his son, she bore what she termed as the “mental load” of raising the child. Given the stark differences between her husband’s and her salaries, it made sense, she explained for her to be more involved in raising the child as they could more easily afford to lose her job then his. Yet the decision for Preeti to be the child’s primary caregiver was not just one based on such monetary considerations: Preeti felt that whenever her husband was given a child-rearing task, she had to check whether he did it correctly, as he had forgotten these tasks in the past. This led to fights between the couple and Preeti felt that it was easier if she just did the tasks herself, telling me: “Even if somebody else would be doing a better job as the Mom I think I know what’s best for my child…. I trust myself the most.” Thus, even though

they were in a companionate marriage of equals, when it came to child-rearing, the couple fell into traditional gender roles, with a highly involved mother and a more distant father.

Unsurprisingly then, although Preeti had returned to work after her maternity leave, she soon quit. She explained that her workplace still had no provisions for her as a mother but that this time, some of her previously supportive colleagues were also hostile. Her male colleague with whom she shared a room, refused to leave it to let her express milk, telling her that she should feed the baby in person. Similarly, the office boy,[60] complained about her storing breast milk in the fridge, saying that it was "indecent."[61] Preeti persisted, pointing out that she was, by law, to be provided nursing breaks to express milk and that there was nothing "indecent" about it. Yet, her appetite to fight these battles was diminished by the fact that her company was going through a rough patch and there was very little work. She explained: "I couldn't just sit there playing solitaire when he [the baby] was waiting for me at home. Maybe before I could but not now. It was too much." She found her decision to quit empowering and when I asked her what I should put down as her occupation, she told me with a large smile, "Now I am a housewife." Her use of the word 'housewife' was surprising, as most of the women I interacted with would not use this term to describe themselves unless they caveated it with other descriptors.

Notably, Preeti's decision to quit, was not because she thought she needed to be a better mother or agreed with her colleagues' preconceptions on how she should raise her son. Instead, it was born out of long simmering frustration with her treatment at her workplace, that heightened during her pregnancy and her early motherhood, and the simple fact that she did not have work to do. As such, despite both women's scepticism of

[60] Most Indian offices have an "office boy" who is responsible for tasks such as making tea for the employees and any visitors, delivering mail and making photocopies.
[61] In a country, where women are routinely given black plastic bags while purchasing sanitary products, gendered bodily processes like the production of breast milk are laden with sexual overturns.

ideologies of "committed motherhood," they found themselves turning away from their work lives and careers, despite the time and effort they had invested into their careers previously. While for Preeti, this meant quitting her job, for Kanchan, this led to a shift in how she identified, as her role as a wife and daughter-in-law became more central to her understandings of herself, particularly in contrast to the increasingly fraught situation at her workplace.

Many of the challenges that Preeti and Kanchan faced during their pregnancies can be thus traced to the hegemonic nature of the ideology of committed motherhood. Although, none of the women I spoke to fully accepted this ideology of motherhood, those around them did, and used it to devalue these women and re-write their identities as nothing but mothers. Moreover, the fact that this ideology of committed motherhood assumes that motherhood is 'natural' allowed the suffering experienced by Kanchan and Preeti during their difficult pregnancies to be minimised and ignored. While both Kanchan and Preeti were able to resist much of these efforts to devalue them, it had an impact on their well-being and future as can be seen by Preeti's decision to leave the workforce. As such the ideology of committed motherhood plants the seeds of isolation, loss of identity and ignorance of women's suffering were are common affective tropes within the suicide stories I heard.

6.2 The Circulation of Care and Early Motherhood

Despite both women's shifts in subjectivity towards a more home and family-oriented outlook, neither Preeti nor Kanchan was happy with their experiences at home, as they found that the ways care circulated within their families had shifted after they gave birth. For Preeti, this shift started at the birth itself. She went into premature labour and

was accompanied to the hospital by her husband and mother. Her mother accompanied her through most of the hospital stay, while her husband took care of the administrative side of the hospital visit, such as paying the bills and filling out the paperwork around the birth. Preeti opted for an epidural despite her mother's objections that it may harm the baby. After the birth, as the child was born premature he was shifted to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). Meanwhile, the doctor told Preeti's mother to make her rest, but these instructions were not conveyed to Preeti. Instead, Preeti, anxious to be a good mother, would trek to the NICU to do care work such as feeding the baby, checking his diaper and singing him lullabies. Later, she was told that this exertion caused the epidural to leak and to temporarily paralyse her from the neck down, a rare side effect.[62] Preeti recounted how scared she was during her paralysis, describing how she lay down , unable to lift her head, thinking "Shit, I gave birth to this thing [the baby] and it paralysed me. His life is starting, and my life is over."

For Preeti, this traumatic incident was a vivid illustration of how her well-being was being sacrificed for her child's. She was particularly distressed by her mother not warning her about exerting herself, and encouraging her to see the baby, despite the risks. Expecting her mother to be primarily concerned about her welfare, she was taken aback when her mother was unrepentant, telling Preeti that: "*Hum logo mein aaisa kohi nahi karetha hain* [take the epidural]" (In our family, no one does this [take the epidural]). The mother explained that she thought the doctor's advice for Preeti to rest was "*aise he*" (just like that) and that he was pampering her. In her mother's eyes, Preeti's attempts to evade the 'natural' pain of childbirth, was an unacceptable risk, diminishing the maternal sacrifice

[62] The medical accuracy of this is unclear – this is Preeti's recollection of what her mother told her while she was paralysed and in distress. As far as I can tell Preeti did not directly discuss her condition with the medical professionals treating her. Nevertheless, this is Preeti's understanding of her situation and the role the epidural played within it.

required to bring in new life. As such she was primarily concerned with how the epidural could negatively affect the baby. Thus, instead of the flows of care from her mother circulating around Preeti, it was redirected to the new-born grandchild, leaving Preeti's need for care during this difficult time not just unmet but trivialised.

For Kanchan, after birth, her previously supportive in-laws fractured into two camps. On one side were her father-in-law and husband, who expected her to quit working and stay at home to take care of the child. On the other side was her mother-in-law, who said that she would take care of the child, so that Kanchan could return to work. Kanchan took her mother-in-law up on her offer to help, yet this did not decrease her husband's and father-in-law insistence that she quit her work, and the environment within the home was fraught. Meanwhile, Kanchan, unlike Preeti, was unwilling to negotiate for the right to have nursing breaks even though, once again, legally she was supposed to be provided these. As the HR Manager had doubled down on his campaign to fire her now that she was a new mother, Kanchan was convinced that it would be a bad idea to further challenge her hostile work environment with demands for nursing breaks.[63] As she could not breast feed, her baby was given formula by the mother-in-law. In the first few months of the child's life, the baby was constantly sick with bad bouts of diarrhoea and Kanchan would often be worried about her daughter's health as well as sleep-deprived, because she spent most of the night awake taking care of her sick child. The doctors who Kanchan consulted, encouraged her to start breast feeding as it was considered more "hygienic" than baby formula. Yet, Kanchan would not consider this, explaining that if she were to start breast

[63] Unable to fire Kanchan because of her supervisor's insistence that she remain, the HR Manager had been trying to make Kanchan's work environment so hostile that she would end up quitting on her own. His attempts to do this was something that Kanchan and her colleagues felt that she had to endure, hoping that her ability to withstand his daily attempts to humiliate her would outlast his drive to get rid of her. Three years after giving birth, Kanchan has remained in this job, and the HR manager, while unsupportive, is no longer directly targeting her.

feeding, there would be no way to hold onto her job due to pressure from the "*ghar-wale*" (the people at home) who would expect her to breast feed in person, and the "*office-wale*" (the people at the office) who would not allow her the privacy to express milk.

While it may seem that Kanchan's insistence to re-join her work bucked the ideology of committed motherhood, in fact, she used this ideology to justify her desire to keep this job. She explained that "I want *everything* for my daughter. A good education, status, a job where people know her by name." To obtain these wants it was crucial, Kanchan argued, that she keeps her job as it would let her afford private schooling for her daughter. For Kanchan, rearing her daughter through the opportunities afforded by her comparatively higher salary, was a way to cement the family's transition from working class to middle class. [64] Thus, Kanchan accepted the ideology of committed motherhood's insistence that the mother should be willing to sacrifice anything for the well-being of the child and be willing to endure the most difficult of situations. Yet she reframed what she needed to endure, insisting that for her child's well-being she would put up with the antipathy from her husband and father-in-law and the hostility of her office rather than quit her job. She used the humiliation and indignities she experienced to further shore up her decision to stay in her workplace, telling me that she must work so that her daughter does not find herself in a similar situation. For instance, she told me "I want people to know my daughter by her name. It is very hard for a girl – no one knows who she is…In my case, if anyone talks about me, they call me Anil's [her husband] wife. In some time, I'll be Neera's [her daughter] Mummy."

[64] This narrative is complicated by the fact that for most of the time I was in the field, Kanchan's husband and in-laws did not know about how much Kanchan was earning. See *Chapter 6: Die-vorce and Suicide: The Unmaking of the Middle-Class Wife* for a more detailed discussion on this experience and precariousness within the home.

As such Kanchan uses the ideology of "committed motherhood" to find worth in her life and make the struggles that she engages with meaningful and morally justified. For her, caregiving is bifurcated into the short-term caring for the infant, and the long-term provision of opportunities for social mobility and increased 'respect' for the child. As the family's main breadwinner, Kanchan has placed herself in charge of the latter and is willing to endure hardships to provide her child with these opportunities. Kanchan acknowledges that most of these hardships are due to her rejecting accepted gendered practices where the male breadwinner is the main provider for the family and the mother is the child's carer. Instead, she performed intense emotional work to minimise how defiant her behaviour was, particularly in her face-to-face interactions. At work, Kanchan said she would never directly dispute her HR manager's less than flattering assessments of her and, at home, she explained that she tried to be the dutiful daughter-in-law, never raising her voice or directly contradicting her father-in-law and husband. Instead, she relied on other women (her colleagues and mother-in-law) to intervene on her behalf with these hostile male authority figures. Her apparent meekness was not just a strategic choice, but also borne out of the ideology of committed motherhood with its emphasis on the sacrificial and suffering mother. Kanchan minimised the impact of her suffering; the humiliation and indignities she experienced dismissed as just an expected part of the suffering entailed within motherhood. Instead, by enduring this suffering she was sending out a moral signal, to herself and to women, like me, to whom she would openly talks about her experiences with, that she was a 'good mother,' working against a hostile world to provide a good life for her child.

Kanchan's use of the ideology of committed motherhood also shifts how she recognised care in her marital family; by focusing on who is doing the caregiving, Kanchan only acknowledged the care she or her mother-in-law gives to her daughter. Her husband and father-in-law meanwhile were not just cast as uncaring but were depicted as obstacles

to her daughter's well-being. This does not mean, however, that the husband and father-in-law were not affectionate towards the daughter. In fact, Kanchan bemusedly noted that her husband loves their daughter, spending all his time outside of work with her, and constantly calling Kanchan for updates on the baby's welfare when she and her daughter would visit her natal family. Yet this care, is not recognised as valid by Kanchan, who feels that it is a way to paint as her being "unnaturally" uncaring especially as it is often followed with entreaties for Kanchan to quit her job. Given that her marriage was forced against her will, it is unsurprising that between the tense situations at home and at work, it is at home where Kanchan felt the most uncomfortable. She told me that when she comes to the office it is like "walking into mummy *ka ghar*" (her mother's home), because of her supportive colleagues, and she can relax amongst them in a way that is just not possible at home: "Everyone [in the marital family] has to adjust [after marriage]. But I have to do the most adjustment because I am new there. Especially when there is a holiday from office." Even though she loves her daughter, Kanchan dreads the time she must spend at home, particularly with her husband, feeling that he does not accept who she is, as a working woman, and her status as a mother only heightens the stakes for this non-acceptance.

Like Shruti, both Preeti and Kanchan struggle with the actual drudgery of child-rearing. Kanchan is frankly says that she finds it intolerably boring; "I am just watching her face [the baby]. I am willing her to wake up so I can feed her – there is nothing else for me to do. But she just wants to sleep. I want to play with her, but she is just sleeping." In contrast, the actual work she does in her office is meaningful for her:

> From the beginning having a job has given me satisfaction. I feel all these thoughts in my mind. I have a hundred thoughts running through my mind. At office, it stops. I can focus. I feel such self-satisfaction at work…99% of people work to earn money. Not for the satisfaction. But for me the biggest benefit is at night, I can sleep. Relaxed. *Koi tension nahi hain* [with no *tension* at all]. I know tomorrow there will be something for me to do.

Weaver (2017 and 2019) points out that the use of the word "tension" in North India, transcends its English meaning. Instead, *tension*, she argues, is a culturally-specific "idiom of distress," particularly when used by women, which indicates a form of social stress that is "defined by the pull of competing roles and expectations" (Weaver 2019, 68). It is closely linked to the changing gender relations, as Weaver (2019) comments: "Tension was its own form of suffering—not simply an idiom for depression, but a phenomenon linked in people's minds specifically to modern urban living and to social dynamics that subjugated women's desire" (87). Gooptu and Krishnan (2017) elaborate this push and pull of competing expectations by pointing out that tension is linked to the "apparent decline of an older moral order, traditional culture and ways of life, [and] a growing understanding of the self as an atomised individual suffering from a deficit of both social cohesion and ethical moorings" (404). In this case, Kanchan finds relief from the tension at home at her workplace, away from the conflict around whether she is successfully fulfilling her gender role as a wife and mother.

Tension is described as "a heightened state of worry and anxiety," that may manifest as weakness, a weakened immune system, lifestyle diseases like diabetes and heart diseases, as well as leading to suicide (Gooptu and Krishnan 2017, 404-405). For Kanchan, she experienced tension not only as an inability to sleep, her mind occupied by her fears over the future, but also a weariness that underlined her descriptions of daily life. For instance, when talking about the tension she suffers she would describe her commute home; telling me how fast she would run to the metro station the minute the clock struck six as she was unable to leave any earlier, despite finishing her work beforehand, without being labelled as a "*kaam chor."* Yet when she would come home exhausted three hours later, her husband would be short with her, and her father-in-law would make snide comments about her coming home after dark. Tension, in this case, encompasses the daily

anxieties around how Kanchan is judged as a worker pitted against her frustrations in how she is understood as a mother/wife/daughter-in-law, underlined by her physical exhaustion from her gruelling commute home. It is, moreover, operating in concert with feelings of being uncared for and being unacknowledged. Tension, thus, acts as a shorthand for not just emotional, mental and physical suffering but is fundamentally borne out of and located within the social sphere.

Yet tension, when it is understood as an individual phenomenon is considered as much a moral disorder as it is an emotional, mental and physical one, with those suffering from tension blamed for their "failure to 'adjust' or take a balanced approach to emerging new problems" (Gooptu and Krishnan 2017, 404). For women, particularly, experiencing 'tension' goes against the expectation that they would "'swallow pain' to maintain family harmony" (Weaver 2019, 87). Thus, Kanchan's refusal to quit her job and take care of her daughter, is understood by her husband and father-in-law to be an act of defiance and a refusal to "swallow her pain" as it indicates that she is not happy with the economic conditions of her marital family.[65] Yet, they share her aspirations of class mobility and improved quality of life and so her decision to keep working is uneasily tolerated by the male members of her marital family, even as the female members openly support her. Nevertheless, the tension from this decision is constantly encountered in her daily life, part "of the everyday cut and thrust of gendered lives," evident in the ever-present potential for conflicts within the family (Gooptu and Krishnan 2017, 405). Meanwhile, as tension is understood to be "a matter for self-control and self-development," Kanchan's emotional disciplining and refusal to take part in conflicts within the home or at the workplace, become a way through which she can deny that her decision to keep working is borne out

[65] This is of course, an oversimplification and misreading of Kanchan's unhappiness, much of which stems from how her wishes were not considered when she was made to marry against her will.

of a ‘hysterical’ reaction to tension, but that it is instead a ‘rational’ and considered choice (Gooptu and Krishnan 2017, 406).

Preeti’s experiences of motherhood are also characterised by the inability of those around her to recognise and acknowledge her suffering. Preeti shared with me that she suspected that she has been suffering from postpartum depression since her son was born. Preeti is unique amongst the women I interacted with in that she uses the word “depression” to self-diagnose. She recognised how rare it is for new mothers to admit that they are depressed and suggested that this is part of the reason why she is having such a hard time getting help for her depression, even though she is actively seeking it:

> The last year I've found myself questioning whether I have postpartum depression or not? And I have been consciously trying to address it. In the sense that, I could have it, and I should get it checked out if I do. So, I have consulted some people. But a lot of people are just not open to the idea of discussing that [postpartum depression]. Even new moms, they make it sound very rosy and like this is the best time of our lives - even if they are feeling low. But if I tell them that I felt very low, that I didn’t want to touch my baby for the first few months - then they are like “I feel the same way.” But they feel ashamed to admit that … because people judge them, like “How can you feel like that about your own child?”

As the above quote shows, there is considerable pressure on new mothers to fulfil the expectations of “committed motherhood” by demonstrating how this is “the best time of our lives.” This is a shift from traditional understanding of motherhood that configure it in terms of sacrifice to an entrepreneurial model of motherhood, which sees mothering itself is a source of fulfilment and happiness (Thornton 2011; Gooptu and Chakravorty 2013). Depression, and apathy towards the baby are particularly stigmatised, as they suggest that the woman is not behaving as a mother should: “How can you feel like that about your own child?” This is particularly the case for Preeti’s society of upper-middle-class mothers who either work in corporate jobs in Gurgaon or are married to men who have such jobs. Preeti described a whirlwind of social activities around the child’s development milestones such

as baby showers and birthday parties. These events were not so much about the children but were ways in which the parents could demonstrate their class status, spending large amounts on ostentatious celebrations. For instance, Preeti told me of one such event which was held at a popular and had a DJ playing the latest Bollywood and international hits. It is unlikely that the one-year-old toddler, whose birthday party this event ostensibly was, appreciated that setting, considering that he slept through it and threw a tantrum when his parents woke him up for the cake-cutting. In such a social environment, there is little room for the depression that Preeti feels, given that happiness, commodified through lavish celebrations of life milestones such as children's birthdays, itself is a sign of class status and entrepreneurial selves.

In some ways, Preeti was well-equipped to deal with postpartum depression; her sister is a doctor and had also suffered from depression for which she was able to obtain therapy. Preeti could have leveraged these networks to get therapy for herself, or at the very least a diagnosis for how she feels. Instead, Preeti has found that her marital family was unwilling to accept that she needs help. She described her husband's reaction to her telling him that she may be depressed: "He told me 'Think postive, *aaisa nahi hoga.* [It will not happen.] It's not depression, stop thinking about it. The more negative you think the more likely it will be.' I'm not completely averse to that but sometimes you can't help it." The denial of how she feels, and the entreaties to "stop thinking" or "think positive" make it difficult for Preeti to advocate for her mental health and further stigmatise her emotions. Yet it was clear to me that Preeti was overwhelmed with motherhood. This could be seen in her bedroom, where overlaying the carefully decorated room, was the detritus of baby paraphernalia. Preeti's laptop, I was surprised to note, was tucked away in the baby's clothing hamper; the desk that it must have formerly occupied now used to change the baby's diapers and stacked with powders, creams and diapers. Clearly the child had taken

over Preeti's life, and she was quite literally unable to get space from him. The networks of care in her family were thus, unable to provide Preeti with meaningful help, despite her own insistence that she needed it.

Yet, Preeti's family were trying to help her in their own way; her parents had been hiring her maids to help take care of the child, and her husband was paying for daycare so that Preeti could get a "break." These practical solutions to child rearing did not alleviate Preeti's feelings of depression and being overwhelmed, though she did enjoy them. She pointed out that even with the maids and the daycare, the mental load of all that needs to be done for the child was still falling on her, and she was the one who was in charge of overseeing her son's diet, medicines and general well-being.[66] Although her son is healthy, the fact that he was born premature meant that Preeti was worried that he could easily fall seriously ill and she was monitoring his health closely. This task of monitoring, and the worry associated with it, was falling primarily on her despite the maids and daycare, partially because, as she said, she "trusted' herself most of all with her son, and partially since other members of her family, like her husband were busy with their own work. Instead, the help she received effectively made her guilty for not working, telling me that "I'm not sure if they [housewives] have the kind of help that I do… [With this help] there's not much for me to do in the house frankly. Now I've sent the baby to daycare so these three hours are free. … [So I am] not doing anything productive per se."

Moreover, Preeti has found that her not working isolated her both from her friends, and, perhaps more worryingly for her, her husband:

[66] Despite having full-time maids, Preeti did not see these women as allies in taking care of the child. For one, they were very young; while Preeti did not tell me their ages, in other households the age of such maids would range from 12 to 24 years old. For another, the maids would rarely stay for long, normally working for less than six. Thus, neither the child nor the mother bonded with them, and these women were the subject of considerable scrutiny, anxiety, and distrust.

> [W]hen I see my friends, they are going to work, they're getting a salary, or they are doing their own work or whatever. In the circle I've grown up everybody works… So as much as I want to be at home with him [the baby], a part of me does want to go back [to work]. In the sense, that is what is required for me to be happy.
>
> Even in the last four-five months, I've got very frustrated *ke pure din* [for the whole day] - all my stories are about his poop or what he did. I don't have anything apart from this.
>
> In fact, I have also felt that Varun [her husband] and I have lesser things to talk about. Because we don't have common office stories... He's also interested in his baby's poop but to what extent? He sees other things during the day. I only see baby. So, at some point, I feel maybe I should just stop discussing the baby with him because he'll also get irritated…

As she is in a companionate marriage, Preeti is concerned with how her new status as a mother will impact her relationship with her husband. She concluded that to keep her marriage that of a marriage of equals, she needs to share similar experiences such as "office stories" with her husband. Thus, her return to the workplace is not just a way in which to keep her marriage healthy, but moreover, plays into her understanding of what makes her attractive in a companionate marriage setting. Furthermore, in talking to Preeti there is a clear sense that she believes that her status as a 'committed mother' and housewife is limiting her experiences, and she complains that "I don't have anything apart from this [motherhood]." Going back to work then becomes a way in which Preeti, like Shruti, can grow and live a more worthwhile life

Preeti's reasons to go back to work critique of the ideology of committed motherhood, demonstrating that it can be isolating, limiting and may not be compatible with companionate marriages. However, even though Preeti said that going back to work is "what is required for me to be happy," I thought that Preeti was not convinced of this. As per her own description, she had been unhappy at her previous job, which had depleted her sense of worth. Furthermore, going back to work would not alleviate the mental load of childcare with which she was struggling. Yet, when I brought this up to Preeti, she

pointed out that there was no way she could afford to have another child without going back to work. By the end of my fieldwork, Preeti had got a new job. As she negotiated the fraught transition back to work, she was able to find solace from the ideology of committed motherhood, reminding herself in difficult moments that the "tension" she was currently undergoing was something that she had to endure for her yet to be conceived child.

Neither Kanchan nor Preeti are suicidal, but their experiences with early motherhood have been characterised by stress and 'tension,' with Preeti acknowledging that she may be depressed. During this time of early motherhood both women have found that the flows of care in their families would skip over them in favour of the baby. Such flows effectively marginalised them within the familial space – as their needs were neither fully recognised nor accommodated, creating situations where they felt they were rejected and overlooked. While both women displayed agency in how they were able to deploy the ideology of committed motherhood to reframe their understandings of the expectations around motherhood and endure difficult situations, it also came with the acceptance of the idea that motherhood is naturally difficult and entailed suffering on the part of the mother. Their early motherhood experiences, thus, demonstrate how women are configured as not needing care and their suffering is taken for granted and dismissed, not just by those around them, but by themselves as well. This minimisation of women's suffering is a common theme across women's suicide narratives, as are the descriptions of women who find themselves in hostile situations but do not seek support from their relatives, as they have no expectations of receiving care. Moreover, in these early motherhood experiences, suffering, just like suicide, becomes a way in which the woman can draw attention to the less-than-ideal circumstances of her family rather than meekly 'swallowing pain' and continuing with the performance of aspirational happiness. It is as such stigmatised and women are encouraged to hide how they feel, further complicating their ability to seek care.

6.3 Suicide and the Receiving of Care

Thus far I have discussed how the ideology of committed motherhood leads to a fraught experience for women during the early stages of motherhood. Yet, this fraught experience is also present for older women whose relationship with their adult children can both infuse meaning into their lives and strip away worth from it. This can be seen in the story told by Shiuli, a woman in her early seventies, who had been widowed during my fieldwork, about the suicide of her husband's niece. The niece was a talented artist who lived in the United States. She was divorced with no children, and Shiuli described her as "eccentric" with odd tastes in food and clothes, who was nonetheless a pleasant person with "excellent friends." More than a decade ago, when the niece was in her mid-fifties, she had an aneurysm after which she wrote a living will, in which she specified that no medical treatments were to be given if she was in a coma. More unconventionally, the will stated that if she had an unnatural death, it would be due to suicide, and no one was to be prosecuted for it. Twelve years later, when the niece was in her mid-sixties, she committed suicide. Shiuli was upset, but not shocked by this as the niece had expressed her desire to end her life. After her first aneurysm, she feared that she would have another medical crisis, which would leave her bedridden and dependent on strangers. At this point, Shiuli paused her narrative and commented that "she wouldn't have done it [committed suicide], if she had children."

I was intrigued by Shiuli's response, as it appeared to run counter to what was happening in her own life. Shiuli was from a wealthy family and her marriage had been arranged before she was twenty years old to a much older man. For the last fifty years, Shiuli had primarily been a caregiver; first, raising her two sons, then moving in with and taking care of her elderly parents and finally, after they passed away, taking care of her

husband in his final years. Throughout this relentless caregiving, Shiuli has been trapped in an unhappy marriage, which, as with Kanchan, was one that she had been unwilling to enter. Her dislike of her husband was palpable, though this did not stop her from taking care of him.[67] Now that he had passed away, Shiuli was looking forward to her newfound freedom away from the restrictions of her family, planning trips abroad, visits to friends and was excited to live on her own for the first time in her life. Residing in a lovely home in one the wealthiest neighbourhoods in Gurgaon, Shiuli was in no hurry to sell up and move in with one of her sons. On the contrary, she was irked that her husband had instructed her sons to "take care of her," putting her in the position of receiving of what she termed as an "allowance" from them and having to justify her expenses whenever she exceeded it. In light of her happiness with her newfound independence, it seemed odd that Shiuli was so convinced that the niece would have not been suicidal if only she had children.

For Shiuli though, her niece's suicide was a matter of loneliness and hinged on the moral question of who care can be received from. Despite her "excellent friends," Shiuli thought the niece was 'alone,' her relations with her friends not being as dependable or sacrosanct as the bond between a mother and child. This loneliness increased the niece's anxiety about what would happen to her if she was to fall ill, and Shiuli thought that she would have hated the idea that she would be dependent on strangers or friends. Such care from "strangers" or even "friends," was not simply a matter of whether the care was dependable, Shiuli explained, but it was also about a person's dignity. It was simply easier to receive care from one's children, she explained, especially if one was a woman. This

[67] For most of their married life Shiuli and her husband lived apart, as a compromise between the couple – Shiuli had wanted to divorce him, but her parents and husband insisted that she stay married but "allowed" her to live apart from him. Shiuli moved in with her parents ostensibly to take care of them. When they died Shiuli had to return to her husband, much to her dismay, as she had no means to support herself on her own. This dismay was, however, tempered by the fact that by then her husband was quite ill and dependent on her.

understanding of reciprocity in the parent-child relationship is one that is prevalent across Indian contexts, which understand "familial relations as entailing long-term bonds of reciprocal indebtedness" (Lamb 2000, 46 and 2009; Donner 2005 and 2008; Fuller and Narasimhan 2007; Vatuk 1990). In this case, Shiuli believes her niece did not have an ethical right to receive the care of her friends or that those friends had the ethical obligation to give her their care – there are no moral debts encapsulated within familial bonds between them. By imposing this moral framework on whom care can be received from and whom it can be given to, Shiuli privileges the mother-child relationship at the expense of other relations. In her own case, while Shiuli is frustrated that her husband did not just leave her an inheritance that she could freely access, she believes that by virtue of the sacrifices she has made through her motherhood, she has a right to receive care from her sons.

Yet, in Shiuli's case, care between child and mother is increasingly being commodified – since her sons are abroad, they cannot perform personal acts of care and instead must demonstrate it through financial acts, such as the online payment of medical bills. As Fuller and Narsimhan (2007) demonstrate, immigration "undermines parent-child reciprocity within the family" and relations between Shiuli and her sons have become increasingly fraught as they negotiate new ways to demonstrate, give and receive care (146). Shiuli's interactions with her sons are increasingly dominated by her frustrations over her 'allowance' that is administered, from afar, by her sons who have little understanding of her day-to-day reality. Increasingly, she understands the strength of her relationship with her sons in monetary terms, scrutinising how 'generous' they are towards her as evidence of both their love for her and whether they are 'good' sons. Yet at the same time, she dreads the day when her sons insist that she moves in with one of them and she loses her freedom. Unlike her experience living in her parents' house during their old age, Shiuli knows that she will be living in her son's house and be expected to 'adjust.'

Nonetheless, Shiuli is more comfortable with being dependent on her sons, than with being dependent on her disliked husband, as she understands the mother-child relation to be more 'genuine,' stemming as it is from the pre-social ties of sacrifice (Das 1976).

Shiuli's experiences of ageing can be viewed as an example of the "assemblage" between the successful ageing discourse that is prevalent in the United States and other Western countries and traditional ideas of Indian ageing (Lamb 2020). Lamb (2020; 2018; 2014) characterises "successful aging" as a discourse that "emphasizes individual independence, busy productivity, and agelessness or a striving to not be 'old'" (2020, 323). Meanwhile traditional Indian ideas around ageing focus on how it is a life stage where the morality of the rest of the family (specifically the child) is established through their caregiving to the elderly person, where the lack of "productive activity" is a 'privilege' to be enjoyed by the elderly, and where there is a focus on how the "worldly life is 'transient'" and bodily decline is accepted as inevitable (Lamb 2020, 322-323; 2013).[68] These two perspectives of ageing are contradictory, and Lamb (2020) demonstrates how her elderly interlocutors end up performing an assemblage of them, weaving together various aspects from each discourse to perform their own understanding of aging. For the elderly women I encountered, there was, as with Shiuli's case, a desire to preserve independence while acknowledging that ageing, bodily decline and death were inevitable. Most of these women would spend considerable amounts of time in spiritual study, in keeping with the Hindu life cycle's emphasis on the spiritual as opposed to the material in old age (Vatuk 1990).

Yet it was concerns with the material plane that dominated my discussions about old age. The fear of abandonment, specifically, was commonplace. Such a fear is highly

[68] These traditional Indian ideas of aging implicitly invoke the idea of the joint family, assuming that the elderly person is the undisputed head of the household, and that there is one or more child living with them who will take care of them. Yet, as Michaels (2020) demonstrates, this idea of the caring joint family is itself a myth, particularly for women, whose care was understood to solely be the purview of their marital family and are thus, dependent on the goodwill of their sons.

gendered, while both men and women fear abandonment by their children, old age narratives depict women, specifically, as being either passive victims, susceptible to both neglect and maltreatment, or as manipulative women who are thrown out by their families. Borrowing from the *saas-bahu* (mother-in-law/daughter-in-law) narrative, Cohen (1998) shows that either the mother is cast as the morally superior woman with 'traditional values,' abused by the 'modern' daughter-in-law, or is depicted as the scheming mother-in-law who harasses the young and naïve daughter-in-law and whose sinful deeds lead her to meet a bad end (Vatuk 1990). The *saas-bahu* relationship is inherently hostile and positions the figure of the aged mother as being vulnerable and precarious, her power within the family inevitably diminishing the older she grows (Das 1976). Thus, although the mother is understood to have the moral right to the child's care and is encouraged to privilege her identity as a mother over her other identities, the narrative of *saas-bahu* vividly makes it clear that the child has other identities than just being the mother's child. In these *saas-bahu* stories, these other identities, whether they be as a spouse, parent, or working individual, can get in the way of giving care to the mother. As such *saas-bahu* narratives act as warnings to mothers by fomenting anxieties around being neglected, humiliated and abandoned.

Such anxieties around the mother-child relationship were apparent even with women who had teenage children. Reema, a housewife in her forties, who lived in Chandan Apartments, for instance, told me that "The greatest challenge a housewife faces are the children. The children that God gives you. Some people get very responsible children who do everything. I have *namoone* [specimens]." Reema is being sarcastic here, *namoone* has a derogative connotation when used to describe people – suggesting, in this case, that her children are the opposite of 'specimens' or 'models' of responsibility. When she said this, I thought that she was referring to how her children were not doing well in school, mindful

of how the child's academic performance is often reflected onto the mother. Yet, Reema clarified that her worries were over the "character" of her children, believing that they were not "responsible" enough to take care of her husband and her in their old age. This was not just a concern of money and whether the children would have enough financial security to look after their parents but based on the way her children would behave with her husband and her. Elaborating, she described an episode of the popular TV game show "*Kaun Banegha Crorepati*?"[69] where the contestant ran an old age home. She described the living conditions of the residents before they moved into the old age home: "There were rats running around. The children had just locked them in with the parents. This is why it's very important that children respect parents and treat them well."

Such fears were shared by other women who had teenagers, who would worry that their children were 'irresponsible' or 'materialistic,' words that were paired with moral concerns over their children being 'selfish' or 'too modern.' These women were concerned about how the child would treat the mother, rather than fearing the child going abroad or setting up a separate household within India.[70] A common complaint was how their child "was always *in* her phone." The choice of 'in' rather than 'on' seems deliberate – conjuring up the image of the child submerged within the phone, in a separate reality that the mother cannot access. While such fears of being ignored and not seen by or cared for their children could be framed as anxieties around 'modern times,' with consumption practices that exceeded those of the past and fears of increasingly individuated lifestyles, many of the women I spoke to considered it a 'natural' generational change, that occurred as children grew older and became more independent. Mrs Chaudhary, a housewife with two children

[69] This is the Indian version of the game show "Who wants to be a millionaire?"

[70] On the contrary, most Indian parents I met professed themselves as excited at the prospect that their children could move abroad and settle there, seeing it as an opportunity for an improved standard of living. Nevertheless, most would caveat that they, personally, would not like to make such a move.

in their twenties explained: “I guess you can call it a middle age crisis or maybe an identity crisis… That your husband and children – they don’t even listen to you. Children become busy; husband was always busy.” For Mrs Chaudhary, her children becoming “busy” has led to a phase in her life characterised by intense loneliness and concerns about going unheard and unseen by her children. Having (albeit reluctantly in her case) bought into the ideology of committed motherhood, she struggled as her children gained independence, and she was decentred from their lives.

Compounding this fraught time is how the ideology of committed motherhood isolates women, making it difficult for them to have lives apart from their child and find other sources of support. Moreover, the discourse of committed motherhood, with its emphasis on care being given *by* the mother *to* the child does not encompass how the mother should receive care. Hence, many of the women I spoke to struggled to seek care from their children. In Mrs Chaudhary’s case, she combatted her loneliness by buying into the successful ageing aspect of keeping herself “busy,” by being more involved in her husband’s business. Other married women similarly set up their own businesses or become more involved in the family business once their children embarked on their careers. While such acts may appear to be entrepreneurial, they were not framed as such, and women downplayed the monetary side of these arrangements while emphasising that these businesses gave them a sense of purpose now that their children were older. Nevertheless, their fears about their changing relationships with their children remained, and Mrs Chaudhary, in particular, shared her concerns that she would not be heard, seen or ultimately, cared for by them.

Other women, like Mrs Garg, while focusing on being ‘busy,’ instead tried to find ways to make themselves ‘useful’ to their children. Widowed at a young age, Mrs Garg, a former professor, retired early once her first grandchild was born. She now lives with her

son, his wife and two grandsons in their early teens, in Chandan Apartments.[71] Having spent the last fifteen years raising her grandchildren, Mrs Garg explained that: "I decided to leave my work because I desired to stay with my son. I thought if I live with them, I would be more useful. Grandparents are better than anyone, except the mother of course, at taking care of children. I thought I could raise them with *mere samskaar* [my values]." She goes on to explain that "it was my duty…this way I could give back to society. Yes, it was a chance to give back." Mrs Garg's understanding of her social role rests on ideas of obligations. Her discussion of giving and receiving of care is transposed into religious terms as strictly accounted for moral 'debts' and 'credits' that are owed between family members. She explains that after she was widowed, her mother-in-law took care of her children so that Mrs Garg could work and provide for her family. She understands her early retirement as repaying her mother-in-law and their family, by rearing her grandchildren so that her daughter-in-law, who has a well-paying corporate job, can work. In return, her son and daughter-in-law provide her a place to stay as well as respect her wishes on how their children are reared. She, thus, determines the culture of the house, deciding on the role of religion, what foods can be eaten and how the family spends its time together.

Mrs Garg's experiences with shared parenthood belie the idea of committed motherhood with a primary caregiver; in both her and the daughter-in-law's case, it is the mother-in-law who does most of the caregiving, and the two women work in concert to further the family's well-being. This lived experience of affinal co-operation is missing in most narratives of *saas-bahu*, but it is not necessarily a harmonious experience. In Mrs Garg's case, she's conscious that she is finding it difficult to rear her grandchildren as they grow older and was worried that she will soon no longer be "useful" to her son and his family. She is, thus, anxious to limit her moral debts to her son. When I asked her about

[71] Mrs Garg has a daughter as well, but she rarely mentioned her.

her arrangements for medical care, she became defensive, insisting that she followed a strict yoga regime to keep herself healthy: "I don't feel any stress, actually… I'm quite healthy. I don't really need it [medical help]. I don't have any regular illness." This seems to be another import from the narrative of successful aging – where the emphasis is on the individual taking care of their health and the failure to do so is understood to be a moral failure on that individual's part (Lamb 2020). Yet, in Mrs Garg's case, her desire to be healthy is tied to concerns about not being a burden to her family. Further discussions revealed that she did become sick and when this happened, she would call her niece, a doctor, to quietly treat her. Mrs Garg expected that if she were to ever fall seriously ill her son and daughter-in-law would help her, but she did not want to 'bother' them for 'minor' ailments. Their care is, thus, understood to be a finite resource by Mrs Garg, one which has to be saved for a rainy day. As such, despite her quest to be 'useful', Mrs Garg finds herself in a precarious position as an older woman, constantly balancing her needs with how much she can ask from her son and daughter-in-law.

Mrs Garg's experience in seeking healthcare underlines how difficult it is for women to articulate their care needs, something that Weaver (2016) also observes in her study of diabetic mothers and their daughters. This is also seen in the case of Ritu, a retired teacher who lives in an upper-middle-class gated community with her husband and son in Gurgaon. Ritu has a married daughter, who she is very proud of, telling me how successful she has been in her financial career at one of the "big four" financial consultancy firms. She could recount the details of her daughter's career which she follows closely, and shared her daughter's fears that now she has become a mother and has taken maternity leave, her career will stall in comparison to her colleagues. Nevertheless, the daughter's success means that she is well-off, and she has used her money to buy lavish gifts for Ritu and her *Nana* (maternal grandfather). In North Indian kinship practices, there is no culture

precedent for married daughters to give gifts to their mothers (they are expected to receive gifts) and Ritu interprets these gifts as not out of any form of social obligation but as an uncontested demonstration of her daughter's love for her. As such they leave her feeling cared for and she would light up while describing them.

Ritu's relationship with her daughter appears to be central to her finding value in the life she is living. When I first met her, she had been just released from hospital for a "life-threatening" condition. She explained that she was surprised that she had survived her ordeal, as her husband had chosen a "cheap" hospital, where the conditions were unhygienic, the doctors inattentive and where she did not receive the treatment she needed. Ritu was fatalistic when recounting the conditions of her hospital stay, telling me that she knew there was "nothing to be done" but wait to die. Things, however, took a turn when her daughter visited and saw her in the hospital. The daughter was appalled at the conditions and made "a scene," telling her father that she would pay to have her mother shifted to a more expensive and better hospital. This hurt his "male ego" and spurred the father to transfer Ritu to another hospital where she quickly recovered.

In hearing this story, I was struck by how Ritu's daughter was the protagonist of the story, intervening in a bleak situation and, in Ritu's words, "saving [her mother's] life." The daughter is depicted as someone who works primarily through motives of care, juxtaposed against the male members of Ritu's family who come across as being uncaring; the husband trying to save money at the expense of his wife's health and the son absent in this story. Ritu is passive in this story – she is resigned to her fate, does not see any point in arguing with her husband about the standard of care she's receiving and does not even consider using her own money to pay for better treatment. Moreover, when her daughter does intervene, it is on her own accord and not in response to a request by Ritu. Thus, while

it is not that Ritu is suicidal per se, she is clearly unmotivated to intervene to save her own life.

Such apathy towards living by the elderly is present in stories of what I term as the 'noble death,' such as Preeti's accounts of several elderly relatives refusing treatment for cancer, precisely because they were old and did not want to prolong their physical suffering. These noble deaths are often explicit denials that the person's life was worth prolonging. Such assertations are done in familial terms, the dying person does not want the family to be burdened with the task of taking care of them and paying for their (often quite expensive) medical costs. Preeti does not understand these deaths as 'suicides,' pointing out that the person was near death in any case. Yet the parallels between these deaths and Shiuli's niece's suicide are evident: Shiuli's niece had initially asked for no medical treatment to be provided for her, but when she found that she was still alive, twelve years later, she committed suicide – a decision, that Shiuli, at least, understands to be borne out of similar concerns around receiving care and a desire not to burden one's loved ones. Noble deaths are not treated with the same stigmatisation and distress that characterise responses to suicide. Instead, they are understood as a final act of care and love by the elderly person towards those left behind, particularly their children. Such acts of sacrificing life, thus, while they give moral worth to the person dying, effectively devalue the remainder of their life as a 'burden' to their family.

In Ritu's case, her abdication from taking ownership of her life, suggests that, as with Mrs Garg, she understands the rest of her life's worth based on how she is seen by and cared for by her children. Her daughter's actions in "saving" her are evidence that she is loved, and through them Ritu can find worth in her living. Yet such a dependence on her daughter is also precarious. Now that the daughter is a mother, she is considering quitting her job and move to Dubai where her husband works. Ritu finds this concerning; she's

worried that her daughter's career will suffer, that she will no longer have the freedom to spend money as she wants and, perhaps, most poignantly, that if her daughter moves abroad, Ritu will be alone, uncared for.

Loneliness, in this case, is not just because Ritu will no longer have her daughter to look out for her, but also because Ritu is so heavily invested in her daughter's life, particularly her career. As Malini, a psychologist, somewhat unkindly says: "Women - what else will they do?... The whole life is about the children. They live through their children."[72] Given the isolating nature of committed motherhood and how it erases women's other identities apart from motherhood, it is not surprising that Ritu became so focused on her daughter's life and career. Yet this does place Ritu's daughter in an incredibly difficult situation. As her daughter struggles with the demands of committed motherhood, she needs to constantly anticipate her mother's non-articulated care needs and is on her own when it comes to fighting the patriarchal structures in her family which devalue her mother's life. Ritu, herself, is resentful of her mother, who would similarly never ask for help, but wait for her relatives to see her suffering and then intervene, using their actions as a metric with which to judge if her life had worth and value for those around her. Yet this pattern of needing care but being unable to ask for it, continues to be repeated by Ritu; stuck as she is in an ideology of committed motherhood, where the mother provides care but does not ask for it in turn.

These experiences demonstrate that the depiction of care being unidirectional between mother and child in the ideology of committed motherhood is a false one, and it obscures how care flows from the child to the mother, causing considerable damage when

[72] Malini works primarily with mothers as the 'mothers' of her clients and critiques them for being "overly involved" and not giving her clients enough "independence" to fully "individuate" and develop adult identities. As such she is prone to be unsympathetic towards these women.

it comes to women finding sources of support. As Shiuli's insistence that her husband's niece would not have committed suicide if she had children demonstrates, women's understandings of the worthwhileness of their lives is intimately tied to the care they receive or do not receive from their children. This places women in an increasingly precarious position as their children grow older and more independent. As the assemblage between successful ageing and traditional Indian ageing increasingly define the experiences of old age, care becomes both scarce and commoditised, increasing the pressure on women to take care of themselves and not be a 'burden' for their families. In such a situation, death increasingly becomes reframed as an end for the need for care allowing the idea and act of the 'noble death' to emerge.

6.4 Conclusion

While most of the experiences of the women discussed in this chapter do not directly deal with suicide, they do show that the ideology of committed motherhood places women in precarious and vulnerable situations. Moreover, the ideology of committed motherhood provides crucial clues, when it comes to asking why women's suffering, as illustrated by the large number of married women dying by suicide, is ignored in India? Committed motherhood is inherently an isolating ideology, making it difficult for women to find allies and support. It minimises their suffering by portraying the hardships faced by women as 'natural' and ways in which 'good mothers' can prove their devotion to their children by enduring difficult circumstances and being willing to sacrifice anything for their children. Furthermore, by focusing so heavily on how mothers' give care, it diminishes how they receive it, making it difficult for women to seek help. No wonder then, when women discuss how suicide emerges as a possibility, it is situations around

motherhood that would come up as moments where they felt vulnerable and had to consider how worthwhile their lives were.

Chapter 7: Die-vorce and Suicide: The Unmaking of the Middle-Class Wife

During my afternoon talks with women in the courtyard of Chandan Apartments, I noticed that they pronounced "divorce" as "die-vorce" with the emphasis on the first syllable. I initially dismissed this as a quirk of Indian English, but soon realised that both pronunciations of divorce were being used. Divya, a judge and former divorce lawyer, for example, would use "die-vorce" when talking about specific women and their divorce cases, but said "divorce" when discussing laws and legal statutes. When I asked her about it, she explained that she uses 'die-vorce' when talking about her female clients because "it is death – the death of the wife, the death of the relationship." Such a sentiment was echoed by Reema, a housewife from Chandan Apartments, who warned me "If you don't adjust in your marriage, you won't survive. [Pause]. By survive I mean the marriage will breakdown. There will be a die-vorce." Divorce, like suicide, was feared by these women, understood as it was to be an ending of a gendered identity which shaped how women experienced and lived their lives.

This chapter explores how affective narratives around suicide interweave with those around "die-vorce," examining, in the process, the role marriage has in disguising certain forms of suffering, specifically those around sensations of precariousness and vulnerability. Furthermore, it looks at how ending marriages through divorce complicates how women understand the worthwhileness of their lives. Focusing specifically on the case of Kanchan and her forced marriage, I argue that women experience a disproportionate degree of vulnerability and precariousness within their marital families, which is echoed in their narrations of suicide stories. Yet, women's experiences of precariousness are not static and with divorce increasingly emerging as a viable option amongst the middle class, experiences of familial precariousness are slowly spreading from the wife to other members of the family. This chapter considers how this shift in experiences of precariousness, in

turn, subverts or reinforces moral understandings of what types of and whose suffering can be ignored.

Precariousness, argues Butler (2004 and 2009), is something that cannot ever be fully recognised, but is affective; encountered and experienced as an emotion, feeling or sentiment that may or may not be ever fully sensed and acknowledged. We are all precarious, she argues, for it is borne out of our interdependencies on, and vulnerabilities in relation to, each other; "Precariousness implies living socially, that is the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other" (Butler 2009, 14). This understanding of the inherent fragility of life as a social being dependent on attachments is echoed in Berlant's observation that "[a]ll attachment is optimistic" embedded with "a cluster of promises" whose loss cannot be easily borne:

> the subjects who have *x* in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the *content* of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forwards to being in the world.
>
> Berlant 2011, 23-24

The juxtaposing of this understanding of, what Berlant calls, cruelly optimistic attachments with Butler's theorisation of precariousness, underscores how the precariousness embedded within everyday attachments and is not just experienced in the moment of crisis. Instead, precariousness is constantly folded into the act of living, a counterpoint that simultaneously undercuts and defines liveability by giving lives a sense of purpose and direction. Hence, if precariousness is understood to be about liveability, it extends from the material circumstances of the living to their affective experiences. This chapter focuses on these affective experiences of how precariousness undermines the linkages between everyday life and people's hopes and aspirations for the future. Tracing these sensations of

precariousness in suicide stories, thus, can be used to understand how the viability and worthwhileness of certain ways of living becomes defined, enacted and diminished.

Despite Butler's assertion that we are all precarious, her theories do not preclude the possibility of experiences of precariousness being culturally and socially specific. Instead, Butler stresses that precariousness is relational as it is differentially allocated – with some lives and their experiences of precariousness being rendered invisible and their critical role in protecting and privileging the lives of others remaining unacknowledged (2004; Lorey 2015). The absence of such recognition allows for culturally specific conditions of precarity to be experienced, where structural-level forces define certain groups of people as being worthy of being protected from certain types of precarious experiences. This protection, however, is at the expense of others whose experiences of precariousness go unacknowledged, resulting in both them and their experiences being effectively marginalised and their suffering unrecognised. Early in her writing on precarity, Butler recognised that women and sexual minorities are particularly vulnerable to such marginalisation and thus often lead precarious lives (2004, 20); however, most of the research on gender and precariousness has been focused on how this plays out at the material level and primarily considers gender and the workplace. This chapter demonstrates that middle-class married women in India experience conditions of precarity within the home too, where their experiences of vulnerability are ignored in favour of mitigating the whole family's precariousness.

This chapter starts by considering the circumstances around Kanchan's forced marriage and contextualises her family's insistence that she marry, through a discussion of the ethics of honour and how it allows certain forms of gendered suffering to be ignored. The next section looks at how women's suicide stories narrate feelings of precariousness and vulnerability. Such stories critique these emotions as not just diminishing the

worthwhileness of women's lives, but also illustrate how these feelings of precariousness and vulnerability act as affective consequences to married women when they violate the ethics of honour. The chapter concludes with an examination of how narratives of divorce, in turn, are based on suicide and the intolerable marriage. It focuses on Kanchan's married life, and how divorce, as well as the backlash to it through the Men's Rights Movement (MRM), shapes how Kanchan defines and performs the role of the "good" wife, while trying to fulfil her aspirations for a better future.

7.1 The Ethics of Honour: *Beizzati* and Unacknowledged Suffering

It took me a while to realise that Kanchan was in a forced and unwanted marriage.[73] Kanchan's marriage was fraught, and she was upfront about the fact that she had not wanted to get married. Yet, such sentiments were commonplace amongst the women I met. Most of these women had marriages arranged by their families, and they would discuss how in the ambiguous time "before marriage," which could span anywhere from their teenage years to the day before their wedding, they would dread marriage, equating it with increased responsibilities. Moreover, several shared how they still struggled with the "tension" of having to adjust to their marital homes. When discussing their initial fears around marriage, some women mentioned sexual and emotional vulnerability, particularly as marriage effectively took away their right to consent, leading them to want to marry a man who would "respect" them. This desire to be respected was conflated with the social need to marry into "respectable" families, a status that was conferred not just on the basis of the prospective bridegroom's family's wealth but on whether the family had a 'good'

[73] While the concept of "forced marriage" has purchase in European courts and media, particularly in conjunction with South Asian and Muslim communities where it can be deployed to make racist and Islamophobic claims (see, for instance, Wilson (2007) and Razack (2004)), it is less commonly invoked in Indian narratives. As such this was not used as a term to describe unwanted marriages.

reputation.[74] Good families had "honour" and family histories that included broken marriages, or suicides were interpreted as lacking such honour. This understanding of marriage as a gateway to adulthood, meant that women's nostalgic recollections of their reluctance to marry effectively minimised their fears as ill-informed worries of a child. When I met Kanchan, approximately a year after her wedding, she was already in this process of undercutting her fears around her marriage, telling me that despite all the 'tension,' being married was "much better than I had expected."

It was only when I spoke to Divya, Kanchan's boss, that I realised how unwanted was Kanchan's marriage. Divya recalled how Kanchan would cry at her desk before her wedding, lamenting that she had told her father that she did not want to get married, yet he had gone ahead with the arrangements for it. Divya shared how she and Kanchan's colleagues were astounded that Kanchan refused to take part in any of the wedding preparations such as figuring out the menu, buying the household goods, clothes and jewellery that would be part of her trousseau, or voicing an opinion on her wedding *lehenga* or make-up. In a socially unprecedented move, she refused to invite anyone from her workplace to her wedding, telling Divya "I don't even know if I'll be there, so how can I ask you to come?"[75] Kanchan refused to meet the groom or his family when they visited her home. Yet the groom's family, like her father, ignored this clear sign that she was

[74] The arranged marriages that I came across were conducted through community networks, where there was enough familiarity between the bride's family, third party intermediaries and the groom's family to arrive at a consensus around the "honour" and "respectability" of each family. This level of knowledge is not present in marriages arranged through online matrimonial services, especially amongst those matches that span across countries. Yet "familial honour" remains relevant in this context although how it is understood and assigned is shifting. For more on online matchmaking services in India and how they are changing how marriages are arranged see Bhandari (2020), Agrawal (2015), Titzmann (2011 and 2013).

[75] While it is not socially mandatory to invite colleagues to a wedding, it is considered a faux pas to not to do so, especially if the wedding and the marriage has been discussed in detail with them. The outright refusal to invite a work colleague, particularly a superior, as Kanchan did, can easily be interpreted as an insult. Divya, however, saw Kanchan's refusal to invite her as evidence of how unwilling she was for the marriage to go ahead. She pointed out that by not inviting her, Kanchan lost both social prestige (a judge would have been a guest of honor) and the large monetary gift that Divya would have been obliged to give her.

unwilling to be married. The marriage was thus arranged despite Kanchan's lack of clear consent to the marital family and her explicit objections to her natal family.

On her final day of work before the wedding, Divya described Kanchan as being frightened, unwilling to let the workday end and return home. To both Divya and me, Kanchan explained her going ahead with the marriage as coming down to her relationship with her father. Kanchan is fond of her father, proudly stating that he considers her to be his most successful child. She explained that he tried to convince her to go through with the wedding by depicting it as an act of love she could do for him. Kanchan's decision not to marry was framed as causing her father to suffer a public humiliation that would ruin his reputation, an outcome that she succinctly described as *beizzati,* or a public dishonour. *Beizzati,* which means 'without' (*beh*) 'honour' or 'prestige' (*izzat*), refers to so deep a humiliation that it strips away respect, honour and status from the person who suffers it, and as such it encapsulates both the emotional trauma of the insult and the material loss of status (Chakravarti 2005). Honour, in turn, while highly gendered in how it operates, is an important moral signifier for both men and women, a sign that not only that they are morally 'good' but also that they will not disrupt the prevailing ethical and social order (Abu-Lughod 1986 and 2011; Chakravarti 2005).

Beizzati can be experienced by both the individual and their family. In this case, her father's *beizzati* would taint Kanchan as well, depicting her as 'spoilt' and unwilling to be a 'good daughter' who sacrifices her comfort to protect him from dishonour. As Abu-Lughod (2011) notes in her ethnographic context of Egyptian Bedouin communities, honour, and particularly modesty or sexual propriety, are part of a contested and dynamic moral order through which women value others and are valued themselves. While honour operates differently in Delhi-NCR, women in this context are also "repositories of 'family honour,'" and their actions are scrutinised as having the potential to bring shame onto the

family (Chakravarti 2005, 310). Viewing Kanchan's refusal to go through with the marriage as *beizzati,* effectively undercuts Kanchan's moral understanding of herself as a "good" daughter. This moral consideration to be 'good' had shaped her actions before marriage as can be seen in Kanchan's vehement response when I asked if she had wanted a "love marriage." She characterised such romantic relations as 'shameful,' bringing *beizzati* onto the family and diminishing her identity as a good daughter. Thus, in such an understanding of identity, experiences of precariousness and definitions of liveability and the life worth living are dependent on keeping the family's honour intact, even if it is at the expense of the individual woman's suffering or curtailment of her opportunities.

Fortun and Fortun (2005) observe that in double binds (in this case, the family's reputation versus the individual's suffering), ethics effectively allows for the negotiation between "competing values" (45). In this situation, it is an ethics of honour that establishes how values are prioritised, allowing for both the status quo of power relations within the family (the father as patriarch) to be upheld, while marginalising emotions such as suffering of women which can undermine this status quo (Chakravarti 2005). Underlining the role of an ethics of honour at play in Kanchan's marriage is the ritual of *kanya daan,* or the gifting of the virginal girl (Parry 1986; Patel 2010). *Kanya daan* is part of the Hindu marriage ceremony, where the 'giving away of the bride' is understood as the parents sacrificing her to the marital family, in return for *punya* or religious merit (Patel 2010). In kinship studies, there is considerable debate over whether *kanya daan* is a rare example of a gift exchange without reciprocity, with Parry (1986) pointing out that the gift-giver (the girl's family) is consigned to a lifetime of gift-giving with no social expectation of reciprocation. (Parry 1986).[76] Patel's observation, however, that *kanya daan* is not as much a 'gift' as it is a

[76] As Parry (1986) notes wife-givers are expected to provide gifts to their daughter and her affines throughout their lives, but are, in turn, prohibited from receiving gifts from them. For more on gift-giving in India and how it challenges Mauss' (1925[2016]) understanding of gift exchange, see Sanchez et al.(2017)

"sacrificial offering" is instructive here (2010, 275). She demonstrates that the wedding of a daughter is an event where the statuses of both families are established in relation to each other (Patel 2010). A successful match rests on the natal family marrying the bride to a higher status family, and rituals such as *kanya daan* are demonstrations of the natal family's lower status to the marital family (Patel 2010). As such reciprocation between the families' risks destabilising this inter-family hierarchy, as it suggests equality between the families. In such a situation, women's morality increasingly becomes defined in terms of how much they can be relied on to not endanger this hierarchy. Suffering, such as the type that Kanchan undergoes, becomes obscured as the woman being morally problematic; it is understood as a demonstration that the bride does not believe the chosen husband is a good match for her and her display of this suffering effectively slights both the marital and natal families, imperilling both inter and intra-family hierarchies.

Yet, the ethics of honour underlining the *kanya daan* ceremony do not go uncontested. Instead, most of the women I met disliked the idea of *kanya daan,* and several had omitted the ceremony from their weddings, protesting that they were not an 'object' that could be sacrificed by their parents. Moreover, when it came to their marriages, they explicitly positioned themselves (and their natal families) as equals of their husbands and marital families. These women would reciprocate in gift exchanges with their natal families and would scrutinise if their relatives were treated well by their husbands or in-laws. They spoke of the importance of ensuring that their natal families were treated as well as marital relatives, such as being provided gifts of equal value at festivals or being provided the same level of care.

Nevertheless, the idea of the bride as "a sacrifice" has cultural purchase and the idea of *kanya daan* and inequal hierarchies between wife-givers and wife-takers are frequently evoked in discussions around gender. As Patel (2010) demonstrates the narratives around

kanya daan are invoked when explaining why is it that women's relations with her natal family after her marriage diminish (as she's been sacrificed, she is no longer accessible to them and seen as "someone else's property") to understanding why female foeticide is practiced (as the girl is going to be sacrificed, she is understood to be "*ukkaro dhan*" or "garbage wealth" that will not benefit her natal family) (271). In Kanchan's case, she had hoped that her job, and career prospects, would lead her to be considered as being too valuable to be 'sacrificed.' She pointed out that not only did she out earn her brothers but that she was more reliable than them in sharing her salary. Additionally, she had contributed to her family over the years through care work, helping her invalid mother and raising her younger siblings, at the expense of her studies and career. Her father's insistence on her being married, thus, left her feeling devalued with her contributions to the natal family either ignored or minimised.

It is, thus, not surprising that Kanchan, while sympathetic to her father's concerns around *beizzati*, was not moved enough by them to go ahead with the marriage. Instead, it was only when her father acknowledged her suffering and proposed a compromise that she agreed to take part in the wedding. Kanchan shared her fears about her marriage, which she continues to have, several times with me – to summarise she believes that life in the marital family effectively marginalizes her as they press her down (*dabana)* until she loses her identity. Given that the marital family ignored her refusal to marry, Kanchan is unsurprised that they do not seek her opinions, from everyday matters of what to cook or do for leisure, to bigger issues around her continuing to work or how she would like to raise her child. In such an environment where her feelings mattered so little and where her consent was not sought, physical and sexual abuse were, for Kanchan, escalations that she could do little to resist or prevent. Such abuse, however, was also not at the core of her fears, which instead

revolved around the belief that her very existence is stunted and diminished within the marital family.

Yet it was the idea that Kanchan would be at the mercy of her marital family and be "tortured," an Indian English word that refers to both mental and physical harassment, that Kanchan believed moved her father to compromise. He told her that if she was unhappy in her marital home and they mistreated her, she should return to her natal family. He promised to support her amidst the social fallout of her leaving her husband, regardless of the *beizzati* this would subject their family too. As such, Kanchan's participation in the wedding hinged on her father and her coming to this compromise – that she will go ahead with the marriage, if he supports her if she leaves it. Moreover, his explicitly stating that she mattered more to him than the family's *beizzati* allowed her identity as the reliable, successful daughter who is loved and valued by her family to remerge and endure, despite her getting married into another family. Thus, the idea of divorce, not only made Kanchan's participation in her marriage possible but also made her life viable, giving her a way to look forward, even if her fears held true and the marriage failed. More to the point, it removed suicide as the only option through which Kanchan could leave the marriage.

7.2 A Life that Matters: *Lajja,* Grief and the Aftermath of Suicide

I heard multiple suicide stories where a woman had been married against her will. In *Chapter 4 Desire and Disdain: Depictions of Attraction in Suicide Narratives* I analysed one such suicide story where Priya, a retired schoolteacher, told me about a woman who had been in love with Priya's cousin but had been forced to marry another man by her family. The story ends with the woman committing suicide by jumping into a well. I broke the shocked silence that followed the recounting of this tale by asking Priya if the woman's parents regretted forcing her to marry. This was an unfair question; Priya had heard the

suicide story from her cousin and had little knowledge of what happened to the dead woman or her family. Yet Priya readily answered:

> Because she was married, they were not sad…. They didn't care if a girl died as long as she was not in their house... No one cares, in India, if a married woman dies…. If a woman dies and if she's married, it doesn't make a difference. She's a *sasti cheez* [cheap thing]. Only the mother cares, not the relatives, not the politicians, not the police.

Priya's answer scales up the dead woman's story to make observations on the status of Indian women in general. Her understanding of how women are viewed after they have wilful deaths is based on an extreme understanding of an ethics of honour which reduces the worthwhileness of women's lives to whether they dishonour their families. In such an understanding, the married woman is configured as expendable and replaceable: a *sasti cheez* whose death does not lead to the same type of *beizzati* that would affect an unmarried woman's natal family if she were to commit suicide. In this honour-based valuing of the dead woman, love and, by extension, grief for her is all but absent. Moreover, the extended society (relatives, politicians, police) cannot be bothered with her death or the suffering that led up to it.

When Butler writes about grief, she emphasises that it is not simply mourning the loss of another person, but also a mourning of the loss of self:

> It is not as if an 'I' exists independently over here and then simply loses a 'you' over there, especially if the attachment to 'you' is part of what composes who "I" am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who 'am' I, without you?"
>
> 2004, 22

Thus, for Butler, grief is evidence of both social attachment and the recognition of a life. Much of her scholarship revolves around the question "*What makes a grievable life?"* (emphasis in the original), a question that effectively delves into the ideas around liveability

and how certain lives and ways of living are (not) recognised (Butler 2004, 20). Priya's refusal to believe that dead women are grieved can be interpreted as a defiant statement, proclaiming that the woman who committed suicide was never known nor recognised by either the people she lived with or the external society that she resided in. Hence, it functions as a critique of the ethics of honour, by proclaiming that that the social attachments the dead woman was encased within were never truly to her, as a person, but instead she was reduced into an object of honour.

Through this denial of the validity and meaningfulness of the social attachments around women, Priya's words resonate with other women's accounts of how their status as wives lead them to experience a high degree of precariousness, characterised by a sense that they are living restricted and limited lives where they are never truly seen. Such experiences of precariousness vary by the regional or caste background of the women I interacted with. For instance, Rekha, a former housewife turned part-time entrepreneur in her early fifties, described the precariousness experienced by the wives in her Marwari-Rajasthani family revolving around the power differences between the wife and the "*pati-dev"* or the god-husband:

> We have seen the suffering of our mothers… Every house has conflicts. Before women wouldn't say anything about them… Women were second class citizens. You just lived in the house and had a very defined role. At least in Rajasthan, where we are from, it was like this... we don't say that you are wrong [to the husband]. Now I will definitely say. They [husbands] are human, not god. There have been changes. Things are different now, but not so much. It's not to the point of divorce.

In contrast, for Mrs Chaudhary, a housewife in her late fifties, her experience of precariousness rests on Punjabi kinship ideas that women, particularly wives, are "replaceable" (Das 1976). She highlights how, for women in her social circle, experiences

of precariousness manifest as a constant striving to improve to please the husband, while fearing not being good enough:

> The husbands – if they are financially well off – then they can keep another woman in the house... they can afford another 'wife.' Women, feel if they are not attractive or beautiful, then they can be replaced… All these women are trying, trying to be the best dressed, trying to look beautiful, trying to be a good cook

Even as both women articulate the specifics of experiences of precariousness, they reframe these experiences in terms of endurance and its opposite affective force, exhaustion (Povinelli 2011). Povinelli points out that "endurance encloses itself around the durative—the temporality of continuance, a denotation of continuous action without any reference to its beginning or end and outside the dialectic of presence and absence" (2011, 32). Neither Rekha nor Mrs Chaudhary consider divorce as a means through which to exit a marriage. Yet they do not consider the capacity to endure as infinity, instead they fear that the everyday exhaustion embedded in bad marriages can overwhelm and deplete women till they no longer exist.

Rekha gives the example of her mother, who had died shortly before my fieldwork, and had been catatonic in the last years of her life. Medical professionals told Rekha and her siblings that there was nothing physically wrong with their mother and her unresponsiveness was due to depression. Rekha described her mother's state as a "living death," and she believes that her mother's experiences with depleting strictures to be quiet and meek, especially around the *pati-dev*, eventually led her to such a state of exhaustion that any act of interaction was beyond her. Such a living death, Rekha pointed out, affected all the family members. She recounted how, as she grew up, her mother's gradual withdrawal from family life effectively meant that her mother was not particularly present in her life: "She was always depressed, never spoke a lot. I never had a mother. I never had mother-daughter talks. All the major decisions in my life were taken by my father." Rekha

is determined to be different from her mother; "I don't want to be like her. I don't want to be completely quiet." In her determination to avoid her mother's exhausted state, Rekha is indicating there are limits to what she is willing to endure to keep the marriage intact. For Mrs Chaudhary, it is suicide that is a 'natural' consequence of the uncertainty and precariousness around being 'replaceable': "Any woman, any housewife would take this step [of suicide] if her husband is having an affair. She would feel completely broken. This thought would come to every woman – to just end it." Both women, thus frame the limits of women's endurance as resulting in wilful deaths such as suicide or "living deaths,"

In focusing on endurance as a response to experiences of precariousness, Rekha and Mrs Chaudhary are invoking the idea of a woman's *sahan shakti* – or her power to tolerate or endure.[77] This term encapsulates the idea that a wife is dependable – willing to put up with whatever trials fate, bad in-laws and uncaring husbands may throw her way for the sake of the family. During my fieldwork, *sahan shakti* was explicitly mentioned by several male high court lawyers in a focus group discussion, where we were discussing divorce and the suicides of married women. These lawyers admired *sahan shakti* suggesting that Indian family life and moral values are rooted in it: Yogesh, a lawyer in his fifties, for instance, told me "We are very proud of our Indian values. We say one husband, one wife for all life. But these values were not because of men. They were because of women's *sahan shakti."* By expecting women to 'endure' whatever comes their way for the sake of the family, women's experiences of vulnerability reduce the family's precariousness; there is confidence that marriages will endure, and that children, parents and husbands will be cared for, due to women's *sahan shakti*. As such *sahan shakti* effectively obscures interdependencies between adult members in an Indian family, allowing women and their

[77] *Shakti* is Sanskrit word which explicitly refers to feminine power that is based on women's sexual and reproductive power and can be harnessed for the social benefit of the household (Marrow 2013a; Donner 2008). *Sahan Shakti* is one form of this harnessing – transferring raw power into the power to endure.

labour to hold families intact to be taken for granted. It thus, sets up a paradox; while women like Rekha and Mrs Chaudhary are highly conscious of how precarious their positions as wives are, they, in turn, are considered to be completely dependable by their family members.

The rhetoric of *sahan shakti* leads to women framing lives that are worth living in terms of their relationships with their family members. This effectively negates, at least in part, indicators of empowerment and independence that are typically thought to help women lead less precarious lives. Mrs Chaudhary, for instance, told me that: "Financial independence alone will not solve the problem - if you have been brought up that way – to put the man's needs first… then you are like this." This observation was echoed by Kamla, who had a trail-blazing career as a female law enforcement officer and is divorced; she remarked that "it is embedded in the psyche of the woman, that she is subordinate. That her family, that her husband comes first. This is regardless of whether she's working, of what she's achieved in life." Both Kamla and Mrs Chaudhary are well-off and highly educated. Moreover, Kamla has had a successful career in the public realm, obtaining both material status and social prestige. Yet, both wrestle with how their lives are devalued through their (former, in Kamla's case) marriages. Core to their observations linking worthwhile lives to the family is that this understanding of worth is inculcated in women's upbringing. Other women recounted how when they were growing up, they were encouraged to take cooking and home economic courses so as to become model wives or shared how they were discouraged from pursuing higher education and employment opportunities as it would not help them in their roles as wives. As such, it is not surprising that neither Rekha nor Mrs Chaudhary consider divorce as a viable option to exit a marriage, despite their frustrations with the precariousness women endure in them.

The precariousness experienced by women in their marriages also functions as a reaction to flouting (or being perceived to flout) the ethics of honour. This is encapsulated in Mrs. Chaudhary's recounting of a story about her mother-in-law, who, after a fight with her husband, "wished she would die." Mrs Chaudhary's described her mother-in-law as being an ideal wife, enduring multiple traumas as a Punjabi refugee to hold her family together and establish the family's socio-economic standing. Yet, these efforts did not lead to her husband being appreciative of her. The discord between the two came to a head when the couple had a fight in front of several of their daughters-in-law, including Mrs. Chaudhary. The mother-in-law had decided to install a water purifier for the family. The father-in-law, however, objected to her spending without his permission, an act that he condemned as inappropriate for a woman, and one that caused him *beizzati*. The parents-in-law fought, and the father-in-law made several accusations about the mother-in-law's family; the contents of which were too upsetting for Mrs Chaudhary to recount in detail. Instead, she described how she felt, saying "As a woman, the kind of things he was saying, I still feel… so shameful [*lajja*]. I thought where should I go? I just wanted to hide." In the aftermath of the fight, the mother-in-law told Mrs. Chaudhary that she wished she was dead. For Mrs. Chaudhary, this declaration was understandable, telling me that "any woman would want to die in that situation… When every activity you do is to please him, and then he says such things. You are broken completely."

Mrs Chaudhary was angry when she told this story, despite the decades between the event and its recounting. She contrasted her mother-in-law's spending, which was for the good of the family, to her father-in-law's expenditure on alcohol, condemning him as being selfish and acting without regard for the family. She highlighted the hypocrisy of her mother-in-law's expenditure being scrutinised while her father-in-law's spending went by uncommented on, even though her mother-in-law also worked in the family's business.

Thus, she felt her mother-in-law was being subjected to a double standard where her ability to maintain a level of deference to the father-in-law was more crucial to her being a morally 'good' person, than how her acts furthered the family's well-being. Mrs Chaudhary's anger resonates with Kanchan's dismay of how her identity as a working woman, and as a caring daughter went unconsidered at the time of her marriage being arranged. Instead, in both cases, Kanchan and the mother-in-law were judged through an ethics of honour, which understood their acting agentively as causing *beizzati* for their family members.

Yet, Mrs Chaudhary does not delve on *beizzati* when discussing this story, focusing on another emotion around humiliation – that of *lajja*. *Lajja* refers to both the ethical virtue of modesty and the affective ramifications of the violation of this virtue, such as emotions of intense shame, disgrace and embarrassment. Building on Menon and Shwedor's (2010) definition of *lajja,* Sinha and Chauhan (2013) use the following "working definition" of *lajja* as a virtue:

> …a sense of *lajjA* is to be civilised; to know one's rightful place in society; to conduct oneself in a becoming manner; to be conscious of one's duties and responsibilities; to persevere in performance of social role obligations; to be shy, modest, deferential; and not encroach upon prerogatives of others.
>
> 134-135

The emotion of *Lajja*, then, is how an ethics of honour operates, particularly for women, creating both a moral and an emotional impetus to ensure the status quo holds and that social ties are not imperilled by individual actions (Sinha and Chauhan 2013). The concept of sacrifice is integral to *lajja,* as Sinha and Chauhan observe, enabling the type of "[l]ife [that] is a kind of sacrifice (*yajna)* of one's desires for the benefit of others" (2013, 135). As with Abu-Lughod's Bedouin's ethnographic context, it is those who are at the lower end of the patriarchal hierarchy, who are disproportionately expected to demonstrate such

modesty or *lajja* and contend with the vulnerability that its violation engenders (1986; 2011).

The violation of *lajja* can be used to describe feelings of shame experienced by any gender, though its usage it has specific gendered connotations. While for men it is used to hint at 'non-manly' or homoerotic behaviour, for women, it often suggests that they have been sexually violated. As such the term is associated with sexual impropriety and incidents that spark it are highly stigmatised and rarely discussed, even with close relatives (Sinha and Chauhan 2013). Thus, the word encapsulates the feelings of vulnerability experienced by those marginalised within patriarchal power structures (Sinha and Chauhan 2013).[78] In Mrs Chaudhary's story her use of the word *lajja* suggests that the insults that her father-in-law hurled at her mother-in-law, revolved around the sexual violation of her mother-in-law's relatives. This is particularly as the story is told against the backdrop of partition where the suffering of the displaced, was repackaged as dishonour, through stories of rapes, abductions, suicides and murders of women (Menon and Bhasin 1998;, Das 2006). Both Mrs. Chaudhary and her husband are from Punjabi refugee families that settled in Delhi after partition, and her in-laws had experienced partition first-hand. As with other narratives of partition there are multiple silences and omissions around the experience (Menon and Bhasin 1998). Nonetheless, partition, and particularly the atrocities committed against women during it, in the name of causing or avoiding *beizzati*, form a backdrop to Mrs Chaudhary's suicide story. The emotions of *lajja* outlast the original, hinted at sexual violation of the mother-in-law's relatives. Instead, they are reignited in the father-in-law's

[78] It is no coincidence that two cultural works titled *Lajja* – the 1993 novel Bangladeshi novel by Taslima Nasreen and the 2001 Bollywood movie – both act as critiques of patriarchal power structures, from the point of view of disempowered minorities (see Mookerjea-Leonard 2011 for a discussion on how patriarchy is challenged in Nasreen's *Lajja).* Nor is it a coincidence that there were backlashes to both these works – Lajja (1993) remains banned in much of South Asia and Nasreen has faced multiple attacks over it, eventually having to flee Bangladesh after its publication. The movie *Lajja's* (2001) reception was less extreme – it did surprisingly poorly in terms of ticket sales, despite having a cast of several popular Bollywood actors.

accusations, ‘shaming’ both Mrs. Chaudhary and her mother-in-law, unleashing such intense feelings of vulnerability that Mrs. Chaudhary wants to “hide” and her mother-in-law to “die.” Thus, *lajja* and the vulnerability embedded in its violation strips worth from women’s lives, abusing them even when they, like Mrs Chaudhary, insist that it is unwarranted.

As such the ethics of honour reproduces this paradox of dependable but precarious women, not just within moments of breaking social norms around gender, such as Kanchan’s desire to not take part in her arranged marriage, but also within the everyday acts of living. This experience of pervasive precariousness is salient in the suicide stories I was told, turning them effectively into critiques of both an ethics of honour and marriage, itself. Such narratives thus act as accounts of how emotions of *lajja* and lack of grief strip worth from women and their lives. The possibility of divorce, however, complicates how experiences of precariousness operate, as is explored in the next section.

7.3 The Fantasy of Die-vorce: Moralities of the Precarious Marriage

For Divya, Kanchan’s marriage, despite the forced nature of it, has been a success. Divya cites Kanchan’s baby, the sizable promotion she received within a month of her wedding, and even how her acne cleared up as evidence of a “successful marriage.” Ironically though, Divya notes, that if Kanchan had been promoted or her looks had improved before her wedding, her family would not have arranged her marriage to her husband and instead sought a more well-to-do family or a groom with better prospects. Instead, these positive developments demonstrate that Kanchan has married beneath her status and that in fixing her marriage, her family had underestimated her potential. Nevertheless, the forced wedding has a happy ending, as per Divya; Kanchan is respectably

settled as a married woman, is significantly wealthier than she was, and her child has infused a new level of meaningfulness in her life. In light of this, Divya does not expect Kanchan to divorce her husband, even though Kanchan has wrestled to adjust to her marital status, contending with an extremely precarious marital situation, particularly as her husband wants her to quit her job.

Kanchan, herself, is ambivalent about her marital circumstances. Her work outside of the home means that the marital hierarchies are not just between wife-takers and wife-givers but between the individuals in the marriage. In this case, it is Kanchan, herself, whose successful career effectively destabilises the power flows within the marital home. For Kanchan, her earning more than her husband is part of the socio-economic reality of urban India with its changing education and work opportunities. Women, who have benefited from these opportunities, have found that, in Kanchan's words, they are "at a different level" from the men they would have traditionally married. She cites the experiences of her friends, who have either found themselves in arranged marriages with men who do not share their economic status or have not married at all. Discouraged from forming pre-marital relationships, these women have found that there are few men in their communities who are earning as much as them or are willing to marry a woman who out earns them.

Meanwhile, for women, like Kanchan, who have married, they have found that earning more than their husbands, effectively places both the husband and wife in a precarious situation where the men have lost status by not being the primary breadwinner while the women are accused of being bad wives:

> "My friend's husband… is not earning very well. But this friend has a permanent government job, so the family is doing very well. But her husband's relatives keep taunting him and insulting him. They say he

> doesn't need to work and should do the household chores. This means they think he's not at her level"

Hence, going against expected gender roles by earning more, emasculates the husband, destabilises the marriage and effectively causes the woman to appear less than an ideal wife. Kanchan's friends are accused of being "domineering" and their behaviour is scrutinised for signs that they are "too independent." To avoid these experiences, Kanchan initially hid her promotion from her husband and in-laws. This caused her considerable anxiety, believing that keeping her earnings secret was unsustainable, as her husband or in-laws would eventually find out.[79]

For much of my fieldwork, Kanchan's experiences of precariousness were infused with a feeling of dread for what would happen when, inevitably, her marital family would find out how much she is earning. The idea of divorce helped counter these feelings of dread as Kanchan recognised it as a potential way to escape from a failing marriage. Kanchan never explicitly said she wanted a divorce but one day, she pointed out a colleague to me and told me that: "This lady… She has two children but no husband. I don't know what went wrong with the husband. But if you were to look at her you could never tell she has no husband. She maintains herself so well and is so smart. Because she has a job there is no tension." Kanchan went on to discuss how the marital family is not always supportive of women, and that it can fail them. In these conditions, Kanchan asserted that working outside the home allows women, like her colleague and herself, to continue with a life of "no tension," contrasting it sharply with the 'tension' she experiences in the fraught marital home. Thus, even though Kanchan knew that her husband disapproved of her working, she valued the economic independence granted by her job, and how, by extension, it made divorce and a life outside the marital home feasible. Due to this, she was willing to risk the

[79] Government of India pay scales are publicly available, and as Kanchan works in a government job her salary can be easily found out.

possibility that her marriage may not withstand her career, because in the long term she felt that having a career reduced her dependence on the marital family and thus, her precariousness.[80]

How divorce is received is constantly changing and differs based on factors such as caste, class, and politics within the Indian context. Nevertheless, for many, particularly women, it remains highly stigmatised, as Divya, who had specialised on gender and the law, reflected:[81]

> We would see cases where the husband has had an extra-marital affair and the woman agrees to it. She says continue the affair, even go and stay with the woman but there should be no divorce... I've met women where the husband beats the wife. They would come with swollen cheeks, black eyes … but even in these cases, there was no divorce. They think *samaj mein* husband *hain to sub hain* [In society, if you have a husband, you have everything]. The moment I lose my husband, the eyes of society, of other men, of other women, will change…[women] become more vulnerable, more targetable. This is at all levels, even women at the highest positions in society… You want to maintain your status as a wife, as a mother. If you are to break this bond than you lose all status.

By equating divorce to "losing status" and becoming "targetable" Divya is referring to *lajja* or sexual impropriety with the divorced woman being understood to be a "fallen woman." Moreover, her observations on divorce are undergirded by the assumption that being divorced effectively dishonours women, removing the social ties that anchor a woman, isolating her and making her more susceptible to exploitation. In such a discourse of vulnerability the morality of the woman is also brought into question. Since wives are expected to demonstrate *sahan shakti* and keep marriages intact, a woman who chooses to divorce is considered morally questionable and the suffering she endures as a divorced

[80] This conclusion, as discussed in *Chapter 6: Sacrifice and Selfishness: Suicide and the Caring Mother* is complicated by the fact, that Kanchan's job itself became precarious after she gave birth.

[81] This understanding of divorce rests on assumptions that can be traced to upper-caste, Hindu, urban and middle-class ideologies of marriage and gender relations. See Parry (2001) for an exploration of divorce in a non-upper caste, Indian context.

woman can be easily viewed as a socially-sanctioned punishment for being immoral. Yet, most women told me that there are circumstances when it is better to divorce than continue with a marriage. What exactly constitutes these circumstances is ambivalent and constantly shifting, but amongst these women there does appear to be a consensus that a woman should seek a divorce if her marital situation was intolerable.

For Kanchan, the circumstances for a marital situation to be 'intolerable' are extreme. This is illustrated through her example of a neighbour who is married to a man, who, while well-off, was "very greedy," demanding a dowry and expensive gifts from his in-laws. Kanchan recognised that the marriage was an unhappy, blaming the man for the difficulties in it. Yet, when I asked Kanchan if her neighbour had tried to break her engagement when it became apparent that he was demanding and mercenary, she was flummoxed, telling me "No! How could she break the engagement?" Although, there is less stigma attached to a broken engagement than to a divorce, this example shows that even though it was clear to this woman and her family that the marriage would be difficult, it is only if the circumstances are extremely dire that a relationship can be ended by a woman. Similarly, in Kanchan's marriage, her father's support for leaving her marital family is conditioned on her being mistreated. Yet again, what constituted as "mistreatment" is extreme; as Kanchan explained when she gave the following example of domestic violence: "See, take my example, if my husband hits me once or twice it's okay. I may get upset but it's okay. It's only if it is a habit and happening every day that I can't stand it. … Then I think I'd rather die." Thus, it is not enough for Kanchan and women like her to just want to leave the marriage. Instead, they must convince those around them that the conditions of their marriage are not endurable, and that they can either choose divorce or suicide.

Such an understanding of how bad the marital circumstances must be for a divorce to be considered, without a woman being considered morally 'bad,' operates within the legal system as well. As my discussions with several divorce lawyers found it is often difficult for women to get divorces, with courts and mediation systems paternalistically intervening to discourage women from filing and going through divorce proceedings.[82] Instead, women are encouraged to go to arbitration centres, which prioritise reconciliation and reify traditional gender roles (Lemons 2016; Grover 2011) Women struggle to get their attempts for a divorce to be taken seriously by courts; Arjun, a prosecutor and divorce lawyer, openly admitted that he advised his female clients who were looking to get divorces to allege sexual, mental and/or physical abuse by their marital family members:

> It is very difficult to get a divorce without the permission of the husband. So, if a woman comes to me and she says that she can't adjust and wants a divorce, I will ask her why. If her reason is very small… then it is a matrimonial dispute not a divorce case. So, then we advise her to accuse him and his relatives of a criminal matter because that can be ground for divorce.

Such a tactic, he added, can also be used to extract more money from the marital family in the divorce proceedings. Thus, although, on paper, there ought not to be any difference between male and female litigants for divorce, Arjun's experience suggests that this is not the case.

Arjun, as with many of the other lawyers who I interacted with, is not sympathetic to women who want divorces, even though his livelihood is dependent on them. His minimising their desire for a divorce if is not based on a 'criminal matter' as a 'very small' reason to end a marriage, suggests the idea of *sahan shakti* and the belief that women should be willing to endure everything within a marriage. Moreover, his equating wanting a divorce with pecuniary motives, such as "extracting money" from the marital family

[82] Basu (2015) and Vatuk (2013) are two examinations of how the legal apparatus works against women seeking divorces in India.

conjures up rhetoric from the Men's Right Movement (MRM) which caricatures women seeking divorces as "urban, educated and money-hungry women" (Lodhia 2014, 914). Such rhetoric is common amongst the lawyers I met; Rakesh, a lawyer and a mediator of matrimonial disputes, for instance, told me that most of the accusations of sexual, physical and psychological abuse were just "money-making" opportunities. His wife Anita, a self-identified housewife, echoed these sentiments:

> These days the trend for girls is to marry into a good family where there's a lot of money. They live like queens, spend like anything, do no work and then when anyone says anything to them, they file for divorce and get alimony. Some of them do it again and again – it's a career for them.

She went on to complain "The boy's side are very scared. They say they work so many hours and so hard and then the girl takes everything." Thus, economic precariousness, when it is undergone by the men and their families, was recognised as dangerous, while the precariousness experienced by wives in unhappy marriages remained normalised and taken for granted. This double standard was evident that when I asked lawyers about suicidal women in divorce proceedings, most did not consider their statements of wanting to end their lives as serious, even if they were otherwise sympathetic. Divya, for instance, lamented that "I can't make out whether these women were genuine or if they were making an emotional use of suicide to pressurise the other side for money."

The MRM targets divorce and domestic violence laws, especially Section 498A which covers cruelty against married women and section 308B which focuses on dowry deaths that can be either murders or suicides (Basu 2016; Chowdhury 2014; Lodhia 2014 and 2009). Under section 498A of the Indian Penal Code, the police and lawyers consider 'cruelty' to be behaviour conducted by the husband or his relatives that could lead to the woman's suicide or cause her grave injury. However, in practice, the stipulation regarding suicide appears to be mostly ignored, with Kamla explaining the difficulty for law

enforcement to objectively ascertain what acts "could lead to suicide." Such laws make the suffering of women within the domestic, marital realm visible, and turn women from subjects of honour to people with grievable lives (Kapur 2015). Yet, by attacking these laws the MRM shifts focus back to men, blaming these laws, paradoxically, for increased male suicides, despite the lack of supporting evidence (Lodhia 2014). The MRM, thus, not only articulates the new types of precariousness experienced by the husband and his relatives through divorce and domestic violence laws but also obscures women's suffering. MRM rhetoric have fuelled a social backlash against women seeking divorces, particularly as it taps into long-standing anxieties around *beizzati, lajja* and women's sexual agency (Lodhia 2014).

As the rhetoric of the MRM has popularised notions of greedy ex-wives and hapless husbands who are taken advantage of in divorce and domestic violence cases, the ethics around how people ought to conduct themselves in marriages has also evolved, particularly if the woman is earning outside the home and has financial independence (Basu 2016). On one hand, there is a realisation that economic independence effectively encourages women to identify as individuals and reduces their tolerance for negative marital circumstances, as Divya observed: "An economically independent woman thinks of herself as a person. They make their own choices and stand up for themselves. They say no to what they don't want." On the other hand, there is increased scrutiny on whether women who work outside the home are being modest and if they adequately contribute to the home, as can be seen in Rakesh's comments:

> There's issues of ego. I would say 50% of cases have this as an explicit cause [for divorce] or as an underlying condition. There is a mismatch in the expectations of how to manage the household when the woman is working. The woman doesn't want to live in a joint family. Or the husband asks for the woman's monthly income – he wants her to pay 50% of the household expenditure and she says no. These are the types of cases we see.

Rakesh implies women are selfish, either trying to break up the joint family or keeping their income to themselves. This view also taps into the fears that women working outside the home is catalysing a change in the values and norms of Indian society. Both legal professionals accounts suggest that the combination of women working outside the home and being able to seek divorces had changed how precariousness is experienced within the family. By equating financial independence with empowerment, Divya makes the case that women are less willing to endure precarious conditions, while Rakesh suggests that this empowerment spreads precariousness to the rest of the family by destabilising it.

For Kanchan, however, her lived experience in a fraught marriage suggests that changing gender relations end up reifying her experiences of precariousness rather than diminishing them. Kanchan is committed to being a "good" wife, knowing that her actions as a woman working outside the home are being scrutinised and if the marriage fails, her reception by her natal family and community members will be based on their understanding of her moral status as a wife. Her understanding of what constitutes being a 'good wife' is formed in reaction to the MRM's caricature of the 'greedy,' 'modern' women. Rather than holding onto her salary, Kanchan gives her mother-in-law as much money as she asks for the household expenses, resulting in her having barely any savings.[83] Since this financial exchange is done bythe two women, the men in Kanchan's marital family are 'protected' from the emasculation of having to ask her for money, but are also unaware of how much she contributes to the family. Moreover, like Rekha, Kanchan's Rajasthani family believes that the husband is the *pati-dev* and Kanchan follows the expected behavioural protocols of a wife, such as never raising her voice or questioning her husband's and in-law's actions. She explains this lack of autonomy and subservient status: "After marriage there is no

[83] This sharing of her salary means that Kanchan's mother-in-law must have realised how much Kanchan earns, which, in turn, helps explain why she supports Kanchan working outside the home.

freedom. Your mother-in-law is everything. If she tells you to come here, you come; if she says sit, you sit." Furthermore, Kanchan has worked to build ties with her female affines in the marital joint family. She won her mother-in-law's and sister-in-law's support when, the day after the wedding, she washed by hand the heavy but delicate garments of the wedding party on a cold winter morning. Kanchan continues to do her share of the household chores, despite working outside the home as well. A good relationship with her female affines has been essential for her, not just in how it helps her appear to be morally "good," but also for the support they provide in looking after her child and intervening on her behalf with the male family members.

The high degree of scrutiny that Kanchan is subjected to, and the strict moral code to which she holds herself to, makes her situation within the marital home fraught. Her efforts to strengthen the family's economic position paradoxically heighten this sense of precariousness, such as her belief she must hide her promotion from her husband. Similarly, when Kanchan got the opportunity to invest in a subsidised housing scheme, she was torn between her aspirations and role as a wife. Owning her own apartment would have cemented the family's status as middle-class. However, rather than discussing this opportunity with her husband, Kanchan consulted her father, Kanchan's reasons for excluding her husband were over fears on how he would react to her economic independence; "He may take it in a bad way. I don't want him to think that I am asking for another house because I want to live apart from the [rest of the marital] family." Kanchan does want to keep living with her in-laws, as she relies on her mother-in-law for day care, but she does not believe her husband will consider this, and just condemn her for being "ambitious" in seeking her own apartment. Kanchan applied for the scheme, but it was overbooked, and she was not selected. Her primary emotion on hearing this was of relief – she had been dreading the confrontation over spending her salary on the apartment, instead

of the household expenses. Yet, this confrontation is deferred, not avoided; the scheme is released every year, and Kanchan plans to apply until she's selected. Thus, Kanchan's pursuit of a better life are made fraught and tense by her marital situation.

As discussed in *Chapter 5: Desire and Disdain: Depictions of Attraction in Suicide Narratives* the pursuit of aspirational, economically mobile lives increasingly hinges on an affective performance of heterosexuality focussed on desire and trust, key attributes of a companionate marriage.[84] Most of the women I met would openly pursue aspirations such as better paying jobs and monetary assets by positioning themselves as taking part in a marriage of equals, where the married partners shared common aspirations and worked together to obtain them. Kanchan's colleagues encouraged her to pursue this type of relationship by being "honest" and "open" about how much she is earning and her desires for the future. Yet, Kanchan was not hopeful that she could have such a married life, telling me, in general terms, that "I think it's not compulsory that in an arranged marriage that you feel loved. Sometimes there's no understanding and mentally the two are not at the same level." Instead, Kanchan felt condemned to an 'uncomfortable' marriage, and she relies on her father when she is making economic and professional decisions. These decisions, in turn, were normally justified as ways to advance her daughter's future. Hence, Kanchan's identities as a daughter and a mother remains her primary ways to engage with the future; her role as 'wife' is not only precarious, but also configured as an obstacle to her aspirations.

At one point, however, Kanchan appeared to be trying for a companionate marriage. She told me about an incident when her daughter fell ill, and she had to instruct her husband

[84] An alternative narrative of an economically upwardly mobile woman's marriage can be found in Dickey's account of a respondent in Madurai (2010). This respondent enjoyed a happier life and more secure future than Kanchan is currently experiencing, notably by having a 'love marriage' where her husband works with her to secure their economic future.

on how to take care of her. Kanchan was shocked that her husband did what she asked, without protest, explaining that: “In Rajasthan, they say that the woman should not order the husband ever.” Her husband’s unexpected lack of reaction made Kanchan hopeful that he was not the traditional *pati-dev* and that they could forge a more equal relationship over their mutual desire to give their daughter a better life. The next day, she told him about her promotion. Her husband mockingly responded by calling her “madam,” which distressed Kanchan, and told her to focus on their daughter, not her career. He did not mention her salary, leading Kanchan to conclude that he doubts her capabilities: “He doesn’t believe that I earn so much. Maybe it is my dress sense, I don’t look as if I earn lot.” As Kaur and Sundar (2016) point out, appearance is crucial for the socially mobile to recognise their new class status. Kanchan’s husband works in a pan-India franchise and has a uniform. She, on the other hand, is expected to dress herself. I had witnessed women in her workplace being scolded for dressing inappropriately, wearing clothing that was deemed to be ‘too tight.’ Kanchan, however, was praised for her modesty and considered appropriately dressed. Her husband’s failure to recognise her clothing as a mark of class status shows the gap between their understandings of class. His refusal to acknowledge her professional success left her feeling diminished and unseen. She continues to endure her precarious marriage.

7.4 Conclusion

Women’s experiences of precariousness within the marriage work both to define what is not endurable in a marriage and the moralities by which ‘good’ wives are determined. In the process, emotions like *lajja*, and *beizzati* mask and downplay women’s suffering in favour of an ethics of honour that protects those higher in the patriarchal hierarchy. Yet, the possibility of divorce has helped women like Kanchan believe that they

can withstand their marriages breaking down without resorting to suicide. With no reliable statistics available on divorce in India, it is difficult to say if divorce rates are rising, though the lawyers I spoke to certainly believe this is the case. Women shared how most of them have neighbours, friends or family members who are divorced or in the process of divorce. The presence of these divorced women undercuts the narrative of a subservient wife 'adjusting' to her husband's home at all costs, using her *sahan shakti* to tolerate everything. Yet, at the same time, the backlash to women who seek divorces and the courts understanding of divorce as a recourse of the last resort for an intolerable marriage, means that the potential of divorce to alleviate women's precariousness within a marriage is limited. Meanwhile, die-vorce and suicide continue to go hand-in-hand, with narratives of suicide articulating the precariousness experienced by married women, and divorce understood as an alternative to suicide.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

What did the women I interacted with recognise as a life worth living? Why and how is it that married women's suffering is systematically overlooked and ignored? Throughout this thesis, the answers to these questions have constantly shifted, evolving with each retelling of the suicide story. For the women in this thesis what is a life worth living and what constituted suffering was understood and imagined at the affective level, through the presence or absence of emotions, sentiments and sensations such as desire, care and precariousness. These affective flows did not just delineate moral understandings of what is 'good' or 'bad' but also shaped views on what ways of living are worthwhile and what types of suffering can be ignored. As such the suicide story emerged as a space in which women were able to articulate a social ethics that both reified and subverted prevailing hegemonic norms around gender, family and marriage.

Each chapter in this dissertation answers these two questions. After the introduction, *Chapter 2: Understanding the Suicide: Suffering and a Life Worth Living* demonstrates how women's suffering has been co-opted into narratives of what it means to be Indian. In the process, women's testimony of their experiences of suffering has been silenced for the most part, unable to enter the public sphere unless it serves broader narratives around who belongs within the nation state. Meanwhile, the configuration of women as needing protection and being associated with the home, has consigned them into the private sphere and the worthwhileness of their lives is framed in terms of how well they serve their families. *Chapter 3: Situating the Married Woman* further nuances this understanding of how certain ways of living are valued and types of suffering are ignored. As women strive to live 'good lives,' they must contend with stopping the erosion of regional and caste identities, maintaining middle-class status in a rapidly changing system of earning and consuming as well as managing the moral contradiction inherent in being

both a consumer and a citizen. Ideas of worthwhileness and suffering are invoked within these concerns and women create moral narratives that privilege certain ways of living while downplaying specific types of gendered suffering

It is against this backdrop, that *Chapter 4: Recalling the Suicide: Affective Storytelling and the Ethics of Gender* demonstrates that the way in which women deploy affect in their storytelling can either trivialise the suicide, turn it into a clarion call for a change in social ethics or obscure both the woman and her death. In the process, it becomes clear that women are divided over how the worthwhileness of women's lives was ascribed. On one hand, there was Shruti, who used her suicide story to call for a world where the woman is not a transient outsider moving from natal to marital family but is central to it; her affects, ambitions and achievements as valued and worthy of consideration as any other family members. On the other hand, Anita was suspicious of 'modern women' whose empowerment she understood as a threat to familial relations and whose suffering was capable of destabilising social hierarchies.

The next chapters examined specific affective flows (desire, care, and precariousness) and how they bolster or diminish ways of living or normalise and obscure certain types of suffering. *Chapter 5: Desire and Disdain: Depictions of Attraction in Suicide Narratives* finds that desire works in concert with disdain, to simultaneously unfold aspirational futures that give meaning to women's lives but also risks situations of indignity where women's desires are easily denied and disdained. Simultaneously, the slippage between sexual desire and sexual vulnerability in suicide stories, means that certain desires and the suffering their denial elicits is obscured. Similarly in *Chapter 6: Motherhood, the Circulation of Care and Suicide* demonstrates that while being cared for gives meaning to women's lives, the ideology of 'committed motherhood' makes it difficult for women to seek this care. Moreover, this ideology side-lines and devalues women's lives and identities

outside their roles as mothers. An isolating ideology, it minimises women's suffering and the sacrifices they make as mothers by portraying them as a 'natural' part of motherhood. *Chapter 7 Die-vorce and Suicide: The Unmaking of the Middle-Class Wife* explores how the ethics of honour devalues women's lives and limits her opportunities by keeping her affectively vulnerable through emotions such as *lajja.* Such vulnerability means that women disproportionately bear the burden of precariousness in their families and the suffering they undergo in keeping marriages together is taken for granted. In this context, divorce emerges as an alternative to suicide, but its configuration as an option of the last resort, limits its ability to reduce women's precariousness. Meanwhile, the Men's Right Movement) backlash to both divorce and abetment of suicide laws, has led to a reassertion of a social ethics that denies women's suffering and values them primarily through the lens of the family.

Taken as a whole, this thesis demonstrates that the narrators of suicide stories, for the most part, portray suicides as not extraordinary acts, but temptations to contend with in the everyday. The affective flows they invoke in their suicide narratives are echoed in their stories of their own lives and demonstrate how suicide can emerge as a possibility for so many women. In arguing that there are hegemonic narratives which devalue the lives of women like them and obscure gendered suffering, morality emerges as a space of agency for these women.[85] The women telling these stories do not passively accept devaluing and marginalising moral narratives. Instead, the affects they highlight in their suicide stories critique, modify and reify these moralities, thereby articulating an affective ethics which envisions worthwhile lives where both women and their suffering are acknowledged and responded to. Yet, at the same time, several of these stories have spawned their own ethics

[85] I understand agency as not necessarily being in opposition to dominant structural forces such as "discourses, ideologies, cultures" but that it can also "Involve a striving toward actively inhabiting, rather than resisting, prevailing norms." (Laidlow 2010, 144; Mahmood 2005)

which demoralise and marginalise women. Such suicide stories insist that women self-discipline even if this depletes them, they deride suicides as being committed by 'silly' women and, in all, refuse to acknowledge gendered suffering if it destabilises the social order. Nonetheless, this affective ethics demonstrates how "affects and emotions are crucial in structuring political fields, imaginaries, subjects, and objects" (Laszczkowski and Reeves 2018, 3). Through their affective storytelling, women prove that they are not apolitical beings but engage with and modify prevailing discourses on gender relations, social suffering and suicide.

As with any study, there are multiple omissions in this thesis. As mentioned in *Chapter 3: Situating the Married Woman,* I regret that I could not capture the suicide stories told by a more diverse subsection of the middle-class women. Moreover, having delved into the suicide stories told by women and explored how suicide emerges as a possibility, I am now interested in the question of what is being done to combat these experiences of diminishment and marginalisation. The next section explores this question, looking at the role of mental distress and psychological approaches to women's suicides. This is followed by a post-script, providing an update on some of the women during the pandemic, and considering how their stories embody the idea of 'powerful optimism.'

8.1. Sadness for no reason

Thus far in this dissertation the psychological reasons behind married women's suicides have rarely been considered. This is because, the women I interacted with rarely discussed mental distress when telling these stories.[86] It was however, commonly used by

[86] The exception to this was Tina's story of her male neighbour's suicide attempt, where at one point she said "*koi* mental *cheeze hogi*" [Some sort of mental thing] when describing his aggressive and quarrelsome nature. However, this was a comment for a specific gendered behaviour (male aggression) and not as an explanation for his suicide attempt.

legal professionals as an explanation of why women committed suicide. In these legal professionals' suicide stories, it was either the generic "mental problem" or depression that was blamed for suicides. This focus on depression is not surprising; Indian psychological practices are based on "diagnostic neutrality" where diagnosis for mental health illnesses such as schizophrenia are rarely shared with patients and family members (Sousa 2016). Instead, depression is often used as a "catchall" and a code for mental distress in North India (Sousa 2016, 43). As a term, depression is understood as signalling social withdrawal and distance; Shashi, a psychologist, for instance, used it interchangeably with the word '*akelapan'* or loneliness. This understanding of depression as social withdrawal was echoed by the women when they used 'depression' in the context of their own lives. Preeti, for instance, suspected she had post-partum depression because she did not want to touch her baby. It was this desire for social distance that she thought was a disorder and it concerned her as much as the feelings of persistent sadness that she also experienced. Similarly, Rekha labelled her mother as depressed because she was 'silent' and withdrew from family life when Rekha was growing up.

As an imported term 'depression' does not map neatly onto Indian understandings of sadness (Singh 2017). Priya differentiated between *dukh* (sadness/pain/sorrow) and depression, telling me that *dukh* occurs due to the social conditions of a woman and that it is difficult to fix without changing her situation and the relations she is enmeshed in. For most women, she contended, *dukh* was something that had to be endured. Depression, on the other hand, she defined as "sadness for no reason" and an illness which could be easily cured by medical treatment. This distinction between depression and *dukh* explains why women did not mention depression in their suicide stories. If depression is unreasonable sadness, then suicide was depicted as being very much reasonable in most women's stories

– a "natural" result of the expectation that women will endure indignities due to their lower status within the family.

The consequence of this separation is that suicide prevention attempts, based on a psychological approach, have little traction with this group of women, as they do not consider suicide to be a psychological issue, but instead, a social one. It is thus, not surprising that the psychologists that I met rarely encountered married women in their practices. My interactions with psychologists were limited as they were not the focus of this thesis, and I did not observe them counselling women first-hand. Thus, the following observations, which are based on my interactions with psychologists, are preliminary and need further exploration. From what I saw when psychologists did meet married women, it was often as the mothers and (less commonly) wives of patients. There were also women who were in severe distress and would either be bought to the psychologist's practice or in more acute cases hospitalised by worried family members. In this context, these psychologists rarely met married women on their own or treated them for more than a couple of sessions at a time. Instead, in most of their interactions, the married woman was a family member to the patient they were treating. In this context, the married woman would often emerge as an obstacle that had to be navigated around, and psychologists would rarely be sympathetic towards her.

If married women considered depression as an unnatural disorder of social withdrawal, then there are indications that psychologists considered the way in which married women engaged socially as being disordered. Malini, a psychologist in her early forties, for instance, criticised women for not being "independent," "curious" and "willing to learn." She complained that they were "scared" and did not "want to go out of their comfort zone." Malini did not value their ways of living, explaining that "These women are not doing anything…. they just live these mundane, routine lives." Ideologies of *sahan*

shakti, committed motherhood, and a moral order that value women by how well they serve their families are blamed by Malini for women's mental distress:

> This Generalised Anxiety Disorder – called GAD, it is very common with housewives. It's always "I have to do this, I have to pack the child's bag, I have to help the in-laws." She becomes very stressed and anxious. And then she may do something [suicide], or she may not. It depends on the individual.
>
> For women, their day-in, day-out routine is just following [rules]. They don't know why they are doing it. Their negative thoughts become automatic. It becomes a habit. It's a chain**.** It just chains them, and it spreads to other stages of their life. Then she becomes a person with a negative thought pattern.

Yet, Malini is also contemptuous of married women, particularly those who are housewives. In deriding their lives as "mundane" and "routine" she fails to acknowledge the effort, self-disciplining and discernment required by women to engage in tasks of social reproduction and care work. As such her failure to recognise these aspects of women's lives lends credence to a broader critique of psychology, which posits that it works to both create and manage the affective individual so that they can participate in economic life (Cvetkovich 2012; Ehrenberg 2010; Duggan 2003). Disorders such as depression are deployed as categories that "manages and medicalizes the affects associated with keeping up with corporate culture and the market economy, or with being completely neglected by it" (Cvetkovich 2012, 12). In this case, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation are configured as a consequence of married women, particularly housewives, not taking part in economic activity outside the home; "these women are not doing anything." Not only does this approach fail to recognise women's work within the home, but it also prizes traits of independence, curiosity and willingness to learn over those characteristics that make life in the home possible for women. As such there is a gap between the traits that women try to inculcate in themselves (modesty, self-discipline, valuing the family over everything else) and the traits that psychologists like Malini appreciate.

Given her dismissiveness towards women, it is not surprising that Malini does not treat many married women. Shashi, on the other hand, markets herself as a psychologist for housewives, and has the status of a minor celebrity in this role; she is often interviewed by the media when they need a "woman's expert" on mental health. There is a curious disjuncture in Shashi's discussion with me, and the advice she gives in her media interviews. In her discussion with me, she shared many of the same concerns that Malini has, explaining that she finds married women to be overly invested in their familial life, without acknowledging the cultural ideologies and moralities that dictate this; "They say I'll be happy if my husband, my in-laws did this, did that." In treating women who have suicidal ideation, she would like women to "shift the locus of control from external to internal" by seeing themselves as agents in their lives and convincing them that "things will not turn around; you have to turn things around." Such advice appears to be trying to inculcate both a sense of individualism and interiority within women.

Yet in her published interviews, Shashi does not directly provides advise to women themselves and instead addresses their family members. She encourages these relatives to 'appreciate' the woman and compliment her work, to create opportunities for her to 'go out of the house' and not to hesitate in taking her to a psychologist or psychiatrist. In her practice, married women do not come to her on their own, but are brought in by concerned family members, who accompany the woman for all her sessions. As such, she explained to me, she has adjusted her counselling, shifting focus from the woman to interacting with her family members and convincing them to change the familial environment. Such family-centric counselling can be seen in other ethnographic contexts in North India; Marrow, for instance, discusses how, in a Varanasi hospital, the psychiatry professionals she encountered "considered it their duty to intervene in family problems for the benefit of the patient" (2016, 67; 2013b). Similarly, Kowalski's examination of domestic violence

counselling in Rajasthan, finds that the focus is on shifting the relations within the home to be more accommodating and accepting of the woman, rather than encouraging female autonomy (2016).

Shashi seems to have defaulted to the familial counselling approach as she has little opportunity to meet women on their own. This familial counselling approach resonates with Shruti's and Kanchan's desires for families that acknowledge women. Such an approach also seems more compatible with cultural concepts such as *samjhaana*, which are based on the idea of reciprocity between senior, more powerful family members and junior, more marginalised ones. Yet *samjhaana* is not particularly favourable towards women and reifies the very gender relations that are understood to be oppressive in suicide stories. It is also concerning how Shashi, in her published interviews, effectively ignores women, and speaks to an audience composed of their family members, rendering women as passive, mute spectators to discussions about their mental health and life. Hence, like Kowlaski (2016), I wonder if such family-centric counselling is truly effective, particularly when it comes to suicide prevention. Moreover, what kind of change in gender relations does such counselling promote? This is an under-researched topic, but one that is relevant for understanding how married women's suicides can be prevented, especially as the language of counselling, psychology and mental well-being pervades into the everyday discourse of the middle-class. It is also a fascinating counterpoint to popular 'new age' spirituality discourses which place the responsibility for the woman's unhappiness on her and seeks to teach her to "manage herself better" within the family (Ponniah 2017, 137).

8.2. Afterword: Optimism and Moving On

> "[T]he survivor is the one who, having stood in the path of death, knowing of many deaths and standing in the midst of the fallen, is still alive"

Mbembe 2003, 36

> Survival looks like a triumph, and that's a terrible thing. I want flourishing. But what do I mean by flourishing anyway? What are all of the synonyms I know for flourishing? There aren't that many. Isn't that interesting? The phrase you use to hold open a space is "an increase in joy." But an increase of joy might not feel like increase. It might feel like relief, it might feel like I can be a mass of incoherent things and not be defeated by that. Or it could feel experientially like all sorts of things. It would be increase in the sense of proliferation, but not necessarily intensification.
>
> Berlant (Berlant and Hardt 2011)

Much of this thesis was written and revised during the COVID-19 pandemic. In these conditions of unanticipated social suffering, I struggled not just with the act of writing an evocative ethnography on suicide stories, but also with the ethical question of what could such knowledge do in this present moment? In asking this question, I am following in Sedgewick's footsteps who asked "What does knowledge do —the pursuit of it, the having and exposing of it, the receiving again of knowledge of what one already knows? How, in short, is knowledge performative, and how best does one move among its causes and effects?" (2003, 124). Sedgewick suggests that there are many ways in which knowledge performs. She focuses on two such understandings of knowledge; the production of strong theory, or a theory based on a "paranoid" approach, and weak theory, which encourages a reparative reading (Sedgewick 2003). Such a reparative reading is not orientated towards explicating what is wrong, but to understanding and documenting what is present (Stewart 2017 and 2008). In this thesis, I have been trying to do both simultaneously. The question of "Why and how is it that married women's suffering is systematically overlooked and ignored?" is a paranoid one, based on the belief that there is something wrong with how so many married women suicides are ignored and trying to "unveil" how this as become the case (Sedgewick 2003, 143). The question of worthwhile lives, however, is a reparative

one, and is answered through descriptions of women's suicide stories, focusing on the affective flows in their narration.

Writing in this manner has led me to the realisation that there is something powerfully optimistic in the fact that women like Shruti and Mrs Chaudhary deeply empathise with the suffering women in their suicide stories – going as far as recognising themselves in her and insisting that her affective condition is one that they have also experienced. Yet they have decided that that their lives are worth living. To reiterate – despite experiencing first-hand these narratives which devalue women's lives, obscure their suffering and limit their opportunities, and having the knowledge that these narratives have defeated other women like them, the women with whom I have interacted have all taken the decision to keep living. As such this is not a 'dark' anthropology of suffering, it is, instead, an anthropology of mourning and moving on, which is powerful precisely because these women have engaged with stories where life is not worth living and been able to insist that, actually, it is.

Such "powerful optimism" could be understood to be co-existing with Berlant's concept of cruel optimism (2011). For Berlant (2011) cruel optimism "exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). Instead, powerful optimism insists, that despite the disappointments of attachments, the act of being attached and invested in living is worth doing. Powerful optimism works through the act of switching 'genres' (Berlant 2011). Genres are "an emotionally invested, patterned set of expectations about how to act and how to interpret [that] organise conventions about what might be hoped for" (Duschinsky and Wilson 2015, 179). Switching of genres occurs by imaginatively and creatively constructing a morality that recognises that aspects of previous genres no longer serve us and, pushes for their abandonment before they wear us out (Berlant 2011). Such switching between genres allows for new ways of adjusting to, and

interpreting, the world around us, which, in turn, leads to a new set of attachments and desires (Berlant2011).

As such powerful optimism encompasses “genre flailing” which Berlant defines as “a mode of crisis management that arises after an object, or object world, becomes disturbed in a way that intrudes on one's confidence about how to move in it. We genre flail so that we don't fall through the cracks of heightened affective noise into despair, suicide, or psychosis” (2018 157). Yet it also goes beyond it, not just creating new opportunities for attachments and aspirations but by making ethical claims on the world and how it should be. Just like genre failing, powerful optimism can be costly and difficult to do, but is also ordinary and present within everyday acts of pause and reflection (Berlant 2018).

The recounting of a suicide tale is one such space where powerful optimism can occur. These stories are not just opportunities to provide the dead woman an afterlife where she is either acknowledged and dignified or derided and overlooked. They are spaces where the women telling these stories can reflect critically and destabilise the moral genres through which gendered behaviour is organised. This means that suicide stories subvert the binaries which classify so much of gendered experience in India such as modern versus traditional, the individual versus the family and the Western versus the Indian. Instead, in these stories’ women were able to create narratives of what is a life worth living that can encompass and override these extremes, and in the process, assert themselves as agentive and active members of the society. The suicide story, thus, becomes a moment not just of reflection but of assertion, as women use these stories as a pause in which to consider both the dead women like them and the world she inhabited, before continuing with the work of living.

Coming back to India during the deadly second wave of COVID-19, I encountered multiple instances of such powerful optimism at play. Due to the lockdown, I was unable to meet the women with whom I had interacted. Instead, I contacted them through a patchwork of WhatsApp messages and phone calls. These were upsetting conversations; consisting primarily of reports of loss or near-loss; of stories of loved ones, alone and scared, in hospital beds; of women feeling powerless, unable to do the acts of care that they longed to do. Yet, they were also accounts of how everyday life in crisis continued.

Kanchan lost her father during the pandemic. Throughout the lockdowns, her office had insisted that she go to work in person, despite the high number of COVID-19 cases. This experience highlighted how expendable she was to her workplace. However, at home, this work was now recognised as essential. Kanchan had to keep her job, as the shop where her husband had worked closed during the lockdown, and they were worried that his job would not survive the pandemic. He no longer asked her to stay at home. Shruti celebrated her family's buying of a dishwasher, with the lockdown her part-time maid could no longer come and Shruti had struggled to manage both work and housework. The dishwasher, a gift from her husband, changed the family dynamics; instead of Shruti standing by herself washing dishes, now the family fought over who got to load and run it. She was not sure if she would re-hire her maid. Mrs Chaudhary's daughter got married to a man of her choice, the ceremony smaller and less elaborate than they had anticipated. After the wedding Mrs Chaudhary had thrown herself in her husband's business, working long hours. She refused to stay at home, despite the threat of COVID-19. Tina was strangely silent. The rumours were that she had been hospitalised with COVID-19 and although she had recovered, she was no longer reaching out to her friends. Was her uncharacteristic withdrawal a sign of depression, or was she worried that her having the illness would be stigmatised as evidence that she went 'out' too much? In any case, several months later when the COVID-19

numbers had decreased, she was planning the elaborate wedding of a friend's daughter, once again restored to the centre of her social circle. Anita's son has declared that he wishes to move out of their family home. As the master bedroom in their house lies empty, Anita says she accepts that he needs his freedom. Priya moved abroad after her husband died, and was living with her son, writing down stories in Hindi as she mourned. Some of these stories included the suicide stories she shared with me, now altered and fictionalised. At this moment of grief and loss, these stories, were once again, providing her with a space to consider and articulate what is a life worth living. Shiuli, meanwhile, was stuck in Gurgaon, no longer able to travel as she had planned in the aftermath of her husband's death. Instead, she tended to her garden, putting in enormous amounts of care as it flourished in the late North Indian winter.

These are stories of disappointments but also stories of powerful optimism, as women adapted, were agentive and formulated new moralities for assigning worth to the lives they were living. The perpetual motion of striving through life, suffering and obscuring it, adjusting while in difficult circumstances continues for these women. This continuation of life does not erase the pain of their suffering nor the injustice of it, just as their suffering does not negate the fact that they are agentive, creative, and morally engaged beings. Instead, if their suicide stories prove anything it is that these women strive for a life worth living, while simultaneously and continuously reorienting themselves as to what that life could look like. That they can do this by considering the wilful deaths of women like them, is powerfully optimistic.

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