

**MAKING LADIES OF GIRLS:
MIDDLE-CLASS WOMEN AND PLEASURE IN
URBAN INDIA**

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Abstract

Current debates in the anthropology of the Indian middle classes suggest a preponderant theme of balance – between ‘Indian’ and ‘Western’; ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’; ‘global’ and ‘local’. Scholars like Säävälä (2010) Nisbett (2007, 2009), and Donner (2011) demonstrate a range of practices through which the ideal of middle class life is positioned in a precarious median between the imagined decadence of the upper classes and the perceived immorality and lack of responsibility of the working classes. Sexuality and intimacy, it has been observed, are important sites, where this balancing act is played out and risks to its stability are disciplined. Young women have particularly come under a great deal of pressure to position themselves dually as modern representatives of a global nation, who are, at the same time, epitomes of a nationalised narrative of tradition. In this thesis I examine, through an ethnographic study, the ways in which young women’s bodies are implicated in the normative reproduction of everyday middle class life, as well as unpacking the social meanings of youth and adulthood for women in this context. Further, locating my study in the context of women’s colleges in Chennai, this thesis comments on the significance of educational spaces as sites where normative ideals of middle class life and femininity are both produced and contested. The chief arguments in this thesis are organised into five chapters that draw primarily on ethnographic material to examine categories of *risk*, *danger* and *pleasure* as mutually constituted in young women’s lives through everyday practice, as well as the making of the everyday as a precarious and compositional event.

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1 | Introduction: A Dangerous Instability

This thesis is about everyday middle class life in the city of Chennai in Southern India, examined through practices of intimacy and sexuality in the lives of young, college-going women. Feminist activist and historian V Geetha describes the experience of youth for women as straddling a ‘dangerous instability’¹ – caught in the crossfire between the celebrations of women’s putative unshackling in the wake of globalization and India’s ‘liberalisation’² from traditional roles; and an anxious discourse of sexual danger that justifies increased surveillance of every aspect of their lives. This instability – examined here, as a sense of precarity – is the central theme of this thesis. This chapter begins with a vignette that spans my first engagement with this context as a student in Chennai between 2006 and 2009, while also telling a story that returned many times during fieldwork and addresses many of the central concerns of this thesis.

The Problem

Seven years ago, early in 2007, a large dog, one of four that had been let loose under the official pretext of protection from intruders, mauled a young woman who was a hostel resident at a small, albeit prestigious women’s college in Chennai. I was an undergraduate student in the city at the time, and heard the story one hushed morning, from this woman’s friends. The student had been part of a small group of residents who had been allowed to stay out that evening past the usual curfew of six-thirty pm to attend a celebratory dinner for participants in the institution’s annual dramatic production. When the group returned, at about ten pm, the dogs had already been released from their cages. Escorted by a watchman, the group of women walked from the gates to their hostel at the back of the campus. The

¹ Personal conversation with V Geetha at her home in Saidapet, Chennai, dated October 12, 2012.

² Sections below will explore ‘liberalisation’ as both an economic and a socio-cultural phenomenon (Lukose 2009, Ganguly-Scrase 2003, Säävälä 2010).

student who was eventually attacked had lingered a bit. Some said she had been talking on her phone. By the time she got to her hostel, the others had gone in and the doors had been locked. Students do not hold keys to the buildings they live in, and so she stood there knocking, waiting for the warden or another student to come and let her in. As she waited, one of the dogs pounced on her and her screams soon drew the attention her knocking had not. In the days that followed, ‘plastic surgery’ was whispered, and for over a term, the student did not return.

While representatives of the institution, St Francis College in this thesis, either refused comment, or claimed no memory of this incident, a group of students who attempted to hold their college responsible for the attack remember it only too well. One of them, whom I met in Chennai upon my return to the city for research, told me about how she and another student attempted to start a petition demanding that the institution apologise for the injury caused to the student, and also reconsider their method of security. The dogs – released every evening at eight pm – effectively prevented students from so much as going on a night-time walk in the gardens, and while the official reason for their presence was the ‘safety’ of the campus, and protection from intruders, the other function they undoubtedly performed was the enforcement of curfew rules, if by grisly means.

The petition was unsuccessful. Many students feared that in signing it, they would be endangering a comfortable academic career at the college. Others wondered why the student had lingered in the first place: had she been talking to a boyfriend? College authorities warned the petitioners that the student had had it coming. She had not only lingered behind despite being told to walk in a group, following the lead of the watchman but also that she had to have known that college rules strictly prohibit students from using mobile phones on campus. Even residents, many of who come from towns and villages both in Tamil Nadu and other

states that are several hours away, and often bring mobile phones that parents give them as a means of keeping in touch, are required to turn in their phones to a warden and allowed to access them only for a short period during the day. Eventually, the vice principal, a formidable nun, called the two petitioning students into her office to ask them why they believed they and other students were in danger from the dogs that had attacked their classmate: surely they didn't plan on breaking the rules as this girl had done? No dogs, she assured them, would attack them, so long as they obeyed the college's rules. And further, did they really want to jeopardise the possibility of graduating from college with good references by going on protest in their last months there? After all, they had signed a contract at admission, promising never to take direct action against the institution³. Were they not aware she could invoke this to expel them? The students dropped the petition without question: 'I didn't want to get stuck there forever' one of them told me, when I interviewed her. Now working in research after a Masters degree from Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, where she was a student activist, this young woman remembers feeling 'stifled' and 'suffocated' at St. Francis.

Many of the students I met during fieldwork in Chennai in 2012-2013 had been told this story as a cautionary tale, and without doubt it worked: almost no one tried to sneak out past curfew time anymore. Many also agreed with the rationale of those who had refused to sign the petition: it was 'a big risk' one twenty-year-old told me, and 'the college is only trying to protect us'. No one had since taken action against the college: it was a 'waste', and was only likely to result in more trouble for the students. Instead, I was advised by a member of the students' union – a body that functions more as a decanal authority than a representative body for students – that dissatisfaction with the college was like teenage anger against parental

³ The section on Class, Caste and Higher Education in this chapter will expand on the political economy of College education in Chennai, demonstrating that the rapid pace of privatization in this city – through the means of public private partnerships – has left Chennai's higher education spaces deeply depoliticized.

authority: something to grow out of rather than take seriously. Indeed this young woman told me earnestly, it was to learn this ‘emotional maturity’ that college education was necessary: ‘it’s about all-round [development], about character [building] and acting like you’re matured, not all about books’.

A number of themes emerge from this vignette. It demands, first of all, the unpacking of ‘security’ preserved here at the high cost of grievous injury and threat to life as well as the notion of ‘responsibility’ at play in blaming the young woman for lingering, even as the College shouldered no blame for its actions. In this, it recalls the notion of ‘surplus life’ (Mitchell 2010, 240) – a situation where ‘certain lives may have to be abandoned, damaged or destroyed in order to protect, save or care for life’ (Anderson 2010, 780). Such arguments are typically made in the context of larger scale abandonments, such as in wars, genocide and long-term resource deprivation. However, abandonments and calibrations of priority and risk in normalized non-crisis contexts, as Berlant (2007, 2011) shows, are what produce the space and time of ‘everyday’, as stable, safe and normal (see also Povinelli 2011)⁴. These processes are revealing of the everyday workings – through diffuse and multiple institutions – of biopower, which functions as an ‘analytic tool for asking grounded questions about whose bodies and selves were made vulnerable, when, why, and how—and whose were not’ (Stoler 2001, 894).

The figure of the mauled woman here serves to index the greater threat – greater than being attacked and nearly killed by dogs – that spectrally hangs over other students should

⁴ See also Sanders (2001) who draws on Derrida’s problematisation (1992) of the distinction between ‘foundational’ and ‘instrumental’ violence in Walter Benjamin’s work to argue against distinctions between ‘extraordinary’ and ‘ordinary’ violence. Extending Derrida’s analysis he suggests complicity between foundational and instrumental violence in acts of discipline that mark some bodies as more vulnerable than others. As such, he argues for the importance of looking beyond ‘scandalous’ violence to problematizing everyday forms of trauma that are structural.

they disobey the rules of the institution, made, in this narrative, to keep them 'safe'. What are they being kept safe from? As Das (2007) writes, this indeterminate phantom of threat to 'good' women – whether in the form of the Muslim seducer (Gupta 2005), the lower caste or rural-migrant rapist in the city, or even discourses of 'modern' life in the form of consumption and desire (Mankekar 2004) – is central to producing a nationalist fiction of 'ordinary' life. The imagination of the extraordinary harm of sexual violence – marked here in the threat of 'intruders' that the dogs, are meant to protect students from – positions the woman's body in 'an economy of sexual propriety and property' (Sunder Rajan 1993b, 72), consolidating the imagined figure of the middle class woman as the symbol of 'all that is worth fighting and dying for' (From EM Forster's 'A Passage to India' in Sunder Rajan 1993b, 72). The ordinary is thus fantastic (Ahmed 2004a): literally a fantasy, whose reproduction is at once life-building, within a neoliberal discourse that aims to maximise individual capability through the stable reproduction of livable⁵ social forms (Jain 2007), as well as exhausting: producing economies of risk and danger that sustain its spiral (Berlant 2007). In order to investigate this, my research focuses on the everyday lives of young women, who are often held up as both pure symbols of this enduring stability, as well as violated figures whose defence and protection this dream of the ordinary life hinges on⁶.

In this, the status of young women's agency is brought under precarious question, as those who do not react 'appropriately' to a situation are apt to be simply silenced, like the petitioners in the vignette above, their voices drowned out by the panicked rumour of threat that justifies violent measures of 'protection' (see also Sunder Rajan 2003). It is essential,

⁵ Butler's work on bodies and materiality (1993), as well as performativity (Butler 1990, 2004b) and precarity (Butler 2004a, 2009) sets out the meaning of the 'livable' and 'unlivable', which will be used and explored in this thesis. In short this is summed up in the question she poses in *Undoing Gender* (2004b, 58): 'What, given the contemporary order of being, can I be?' This is explored in greater detail in the theoretical frameworks discussed in a later part of this chapter.

⁶ See also Ramaswamy (1998) who explores the centrality of the figure of the violated woman to the making of everyday Tamil political life.

within this context, to trace the gendered histories of this ordinary and middle class ‘everyday’, and the mechanisms and structures of common sense through which it is produced and reproduced. The ethical imperatives that circumscribe the sphere of ‘appropriate’ agency – marking the ‘correct’ direction for action – are shaped by this common sense. The mauled woman, in this case, is thus also a ‘wilful subject’ (Ahmed 2014). She is persistently stubborn, compromising her ability to survive, disobedient to the point of near death, and hence deserving of punishment. Further, locating this incident in the context of an educational institution, we might regard her disciplining as implicitly tied to pedagogical practice. If as the student union member said to me, the purpose of college is to produce maturity in emotion, then this young woman – the wilful subject, now mauled – has failed in this task, as have the petitioners. As such, the threat of the dogs might be read as an instance of ‘poisonous pedagogy’ (Ahmed 2014 cf. Miller 2002): the taming of wilfulness through violent means. As a wide scholarship on the Protestant roots of modern education (Zornado 2002, Miller 2002) demonstrates, this has long been used as a tactic of taming the child’s wilfulness into a mature, contained adulthood. This is particularly pertinent in the postcolonial context where continuities between ‘child’ and ‘savage’ (Kent 2004, K. Kumar 2005) have defined the domain of colonial governmentality, and spilled over into the postcolonial state’s investment in education as a means of producing orderly and modern citizen subjects (K. Kumar 2005)⁷.

This vignette thus also points to complex youth transitions to adulthood, managed through the governance and organisation of affect. Giving up rebelliousness, or to put it otherwise, dissent, is regarded as a sign of maturity: having grown out of teenage. In this understanding, personhood and autonomy are mediated by capacities (Puar 2009, Jain 2007)

⁷ See Rao and Pierce (2001) address this arguing for instance that criminality and disorder were produced in colonial societies not only within the realm of the law but within other institutions as well. Indeed as they and a huge body of postcolonial scholarship has shown, a variety of disciplinary projects were engaged in making bodies available to governmental reason.

and no one is ever quite as capable as they might be. This in turn justifies violent practices of ‘safekeeping’ and the management of life by educational institutions and the state, in the interest of reproducing the space and time of the ‘ordinary everyday’. This is simultaneously also rooted, in India, in a history of postcoloniality’s complex engagements with the continuities between capacity, adulthood and autonomy. A substantial historical scholarship has explored gendered ideologies of imperial rule that cast the colonized body as the weak and excessive ‘other’ against which the ‘healthy, vigorous, bourgeois body’ (Stoler 1995, 7) of the European bourgeois was socially produced. As these scholars argue, mainstream middle class nationalism typically reproduced these typologies of colonial reason thus creating regimes of recognition and exclusion centring on these notions of morally inflected capacity (Sinha 2006, 1995). If the justification for continued colonial rule in India was the theory that Indians were yet too uncivilised, their women too enslaved and their sexual cultures too permissive and decadent for the muscular and moral business of governance, then its resistance was centred on the production and disciplining of bourgeois bodies into educated, self-controlled citizen subjects: robustly reasonable of mind, and healthy of body alike, as metonymic of the demand for national self-governance. These themes continue to be pertinent in a context where the ideal of self-caring and responsible citizenship is increasingly upheld as central to a narrative of national development and progress, and informs contemporary histories of youth.

Addressing these contextual frames, this thesis undertakes two broad and interlinked lines of enquiry. It investigates anxieties about young women’s sexuality as a site where *youth* and *pleasure* are produced and contested as categories of experience in the broader context of the practices through which livable forms of middle class life are produced. In this, it employs the lens of governmentality to particularly investigate *education* – both in its formal institutionalised form and as a wider practice of pedagogy more diffusely located – as a site

where gender, caste and class are disciplined and vulnerabilities differentially distributed within the regional context of Chennai, as well as for everyday practices of gendered agency.

‘Private’ and Precariously Balanced Middle Classes

The context that prompts this investigation is that of liberalisation. Usually shorthand for the range of socio-political and economic changes that are linked with the structural transformation of the Indian economy since early 1990s, and the rise to prominence of an ambitious middle class, ‘liberalisation’ is as much a shift in cultural imaginations and sensibilities as it is about rising middle class incomes and rapid growth rates. Paraphrasing Kaviraj (1984, p. 225, cf. Gramsci 1971) on the postcolonial bourgeoisie of the first decades after independence, ‘liberalisation’ might be understood as a shift in the common sense of society, away from the sluggish pragmatism of Nehruvian ideology to the sexy and ambitious ‘India rising’⁸: a nation ready to transcend the weight of its colonial and postcolonial baggage and emerge into a globalised milieu.

To be middle class in post-liberalisation India is to have emerged from development’s waiting room (Jeffrey 2010) into a globalised world. The Indian middle classes are far from

⁸ The phrase ‘India Rising’ is the title of the journalist Oliver Balch’s book on socio-economic transformation in India, subtitled ‘Tales from a Changing Nation’ (2012). The phrase, typically indexing the increasingly influential and ambitious character of India’s middle classes, has also been used in other media outputs, for instance, a CNBC broadcast from the US that addresses India’s economic growth rate and makes predictions on the possibility that this ‘emerging economy’ might become a ‘world leader’. This phrase also recalls close associations with ‘India Shining’, which was the campaign slogan that the BJP used in the 2004 elections. This phrase like ‘India Rising’ marks a climate of economic optimism, and brings to mind images of a flourishing middle class, world-class lifestyles and the nationalist dream of India as a ‘world leader’. Both these politically weighty phrases were also recalled in the Modi-led successful BJP campaign in the 2014 elections, which used the slogan ‘*Achhe din aane waale hain*’ or ‘Good days are coming’, to highlight the BJP’s electoral promise of rapid economic development and upward social mobility for the middle classes. Notably, the phrase has been repeated since by other politicians around the world such as UK Conservative MP George Osborne to suggest a better economic future in trading with India as well as India’s ‘rise’ as a global power. This brief history of slogans referring to economic and social optimism in India points to the links between the rise of Hindutva parties and ideologies – characterized by a nationalist dream to ‘lead’ the world, and maximize growth as well as foster world-class living situations for the middle classes within a linear developmental narrative – and the socio-cultural shifts and anxieties indexed by ‘liberalisation’.

homogeneous in character (Fernandes 2006, Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase 2009, Brosius 2010, Donner 2011). Fernandes (2006) identifies three tiers: senior bureaucrats and professionals, a petit bourgeoisie composed of landowning farmers, and small business owners who have risen to middle class status through economic advancement though they are often seen as lacking in cultural capital, and an educated class that lacks economic capital and rarely owns land, and is hence low down in the bureaucratic ladder. Most of my informants came from the second and third tiers in this schema. They were daughters of small business owners, schoolteachers and junior bureaucrats, and often expressed the tenuousness of the hold they felt they had on middle class status.

As such, and as this scholarship points out, while ‘middle class’ as a group may have little empirical validity, it is definitive as a discursive space in contemporary India, and as such carries analytical value. Rather than use class as a single category, it is posed as a problem in this thesis, and practices of intimacy and pleasure are demonstrated to be among the many processes through which a contested set of *class dispositions* (Baviskar and Ray 2011, 4) of middle classness is produced and consolidated. Bourdieu (1984, 77) writes that there is ‘an immediate adherence, at the deepest level of the habitus, to the tastes and distastes, sympathies and aversions, fantasies and phobias which more than declared opinions, forge the unity of a class.’ Gender, sexuality and intimacy are sites upon which these tastes, fantasies and phobias that are constitutive of middle classness are contested, arbitrated and disciplined in the everyday lives of young women⁹.

⁹ This has been widely demonstrated by historians studying the colonial logics of governmentality and the making of a colonial middle class (Hodges 2008, Gupta 2002). In the contemporary context, scholars like Sanjay Srivastava (2007), Osella and Osella (2004) and Lawrence Cohen (1995a) among others have explored gender and sexuality as a site for the articulation of peculiarly postcolonial modernities.

Middle classness might be studied as *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977). *Habitus* has been examined in the anthropological literature on India as an analytic of *background* (Radhakrishnan 2011): a word often used in English by middle class Indians to describe class and caste origins¹⁰. However, despite its rich character as an analytical tool to explore class as a composite of social, cultural and educational capital, *habitus* is still ‘curiously inert, constantly supplemented by determinate structural logics at the expense of the “slight surprise of action”’ (Anderson 2014, 10). As such, this thesis, in attending to the significance of fantasy, aspiration and emotion in the process through which class subjectivity is produced, is instead concerned with what it means to inhabit a middle class *world*, and how such worlds are built in ‘the slippery relation between the collective and the individual, between genre and individual emplotment of stories’ (Das 2007, 2). This is the process that Stewart (2010, 340) calls a *worlding*: the making of ‘the present as a compositional event’ – never quite fully created, and always prone to rupture and fragility. As such, this thesis sees *middle class* as a discursive site upon which anxieties about cultural globalisation, new global modernities, and a shift in political sensibilities have been articulated. This understanding of *middle class* as a dynamic category produced in engagement with ethnographic narratives of lives, and the ways in which they recall and link to larger historical and structural realities also positions it squarely within the ruptured and fragmented histories of modernity in South Asia. Drawing from scholars like Miller (1994) and Osella and Osella (Osella and Osella 2000), we might argue that modernity in postcolonial contexts mediates the differential ways in which precarious circumstances are produced. It is ‘about dream and disillusionment, promising progress to all while delivering to a few’ (Osella and Osella 2006, 584).

¹⁰ Radhakrishnan (2011) examines ‘background’ as a composite of class, caste and place of origin. A popular category widely used among middle class Indians, *background*, like *milieu*, refers to a positioning within multiple socio-cultural indices of power.

To be ‘middle class’ is thus also increasingly a balancing act (Radhakrishnan 2011, Donner 2011) – a precarious position of steadfast moderation – between what is often regarded the backward failure to enter global modernity associated with the working classes and the elites’ disregard for ‘Indian culture’. As Mankekar (1999, 9) writes, ‘If the middle classes seemed eager to adopt modern lifestyles through the acquisition of consumer goods, they also became the self-appointed protectors of tradition.’ Seeing themselves, then, as representatives of a global nationalism (Gilbertson 2013, 121), the middle classes seek to consolidate this position through a range of strategies – for instance, the acquisition of education, jobs in the private sector and consumption, as well as the cultivation of particular practices of self-expression that display middle classness – to prevent downward mobility. At the same time, they seek to be ‘appropriately Indian’ (Radhakrishnan 2011) through strategies of moderated consumption and a resurgent politics of traditionalism (Säävälä 2010). Further, the disproportionate weight of this balancing act falls on women, particularly young women (Gilbertson 2013), who are called on to demonstrate their ability to straddle both a ‘global’ world of education, work and economic opportunity, as well as a family-centric ‘India world’ as one student I met put it. This precarious balance is central to constructing ‘the “appropriate difference” of the Indian family—cosmopolitan due to appropriate levels of “exposure” to the world, but also restrained and grounded in a cultural identity that maintains the sanctity of a woman’s sexual purity’ (Radhakrishnan 2011, 169).

This precarious rise of the middle classes has been accompanied by the increasing significance of a discourse of privatisation as integral to the socio-political dynamics of liberalisation. Private sector jobs, private entrepreneurship, and privately owned public spaces have emerged as representative of a new modernity. Indeed ‘public’ appears to have been equated with an old world of corruption, and inefficiency, incompatible with the ideals of a new middle class that seeks to be globally competitive, and protect its interests (Fernandes

2006, Lukose 2009). Entry into these private institutions and companies, and access to private capital is widely connected with involvement in the right social networks. In this context, the 'public' (spaces, institutions, the urban crowd) has come to be associated strongly with imagined threats to this precariously maintained middle classness. This is deeply imbricated in a process that scholars like Varma (2004) describe as 'provincialisation' – the entry of the vernacular into the decosmopolitanised (Appadurai 2000) city – that is an aspect of the fall of secular and rational postcolonial urbanism (see also Prakash 2002), and the emergence of a discourse of panic about middle class safety in the city¹¹. The 'private' city then as a place that is representative of a globally competitive India - its call centres, malls, efficiently managed businesses and model citizens - is thus increasingly both discursively distanced from a 'public' city of slums, beggars and homeless people, of dangerous dark streets where rapists and murders lurk, as well as physically distanced by a middle class that travels 'from guarded homes to darkened cars to air-conditioned offices, moving always in an envelope of privilege through the heat of public poverty and the dust of dispossession' (Appadurai 2000, 628).

An economy of rumours (Das 2007, 117) is central to this narrative of threat, 'as a voice that was unattributed, unassigned, and yet anchored to the images of self and other that had been circulating...' Contagious whispers¹² – about Dalit men's rapacious tendencies proclaimed by an OBC political party (Pandian 2013); about Muslim men's desire to wage a 'love jihad' to marry and convert Hindu women (Gupta 2009); about 'undeserving' lower caste students taking away college seats and employment that rightly belongs to 'us' (Ghosh

¹¹ Comaroff and Comaroff (2008) note the emergence of 'uncivil society' across regional and national contexts, as the looming threat to order and control in contemporary postcolonial societies, particularly in the wake of economic restructuring. On the one hand 'ordinary' people become more and more willing to pay bribes, engage in murky acts of criminality to get their ends, and on the other this opportunistic discourse is nurtured in a context where the state is less a monolith of bureaucratic institutions and more a franchising authority. This context, they argue, is shot through with a sense of threat, and 'others' are created as the boundary between permissible forms of uncivil life, and non-permissible ones.

¹² This is what Bhabha (1994, 286) calls 'the manic repetition of rumour.'

2006); about the dangers of *Hijras* (Patel 1997) – solidify into ‘fact’, bolstering this prevalent anxiety. The Indian middle class’s ascendance is marked further by the territorialisation of space. ‘Middle class space’ is increasingly ‘owned, distributed, mapped, calculated, bordered and controlled’ (Elden 2007, 578) Other ‘places’ of the city become cast as ‘risky’ and increasingly excluded from the ‘pastoral web of risk and care’ (Mitchell 2010, 240) that desirable middle classness is encircled within. In this discourse, being ‘middle-class’ is more than just about economic status. It has been constructed as a moral virtue that affirms dominant neoliberal paradigms on India’s growth (Fernandes 2006, Säävälä 2010), and as a domain of muscular, virtuous individualism that is constructed in opposition to ‘rowdy’ or ‘unruly’ lower class identity politics (Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2008), such as unions and demands for affirmative action (Lukose 2009).

Mandal’s Spectres: Education and Caste in Middle Class Life

A number of scholars have noted that increasingly, the upwardly mobile ‘new’ middle classes have embraced higher education as a vehicle for this desired socio-economic ascendance (Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2008, N. Kumar 2011, Lukose 2009). Individuals and communities therefore move not only up and down the class ladder but also horizontally across, through practices of capital conversion (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990)¹³. As Gilbertson (2014) notes, this is of particular relevance to the study of Indian educational spaces in contemporary times where students and their families often seek to convert newly acquired economic capital into social and cultural capital by enrolling in relatively more expensive and privately-run institutions, whose membership offers prestige, the possibility of social mobility through future employment prospects and access to otherwise exclusive social networks. There has thus been an exponential increase in the educational enrolment over the past two

¹³ Bourdieu (2006, 81) calls this ‘a transubstantiation whereby the most material types of capital – those which are economic in the restricted sense – can present themselves in the immaterial form of cultural or social capital and vice versa.’

decades, with young women's enrolment in institutions of higher education (colleges and universities granting post-secondary qualifications) increasing nearly 25% between 2007 and 2009 (Singh 2013). As scholars like Fuller and Narasimhan (2012) and Baas (2009) further note, a growing number of jobs in IT and a burgeoning number of other corporate workspaces are increasingly considered respectable and appropriate for middle class women (see also Radhakrishnan 2011), thus contributing to this increase. In Chennai, the narrative I popularly heard about the numbers of women in higher education over the years centred on the mushrooming local economy of hostels¹⁴. 'There is a hostel on every road' a middle class resident in the city pointed out to me, adding that this had not been the case in previous years when 'parents feared to send their daughters so far away'. According to women like this middle-aged 'aunty'¹⁵ as I – also a middle class Chennai-ite – called her, the increasing ease in communication through the wide prevalence of mobile phone and Internet technology had also significantly contributed to the rise in young women's enrolment in post-secondary institutions of education located away from their homes. It had become easier 'to keep an eye on our girls' as she put it, even as they were far away, living in a hostel, and studying.

'College' in common middle class parlance in urban India, is often interchangeable with 'youth'. 'Youth' and 'childhood' as social categories of experience in India, it has been suggested (Nakassis 2013, Jeffrey 2010), are located at the intersection of age, kinship hierarchies, position relative to institutions of schooling and marriage, and since liberalisation, media discourses that have produced a range of cultural products addressing this category. 'College culture' is therefore interchangeably 'youth culture' and includes wandering about the

¹⁴ 'Hostel' in India typically refers to the undergraduate halls of residence that function either as part of on-campus provisions for students, or increasingly, as private institutions unaffiliated to any university that offer 'safety' and 'comfort' to students – including laundry service, cleaning and catered meals – living away from home. These residences are typically single sex, and the rooms are large and shared between as many as eight or nine women in dormitory-style residences.

¹⁵ The role of fictive kin relations in disciplining gender is discussed in Chapter Three.

streets, ogling members of the opposite sex and spending time with friends (Osella and Osella 1998, Rogers 2008). As such, 'youth' is often described in terms of time stretching endlessly, a lack of responsibility, combined with freedoms that were inaccessible during childhood, as well as access to consumer products such as motorbikes, MP3 players, and mobile phones. 'College' is about 'freedom'. 'Youth' it has also been suggested (2013) is widely seen as male by default (Nakassis 2010), and women's access to the practices, spaces and temporalities that define 'youth' remain tenuous. Seen widely within Tamil culture as natural and even expected and conducive for the development of adult masculinity (Mines 1994), young men are encouraged to leave the home and engage in some 'mischief' with friends.

Young women, on the other hand, are regarded as being in a precarious stage, needing perpetual supervision and control. Unlike in young men's case, for them, youthful transgressions can cause lasting scars, affecting their reputations and ability to marry well. Further, 'Youth' and 'adulthood' as categories of normative behaviour, as scholars like Sunder Rajan (2003) have demonstrated, mediate not only the distribution of the privilege of being one of the decision-makers in kin circles (Mines 1994), but also for being taken as agent actors in socio-legal contexts. 'Youth' is thus not merely an age-bound category, but a disciplining discourse. For instance, women imagined to have made 'bad' decisions by 'eloping' from college with a lover, even if well above the age of consent and the legal age for marriage, and hence 'adult' in the law, are often remanded to the care of court-appointed guardians, separated from their lovers and 'returned' to their parents¹⁶. Reminiscent of the practice of 'returning' women that occurred in the wake of India's partition from Pakistan (Das 1990), such practices are productive of regimes of legitimacy around sexuality that are integral to gendered ideologies of 'youth' and 'adulthood'.

¹⁶ Chapters Five and Six expand on these arguments in this thesis. See also Baxi (2006), Mody (2008) and Arasu and Thangarajah (2012) for elaborations of this point.

Education must thus be examined beyond its formal meanings and location within formal institutions alone, as a wider practice of governmentality. In the particular context of the postcolonial state, the history of adulthood cannot be separated from the history of the citizenship and governmentality. As Srivastava (2005, 2007) suggests, one of the major projects of a postcolonial modernity has been the education of the native into the citizen. These scholars see this as a pedagogical project that mimics and transforms colonial strategies of power in which the colonised world was seen as yet not grown-up enough for self-governance (Chatterjee 2011). If, as this literature suggests we are to regard educational institutions in India as places where modernity in its imagined ideal form is produced through a regime of discipline, then, given the spaces where this thesis is located, we have to take this understanding of adulthood seriously. Institutions of higher education are thus important sites in learning dispositions that make up middle classness (N. Kumar 1998), as well as positioned as oases of rationality, order and discipline in dangerously unruly landscapes of urban modernity (Jeffery, Jeffery, and Jeffrey 2006, N. Kumar 2011, Srivastava 2005).

Education, as Donner (2012, 126) argues ‘allows middle class people to insert status and refinement into everyday life through institutions and practices.’ Indeed, as it has been widely noted, the lives of Indian children are typically punctuated and marked by educational milestones and school and family mutually shape each other in the making of middle classness (Drury 1993, Jeffery 2005). Along with science, technology and family planning, formal education mediates intimate and public life, and thus structures the postcolonial landscape of modernity in India. In this, institutions of education have been important as domains of governmentality: sites to produce responsible, capable citizens, once the ideal subjects of a postcolonial welfare economy focussed on national development, and increasingly the new class of enterprising and ambitious ‘liberalisation’s children’ (Lukose 2009).

Educational institutions have also been structurally transformed in the wake of liberalisation's shift in socio-political sensibilities. Most of the constituent colleges of Madras University have been made 'autonomous' in a process that began as early as the mid 1980s. 'Autonomy' is a form of public-private partnership that is perhaps the most pervasive form in which the advance of neoliberalism has made its way into the Indian higher education sector¹⁷. This allows individual colleges to design curricula that are at a variance from the curriculum offered in the larger university – offering more specialised or challenging courses for instance, but also choosing not to offer 'traditional' courses in a discipline¹⁸ – while also charging much higher fees. Autonomous institutions thus become not only exclusive and affordable only to those able and willing to pay fees that are up to ten times as high as fees in non-autonomous colleges, but also an object of aspiration. Besides this, autonomous colleges in Chennai also typically enforce contracts that bind students to rules of disciplined behaviour. These contracts usually require students to waive their right to protest against the institution in any manner: strikes and other forms of direct action are grounds for expulsion without further explanation. This is the context in which the vice Principal of St Francis threatened the two students, who petitioned for an overhaul of the campus security system – the dogs – in the wake of the mauling, with expulsion. These institutions are thus regarded as 'focussed' and devoid of the imagined 'political distractions' of government colleges. They are thus, emblematic of the spatial strategies within educational institutions, which are, as scholars

¹⁷ Jandhyala BG Tilak (2014), in an article on privatisation in higher education explores different modes through which this has occurred in India. He comments that public-private-partnerships have been one of the central means through which the government has gradually abdicated its responsibility to position higher education as geared towards promoting common good rather than a consumer service, and at the same time also its commitment to promoting social equity through the expansion of central universities.

¹⁸ One history department for instance had done away with courses on the history and politics of the Tamil region in favour of a more 'national' focus as being more relevant rather than a 'divisive' focus on caste politics and the history of Tamil Nadu.

like Jeffrey et al (2008) have suggested key to the constitution of middle-class identity, as well as engaged in the ‘regulation of public conduct with the subjective emotional and intellectual capacities and techniques of individuals and the ethical regimes through which they govern their lives’ (Rose cited in Rofel 2007, 15).

Caste comes into particular relief in institutions of higher education where the politics of affirmative action through policies of reservation of seats for members of lower castes have been a chief source of public debate and conflict since the 1990s. The upper caste and middle class agitation against government proposals to introduce reservations for the Other Backward Classes¹⁹ in educational institutions highlighted a discourse of *merit* as central to the ideological foundations of the middle classes. As Deshpande (2013, 84) writes, while *merit* literally refers to certificates of competence in examinations and interviews where the subject of this competence is taken to be in a state of neutrality with regard to her social identity, on the ideological level *merit* functions as a ‘moral claim on society’. In this discourse then, students of backward classes and Dalits who have entered educational institutions through affirmative action quotas are cast as ‘undeserving’ (Ghosh 2006), and positioned in an economy of rumours in which it is believed that their entry has lowered the standard of education in the country, driving ‘deserving’ students – a narrative that I often heard, and which is detailed in Chapter Two – to foreign nations. There are also whispers of these classes having ‘swamped’ what is rhetorically cast as ‘our’ education system. Indeed I heard a highly ranked college officer at NT College making the comment that colleges like NT were essential in a political climate in which ‘our children’ (from her accent and implication Tamil Brahmin children) are ‘victimized’ and ‘excluded’ for ‘being intelligent’ and ‘working hard.’ This is not

¹⁹ The administrative categories of Forward or Other Class, Other Backward Class, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe that form the basis of reservation of seats in educational institutions include, according to a range of socio-economic factors, different sets of castes in different regions in India. See Gorringe (2005) on the working of this schema in Tamil Nadu.

an unfamiliar narrative as many scholars have noted (Hancock 1995, Geetha and Jayanthi 1995), given widespread Hindu and upper caste resurgence. In a moment of candour, a professor at another institution said: ‘These SC/ST girls are the problem’ – i.e. Dalit and Adivasi students – ‘they have taken over the campus’.

As scholars like Rege (1996, 2006), Chakravarti (1993) and Menon (2009) among others establish further, caste and gender are constitutive of each other. Thus we find for instance that during the protests against the Mandal Commission, caste Hindu women joined the anti-reservation bandwagon with the anxiety that if all seats in educational institutions were given away to Dalit and lower caste men, they would be unable to find ‘educated’ husbands (Chakravarti 2003). In colleges in Chennai itself, I often heard the story that women of Dalit and OBC backgrounds had brought down ‘the standard’ not only of education, but also behaviour and ‘character’. A professor, herself a Brahmin, mused nostalgically about the days when the students of her college were ‘the best and the brightest’ from the city’s prominent families: well read young women ‘who had been taught how to behave in public’. These women, she told me, no longer wanted to attend college in Chennai and for this she blamed reservations. And now instead she said we have ‘these girls’ gesturing out of the window, ‘behaving like newly-released donkeys’ (*avutu vitta kazhuthai*)²⁰.

As Ahmed (2004a, 122) suggests, the language of ‘swamping’ and ‘take over’ – whether by immigrant workers and upwardly mobile working and lower middle classes in the city at large, or by lower caste and working class students – create associations between these populations and a ‘loss of control, as well as *dirt* and *sewage*, and hence work by mobilizing

²⁰ This phrase in Tamil has a connotation of lacking the capacity for rational thought and unrestrained behaviour, and as such, also casteist overtones.

fear, or the anxiety of being ‘overwhelmed’ by the actual or potential proximity of others.²¹ The association between urban migrants and lower castes and dirt is noted in the Indian context by other scholars as well, who point to this analogy in explaining the spate of urban beautification projects and middle class bids to environmentalism in the city that often carry casteist undertones (Mawdsley 2004, Fernandes 2004). Rather than being contained in particular bodies then, we might argue, drawing on Ahmed (2004a), that fear circulates in a contagious economy, rehearsing rumours about Brahmins being ‘India’s Jews’, a well-known rhetorical complaint heard widely in Chennai that makes impossible comparisons between an anti-caste movement for rights and the holocaust, and men of low caste seducing away dutiful albeit naïve upper caste daughters.

As Rogers (2008) shows, caste in men’s educational institutions typically takes the form of masculine competition played out on the bodies of women through practices of ‘eve teasing’ or sexual harassment, or practices of posturing and trading caste insults. Given that Chennai continues to have a vibrant anti-caste political sphere (Pandian 2013), organisations of backward class and scheduled caste students, as well as Tamil cultural nationalist groups such as *Save Tamils* are often viable spaces for male students to engage in a politics of caste. During fieldwork, I attended meetings of such organisations, hosted at a prominent men’s college in the city. However, women undergraduate students typically do not attend these meetings. For one, all of the meetings I heard of were held after six pm. This is usually past curfew hours for those living in hostels, and for others, can often still be later than their families let them stay out. For another, they are typically hosted in men’s institutions or even men’s hostels: spaces that women undergraduates typically regard with suspicion, knowing

²¹ See Mazzarella (2010) on the mediatory potentials of crowds. He argues that the distinction often made in social theory between crowds as uncontrollable, pathologised and banal; and multitudes as pure collectives is false and revealing of anxieties about the non-sovereignty and loss of individual agency represented by the image of the crowd.

that they often risk their reputations by simply being there. As scholars have noted, anti-caste Tamil political spaces of dissent are typically almost exclusively male, with few women, particularly young women, having access to them²². The women I met typically also saw politics as a male preoccupation: one that would get them in trouble, and maybe even jeopardise their futures if their college heard of it, or worse, their parents²³. Others even added that the only men at such meetings, however much they might sympathise with the cause, would be ‘rowdies’: not the type of men they aspired to marry or be with, if they were to have the social mobility that they were aiming for. As such associating with them would be harmful to their reputations. As Lukose (2009) suggests then, the fear of getting ‘left behind’ as well as anxieties about reputation typically close off public spaces of protest for young women.

Further one of the fallouts of resurgent Hinduism in Tamil Nadu, has been the rise of Brahminism, and the weakening of the anti-caste discourse among the middle classes (Hancock 1995, Geetha and Jayanthi 1995). Increasingly powerful Hindu organisations, whether local in scope such as *Jan Kalyan*, the *Hindu Munnani*, and *Thambraas* (a portmanteau of Tamil and Brahmins), or regional wings of national organisations such as the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP), and *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) undercut the anti-Brahmin discourse of caste that has long defined politics in Tamil Nadu by appealing to a unified Hindu identity, co-opting in particular, non-Brahmin women, into a discourse where a defence of ‘Hindu’ life is in effect materialised through the public performances of upper-caste religious rituals

²² Ramaswamy (1997) demonstrates that while the figure of the Tamil woman both as virtuous wife and as a goddess has long been central to Tamil politics, ‘real’ women are typically excluded from Tamil political spaces. Hodges (2005) similarly points out the significant distinctions between the discourse of Self-Respect politics in the early 20th century, which was driven by Periyar’s anti-masculinist politics encouraging women to participate actively in public political life; and the DMK politics that emerged after which reverted to a nostalgic idealisation of the Tamil woman and of Tamil family life in which women were recast as virtuous goddesses.

²³ Lukose (2009) shows that similar ideals prevent young women in Kerala from feeling able to become openly involved in student politics.

(Geetha and Jayanthi). These scholars note, in particular, the role of Hindu schools, colleges and neighbourhood associations in the insinuation of nationalism into women's intimate lives, as well as in the increasingly caste-patterned marking of public life in these institutions. At NT College, for instance, the cultural activity that the student cabinet undertook for the year 2012-2013 was the staging of worship for the Hindu god Ganesha. As Fuller (2001) notes, Ganesha festivals have typically marked the increasing inroad of Hindutva ideology, and in Tamil Nadu have accompanied the increasing resurgence and public visibility of Brahminical practices. At these festivals, young women wear *saris* and recite Sanskrit verses, recreating the atmosphere of worship in a Brahmin home, playing the role, self-consciously, as the institution's magazine and the introductory speech before the event indicate, of dutiful daughters celebrating 'Indian culture'²⁴.

Risk, Gender and Intimacy

As argued previously in this chapter, this thesis approaches gender as mediating the balancing acts that go into the making of middle class everyday life. It has been said many times that the bodies and sexualities of young women have constituted an important medium for the construction of a postcolonial modernity in India. As the object of the colonial gaze of mission and reform (Kent 2004), as well as the symbolic last frontier of anti-colonial defence (Chatterjee 1990), women have been educated, dressed, pruned and primped to appropriately fit notions of a modern India. Today, as the poster-girls of a neoliberal consumer polity, young women's bodies continue to represent the grand destinies of the nation (Radhakrishnan 2011). As scholars like Das (1996, 2007) have shown, the staging of the violation of these 'good' women – whether through the telling of stories of rape, or in the case of the women studied in this thesis, everyday whispers of 'girls-gone-bad' stories of college girls who 'lost their heads' and went down the slippery slope from sexual promiscuity to sex work – typically sustains this fantasy of 'ordinary' middle class life and mobilises suspicion and hatred of

²⁴ See also Hancock (2008) on this.

communities imagined to be the perpetrators of such violence. As Ahmed (2004a) observes the love of the 'ordinary' and the hatred of the 'other' typically blur into each other, as women become nodal points in acts of boundary-making: marking differences between castes and classes, as well as 'Indian' and 'Western' (Radhakrishnan 2011).

This is further demonstrated in the 'ideological deployment of the family' (Chatterjee 2004, 4) in the discourse of nationalism in India, and significantly also in that of Tamil cultural nationalism in South India. As scholars like Hodges (2008) show, women's sexuality has long been typically at the centre of this discourse, and in Tamil Nadu took a particularly complex trajectory over the late colonial and early postcolonial years, in the context first of the rise of the radical Self-Respect Movement, with its unusually progressive discourse of women's bodily autonomy (Anandhi 1991) and following that the *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (DMK) and its politics of Tamil linguistic and cultural nationalism (Ramaswamy 1992, 1997). Reading the history of the self-respect movement as a story in 'contested family values' Hodges (2005, 255) demonstrates the significance of the re-making of rituals such as marriage, into political spectacles in the lives of self-respecters, and birth control or 'reproductive strike' (Hodges 2005, 272) not a Lysistrata-esque tactic but a means for women to take control of their bodies and futures, in its influence in the intimate spheres of everyday life in Tamil Nadu. Indeed as she points out, the circumstances of CN Annadurai's famous split from EV Ramaswamy Naicker 'Periyar', in the making of the DMK itself signals this contestation in family values, as it occurred as a result of Annadurai's scathing critique of Periyar's decision to marry a woman forty years younger than him. As Hodges (2005) and others (Ramaswamy 1992) have noted, family life remained at the heart of the DMK's politics, marked in its espousal of a Tamil cultural nationalist politics in which the virtuous Tamil woman – as wife, mother and motherland – is centred, along with a vision of reproductive futurity. Iterated within such histories, womanhood in Tamil Nadu is conceived in interaction with social discourses of risk.

Women are, in the popular discourse, both powerful and dangerous at once (Daniel 1987, Wadley 1980). They are imagined as bearing the power to bring honour to the family by enacting self-control and discipline over their sexuality in various everyday ways – or instance, dressing modestly, remaining chaste or loyal to their husbands, and by performing appropriate and sacrificing motherly and wifely duties – while also holding the ability to destroy the clan through their undisciplined sexual natures, and propensity towards emotional excess. As such, rather than the epidemic or crisis that it is made out to be in the media, many young women I met regarded the everyday precautions and machinations to mark themselves as respectable, as an integral aspect of being an adult woman, and an expected, even desired, aspect of their lives as members of the middle classes. As Geetha (1998) points out, everyday forms of violence that discipline femininity sometimes come to be regarded so naturally constitutive of it, that they in fact make womanhood in itself.

Youth in urban Tamil Nadu is, as stated in the previous section, widely seen as male by default (Nakassis 2010), and women's youth is then widely regarded as something in need of domestication and containment (Wadley 1980, Rogers 2005). While higher education for middle class women has come to be regarded as desirable, there is still a great deal of anxiety about women's participation in the 'youth culture' that college going men routinely partake in. These practices create ruptures in dominant notions of middle class place and time, placing their subjects in positions of precarity. Typically the concerns regarding these practices centre on local notions of female sexual chastity: *karpu*, which Trawick (1990) defines as a moral condition maintained through sexual virtue – and honour, in the idiom of *maanam*, which is typically seen as invested in Tamil men and dependent upon the woman's guarding her *karpu*. As scholars like Aengst (2013), Brunson (2013) and Phadke (2007) suggest in other contexts, a nexus of technological development – the wide prevalence of mobile phones, as well as

cheaply available motorbikes – and aspiration, which is often the basis for young single women’s migration to large cities for education and employment, as well as their travel from home to places of study, work and consumption, have made women increasingly mobile. However, a gendered discourse of anxiety that casts the woman on the move as a subject liminal to respectability is also widely prevalent, and young women often feel as if they are trespassing (Phadke 2013) when they enter places that are marked, within the normative discourse, as ‘men’s places’.

As Phadke et al (2011) have shown, ‘risk’ as a popular category among India’s urban middle classes often refers ambiguously to the risk of sexual violence as well as social anxieties about women’s exercise of sexual autonomy. What is *riskee* is middle class respectability, marked by sexual virtue: a precariously balanced thing that can be upset equally by sexual violence (Menon 1998) and consensual pre- or extramarital sexual activity (Phadke 2007, Säävalä 2010). These discourses of risk thus typically cast urban public spaces as being ‘dangerous’ for these women. They are imagined to be full of lower middle class and working class men, whose bodies are typically stigmatized as carrying the danger of sexual violence against upper caste and middle class women (Rogers 2008) – while both commercial and domestic private spaces such as shopping malls, homes, cafes etc. – are marked as ‘safe’ and indeed also the sites of the much-celebrated sexual liberation of women in recent years (Nair and John 2000). ‘Risk’ is further deployed to justify the surveillance and violent policing of women’s behaviour and mobility (Phadke 2007, Lukose 2009). Young women’s ability to give consent for sexual activity is entangled, in this context, with a social imaginary where it is the family or community that is vested with the power to give consent on behalf of the young woman (Phadke 2013), and whose reputation is damaged or held up by her behaviour. This argument is further drawn out in Chapters Four and Five of the thesis.

If the feeling of living at risk is ‘the condition of mutual need and exposure’ (Butler, 169), then the desirable impetus that is enforced in the common sense of middle class life is the securitization of life through the acquisition of power: through association with a state-funded programme, for instance, and by ensuring the continued support of the traditional family and caste group through normative behaviour. As scholars like Daniel (1984) suggest, prioritising the self’s own desires or needs over those of the community is typically regarded, in Tamil society, as being selfish. For young women in particular, this was often taken to be a sign of overweening pride or arrogance (*timir*) that, on the one hand, suggested sexual looseness, and on the other hand, had to be tamed. As such, many young women I met were wont to express a great deal of gratitude to their parents and families for ‘sending [them] so far away’ for education. The *risk* they feared they took if they veered from the safe path was that of ‘becoming a burden’ on their families as an unmarriageable woman, or a woman who had brought her parents to shame in their community through her acts.

As scholars like Chakravarty (2003) and Rege (1996) demonstrate, notions of female chastity and honour are further structured by, and produced in engagement with caste. ‘Inappropriate’ sexual relations, and women’s sexual autonomy itself, endanger the perpetuation of caste privilege through endogamous sexual relations and marriage. As such *karpu* and *maanam* typically refer to women’s positioning within caste groups. Taking *risks*, particularly by eloping with a man of much lower caste, by having sex in College at the risk of becoming pregnant, or getting drunk at a bar only to be found out in the hostel, all posed the danger of ill reputation traveling back to their caste communities. This, they feared, might not only result in the impossibility of a respectable marriage with a man of the same caste but dishonour for parents, extended kin and ultimately also themselves. The familiar narrative that Clarinda Still (2011) presents of young Dalit women’s increasing subjection to norms of sexual propriety as their families become more socially mobile typically holds true. The

growing numbers of women of lower caste and class background migrating to urban colleges for education find themselves under surveillance from members of their caste community in Chennai, or even hostel authorities, who threaten to report any sign of their ‘taking advantage’ as it was often described, of their ‘new freedom’ by engaging in sexual affairs. It is telling in this context that the commonly used idiom for rape among young women is *karpu-azhippu*, literally, a loss of chastity, which makes no mention of consent in the act, but implies its location outside legitimising institutions of marriage and caste endogamy.

Educational institutions typically play a role in producing these notions of risk through the *in loco parentis* mandate that they typically assume over their students, and by enforcing norms of respectability in their management of ‘discipline’ on campus. As I have explained above, the colleges studied in this thesis are private constituents of Madras University. As such, they often emphasised their role in ‘keeping students safe’. The architecture of bourgeois educational institutions, as Nita Kumar (2011) points out, itself suggests an oasis of safety, rationality and discipline amidst the chaos of the postcolonial city. They are typically large and walled off, with imposing gates meant to keep the riff-raff and the dirt of the city out, building a simulated perfect space of postcolonial discipline and order: a microcosm of the dream nation of the middle classes (Srivastava 2005). As will be explained in greater detail in the Methods section, and has been indicated in the narration of the ‘dog mauling incident’ at the beginning of this chapter, women’s colleges in Chennai are particularly concerned with ‘risk’, often engaging in what Butler (2004a) calls the differential distribution of precarity – i.e. making some lives more precarious than others, in the process of enforcing norms of behaviour and creating order towards the making of stable and ‘safe’ life.

Gender and sexuality have typically been positioned in studies of globalisation, risk and governmentality as nodal points of mediation. As Roy (2012) shows, increasingly, third

world women are positioned as moral subjects of risk reform within a context where they are co-opted as entrepreneurial subjects of global capital, through microfinance and skill building institutions. This marks a telling departure from the ‘under Western eyes’ (Mohanty 1988) formulation of women as victim subjects for uplift. As subjects of risk, women are thus increasingly co-opted into the moral management of risky subjects, through discourses that emphasise and essentialise their ability to provide care, to lead ‘financially responsible’ lives, and to manage the reproduction of stable and predictable life. As Roy (2012) argues, drawing on de Lauretis’ formulation (1987), a range of institutions – microfinance organisations, schools, workplaces and institutions of higher education – here function as technologies of gender in producing this ideal of the ‘good’ and ‘responsible’, besides also ambitious and socially-mobile third world woman. ‘Bodies’ as Mitchell (2010, 244) argues, ‘can become vessels for concepts of risk that are formed in anticipation of an inevitable future.’

Pleasure in this context, is a fraught experience. First of all, all pleasure, whether by definition ‘sexual pleasure’ or otherwise, was described in terms that brought the dynamics of women’s sexuality into play, in that it was always positioned as holding the possibility for sexual transgression. As Carole Vance (1992) argues, any form of enjoyment for women is typically laced with the possibility of sexual danger. Thus, acts as innocuous as going for a walk, or simply sitting on the beach, or even, in an instance many offered, leaving the hair loose can be construed as acts of sexual transgression²⁵. Smoking, drinking, cutting classes, wearing ‘too much’ or ‘too little’ make-up, dressing boyishly, dressing in very feminine saris, wearing ‘Western’ and ‘Indian’ clothing, listening to Carnatic music, going to rock concerts, going to watch English films and locally made ones alike all were commentary on the sexuality

²⁵ See McCullough et al (2013) on the pertinence of choosing the lens of sexuality in examining how affective regimes of pleasure circulate and are disciplined. As a site where discourses about body, health and self-control all cohere in larger narratives of development, they suggest that sexuality offers a particularly interesting terrain to examine both the uneven regulation of pleasure as well as acts of agency and improvisation in the making of intimacy and in acts of pleasure.

of the woman in question, structured in interplay with caste and class. Sexual respectability is thus constructed through a set of practices that in themselves may or may not inhabit the realm of the sexual, and any practice that is pleasurable acts as commentary upon the notion of this respectability. This recalls Phadke et al's argument (2011a) that loitering might be seen as a revolutionary act for women in a context where the simple act of walking without purpose often brands women as being questionable of morals.

Secondly, the notion of pleasure often suggested 'waste' and 'irresponsibility' to the young women I met, and was thus positioned in the Catch 22 of being simultaneously the central aspect of youth – 'fun' or 'jolly' – and the thing that was to be given up gradually in exchange for more visibly 'productive' practices in the process of growing up. Hence, I would often be told that such things as hanging around and watching films, sitting in a mall and watching the men go by, spending a day in the shops staring at expensive make-up no one could imagine buying were all 'youth' activities, unimaginable for a 'grown-up woman', who was imagined to be a responsible wife or mother, or at the very least, a working woman sending money home to her family, and having no time for frippery and fun. Pleasure was thus *risky* because it was not productive or grown up and troubling to normative epistemes of the everyday: constituted in waking up late in the morning for instance, staying up half the night watching films, or partying, having sex in the afternoon, all of which my informants engaged in with all the gleefulness of being 'youth' and breaking the rules that they imagined they could no longer break when college was over. Further, as Chapter Two will show substantially, education for women has been imagined in discourses that distinguish between 'mere' learning for 'selfish' means that is often regarded dangerous, and apt to breed arrogance, and 'real education' which is imagined to produce women who are enlightened and able to contribute to society without seeking to threaten its foundations. Pleasure could thus be a site of agency and critique. It is, as the chapters that follow will show, often a significant

means of resisting the otherwise regimented lives young women lead: bells in college and hostel marking the hours of their lives, and setting strict mealtimes, curfews and even, in the cases of some hostels, bedtimes. The account of agency that this thesis offers is an account of these pleasures and the everyday ways in which they tended to constitute breaks in the 'ordinary' everydays of middle classness.

Precarious Agency

This thesis positions a narrative of 'growing up', sexuality and pleasure within the context of the governance of affect, and investigates the precarities that are made visible in the practices through which affect is organised, as constituent of everyday middle class life. Affect has received significant attention from scholars across fields in the social sciences in the last twenty years (Massumi 1995, Sedgwick and Frank 2003, Mazzarella 2012, Anderson 2012). Beginning from explorations of Foucault's suggestion that it is 'not that life has been totally integrated into techniques that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them' (1978, 143) scholars have moved to a growing sensitivity to what affect then attunes us to: ongoing and continuous processes of mediation (Mazzarella 2004), the attachments and hopes that constitute embodied ways of being in the world (Stewart 2010) and un-heroic moments of suspended (Ngai 2005) and lateral (Berlant 2007) agency in which the precarities of such worlds are brought into relief. The story that this thesis tells thus attempts to make sense of such moments as the 'dropping stomachs' I heard about day after day as students entered their securitized college campuses, and the rush of anxious excitement at sneaking back in after curfew, the literal and symbolic violence of 'the dog mauling incident' that this chapter began with hanging over them, and through them to construct an understanding of the social worlds that my informants understood as 'middle class' and as 'their' worlds.

'Risk' and the distribution of precarity have been studied as a central issue in studies of governmentality in many ways, particularly in the postcolonial context. Historical and anthropological studies of health for instance, have highlighted the importance of classifications of 'high-risk' populations and the governmentalisation of collective risk as sites for the making of scientific modernity (Comaroff 2007, Boyce and Khanna 2011, Livingston 2009). Risk has also been examined in the context of contemporary 'gambling economies' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). This analysis has focussed on the rolling back of social insurance in favour instead of a discourse of enterprising individualism, self-care and insurance in which the logic of governmentality has been deployed to mark subjects who are regarded high-risk or pre-determined risk-failures: the poor, the obese, queer non-normative and HIV positive people, as well as youth, as populations in need of management, and education. In her work on precarious life, Butler (2004, 2009) offers the premise that all life, being social, is vulnerable, in that we are all, as groups dependent upon and are exposed to each other. Norms, she suggests, emerge as frames of reference, in the discursive construction of what counts as life, worthy of protection, and what might be allowed to be destroyed. Reading Foucault's biopower as 'the power to *make* something live or to let it die, the power to regularize life, the authority to *force* living not just to happen but to endure and appear in particular ways' (Berlant 2007, 756 emphasis original), Butler and other scholars (Stewart 2012, Allison 2012) then locate precarity in the scene of the reproduction of everyday life through the organisation and governance of affect.

Institutions of higher education are examined in this thesis as a significant site where this disciplining process occurs. However, I position 'education' as occurring not only in formal centres of learning but also as a wider set of disciplinary practices through which the notion capability is produced. As scholars like Deleuze (1992) suggest, in contemporary neoliberal societies, the desire for capability is unending: as such, schooling goes on forever,

taking the form of training and social discipline in a range of sites: the middle class home, workplaces, in the family, and through medical discourse. As Edelman (2014) notes, 'education' always connotes a movement from one state to another: progress upward out of the state of childhood into something better; out of ignorant obesity into health and out of wilfulness to reproducing 'ordinary' life. In countries like India, education has been imagined, both in the practice of policy, as well as in the popular discourse as a way out of poverty and backwardness: a technology of modernity and governmentality. As Krishna Kumar (2005) notes, the architects of post-colonial education in India saw schools, colleges and universities as a means to produce an orderly and manageable population: a means, through the regime of bells, gates opening and closing, neatly pressed uniforms, and standing-in-line, to teach self-discipline to a population imagined as lacking in the muscular orderliness and rationality needed for the business of self-governance.

The making of precarious life might thus be linked directly to the complex forms that modernity has taken in postcolonial contexts. This is complicated in the contemporary context by the perception of the breakdown of law and order in post-liberalisation India, where, as mentioned above, fears of caste, class and religious 'others' swamping the cosmopolitan space of modernity has produced an anxious discourse that further differentially distributes experiences of vulnerability. As Comaroff and Comaroff (2008) show in the South African case, contemporary anxieties about threats to modernity produce a complex discourse that in some ways inverts and complicates the history of discipline that Foucault (1977) offers. Even as discourses of neoliberalism further regimes of self-governance, the fear of increasing disorder also produces and normalises forms of discipline that are more theatrical. In educational institutions, this process stands in particular relief, as these institutions position themselves as oases of rationality and epitomes of modernity, even as they have been transformed by affirmative action on the one hand, and by restructuring policies on the other.

They hence emerge as sites where discourses of disorder and deviance are produced and disciplined. As sites of affective labour where aspirations to modernity are direction, institutions of higher education are particularly significant as places where disorder of various kinds is disciplined, and new forms of precarity emerge on the margins.

It is in this context, that this thesis seeks to recuperate narratives of youthful pleasure and agency. Rather than investigate this through paradigms of intentional domination or resistance, in this thesis I examine agency through practices of resignification (Butler 1990). These might be understood as fragmented, not entirely coherent practices that might push, or somewhat turn around dominant social meanings, make fun of authority, or constitute a break from the routine of discipline through which the 'ordinary' is reproduced. Young people negotiate multiple structures of dominance – for instance economic restructuring, institutional hierarchies, and in the Indian case, caste – in their everyday lives. Drawing on Berlant's concept of 'lateral agency' (Berlant 2007, 754) this thesis positions their everyday forms of agency as located in the temporality of un-heroic time, 'where life building and the attrition of human life are indistinguishable, and where it is hard to distinguish modes of incoherence, distractedness, and habituation from deliberate and deliberative activity, as they are all involved in the reproduction of predictable life.' Lateral agency, is, in Berlant's writing, an act of 'self-suspension' in which agency is the experience of a brief break from 'the liberal and capitalist subject called to consciousness, intentionality, and effective will' (2007: 779). Whereas agency is typically conceptualized as movement forwards, lateral agency is to move sideways for a moment. Its context is middle class aspiration for predictability and for distance from any form of risk – to health, financial stability or any other circumstance that might deter the reproduction of life – in the context of neoliberal advance. This is, as many scholars have noted, a project that is reproduced through exhausting, even debilitating regimes of self-discipline (Allison 2012; Livingston 2009). The subject here is not the fully

self-conscious liberal subject acting in his own best interests, but the precariously positioned subject of governmentality, seeking a break from the drudgery of walking the tightrope. In his work on boredom, Anderson (2004) suggests that a moment of agency is revealed in the recognition of drudgery and the consequent sense of feeling tired of it. To know that one is bored is to be able to step away for a moment from the ordinary everyday and imagine the possibility of being less bored, even if the object of this imagination is unclear. This stepping aside, a suspension of self, is the scale in which agency is conceptualised here.

Non-sovereign conceptualisations of agency are pertinent in particular to this context because they account for practices that are not necessarily coherent, identity-building, or aggressively active. It has been noted (Osella and Osella 1998) that the kinds of agency available to young women in India are often of this order: allowing for action without necessitating a break from continuity. Indeed a substantial feminist scholarship has long studied such forms of agency through studies of songs (Raheja and Gold 1994), poetry (Abu-Lughod 1990), laughter (Ciotti 2011) and play (Dyson 2010). My thesis extends this scholarship in two significant ways. First, by exploring in particular practices of negativity – bitching, ranting, anger, dark humour – as located at the heart of such practices, I explore non-sovereign practices of agency as bringing together incommensurate affects and desires. These practices, I suggest, create places where epistemes and trajectories of modernity – through education and traditional transitions from ‘youth’ to ‘adulthood’ – might be simultaneously desired and laughed at or scorned. Locating pleasure in such incommensurability²⁶, I argue that this then suggests the fragility at the centre of the project of middle class stability and normative discipline.

²⁶ See also Dave (2012) for a discussion of incommensurability as a site of agency.

This form of agency occupies the interstices of the compulsively reproduced everyday of middle classness, and operates through fragmentary moments of self-reflexive laughter, in cuttingly bitchy statements, in ‘escape’ from the hostel and from home, and in the language of ‘mischief’. It bears a relation to the notion of ‘practical resistance’ (Scott 1986), conducted through ordinary means; however, as said above, I demonstrate that it cannot always be seen as ‘resistant’, indeed some forms of laughter, mischief and bitchiness reaffirm dominant discourses, most often functioning ambiguously. In referring to this form of agency as fragmentary, I do not imply that it is part of a whole, more coherent picture of agency but as Das (2007, 5) puts it, in this conception, ‘the fragment marks the impossibility of such an imagination.’

Second, I suggest that agency, following and building on the work of scholars like Laidlaw (2010), is subject to ethical regimes of discipline through which vulnerability is distributed unequally. We cannot discount as agency the work that goes into the reproduction of everyday life, and the sustenance of the structures of power and normative discourses of gender, sexuality and maturity through which it is maintained. The will, as Sara Ahmed (2014) suggests is integral to neoliberal conceptions of subjectivity, but its exercise is imagined to lead to a particular image of flourishing and happiness. Will that works against this is typically regarded as a kind of wilfulness deserving discipline and control. Many of the practices of pleasure I examine in this thesis might be placed in the realm of wilfulness: a category that also rehearses the identifications between childhood and the inability to take sound action. Wilful subjects as theorists like Ahmed (2014) and Edelman (2004) indicate are often marked as needing further education (c.f. Deleuze 1992). This then further situates agency within the regimes of perpetual training and self-development towards an impossible ideal of capacity that have been associated with contemporary neoliberalism (Jain 2007). As such, as I will demonstrate, agency is often contradictory and uneven.

Setting and Methods

I conducted fieldwork over a period of eleven months in the city of Chennai, between May 2012 and March 2013, and additionally also returned to the field for two months in the summer of 2013 for some supplemental research. During ethnography, and after, I also spent time reading some archival material, at the institutions where I conducted fieldwork and the British Library, to frame and situate my research questions. Chennai, formerly Madras, is on the East Coast of the Southern state of Tamil Nadu. I chose this city because of my interest in studying a metropolitan urban setting in India, as well as for the city's history as a centre of education to which students tend to migrate. In Chennai, I did research primarily in two women's colleges, a Christian institution founded in the early 20th century that I refer to as Church College, and a late 20th century college managed by a trust named for a Brahmin Philanthropist in the city: NT College in my thesis. Besides this, I lived for five months in a privately managed ladies hostel down the road from Church College, at which students from NT, Church and other colleges resided. Central and Southern Chennai – from about Anna Nagar in the West of the city to Adyar in the Southern end of the city – tended to be the primary areas where the women I met spent their time. This was the area in which hostels were located and it was also regarded the 'safe' centre of the city.

The North of the city came with a reputation for being the tough and working class end of town and while I did meet women who lived or had grown up there, most insisted that they would never actually spend time 'hanging out' in this part of the city. The Southern outskirts, from Tiruvanmiyur, once a separate village and now a bustling and characteristically Brahmin suburb of the city, bordering the sea, on the other hand, came with connotations of decadence and moral laxity. The road to Mahabalipuram, a site of sixth century rock carvings and an on-going political economy of sculpture and art in the South of the city, is particularly notorious and 'going to OMR', Old Mahabalipuram Road, had a variety of connotations,

ranging from going to an alcohol-fuelled party on the beach, or for an evening of taking soft drugs like marijuana, to engaging in casual sex. Unsurprisingly, therefore this area was one of the places that most colleges and hostels forbade resident students to visit. This recalls the formulation of ‘out-of-the-way places’ (Tsing 1993) as being both physically marginal and hence dangerous, as well as sites of ‘out-of-the-way’ practices and precarious intimacies (see also Aengst 2013).

Church College is regarded as being traditional in its provision of a liberal arts education, and proudly claims now to be educating the fourth generation of women from some families. It was described to me as ‘the Wellesley College of Chennai’, referring here to the elite women’s college in Massachusetts. Some of the debates in the early years of this institution’s life, on college curricula and women’s role in the service of the nation (Sunflower 1943) might be seen as having been constitutive of what I discuss in Chapter Two of this thesis as ‘nation building discourses’ of middle class femininity. Church College is now an autonomous constituent of Madras University. It offers reserved seats as well as scholarships to Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Other Backward Class (OBC) students, as well as a special quota for Christians. It also runs separate government aided and unaided courses, the former far less expensive than the latter. As a result, it was often pointed out to me that this college had now ‘become more local’, i.e. grown less exclusive and elite.

NT College is a newer institution, born straight into the era of autonomy in 1992. This college has the reputation of being, on the one hand, an upper caste institution, and on the other, a ‘professional’ rather than liberal arts college. The latter reputation relates to the college’s overall focus on courses like ‘Visual Communications’ and ‘Corporate Secretaryship’ over the traditional social sciences and humanities, which it does not offer, with the exception of Sociology. The promotional material that the college uses suggests a pride in the college’s

rate of success in creating employable professionals. Its reputation as a 'Brahmin college' comes, on the one hand, from its management by a Trust named after a Brahmin philanthropist, and consisting of a number of Tamil Brahmins and Gujarati Jains. On the other hand, a number of students also pointed more to its everyday life in explaining the notion that NT was a 'Brahmin college': daily Sanskrit prayers, the banning of non-vegetarian food on campus (a significant marker in Tamil Nadu where vegetarianism is a marked sign of upper caste character) and the institution's refusal to grant a holiday for Id. A student-published journal further proudly marks the celebration of a Ganesh Vandan Nanda Mahotsav (literally: prayer to Ganesha, and festival of Krishna) as a combinatory celebration of Krishna Jayanti (the Hindu god Krishna's birth) and Vinayaka Chaturti (a celebration of the god Ganesha)²⁷ as the markers of the college's 'cultural achievements'.

At these colleges, I usually spent the day sitting in the canteen, chatting with students who came in between classes or having skipped a lesson, as well as in classes in various departments, particularly during the Orientation period. I also spent some time in the libraries, and the college gardens at Church, where students tended to hang out in groups, usually talking, reading or surreptitiously using their mobile phones. Most women's colleges in Chennai do not allow free entry. As such I spent the better part of my first month in the city explaining my research to college authorities and acquiring letters of permission to present at the gates everyday. At Church College, after a month of waiting, an office worker took me aside and told her that while they could not give me permission as such to enter, they would not object if I found adequate reason to enter a few times a week. As such, I had to strategize to ensure I had friends among students waiting to collect me at the gates, or an appointment

²⁷ The significance of this also lies in these festivals' resurgent meaning within a Hindu Public Sphere in contemporary India. See Fuller (2001) who argues that the increasing popularity of such publicly held Hindu rituals in Tamil Nadu suggests the resurgence of upper castes and a discourse of Hindu Nationalism in this region.

with a professor, as adequate excuses. At NT I was given a card to present every morning at the gate if I was to be let through.

A Malayalee family, who lived in a nearby affluent neighbourhood, owned Teresa Ladies Hostel, where I lived between August and December 2012. It was run under the headship of a warden, who lived on-site, along with a hostel manager, and cleaning and kitchen staff. Most residents were Malayalee with a smaller, but steadily growing, number of Tamil residents. It boasted a wide variety in types of room – ranging from air conditioned singles, to the eight-person dormitories, all sharing one desk and one bathroom, in which I lived. As such, the class make up of the hostel was correspondingly varied – ranging from students who considered themselves ‘socialites’ and spent time in the city’s expensive cocktail bars, to others, like some of my roommates, whose parents worked in semi skilled positions in Kerala or had briefly migrated to the Middle East – ‘the Gulf’ – and pooled in their resources for one pizza every month. Among these women, there were a small number of upper caste Nairs, and the rest were lower caste Christians, Syrian Christians, and Muslims. I ate meals with the students in the hostel, spent time in the common room, and in the dormitory, besides often going on ‘outings’ with residents, to coffee shops, the beach, and other popular hang-out spots. Besides everyday interactions, I sometimes conducted focus-group discussions on particular topics at all these institutions. More often, however, these group discussions occurred spontaneously as people joined in on conversations I was having with one or two others. Indeed it was often difficult to interview anyone separately within these spaces. Even single rooms had no locks, and other residents passed in and out without knocking. On the days I was not in, my bed became cluttered with their clothes, food and books: often inviting ants.

Besides young women in these colleges, I also interviewed lecturers, a few male students, a number of alumnae of varying ages, watchmen and other college workers, as well as hostel authorities such as deans and wardens. Students, almost unanimously, refused to take me home to their parents. I would be regarded an inappropriate friend, I was told, and their participation in my research risky and a waste of time; besides, as one young woman clearly mimicking the standard dialogue in thriller cinema put it, I ‘knew too much’, i.e. too many secrets, and hence couldn’t be trusted. However I was able to interview a small number of parents of current and former students and also visit the homes of a few students, and conduct participant observation of their lives at home. For the most part however my research is confined to spaces of youth sociality – examining young women’s lives and friendships with each other as the central context in which they learn and practice youth, middle classness and gendered modes of being. This reflects the widely stated argument that youth cultures in this region seek to spatially separate themselves from family (Nakassis 2010; Osella and Osella 1998), which, particularly in the case of the young women my research addresses, were largely cast as spaces of surveillance and control, where the performance of ‘youth’, variously described to me as ‘fun’, ‘madness’ and ‘being naughty’, was not possible. As subsidiary sites, other than Church and NT Colleges, I used two other women’s colleges in the city: a Catholic institution I will call St Francis College and a secular college founded by a lay Tamil Christian, which I refer to as Arul College. Both of these colleges are considered to be ‘middle class colleges’ rather than ‘low class colleges or high class colleges’ as a lecturer at Arul College put it, and I met students at these institutions in Teresa Ladies Hostel, as well as among social circles of the Church and NT College students I spent time with.

I chose in particular, these colleges, because they are attended by a wide range of those who define themselves as middle class. As is demonstrated in other parts of this thesis, ‘middle class’ is a processual category here defined by a set of tendencies towards aspiration

for upward mobility not only in economic terms, but also in social and cultural terms; as well as the much-touted ‘balance’ (Donner 2011 for instance) between the imagined amorality of the upper classes and the often-denounced ‘laziness’ and ‘immorality’ associated with the working classes. So for instance, these colleges were marked as middle class because they were seen as ‘safe’ colleges for middle class girls: i.e. neither too liberal as in particular New Delhi’s colleges without their strict dress codes and with their 10 pm curfews were imagined; nor filled with ‘the wrong sort’ as colleges such as Queen Mary’s College and other ‘low class’ and implicitly lower caste colleges in Chennai, as they were frequently described²⁸. As ‘safe’ institutions, I was frequently told, they created the best environment for learning, devoid of distractions. Among the imagined distractions here was, significantly, politics: at NT College I was proudly told that there was ‘no unionisation – we are not a factory’. Instead there was a ‘cabinet’, which was meant to be a ‘leadership experience’: one more item on a CV for the aspired-for corporate career, rather than a path to political dissent, student organisation, or protest. Similarly, at Church College, there is a ‘student senate’ whose ‘senators’ sit in governing body meetings with senior members of the college. The college, I was told, boasted of several women who had gone on to careers in the diplomatic services, and in government: experience in the senate was training for this. It was not ‘about conflict’ and it was ‘not for complaining’. Rather it was a reward for having been an ideal student: a kind of prefecture rather than a student union. Prefects in these institutions police the behaviour of other students, hand-in-glove with the administration in enforcing dress codes, rules against bringing mobile phones (and meat in NT College), and the more vague rules about ‘decent

²⁸ A ‘low caste’ or ‘low class’ college is not merely so because of its demographic – i.e. people belonging to lower caste and class backgrounds and coming from provincial towns – but also because of its location and its architecture. Queen Mary’s on the Marina Beach is a telling example: this college is taboo for girls who aspired to be, or are ‘middle class’ not only because of the class and caste composition of its student body, but because as a college that is located on the beach, as well as one that is falling apart architecturally, and does not have the manicured gardens that ‘middle class’ colleges typically have, it was seen as embodying the potential for immoral behaviour. Queen Mary’s girls, I was told, had ‘access’ to ‘action’ being so close to the beach. This ‘action’ on the beach – ‘sexual activity’ – is further explored in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

conduct'. If India's middle classes have increasingly deserted the 'public' for 'private' domains of power-making and status-creation, then these private educational institutions are significant places where middle class subjectivities are made and contested, as the official discourse of the institutions, their many interpretations in practice, and young women's own aspirations and desires all play into the making of what it means to be a 'middle class' subject.

What makes these institutions particularly interesting in the present is the increasing number of students from middle and lower caste backgrounds, from small towns and villages, and from the fringes of Chennai who now fill the ranks of these institutions. As demonstrated in this thesis, what this has resulted in is competition over definitions of 'middle class' – who is 'properly' middle class and who isn't – in ways that intersect with practices of caste in interesting ways. In this, this study explores a post-Mandal (explained in detail in a section on caste and education above) landscape of education, in the particular and complex context of young women, whose engagements with caste are complicated significantly by the ways in which caste practices produce respectability. The narrative often heard in these institutions is one of a fall from glory: a lament about the increasing desertion of such institutions by the 'creamy layers of the city' who now prefer to send their daughters to colleges in New Delhi or even abroad, and the increasing 'swamping' and 'filling' of these former bastions of elite education, by the 'new' middle classes, and the much-reviled villains of the Mandal drama: first-generation college-goers, whose very presence is imagined to have brought down the educational standard of universities, and forced colleges to clamp down and become places of 'crowd control' – a phrase I often heard. The choice of educational institutions in this thesis thus reflects its preoccupation with studying the middle classes who, as I have shown above, see themselves, on the one hand, as the central stable core of moral life in the nation. In studying institutions that are undergoing a drastic change, I seek also to position 'middle class'

as a changing category reflecting a set of tendencies and moral values rather than indicating a specific or unchanging bracket of people.

These institutions also interested me as sites for ethnographic research because of their securitised spatial organisation that reflects their preoccupation with sexual risk. They are gated, and anyone entering or leaving is required to take permission. Students are under strict curfew rules, as early as four pm in some cases, and often not allowed to spend the night anywhere other than with a 'local guardian', usually a relative. Wardens in on-campus residences, and private hostels alike enforce other rules that forbid the use of mobile phones, Internet and cameras in hostels. At Teresa Hostel, other rules were in place including a regulation requiring written permission signed by parents if a resident wanted to go anywhere other than to their parents' home during the vacations, as well as a no-tolerance policy that mandated expulsion if a student was 'caught' meeting up with a male friend not only on the hostel premises but anywhere in the city. Most institutions also control their students' sexualities in more explicit ways. Men, other than brothers and fathers, are typically not allowed to visit, and even these men are usually required either to wait at the gates, or in the hostel's lobby and only see their sister or daughter in a supervised, public setting. The danger, I was told, was of girls passing boyfriends off for such relatives. While I was at Teresa, I saw a student get into a great deal of trouble when her brother, who was visiting her because she had been ill for a long time, brought a male friend, who also knew the hostel resident quite well, with him. Besides this, most of the hostels I saw or heard about require students to place furniture between their beds if they are sharing a room, and the dean of Church College's on campus residence proudly told me that such a rule had prevented 'the spread of lesbianism' in her institution. Indeed, she said, they had 'no such thing at all' in her hostel: a narrative the students I spoke to appeared to disagree with.

Another rule at St Francis College bans teddy bears and other stuffed toys. While I thought at first that this was intended to enforce adulthood where toys can no longer be used, the story I was told in explanation for this rule offered a more nuanced, if also entertaining, explanation. I was told that a young woman had been caught, a few years ago, masturbating against a stuffed toy she had brought from home. Since then, the college had banned these toys and also did not encourage the use of extra pillows. Whether this is true or apocryphal, it is telling of the powerful position of the women's college and the hostel both as places of women's discipline and as sites of fantasy.

Security is also enforced at these institutions through CCTV cameras, which are numerous and placed all over college campuses. Students often even joked that the toilet was the only place without a camera. College and hostel rules further also dictate strict dress codes, and any looseness of bodily comportment that indicated a lack of discipline was punished: for instance, leaving long hair loose, running rather than walking, and reclining back on the ground with the legs stretched out. When a fresher at Teresa Hostel wore shorts and a t-shirt to dinner one day, she was called to the warden's office that evening for a long scolding on her lack of modesty. Did she want to tempt the mess boys, the warden had asked her, adding that this hostel wasn't 'that type of place'. Young women also tended to censor their own behaviour in public spaces, choosing to dress modestly, and walk with their bodies held together, handbag clasped close to the body, purposefully (Lukose 2009; Radhakrishnan 2011). It was best, one nineteen-year-old advised me, 'to become invisible'.

The justification for this focus on security is typically 'risk'. Time and again, I was told that young women were taking a necessary, albeit great 'risk' when they came to college and that it was the institution's duty to return them 'as they came' to their parents – i.e. sexually untouched. Many college authorities repeated the widely held idea that young people –

particularly young women – were prone to being ‘emotional’, and hence incapable of making ‘right and sensible decisions’ as one lecturer put it. As such, institutions also typically punish students for sexual involvement. At least three students were expelled from Church College, and more than one student suspended from NT during the year I spent at these institutions, for having been ‘caught’ leaving hotels with men they had presumably been having sexual relations with. Chitra, a resident at Teresa Hostel, justified these expulsions as necessary so as not to ‘spoil the others’ – sexual immorality is seen thus as contagious, liable to spread if not nipped in the bud and stopped early.

The anxiety about ‘risk’ and keeping students safe also structured the practice of my fieldwork in that I found myself stopped at the gates daily and spent a good portion of my time bargaining with watchmen and security staff. I had gone to Chennai in May 2012, a good month before colleges reopened for the academic year for the sole purpose of ensuring I had the adequate permissions to enter and speak to students. However, throughout the period of fieldwork I found that the first few hours of my day were invariably spent in negotiating with gatekeepers – literal and metaphorical: watchmen, wardens, college deans and vice-principals, and administrative staff tasked with ‘dealing’ with me when I appeared day after day in these institutions.

The vice principal of NT College asked me if I could leave surveys for her to distribute to the students, rather than speak to them myself. “This is a waste of your time. It’s a waste of our time,” she said. She was uncomfortable with students saying things about their college experience without the institution’s permission, she added. Towards the end of our meeting she reluctantly agreed to allow me a few hours in her college everyday for five months, following which she would review permission. She could not imagine why five months were necessary for such work; leave alone much more, she said. Did I not want to

finish my studies, and get a job soon, she asked in the end, adding that she was advising me for ‘my own good’? Why was a young woman like me – well, loitering? This accusation of loitering is what often also made me suspect in the eyes of watchmen in every college campus and hostel I visited. I was apprehended a few times every week, even after I had gotten permission a few hours before, and brought back to the gates, or taken to a college office for questioning. Why was I loitering? Did I have nothing to do but sit under the trees and chat with students? If I was a researcher, why I was not handing out questionnaires? They would ask to see my notebook and check my bag: I could be stealing mobile phones for all they knew, a watchman at Church College told me. I began keeping separate notebooks to write my shorthand and diagrams from the field, leaving my longer observations at home. I meticulously made sure my bag had nothing in it but a mobile phone and pens. Any other electronics, as I discovered, would be confiscated.

The fraught nature of my loitering became the central irony of my fieldwork: as a young woman studying the ways in which young women’s practices of embodiment produce ‘risk’, I found myself deeply implicated in these economies of danger and pleasure. As Ciotti (2011) suggests, analysis begins at the moment of the ethnographic encounter rather than in a separate process of ‘writing up’. These challenges in gaining access and in conducting fieldwork in a context where the practices that make up ethnographic fieldwork – wandering about, ‘hanging out’ and chatting without particular purpose – are precisely the ‘youth’ practices that young women still struggle to inhabit in a context where ‘youth’ is imagined entirely as masculine, were thus central to producing an analysis that focuses on what makes ‘youth’ for young women, and how risk and ‘adulthood’ comes to be imagined in this context.

'Home' in the Field

In studying Chennai, I returned, in some sense, 'home'. Though I did not spend my early years there, I spent a substantial portion of my teenage and young adult years in Chennai as a high school and college student. In seeking to study the everyday experiences of young middle class women, I am, therefore aware of the extent to which my own subjectivity is inextricably entangled in the discourses and practices I seek to unpack. I joked many times to friends that this thesis was in fact begun during the final years of my undergraduate education when my friends and I would gather near the college canteen to rant about our seemingly troubled teenage lives, the oppressions of the college, curfews imposed by parents and hostel authorities alike, and our complicated love lives.

My 'insider' status, however, was limited in reality on the field. While I heard the arguments my friends and I had made echoed in many ways, the three years I had spent abroad were very long, and the 'multiplex identities' (Narayan 1993, 673) that I had gained in these years as a 'Non Resident Indian' apart, the 'field', Chennai, itself, had transformed in many ways. My informants' everydays were more 'global' than mine had ever been, indicated by the prevalence of smartphones for instance, and their widespread access to the Internet, less widely available when I was a student in the city, influenced this. Most of those who came from a background similar to mine, upper middle class and upper caste, privately educated, with parents in professional occupations, now use Western pop-culture references, and displayed 'global' brands: all star converse shoes; Apple Mackintosh laptops and *Zara* jeans for instance. Bollywood and Tamil films, which dominated my childhood and early adulthood as sites of imagination are now, faded pastiche objects for members of this class, who typically see them as passé, 'a big thing only for the type of people with fake brand names on their jeans' as a nineteen-year-old student dismissively put it.

Examining this context also as a formerly closeted lesbian, I am struck further about the contradictory effects of the recent visible emergence of LGBTQ populations on the political and cultural landscape. While this will be explored in detail as a running theme in many chapters of this thesis, I was struck, on the one hand, by the availability, on the one hand, of a widely popular vocabulary of identification and for discussing sexuality. While, as Ponni Arasu, a friend and queer feminist activist from Chennai mused when we discussed this, lesbians were typically in the early millennial years glossed as ‘1’ or in my vivid memory ‘Fire girls’ – referring not to any fiery natures but to the controversial film *Fire* (1996) that, as some scholars have suggested was one of many originary moments when the figure of the lesbian was made visible (Dave 2011) – words like ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ and even ‘queer’ can now be said openly. Among upper middle class transnationals, the espousal of ‘LGBT rights’ – if in a very conservative framework that often raises questions about why ‘these gay people’ must ‘wear their sexuality on their sleeve’ – within a liberal language of rights and a linear narrative of progress is reasonably popular, even if the cynic in me often saw this as yet another strategy to access ‘global’ discourses of middle classness rather than a progressive politics. Further, the more visible presence of LGBTQ actors in public spaces improves access undoubtedly for young people questioning their sexuality or seeking support. However, as this thesis will argue, primarily in Chapters Three, Five and Six, this increased visibility and widely available vocabulary has also created the context for the emergence of equally visible and virulent homophobic discourses. Put simply, while women who love women increasingly access vocabularies of ‘lesbian’ and ‘queer’ identification, ‘lesbo’, ‘faggot’ and ‘queer’ are also used among youth as insults: means of degrading each other. Drawing on the one hand on Hindutva ideologies of homosexuality as a ‘Western import’ and ‘anti-Indian’ practice, as well as on other cultural discourses of its ‘unhealthy’ nature and the inevitable life of loneliness that is imagined as the lot of all non-heteronormative people, I heard a great deal of anxiety about the ‘gay agenda’. Among Protestant Christian communities in particular, I also

wondered (although this thesis did not offer the scope for a full exploration of this) about the influence of Evangelical Christian discourses about homosexuality, which travel back and forth from America. ‘Homophobia’ was, most strikingly, presented to me by a few young women, as an aspect of their identity: something that they were proud of, as ‘cultured’ young women.

Echoing Mankekar (1999), therefore, I found that my positionality on the field was built not only by my own ‘native’ status in Chennai, but by the personal and political relationships I built whilst doing ethnographic research. These lasting friendships with informants have also allowed me to think more rigorously about the ethics of field-based research, and the politics of representing female subjects of what I present here as a feminist ethnography. This is not a description many of my informants took to kindly during the period of my research. ‘Feminist’ was often associated with disrepute, a phlegmatic clinging to complaint and anger, a lack of personal initiative and, in the words of one young woman I met at a workshop in one of the colleges, being *adangapidari* – i.e. undisciplined, or rather resistant to discipline. The figure of this feminist *adangapidari* is complicated by the ever-present question on the extent to which the feminist researcher seeks to discipline her female subjects into being ‘properly’ feminist in their exercise of agency (McRobbie 2004). As Mohanty (1988, 62) pointed out in her influential essay on writing as a feminist within the academy, ‘feminist scholarly practices exist within relations of power - relations which they counter, redefine, or even implicitly support.’ In one instance early into fieldwork, I was speaking with one of my roommates at Teresa Hostel, about her Gandhi-esque promise to her mother in Kerala, to never touch alcohol, or have sex with a man while she was away in College. While, after a frustrating conversation about her belief in chastity and sobriety, I attempted to tell her that she was only subjecting herself to long-distance surveillance by keeping to her promise, she angrily retorted that I was nothing but a ‘Westernised feminist’ in

my thinking. Did I not understand that this promise had been her ticket out of her small town, where her parents had to justify to their small Christian community everyday why they had chosen to take the big risk of sending a young girl to a city where they had no relatives, and into her aspiration to live in a big city, go to college and potentially find an urban job? She was 'bargaining with patriarchy' (Kandiyoti 1988) here: calibrating risk, choosing to be a less disciplined subject of feminism so that she could be a more disciplined middle class subject in a context where her autonomy depended largely on demonstrating the latter.

I found the ethics of my position on the field similarly also put to the test when many informants declined to be recorded for the reason that they wanted no traceable proof – other than my word, which, as they said, could easily be denied – of their saying anything that could get them into trouble. While this is telling of the precarious position many young women find themselves in, this also left me, as an ethnographer typically making notes, trying to get sentences down verbatim, knowing that there was no way – other than asking my informants to remember what they had said – to verify in future the accuracy of what I was writing down. This appeared to vest a greater deal of power of representation and narrativisation in my hands than I cared for. However, I have, on many occasions, shared my work with informants who are yet to object to their own or others' characterization.

My adventures with the recorder on the field also produced other telling and interesting results. During two distinct occasions, the women I was speaking with allowed me to switch on the recorder, mostly because the content of what they were saying was terribly interesting but also delivered in a very quickly-paced rant I was finding difficult to commit to paper faithfully. In each case, the story changed, not mildly or merely in tone, but diametrically, once the recorder made its appearance. One of these was Shahnaz, who had returned from a date with her new boyfriend with sizeable hickies all over her neck. She had

just been talking about how her boyfriend loved to use his teeth, and had expressed fantasies, which she shared, of his biting her all over her face. As she went on to talk more broadly about her views on sex and rape, I asked if I could record. I was tired at the end of a long day and worried I wasn't paying attention closely enough to precisely report the conversation. She said yes without hesitation and I fished it out and turned it on. She introduced herself on the machine and then went on to talk about how she had never let a man do any more than hold her hand – even kissing was out of bounds. During the other occasion, a story of lesbian experimentation turned rapidly into a moral story of how Chitra, who appears many times in this thesis, boldly stopped an act of 'lesbian immorality' among two women in the hostel and reported them right away as she thought was her duty. If as Trawick (1990, 89) writes, it is not so much the work of the anthropologist to dig out the truth but to 'lay bare the structure of lies' that our informants tell us, then this is what I have tried to do here: examining the many stories I was told, to investigate contingent nature of social realities, and the calculations, fully agential and otherwise, that went into self-presentation in different modes.

Outline of the Thesis

This thesis, in five substantive chapters, builds a narrative of precarious intimacy in young women's everyday lives. The chapter that follows this introduction, 'Making Ladies of Girls: 'Homely' Histories', will explore another contextual parameter of this thesis, which further also sets the scene for the chief arguments I make further on: early and mid twentieth century debates on women's higher education that frame contemporary anxieties and concerns about young women in colleges, and the histories of the figure of the 'college girl' in Chennai. The third chapter 'Inhabiting Everyday: 'Wasting Time' and 'Sight-ing'' presents a sketch of everyday life as the young women I met and spoke with experienced it. Its central concern is with the time and space of youth explored through the idiomatic practices of 'wasting time' through *oor sutharathu* – wandering the city – and engaging in flirtation through

sight adikkarathu— stealing glances. It situates youth, on the one hand, as an affective assemblage, and secondly, examines non-productivity, i.e. ‘wasting’, as a form of suspended agency.

In chapter four, I continue to explore themes of romantic love and sex, and their location in public places. A wide range of discursive practices, I demonstrate, go into the construction of certain physical acts as constituting the category of ‘sex’ as an erotic practice, and linking it to romantic love, many of them having to do with space and place. Such discourses also often facilitate creative re-imaginings of the city, on the one hand, and of notions of ‘risk’ and ‘surveillance’ on the other. Chapter five complicates some previously explored understandings of same-sex friendships, romantic love, and sex, while continuing the discussion of place and sex in chapter six. It examines, on the one hand, how young women make sense of the ambiguous terrains of pleasure and violence in their everyday lives, through humour and play, while also attempting to recuperate an archive of same-sex erotic practices, both in everyday practice, and in the stories told about the intimate spaces of the women’s college and its hostels.

Friendship often carries, the risk of gossip, and scandal often has much to say about middle class lives. Chapter six, ‘Spectral and Scandalous Bodies: Stories of Rupture’ examines what lies at the margins of middle classness and respectability. Sarkar (2001) suggests that the study of scandal and its circulation is a useful practice in the study of gender and middle class lives, because it is in scandal that the everyday practices of dialogue and self-stylisation through which the differences among the middle classes are arbitrated in bids for legitimacy, are made visible. This chapter seeks then to present the argument that scandals and cautionary tales often enact new forms of exclusion and inclusion mediated by desire, and technologies of self-construction.

In conclusion, I summarise and draw together the argument this thesis makes on diverse negotiations with power among young middle class women in Chennai. The concluding chapter also maps some young women's lives after college, and ends by commenting on the kinds of adulthood young women hope to achieve, and often perceive themselves as having achieved after their experience of university education. This chapter also indicates directions for future research, and explores ends left untied that are beyond the scope of this project that may be taken up later.

2 | Making Ladies of Girls: 'Homely' Histories

To be able to succeed in their destined role, educated women must project a healthy image of themselves. Frequently one hears the caustic comment that education breeds overweening pride and a sneering attitude towards all that is traditional. Yes, educated women must fight traditions, but only those, which have become irrelevant in the present

Delhi State Council of Women
20th Triennial Conference of the National Council of Women in India

Every year, the Principal of St Francis College in Chennai ended her speech to the first-year students at her institution at the start of their term, by saying 'you enter this college as girls. You will leave it as ladies.' She repeated these words at the end of the class's career in the institution, making it a point to address them now as 'ladies'. It is this speech that the title of this thesis refers to. The students wear white and hold candles – a bit like Christian brides in Southern India – and walk to the college's grotto where they lay their candles down as a symbol of their dedication to serious and consequential lives as adult women. In other colleges too similar ceremonies are conducted, even if without the Catholic symbolism of the grotto. These ceremonies are solemn, marked by little of the playfulness that is ubiquitous in

the everyday lives of these institutions. When some students giggle and move about, they earn a sharp look or a scolding. Ladies, it is evident, must be serious creatures.

As Sangari and Vaid (1990, 17) put it ‘womanhood is often part of an asserted or desired, not an actual cultural continuity’. Elaborate projects of lady making – located in middle class homes (Sreenivas 2008, Sarkar 2001), in the discourse of mothering (Donner 2012, Sen 1993), of educational institutions (Hancock 2001), and of the state, in the disciplinary regimes of the workplace, and constituted in the debates of the 1940s to 1960s about appropriate liberal arts curricula for women (Anantha Raman 1996), as well as in the concurrent public discourse on middle class women’s increasing visibility and ‘safety’ in public spaces – have engineered the figure of the respectable female subject as a coherent ideal in India’s postcolonial history. As a wide scholarship now asserts, places of education are central to the regimes of discipline that produce class and gender (Foucault 1977, Bourdieu 1984, Srivastava 2005). This is of particular significance in a postcolonial context, where formal education has been invested with the burden of making orderly and law-abiding citizens of the vast multitudes of the nation (K. Kumar 2005). As Jeffrey et al (2008) show in the Uttar Pradesh case, education as affective labour is focussed not only on gaining qualifications towards a potential better future, but also towards building narratives of self as morally superior, more modern and more civilised. As such, whether education leads to employment or not, it is invested with intrinsic value, and the potentials it creates are not only limited to the possible broadening of economic horizons but it also *‘insinuates’* itself into people’s everyday actions, thoughts and modes of appreciation’ (Jeffrey et al 2008, 63, emphasis original). In this, higher education’s contemporary history as a set of institutions mediating the making of capable and legitimate neoliberal subjects, with particular affective orientations recalls an older colonial and postcolonial history in which education mediated the uplift of the savage into citizenship (Kent 2004, Savage 1997).

Taking *education* thus, both literally, as sited in institutions of formal education, and as a wider discourse of governmentality and development, this chapter begins by defining the meanings and histories of ‘youth’ for middle class women in Chennai. Mediated by the activities of Western progressives and Christian missionaries, as well as Hindu reformers, Theosophists and Orientalist converts to Hinduism, the story of women’s higher education in India has presented, for a variety of historians of the British Empire in India, a promising narrative about modernity, the making of the Indian middle classes, and the colonial politics of gender (Burton 1996, 2000, Haggis 2000, Haggis and Allen 2008, Jayawardena 1995). Building on these narratives and taking them forward to explore the makings of the ‘present’ of this study, this chapter sketches the figure of the college girl as an iconic image of middle class youth, positioning her as both a site for the fantasies of the potentials of postcolonial modernity, as well as a locus of its anxieties. The chapter then uses histories of ‘home science’ to frame a discussion of the practice of teaching ‘value education’ and ‘personality development’ to young women, as sites where gendered agency has been both circumscribed and contested. Finally, this chapter returns to its positioning of the women’s college as both an oasis of ‘safety’ and rationality in an unruly city to examine the figure of the college girl as mediating the urban and urbane in the making of contemporary middle class modernity.

‘Youth’ for Women

Eleanor McDougall, a Scottish missionary in India published an account of ‘South Indian College Women and their Problems’ in 1943, based on her experience over many years as Principal of a college in erstwhile Madras. The book is typical of other missionary accounts of women’s education at the time.²⁹ Its focus is the principal’s work in bringing to what she sees as a cohort of over-sheltered, and undisciplined Hindu and Christian women, the rationality and the scientific temper that McDougall places at the heart of modern

²⁹ See Jayawardena (1995) for similar accounts from India and Sri Lanka.

womanhood. McDougall prides herself, and the work of Christian missions in general, also for introducing a period of youth into young women's lives: a development she links explicitly to the passing of the Age of Consent bill to increase the age at which women might be married, and the social campaign against child marriage. She writes (1943, 125):

The great gift of girlhood is a boon which Christianity has been gradually bestowing on India, beginning from the steady disapproval of child marriage which has at all times been characteristic of Christian people, and spreading far beyond the boundaries of the Christian Church. By an Indian enactment the minimum age for the marriage of girls has now been fixed at fourteen...[and] is gradually coming to the point of allowing a few years of girlhood before the responsibilities of wifehood and motherhood close in on the child-daughter.

During this period of girlhood, McDougall imagines (1943) that young women would discipline their minds and grow more mature, thus becoming more able to take decisions for themselves. Of particular concern to her is marriage. Truly modern women, in McDougall's opinion, would be able to choose their husbands according to ideals of compatibility rather than enter matches arranged by their families. Having learned to govern their emotions at college, she hopes, more and more young women would go on to do this. Ambiguously addressing as emergent both the Indian nation and the womanhood of her students, both of which she argues, are experiencing the pain of separation from their pasts, she goes on to write: 'Such times of transition are full of joy and exhilaration; there is the thrill of freedom and the glory of opportunity; but such times are sure to involve pain and danger also' (McDougall 1943, 127). McDougall's portrayal of youth for women continues to be echoed. Youth for women is often described as a dangerous time: a precarious period of extended tutelage meant to inspire self-discipline and rigour in young women, but also a process apt to go wrong, and result, as the quotation at the beginning of the chapter warns, in 'arrogance' and dissent.

Further, the linkages she makes between a 'youth' for women, the education of sexual consent, and India's emerging postcolonial modernity are pertinent. As historians show, education for women is entangled in histories of imperial discourses that cast Indian women as enslaved, and living in dank darkness, both literally, in that the interiors of homes were imagined to be lacking in hygiene and scientific order (Stoler 1989, 893, McClintock 1994, Sreenivas 2003) as well as metaphorically, in that these women were cast as being largely ignorant and lacking in the initiative and efficiency attributed to European women (Sinha 2006, Burton 2011). This history, as scholars like Sreenivas (2008) is also imbricated in the nationalist response to this criticism. The controversy around Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*, which was received with resounding criticism from women in South India (Sinha 2006), has been particularly marked as a moment of origin, both for the reactionary responses that glorified an ancient golden age in India when women had supposedly been enlightened and free, as well as the strengthening of the missionary discourse that sought to bring women 'into the light' so to speak. Tellingly, the motto of the institution that McDougall founded was 'lighted to lighten'³⁰. This history inextricably links discourses of scientific housewifeliness (Berry 2003) and the anti-child-marriage campaign that placed sexual consent squarely at the heart of modernity, with 'youth' for middle class women. As Sarkar (2001) and Burton (1998) have both noted, these incensed and vigorous nature of these debates ultimately had less to do with young women's individual agency to consent to sexual acts, and more with the anxiety that the notion of an 'age of sexual consent' suggested the possibility of women's sexual autonomy.

³⁰ This has been gleaned from the institution itself. However, for the sake of anonymity it cannot be cited.

'Youth' is iterated here as a precarious, albeit, as Comaroff and Comaroff (2006) suggest in a different context, quintessentially modern category of experience. It is accompanied by an imagination of uplift from a condition of ignorance through a pedagogical regime, and marks the blurred boundaries between notions of social and sexual consent in its positioning as a required period of tutelage before either can be given. As we know from the rich literature on this subject, several communities across India have rooted their identity and practices of social mobility in this attribute of education, seeking to use it as a means to transcend caste and other oppressions (Osella and Osella 2000, Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2008). As anthropologists like Clarinda Still (2011) have further demonstrated, the aspiration for social mobility through education, particularly the education of girls also comes with a tightening of the leash around women's sexual practices, even in lower caste communities where women may have experienced fewer restrictions. The practices of discipline in which 'youth' is imbricated thus also mark sexuality as the dividing boundary between 'childhood' and 'youth'. In this, we might argue, drawing on Foucault (1978) that 'youth' marks the intensification of the anxiety about the child's sexuality as a savage and undisciplined thing³¹. If children's sexuality was a precarious thing, to be watched carefully, in this period of 'youth', sexuality and its governance are overarching concerns. Indeed, the whole purpose of 'youth' it would seem from McDougall's narrative (1943) is to postpone sexual activity until women are 'mature' and have disciplined their minds. Until then, she fears, they might act either in obedience to someone else and hence risk their futures as respectable women or end up child-brides, or else act wilfully, i.e. exercising the 'wrong kind of will' (Ahmed 2014), an act that is located discursively in the realm of 'immaturity' and hence demanding further tutelage, and end up in a bad way.

³¹ While this thesis does not treat young men's sexuality, it might be noted here that while young women are held up to an ideal of sexual innocence and self-control, other forms of sexual discipline characterise the way in which young men's sexuality is addressed. For instance, among male peers as well as within broader institutional discourses, young men are often compelled to position themselves as conventionally masculine by engaging in forms of sociality with other young men that suggest this. See Rogers (2008) for a discussion of this.

Further, it is clear that 'youth' is a period when the will might be disciplined, and directed in particular ways. As Ahmed (2014) argues, acts that threaten to rupture the reproduction of ordinary life are often seen as the 'wrong' kind of agency: a stubborn exercise of the will towards an end that is imagined not to bring happiness. Ethical imperatives are thus insinuated into agency in taming it. This is again evident in McDougall's work (1943), where she outlines how she seeks to educate women who can make decisions, for instance to marry a certain person, rather than allow their families to arrange their marriages. However, she emphasises the importance of disciplining the emotions before such decisions can be made. Such sentiments were as Sreenivas (2003) demonstrates in her work on Tamil periodical literature from the early 20th century, widespread. Indeed, the whole point of education was the exercise of the will. However, the danger – the opposite of exercising the will – is not inaction but 'wrong agency'. *Education* might then also be regarded as a set of practices that discipline aspiration and action into a modern narrative of progress. The notion of 'youth' set out in McDougall's writing (1943) is a very specific type of middle class youth, open in her time, to a small group of the population of women who actually attended university. It suggests further that without education there is no 'youth' for women, and that they pass directly from an over-sheltered and undisciplined childhood to the burdens of motherhood and wifedom. The pain that scholars have associated with modern pedagogical practices (Miller 2002, N. Kumar 2011) might be usefully located in this disciplining and directing of the will.

Some of these insights on the colonial and post-colonial histories of middle class 'youth' carry resonances in the anthropological literature, where youth has been studied in the context of research on life stages and rites of passage. Most women I met marked menarche and the rituals that often continue to accompany the attainment of puberty as the end of

childhood. Largely non-Brahmin, these women had experienced ‘youth’ as marked by the ritual of *manjal neer* (lit. yellow water – referring to the use of turmeric to bathe the young woman’s body), which continues to be performed in rural as well as urban Tamil Nadu, and many young women I met had gone through the ceremony. Among the urban middle classes, however, with increasing individuation, and compulsions towards appearing culturally ‘modern’ and distant from ‘traditional’ or ‘backward’ rituals, as I heard these described, such ceremonies are seen as an embarrassment (Narasimhan 2011). Many of those I spoke to, even some who had undergone this ritual, saw it as a pre-modern relic, and insisted that they had been forced to undergo it to placate a rurally-located grandmother, or that it had proceeded against their every wish. Whether they had had the ritual or not, most women remembered their mobility: both their movement at the scale of the body, within confined spaces of home and neighbourhood as well as their permitted mobility around wider areas, circumscribed at this point.

The word *vayasu ponnu* – a girl of age – came up many times as young women remembered suddenly being told not to sit in the front of the auto-rickshaw with the driver, being reprimanded when they asked, as always, to go and play with the neighbourhood boys after school, and told not to run or flail their arms so much and to tie up their hair and speak quietly at home. In other words, they are suddenly marked as fully and functionally female, even nubile, and hence at risk. Their access to spaces in the home is typically circumscribed at this point as well. While Brahmin women, as Narasimhan (2011) also shows, face seclusion and ritual separation during their period, other women recounted being forbidden from going up to the terrace after they had attained puberty. The sight of single, young women standing on the terrace is widely taken as a sign of sexual looseness, and students remembered being censured even for sitting in their balconies for too long. As Wadley (1980) wrote many years ago, young women between the ages of menarche and marriage are typically treated as a

liability, prone to ‘go bad’ or ‘be spoilt’ as many young women I met put it – in metaphors reminiscent of food – and needing control and surveillance to keep them ‘fresh’ as a college authority said one day euphemistically, i.e. sexually touched. Even outside of formal education, thus, young women are subject to forms of surveillance and discipline, meant to make ‘women’ of them, marking their bodies as *vayasu ponnu*

It has to be noted that almost all these women disclaimed this discourse where ‘youth’ is marked by menarche, even as they mentioned it. Rather, they sought to be iterated as ‘youth’ in ‘modern’ ways, through participation in a range of cultural activities – joining bands, listening to certain types of music, going to college, watching films – that marked this category. However, it was clear that ‘modern’ ways of marking youth, such as position relative to stages of education, and positioning relative to discourses of consumption, intersect with practices dismissed as ‘traditional’ markers. School uniforms at most schools attended by the middle-classes mark this, changing in about year eight or nine, when students are typically about fourteen years of age, from skirts or pinafores to the *salwar kameez*, which covers the legs and includes a *dupatta* (scarf) to wear across the breasts, all of which restrict movement, and create awareness of the body. Young women remembered Physical Education classes suddenly discouraging women’s participation in sports like Football or Basketball. The market too, as Phadke (2013) points out is complicit in producing this differential way in which young women experience space by mediating discourses of shame and sexualising particular body parts. She offers the example of clothing marketed at pre-teens and teenaged girls that mark, in their cut and style, yet-undeveloped breasts. For a four-year-old to keep a bikini top on properly, means to be more careful and aware of her body, and the parts that this top is meant to cover in the way a child wearing say, a T-shirt might not be. We might recall Menon’s argument here, that market ideology, by and large reinforces existing scripts of women’s bodies, albeit through a discourse that is cast as ‘modern’ rather than resist them in

any substantial way (Menon 2004). Many schools further punish female students from this age on for any sign of active sexuality. Students I interviewed remember being told that they were ‘spoiling’ their own childhood – i.e. effectively ending it, in this imagination – if they were sexually active. Others recalled getting into much bigger trouble with one woman remembering her boyfriend being beaten up by a crowd that saw the couple together whilst she was in school uniform and simply assumed that he had been harassing her. Many remembered schools policing, and even stringently punishing any kind of physical contact between boys and girls, and increasingly among girls³² as well. The explanation typically given for this policing is that ‘there is a time and place for sex’ neither of which is that of education. This narrative recalls McDougall’s memoir (1943) in which youth is a period of sexual deferral and postponement, as well as of self-restraint and learning discipline.

Going to college, however, is often much anticipated as this is the first time a number of women I met had been released from the close surveillance of family, even if into the surveillance of college authorities. As scholars like Aengst (2013) and Brunson (2013) further note, as higher education has increasingly come to be regarded essential for social mobility, and as young women have access to technology like mobile phones, the possibilities for escaping surveillance and discipline multiply. In this context, college, as the iconic location of ‘youth’ is a site for imaginations both of the possibilities of this extended period of education, and fantasies of participating in a culture of consumption and fun away from home, as well as the site where young women’s movements are under surveillance and closely circumscribed within a narrative that positions them perpetually at risk.

³² New vocabularies and practices of homophobia are discussed elsewhere in this chapter and in Chapters Five and Six.

Constructed at the intersection between a colonial history that ties histories of a 'youth' for middle class women to education for women, as well as sexual deferral and self-restraint, and popular discourses about young women and their precarious sexualities in Tamil Nadu, the notion of 'youth' in young women's lives is lived in tension with the ways in which modernity has been experienced in India. The notion of 'youth' is thus deeply imbricated in the ways in which *education* circulates as a technology of governmentality within and outside of formal institutions, as well as in 'traditional' schemas of 'growing up' that are then demonstrably engaged in producing 'modern' femininity.

'Homely' Girls and 'Value Education': Interrogating Agency

The word 'homely' has had a career in India quite different from its Webster Dictionary meaning of 'unattractive' or 'simple.' The Indian 'homely' recalls notions of uncomplicated-ness – unassuming, home-centred domesticity (Patel 2004), and makes frequent appearances in matrimonial advertisements in newspapers and in matchmaking websites, where women described as such are widely sought³³. To be 'homely' as a middle class Indian woman is to embody the 'good' bourgeois femininity, which has, as a rich literature now demonstrates, long been placed at the heart of Indian modernity (Chatterjee 1989, Burton 2000, 2001), and even positioned centrally in discourses that otherwise challenge the totalising imperatives of Indian nationalism (Ramaswamy 1992, 1998). The home has been constructed in nationalist discourse as both microcosm of the modern nation that must be efficiently managed as the site where the nation's future citizens are fashioned (Hancock 2001) as well as the reservoir of culture and tradition guarded by women, who must, as keepers of this sphere of culture and purity, remain untainted by improper desire (Chatterjee 1989). The 'homely' woman is the ideal: the 'perfect family member' who stands for

³³ See Srilakshmi Ramakrishnan (2012) for a discussion of terms such as 'homely', 'wheatish' and 'innocent' through which the figure of the ideal bride-wife is produced in matrimonial websites. Though this thesis does not offer scope for a discussion of this, matrimonial columns of newspapers in which families solicit matches for young, unmarried or divorced members, constitute a domain of discipline through which ideal coupledness and 'homely' womanhood is produced.

‘nationality as traditional family in public conduits; privatized nation mobilized as wife and as gendered family intimate’ (Patel 2004, 134). Homely women, in other words, exercise their will and agency ‘appropriately’: in the interest of nation, family, and culture.

‘Homely’ women are the original objects of the bourgeois nationalist project of women’s higher education. As a rich historical scholarship points out (Haggis 2008; Hancock 2001), the education of women in India had its origins in the imperative to teach mothercraft, home science and household arts – a group of subjects developed in the early twentieth century as a means to make modern homekeepers and mothers of women – that Indian reformers and nationalists, the colonial government and Western and Christian missionaries all shared. On the one hand, these scholars show, the space of the elite home’s interiors – unreachable to the colonial arm, and protected fiercely in the cultural nationalist discourse – was imagined to be a dank space of ignorance and women’s enslavement. Springing from the American journalist Katherine Mayo’s discussion of Indian women’s ‘status’ and ‘plight’ (Sinha 2006), this imagination then positioned education as possessing the power to transform this sphere by bringing women into modernity. While in the missionary discourse this might mean a movement forward from ‘tradition’ to ‘modernity’, for Orientalists and Theosophists like Annie Besant, and Hindu reformers, this transformation of the intimate sphere through the education of women was imagined as a return to a golden and purely Indian state of glory (Jayawardena 1995). Both are concerned with the sphere of women’s action and the form and directions it ought to take in transforming the Indian home, and through this, producing a vision of a postcolonial future. In both discourses, the home is reimagined as a site of contestations both over the intimate everyday lives of postcolonial modernity, as well as women’s agency.

The debates on women's education in Tamil speaking South India in the late colonial period are characterised by this anxiety about homeliness. Themes of 'goodness' and 'appropriate behaviour' for educated women are prevalent in the periodical literature in Tamil in the early twentieth century. 'Good girls' are, for instance, compared with 'good fruits and good flowers': 'just as good flowers, by giving pure fragrance, and good fruit, by giving sweet taste, make us happy, in the same way, good girls, with their wholesome qualities give man happiness' (Iyer 1904, 119). This narrative presents an instance of Hindu upper caste anxiety about women's education, echoed by Orientalist nationalists such as Annie Besant, who was an important champion of women's education in Chennai. Besant's conception of 'true education' much like that of other Theosophists in erstwhile Madras, rested on a Brahminical notion of ancient ideals of education for women. Placing her agenda of producing homely women for a new nation within the nationalist goal of home rule, Besant also writes: 'the *national* movement for the education of girls must be one which meets the national needs, and India needs nobly trained wives and mothers, wise and tender rulers of the household, educated teachers of the young, helpful counsellors of their husband, skilled nurses of the sick rather than girl graduates, educated for the learned professions' (Besant 1913 (1904) 319-320). This approach to women's education has been discussed as the '*sakti-sarada-sita*' syndrome (Anantha Raman 1996): referring here to the ideals of mythical femininity that were held up for women. Tamil poet, Subramania Bharati for instance held up the *Sakti* ideal of pure, enlightened womanhood as the essence of education, exhorting men to educate the women in their families. His poetry, as Anantha Raman (1996) recalls, exhorts this ideal of chaste and educated womanhood as the spirit of modernity (*pudumai pen*). Education, he believed, would open women's minds to what was truly important both to the nation and to the family, and that without this, they would not be able to earn the respect and love of the men in their lives. For Bharati as for other Hindu reformers of the day, a truly 'Indian' education would have to differ from the academic pride and defiance of tradition associated with 'Western' education

for women, in that it would be based on the principle of selflessness. Education for women was meant to serve family and nation, and without its location in these homely goals, it was no more than merely a selfish pursuit. This anxiety about the 'selfishness' of learning to read and write is evident in Sivaraman's memoir addressing her grandmother, Subbulakshmi's desire to read. Subbulakshmi, we learn, battled guilt all her life, simply for her desire to read voraciously, and in the little notes she jotted down every now and again – all carefully impersonal and entirely silent on her home-life but intimate nonetheless in what they indicate of her desire for knowledge – in her daughter's notebook. For education to be homely, it had to be of use to reproducing everyday nationalist life, not troubling or questioning it.

In contrast, the subjects of many of Eleanor MacDougall's ruminations on the 'problems of college girls' (1943) are lower caste converts to Christianity. Among them, McDougall fears laziness, a lack of initiative, and what she sees to be an in-bred tendency to take orders and evade responsibility. In this case, she sees education's role as being rooted in bringing Protestant ideals of hard work, personal responsibility and courage to young women: making them able, in her imagination, to resist improper suitors and the temptations of sexual impropriety, to place a commitment to Christian values above any other thing, and to be appropriate representatives of a modern India. The ancient ideals that Besant enumerates and values – of the woman's place in the family, and her primary responsibilities as a Hindu wife and mother – are less important to McDougall who sees these ideals as having enslaved women and made them incapable of independent thought and action. Much like the missionaries described in Kent's work on converting women (2004), McDougall seeks to educate a class of sensible, modern and responsible Christian women who might then go on to raise Christian children, ministering to them through her Protestant ideal of loving discipline. Christianity, she suggests, has brought also the ideal of choice to the educated woman, recasting marriage as a matter of love between two individuals rather than an

arrangement between families, mitigating the pain of transition that arranged marriage entails. Women who have made marriages of choice, she goes on to say, live happier lives, exercising more will in their everyday care of the home, and building a modern relationship with their husbands. The homely women that McDougall envisions thus bravely stand against ‘tradition’ and make choices for themselves, and serving the nation through their lives as scientific housewives and mothers.

The College thus also plays a direct role in reproducing the middle class home. This understanding of the educated woman’s role is the context in which the teaching of ‘Home Science’ in Chennai’s women’s colleges, since the 1940s, evolved (Hancock 2001). ‘Home Science’ one essay published in a college journal (Sunflower 1943)³⁴ argues, is an inappropriate name for a subject whose scope is much wider than the home, and which is really a science of the immediate environment. This subject, the writer (1943, 3) suggests, trains young women not only to be better homemakers, but also expand public knowledge on scientific techniques of child rearing and the psychology of parenting, food preparation and nutrition conservation, as well as environmental science for home management. ‘Home Science’ or ‘Household Arts’ programmes as they were variously called typically became sites where the contours of ‘proper’ femininity could be debated, and the purposes of women’s education made clearer. Student Council reports suggest that these departments held debates on matters such as appropriate dress and style for the modern Indian woman (Senate 1957-58, 11). The nation, imagined as microcosm of the home, and within a familial metaphor, it is suggested, will be transformed as women begin to run their homes, and teach other women to manage their households in a scientific manner.

³⁴ Specific colleges are anonymized through this chapter by omitting the name of the College from the citation data on the journal.

This line of thought is also represented in the language that the State uses. A report of the National Committee on Women's Education published in 1959 argues that a good mother is not one who is merely concerned with the care and comfort of her child. Instead, it suggests (1959, 8):

Only she is a really good mother who can help the child in developing its full and many-sided personality, in inculcating in it right attitudes of life and habits and in giving it a real training for life. We think that all this would be possible only for the woman who is educated in the real sense of the word, who has full knowledge and varied experiences of wider life, and who is acquainted with the problems and challenges which life presents.

This report and other debates on women's education in the immediately pre-independence and postcolonial period are concerned with notions of true or real education and mere formal education. The former, they often suggest leads to a disciplining of the emotions (McDougall 1943), to greater development of what are imagined to be womanly qualities of nurturing and efficient home management (Sunflower 1943, Besant 1924). The latter – 'mere', 'false' or 'formal' education: the equivalent of what is today typically described as 'book learning' as opposed to 'all round' or 'holistic' education in College orientation programmes – on the other hand, is linked with arrogance, and to anxieties about educated women challenging established societal norms of family.

In May 2012, I sat in an orientation class at NT College and heard the principal of this institution, which prides itself greatly on producing women who have high employability potential and advertises its close ties with recruitment agencies, tell her new students that it was in their interest to be 'good girls' whilst at her college. After all, she would write not only their recommendations for jobs, but also offer her opinion to the families of any potential

bridegrooms who came by and investigated her students before making an offer of marriage. On the noticeboard in the institution is a poster that argues that divorce shows failure: the inability to 'manage' a marriage as one might an administrative team, or a corporate project. Successful women, it suggests, learn to work on marital issues and resolve them rather than get divorced. In other words, successful women are, in the Indian sense, good homely girls. The promise of homeliness, as Patel (2004) suggests is that of proper postcolonial development: good homely girls who study hard, get married without scandal, work to keep their marriages and reproduce responsibly can then 'eat well, borrow on debt, own goods, and join the fellowship of the less-fecund First World.'

Home Science, while still often an optional subject in schools, is typically no longer offered to women at university. In its place, are programmes on nutrition, diet management and hospitality, intended to train women as nutritionists, chefs and hotel managers. Though it dramatically expanded the years immediately after independence, it has now given way to programmes that teach the commercial use of some of the same skills. However, homeliness is taught through programmes of 'value education' and 'moral science', which are typically compulsory. It might be noted that men's colleges – even those run by the same organisations – often do not have comparable programmes and the stated purpose of these programmes is to prepare women especially to manage homes, and thrive in marriages. At NT College, the value education programme is offered to first and third year students as – the un-ironically named – 'beginning' and 'finishing' school courses. 'Value Education', much like 'home science' is often presented as a component of college education that makes it holistic, taking it beyond book learning to intimate aspects of women's lives. 'True education', a teacher in NT College's 'beginning school' programme said one morning, is the purpose of these programmes. These programmes are typically structured to equip women to be efficient homemakers and career women, and according to NT College's website, also to be 'open-

mindful and accept changes in life' as well as to be 'assets in their family and workplace'. At Church College, the Value Education programme presents an overview of 'expectations in married life' as well as a module on 'managing home life'. The premise of these programmes is that women students will soon be wives and mothers and much like home science they are geared towards giving them skills to manage the home better. 'Success' in life, a value education class at Church College taught its students, 'is balance' – i.e. the ability to be an efficient career woman as well as a good homemaker.

Towards this, the course of lectures that students are required to take in their 'finishing school' programme at NT College includes topics such as 'avoiding ego clashes with the partner', 'learning to adjust in the new home' and 'respecting the institution of marriage'. The programme also teaches 'etiquette', particularly 'table manners', 'conversation skills' and 'effective housekeeping' as well as 'health and hygiene' including 'family planning' and 'healthy motherhood'. Such topics are taught in lectures and class discussions, where I heard, among other things, a passionate defence of caste-endogamous marriage as a means to prevent divorce by ensuring that the couple is well rooted in the same milieu, as well as in written exercises and workshops where students are required to give the 'correct' answers to various questions about behaviour before and after marriage. A further stated aim of this programme is to ground women in 'culture' in a time when 'tradition' is seen to be threatened. In college prospectuses, this programme is presented as signalling the college's commitment to producing a class of women who are not only prepared for careers, but also socially responsible and committed to family.

These classes were typically presented further as essential both to the professional and personal 'success' of women. The module on 'etiquette' in particular was offered as essential to partaking in a global corporate world. Offered along with classes on make-up and fashion

(‘dressing according to your weight’) that instruct women on to toeing the very fine line between ‘attractive’ in recognisably feminine way, and ‘whore-ish’, as a student I met put it, these lessons are regarded essential to ambitious young women seeking to find professional success. Colleges like NT often further also partner with the mushrooming economy of ‘etiquette training schools’ in Chennai that teach grooming, diction, interview technique and conversation skills as part of a programme to ‘fine-tune’ personalities, and ‘put your best face forward’. In NT College’s ‘beginning school’, students are required to take a ‘personality development’ course that teaches them how to present themselves as ‘charming’ and ‘powerful’ by for instance, standing in particular ways, using a firm handshake, and presenting themselves succinctly. During this class, each student was required to say a few quick words about herself, and was given extensive critique by a personality trainer who chastised students on trying to be funny, and taught them to present hobbies and interests as ‘extra-curricular activities’. In the ‘finishing school’ course which brings this training to its finish, these skills were called on again and re-positioned as useful for women seeking to marry and have children: management skills, I heard many times, would be of use in ‘handling’ in-laws without ‘breaking up the family’ and in ‘learning to adjust’.

Value education – whether in its iterations as ‘moral science’ or as ‘beginning’ and ‘finishing school’ – much like home science might be seen then as a site where women’s agency has come to be arbitrated and contested. A wide literature on neoliberalism, subjectivity and youth in India now positions education as a site for transformation. The boom in private education in India – schools, colleges and universities offering courses to prepare students for work in a corporate environment through the study of ‘skill-based’ rather than liberal arts courses, as well as teaching them to adapt to a ‘global’ setting through conversation skills and personality development courses – has accompanied the expansion of a neoliberal discourse of state, in which market-driven education is a site where consent is

educated and obtained for this model of governance and the circuits of affect within which it seeks to position citizens. Etiquette and grooming lessons are now offered by a variety of private consultancies in Chennai, who conduct workshops in colleges, teaching young women how to put on make-up differently for the daytime, for work, for interviews, and for parties; giving them practice of conversations, training them to use the right fork for the correct course, and offering them ways of sounding more assured, confident and well-adjusted to a corporate environment.

The aspect of this education that particularly addresses intimate spheres of love, sex and marriage in young women's lives – talks on 'respecting marriage' and 'adjusting in a new home' – offer the less widely discussed intimate transformations wrought by neoliberal expansion. As anthropologists working on gender and sexuality in South Asia have shown, the aspirations, fantasies and desires of South Asian youth are intimately structured and produced within discourses of cultural globalisation and the changing ways in which middle class subjects are positioned within them. Value Education functions in this context in some ways as Home Science did, to re-situate women's education and the skills they learn in the context of the home and its modern management. If the Home Science student of the early post-colonial years learned to apply principles of nutrition to improving her husband and children's health, the contemporary student manages her home, through the skills she has learned in the context of the workplace: approaching relationships through corporate principles, and exercising her influence as she might as a 'team leader'. As a class in NT College taught, 'team-work' could be as central to marriage as it was to professional success. Managing to find love, albeit within an acceptable milieu, marry and settle down, as well as staying married and efficiently traversing worlds of work and home were thus positioned as aspects of middle class success for young women. In this, it echoes Ahearn's findings in Nepal (2001), albeit

with a far less privileged community, where she finds that successful marriages of choice are regarded a significant aspect of being ‘developed’ subjects.

Home Science and its discourses of homeliness, whether in Besant’s nostalgic ideal or McDougall’s Christian notion of freedom from Hinduism’s shackles, locate women’s agency in the espousal of education as a means to enlightenment and modernity. Women are seen as inherently pure, and able to shoulder the burdens of intimate service for the nation and the family, fighting tradition only where it is harmful to this ideal. In this, it both marks out and circumscribes the domain of women’s agency, locating it within a world of nationalist life, and also constitutes the space from where women have contested this role: advancing critiques of Home Science itself, and of their position within higher education. Value Education similarly marks out a domain of gendered governmentality in the neoliberal context, where young women are positioned as agents of a new entrepreneurial subjectivity. The old value of learning to ‘adjust’, marked in the popular poster put in classrooms around the city reading ‘if you cannot change the circumstances change your attitude’, is marked as a key strategy in becoming empowered individuals. In a class on marriage at Church College, for instance, students were asked to separate ‘myths’ from ‘realities’ with regard to their future marriages. The aim of this class was to dispel fears and ‘misgivings’ and give students ‘the confidence to approach marriage successfully’. Among the issues discussed were the notion that one could only be happily married to ‘the right partner’. Instead, students were taught that ‘people can adjust and lead a satisfying life.’ Similarly, the students were advised that marriage does not rob them of their independence but only requires – again – ‘adjustment’ to the needs of the spouse to approach life together. ‘Aversion to marriage’ was ascribed to ‘unrealistic ideas’ about romance and love, as well as exposure to ‘badly conducted’ marriages in the family. With ‘assertive communication’ and ‘compromise’ the teacher advised, problems could be solved and the relationship preserved.

These courses of study also draw the boundary between permissible, even laudable, agency that usually forms the crux of the celebration of women's increasing public presence in urban India, and the forms of agency regarded as troubling, and hence wilful (Ahmed 2014). Wilfulness as Ahmed (2014) writes, is the will gone mad: a desirable quality exercised in places and in ways that display a lack of discipline, as well as the stubborn refusal to be controlled. Wilfulness is dangerous precisely because it threatens to take a 'good' thing and stretch it to its worst extreme. This is often exactly the fear that surrounds education for women. While higher education is increasingly regarded desirable for women, the fears of young women's sexual agency that it brings inspire anxieties, and impel forms of surveillance and discipline meant to foreclose such opportunities. While an increasingly extended period of 'youth' affords women the opportunity to become educated and career-driven, even contributing valuably to the household income, as well as marrying up, it is also a deeply precarious and dangerous time: fraught with possibilities that women will 'cross the line' and deploy the agency, independence and discretion that education might give them to resist and criticise family, tradition and nation.

Dangerous and Alluring College Girls

In her essay first published in 1930, Janaki (2003), a Self-Respect writer in Tamil, discusses the many adages that warn women of any number of accoutrements of modernity – education, using umbrellas, wearing slippers, and eating and drinking next to members of other castes – threatening that the skies would cease to bring forth rain if women did any of these things. The anxiety here is of the power of caste-based kin structures breaking down if women were to step out – wearing slippers, holding umbrellas – get an education, or mingle with men and members of other castes. The threat – that the skies would cease to bring forth rain – is directed at the disruption of 'ordinary' and peaceful life, in the possibility of turmoil

represented by drought: the impossibility of reproducing life season after season if the skies simply closed up. This is also mirrored in the anxieties that pervaded Tamil Nadu about young Brahmin women's education in the new missionary-run schools and colleges (Sreenivas 2003) in which they were liable to mix with students of other castes, and it was feared, even lose their sexual chastity by becoming 'Westernised'. In her memoir constructed from notes her grandmother, Subbulakshmi, left scribbled and often disguised as 'homely' artefacts like grocery lists, activist, Mythili Sivaraman (2006) tells this story in Subbulakshmi's yearning for education, and voracious reading habits – much of it done in secret, so as to avoid criticism from her husband's family – even as she is married off as a teenager. In contemporary times, the debates on dress codes in Colleges, and the anxious discourse of 'safety' in which young women's higher education is positioned suggests that many of the anxieties of the early twentieth century continue, if it permuted forms and within contemporary histories of caste and gender.

In this context, the women's college might be considered a particularly potent site where the figure of the 'new woman' for an Indian nation has been imagined and produced many times over, first as the educated, scientific housewife of the early twentieth century (Berry 2003) and since the 1990s, the multitasking wonder-woman who is both successful in her high-earning career which contributes to the family's social mobility and middle class status, as well as in her role as a traditional wife, mother and daughter. As Sunder Rajan (1993) points out, the imaginary of the 'new Indian woman' often serves to obscure the real contradictions and trials in the very real and varied lives of Indian women, who may feel neither 'new' in any particular way, nor even particularly 'Indian' in a broad-brush nationalist sense that over-rides the cultural differences of region, caste and class within which women are located. It is important to add, therefore, that the history of women's engagement with higher education in India is a story equally of the fantasies of the unbridled potentialities of

new urban womanhood even as it is a narrative of the anxious spatial and social practices that re-inscribe scripts of home and nation on the bodies of middle class women, dramatically limiting the space of freedom in which the college-girl is fantasised.

Yet, the college girl is in the narrative popularised by cinema and vernacular writing across regions in India, is also alluring, headstrong and dangerously sexy. Symbolic of an ambitious postcolonial modernity, the figure of the college-girl has long suggested the articulation of powerful new fantasies about educated women, suggesting the possibilities for youthful sexual exploration, and mixed sex, mixed caste publics that became increasingly accessible for the middle classes over the course of the twentieth century. The college girl thus emerges as a liminal figure in the history of India's urban modernity: ambiguous of virtue, and in her mobility and extended youth, a figure of some danger.

In his 1966 short story, *Agni Pravesam* (Trial by Fire) serialised in the *Ananda Vikatan*, and eventually developed into the full length *Sila Nerangalil Sila Manitargal*, 'Some people sometimes' (1970), noted writer Jayakanthan explores the sexual ambivalences that surround the figure of the college-girl. In both versions, a young woman stands outside a college, holding books, waiting for her bus, when it starts to rain heavily. She waits and waits, getting drenched all the while when suddenly a car stops by her and the driver, a young man, offers to give her a lift home. The young woman, a Brahmin, refuses at first, but changes her mind and gets in. They drive around, and the girl sits in the back comfortably. As they near her home, the young man stops the car and makes a sexual overture. The young woman is coy at first, but not uninviting, and remains ambivalent to his affections. A sexual encounter occurs. He drives her home, and here is where the narratives divulge.

In *Agni Pravesam*, her mother, to whom she narrates this as an ambivalent incident: one where she knew she was giving consent but had not gauged the magnitude of the act and its meanings in her life, pours water on her, and asks her to forget the incident and move on. The possibility of a ruinous encounter ‘spoiling’ the college-girl’s life is averted. In *Sila Nerangalil*, the young woman’s brother, who lives with her, hears her narrating this story to her mother as rape, declares her unchaste and turns her out of the house. She goes to live with her maternal uncle who, seeing her as a ruined woman, makes unwanted sexual advances, which she dodges as she steadfastly finishes college and builds a successful career as an office manager. Then, in a serendipitous turn, the young woman meets the man with whom she had her fateful encounter – now married – and upon reflection recognises that she in fact had felt desire towards him too that evening, but was only too afraid to admit to her own agency in what had transpired between them. They begin an affair and gradually she finds herself falling in love with him.

Both of these stories describe some of the greatest social anxieties linked with the college girl: the fear that her transit to and from the educational institution will prove too unsafe, for instance, and that this sense of danger might not only be located in the possibility of sexual violence against her, but also in her own exercise of desire. The College Girl, in these stories, enters a space of both sexual possibility and danger in the stranger’s car in contravention of proverbial advice dispensed to young women, in her ambivalent sexual encounter, in her literal loss of home and subsequent re-subjection as a ‘career woman’, and eventually, in her exit from ‘homely’ spaces in admitting to her own wanton desire for a quick sexual encounter with a stranger, and almost worse: in her becoming the ‘other woman’. *Sila Nerangalil* ends on a cautionary note as the woman’s paramour now advises her to marry someone else so that they might continue their affair even as she sets herself up as being unquestionably moral in the eyes of society. Unwilling to be hypocritical, she breaks off the

attachment, now entirely rendered unable to establish a married or partnered home, as she chooses instead to live alone. In a more subversive reading, *Sila Nerangalil* is less the cautionary tale and rather a tragic account of the very real limits and boundaries that restrict and structure the fantasy of unbridled and youthful sexuality contained in the imaginary of college going.

The centrality of the College Girl, as a figure of fantasy, representing the possibility of new socialities and urban publics on the one hand, as well as of the dissolution of previously secure gender practices on the other, to the urban imaginary in Chennai is powerfully represented in Tamil Cinema. As a wide scholarship notes, cinema has been central to public imaginaries of family, nation and community in India, and women in particular have come to mediate the cultural production of these structures in affectively significant ways. In films of the 1950s and 1960s, the trope of the woman migrating to the city in search of a better future, and falling prey to sexual temptation on the one hand, and to the desires of predatory men on the other, are common. In romantic comedies of this period – films like *Kaadhalikka Neramillai* (*No Time for Love*), the arrogant college girl and her rich father typically constitute both figures of aspiration, and ridicule for the less privileged hero, who seeks to win over both, and hence secure his fortune. The College-Girl here is absurd – in her exaggeratedly fashionable clothing, her English-accented Tamil and her scorn for the working class hero – as well as alluring.

In the 1970s, J Jayalalitha, who eventually went on to build a career as a politician for the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), starred in a number of films – such as *Pattikkaada Pattinama* (1973, *Village or Town*) for which she won a national award – where she played the modern college girl, a figure who is, in the narrative of the film, typically tamed into ‘proper’ femininity by marriage or romantic love. By the mid 1970s, films such as

Nootrukku Nooru (A Hundred Per Cent) explored heavier themes such as sexual harassment in the college, and the college girl emerges as the empowered alternative to the victim heroine otherwise popular in Tamil cinema.

College-going women continue to be central to the plots of Tamil films. In films of the 1990s and 2000s ranging from the controversial but popular *Bombay* (1995) – in which a burqa-clad college-girl falls in love with a Hindu man who waits on street corners to watch her walk by, clutching her books, her veil lifting in the wind just enough for him to catch a glimpse of her face – to more controversial films like *Oru Kalloriyin Kathai* (A College Story, 2005) – in which the hero is shown to be entirely in the power of his enticing college-going lover – the college-girl represents a fantasy of uninhibited sexuality, the possibility of romance and sex before marriage, as well as of the city as a place for youth. The 1996 hit film *Kaadhal Desam* (Nation of Love) explores conflict between young men of different classes and castes over the figure of the middle class college girl, who is represented as mysterious and glamorous and yet, alluringly homely in her gentle manner and ultimate decision to marry neither man but instead rise above this love triangle. In films like *Kaadhal Konden* (I have fallen in love, 2004), *Kalloori* (College, 2007), and *7G Rainbow Colony* (2003), college girls make bold decisions to have sex before marriage, embarking on romantic relationships that are largely depicted as being unstable and dangerous, leading to social ostracism, on the one hand, and on the other, exposing them to dangers from men who treat them violently. In *Moonu* (Three, 2012), a school and college romance, beginning with the exciting possibility of clandestine sex when the teenaged couple's families are away, and a very familiar trajectory involving after-school tuition classes, leads to misery as it turns out that the young man has been hiding his violent and ultimately damaging mental illness from the woman. The iconic *Alaipayuthey* (The Rolling Waves, 2000) was the film that most young women cited back to me as the filmic script they hoped to base their own romances on. It was regarded 'decent' – the couple barely

even kiss before marriage – and an instance of ‘true love’. Though the lovers in this narrative elope whilst one of them is still at college, many saw this as necessitated by the conservatism of the couple’s families rather than an act of impulse. Here, the college girl is spunky, smart and ultimately stands on her own feet, as a doctor, earning higher than her husband, a computer engineer managing a start-up.

College is thus a mass mediated site of fantasy. A vast number of those I met – both men and women – told me that the ‘real experience’ of college was a disappointment to them, given the expectations they had from films and television programmes about college students. For instance, young women at women’s colleges typically complained that unlike in films, they rarely ever met any ‘decent’ men standing outside their colleges, watching them, and the idea of actually ‘going with’ – i.e. starting a romantic or sexual liaison with – someone they had met on the bus or a local train, while so alluring on screen, and indeed the starting point of the romance in *Alaipayuthey*, seemed like a terrible idea in real life: even dangerous. At the same time, for many, despite all the limitations, college was everything they had always wanted. Unlike home, I was told, it was ‘happening’ and ‘fun’: signalling a time for friendship, unproductive ‘waste of time’ and ‘timepass’ as well as romance. On my first day in Teresa Hostel, I was just setting up my things as Manasi, one of the youngest members of the room, burst in with barely contained excitement. She had saved up from the monthly allowance her parents gave her to buy a pair of ‘strip jeans’ – jeans ripped at the knee and along the thigh. She had asked for a thin piece of cloth to be sown behind the rips so that her thighs and knees would not actually show – ‘my mother will faint otherwise’ – but this itself was ‘college rebellion’ as far as she was concerned: she was wearing ‘dirty’ and ‘Western’ clothes, she told me, feeling very proud indeed of her mischief, and ‘like a heroine’ – i.e. a film-star. Emboldened by her successful shopping venture, Manasi wore a pair of shorts to dinner that night. That, however, went down very badly as the warden abruptly called her in and lectured

her on decency asking if she wanted to seduce one of the servers in the mess, and if not, why a decent young woman would want to show off her legs like that.

Tamil cinema's transactions with the everyday lives of college girls also travel into the everyday ways in which Tamil film music and repartee comes to figure in interactions between college-going men and women. For instance, as Nakassis (2013) shows, singing and '*route podarathu*' – i.e. celebrating a bus route – through practices of noise-making and declaring the virtues of the young women who travel this route are common practices of masculine display among young men. These practices typically make use of film songs, in which young women are interpellated as seductresses, mercilessly drawing men into their wanton grasp.

The popularity in Chennai of the Sinhala song, *Surangani*, which saw many Tamil versions, some of which hailed college students as exchanging kisses for money, and being easy to convince into oral sex, is an exemplar of this. *Route podarathu* is usually a popular time for women who travel by the same bus routes to meet and flirt with men, knowing that the atmosphere of abandon and flirtation that is created on such a day, makes more place than usual for such romantic overtures. Osella and Osella's formulation of *youth culture*, as interchangeably also *college culture* or *cinema culture* (1998) is particularly relevant here in the context where real and imagined iterations of the college girl intersect in the everyday ways in which mixed sex publics are produced as spaces for youth and romance in young women's lives. The College-girl is thus a potent figure in the contemporary experience of Chennai, as well as of modern urban Tamil life, mediating the intimate imaginary of the city as structured by violence and temptations into risk, as well as of the home as threatened by these influences. Her movements and the anxieties that surround them however also tell a story about the city and the dangers now associated with its public spaces.

Urban and Urbane

It has been suggested that educational institutions are the theatre in which the nation is staged, and where the figure of the 'educated person' is naturalised as an ideal type of citizen (Srivastava 2005). The figure of the college girl in many ways mediates the middle class experience of the much-discussed 'decosmopolitanisation' (Appadurai 2000) of India's urban spaces. The debates on the city's cosmopolitanism figured centrally in the self-narrative of the institutions where I conducted fieldwork in two prominent ways. First, these institutions typically positioned themselves as sites where proper urbane middle classness was produced, and which, it was suggested, was threatened by an increasing influx of provincial elements in various forms into the institution. This referred both to the anxiety about the increase in young women migrating to cities like Chennai for higher education, thus bringing a larger number of students than before, from small towns and villages in Tamil Nadu and elsewhere; as well as upper caste anxiety about 'un-cosmopolitan' lower castes, lacking in the cultural capital that the upper castes have traditionally held, making their way through affirmative action policies and otherwise, into institutions that have been the traditional strongholds of these dominant castes. 'SC/ST Students', i.e. Dalits and Adivasis, were frequently referred to as being 'undisciplined' and 'the reason for falling standards of education', as well as blamed for 'ruining the reputation of the college'.

As Sreenivas (2008) points out, even the early 20th century debate on education and child marriage in Tamil Nadu was structured significantly by on-going politics of caste. The Dravidian movement, headed by Self Respect Leagues all over Tamil Nadu had offered alternative models for the organisation of family and community life, stressing mutual consent between partners and even creating alternatives to ritual Hindu marriage (Hodges 2005). This significantly impacted the debate on child marriage as a now-angry and reactionary Brahmin middle class became increasingly vocal in the early twentieth century, first in its defence of

child marriage as central to traditional Hindu practice. As Sreenivas (2008) points out, when it became clear that the wind was blowing the other way, this gradually resulted in the eventual structuring of education in ways that accommodated caste, as well as in producing an ethic of middle class femininity influenced by Brahminical, and in the urban space of Chennai additionally also Theosophist, ideas about proper modern womanhood.

The centrality of caste to the debates on women's education is evident in the prevalent Brahmin fears of women's forcible conversion to Christianity in the course of their education. As Kent (2004) points out, Christianity stood in not only for religious heterodoxy and departure from appropriate upper caste life, but also the anxiety of young women's 'Westernisation' and loss of virtue in institutions run by Christian lay teachers or missionaries. In some of the city's oldest women's colleges, caste was accommodated through the construction of separate eating and living areas for Brahmins, apart from the potentially beef-eating Europeans, and from other meat-eating Indian castes. Separate living areas for widows similarly suggest concessions to their lower ritual status, though this is still an improvement from wholly separate 'widow hostels' and training institutes, which only women whose husbands had died were permitted to enter. As an alumna who was at Church College in the 1970s remembers, some such caste distinctions were still in place then, with a separate 'SC Canteen' for Dalit students. On the other hand, from McDougall's narrative (1943) it is evident that Christian educationists such as herself saw upper caste Hindu women as being overly sheltered, and in effect immature: unable to take on the burdens of modern femininity. In contemporary times caste was connected with the notion of 'childhood' and 'adulthood' in interesting ways with a vice-principal at NT College asserting the importance of a college like hers – with its reputation for being a 'Brahmin College' – to preserving 'our culture' and 'educating our children'. The young woman is imagined again here as an impressionable figure in need of appropriate guidance.

Caste mobility also enters the lives of school-going students in other ways. As N. Kumar (2011) notes, middle-class children typically do not help out with chores at home. One of the ways in which ‘middle-classness’ is located in the body of the child is by the marker that defines the ‘working child’ or the ‘child labourer’ as working class, as against the educated middle-class child. Further, as Qayum and Ray (2011) note, most middle-class households in India hire help for domestic work, as a matter of distinction, if not necessity. As such, most middle-class children are often used to having help do their chores for them. As college students, most women from such backgrounds therefore also seek out hostels where ‘maids’ – as the domestic labourers are popularly called – are hired to clean the rooms, do the washing, and most importantly, clean bathrooms. Teresa Hostel, where I lived, was regarded highly for this reason and it was frequently pointed out to me that even the women who lived in the cheapest rooms did not have to do their own cleaning or washing. The upper caste child’s body, and indeed the upper caste adolescent body are not labouring bodies but bodies in training, and hence distinguished from lower caste and working class children’s bodies.

More significantly, however, Brahminical and Theosophical aesthetics of womanhood captured the reformist upper caste imagination in the early and mid 20th century, thus constructing ‘proper’ and ‘modern’ womanhood as necessarily genteel, nurturing and centred on the image of motherhood. In Annie Besant’s narrative discussed above, as well as in the work of other European reformists such as Margaret Cousins (1941), there is a nostalgic yearning for an ancient time in Hindu India when women were supposedly learned and equal to men, and a sad trajectory into ‘ignorance’ in the middle ages, following which there is a call for awakening into a modern time. Here, the upper caste woman is vested with the duty of carrying on the white woman’s burden of educating her less privileged and presumably less modern sisters.

In an interview with Kamala, now a lecturer at Arul College, and an alumna from the mid 1960s, of more than one women's college in Chennai, expressed this opinion. In the past, Kamala told me, sketching a broad brush story of the history of women's colleges, the prominent colleges for women in Chennai were full of 'Brahmin girls and upper class girls', much like herself, an upper middle class Brahmin born and raised in Chennai. During this time, she said, the standard of education was high, and teachers did not have to worry about matters of manner, and behaviour because students had learned these things at home. After all, she added, homes like her own were places where young women were trained for properly joining public life as professionals. Pointing to a group of students she had identified as 'SC/ST girls', i.e. Dalits and Adivasis, she told me, that these young women's presence in her institution – 'first generation learners' – was a result of many years' affirmative action that had eventually reached them. Now, she said, women like herself were vested with having to exercise a disciplinary role, 'doing crowd control' because 'these girls don't know the difference between public and private'. Many were away from their hometowns, she added, and the supervision of family and wider kin groups for the first time, and this, Kamala believed, often incited them to behave as the students outside the window were behaving: without, in her perception, discipline.

It was in order to deal with this situation that colleges like hers had to tighten their ropes with regard to discipline, she told me, and institute a host of new rules on behaviour: dress codes, curfews and other regulations on discipline. The girls who now filled Chennai's women's colleges, she told me, were 'not sensible. They are not smart.' In her own youth, she told me, she would go to conferences and return to the city as late as a little after midnight, in the wee hours of morning. She held herself confidently, she told me, and in such a manner as not to attract attention. As such, she was able to remain safe. The girls today, she told me,

couldn't do so. They 'giggle and laugh' she said, 'and don't stand up straight' – all indicating, to Kamala, a feebleness of character that made them vulnerable.

Playing into existing stereotypes of lower caste and working class women, Kamala's fears extended also to what she perceived as these young women's increasing 'sacrifice of love and patience to lust and sex.' Just as differences between public and private had come to be obliterated in 'non-OC' women's increasing entry into elite urban women's colleges, she believed young women increasingly allowed themselves to be carried away by lust and sex, leading to 'a dangerous situation' she said, where they would be no more than objects of sex. Kamala's opinions in some sense neatly bridge a MacKinnon-esque understanding of all sex as embroiled in the potentiality of rape and exploitation on the one hand, and Hindu upper caste anxieties of lower and working class women's sexual voracity. These women, she feared, echoing some concerns that Eleanor McDougall (1943) expresses would be too 'emotional' and 'silly' and hence might 'spoil their reputation'.

Much like Kamala, others I met expressed fears that 'low caste' women and 'first generation college goers' might slip into 'bad habits' during their college years. One often expressed fear – which, as V Geetha pointed out in conversation – had little base in fact given the paucity of any verifiable anecdotes on this, leave alone reported news-stories or first-hand information, was that college girls belonging to underprivileged backgrounds would easily slip into sex work. The college girl and the call girl, one young man I interviewed pointed out to me, were not very far apart in the imagination. This fear and fantasy of college-going women slipping into sex work was very strong among the young women I met as well, where many stories circulated of women having gone from a wanton life of sexual promiscuity to prostitution. As Venkatachalapathy (2006) writes, much of this comes from social anxieties generated from the early 20th century onward of cities as places of bad reputation and dark

misdeeds. To move to Chennai, he suggests (2006), was to admit to having been morally ruined.

These narratives further reveal a number of trends that emerge in what we might loosely classify as the post-Mandal years in Chennai's history of college education for women. The twofold anxieties Kamala expresses – her need to lower her standard of teaching, and anxieties about lower caste and working class women's sexual behaviour and bodily comportment, and consequent call for increased discipline – are representative of the main arguments voiced in the upper caste critique of the Mandal Commission's recommendations in the 1990s. The College in this narrative is positioned as an instrument of crowd-control and the cleansing of urban spaces in the wake of the increasing occupation of urban public spaces by working class, lower caste members of society, and the perceived loss of order and control in this. Colleges also mediate narratives of de-cosmopolitanisation in positioning themselves as oases of discipline and control in a context of growing indiscipline and urban anxiety, characterised by upper middle class fears about the influx of provincial elements to urban spaces that were formerly the forte of the middle classes: posh shopping centres, restaurants and cafes, as well as into the urban public at large which is imagined to have become less orderly, and more dangerous on their account.

In Chennai, this narrative was, I found, often mixed with the idea that the Dravidian parties, particularly the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) had 'given too much space' to such elements or 'encouraged them' as various people, both students and staff of the colleges I visited, suggested to me. Here we see renewed the division between the Brahmin-Theosophical city, whose public spaces are imagined to be clean – both orderly, and rid of the visible provincial element that is imagined to render them unsafe or even merely unsavoury to the eye – and the 'DMK city' as some put it, which is the chaotic city of traders, fishmongers,

dark-skinned men on buses, and young women speaking in Madurai accents, and screaming insults at people who jostle them. Films like *Nadunisi Naygal* (Midnight Dogs, 2011) take this theme a step further and depict the modern and free-spirited college girl as positioned in mortal danger from predatory, even murderous men, who, disappointed in their own failures in the city, have become psychopaths. As such, in the narrative of the city's private colleges, Chennai was imagined to be a deeply unsafe city, holding the potential for rape and violence in most spaces except those that were regarded strongholds of the 'respectable' classes.

This 'swamping'³⁵ by a disorderly mass was often stated as the reason why colleges had to focus more heavily on discipline and enforce rules of dress and curfews, as well as curbing the powers of student unions which were now, I was told time and again, apt to run rowdy given whom they were run by. This is, in many ways a classic post-Mandal narrative of education in contemporary India. However, while this has been studied in the context of young men (Jeffrey 2010, Nakassis 2013, Rogers 2008), the story of women's experience of educational spaces, and of this discourse remains under-researched. Yet, this experience is significant particularly because on the one hand, the middle class woman is the often-stated object of protection, in discourses of cleansing the city, and getting rid of the riff-raff that is regarded as a threat to her safety (Nair and John 2000) even as the increasing numbers of single women from lower middle class and lower caste families migrating to large cities for education and employment are repeatedly called on to establish their respectability publicly by dressing and comporting themselves in particular ways to demonstrate that they are subjects worthy of this protection (Phadke 2007, Phadke, Khan, and Ranade 2011a). Much as in the racialised discourse of colonial rule, in contemporary discourses too some bodies are regarded

³⁵ See Sarah Ahmed's analysis (2004a, 122) of words like swamping in producing the public affects of suffocation and take-over. They work, she suggests (2004a, 122) 'by mobilizing fear, or the anxiety of being 'over-whelmed' by the actual or potential proximity of others.'

as falling below capacity – as pre-determined risk failures (Mitchell 2010, Mbembe 2003) – who now feature as ‘surplus life’: people who haven’t learned to look after themselves well enough, and hence need to be ‘managed’ in some form.

As colleges like NT accepted more and more ‘students who don’t know how to behave’, it was important to have systems in place to teach them what she believed was ‘essential discipline’, necessary, in the interests of eventually securing corporate employment. This commitment to ‘social service’ towards the underprivileged has a long history in women’s colleges and among women’s associations in Chennai. Speaking with alumnae and long-serving professors at Church, St. Francis’s as well as NT, I often heard about these colleges’ historical commitment to the ‘uplift’ of ‘poor students’. The co-optation of peers to participate in this project of uplift was then seen as the performance of a form of ‘community service’.

Anthony Carey Watt (2005, 3) writing about associational spaces and cultures in India notes that in Chennai: ‘with notably few exceptions social service work was undertaken by urban elites of the upper castes, lower-middle and middle classes, and directed towards individuals of lower social status.’ This in many ways, was also what I found, and indeed it might be possible to argue that to situate oneself as being the doer of social service rather than its object: the person handing out rather than receiving help is in some ways central to middle class identity. At NT College when they had a ‘college welfare day’, I was expecting talks on students and their well being, perhaps, conversations about issues facing students. However, it turned out to be instead a day for ‘social service’ in college. So a number of ‘underprivileged people’ with diabetes were invited and handed out insulin injectors. They also had a ‘stall on breast cancer’ that displayed information. ‘We don’t need a day to talk about welfare’ the cabinet member who had organised this told me, ‘as educated women we have to

help others. We are capable of handling our own issues'. This, in many ways summarises the approach to politics that is widely prevalent in these institutions: one is middle class, and properly so, if one no longer needs a helping hand of any kind. This goes back to the preponderance of themes of self-reliance and initiative in young women's practices of subjection discussed in the previous section. 'Educated women' like themselves, I would often be told, do not complain or see themselves as victims. Instead, they are to feel grateful and lucky. Any anger, upset or criticality at their own situation was only a sign of a lack of initiative to transform their own situation. I was often given glib quotes like 'be the change you want to be'. There is, then, considerable embarrassment associated with expressing any strong discomfort with the state of things in college or seek collective action. To be 'urbane' and thus truly middle class it appeared, was to embrace a certain kind of agency that marked middle classness while consciously moving away from what might be seen as wilfulness: troubling, or disturbing agency.

Conclusions

The equation between 'child' and 'savage' that was central to colonial justifications of rule over a people regarded yet too uncivilised, their women too enslaved and their sexual cultures too permissive and decadent for the muscular and moral business of governance is evident in these histories of women's education. As some scholars (Sreenivas 2003) point out, direct connections were made in women's magazines of the early twentieth century, between women's education – and elevation from a sexually undisciplined, unhygienic savage labouring under a 'dependency complex' to borrow from Fanon (2008): a pathological inability to thrive without being dependent on someone else – and autonomy on the one hand, and the demand for national independence on the other. 'Adulthood' is then centrally bound up with the project of development and education into modernity. This recalls Halberstam's formulation of an epistemology of youth (2005) where he suggests that citizens who do not dwell in the

temporalities of ‘productive work’, i.e. waking up in the morning, and going to school or work at a certain time, playing or relaxing in the evening and sleeping at night, progressing in time from ‘childhood’ in school, to ‘youth’ at university to ‘adulthood’ in the workplace are typically those who become the subjects of governmentality. It is their lives that are rendered precarious in that they are regarded irresponsible and in want of institutions that would discipline them, to make their decisions for them, punish them for their refusal to conform. This is the context in which I place the disciplining of bodies into ‘child’ and ‘youth’ at different educational institutions, and the attributions of sexual-ness and *a*sexual-ness to them appropriately.

Drawing on Halberstam’s work on queer time (2005), I also seek to examine, here, an ‘epistemology of youth’: a historical sociology of the adult-youth binary that structures middle class women’s lives in normative discourses of capability and autonomy. These discourses stage at once, sites of affective intensity upon which this boundary is constructed as a thing of the present, an ‘inherent’ difference that is revealing of an ahistorical common sense. They also open up late colonial histories that, to bastardise Sara Ahmed (2004a, 126) who is writing about race rather than adult-child binaries, ‘stick to the present’ and allow the child’s body to be constructed as apart from the adult’s body: as de-sexualised; innocent; a prominent subject of the fantasy of violation that is central the making of everyday life³⁶.

Tracing the histories of such regimes in India, some of these linkages – between ‘adulthood’ and political autonomy; ‘growing up’ and political maturing – become more evident, particularly in the case of women. There is a concern about ‘newfound liberty’

³⁶ Edelman (2004) makes a similar point in talking about the role of the figure of the child as the innocent subject of protection, who is simultaneously the figure whose threat mobilises the defence of the ‘ordinary’ everyday of middle class life. For instance, the child is the object of protection in ordinances against queers participating in certain parts of the workforce for instance, or in anti-pornography legislation.

‘[going] to one’s head, be it for men, women or a nation’ (Faridoonji 1935, 194), as Mrs Rustomji Faridoonji, addressing the All India Women’s Conference puts it. Moderation is hence advocated and Mrs Faridoonji advises separate streams of education for men and women with the latter largely enrolled in ‘cultural colleges’ (1935, 195). She also advocates ‘the training of the emotions’ (Faridoonji 1935, 194) as the central need of the hour for women’s education, echoing the ideals of reformists who similarly sought to create ‘modern’ and ‘new’ women, as the companion-wife to the English-educated professional middle class man. Similarly, in her book, discussed above, McDougall (1943) discusses the need to discipline young Indian women’s emotions, which she regards as having grown quite out of control through many years of what she imagines to be a sheltered upbringing, in which they are taught to obey without question, and to suppress any ability to use their own initiative.

There is however also a parallel history of women’s writing about *home*, whether in the genre of diasporic longing and reconstruction of cultural memory (Burton 1997), or in memoirs about family life that centre on the home as a contested space of both anger as well as possibility (Sivaraman 2006, Visweswaran 1994), which disturb the easy mappings of nation and culture onto home and woman, making cracks in the image of interiority and privacy upon which the postcolonial middle class’s notions of respectability have been poised. These stories are laden with anxieties about what really counts as home: about the many *homes* that women, moving from natal home, to the fixed space of the husband’s home, to college hostels, to working women’s homes, to spaces of comfort and politicisation discovered with other women. Home is, in these narratives, ‘neither a self-evident place, nor a stationary trope. Like all historical utterances, it is both fictional and contingent’ (Burton 1997, 922). These narratives trace a history of precarious intimacy that reveals the inconsistencies and excesses – the colour outside the lines – of the figure of the respectable college-educated lady.

Some of the literature by young women in College magazines represents this tension. One essay in a 1982 magazine entitled *If* details the regrets of one young woman who chooses to marry and settle down – attracted by the offer of marriage from a handsome doctor – rather than take up a scholarship to study Journalism at a University in the US. She is seized with regrets at the thought now of meeting her friend, who took up this scholarship instead, having come second in the competition, and who is now a successful career woman. She ends the essay ‘To a twenty-year-old, very romantic Indian girl, from what you may call “a typical family unit”, the prospects of marriage, a secure future seemed far more attractive than a mere pursuit of a career... And what do I have for the future? An identity? Not without that basic self-confidence one gets out of independence’ (Gupta 1982, 35). On a more humorous note, a much older entry in the annual update on alumnae of this institution says: ‘Rajeswari Sumanam nee Baghanathan (Inter) has two children, a boy and a girl, and says her present occupation is ‘twiddling my thumbs’ but we doubt it’ (Sunflower 1941, 19). We might read these instances as examples of interstitial agency. They trouble epistemes of happiness in future in the first example through the imagination of regret at having let go of a professional opportunity in favour of the only livable form of happiness that seemed open to the young woman. In the second, more humorous instance, this is done through the playful expression of boredom, which, as Anderson (2004, 740) argues, can often be a means to acknowledge that ‘life can be at the risk of *lessening*’. Home, in these narratives is a place of exhaustion, where independence is lost, and where there is nothing inspiring to do. Homeliness comes at a loss of independence, and the homely girl is left twiddling her thumbs in boredom, having achieved a successful state of affairs that she is, nevertheless proud to report back to her alma mater.

In this context, college-girls have constituted both a risk to the imaginary of the respectable and quintessential woman, and simultaneously, its paradigm. As I have

demonstrated above, increasingly, there are anxieties rooted in class and caste about disciplining these young women into ‘ladies’, coupled with a nostalgia for the ‘ladies’ of years before when women’s colleges were largely populated with the city’s elites. In studies of provincial schools, Nita Kumar (2011) contests the view that education is a one-way imposition of postcolonial discipline, arguing instead, that schools and colleges are central in producing fractured forms of modernity that might be read, in classic postcolonial theorising, as a form of mimesis: the Indian who wears a suit, looks for an office-job, all the while chewing and spitting *paan*, and bastardising English with regional languages. In her work, Nita Kumar (2011) reads such practices as representing agency through a widely held disregard for the all-pervasive discourse of order.

As she suggests, even as the child in a provincial school learns to stand in lines for school assemblies, and finds her day structured and regulated by bells and gates, routines and rituals, she also learns that middle class adulthood is about learning to skirt this order: jumping queues if she can, bribing officials in contravention of the ideals of truth typically put up in schoolroom charts, sticking notices up on walls that specifically forbid this, and if she were a man, then urinating on the imposing walls of the colonial college. As Jeffery et al (2008) suggest then, education is also productive of metropolitan and non-metropolitan forms of modernity in India: mediating often, as Craig Jeffrey once put it in personal communication³⁷, the making of the urbane in the life of the urban middle classes.

The chapters that follow examine ways in which young women resist and affirm this lady-making process, finding ways, in the course of their everyday lives to have fun, make friends, and engage in practices that reveal the cracks in the making of respectable ‘new’ women. In

³⁷ Personal Communication with Craig Jeffrey February 2, 2012 at the Department of Education, University of Oxford.

this, I demonstrate, young women skirt risk, and experience a sense of precarity as they lay claim to the pleasures of 'college culture'.

3 | Inhabiting Everyday: ‘Wasting Time’ and ‘Sight-ing’

<i>Amma wake me up</i>	<i>Mother, wake me up</i>
<i>Kalaile nine o'clock</i>	<i>At nine in the morning</i>
<i>Shopping Poganum</i>	<i>I have to go shopping</i>
<i>Lip Gloss Vaanga</i>	<i>To buy lip-gloss</i>
<i>Ten o'clock friend vara</i>	<i>A friend of mine is coming over at ten</i>
<i>Ten-thirty share auto</i>	<i>At ten-thirty we're taking a share-auto</i>
<i>Three hundred change kudu</i>	<i>Give me change for three hundred (rupees)</i>
<i>Breakfast venaam</i>	<i>I don't want breakfast</i>
<i>Daddy-tte sollaade</i>	<i>Don't tell Daddy</i>
<i>Saayankaalam late-aagum</i>	<i>I'll be late this evening</i>
<i>Enge Ponaalum</i>	<i>Wherever I go</i>
<i>Boys, ba-ba, boys</i>	<i>There are boys, ba-ba, boys</i>

- From *Vathikuchi* (*The Matchstick*, 2013)

Few of the young women I met in Chennai would actually be able to tell their mothers the audacious truths of their wandering in the city and they certainly wouldn't boast about the ubiquity of 'boys, baba, boys' in their lives. In the words of eighteen-year-old Shankari, a Computer Science student at NT College, whom I asked whether she shared the stories of her daily adventures with her parents: "They'll lock me up, *di*³⁸". In reality, a few hours of going to the mall are usually won in exchange for babysitting siblings, and finishing chores early, or more often, stolen away when parents think their daughters are attending extra classes, or have been assigned extra responsibilities that require them to stay on in College longer.

³⁸ The feminine '*di*' is a word of affection, of which the masculine '*da*' is also often used among women.

Shankari had told her parents that the college worked every Saturday – a lie that got her out of the house without a squabble whether it was to go to the mall with her female friends, or, as a section in Chapter Four will discuss, to the beach with her boyfriend. The song is however representative of a fantasy of youth that many young women nurse: of waking up late, going shopping for make-up with their friends, and being surrounded by romantic opportunity. Such fantasises, as Mankekar (1999) suggests, are ways of imagining global modernities, centred on consumption.

The song and its video thus ring endearingly close to home in many ways. It begins with a group of young women meeting up in middle class locality near Avadi, in the city's suburbs, where they get on a share-auto – the increasingly popular hybrid of a bus and an auto-rickshaw, that offers more comfortable travel than a bus at its low rates – and go to a popular mall in the city. They wear the dark leggings and tunics that were popular among girls of this age and class during my fieldwork period, accessorised with a *pottu* (mark on the forehead), and a watch, as well as ballerina slippers and fake-leather handbags, bearing such labels as Gucci and Louis Vuitton. They take pictures of each other in posh-looking shops, giggling in the dressing room, wearing the clothes they would never be able to afford to buy, and perhaps also never dare to wear out: halter tops, backless dresses, low-rise slim-cut jeans. One of them considers getting a tattoo, only to be jokingly censured by a friend immediately with the words, 'your father will beat you with his slippers'. They squabble over calling a male friend to help them with their bags, and maybe even give them a ride, as they squeeze into an auto-rickshaw, and stare in envy at those with cars. As the day wears down, they sit in a posh coffee shop, pooling their resources for one cold coffee, in order to earn the right to lounge around. Here they watch not only the men, but also comment on the women: '*English-la scene podara – tho paaru semma figure*' (Look at her, making a scene in English, oh look she is hot).

These were all activities I engaged in week after week with different groups of young women: practices that usually went by the description of *oor sutharathu*, wandering the city. Sometimes one of the students had a car, and then we bundled in, double the number the car could normally carry, piling on top of each other. Most often, we travelled by bus and auto-rickshaw, sweaty but determined, through the sweltering, uncomfortable trip to a ‘cool’ hangout spot. The song also rings true to a memory that a friend, Marianne, whom I interviewed early in 2013, shared when I asked her what she remembered most vividly when she thought back to College. As a high school student, and in her first couple of years of college, Marianne remembered dressing up, dabbing on a little make up and going with her friends to the mall. In the early and mid 2000s when we did this, the most popular mall for middle class girls was the glass and steel 1980s Spencer Plaza that stood in place of the colonial Spencers Department Store. We would be much too overdressed, usually wearing heels, and the then-popular glittery eye shadow, over thickly lined eyes. Our parents would likely never let us wear particularly revealing attire, but we could make do, with figure-hugging jeans, and taking off shrugs and *dupattas* to reveal sleeveless tops once we got there. We would all go and stand in the newly built Phase Three Atrium, or sit around on the steps outside Food World, sipping Nestle iced tea, or coca cola and eating *chaat*, checking our newly acquired flip-top (not-so-smart) phones, as if we were simply there shopping. But no – of course we weren’t. We were there, as Marianne reminded me, ‘to be ogled’. Typically referred to as *sight adikkarathu*, hanging out in order to watch and be seen by members of the opposite sex is a popular practice among young people in Chennai, and often the purpose of *oor sutharathu*. Living in single-sex hostels, and attending women’s colleges, my roommates at Teresa Hostel told me, they would never meet men if not for *oor sutharathu*.

Practices like *oor sutharathu* and *sight adikkarathu* have been studied largely in the context of men by scholars like Osella and Osella (1998) who describe young men in rural Kerala who go *vaya nokkan* – literally a phrase meaning ‘to stare at the mouth’ but connoting practices of wandering about and looking at girls. Rogers (2005) and Nakassis (2010, 2013) similarly demonstrate practices through which young men engage in practices of display by ‘doing style’ for instance – i.e. positioning themselves as stylish subjects in public places such as roads, displaying fakes of famous brands – and negotiate hierarchies within the peer group. These scholars and others (Nisbett 2007b) typically emphasise the resistance that groups of young men display towards social hierarchies of caste and community, sharing resources such as money, cigarettes and alcohol, and displaying intimacy through hand-holding, and draping their arms around each other’s shoulders. For Nakassis (2013) it is these practices that position male youth in Tamil Nadu as ‘exterior’: i.e. removed from any serious role within their families and hence free to turn inward towards the peer group.

Despite young women’s increasing participation in these activities, for many I spoke to, both gazing flirtation and wandering the city are predominantly masculine practices, in which their participation is a pleasurable act of transgression. One major reason for this is that loitering remains a laden and difficult practice for young women to engage in. As Phadke et al (2011a) amply demonstrate, women in Indian cities typically do not feel free to wander about without purpose: feeling watched and sexualised simply for their presence in public spaces; as well as positioned as ‘loose’ or ‘immoral’ women if they are seen to be simply loitering without actually going somewhere. As this chapter will demonstrate, this is often true in Chennai and young women experience a range of censorious advances ranging from the middle aged man who tells them ‘good girls’ should not be out hanging about by the bus-stop, to policemen threatening to book them for soliciting sex. As Kapur (2014) points out, however, it would be wrong to be too hasty and judge this within a unilateral framework that

allows no place for the expression of women's agency and desire. Instead, we might explore the street as a place of possibility. Away from the sanitised safety and surveillance of 'indoors' – the mall, the coffee shop, the college, the hostel, home – young women often play with hierarchies and discourses within which they are cast as demure and victimised (Osella and Osella 1998, McDowell 1999), while also finding ways to express desire. In exploring young women's practices of wandering the city and engaging in an economy of gazing that is constitutive of youth romance, this chapter further lays out the contours of the everyday in the lives of young middle class women. This chapter begins with two sections that set the context in which young people engage in practices of wandering the city – 'college friendship' qualified as a special type of kin-like relationship, and their conception of time as circumscribed by looming responsibilities. Four sections that explore embodied movement in the city, practices of flirtation and their blurred boundaries with sexual harassment, and queer women's experiences of these youth publics follow this. Finally, this chapter examines the idiom of escape as a means of understanding the ways in which young women play with the notion of boundaries – and disturb the many very real boundaries – that typically governs their lives as young women.

'College Friendship'

'College friendship', my roommates at Teresa Hostel told me was 'thick' or 'strong' and 'the most important thing' in their lives. Friendship, for my roommate, Arti, made her life, otherwise described as 'boring', a 'happening', i.e. eventful and exciting thing. Usually qualified as 'college friendship', which carried a special connotation of closeness, such relationships were extremely important in the lives of young women: often defining their experience of college entirely. Even so, most did not expect their friendships to outlast their college lives, and many spoke explicitly about college being a 'bubble' or a 'phase' – using these English phrases – in which friendship would be the most important thing, albeit for this

short and temporally contained period. Friendship was important to practices of wandering the city because young women typically venture out in small groups of close friends, usually all-women, to hang out together, watch men, and have fun. Often geographically located away from their families, many young women felt removed from the extended families and close-knit neighbourhoods they had grown up in. To this extent their situation is comparable with that of young men (Nisbett 2007b, Nakassis 2013) and they too turned inward to the peer group as a fictive family. Particularly in hostels, this was further established by the use of forms of address that indicate positioning within the hierarchy of this family, such as *akka* (elder sister) and *kutti* (little one) or in Malayalam, *chechi* (elder sister) and *kochchu* (little one).

Youth friendships have come to be regarded in recent sociological and anthropological literature, not so much as ‘pure relationships’ constructed purely of sentiment, with no element of exchange, but as a structure that is participant in the process of producing, contesting and reproducing other social structures such as class, caste and family. Anthropologists studying South Asia (Desai 2010, Froerer 2011, Dyson 2010) have examined in particular interactions between friendship and kinship practices to examine practices through which youth and children challenge, reaffirm and play with hierarchies in everyday and intimate life. These studies have emphasised the importance of fictive kin relations – ‘like brother’ and ‘like sister’ – in intimate relationships between youth that enact and disturb the closeness of kinship while being unencumbered by the antagonisms of property-struggle, family responsibility, and financial duty that kin relationships are founded upon. Such relations, scholars have typically suggested, ignore and reverse the hierarchies set up by caste society in that they are ideologically founded on affinity based purely on sentiment and across lines of caste and class, even as they exist in contrary co-existence with individual adherence to caste-based practices. These practices often also negate the physical distance mandated by

caste in that they involve young people intimately touching each other: holding hands, putting their arms around each other etc.

Such practices of fictive kinship are widespread among youth in Chennai, and I was often told that life in college was like a prolonged vacation with cousins: a scenario that is familiar for most middle class Indians who, during vacations, spend time at a grandparent's home where the cousins gather. When I moved into Teresa Hostel, Ranjana, my boisterous roommate, a Syrian Christian student from Kerala told me that I should expect no more than my underwear to be mine alone. This was largely true in the case of clothing, electronics, and food that students brought from home. So MP3 players were passed around, and junior students, many of who did not own laptops borrowed computers from older students who had them. Similarly, when residents went home for short breaks, they usually returned with reserves of pickles, chutneys and sweets, which they passed around. Clothes were universally shared on a needs basis as well. The same typically held good for non-resident students who interacted with friends in the college. They ate from each other's lunch boxes, sat cuddled together in the canteen, and often used each other's books, clothing and stationery. Friendship was 'closeness' as a first-year student put it: it negated social distance, and within the bonds of friendship, resources were shared without much concern for personal or private property. In fact, residents who were possessive and labelled their belongings or refused to share were teased mercilessly until they gave in, or if they did not, then ostracised. Groups of friends thus functioned 'like cousins' – i.e. parallel kin³⁹ – in that they pooled resources, lived together, and saw each other as 'like sisters', often also addressing each other in the same way.

³⁹ See Busby (1997) for an explanation of the significance of 'parallel' vs. 'cross' kin in Dravidian kinship practices. Typically, the significant difference is that 'parallel kin' are non-marriageable relatives, who are regarded flesh and blood, linked by the notion of shared substances, whereas 'cross kin' are marriageable.

This is at a variance from Nakassis' discussion of tropic kinship among young men (2014) in which by addressing each other in cross-kin terms, as *maama*, *machchaan* and *maappillai* – literally uncle, brother-in-law and bridegroom, all of which are ways of addressing the sister's husband – young men blur distinctions between 'inside' and 'outside' of kinship groups, drawing attention to the ambiguous possibilities of intimacy in cross-kin relations, while at the same time playfully upending the hierarchies of age and status that structure these kin relations outside of friendship. Other than in the exceptional circumstances discussed below, young women tended not to address each other by cross-kin terms. Rather the typical relations inscribed on students was that of the elder sister – *akeka*– which designated the addressee as a fictive family elder, and the addresser, the *tangkachchi* or the younger sister. Rather than represent a playful inversion of age hierarchies however, *akeka* often reinforced them: positioning older female students in the role of pedagogically positioned older kin in relation to younger women. The *akeka* in any context often took it upon themselves to instruct younger women in behaving 'decently' and covered up their follies before the warden or a college authority in return for favours. When a younger girl in the hostel got told off for wearing inappropriate clothing for instance, the *akeka* both consoled her as she cried, and also firmly added that if she wanted to be taken seriously, she would need to dress 'neatly' and listen to her 'seniors' words'. They went on to tell her she was no longer a child and if she did not want to be taken for someone with 'head weight' – i.e. arrogance – she should learn to dress 'properly'.

Akkas showed care through physical gestures: they would oil their nominal sisters' hair, nurse them through illnesses and hug them through bouts of homesickness. Within these relationships friends covered for each other almost fiercely. *Akkas* and their sisters also shared close physical relationships, often cuddling in one person's bed, sometimes kissing and caressing each other, even making fun of each other's sexual experiences in explicit ways.

While the dynamics of physical intimacy between friends is explored in detail elsewhere in this thesis, this was explained to me as being ‘like between cousins’ – a loving relationship that is founded on horseplay, teasing and fun. *Akkas* and their nominal sisters tease each other, and in order to become a *chechi* in my room and an *akka* among other groups I was put through a few months of ‘ragging’ before I could be addressed in those terms. To become a *chechi* or an *akka* was to have won a little trust, and in return, I was also expected to show my love by being honest about what I thought of people’s relationships, and by engaging in teasing and mocking others within the group. The love between nominal *Akkas* and *tangkachchi* was often described in Tamil in the idiom of *paasam* or *anbu*, both often-used words to describe filial love. In this, the relation of *akka-tangkachchi* was circumscribed as platonic, and also positioned within regimes of pedagogic intimacy. Love here parallels Trawick’s observations (1990) of love within family settings in that it also implies discipline. As loving elders within the community, a nineteen-year-old in the hostel told me, the *Akkas* in her room lovingly ‘scolded’ her, and taught her ‘discipline’. This was, for this young woman, integral to her ability to ‘keep [her] head on [her] shoulders’ whilst gaining the ‘exposure’ that she felt education gave her: it was a means to perform the precarious and gendered balancing act that this thesis has established the middle classes perform in consolidating their middle classness. *Akkas* thus professed opinions on men that junior students dated, and declared potential romantic partners ‘decent’ or otherwise.

The regime of *Akkas* in hostels and colleges thus typically also constructed webs of protection that were seen as easing young women’s entry into ‘the real world’ from the sheltered lives they had led with their families. However, while students of certain cliques addressed older women within their groups as *akka* they rarely accorded the same privilege to women from other social groups. In my room, the eight women who lived in the main dormitory did not belong to the same group as Chitra who lived in a small single room in the

same set of rooms. She had been known to hang out with another ‘small town type’ as Shahnaz put it and was ‘not cool’. As such, to the younger women in my dormitory, depending on how they felt towards Chitra she was called by name, or even referred to angrily as ‘*aa saadanam*’ – that creature – but she was never, as the others in the dormitory always were, *chechi*. At NT College, the caste lines were more explicitly drawn, with the front benches of the canteen always occupied by English-speaking and urban middle class students, many of them speaking Tamil using inflections of speech and the Sanskritised language that is identifiable as the speech of Brahmins, others speaking fluent neutral-accented English, suggesting education in an urban English-medium school. Most members of student clubs and officers on the Student Cabinet in the college came from this group. Towards the left side, a group of young women in jeans and tunics, speaking regular Tamil interspersed with English usually sat. This group was described as ‘Tamil girls’, not quite as far down the pecking order as the ‘quota students’ – lower caste students who had benefitted from reservation policy – who sat in the back on the blue plastic chairs. It is worth the mention that Brahmin women are rarely described as ‘Tamil’, this phrase typically iterating students belonging to middle-caste non-Brahmin backgrounds. We might trace this back to the history of caste politics in Tamil Nadu, where Brahmins have been positioned as Sanskritised and hence not authentically Tamil.

As Kalaiselvi, an outspoken occupant of the blue chairs said one day, while there would be no overt objection if a ‘dark skinned’ girl like herself were to occupy the front seats under the fan, she had been glared at in what she felt to be a hostile manner many times for trying. Within each group, senior students were *Akkas* and given a degree of reverence: juniors, for instance, fetched them food in the exam season and helped them hide their phones, in return for favours such as advice on how best to get out of trouble with a particular teacher, or, in the case of the lucky first-years whose *Akkas* were members of the

college's student cabinet, the assurance that they would never be 'caught' and reported for breaking the institution's regulations of behaviour. The 'quota students', however senior, were never '*akka*' to the occupants of the front benches of the canteen, and vice versa. So, for instance, despite the intervention of *Akkas* from her group, I saw a first-year student sitting with the 'Tamil girls' fined and given a punishment after one of the 'English girls' reported her for wearing 'clothes inappropriate for her body type' as the student cabinet member described it. Neither party referred to older students in the other group with terms of deference in talking about the incident, choosing instead to refer to them as 'that girl' or 'that Sunita' – i.e. using their names – rather than calling them *akka*.

These social groups within which such relations of fictive or tropic kinship functioned sometimes also referred to the *ooru* (town or city) from which specific students came – their 'native place'. A group of 'day-scholars' – non-boarders – who came from the Red Hills suburbs of Chennai for instance functioned within such a group. *Akkas* in this case helped their tropic younger sisters find buses back home if they were late, and covered for them with family if the junior student had a date. For a group of women who all came from towns near Tirunelveli in Southern Tamil Nadu, the *ooru* group functioned as a means for their families to keep an eye on them. The possibility that others within the group might report the details of their lives to their families exercised a form of restraint on public behaviour.

Such groups of course also created bonds of solidarity. Among friends, narratives about college life to produce at home could be agreed on, and *Akkas* and *tangkachchis* frequently covered for each other, particularly where controversial matters of love and romance were concerned. Even where *Akkas* were harsh to their *tangkachchis*, this typically got the younger women into far less trouble than getting caught with hostel or college authorities directly. So for instance, when a group of first-year students returned late one evening to

Teresa Hostel, they got a good dressing down from the *Akkas* in their room, who had had to make excuses on their behalf for the warden. The scolding however was focussed rather on their ‘stupidity’ in not having informed the *Akkas* of their plans to stay out, thus placing them in a difficult position. As such, cultivating such relationships was often crucial to finding the means to go wandering in the city, and to engage in flirtation and romance without getting ‘caught’ by a hostel or college authority.

A notable exception to the intimate discipline that young women enforce through fictive kin relations is in addressing each other as *machchaan*: brother-in-law. This term does not apply to them, not only in status and age terms, but also, most obviously, in gender. *Machchaan*— with its variants *machchaa* and *machchi* — is used much the same way that women speaking English use the word ‘dude’ with each other: in marking a casual albeit intimate friendship that plays with the forms of intimacy typically expected of women, as well as women’s lack of access to the fictive brotherhood of men. In Chennai, I saw women’s use of *machchaan* also as a means for young women to lay claim to a discursive space of youth friendship that is, as scholars have noted (Nakassis 2013, 2010), tendentiously male, and into which women’s entry remains a tenuous affair. In addressing each other as *machchaan* young women therefore also play with the gendered construction of public space as the place of male bonding and friendship. The value of *oor sutharathu* within women’s friendships lies in this role that friendship plays: facilitating young women’s access to a ‘youth culture’ of wandering about, gazing at members of the opposite sex, and ‘wasting time’ in coffee shops, and malls. As Nakassis (2014, 186) further also adds: ‘Not simply transgressing normative kinship, women’s appropriation of these terms redoubled that transgression by troping on the normativity governing young men’s own tropic usages.’ In the context of the argument made above about the hierarchies set up by relations of *akka* and *tangkachchi*, the *machchaan* trope further also suspends hierarchies and practices of intimate discipline among women by instead

positioning them within the impossible and blatantly transgressive tropic relationship instead of male cross-kinship. As *machchaan*, young women are equals, hanging out and talking. It referenced ‘jolly’ and ‘fun’, and friendship in a mode that did not connote *paasam* and *anbu* as intense emotions in the mode that sisterhood did.

Friendship might therefore be regarded here as a contradictory resource (Dyson 2010). On the one hand, it allows young women to disturb gendered notions of space, and also play with the normative ways in which they are interpellated as middle class women. Through friendship, young women learn how to break rules, wander and flirt. They also build intimacies outside of the family, and in Nakassis’ usage (2014), suspending kinship, caste and gender in the process. In this, friendship facilitates forms of interstitial agency, allowing young women the social space to transgress, explore and imagine possibilities other than familial and societal expectations of them. On the other hand, friendship also reinforces these structures, restaging in the site of the women’s college and hostel practices of intimate discipline through which home is constructed as being simultaneously intimate and a place of surveillance. In playing their role as ‘grown ups’, protecting younger women, older students reinforce normative notions of femininity and behaviour.

‘Wasting’ Time

There is a connotation of leisure to *oor sutharathu* as well as to hanging about and flirting. As such, it cannot, many young women emphasised, be done as a ‘proper’ adult. Its context is a prolonged period of young adulthood before marriage and other binding responsibilities. As a wide scholarship on youth in South Asia (Osella and Osella 1998, Nakassis 2013, Nisbett 2007b) establishes, young people – particularly members of this educated middle and lower middle class – are often not yet fully drawn into the stable social structures of caste, (often arranged) marriage and family. As such, young people often play with these structures and

hierarchies in meaningful ways, expressing agency through irony and laughter, as well as in the precarious intimacies that they build and attempt to sustain (Cohen 1995a, Osella and Osella 1998). It is notable that *oor sutharathu*, along with *sight adikkarathu* was often described as ‘doing nothing’. The reason that these activities were pleasurable at all, was that they were marked as unproductive: hanging somewhere between childhood’s worlds of play, and the adult imperative to make time count, and marking the final years in which young women expected to have the time to ‘do nothing’. How can we ‘do nothing’, young women would ask me, rhetorically, when we have jobs and husbands and children.

‘Waste’ is then a form of cultural production – a socially, if not economically productive activity – that defines both middle classness and youth⁴⁰. To be able to go to a café or a bar and simply, and without care for price, hand one’s debit card over suggests an excess of economic resources: the ability to consume that marks secure arrival into middle class status. At the same time, having temporal resources to waste – the sense of time stretching ahead with no end, and with no demands made by family or work – in the act of wandering the city, simply taking it in and spending time with friends, marks youth in the popular discourse in Chennai. ‘Waste’ as an iconic ‘youth’ practice is a means for young people to aspire by positioning themselves within a fantasy of excess that contradicts the truth of their economic and social struggles and imitates the consumerist excess that they associate with being ‘modern’. Mediated by filmic images of ‘college’ as a time for romance, friendship and ‘wasting time’ away from family surveillance, this *oor sutharathu* – and its companion activity *arattai adi* – a word that the University of Madras Tamil lexicon defines as ‘Empty, purposeless talk’, giving as synonyms *veenpechu* and *vambuttanam*, both words indicating unnecessary or useless talk, even gossip – are often invoked as essential experiences of middle class youth.

⁴⁰ For a comparative perspective, see Sasha Newell’s work on *gaspillage* (waste) as an idiom for subversive forms of youth cultural production in Abidjan (2012).

Young people's valorisation of 'waste' thus undercuts dominant middle class chrononormativities (Freeman 2010) that stigmatise the use of time in socially and economically unproductive activity as being both dangerous – ranging from many classroom blackboards I saw with 'An Idle Mind Makes for the Devil's Workshop' inscribed above, to the 'No Loitering' signs famously displayed outside most public offices in India – as well as indicative of a phlegmatic lack of initiative that is often gestured to in blaming the masses for their fates of anonymity and mediocrity in a middle class discourse of hard work and merit. 'Wasting' time and money, I often heard college professors and hostel wardens tell students, would only land them nowhere, without a good degree, and likely a bad reputation as the type of girl who 'gets around', here suggesting the slippages that conflate women wandering about the city with 'loose' or promiscuous women, the latter typically indicating 'waste' and a lack of self-control. The culture of 'wasting time' and wandering the city was often attributed in these discussions to 'cinema culture', in which youth are shown skipping classes, and spending their time on friendship and romance. If normative uses of time determine the binaries between 'adult' and 'youth', then by engaging in 'waste', young people embrace their anti-hegemonic and marginal positioning as subjects in need of schooling.

This 'waste' of time and loitering are further often regarded masculine activities. Indeed, at many women's colleges, I was told that these were 'new problems' that women's institutions hadn't had to face in years past, when it was men who were – and this was always said in a tone of indulgence, sometimes followed by a *pasangka-nna appadi than* (boys will be boys) – regarded 'unruly' and women on the other hand, seen as 'easy to manage'. A number of scholars have commented on the centrality of 'doing timepass' – i.e. passing the time while doing 'nothing' – to young men's friendships and understanding of themselves as 'youth' (Jeffrey 2010, Nisbett 2007a). Located away from the parental gaze, in public spaces such as

Internet cafes, roadside teashops and bars, as well as in bus stops and railway stations, young men ‘hang out’ together, sometimes, as in the case of a group of young men in Nisbett’s ethnography in Bangalore (2007a), nominally minding a relative’s shop or doing some such work, but very often simply joking, sharing cigarettes, food and money, and posturing as ‘stylish’ youth (Nakassis 2013), with the financial and social resources to sit comfortably in a beer parlour for half the day, drinking with friends (Lukose 2009). These practices are typically regarded as Nakassis (2010) suggests, as activities young men need to engage in to have their corners knocked off and learn to be men – even if they sometimes entail transgressive acts – along the path to adulthood.

As Phadke et al (2011a) show, for women, particularly young women, being present in public spaces without an explicit purpose is often a practice laden with anxieties, and which often exposes them to policing and social censure. The young women I studied did not ‘loiter’ for the same reasons as the young men of other ethnographies (Lukose 2009, Jeffrey 2010) who find themselves unable to transition to ‘adulthood’ through gainful employment that would allow them to support their families and find a suitable bride. Time, for these young men, stretched endlessly and they are stuck on a hamster’s wheel of ‘timepass’ (Jeffrey 2010) as they wait for it to end. The young women I met were instead beset by a looming sense of youth about to end. I was often told that this was ‘our last chance’ or ‘this are the final years’ for fun, and ‘doing nothing’. Even if they did not find jobs – and a surprising number of women I met saw jobs as only something they might need to do if they married men who did not earn enough to give them the lifestyles they deserved – most knew that they would, at the very least, return home and have to ‘sit there⁴¹’ until they married, now lacking the excuse of

⁴¹ I was reminded in this of the very different context – which seems an unlikely comparison – of Jonathan Parry’s Satnami informants in Chattisgarh (2001), ‘sitting’ at home waiting for men to come and woo them. This language was widely prevalent among the young women I met in Chennai, many of who saw it as a great success if they could manage to wrangle a life where they would never have to work and could simply ‘sit at home’ – first waiting for a husband, and then looking after children, or

youth for fun, and with every growing year risking failure to fledge if they didn't hurry up and manage to impress a suitable bridegroom. The sense of an impending return to 'family time' (Halberstam 2005, 5) of waking up early, doing household chores, going to bed early, and moving through public spaces in a disciplined, even demure manner, then informs the rush to 'make the most of this chance' as one nineteen-year-old put it⁴².

Their college years were thus the 'last chance' for many young women to engage in 'waste'. With one foot still in childhood, any lack of containment, responsibility and womanly demureness in 'wasting' might be excused as 'childishness', and forgiven without permanent consequence. Even in this final burst of freedom, 'doing nothing' is no easy task for middle class women, given the many ways in which their time, and movement through public spaces is structured by the institutions of education and family. The regime of bells, curfews and regulations against leaving campus once they have entered it discussed in the previous chapter, creates a range of boundaries and constitutes women's bodies as precarious: always about to be hurt, in a violent fantasy (Ahmed 2004a) that is necessary to positioning them as subjects of protection in the continued reproduction of middle class life. As Phadke et al (2011a) have shown, further, women loitering in public spaces are often subject to policing by the state, and even widely socially thought to be loose of morals. Thus it is that we often find women hurrying through the roads, checking their mobile phones nervously to give the impression of being occupied, and clutching their books to their chest in a 'closed' comportment (Lukose 2009) suggesting unwillingness to engage in conversation or physical

even in the imaginations of some women who had gone to urban schools and were more familiar with an increasingly popular global discourse that preaches a return-to-the-earth hands-on philosophy of living and parenting: taking art lessons, and doing or teaching yoga, and 'being a wholesome parent', even maybe home-schooling their children - all their lives.

⁴² This sense of urgency is echoed in Sunder Rajan's comments on the New Indian Woman of the 1990s (Sunder Rajan 1993), who suddenly has freedoms and opportunities her mother might not have had, but in a manner circumscribed by the demands of family-making and reproducing middle-class life.

advances. Loitering – i.e. simply taking pleasure in occupying public spaces with no productive purpose intended – is thus, as Phadke et al (2011a), suggest a profoundly political act: one that disturbs normative notions of middle class women’s comportment, as well as gendered ideas about body and space.

The spaces and times of ‘doing nothing’ in many ways constitute ‘youth’ in Chennai within a double discourse. On the one hand, the tendency of youth to hang about ‘doing nothing’ was often cited by parents, college authorities, residents of middle class neighbourhoods and hostel wardens as a sign that young people, as discussed in Chapter Two, are subjects in need of education and moulding: fitting into the normative time and space of middle class adulthood. Youth were often described as increasingly shallow, obsessed with popular culture and wasteful. Cinema was typically blamed in this narrative for ‘corrupting’ the youth, turning them into ‘loafers’ and ‘wasters’, obsessed with, as one hostel warden put it, ‘friendship dramas’ and ‘love affairs’, rather than the consolidation of their futures through hard work. ‘Loitering’, especially in young women’s case, was blamed for the high rates of sexual harassment and violence in Indian cities. Simultaneously, ‘wasting time’ was, for young people, the thing romanticised and sought as a mediated production of what it means to inhabit the time and space of ‘youth’. Young women urged each other to take advantage of their ‘last time of freedom’ and hang out with friends. In this narrative, ‘waste’ was integral to women’s claims to youth as a set of social and cultural practices.

Bodies in the City

Dress Code: Obscenity and Vulgarity in dressing is strictly prohibited. Simple, modest and comfortable dress in keeping with the dignity and decorum of the college should be worn. T-shirts, three-fourth pants, leggings and sleeveless tops, shorts and miniskirts are not permitted.

- NT College Handbook 2012-2013

Any girl growing up in Tamil Nadu has heard, and been reprimanded with the phrase *adakkam-othukkam* many times. We are instructed to be *adakkam-othukkam* when we run down corridors in school, when we sit on chairs with our knees apart, or on the floor with our legs spread wide. In films, the hero only falls in love with the heroine after she transforms from the boisterous tomboy to the young woman who is *adakkam-othukkam*. In bus-stops, middle-class ‘aunties’ clutching their handbags, and their male counterparts, the ‘uncles’ commuting home from work ask groups of young women who are laughing and joking to be *adakkam-othukkam*. Inferring from the discussion above, it may be argued that what young women stand to lose in ‘loitering’ is the impression of legitimacy and respectability conferred in being *adakkam-othukkam*.

Literally, both *adakkam* and *othukkam* signify discipline. *Otukkam*, in everyday speech, is equally applied to a woman’s body, and to neatly arranged articles on a shelf: thus signifying bearing and demeanour as well as comportment. It suggests containment – reminiscent of the closed comportment that Ritty Lukose (2009) discusses in her ethnographic case of young Malayalee women. What Lukose’s informants understand as open or *thuranna* comportment, is what most Tamil women see as the opposite of *othukkam*. To walk in a manner that suggests *othukkam* is to clutch one’s articles close to one’s body (the stance with one’s bag or books against the chest that is so common, for instance), and not make eye contact with too many people. It is, in one informant’s telling definition, to ‘become invisible’ so as to avoid being addressed as a sexual object. *Adakkam* on the other hand, refers more to emotional containment, translated in embodied forms: sartorial style, control of one’s limbs, and the way one gazes ahead for instance. In an iconic scene from the Tamil film *Padayappa* (1999), the title character, played by the famous Rajnikanth lectures a young woman who we know to be urban, educated and independent, on her putative lack of *adakkam*. He proceeds to shout at

her in English – supposedly to match her power as a Westernised woman, telling her that by her lack of *adakkam* she has become something that is not a woman. Srivastava (2007) notes the running theme of excess emotion as ruinous to women in the Indian media. *Adakkam* signifies this excess: a lack of self-control. A lack of *adakkam* could turn a girl's head: lead her to act imprudently. Often when young women I spent time with developed crushes on boys, and waxed eloquent on this to friends, I heard their friends respond with the friendly reprimand: '*adangu*' (imperative verb form of *adakkam* – i.e. contain yourself, or calm yourself). Similarly when telling me about how she believed an ideal romance should be conducted, one student told me that she believed the most important quality for women her age was *adakkam*. She equated *adakkam* with level-headed-ness and responsibility: her *adakkam* would not allow physical desires to overtake a calculation of their risk, of the vulnerability in which she placed herself if she were to express or explore such desires. *Adakkam* as a value seeks to protect risk to reputation rather than safety. In Margaret Trawick's work (1990) *adakkam* is a defining feature of love within the family – it signals moderation rather than excess, and love given through self-restraint and discipline rather than through effluence. Through *adakkam*, love is equitably distributed among all the children, and love between husband and wife is kept restrained, subordinate to other ties and duties within the families. In student narratives, *adakkam* is also couched in a more contemporary discourse of the individual that casts *adakkam* not as power imposed externally on women, or indeed as the requirement of a code of morality, but as an aspect of socially-desirable self-surveillance, within an economy of choice.

Othukkam, in its connotations of containment also addresses the relational space of bodies, and women's notional separation from men even in public spaces. We might ask, like Elizabeth Grosz (1994, 50) what does 'this relation to space do to one's body in order to produce it as a different kind of body?' *Othukkam* has to do with the anxieties of men's

bodies colliding with those of women as they jostle in the urban crowd. More specifically, then, the anxieties that *adakkam-othukkam* suggests has to do with the anxieties about middle-class women's presence in the city's public spaces, and with the increasing ways in which the expression of emotion and intimacy straddles public and private domains. The processes of 'dressing up' to go out were elaborate, and often concerned at once with seeming 'modern', 'demure' and 'middle class', as well as 'like a respectable female' as my roommate Manasi put it, 'rather than some whore'. Carelessness of dress could convey looseness of character, on the one hand, or a lack of concern for social norms, both often drawing criticism and sexual harassment. For instance, my roommates in the hostel preferred to wake up as early as five-thirty or six in the morning, to shower, dry their hair, and put on make-up before going out for their eight am classes, rather than simply roll out of bed and throw on some clothes. Hair had to be 'done' even if it was going to be left loose and there was always a scramble for matching shoes, stoles and bags. The street, as scholars like Srivastava (2007) write, has come to be identified as the domain of middle-class female self-expression through practices of consumption and leisure. Moving to the street, from the home requires dexterity in 'moving between desire and constraint, 'modernity' and 'tradition', rather than being prisoner to one context' (Srivastava 2007, 301)⁴³.

As a wide scholarship indicates, loitering, or wandering about purposelessly in the public spaces of cities often puts women in a precarious position (Phadke 2007, Phadke, Khan, and Ranade 2011a). A number of women I met talked about how they would be stopped by policemen who would enquire why they were out and about in the middle of the day: didn't they have homes to return to if classes were finished? If they didn't want to go home right away, why not go to a mall? One of my roommates, was having some fun late one

⁴³ See Sumanta Banerjee's classic *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta* (1989) for a discussion of the colonial histories of the spatial politics of middle class respectability.

afternoon, *sight*-ing men on the road, and enjoying their looks of appreciation, as she slowly walked back to the hostel from her college, when she was stopped by a policeman, and aggressively asked what she was doing out at this time. When she said she had attended an afternoon seminar and was just returning home, the policeman asked her how he could be sure she was telling the truth – might she not be a sex worker soliciting by slowly walking down the road, and staring at every passer-by. Practices of standing around in public, and staring are also widely banned in women’s colleges, where staff routinely rounds up students sitting around under trees, or in the canteen, and sends them back to classes. At NT College, the ‘Home Ministry’ of the student cabinet takes on this policing duty: members of this ministry routinely check the canteen for students ‘bunking’ – i.e. skipping classes - and send them back, or interrogate them about why they are there. At college gates, security guards typically hurry students along so they don’t hang around, often just staring at passers by, and assessing the men standing that day at the bus stop, while they wait for more friends to arrive.

Concepts of *maanam* and *karpu* were often brought into play in this context and women feared that they might be seen as arrogant – having ‘head weight’ – and the perception of ‘arrogance’ always exposed a woman to some mechanism of disciplining. That these concepts circulate popularly among youth today is obvious among students in the city. Soon after my arrival in Chennai for ethnography in 2012, a song called *Clubbu-le Mabbu-le* (in the club), by a local band named *Hiphop Tamizha* gained popularity on social network websites and YouTube⁴⁴. A male singer, in this song, bemoans the loss of his *maanam* at the mere sight of Tamil women in revealing clothing at clubs, performing ‘transgressive’ acts such as drinking, smoking and engaging in casual flirtation. Both in everyday conversation and on the comments of the song’s YouTube page, a number of young people, both male and female defended the song, arguing that *karpu* and *maanam* appear threatened in the face of rapid

⁴⁴ Clubbu-le Mabbu-le by *Hiphop Tamizha* - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMKcCRXL4BA>

urban transformation and advancing consumer culture. It does not address ‘all women’ was the explanation I was often given, but only ‘bad girls, who do dirty things’.

College dress codes in Chennai reinforce this discourse, typically advising women to dress ‘according to weight’. This is reinforced by the prefecture system through which these codes of behaviour are enforced. Most colleges in Chennai have student officers in charge of such matters, and given the need for a speech in English for election to such positions, this officer is more often than not drawn from the increasingly fashion-conscious urban upper middle classes. At NT College, I saw the student responsible for this pass comments on how ‘disgusting’ and ‘dirty’ it was to see ‘flesh hanging out’. In another college, the student group responsible for this had had a weighing machine installed in the canteen to ‘prevent overeating’. Jokes, similarly, about full-figured girls running, or playing sports abounded, and often college dress codes for sports included a separate regulation that these women wear full trousers rather than shorts.

Caste, particularly in the context of NT College was an undeniable influence here. I heard comments made in the canteen about lower caste women ‘dark like buffaloes’, a reference here both to their skin colour and full figures. Further, the College Policy that prevents the consumption of non-vegetarian food – including eggs – on campus was supposedly meant to prevent obesity, and encourage healthy eating. However, given the acerbic politics of caste commensality in Tamil Nadu, where vegetarianism is the marker of the Brahmin, this is also a device to regulate the bodies of lower caste women⁴⁵. Vegetarianism was further often associated in the college’s discourse – professors’ lectures on ‘body language and behaviour’ for instance as part of orientation included this – with disciplined and kind behaviour: attributes I was told by both students and teachers, were

⁴⁵ See Appadurai (1981) on this.

natural to women and had to be cultivated further. This not only stigmatises the body of the lower caste woman as being un-womanly but also again attempts to discipline her movement into upper caste notions of appropriateness.

Sighting and Flirting

Arti did not always take the bus to college. If she woke up early enough, she preferred to walk. At 7 am, the sun was not too bad yet, and the traffic was not terrible but more often than not this year she had been oversleeping and having to take the bus. One day on the bus, she noticed a young man looking at her. He was cute, she told me: tall, lean, and a little shy. He had looked away immediately as soon as he noticed she was looking. He did not attempt to ask her for her phone number, laugh or follow her when she got out at her bus stop. Arti was impressed. She took the bus again at the same time the next day and he was there again. Chennai's city buses typically have one side's seats reserved for women, and across the aisle is a 'general' section that tends to be all men. Arti did what many college girls do to spend time with a man, without attracting the opprobrium that often descends on a woman, travelling alone, if she chooses to sit in the general section next to a man. She stood in the aisle. He chose to do the same, and again they exchanged glances and she sensed attraction.

Soon it was a bit of a ritual. She would make sure to be at the bus stop at exactly the same time everyday and on cue, he was always there, standing in the aisle even if the bus was not full. Finally, one morning, they had the courage to sit together, on the general side of the bus and he told her his name: Aniruddh. She told him about her boyfriend, but admitted she enjoyed their flirtation, which she saw as harmless, and fun, nevertheless something she'd never tell her boyfriend about. He wouldn't understand, she told me when I asked her why not: he'd only feel threatened. She never spoke to Aniruddh again but the *sight-ing* continued, giving Arti her morning thrill on the way to college. She dressed up, she told me, and

sometimes did her hair specially so he'd notice. And he never disappointed. '*Sight-adikkarathu*' – to steal a glance, or many glances at someone – many different groups of students told me over the months that I was in Chennai, 'is fun'. It was characterised as 'jolly' and '*chumma*' – an act with no real long-term purpose. Young women often contrasted this practice and the harmlessness that was attributed to it, with *love pannrathu* – to be in a romantic relationship defined by the English term, *love* as the register for the attachment – was an until-death-do-us-part affair: it was 'serious' and a 'matter', as many referred to a relationship or thing of great importance. To be in a *love* relationship with someone was to plan to marry him.

As eighteen-year-old Shankari, a student at NT College put it, when she said that she was in love, she had indicated not a casual romance that may or may not develop to permanency but that she had found her 'love marriage partner' – a future husband. *Love* produced a sense of futurity – and to be in love, Shankari had told me, was to weigh up matters other than attraction and looks: for instance she had thought about her 'love marriage partner's' earning potential – he had scored well, having had ambitions, which he is now in the process of realising, to become an Engineer – his family, and his ideas about her working – she was pleased to find he wanted to be able to provide for her and saw any job she would hold in their early years of marriage as a stop-gap arrangement until he earned enough to support them both – as well as children. Through the lens of *love*, Shankari was able to imagine her future, and now conducted herself accordingly. For instance, she had chosen to study computer science so that she could get a job in a small IT firm or even a bank, while her 'love marriage partner' made the fortune they imagined he would make as an Engineer. *Love* was not merely *jolly* or fun but a very serious aspect of the modern lives that young women imagined. As Brosius (2011) writes, the idiom of *love* signifies a form of emotional labour that is the site of the making of a modernity in which the circulation of feelings is given a central location, as well as of contestations that unravel 'modernity's ambivalence in terms of its

qualities and the whereabouts of empowerment and restriction’ (Brosius 2011, 28). Being in a *love* relationship was a way of being a modern self. Having a ‘love marriage’ rather than an ‘arranged marriage’ was desirable, an aspect of middle class aspiration, marking arrival into a global modernity⁴⁶.

In contrast to the seriousness of *love* and its acknowledged importance to aspiration, futurity and life after college, *Sight* was a playful and casual practice. It typically occurred in public spaces – on the roads, in buses, in cinemas and in shopping malls – and was rooted in flirtation, typically perceived as being harmless, and largely just *jolly* or *fun*. No calculations of appropriateness or future went into *sight-ing*. There is ‘no risk’ I was often told, in participating in *sight-adikkarathu*. After all, there was no touching involved, and usually no exchange of contact details: just a tacit agreement to turn up at a certain bus-stop or outside a certain shop, in order to glance at each other and occasionally make remarks. It was in touching, women largely believed, that ‘actual’ exchanges – economies that ‘counted’, or mattered for ‘real life’ – were set in circulation, whereas glancing was often seen as being largely inconsequential. *Sight-ing* could lead eventually to *love*, I learned, and indeed it had done in the cases of some women I met. However, it more often did not, at most proceeding to a rough and aggressive banter that straddled the boundaries between flirtation and harassment. And even young women who had gone from *sight-ing* men to *love-ing* them, typically spoke of a shift in the dynamic, away from just *sight-ing*, that had led to such a romantic attachment: for instance, the feeling that the man in question was ‘not just a loafer’ – i.e. someone serious – or that they had made friends with this man before embarking on a relationship with him.

⁴⁶ See also Ahearn (2001, 2003) who examines the role of discourses of romantic love in shaping modernity and notions of progress in Nepal.

It is significant that for Marianne, whose description of *sight*-ing is described in the introduction to this chapter, ‘being ogled’ was as much an active practice as ‘ogling’. She remembered posturing, standing with her hair purposefully-carelessly flicked back, hips ever-so-slightly out, pretending intently to be looking at her flip-top phone, or having a charmingly vivacious conversation with her friend, even as the two women were very aware of the eyes on them: the men looking, waiting for a chance to make their move, and more often only looking and staring with desire. Osella and Osella (1998) argue that the exaggerated play of demureness that young women often perform, in response to men ogling them is as much an active part of the process as actually doing the ogling. In this, it is significant as a practice of agency. For many of my informants who dressed up, went out, and positioned themselves in places where they would be conspicuously visible, being the object of young men’s erotic gaze was as much an empowering thing as actually doing the *sight adikkarathu* – gazing – themselves, and indeed a way of also doing the gazing, albeit in a posture of virtuous demureness.

The practice has also migrated since Marianne’s days being ogled, to the much more posh Express Avenue, erected in place of the old Indian Express offices a short walk from Spencer Plaza. Under Emma Watson’s sultry glare as she poses on the window of the new *Burberry* shop that advertises handbags priced at up to a hundred thousand rupees. Despite this mall’s unaffordability, I was often told that if you wanted ‘decent boys’ to *sight* you, then you came to Express Avenue, bought a small cup of coffee for a pricey one hundred rupees or more, and sat around, in the olfactory assault of *Lush* cosmetics and its ‘organic’ products, and waited to be ogled. As such, youth practices of *sight* are also deeply inflected by social and geopolitical discourses of desire and consumption. Solicited by complex ‘mediated erotics’ (Mankekar and Schein, 2012) emanating equally from the people around them, as from billboards, shop windows and TV screens, young women’s practices of *sight adikkarathu*

engender 'renewed forms of place-making,' (Mankekar and Schein 2012, 2). Located as they are in a wide range of public spaces ranging from the semi-public, privately owned middle class spaces of malls and cafes, to the more public and less restricted city bus stops, and beaches, *sight adikekarathu* positions public spaces as places of desire and erotics, disturbing and rendering ambiguous, their typical casting as sites of risk, fear and violence. The continuities between intimacy and home come to be ruptured as youth, treat homes – and the temporary 'home' spaces of hostels – as spaces of surveillance, rather than intimacy and erotics, and instead choose to locate their practices of erotics outside the home.

Similarly some women told me about how *sight*-ing and commenting on young men was a way of feeling more in control of the public spaces of roads and bus stops, and responding to gestures that might feel uncomfortable, or unwelcome. It showed confidence I was told – and a sense of ownership over the space if women too commented and evidently watched the young men in the bus stop. And even more pleurably, it unnerved the men themselves just enough to make it funny for the girls. For instance, my roommates all attended an early morning class in accounting that took place off campus at a Chartered Accountancy Institute down the road from their college. A number of men enrolled in this class were, they told me, a little younger than them. While most women do not see younger men as potential partners at all – the norm of older man – younger woman is very strong, buttressed by the desire to 'look young' next to one's partner in photographs - these men often *sight*-ed and commented on the women, sometimes making them feel uncomfortable in the classroom.

In response, my roommates took to loudly commenting back, and watching and gesturing theatrically at these young men as they walked into the classroom, or as they all stood together at the bus stop. In doing this, my roommates were asserting their status as

older women, over the *cherukkans* (Malayalam word meaning ‘little boy’, whose Tamil equivalent *chinna payyan* indicated a similarly diminutive status) who were flirting with them. In doing so, these young women were reinforcing the norm that renders any possibility of romance between a younger man (here younger by no more than a year or two) and older woman while also finding a way to actively assert themselves in a context that often borders on harassment. Young women’s exercise of agency here reinforces some existing normative regimes in the interest of the pleasure of disturbing other norms.

While men of lower class and caste are often the objects of fantasy, very few middle class and middle to upper caste women actually indulge in any real flirtation with them. Indeed, Nikita, who lived downstairs from me in the hostel was one day horrified when a young construction worker she’d been watching for days, and whose body she would describe in great, and amorous detail, made an indication of his own attraction to her by simply giving her a long and admiring look. She was terrified, she told me, that he might have taken her to be inviting some overture, which she did not intend to do. She immediately acted as if she hadn’t been looking, she told me, straightened up, and walked away, not making eye contact. Besides this, for instance, as in Arti’s story, there were elements of body language that defined ‘decency’ for some: not leaning forward too much, or trying to touch the woman for instance; and not leering, or laughing but more quietly simply watching. Similarly, the man, most women, across class backgrounds agreed that the man needed to look ‘decent’ – he should not, I was told, ‘do style’ or act ‘*over-aa*’ – i.e. coming on too strongly. As Nakassis (2010) mentions, ‘doing style’ is also – in the catch 22 of youth practice of class – an indicator of not actually having style: a boy who needs to ‘do style’ is often seen as being undesirable by young women. Such men were likely, I was told, to be ‘local’, and not ‘decent’.

'Local' is a commonly used idiom to indicate the unworthiness of someone or something for inclusion within a middle class social milieu. 'Don't go that *chaat* shop,' I would be told, 'It's local.' Or 'don't go out dressed like that. You look local.' A 'local boy', I learned, is a person whose notion of self and everyday cultural practices are mediated by *local* or does not have global references, wear branded shirts bought at a mall, or drink coffee in the popular Café Coffee Day. He might be seen lurking around the bus stops outside women's colleges, hoping to begin a flirtation as a young woman waited for her bus, or riding bus routes popular with college girls up and down, cruising (*sight adikkarathu*) young women. Such men were also referred to as 'rowdies' or '*vetti pasangka*' – jobless boys – the lack of a productive occupation also making them particularly liminal to middle class status. 'Local', I was told one evening at Teresa Hostel, 'is *cheri*.' Literally referring to the Dalit settlements outside of villages, or in urban centres to slums populated by working-class and lower-caste populations, *cheri* in the popular youth usage typically refers to forms of behaviour described as being 'backward', 'crude' or 'cheap'. *Cheri*, it was often argued, was the opposite of the upwardly mobile modern aspirational ideal, eliciting a spatial imaginary of the urban slum sprawl as well as the image of a working man – auto rickshaw drivers, or as one student put it one day in a candid moment, 'SC boys' – i.e. Dalits – whom she went on to specify, she would never marry, or consider a long term relationship with, even if they might be tempting to lust after. After all, she added, they were not *thayir saadam*, rice mixed with yoghurt: the idiom typically used to refer to Brahmin men, regarded highly on the marriage market but carrying a very low purchase in economies of lust for their reputed lack of virility – 'all those vegetables and that *thayir saadam* they eat' – and their 'chocolate boy' fair-skinned, clean-shaven image that was often contrasted with images of dark-skinned, muscular and reputedly physically powerful lower caste men.

Women could be *cheri* too: loud girls were *cheri*, one group of first-year students at NT College informed me, as a third year friend of their chimed in that ‘fat girls’ were also *cheri*. It just showed lack of responsibility, this young woman went on to add, and ignorance about healthy eating. She herself never ate the oily fare served in College, or indeed meat. ‘Look at them’ she added for good measure, ‘they look like buffaloes’. *Cheri* girls played masculine sports like the javelin throw, or short put, and joined the National Service Scheme (NSS) rather than something like the Tennis Club for their required ‘community hours’, another group of women, twenty years old, and members of badminton societies, and a new-fangled NSS-alternative called ‘Young India’ told me. ‘Young India’ is an organisation that mobilises ‘youth-force’ in various aspects of ‘social service’ and uses new media platforms, community radio and capacity-building exercises with young middle class students in its activities. It was, therefore, ‘cool’ not *cheri*. As Darshana, beguilingly said one day, the advantage of being in Young India instead of NSS was that you didn’t have to ‘go to these *cheri* areas’ – i.e. it was service in the comfort of the middle class spaces of the city⁴⁷.

The idiom of ‘local’ and *cheri* allow youth to reinforce caste and class laden discourses about bodies and desire even as they play with these hierarchies, using them to express agency in contexts where they might otherwise feel disempowered. The logic of *cheri* and ‘local’ in the context of flirtation also affirms Sunder Rajan’s argument (1993) that upper caste women often invoke caste purity – their higher positioning in caste and, often also class, terms over lower caste men – as a means of managing threats of sexual violence, as well as anxieties about desiring such men. Marking such men as being naturally and inherently prone to baser sexual instincts both sexualises them, marking them virile and desirable, as well as less civilised

⁴⁷ See Harriss (2006, 2007) who argues that typically middle class activism in Chennai rarely actually engages with areas in the city that marked as being non-middle class. In this city, this typically means that middle class social service activists rarely go into the North of the city, sticking to organisations that function from the predominantly Brahmin and upper middle class South.

and consequently more dangerous. This recalls Fanon's explanation of the complex circulation of disgust and desire in white women's engagement with black men (2008), who are seen both as sexual enigmas and hypersexualised objects of desire, as well as primeval 'others' posing a danger to the civilised sexuality of the white woman. We might further argue then that *cheri* men are 'dangerous' because they pose the threat of drawing the now-suppressed and sublimated baser instincts in 'good' middle class women⁴⁸.

'Eve Teasing'

Flirtation sometimes pales into the territory of 'eve-teasing' as sexual harassment on the streets is often called. So ubiquitous that most young women now carry pins or umbrellas with sharp tips when they board buses, to ward off the roving hands of male passengers, eve-teasing is an experience many connect to the dangers of simply 'hanging out' in places. As Rogers (2005) suggests, for young men, eve teasing is often both an aspect of masculine competition with other young men, as well as a means of exercising control over women who are seen as being arrogant, or otherwise transgressing the bounds of femininity. 'Eve-teasing' is further also legitimated in being worked into the romantic narratives of Tamil films. One popular scene from the film *Sivakasi* (2005) starring the popular Vijay shows him first 'saving' a young woman from physical harassment by another man before he then publicly shames her for going running in clothes that, to him, are reminiscent of women's underwear. Her body, he tells her, is meant only for one man. In showing it to other men, he tells her, she is inciting sexual violence upon herself. This sentiment is repeated in a number of Tamil films, such as the popular *Jillunu Oru Kaadhal* (A Soothing Romance, 2006) which a number of women I spoke to idolized for its depiction of college romance, as well as, more recently, in *Thuppakki* (2012), also starring Vijay, which became extremely popular in 2012 while I was in Chennai.

⁴⁸ This is somewhat analogous to Stoler's argument (1995), drawing on Foucault (1978) that white children had to be kept on less than intimate terms with non-white servants not because they were seen as being inherently better than their governesses, but because they were seen as easily corruptible: the fear is that their education into whiteness and civilization would be undone by this contact.

As Kapur (2012) writes, women in Indian cities are ogled and sexualised in any context where they are present in public spaces: whether as shoppers, workers or students. Following the death of a student in a road traffic accident that was directly related to this form of harassment in Chennai, the Tamil Nadu government passed the *Prohibition of Eve Teasing Act* (1998) that recognises this practice as a crime, carrying a sentence of up to ten years' imprisonment for particularly heinous forms of harassment. In the years that I conducted fieldwork – 2012 and 2013 – 'eve teasing' was back in the focus in the context of renewed debates on dress codes in Chennai's colleges. Often invoked as the institution's justification for imposing a code of dress and behaviour, 'eve-teasing' was often, in orientation sessions for freshers as well as in the conversations I had with college authorities, linked to the 'undignified behaviour' of 'the type of girls we get nowadays' – i.e. lower caste and lower middle class students – as well as the 'type of men who hang around on the roads' before whom, a teacher at NT College made it very clear, she did not want her students to be 'showing skin and tempting those kinds of men'.

In the everyday lives of young women, 'eve-teasing' often occupies a murky boundary between the aggressive banter that characterises flirtatious games and sexual harassment as a form of violence. It indexes forms of play between young men and women where young men use a challenging, hypermasculine tone in addressing women they wish to flirt with. As Osella and Osella (1998, 194) suggest, the effect of this is most often 'to rupture social distance, reducing formality and restraint and bringing the girl and the youth into the same space.' The context is most often left ambivalent; allowing the young woman and her friends either to accept the invitation to banter, or to interpret it as harassment, and in this latter case, usually walk away. And confusingly, in this dynamic, sometimes 'no' does mean 'yes'. As one group of second-year students patiently explained to me, men would not take them seriously, or

rather would see them as loose if they flirted back right away. So it was necessary instead to rupture the man's masculine display with mocking comments and laughter, turn him down and walk away. They thus consciously play with social norms about demureness and sexual refusal, and in this case, walking away is an invitation to pursuit. If the man pursued without getting bored or leaving, then, I was told, the girl could be sure that he was genuinely interested. Kamakshi, a sports scholar from a small town near Madurai, whom I met in the canteen of one of the colleges, breathlessly told me of how her best friend had recently begun a *love* relationship with a young man whom she had met at the public sports arena where they both trained for athletic competitions. The woman didn't speak to the man at all - they had begun an exchange of glances about a month before - and indeed often showed disdain until he 'proposed' to her one evening. In response she feigned outrage and walked away, but waited for him to ask again. After what Kamakshi described as 'month after month of proposing' she returned his 'I love you.' 'No' in this scenario, confusingly does then mean 'yes', and a show of disdain is assent. It was, Kamakshi explained, a way of making sure the man really meant business, while also demonstrating that the young woman he was addressing was not easy, or sexually loose: she was consolidating her middle classness, and respectability by playing demure.

In the months after I finished fieldwork, *Whistling Woods International*, a film school in Mumbai issued a public service announcement video titled *Dekh Le* (Look)⁴⁹. This video shows men staring at women in various contexts: at a traffic signal, men stare at the legs of a woman in shorts; on a bus, a man stares at a woman's cleavage; in a café, an older business-suited man looks at the tattoo on a young woman's lower back. The second half of the advertisement is accompanied by fast-paced music and the lyrics *Dekh le tu dekhte hue kaisa*

⁴⁹ *Dekh Le* (2013) – issued by Whistling Woods International
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDYFqQZEdRA>

dikhta hai: look what you look like when you're looking. In this half, by various fortuitous circumstances, mirrors come to be placed before the men – in the visor of the woman on the motorbike, a necklace with a large shiny medallion falls into place on the bus; and in the café the woman's bag swings into place and the mirror on the bag reflects the man's face. All the men are shamed at the sight of themselves staring and look away immediately. While this video points out the undeniably important fact that women are sexualised and ogled in every context in which they are present in public spaces, as well as in every form of attire ranging from *saris* and *burqas* to shorts and low-waist jeans, as I watched it I could not help but think that many of the young women I met would have construed those glances not as menacing or violent in form, but flirtatious. This ambiguity is particularly present in a fourth instance of a man smiling at a woman in a Mumbai local train. The woman is wearing a hijab that shows only her face, and the man – also visibly Muslim – eats peanuts, catching her eye early in the video and smiling. She is sitting directly opposite from him. In the second half, she puts on sunglasses and he, seeing his face in her glasses, does not know where to look anymore. Interactions of this kind occurred everyday and as Osella and Osella (1998) write about aggressive flirtatious banter in Kerala, were deeply ambivalent, allowing for interpretation based on the particular dynamics of the interaction in question. As during fieldwork when I found myself unable to tell whether what was going on was an instance of harassment or flirtation and, having many times misconstrued one for the other, I was confounded again.

In this context, young women often locate the difference between wooing and sexual harassment in who was doing the *sight*-ing, and the particular bodily movements that constituted it in that instance, as well as the place where it was being done. So for instance, some young women saw all *sight adikkarathu* occurring in bus stops and on the pavement outside college gates as harassment. These were places, they said, that women didn't typically go to looking for flirtation. Typically possessing the resources to spend time in malls and

cafés, women who told me they saw the street as entirely inappropriate for flirtation engaged in this activity in the consumer spaces they were comfortable in: coffee shops, restaurants, cinema theatres, during college cultural programmes which were an occasion when men visited the women's college and vice versa, as well as, in rare cases, bars and pubs in the city. Men on the street were typically dismissed in this discourse as being *cheri*, or 'local'. 'Decent' boys, I was advised by a group of girls whose favourite site for *sight*-ing was a coffee bar upstairs from a bookshop, would not spend their time at the bus-stop. College authorities seemed to agree with this idea as one of the duties watchmen typically perform is to threaten with beatings and chase away the groups of men who typically begin to hover outside the gates of women's colleges close to lunch-time when classes end or break and the women pour out. As scholars like Phadke et al (2011) have amply demonstrated, by and large, middle class women expect to be harassed by working class or lower middle class men, more than they do by men of their own class and caste. This perception plays significantly into the discursive construction of the caste-endogamous middle class home as the 'safe' site of intimacy; and indeed the middle or upper middle class mall, and other spaces of consumption as the locus of middle class women's sexual unshackling in a new global modernity.

That said, a substantial amount of the *sight*-ing and flirtatious banter still occurs on the roads and on public transport. On the one hand, for women like Kumari, Vidya and Kalaiselvi, all 'sports quota students', who came from underprivileged backgrounds and could not afford malls and cinema theatres, such places were central to their everyday flirtation. This group of girls – a raucous bunch who typically sat in the back of the canteen at NT College, making fun in Tamil of the 'English *pasangka*' – English kids, i.e. English-speaking students – in the College told me how they looked forward to the moment when they left the government sports field where they trained every morning. As they processed out, through a small gate, Kumari said, they would flirt and exchange glances with the male sports players

whom the coaches usually never let them speak to. Sometimes the men would try to grab one of them, or touch them, and it was fun to dodge, Vidya added, giggling at the memory. They would also flirt with the men standing in the bus stop, now away from the surveillance of their coaches. 'No one else wears shorts and pants like us on the bus' Kalaiselvi told me, gleaming. As athletes, they got to wear 'modern clothes' and as such would flaunt it a bit on the way to college: crossing their legs, sometimes reaching out to grab a handrail, well aware that their T-shirts had lifted a bit. If the men touched them, Vidya told me, she would consider that eve teasing, but if they looked, she said, 'let them'.

One common way in which some women addressed the ambiguity of this situation, particularly where they were uncomfortable with it, was by taunting the man who made this overture, by nominally addressing him as a brother with mockingly exaggerated oblivion as to his erotic intent. This, by nullifying the possibility of romantic attachment, embarrasses the young man, snubbing him in the moment of his making his gesture, often also embarrassing him before his friends. For various reasons, Kalaiselvi had decided she didn't want to engage in any romantic attachments with boys around her. She found them immature, she told me: they were *china pasangka* – 'little boys' – and she wanted a 'man'. However, she often found that she was the object of *sight* and commenting for the young men around her – many of them would gather to watch, and comment on her body – 'figure' – as she did her long jumps, and later would stand around and pass comments as she walked back towards her locker to change. While she ignored them most of the time, sometimes, she said, she enjoyed bantering with them and then eventually snubbing them, calling them *tambi*, (little brother) so they did not seriously pursue her. In this, Kalaiselvi's friends considered her 'smart' – using the English phrase (*aval romba smart akka* – 'she's very smart, sister'). In some way, she was seen as having her cake and eating it too: enjoying the flirtation so long as it was pleasant, and then cutting it off when it was no longer simply fun, and threatened to cross the boundary into harassment.

The murky ground between ‘eve teasing’ and flirtation however also rehearses the co-existence of conjugal love with shame, violence and pain within a popular discourse of romance. As Geetha (1998, 308) writes: violence seems to ‘inhere as much in the grime of everyday life, in habitual tone, gesture, and touch, as it did in the particular and determined act of violence.’ This came to relief in the complex relationships women often had with men they were in romantic relationships with. As Arti mentions in the ethnographic vignette in the last section, most women did not tell their boyfriends about any men they gazed at or flirted with for fear of expressions of jealousy. For many this jealousy is an indicator of romance. Eighteen-year-old Kanchana was pleased when her boyfriend forbade her to wear short skirts when he noticed another man staring at her legs one day. This proved, she told me, that he was serious about her. Her friend, Khadija was happy when her boyfriend slapped her for talking too long to a male friend. Even though she had been upset and cried in the heat of the moment, his jealousy was a sign, Khadija told me, of his care for her. Love, it seemed, could only be concretised and made serious with the intensity and force of violence. Without that it could be dismissed as a trivial college romance. The next two chapters will take this theme forward to address rape and the meanings of consent in greater detail.

Queers on the Loose

You can't have a bald head or super short hair in Madras and not be looked at by everyone who passes by...if you want to pass, you have to tangkachchi-fy yourself.

- Ponni Arasu, Activist, Skype Interview, 17 November 2012

During our interview early one morning, Ponni and I talked a lot about ‘passing’ in Chennai. Originally from Chennai, Ponni had migrated to New Delhi at the age of sixteen to start college, and had since returned to Chennai to work with communities in Tamil Nadu. I knew Ponni as the only visible queer woman I had heard of in Chennai when I first wanted to reach

out to someone in the community. As Satya whose story is told here, put it, Ponni was ‘my me’: she had done for me what I did for Satya, which was to put her in touch with other queer women and reassure her that there were many of us. Cliché as the narrative might be, the fallout of queer invisibility still seemed to be the experience of a discomfiting loneliness. Though there were more of us now, visibly present in the city’s queer landscape, it was still murky. And this is where Ponni and I started that morning when we wondered how we ‘passed’.

I had been thinking a bit about this, after having had conversations with Satya, the twenty-year-old student I had met in May 2012, who openly – everywhere, tellingly, except at her most intimate spaces: hostel and home – identified as queer. Satya was my first informant – I met her before anyone else in the city – and somehow, perhaps because we each stumbled along together learning how to play ‘ethnographer’ and ‘informant’, she was one of the first people I had many joyous reunions with, every time I have returned. I often made fun of Satya, calling her a ‘stalker’. Like many other young queer people her age, Satya had gone online in search of ‘other lesbians in Chennai’ and somehow found me. When we met, she seemed to know every detail of my life – though she disagrees with that judgement, adding that she knows ‘most of the details’ of my life, and less than she’d like – having Googled and combed through every available piece of information. Gleefully she informed me that I was the first real live lesbian she was meeting.

Satya had never quite been able to ‘pass’ – always drawing questions about her sexuality, even from people she would not feel safe coming out to. We were in a bar when we were talking about this, and I noted her posture: she was sipping a whisky neat with her ankle crossed over her knee, chair swivelled a bit so she could keep an eye on a sporting match playing on the TV in the corner. We giggled together at this, and I told her she was well on

her way to being a proper butch. She wanted to be one, she told me. But that day, we wondered how to pass – or as Ponni more accurately put it, ‘what registers as queer in Chennai’ – and ‘looking feminine’ seemed to come up a few times: long hair, clothing that struck the balance between revealing and curve-hiding, walking demurely, coy flirtation where men were present.

Satya added fair skin, and being thin, or at least worried about one’s weight. I agreed, as I thought back also to what a group of *Aravanis*⁵⁰ I knew in Chennai had told me about fairness creams and chemical bleaches being central to their process of transition: it wasn’t enough to have surgery, start wearing make-up and putting on feminine clothes. To attract men – an imperative that refers on the one hand, to the desire to look like a heterosexual woman but which is also implicated in the economy of sex work, *dhandha* as they call it, within which *Aravanis* are often located – it was also important to be thin enough and to have soft fair skin. One young *Aravani* in her twenties commented during the discussion that after all the fantasy for most men was to sleep with an upper caste woman and given the associations between fair skin and high caste, it made sense for her to lighten her skin. For Shankari, whose home we were in, and who is a well-known figure in transgender and sex workers rights activism in Tamil Nadu however, the desire to be fair-skinned was more intrinsically connected with wanting to be a woman. She and Sowmya, also an active political figure in the movement, recalled their early years of transitioning. As Sowmya carefully rubbed a chemical whitening cream into her face, she told me how she wanted to be a ‘true woman’ – not the

⁵⁰ Typically known as *Hijra* in other parts of the country, *Aravanis* are typically male-female transgendered communities in Tamil Nadu. As Reddy (2001, 2005) notes however, *Hijra* and *Aravanis* identities cannot be taken as merely gender-identities or sexual identities. They are rather, also produced at the intersection of cultural, political and health discourses, as well as in the discourse of the state. As Cohen (1995a, 409) argues, *Hijra* is a ‘densely polysemic term’ – referring to the third gender: ‘neither man nor woman’ (Nanda 1999), as well as less formally to men who dress like women even if not formally affiliated to *Hijra* communities (Cohen 1995b). While *Aravani* typically does not carry a similar loose usage, it is nevertheless a similarly multivalent subject position. The circulation of *Aravani* identities in particular as Patel (2007) shows, is imbricated in gendered economies of state and Tamil cultural politics.

dark and hairy person she remembered being in her past. To refer back to an argument made earlier in this chapter that links dark skin and full figures with lower caste femininity, we might note as well the widespread normalising of upper caste women's bodies as the ideal heterosexual body: one that other women must strive to, if they are to 'pass'.

'Passing' as heterosexual, thus also intersected with other experiences of urban spaces, whose heterosexualisation is not immediately apparent. That morning, Ponni also talked about the difference she experienced when she went out in Chennai wearing a salwar kameez, complete with *pottu* and *mai* (eyeliner) and with her hair done nicely; as opposed to when she had short hair, or wore jeans and a t-shirt, with no effort at looking feminine. In the former attire, she pointed out, the looks she gets are of approval: men romanticising her appearance as a 'good' albeit modern Tamil woman. In the latter, she told me, she feels glared at, censored for her lack of femininity and what is usually interpreted as arrogance (*timir*). Similarly, she told me, having a man to walk about town with makes a difference: she is taken more seriously, given fewer threatening looks, and groped less. She told me that she felt her presence at places like malls and cinemas, and especially simply walking down the road which, as discussed in a previous section, can often draw a number of unsavoury questions from passers by and even the police, was more legitimate. Having short hair, in her experience, almost always registers as 'something different', something that could be queer, or at least is not fully heterosexual.

Timir might also be translated as a kind of wilfulness: the refusal to comply and conform, the disobedient insistence on standing out in the crowd even when it is not the 'safe' thing to do. Queerness is interpreted as *timir* because it is seen as the wilful practice of deliberately going against the grain. And much like wilfulness in cautionary tales in the West, *timir* is typically warned against because it is regarded as leading to unhappiness. The *timir*

woman must be tamed and this is a commonly heard justification for sexual violence and harassment against women who look non-traditional in any form: whether it is because of their lack of femininity, or perceived ‘Westernisation’. The typical rhetorical question that many women in Chennai have heard at the start of such an offensive is: *Nee ellam oru tamil ponna?* Are you even a Tamil Woman? The question forecloses the figure of the Tamil woman as virtuous, womanly, bashful and self-conscious of her body, and its sexuality. The threat it offers is corrective violence, directed at the figure at the margins of this Tamil womanhood: the defiantly dark, unwomanly woman, dressed in ‘manly’ attire.

Returning to the quotation at the beginning of this section, Ponni argued that in order to be taken seriously as a woman – i.e. to ‘pass’ – ‘you have to *tangkachchi-fy* yourself, i.e. make yourself a ‘little sister’. What Ponni is referring to here is the need to be positioned within an affective economy of kinship, in which young women are *tangkachchi*– little sisters – not to be molested, or leered at for looking ‘queer’ or ‘slutty’. *Tangkachchis* as a student at NT College pointed out early in my fieldwork, ‘have *vekkam, maanam, soodu soranai* – i.e. shame, honour, anger if this honour is questioned – i.e. indignation – and sensitivity. Often referred to as ‘VMSS’ playfully by students I met, many still told me that they felt these were necessary qualities for womanhood, exemplified by modest clothing – ‘according to your body type’ – a demure ‘closed’ stance, clutching books or bag close about the body, in public spaces, and the absence of *timir* – arrogance – marked in this display of demureness. The *tangkachchi* is thus a homely figure: a smart, even playful (*chutti*) young woman who is nevertheless ‘good’, and demonstrably so by her indubitable heterosexuality, and virtue. The *tangkachchi* as Ponni went on to say that day, does not yell at a man for groping her on a bus, but asks for help. She is not bald headed, short-haired, or ‘arrogant’ (*timir-pidichu*) – the last of these very often identified in, for instance, looking strangers, particularly men, straight in the eye, sitting back in a relaxed posture on the bus, or being snappy of tone.

This need to be a *tangkachchi* in order to pass without suspicion in the city recalls the imaginary of kinship in the construction of the nation as a cultural community that scholars like Das (2007) suggest in examining the gendered politics of crisis-points like partition and the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in Delhi during which the traffic in women typically mediated narratives of communal nationalism. In the particular context of Tamil Nadu, as scholars like Ramaswamy (1992, 1997) have pointed out, the discourse of Tamil cultural nationalism has in particular hinged the cohesive unity of Tamil cultural identity itself upon the figure of the virtuous Tamil woman as daughter and sister. The fantasy of the defilement of the sister – the *tangkachchi* – and her protection by the Tamil man, are thus central to the staging of ‘ordinary’ nationalist life. This trope is common in Tamil Cinema where plots routinely revolve – for instance in films like *Yudham Sei* (Make War, 2011) – around the rape of a modest sister, who must then be avenged. While the sexual harassment of the glamorous heroine rarely elicits emotive anger and vengeance, and is instead often a plot-point that prompts the beginning of a romantic relationship between the harasser hero and the woman he molests, the modest, virtuous and quintessentially Tamil *tangkachchi* on the other hand, must always be saved, avenged, and protected if she is not allowed to pass unharmed.

If *oor sutharathu* was complex for queer women, so also was *sight-adikkarathu*. About two weeks into our acquaintance, I got a text from Satya, who was attending a friend’s wedding: she had seen an attractive young woman at the reception, and had wanted to tell someone. Later, she told me she had been a bit tipsy when sending this text: hence perhaps more open to admitting what I assured her was a common conundrum. If she were a man, we mused, she might have been able to flirt a bit, make some small talk, get a phone number. ‘She was hot’ Satya told me, as we talked, musing thoughtfully, ‘a lot of them there were so hot.’ She added: ‘It’s hard man. How can I *sight-adichu-fy* girls?’

Satya also told me about crushes she'd had on friends around her – it was bound to happen, we said to each other. After all, as in a heterosexual, and mixed sex peer group where such attraction is more normalized, passing, or lasting attractions inevitably occur. But Satya had concerns – did these people see her looking at them? While she was out to some of her friends, this, she was concerned would make things a little weird. Would they be comfortable around her in the same way, and continue to invite her, for instance to sleepover parties, and so on? Was she being 'creepy' she wondered, if she enjoyed the sight of one of her friends during such events, or even for a moment gazed at her with desire? It seemed as if doing so would break the implicit pact that undergirds women's homosocial spaces: making them 'safe' in that they are desexualised. On the part of straight women I met, this attraction in intimate spaces was exactly what they feared about the possibility of lesbians existing among them. The idea that women who might have desire for other women would have the access to see them in their intimates and in nightclothes in the hostel made many young women I met feel queasy, some adding that living with a lesbian was like 'living with a man'. While Satya didn't doubt in theory that her friends would eventually 'be cool with it' the possibility of temporary awkwardness was too much to bear.

Particularly in the homosocial spaces of women's colleges and hostels, this is a perpetual issue. By and large these institutions do not see lesbianism as a desirable thing. When Satya did research projects on LGBT rights for classes, she had to give elaborate justifications including drawing on the 2009 Delhi High Court ruling that read down Section 377 of the Indian penal code, effectively de-criminalising homosexual relations. At college hostels, as I have mentioned before in this thesis, the regulations usually require beds to be separate and for desks to be placed between them, to deter lesbian activity. The warden at St Francis was known to do random checks and students who had so much as drawn their beds

closer so as to be better placed under the ceiling fan for the night, were typically suspended or strictly censured. At Teresa Hostel, two women found engaging in same sex activity a few years ago, one long-time resident told me, had been dramatically expelled. On the walls of the hostel, I found homophobic messages – pornographic drawings with ‘lesbo’ scratched on them over the beds that had been occupied by students who had eventually left after having been socially ostracized in the wake of rumours that they were same sex desiring. All of this naturalizes these spaces as predominantly heterosexual. Further, as discussed in detail in Chapter five, any same-sex exploration between young women is typically policed and often placed under a pornographic frame of ‘practicing for our boyfriends’ or an anti-homosexual framework of ‘making fun of lesbos’ when it occurs. As such, while same sex activities do occur rampantly in hostels, they do so under the cover of parody, ridicule and joking, thus sometimes denting but not seriously disturbing the heterosexism of the space. For girls to *sight-adichu-fy* girls, in Satya’s idiom, remains hard.

Nevertheless, it does continue to occur, and can, as some scholars have suggested, often engender places for erotic communities of dissent to form. One day, jokingly, Satya, a little frustrated, at how few queer women she knew in the city, wondered if the *gaydar* – the pop culture name for a radar that queer supposedly people have for detecting other queer people around them, usually based on stereotypical factors such as gender non-conformity – actually existed. A few weeks later, on a train, with her classmates Satya came to the conclusion that in some ways it did: you could watch people watching others and draw your own conclusions, she told me. She had seen one classmate, Vinita, look sadly, and seemingly longingly, at another of her classmates. Satya was curious and started an ambiguous conversation with Vinita about friendship, and love. As the journey wore on, Vinita finally told Satya that she had had a fling with the woman she had been staring at, and was now

heartbroken, as the object of her affections had taken up with someone else. She told Satya she was relieved to have told her story ‘and that I acknowledged it’ Satya added.

In offering her commiseration, Satya had allowed her to legitimize her grief. Though in a more traumatic context, this scenario is comparable to the oft-cited case of the inability to mourn the deaths of lovers within the LGBTQ community (Cvetkovich 2003). Mourning, as Butler (2003) writes, is a deeply affective act of social legitimation: only that which has been recognized can be mourned. Conversely, as both these scholars also argue, the injunction against mourning in certain contexts sets up a conspiracy of silence around certain deaths: casting certain lives as being less valuable than others. Around Satya and Vinita, heterosexual women who cannot express their heartbreak and grief over the ends of relationships with their families, who are usually not privy to their dating lives, take heart in the comfort offered by friends. In acknowledging Vinita’s mournful glances, and her sorrow, the two women were creating a place for queer desire, and heartbreak, building a space of precarious intimacy. Over the course of my time in Chennai, Satya faced another, bigger loss, which brought the impossibility of mourning into far sharper relief. A friend she had made on a lesbian social networking site killed herself. This woman was in a different city, and while Satya was in touch with her friends, she had never met her. They had only talked on this website, sharing their experiences of friendship and intimacy. And now her friend – a friend no one knew she had had – had suddenly, and seemingly without warning or explanation, died. Satya was distraught for weeks and though we talked about it there was a suffocation that accompanied her sadness: the feeling that she could not talk about her friend without talking about herself. Mourning was dangerous because it came with the threat of having to identify herself as queer in a setting that might be hostile. But if she let this pass without mourning, without memorialising her friend, expressing anger, even outrage at the predicament that they shared and which her friend had succumbed to, Satya feared she would be giving into the status quo

– even letting her friend be forgotten. The depression that Satya and I shared over this seemed to function as a site for political community (Allison 2012), and queer agency.

It has been suggested in the literature on lesbian space, that ‘dyke scenes’ in films – scenes showing female same sex love, or indeed the lives of queer women in some form – are moments of film watching that give same sex oriented women, the permission to stare (see Munt 2005). We might think here of everyday lesbian gatherings to watch popular television dramas centring on the lives of queer women, such as *the L Word* (2004-2009) or the sheer joy that was expressed among queer identified women in India at the idea of the famously beautiful Madhuri Dixit playing a woman with same sex desires in the 2014 film *Dedh Ishqiya* (One and a half loves). Satya, during the time I spent in Chennai, used the wifi connection in her hostel to download lesbian romantic comedies like *I Can't Think Straight* (2008) – popular among queer women and girls in India because it stars Lisa Ray, a Canadian-Indian actress. After, she'd call me to discuss, which of the two women we'd each prefer, and which one she identified with: much like others might discuss the men in films, reviewing them one by one – as my roommates at Teresa often did. For Satya, these films were sites much like the bus stop: where she could look at, and allow herself to feel and express attraction, without self-censorship.

Films aside, Satya's more standard place for *sight-ing* women, was the Internet. As we know from histories around the world, before the Internet, and social media in the form that they take today, there were other kinds of media that rendered these communities of queer women imaginable. Dave (2012) describes in her ethnography of lesbian activism in India, how some of the earliest communities of queer women in India began from letters written to one organization in Delhi, which then often put women in touch with each other. Through these letters, women would express their desires, flirt with each other, and also, and perhaps

more importantly gain a tangible sense of a community of erotic practice. The heterosexual women I met did not register on dating websites to do their online *sight*-ing, seeing this as being a too-overt expression of their desire for sex or romance. The Internet, they often said, parroting the pamphlets on Internet safety that colleges tended to distribute, was a misleading place and ‘chat room romances’ – once popular in the early 2000s and late 1990s – were now considered the provenance of those who couldn’t find romance in ‘the real world.’ Only ‘despos’ – desperate people – they often said, would get on dating websites.

Satya, on the other hand, saw things differently. For her, the Internet – where she rarely went by her own name, and felt more comfortably anonymous, and unaware of her usual insecurities regarding her body and appearance – was a place of freedom, and dating websites were, as she often said, a place where you could at least be sure if someone was queer. Though she never actively dated any of the women she met while I was in the city, much of what Satya enjoyed was simply being present on the website she used, and browsing the profiles of other women who might also be looking at her. She would ‘send a smile’ – a function the website offered as a way of expressing attraction without having to speak to each other, much as one might do if one met someone offline – and be excited if they smiled back. She would spend hours perusing pictures others had posted – somehow comforted in the knowledge that these women intended other women to look at them, and express desire in response to these images of themselves. To Satya this dating website offered her the possibility of a public where she might flirt, look at, and allow herself to feel attracted to women without wondering if they were straight, and might not just reject her, but feel offended by her desire for them.

This experience of dating websites also suggests forms of embodiment that pay attention to the virtual as a site for the location of affect⁵¹. As extensions of the real, virtual bodies are sites of fantasy and erotic play: removed from the physical realities of her body in the hostel, desk between herself and the next woman, Satya could, in her forays online, flirt, orient herself towards other women with desire, and stare with desire. The online networks of queer women that Satya participated in are an incitement to fantasy: through them, young women learn to desire and imagine worlds of possibility in which these desires are livable. The intangibility of these worlds, is, however, simultaneously made starkly obvious in the tragic abyss that Satya experienced when her online friend passed away. Unable to reach out to a community of friends with whom to express her mourning, it seemed as if Satya's virtual world of unrestrained lesbian exploration threatened suddenly to impinge upon her straighter real world. The collision of these two worlds of embodiment were in some ways a place of potential – a site from which to address the silences that characterised each, and the location from which Satya commenced the task of building a community around her.

Escape to the City

...to escape is the greatest of pleasures

- Virginia Woolf, *Street Haunting* (2005, 1, 55)

In this chapter I have explored what young women's everyday lives look like, exploring practices of friendship, flirtation, romance and consumption as well as the institutions of higher education, family and state in which their lives are entangled. Its purpose was to lay out gendered discourses that produce 'youth' as a precarious time for young women. However, I have demonstrated, young women do exert their agency, if in everyday and non-transformative ways, through practices of irony, play and friendship. In practices like *sight adikkarathu* and *oor sutharathu*, I have shown, they typically consciously play with hierarchies of gender and caste, sometimes disturbing them. In the final section on queer

⁵¹ See also Boelstroff on virtual spaces and embodiment (2004).

women, I have also examined how normative ideas about caste and class further also shape perceptions and notions of sexuality, on the one hand, while on the other, also demonstrating how young women find ways to share empathy and build intimate relationships even where identifications cannot be made explicit. By positioning intimacy as rooted in economies of affect – in practices of gazing, and in commonly experienced joy, sorrow and shame – I have explored intimacy as an engagement with precarity. As Berlant (1998, 281) writes: ‘Romance and friendship inevitably meet the instabilities of sexuality, money, expectation, and exhaustion, producing, at the extreme, moral dramas of estrangement and betrayal...’ This chapter has also illustrated that discourses of boundaries – encompassing narratives of embodiment, physical mobility, as well as of caste, class and gender – integrally shape ideas about appropriate behaviour for young women. As other scholars writing on these topics have shown, in this context as well the disciplining of sexuality is central to producing these boundaries that shape gendered norms, thus marking certain practices as being ‘out of bounds’ or ‘excessive’: literally and otherwise colouring outside the lines.

In conclusion, I consider the language of ‘escape’ – from the hostel, from curfews, from parents – in which young women often couched any talk of leisure or pleasure in their lives. This ‘escape’ is necessary because colleges typically don’t let students leave campus between classes and before the 1 pm bell when all bets are off, at least until hostel curfew time, which, for on campus residents tends to be as early as four thirty pm, and for those in private hostels off campus, at the not much later time of about six pm. When I first enrolled in College in Chennai in 2006 I noticed the sharp pieces of glass stuck on top of the already high walls – a common sight in middle class homes in Chennai, where the often-stated purpose for this is to keep the boundaries of the home secure from intruders, and a similar justification was given to us students during the official tour – but within a day or two, I had been given the unofficial tour by a couple of senior students, of places with very low glass

density: i.e. places where the wall could be scaled, and jumped over. They also told me about how this glass came to be put there – it wasn't until 2003 that it had appeared. Though the college's line remains that the glass was there to keep intruders out, when I interviewed these students, now alumnae in 2012, they remembered another story. Early in 2003, two students – one of whom verified this narrative – had gotten tired of being locked into campus and tried to escape by scaling the walls, at this point glass-less. They thought they had succeeded. However what they had not factored into their calculations was that this college shares a wall with former chief minister and AIADMK Chief, J Jayalalitha's residence in Poes Garden – an affluent neighbourhood in the city that is always crawling with her personnel. They were almost immediately caught and taken straight back to the college – to the Principal. Though the students were not expelled, the college, within days, had lined the walls with glass. In the graphic words of one alumna I spoke to: 'it is either enduring getting locked in, or risking having your vagina torn by a piece of glass.'

Not too soon after however, in 2004, another student decided she was tired of being locked in. Along with a friend she managed to dislodge the glass off of a small one-foot stretch of wall. They stood on each other's backs to do this, she tells me, careful because they didn't want to get hurt. And then, just as she had climbed the wall and thrown one foot and her bag over, one of the college caretakers, an old yet fierce Malayalee nun known for her wrath and somewhat disturbing tendency to deliver beatings on students' bottoms, came charging at them. At this point the second student ran away, leaving her friend dangling on the wall. She jumped over to the other side, just in time she told me, when I interviewed her in 2012, and escaped, but didn't come back to college for a week. Thankfully for her, the caretaker hadn't seen her face well enough and couldn't really recognise her.

When I returned for fieldwork, I noticed that the unsupervised orientation tours that senior students often take junior students on, now routinely include advice on the best spots in the campus for ‘escape’. The glass pieces are still there, replaced and repaired every year, and duly, at the beginning of the year students pass around knowledge about which points present easy routes of escape: where the pieces are easy to pull off, and where the wall is low enough that it doesn’t matter. During monsoon season in 2012, a tree from the road fell onto one of the walls in the campus, leaving a gaping hole in the wall for a while. As soon as the debris – and electrical wires – had been cleared up, this gap became the source of a great deal of jubilation, as there was finally an open point for ‘escape’.

At NT College, the freshers learned very quickly about one short wall in the back of the college that it was easy to jump over. Located about twenty feet from the watchman’s kiosk, this was a part of the college that has no surveillance cameras trained on it, perhaps because it was in the watchman’s direct line of vision from his kiosk. Whether in collusion with the students or otherwise, however, the watchman never reported anyone for jumping over the wall at this stretch. Within a month of starting college, a group of journalism students I had met started telling me about how ‘suffocating’ and ‘frustrating’ it was to be locked in all day. Soon, one of them came to me, with barely suppressed excitement as I arrived in the morning to tell me that she had jumped over the wall and gotten away the previous evening. ‘It got to that point where I needed to jump’ she said, shaky with excitement, admitting that she had ‘taken a risk’.

At the hostel that was across the road from Teresa, Venetia, who resided there had mapped all the areas where it was possible to ‘escape’ out of, and routinely bribed the watchmen who guarded the institution’s gates with gifts. She happily passed this information on to any new residents, teaching them also how to best bring the hostel cleaners and other

staff on their side. Watchmen she told me, were best bribed with alcohol – a small bottle of whiskey or rum would do, she explained – or even cigarettes, which cost less. The female cleaners who worked inside the buildings, who could not be bribed with alcohol or cigarettes, were a bit trickier. But Venetia had made friends with them. She had bonded with them over stories of family, and their mutual hatred of the warden, and now she routinely brought them gifts. They trusted her, she told me, and so it was easier.

To ‘escape’ this is to choose instead to go out into the unsupervised ‘outside’, and take risks. As feminist scholars across disciplines have suggested, ‘safe’ spaces are often the places where women find themselves most under surveillance – under pressure to play ‘good girls’. ‘Escape’ is the journey to a place where it is possible to be ‘bad’ – as Phadke et al (2011) suggest, it is this risk that young women in India have, in some sense, been struggling to take in the course of the past years’ contestations over gender, sexual violence and protectionism in urban spaces. ‘Escape’ also brings to mind the concept of ‘out of the way places’ (Tsing 1993): places that lie at the margins, both of respectability and middle class acceptability as well as, often, the margins of the city itself (see also Brunson 2013).

As the next chapters will examine, leisure and erotic pleasure in young women’s lives are often contingent upon ‘escape’ to these ‘out of the way’ places – spaces teeming with the risk and danger of being ‘deserted’ and ‘cut off’ and yet affording the privacy that these women’s lives often sorely lack. Drawing on this, the next two chapters go on to further explore these affective narratives of being young in the city through a study of practices of flirtation and romance as productive of spaces of intimacy as well as of definitions of the sexual in a context where women’s everyday lives are saturated by signs of the sexual.

4 | Having Sex in The City: Publics and Privates

In an inverse of the usual advice given to couples displaying affection in public spaces – ‘get a room!’ – the common wisdom among college students in Chennai is that public sex is far preferable to the risks of actually getting one. Whether in a hotel, or in someone’s home, or worst of all, in a hostel, on-campus or private, getting a room carries the danger of discovery by a parent, or a figure of institutional authority at College. Getting a room is ‘traceable’: there might be witnesses, papers to sign, and documents to be produced. Instead the best place ‘for some action’ – i.e. sexual activity – is the beach, or a local park, where a degree of anonymity is possible. And indeed, in the heat of the mid-morning sun, after the joggers had dissipated slowly and later in the day, after the family-heavy hours of about four to six-thirty pm, I saw young couples canoodling in many of Chennai’s public leisure spots: the somewhat more quotidian Marina, as well as the more posh environs of Eliot’s Beach, in the proximity of the stiff upper lips of Chennai’s Brahmin upper middle classes in the Adyar Theosophical Society’s gardens, and in various smaller local neighbourhood parks.

Places like beaches and parks still remain, therefore, spaces of ambiguity and possibility. Among the many locations listed in women’s college rulebooks, where on-campus residents are forbidden to go on their weekly ‘day out’, are the city’s beaches and parks. One alumna who had ‘escaped’ from her college in the 1990s to go to the beach one afternoon recalls the demeaning scolding she and her friends received afterwards from an angry college dean, who had particularly taken offence to the fact that the young women had rolled up their trousers to wade into the sea. Didn’t they care, she asked, at least for the college’s reputation, if not their own, as they displayed their legs for all the men to see? They would only attract urchins and auto-rickshaw drivers, she had warned them, not respectable middle class husbands, if they continued to behave in that way. The anxieties expressed that college girls sitting on the beaches, simply taking in the air, are dangerous figures, a ‘menace’ to middle

class society as a video report by the popular Tamil news organisation *Dinamalar* puts it, and a danger to themselves as many college authorities described them to me⁵².

For many young women, going to the beach, or a park, even with family, means letting go of the disciplined ‘closed’ (see also Lukose 2009) bodily postures otherwise expected of them: the characteristic handbag or books clutched to the chest and short, quick steps that most tend to take when on the road. The beach is thus most described in association with ‘relaxation’, ‘fun’ and ‘jolly’ – the last of these an English word that has entered the popular youth lexicon as a signifier of playfulness and fun: the opposite of which is typically ‘adult’ or ‘real’ acts and behaviours. There is something, it appeared, about the wind blowing one’s hair out of place, and clothes out of position – *dupattas* as a rule refused to stay on, on the beach, and it is not uncommon to see young women giggling aloud, stretching their arms out, and being playful – that makes places such as beaches and parks sites of jolly and fun activity. Young women run, sit with their legs apart on the sand; roll up their trousers or *salwar* bottoms higher than normally regarded appropriate and wade into the water knee-deep. Some evenings I sat with groups of young women as they feasted their eyes, often giggling and commenting, as young men in no more than tight shorts or underwear went into the sea, and splashed back out onto the sand, playing games with their friends, or chasing a ball with a younger boy: ‘such a site for play this edge’ (Taussig 2000, 251). Outside of the ‘family time’ hours of early morning and late afternoon – in the scorching mid-day Chennai sun, and between seven and eleven in the evening – the beach is a place for sex. Couples are everywhere, finding a place for intimacy under makeshift tents made of *dupattas*, backpacks and shawls; behind large corporation dustbins; in the catamarans that fishermen obligingly leave on the beach. No one ever gets naked on the beach – that would be ‘icky’ – all that sand

⁵² Beach Love – Dinamalar 4 March 2009, video clip, accessed 12 April 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZKVOx7GvUw>

in your... you know... parts' as one wise twenty-year-old put it – but zippers are unzipped, bras unhooked, and heads suggestively bob up and down on laps. The beach is where the city's college girls go for 'action'.

Urban India has had a chequered history with regard to public displays of affection. In much of North India, the celebration of Valentine's Day, spurred on by the emergence of a culture of consumption, as well as globally mediated discourses that define the importance of such days to personal expressions of desire, and indeed the increasing significance of such desire to emerging neoliberal selves in contemporary India, has come under attack from conservative quarters (Brosius 2011). Vigilante groups have been known to police and break up canoodling couples in parks, cafes, bars and clubs: going as far as beating people up, forcing couples to tie *rakhi* on each other, thus declaring them symbolically siblings, and harassing women in the name of protection. Scholars like Charu Gupta (2002) have commented on the genealogies of 'obscenity' and its links with the processes through which a postcolonial middle class has come to be constructed through discourses of chastity and through the construction of both urban public spaces and those who inhabit them as being 'dirty'. As she, and others like Mody (2008), who examines the more immediate context of Delhi in contemporary times, have noted: women's expressions of desire in romantic or sexual involvement with men of lower caste or class, or indeed extra-marital affairs, or elopements, whether with a 'suitable' boy or otherwise, are all widely regarded threats to middle class respectability. 'Obscenity' as Sreenivas (2008) points out, was constructed in erstwhile Madras in a historical context fraught with debates on sex work and Devadasi culture on the one hand, and companionate marriage and the emergence of what has been called a 'nationalist feminist' subjectivity on the other: one that, while positioned in critical opposition to various axes of power, is also predicated on 'respectability' established through particular caste and class laden practices of embodiment.

The public presence of women's sexuality, both produces risk, and is risky. It marks the beach – and indeed also the public park – as a place of impropriety and 'danger', where men may lose both respectability and wealth, while young women also risk their own legitimacy as educated middle class women by 'dangerously' positioning themselves in a posture of abandon on the beach, even sometimes 'sticking' to the young men they might meet. This imagination also constructs these places as being 'out-of-the-way' - marginal locations, literally on the edges both of the physical city, as well as of the order and discipline that is imagined to characterise urban life: places where 'the instability of political meanings is easy to see' (Tsing 1993, 27). Further, the structures of feeling that accrue to the sea, as Taussig (2000) notes, underwent a transformation in the mid twentieth century, as beaches around the world came to be positioned as sites of pleasure rather than trade. The anxiety about young women simply hanging out on the beach comes from the confusion often made between the seafront as a place of trade and work and its emergent meaning as a place for middle class pleasure. Sex workers have been known to frequent places like the beach over the course of the twentieth century, and continue to see as a lucrative location, where they now service a varied clientele, ranging from local workers to upper middle class men living in the area.

Addressing this context, this chapter makes two arguments. First, examining the seeming inversion in young women's casting of public spaces as being 'safe' for sexual activity, while homes, student residences and commercial establishments – otherwise regarded 'safe' spaces for young middle class women – are cast as 'risky', this chapter considers regimes of surveillance and policing that produce the category of 'risk'. In doing this, this chapter situates young women's understanding of sexual 'risk' also within the context of normative discourses of middle class, upper caste female adulthood. Second, this chapter will follow from that to

suggest that the public discourse of ‘risk’ produces regimes of legitimacy within which different sexual acts are situated. Thus a study of ‘risk’ is also revealing of how the categories of ‘the sexual act’, ‘sexual intercourse’ and ‘sexuality’ come to circulate among middle class youth. Intersections between pleasure and shame are considered here in the experience of sexual intimacy as both a ‘youth’ practice of pleasure, and a constitutive practice of modernity among middle class women.

The ‘Menace’ of Lovers

In 2003, Seerani Arangam, a public platform on Chennai’s Marina Beach was dismantled and removed in the dead of the night. Such ‘stealthy’ changes in the city’s façade are not uncommon for Chennai, and other monuments - such as the statue of Kannagi, the mythic heroine of the Tamil epic *Silappadikaram*, who is revered for her chastity - have been the subjects of such moves. The Arangam’s removal received reportage in the *Hindu* and the usual outrage from the authors of *Madras Musings*, the mouthpiece of Chennai’s heritage preservation activists. They pointed out that it had been the site of political organising in the 1960s, and public meetings until recent times. The writers in *Madras Musings* (2003) wondered aloud why the government had chosen to demolish the building in the dead of the night – what were they hiding?

One explanation that was popularly discernible through all this, though it did not make it into the official discourse on the demolition of the Arangam was the widely held public opinion that the demolition had to do with the increasing numbers of lovers who used Seerani Arangam as a space for sexual intimacy. Narratives of the ‘menace’ of lovers who use spaces like the Arangam, the beach itself and the nearby Gandhi Mandapam for sexual activity are popular among Chennai’s middle class residents. A video published by *Dinamalar* (cited above) one of the city’s most prominent news outlets, shows visitors to the beach

complaining that it was no longer possible to bring children to the beach because of the visible presence of 'lovers'. The beach, this programme suggests, is no longer accessible to the general public because of some 'lovers' who 'cross the line' in their activities there. Much like the police, quoted in news reports, this programme also specifies that men often bring women here 'without their parents' permission'. And indeed, every few years the papers report that the police have cracked down on lovers in parks and on the Marina Beach. While, by and large, couples slip under the radar by slipping the constable on duty his five-hundred-rupee bribe, when these police 'raids' occur, they typically result in men being dragged off to the police station, and in one case, even being produced before a magistrate, while the women are chastised for having agreed to engage in such activities in the first place.

Two narratives emerge here. First, there is the story of urban beautification, where the 'menacing' presence of lovers threatens to sully the city's public spaces, and make them inaccessible to families. State making practices – urban planning, the building of monuments and urban beautification – here produce precarity through acts that foreclose the meanings of public spaces, privileging particular discourses over others. We might recall here, the moorings of Chennai's two dominant political parties, the DMK and the AIADMK in a conservative discourse of Tamil patriarchal family and gender (Hodges 2005, Ramaswamy 1992, 1997). This ideology has motivated other transformations of the city's architecture, not least the many relocations of the nearby Kannagi statue referenced above (Pandian 2005). In the removal of Seerani Arangam, the state's ideological investment in preserving this traditional Tamil family centred on marriage is transparently evident. The narrative about intimacy out of place as 'dangerous' also positions it as contagious. I was often told that youth would 'learn bad habits' simply from observing others at it, or even knowing that such possibilities exist at all. Like other affects, then, sexuality in public too is seen to be catching, spreading among a group of young people positioned as being a 'high-risk' group for this – in

that they are seen as emotionally vulnerable, ‘hormonal’ and easily influenced – and negatively affecting them. Lovers are a menace, thus to ordinary middle class life, because they pose the threat of affecting and infecting its foundations in a family unit where sexual feelings are appropriately located only within marriage.

They are also a bad influence on children, as the *Dinamalar* broadcast discussed above indicates. Children, as Edelman (2004) rightly argues in the American context, are increasingly integral to the moral regimes of neoliberal development, and its aspirations of future-proofing (Appadurai 2013, Roy 2012). Building a safe and stable future in which affect is regulated through the separation of childhood from youth and adulthood by the boundary of sexual awareness, is, in Edelman’s argument (2004) central to this project, often justifying the censorship of art, cinema and other cultural products, as well as limiting the everyday lives of gendered, sexual and class ‘others’. This is not an unfamiliar terrain in South Asia, where the figure of the impressionable child often functions to justify censorship in the media. Examining complaints against advertisements of products marketed to children, Pinney (2009) observes that children are typically imagined as potential agents of their own destruction: ‘mimetic automatons’ (Pinney 2009, 128) liable to be seduced and endangered. Their agency is imagined as inevitably negative and dangerous. This is the same argument at play in casting lovers as ‘menacing’ to children. The marking of public spaces as places of middle class leisure, also thus renders them subject to the requirement that they are ‘appropriate’ for children.

Secondly, the *Dinamalar* broadcast about the beach suggests the pervasive anxiety about sexual violence against women that precludes narratives of consensual pleasure or casts them as being along a continuum of illegitimacy along with rape. Elsewhere in the thesis I have suggested that *consent* is a category fraught with caste, and community concerns for

women's chastity, and demonstrated that, as scholars like Phadke (2013) argue, consent is often held by family members and caste kin, on behalf of women. 'Rape' thus often refers to any sexual activity outside the sphere of community-mediated consent, thus positioning sexual activity before marriage in an always-precarious light. As one of my roommates once wryly commented when we were on this topic: 'if you're not married, it's better to be raped than to say you actually wanted to do this.' This offers young women, in the state's discourse, a choice between a sympathetic albeit disempowering positioning as victim and being the wanton whore. Reading police concerns about adult women being brought to the beach 'without their parents' permission' in this light, it is easy then to link the discourse of risk in public spaces, and the popular casting of places like the beach and the park as sites, exclusively of sexual violence rather than pleasure or possibility, with widespread practices of public sexual activity among youth.

This further also highlights young unmarried women's infantilisation in the practice of the state, even if not its discourse: a practice scholars like Sunder Rajan (2003) have discussed in the case of the denial to women regarded 'destitute' of the right to consent to sexual acts. In a harrowing discussion of forced hysterectomies on women living in state-run 'homes' for the destitute, Sunder Rajan (2003) explores the biopolitical regimes of reproductivity in which any act of sex in which these women participate is only registered as 'rape' and even in this case, the central aim of the state is to prevent 'consequence' from such an act, through hysterectomy – i.e. removal of the possibility of pregnancy. Scholars like Baxi (2000, 2006) and Arasu and Thangarajah (2012) similarly explore the state's legislation of rape on the one hand, which typically presents a retributive narrative in which the injury is seen as inflicted on the state or the family rather than the woman, as well as legal proceedings over elopement

which present a similar case in which women are typically ‘returned’ to their families⁵³, and partners prosecuted for kidnapping and rape, regardless of their majority in age, soundness of mind and right to consent. The cleaning up of spaces is then purported to safeguard women, if even from their own desires. The threat of the public space lies in the very possibilities that feminist scholars (McDowell 1999) have seen in it: of collectivisation, resistance and positions of critique to privatised, ‘proper’ citizenship. Consent is regulated here by a carceral regime (Dillon 2012) in which young women ‘out of bounds’ set off the alarms for risk. This is made starkly evident in the anxiety over women’s presence ‘without parents’ permission’ and the television programme’s distress at their ‘crossing boundaries’ on the beach. This language of ‘boundary crossing’ in this context is reminiscent of the classic Mary Douglas (1966) conception of ‘risk’ as located in a potential for ‘pollution’, and indeed here the ‘menace’ at hand, is the risk of putting out of orderly place, both ‘good’ middle class and upper or middle caste women, as well as intimacy itself. The language of ‘spoiling’ and ‘ruination’ that typically accompanies popular commentary on young women engaging in sexual activities before marriage – and ‘she spoilt herself’ or ‘she ruined her life’ could often be metaphors for women having engaged in penetrative sex as I discovered – gives further credence to this.

The wide prevalence of public sex in places like beaches and parks also contests the popularly made argument that the locus of middle class women’s much celebrated sexual unshackling in the last decade or two in India, is privately owned, or semi private space. Malls, gated living facilities and bars, for instance, are both celebrated in the mainstream media as sites, in post-liberalisation India, of women’s sexual liberation; and attacked by right wing groups for the same reasons: sometimes literally, as in the 2009 assault on women at a bar in the city of Mangalore in Karnataka. As Phadke et al (2011b) write, the popular perception casts open public spaces as peopled with working class and lower caste men, as well as rural

⁵³ Chapter Six will tell the circulation of stories of elopement in detail.

migrants who are all seen, in this discourse, as threats to urban women's hard-won sexual liberation. On the contrary, most often the young women I spoke to regarded many of these private or semi-private spaces as places of surveillance, where 'nothing is possible' owing either to the presence of middle class families, security guards charged with maintaining 'respectability' in establishments and evicting anyone who is acting 'obscene' as well as security cameras. For instance, the relatively new Express Avenue mall that stands on the site of the old Indian Express offices was seen early in its days as a place for unrestrained 'fun' particularly because its elevators unlike those at Spencer Plaza, the older mall down the road, were not made of glass. However, the mall authorities soon installed security cameras inside elevators, and occasionally an elevator operator, thus closing off all opportunity for sexual activity. Similarly, bars and clubs are places that are seen as 'safe' for dancing together, and a little kissing but 'indecent behaviour' can often get couples thrown out unceremoniously. The much-feared disorder of the city's public spaces also then makes places for 'disorderly' conduct of many kinds for young women: as McDowell (1999) writes, public places, while often removing women from the protections of respectability, also free them up for choosing to undertake 'risky' behaviour, often in the pursuit of pleasure. I repeat here the point previously made in this thesis that 'risk' is often risk to reputation and middle-classness that is achieved in the performance of this respectability rather than risk of violence.

Despite all of this – the daily threat of being caught by the police, the many state efforts to curb acts of affection in public spaces, and many fear-mongering reports in local media – public places in Chennai remain, in the worlds of youth, places for 'action'. But then, as I learned to ask halfway through fieldwork, what is sex? What types of bodily orientations, affective intensities and acts are regarded as being 'obscene' in public spaces, even sexual; and which ones constitute 'sex'?

Bases and Places: What is ‘sex’?

When I first told a friend’s brother what I was in Chennai to study, he snorted with laughter and said if I wanted to study Chennai’s youth and their sexual practices, I needed to spend some time in the city’s red light districts – hang out at Parry’s Corner, he advised, and see how many college boys visit the women working there; or go to Marina Beach with a boy and watch others approaching the sex workers there. Many others seemed to corroborate his view: often sheepishly adding that in a city where middle class women still continue to feel uneasy about sex before marriage, this was the way to go if one wanted some ‘experience’. This is reminiscent of a similar argument offered in the popular Tamil coming of age film *Boys* (2003) when the eponymous ‘boys’ – a group of male college students who are the protagonists of the film – go to great lengths to visit a sex worker in a desperate attempt for some sexual experience.

When I rephrased this question, however, to ask where young men went to ‘get some action’ – the phrase used to mean intimate activities that didn’t count as ‘sex’ - I was told that the beach was a good option, or parks, much the same as I had noticed. Young women appeared to offer a similar typology – most said that they were ‘virgins’ and had never had sex, even as they had just admitted to engaging in acts of oral and manual sex. Indeed many times I was told: ‘no one in these colleges has sex’. However, they casually talked about having ‘hooked up’ and gone to ‘third base with’ or ‘given a blow job to’ a boy, sometimes including any or all of these activities in the phrase ‘made out with’. In Tamil, I was told that these acts were not *udal uravu* (literally bodily intercourse, but connoting sexual intercourse), but only ‘jolly’ or ‘boyfriend-oda pogarathu’ (*to go with one’s boyfriend*) – acts considered naughty and transgressive in relation to an adult world, but still permissible within the universe of possible youth transgressions. What one did when one went to the beach was, in other words, most importantly, a ‘youth’ activity – it was not ‘sexual’ because one didn’t lose one’s ‘virginity’

through it; it was an aspect of the idiomatic youth experience of *'love panrathu'*: literally to *make love* and often traveling between the phrase's older meaning – to woo – and its contemporary connotation of having sex.

Ironically, in this view, the most deviant sexual act for college girls includes the most normative sexual act – peno-vaginal intercourse, which most of my informants saw as the provenance of married couples. It was seen as 'risky' for the obvious reasons of possible pregnancy, and somehow more prominently, the idea that penetrative sex is the moment in which 'virginity' – located in this definition in the hymen that is imagined to be unruptured through childhood and adolescence – is broken. Boys, I was told, can do what they like because they 'don't have virginity' – i.e. it is harder to tell if they have had (penetrative) sex or not, whereas this was not the case for women. Girls like Arti who did not think that they wanted necessarily to wait until marriage for penetrative sex still saw it as a 'special' act that should only be performed between people who have 'true love' for each other, as opposed to people who might be involved in a casual college fling. Others like Ranjana believed it would not be pleasurable for the woman unless she was truly in love with the man with whom she was having sex: after all, if one bleeds the first time, then the act must be quite painful. It was often discussed as an act that made 'women' out of 'girls' – oddly analogous in imagery to menstruation, in that the violence of bleeding was central to this proof of 'womanhood'. My roommates appeared to agree also that it connoted vulnerability, the risk of which could only be taken with a husband: not with a lover, however serious or long-term the relationship was.

Having penetrative sex while still at college also had to do with a lack of proper place. 'Up to third base' Venetia told me, as we sipped our cold coffees in the coffee bar upstairs from the Oxford Bookstore where she and her friends often hung out, 'is possible on the beach'. For her, personally, even 'third base' – oral sex – was out anywhere but in a room:

‘sand goes in all your – you know – places’. But ‘first base’ and ‘second base’ – kissing and heavy petting ‘top action’ – could go on in the beach. Others appeared to concur with Venetia and indeed, the shyness associated with talking explicitly about sexual acts for many young women made the Americanism of ‘bases’ a particularly easy euphemism to use. ‘Full sex’, another young woman explained to me, when we spoke about this, required more nakedness – and a more explicitly sexual position that could not be concealed as, for instance, merely lying in a lover’s lap: in itself often drawing opprobrium but not as much as having sex. It would also be harder to ‘zip up and run off’ should a policeman be sighted nearby. Further, romanticised as a ‘special’ act, many dreamt of ‘doing it’ in a posh hotel room, or a large decorated bedroom: it would somehow be less pleasurable, Manasi told me, if the environs were not beautiful, and indeed that was when it might be more painful.

On a more logistical level, there is also a great deal of concern about ‘the condom problem’. Venkatesh, then a nineteen year old student at one of the city’s colleges told me about how he went all the way to a pharmacy about an hour and a half away from where he lived with his family when he wanted to buy condoms for his first time with his girlfriend. Being – and looking, very evidently, in his skinny boyish features – no more than nineteen at the time, he feared judgement from the middle aged, ‘aunty’ at the checkout counter. So it took him three tries before he finally bought a pack. His girlfriend would not have considered going on her own – she would be leered at, she told me, by the men in the shop, both customers and shop assistants if she so much as picked up a condom: a fear – not unjustified – that many young women shared.

We might also detour here for a moment to the striking down of the 2009 Delhi High Court order that read down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Section 377 criminalises ‘carnal intercourse against the order of nature’ – usually interpreted to refer to oral and anal

sex between men. The section does not specify consent and instead renders a whole range of sex acts illegal irrespective of the age, and consent of participating parties – i.e. the difference between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sex here is the particular act rather than consent in the act. In his December 2013 judgement, Supreme Court Justice Singhvi specified that he wasn’t ruling against any particular community – i.e. the judgement was not to be read as being homophobic – but against a set of acts he deemed as being against the order of nature. He proceeds to expand upon the inappropriateness of using the mouth as an organ of pleasure. As activist Jaya Sharma pointed out on TV, within days of the judgement, the judge’s words suggest, and perhaps with eerie accurateness that the policing of non-normative sex acts is less about any narrow conception of ‘homophobia’ alone though it certainly entails that, and more about the closing off of the sexual horizon and the re-centering of married (often caste endogamous) heterosexual sex in a form that is likely to lead to reproduction, as the only legitimate form of coupling. This hierarchy holds a very different meaning to my informants, most of whom were unaware that they, along with homosexuals, *hijras*, *kothis* and other such obviously liminal subjects of the law are liable to classification as ‘criminal’. That non-penovaginal intercourse is regarded somehow illegitimate – not quite what one means when one says ‘sex’ – means ironically, though unsurprisingly, that most women feel they can have it without technically losing their virginity.

Normative ideals thus work in contingent ways in creating a sense of precarity. Whereas for queer or non-heterosexual populations, the disciplining structure of law and society polices their practice of ‘carnal intercourse against the order of nature’, the practice of such intercourse offers a possible place for pleasure in the lives of young women, in whose lives normative sex acts are circumscribed discursively within marriage and conjugality.

Shankari and Manohar: From the Zoo to the Beach

It was ten in the morning when I finally made it to NT College. I was a bit later than usual, and went straight to the canteen, keeping an eye out for any of the students I usually chatted with around this time. At one of the benches against the back wall of the large hall scattered with tables and chairs, I saw Shankari perk up as soon as she saw me – she seemed to be bursting with excitement, rocking lightly in her chair, as she ate the ‘tiffin’ she brought daily for brunch. Shankari was also an ‘afternoon college student’ – her classes didn’t begin until 11.30 – but she still came to college at 8 am, and had told her mother she needed to be in early: this way she got in some romantic time on the bus with her boyfriend, and perhaps even a short walk if they could manage it. Manohar – whose name she said only once, and coyly, during our acquaintance, euphemistically calling him ‘my him’ (*ennoda avan*) otherwise – was her high school sweetheart, and now, to Shankari’s enormous pride, an Engineering student in the city.

So she always spent her mornings sitting in the canteen and people watching – indeed when I first met her she had pointed out, laughing that I was making a career of what she did for fun: chatting with people about their love lives. I knew that Shankari had been planning a big moment with Manohar, and as I neared her table, she looked coyly down at her food and said, ‘He took me to the beach.’ It was a landmark moment in their romance: after all, though Shankari blushingly said no more than that they had ‘done more’ than at the zoo or the temple – where hand-holding and some kissing was possible: a little necking even at the zoo ‘near the unpopular animals.’ ‘Going to the beach’ was the popular, and often accurate, Chennai euphemism for what the more outspoken Venetia described as ‘third base’ – i.e. oral sex.

I had, by this point, followed Shankari and Manohar's love story for a while. They had begun their relationship after the exchange of love letters in school, and the exchange of 'I love you' outside the school gates. In time, Shankari and Manohar had gone to the neighbourhood temple together – here they could pass for being very pious and praying for good exam results while also finding nooks behind shrines in which to hold hands and exchange sweet nothings. Soon Manohar bought Shankari a new mobile phone, one that looked exactly like the phone her father had bought her a few months before, so they could talk all night without fear that they would be discovered when Shankari's parents paid her phone bill, or even checked the calls and texts on her phone as they sometimes did. For safety, Shankari had also saved Manohar's number under the name 'Manohari' – the ending suggesting a female name – and used the familiar 'di' that women use with each other, to address him on the phone if her parents were present. In other words their 'love' had progressed and was now a full-fledged clandestine affair.

'A bomb will break in my house during my marriage' Shankari said to me in English, early into our acquaintance, translating directly from the Malayalam. Though she had been born and raised in Chennai's suburb of Mangadu, her family were Nairs from Kerala. They considered themselves quite high up in the caste ladder she told me, and proudly added that though they were not wealthy, her father was a central government employee. Manohar's family on the other hand were 'OBC Tamil' as Shankari explained, declining to specify their caste: this was something her parents would not approve of. Further they lived in a small two-bedroom apartment – a place into which they would expect her to move should she marry Manohar. Manohar's mother, the only parent in the picture who was aware of this romantic attachment, had already specified this: she would only allow the match if Shankari agreed to move in with her in their apartment. Shankari told me she believed that love would be enough for her and Manohar: they would not need space. She looked at me dreamily – she hoped to

raise children with him there too and wondered if maybe they would someday make enough money for an extension to the flat: a room for the children. Her parents would, however, be unhappy with this living and economic situation too, according to Shankari: they would be disappointed she did not seek to find a richer man to marry. However, she planned on appeasing them by assuring them that Manohar had already told her that he wanted her to stay at home and not work: at least she would not have to be ‘a working woman’⁵⁴. Was this what she wanted? I asked. She shrugged: what she wanted was to marry Manohar.

So now – it was Shankari’s priority to ensure that things ran smoothly – and respectably - until the day she told her parents. Otherwise – there might be more strength to their objections: they would, for instance, she said, fear that she had been ‘used’ by her less wealthy and lower caste boyfriend: a fact she needed proof against at all times, even as she had her fun. So, while many lovers chose to move on from temples and neighbourhood parks where handholding was possible, to cinema theatres, ‘for second base action’ – i.e. heavy petting – Shankari and Manohar had chosen to go to the zoo, a less popular spot, nevertheless regarded ‘safer’ as one’s family was less likely to wander in and take the adjoining seat. For their next step, however, Shankari had fretted and feared. A big public park had been considered and decided against: it might be too public and an old uncle might pick that day to take a walk. The temple itself was a little too sacrilegious even if relatively ‘safe’ from family and interference during mid morning and afternoon hours and before the evening worship. They finally settled on the beach.

Shankari was too shy to tell me much more but she indicated that ‘more’ had happened than at the zoo. They had not had – and she had told me well in advance that they

⁵⁴ See also Clarinda Still (2011) who shows that it is widely held to be desirable for brides to be educated but not to have to work as a sign of social mobility.

would not have before marriage – ‘that relationship’, i.e. sexual intercourse – but ‘other things’ had been done. She had chosen Raksha Bandhan – a primarily North Indian holiday that honours a relationship of protection between brothers and sisters. Unexpectedly, NT College, which is run by a trust half-populated by prominent Gujarati Jain merchants in Chennai, had declared a holiday for this observance. Shankari’s parents – South Indians who had never heard of this festival, much less observe it themselves – had not batted an eyelid as she packed her dosa tiffin as usual, swung her backpack on her back and took the bus. Except this time, it was a different bus, that went right past NT, and St Francis a few blocks down, past Queen Mary’s, picking up from the bus stops near all these women’s colleges, young women who had likely been dropped off for the morning by parents, all the way down to the Marina.

I too was on such a bus that day, going down to see the ‘scene’ on the beach, as we called it in my years as a student, on a day that was an unexpected holiday in one or two big colleges in the city. I had gone down to the College Road bus stop, centrally located and close to some women’s colleges, at 8.30 am and taken my place in a packed 29C bus down, first to the more elite Besant Nagar Beach in South Madras, and then traced my way back to the Marina. On the bus, young women texted boyfriends, coordinating when a lover should jump on the bus, what stop they were at, or where on the beach they might meet if arriving separately. On the beach, the couples paired off, sidling off to find a quiet spot: the back of one of the city corporation’s large dustbins, in catamarans, or simply out on the sand in a lonely patch.

The ironic location of such intercourse in the public spaces of beaches and parks where arguably queers, sex workers and other perceptibly marginal subjects are most policed is also ironic. While, as will be established below, young women certainly risk misidentification as sex workers, their location out in a public place also keeps them ‘safe’ in that it does not

carry the taint of having ‘gotten a room’. One particularly smug student said to me one day: ‘it’s all about place’, adding, in what is a direct translation from the Tamil, ‘if you sit under a palm tree, even if you drink milk that is toddy.’ In other words, it was more precarious for ‘respectable’ middle class women to risk being traceable and going to a room rather than engage in practices of ‘not-really-sex’ in entirely public places, where, by virtue of their location in a ‘public’ rather than a ‘private’ place, they are still ‘safe.’

‘Safe’ Sex in Public

One night at 10.30 pm I stood at the intersection in Nungambakkam High Road, close by NT college where I often hung out during the day. Centrally located, this road is usually buzzing with activity in the day: the big corporate offices are all off of it, a number of colleges dot it, interspersed with malls, independent shops, cafes and bars. It is the centre of middle class leisure, consumption and work in Chennai. During the day, I never feel so safe anywhere else: there are always a number of women out on the street in Nungambakkam, career women, college girls, shoppers, mothers picking up children from school. But now, at 10.30 pm, no one was around. The traffic had slowed down, and most of the road’s commercial establishments were closed. I only saw one other woman, also nervously waiting for her ride. Glancing down the road, yet again, I felt relief as I saw the motorbike nearing, with Vimal’s familiar figure on it. Earlier that day, over breakfast, Vimal, a fellow Oxford DPhil student, now on vacation in Chennai, had agreed to take me on my expedition to the Marina late at night: I had been advised never to go by myself, and Vimal had what he sheepishly described as ‘experience’ of the Marina at night: so he could ‘give me the tour’.

Riding pillion on a boy’s bike, like the many other girls that night, I too went to the Marina. We parked opposite Queen Marys College, bought ice cream from the middle aged *Kvality Walls* seller with the knowing smile, who looked disapproving when we paid separately,

and walked down the beach. On a moonlit night like this one, the beach was a sight: every five or six feet, there were bodies writhing on the sand: heads bobbing up and down on laps; arms and legs shooting out of catamarans at intervals. At almost exactly 11, the police started coming around, and the last couples, dusted themselves off and tried to leave as inconspicuously as possible. The few that didn't manage to slip through quietly to their motorbikes and ride back home slipped ready five hundred rupee notes to police. The girls who go to the beach at night are seen as lucky: they usually live in rented houses with other girls their own age, free of their parents, and free of wardens. Though their own housemates might not mind, it was still considered unwise to bring men home: their neighbours might see and complain to the landlord. When Venkatesh was back in town from Pune where he now lived, he spent a few nights with his long-time girlfriend, Sowmya, who had, to their delight, recently moved from her hostel to a house she rented with friends. Venkatesh knew her flatmates well too – they had all been friends in college. However, as Sowmya feared, her neighbours had noticed that Venkatesh had stayed overnight and they called her landlord, who was their distant relative. The landlord descended on them in a few days' time and told Sowmya she would have to leave: she was bringing shame, and this was 'not that kind of neighbourhood.' Affronted, Sowmya told the landlord he couldn't possibly interfere in this matter – only to be threatened with immediate eviction. He couldn't risk disrepute.

Slowly finishing our walk, Vimal and I walked to a cigarette and tea seller and bought masala milk and a pack of Goldflake light cigarettes, as Vimal told me about how he had brought his girlfriend to the Marina during his days at Loyola College. There was nowhere else to go – you couldn't take lovers back home; and hostels were out of the question. No respectable hotel in town would let young unmarried people of the opposite sex get a room together. And not-so-respectable ones would have felt less safe than coming to the beach, he told me: a view many young women had expressed to me. By 'safe' of course, we meant many

things: for one, there was ‘exposure’ as some women put it. The feeling that the receptionist knew why one was there, that he might give one knowing looks as one booked in, picked up one’s key and went to one’s room was too much to bear. Also – this could mean putting up with offensive remarks during checkout. At expensive hotels, the impression was that at least, the staff tried to be discrete, and not let on that it was evident why two unmarried people living in the city would check themselves in for all of one night.

But ‘safe’ also referred to being clearly marked distinct from sex workers, who also tend to use some of the same spaces as middle class women for sex. One young woman reminded me of the scene in the popular Bollywood film, *Jab We Met* (When we met, 2008), in which the protagonists end up stranded in a small town in Madhya Pradesh and choose to go to a cheap motel for the night. As they book in, the receptionist gives the young woman curious looks and asks the man if he’d prefer the hourly rate for the room, rather than a day’s rent: the implication being that he thinks that the woman is a sex worker. This, to many, is the worst-case scenario.

How then does one mark oneself out as being ‘not a sex worker’ while having sex in public spaces? The trick, I was told, is to pick the right spot. For instance, the stretch of the Marina that is opposite the colonial ‘ice house’ where blocks of ice were once stored to cool down the Sahibs’ experience of torrid Madras is college-girl territory. Sex workers, I was told, tend not to operate there. Similarly the stretch near the Marina swimming pool, and ironically near the much-contested statue of the Kannagi, celebrated as a paragon of Tamil women’s sexual virtue, is also seen as relatively safe, although this area is also a popular gay cruising spot. The catamarans, which many young women prefer for their privacy and the fact that it’s seen as less messy than sex on the sand, are more ambiguous. While middle class women use some catamarans, sex workers use them too – presumably for the same reasons.

Besides this, the Elliot's beach in the South of the city, at the end of Besant Nagar is seen in general, to be more elite. Students attending NT and Church colleges by and large prefer to go there: the more posh neighbourhoods that line this stretch of the beach are seen as keeping the 'wrong crowd' out, and sex workers are fewer in number than at the Marina, though by no means entirely absent. Further, crowds of young middle class people, whether there for sex or not, tend to be present in the area until at least 9.30 or 10.00 pm: at the juice stalls lining the beach, the cafes on the little lanes just off of it, and necking, or just even hanging out in cars parked along the road. This lends the area, the veneer of safety that many don't feel at the Marina. Feminist activist, Ponni Arasu, who grew up in this end of the city explained the ritual to me, as she reminisced about her own days in the city: 'walk up and down that parapet. Look at boys – eye to eye – go for a walk till Taj Mahal [a shop in the area]. Go to Cosy and have a Pepsi with two straws, eat pani puri.' Night after night, as I took walks on the beach, I saw this ritual.

However, for many who live or have family living in the predominantly middle and upper middle class, and Brahmin Adyar, Besant Nagar and Thiruvanmiyur neighbourhoods that Eliot beach borders, this could mean an embarrassing run in with an aunt and uncle taking their evening walk, or a neighbour walking his dog. This would mean that sex-workers or not, the Marina was 'safer'. One was likely to get into less trouble there. And then there were rules of course for getting out of trouble if a policeman started questioning– wearing a thin gold necklace and claiming it was the wedding necklace – the *taali* – was useful. But this didn't always work. In that case, having the number of a male friend stored as 'Appa' (Father) also helped, I was told: the policeman could call this person and verify that the woman in question was indeed married. The friend in question would be coached to cooperate and would likely be in reciprocal need for similar favours. The easiest way of course, I was told,

was to press a five hundred rupee note into the man's palm before he got too curious: though most cannot afford this, girls like Shankari were happy to save for this event.

Interestingly, from sex workers' perspectives, the increase in the number of middle class women who came to the beach to have sex over the last ten or fifteen years has affected their work adversely, leaving them with far fewer customers than before. One *thirunangai* (*hijra*) sex worker that I spoke to pointed out that in the past middle class women often refused to go as far as sex with men before marriage, thus leaving the men to come to sex workers. While it is still relatively rare for middle class girls in Chennai – as Shahnaz who lived at Teresa hostel put it, it is still perceived that 'every man wants to break the seal himself on the wedding night' - to consent to penetrative sexual intercourse before marriage, or at least the promise of marriage given the preponderance of a hymen-centric discourse of virginity, most engage in oral sex. This was a thorn in the side of this sex worker. Business had been bad since the late 1990s when oral sex became increasingly normalised among middle class college girls – until then, she told me, cis-female⁵⁵ sex workers had even either refused to perform or charged extra for oral sex, making it a particularly specific *thirunangai* preserve.

College-going women that I spoke to explained that oral sex was of course the most convenient form of sex to have on the beach. One young woman told me how she would go to the beach wearing long skirts and no underwear, so her boyfriend could have easy access without the hassle of having to take off clothes: an act that might draw attention. Others told me how they could simply appear to be lying in their boyfriends' laps without the appearance of anything more intimate, while still 'doing blow jobs'. Further, another woman in her early twenties told me how she and her boyfriend would pleasure each other as they drove around the city – the police was only likely to come and check the car if it was parked: they could

⁵⁵ 'Cis-female' is a widely used descriptor for those assigned female at birth, who identify as women.

easily have sex, while the vehicle was still in motion in less crowded areas of the city. Indeed, oral sex in public places is now popular enough among college girls that I met young women who thought nothing of trading ‘a blow for a ride’ – oral sex for a ride on a boy’s bike or in his car, back home, or to the hostel. ‘It’s easy and you know you don’t have to see his thing while you’re doing it, because it’s in your mouth’ one nineteen year old giggled, explaining her ease with this sexual act.

This trading of sexual acts of course invites the question of sexual transaction. Young women widely discuss sex in the language of transaction. Arti, my roommate described even her first kiss in this language: after two years of asking her to kiss him, her now boyfriend had helped her out of a scrape in school. In return she kissed him. Similarly, another young woman talked about young men bringing her back from parties in the suburbs that she liked to go to: she often gave them ‘a little something’ on the ride back, in their car. It was only fair, she thought; after all they were being nice and bringing her back. Others talked in more traditional terms: one woman talked about how her boyfriend had told his parents about her, and made it ‘official’. In return she had ‘put out’ for him. Public sex was also often discussed in transactional terms. For most women, it was the man’s responsibility to bring the bribe to pay off the policeman and to ensure their safety, while they gave them ‘head’ or oral sex. Again this indicates that regimes of surveillance shape imaginations of what is ‘normal’ and ‘deviant’ sex.

I once tentatively asked how then these middle class girls saw themselves as particularly different from sex workers. The difference, I was skilfully told was that they did not solicit and that they had ‘standards.’ ‘I’m not a despo who’ll go with anyone’ one young woman said. Arti, when I asked her, deflected the question with the telling response that she believed that if there were more sex workers around, girls like herself would be safer. The

police, she believed would be more gainfully occupied in stopping their activities than interrupting her own, and men who were likely to rape would instead 'go to sex workers'. When I asked her what she thought about these men raping these sex workers her response was an often-heard one: that she couldn't imagine why a sex worker would turn down the business, and that when they were there, not with a designated boyfriend, but soliciting sex from 'any guy who's there' then they couldn't possibly take offence at aggressive propositioning. So that then was the other distinction: middle class girls apparently went to the beach only because they absolutely had to – for lack of other places for what was otherwise, respectable sex. But then, as I discovered, getting a room was almost more dangerous.

Get a Room!

'Get a room!' I heard girls say many times, and as I have said many times myself, upon seeing friends express sexual affection with their lovers, in public: it is a teasing way of acknowledging the relationship, and also the embarrassment of its public location. 'Get a Room!' I'd hear in malls when girls leant into their boyfriends' arms in front of friends, and when young men wrapped their arms around girlfriends in the cinema, or the theatre. In Teresa hostel, sometimes this was my roommates' way of bringing into ambiguous legitimacy the same-sex intimacy they engaged in often with each other: 'get a room' someone would shout, and in ironic response I'd hear 'this *is* my room'. They also acknowledged then, that at the end, what young people in Chennai sorely lack, is a room of their own.

But in Chennai, for unmarried couples, getting a room is a deeply complicated matter. In my first month in the city, the question of the room came up when a young lecturer at a college lost her job after she was found leaving a mid-level hotel with her boyfriend one morning, presumably having spent the night there with him. The college's justification was

that she had signed a clause in her contract, agreeing to obey all the institution's rules – including setting a good moral example to students – and not tarnish the name of the college. My informants thought she had been a bit stupid: it never worked to leave the hotel in the morning with your boyfriend. You had to leave in the middle of the day, with a female friend, I was told, to make it all seem less suspicious. But more significantly, this was why it didn't do to get a hotel room: however much more comfortable that might be than furtive groping on the beach. It was traceable: you often had to show some kind of ID to get a hotel room, and they would make copies of it. If someone wanted to trace it all, they could. And then there was the matter of entering and leaving without being noticed. On the beach, one could always make up another excuse.

Many years ago, as an undergraduate student, I remember feeling some horror, and the instant fear of being watched, at hearing the principal of NT College say that she often provides references not only for jobs, but also to young men who come enquiring after the women that they have found on the arranged marriage carousel – via matrimonial websites, the bridal ads in the papers, or through caste network groups. Proudly, she announced that it was in the interests of her students to behave well whilst in college because any misdemeanours would be noted and revealed to men who came enquiring. She added that this sort of spy work was essential today: after all wouldn't every woman in the room want to know all her bridegroom's secrets before marriage? Next to me, a fellow student quickly whispered that she agreed – a cousin who had recently gotten married had found out afterwards that her husband was – pause, and this was the mid 2000s after all, well before the 2009 reading down of Section 377, and when the issue was not even reported in the papers much less on party manifestos – a homosexual.

Hotels often participate in this. They tend to call and inform the college in question if they happen to find out that a female guest at their hotel who they know to be from a local college, has male guests in her room. One student told me she was turned away from one or two hotels that, having seen her age on her ID, simply made the assumption (correct though it was) that she was a college student. They did not want to be 'that kind of place'. In my experience, this happened twice in the year that I spent in Chennai, and in both cases, the woman was suspended, with the punishment being extended to an expulsion in one case where the student questioned the college's authority in interfering in her personal life, especially as she was a legal major and above the age of consent at the time.

Visiting men in their rooms or receiving men in hostel rooms can open up a particularly rocky terrain, for young women from lower middle class and lower caste backgrounds whose hold on a 'respectable' middle class status is already tenuous. I was once told off by a student called Vidya when I asked her why she didn't participate in all the sexual fantasising her friends did. Her mother, she told me, had been a lower middle class college girl, much like herself, who started a sexual affair with a young man, often going to his room, and letting him take her to various hotels. Eventually, when it came to it, he refused to marry her and she ended up being his mistress (*veppaatti* – the word, literally meaning 'kept woman', carries a great deal of shame in colloquial Tamil) while he married someone he found more suitable. She on the other hand, had lost her status and could not find a way to have a respectable marriage. Vidya had faced daily taunts from the men in her neighbourhood as she went to school, and now to college: they asked her suggestively why her father only visited two days a week, rather than live with them; and if she wanted to come away one weekend with them. All she desired now was to avoid any scandal and marry a respectable man.

Hostels are, further, hard pressed to demonstrate their respectability and hence go to great lengths to establish themselves as ‘safe’ places where ‘inmates’ would not be ‘spoilt’ – in the language of one hostel Dean I spoke with. The more restrictions placed on residents, the higher the hostel’s perception as a ‘respectable’ place for middle class women to live in. As a cautionary tale I was often told the story of a hostel about half a kilometre up the road from NT College. Run as a ‘paying guest house’ by a middle-aged woman with the assistance of a cook and a watchman, this hostel was seen as being quite liberal. The ‘Aunty’ running it – effectively proprietor and warden of the establishment – did not prevent girls from smoking in their rooms, or even on the terrace where neighbours might see them, occasionally having a few drinks together, and even let them bring boys up to the living room. Some of the girls who lived there also tended to wear shorts as they stood on the terrace, chatting on their cell phones, and smoking a cigarette, one of my roommates told me.

And then one day, after a boyfriend had dropped off resident at the gates, she noticed a police car parked near the hostel and saw the policeman follow her up to the hostel. So she went in quickly and warned the others that something was up before he rang the doorbell. A neighbour – troubled upon seeing girls dressed in revealing clothes standing on a terrace smoking – had called the police on the suspicion that the hostel was in fact a brothel. The residents, warned by this point, had hid their cigarettes away and changed into *salwar kameez*. When the policeman, accompanied by the nervous proprietor came up to their rooms to question them, they all then showed him their college ids and promised that they would behave better. The place was let off with a slap on the wrist – and a sumptuous dinner for the policeman – but not without a significant loss of reputation.

Since then, this hostel, and most others around it had tightened their regulations. Curfews were tightened and dress codes instituted. Virtually no hostel now allows smoking or

alcohol and young men are apprehended and shooed off by watchmen when seen dropping off their friends at the gate, even if they make no attempt to come in. Manasi, one of my roommates at Teresa hostel was roundly told off by the warden and asked if she had no concern for her own reputation and that of the hostel when she wore a pair of shorts down to the dining hall – what, the warden asked, would the watchman think?

That there is a caste narrative implicit in this is undeniable. I would often be cautioned that women should only do ‘risky activities’ such as going to a boy’s room with men of their own caste. Though from a middle class family, the same as her boyfriend, Arti knew this would be an issue when she started dating her school classmate, Varun, who belonged to the Nair community in Kerala – a caste group that is not Brahmin but is a landowning elite community in the region. Arti herself came from the Izhava caste – a group that is classified as a Scheduled Caste or Other Backward Class: as she jokingly put it, in some other day and age, she’d be aspiring to be Varun’s mistress, not his wife. To make matters worse, in Arti’s mind, her father was a vocal member of an Izhava political association, and very strongly conscious of the fact that his daughter might be treated badly in a Nair household. He had ‘flipped’ as Arti put it, when one day, Arti had an accident on a clandestine motorbike ride home with her boyfriend, and the romance came to light: that his daughter might be spending time late in the evening with a Nair boy made him angry not only because he worried for her safety and if she would be treated with respect by a Nair man, but because, as she told me, he was angry that she had somehow betrayed him and the middle class life he had made for the family. Arti considered herself ‘modern’ and saw caste as mattering very little in her life. So while she understood her father’s anger, she chose to keep seeing Varun. It was indeed ‘risky’ in some ways, particularly as she lied to her parents as well as to the *Ammachchi* (grandmother) appointed as warden at Teresa Ladies Hostel, to go visit him in Bangalore and even stay over: even as she worried that Varun’s father might not approve of her, and often said that if she

and Varun were to marry, it would be amidst drama and family anger, she simply chose to risk it, believing that if she was nice to Varun's family, and a 'decent girl' in general, all would turn out ok.

For others, located more marginally than Arti to middle classness, this was a little different. Kalaiselvi, who was at first reluctant to talk about this but later changed her mind saying: 'Write this, *akka* (sister), only then others will hear of such things' told me a story about her friend, Malar. Both of these young women were from working class backgrounds (Kalaiselvi's parents caught and sold river fish near Madurai), and were, in Kalaiselvi's emphatic assertion 'not SC', but still low in the OBC ladder. Kalaiselvi refused to tell me her exact caste saying it was immaterial as I was clearly a Brahmin anyway. Malar had had what Kalaiselvi described to me as 'love failure.' She had met a boy, Selvam, two years before while doing sports – she played for the state women's athletics team, and he was a long jumper for the men. He now had a job in a small firm in a city in South Tamil Nadu where his family lived, and had moved away from Chennai. But his work required him to come to the city on occasion and at times like this he stayed in a 'bachelor's lodge'.

Malar was at first reluctant to go and see Selvam in the lodge: she didn't want to be suspected of anything. She had told Kalaiselvi that she wouldn't sleep with him before marriage and feared that if she did, he would lose respect for her, and ultimately refuse to marry her. After all, she had revealed to Kalaiselvi, to the latter's nervous anxiety about the risks her friend might be taking, he was a bit higher in caste, though also of the same larger caste group. But Malar had done 'other things' Kalaiselvi told me, with a knowing look, and was very nervous about where this left her. When Kalaiselvi – very proud in this regard, and often prone to take a moral high ground on account of her own complete lack of involvement in any love affairs – asked her why she had 'given in' to his requests to come to the lodge and

spend nights with him there, Malar had told Kalaiselvi that she believed she was in love, and that sometimes she felt herself taken over with desire.

Soon after Malar had first started visiting her boyfriend in the lodge, he told her that he was in debt: he had paid huge sums of money to get one of his sisters married and was now strapped for cash. He had noticed the thin gold chain that Malar usually tucked under her clothes and asked if he might pawn it for cash. When Malar hesitated, he asked how she could trust him enough to come and spend a night with him in a lodge where the staff who saw her check in surely gossiped about this unmarried woman visiting a man traveling for work – perhaps suspecting her of prostitution – but not to pay her back for this eventually. Afraid that her family would be angry, Malar first refused but eventually gave him the necklace. A few months later, Malar's family asked her why she wasn't wearing the gold necklace. She lied, saying she had accidentally left it in the hostel and that Kalaiselvi had it for safekeeping, and then asked Selvam to pay the pawnbroker and give it back to her. Selvam kept putting her off, even asking her to give him her earrings instead. When she refused saying her family would definitely be upset if the expensive gold earrings were lost, he asked her why a slut (*thevadiya*) like her needed earrings and then proceeded to mock her for having come and spent nights with him in the lodge.

Fearing he wouldn't keep his promise to marry her at this rate, Malar decided to give him the earrings. However, she knew something was wrong when he didn't call her on her birthday. And before the earrings changed hands, he broke up with her, saying that he had yet another younger sister to marry off and that his family wouldn't think an alliance with a girl like her was the right thing for him. Kalaiselvi blamed the whole thing on the fact that Malar had given in and gone to Selvam's room in the lodge. Malar, she said, had put everything at risk every month when Selvam came into town, to spend a night with him: lying to everyone,

even keeping a separate mobile phone to call Selvam so that her family, who paid her other phone bill wouldn't notice calls to this number. A lodge of that sort, where only men who were in town for work stayed, also often attracted 'women of a certain kind' (*oru madhiri aana*) Kalaiselvi said, and Malar had allowed her boyfriend to eventually treat her in the same way that he would treat one of them. Utterly humiliated, and afraid that she would never be able to marry well, Malar had become suicidal.

I asked Kalaiselvi if Malar could simply not lie to a potential bridegroom about her previous involvement with Selvam. While conceding that this was probably what Malar would end up doing, Kalaiselvi explained that Malar nevertheless feared that the now-routine investigations that bridegrooms' families often made, of the bride's life before marriage, especially when the bride had lived a few years alone in a big city as a college student, would reveal the indiscreet trips to the lodge to see Selvam. Auto-rickshaw drivers near her hostel and near the lodge might speak out, Kalaiselvi said, and so might friends of Malar's who had heard of this, especially girls who came from the same town and the same caste. Also it didn't matter if they hadn't had sex. The fact that she went to a lodge and spent a night with Selvam alone could be used to discredit her. Further, if one potential bridegroom knew, Kalaiselvi feared that others from the region, and caste group – her pool of options for marriage - would soon find out too. She – and her family – would be shamed.

Besides this, Malar had said that she would never be able to trust a man again, Kalaiselvi said to me, and added that this was why she would never fall in love (*kadhale seyyamaatten*), even after marriage: it was too risky. Also, she pointed out, the story of the girl of lower caste falling for, and sleeping with a man of a higher caste only to be dumped was too common, she told me. And it was time girls like her steered clear of such men. One had to be pragmatic – as such Kalaiselvi had decided that she would marry a man of her own

social class and caste, with a decent salary and settled in the city. She herself hoped to work in the Indian Railways, with all its security of a central government job. Then, looking at my somewhat baffled face, she added that while girls like me (urban, upper middle class, upper caste) could afford to take risks, girls like her, who came from small towns, and needed to find ways to rise in social status couldn't. But wasn't it excessive, I asked her, to say she wouldn't fall in love even after marriage? After all, one wouldn't have to do such things as go to a lodge in secret if one were married.

But Kalaiselvi was convinced that *kaadhal* (romantic love) caused women to lose their minds, and the ability to think rationally: she was not Dalit, she emphasised to me, as she continued, but her parents sold fish. For them, sending a daughter to college was a big step: she in turn intended to find a foothold in Chennai and stay here. She dreamed of her children going to a convent in the city, and shopping in T-Nagar, a busy shopping district that she had only visited a couple of times. In order to do this, she said, she'd need a good head on her shoulders, and not get carried away by emotion – she could not afford to go to any rooms with boys. Then coquettish, she leaned in, probably smiling for the first time since she'd started telling her story: it wasn't as if she hadn't had offers. Plenty of boys wanted to take her to their rooms. She giggled with pride.

Another fear regarding hotel rooms that I often heard was the fear that boys would then want to record the sexual activity on their phones – particularly given most couples could only afford to go to a hotel room, or even find themselves alone at home overnight and invite a boyfriend over, about once a year. In the beach or the park, no one could undress fully: so there might not be any point in trying to make a sex tape or taking pictures. However, in the privacy of the hotel room, the man might want to see one naked, and even take pictures. To some, consenting to sex was consenting 'to everything' – they wouldn't blame the

man, they said, if he didn't take their resistance to being photographed or videoed seriously when they had come this far. This fear had particular resonance because of the MMS (multimedia messaging) scandals that caught the news media's frenzied attention a few years ago, involving college students and their boyfriends. Some women pointed out that in the film *Dev D* (2009), Chanda, one of the lead characters takes to sex work after her boyfriend distributes a sex tape, without her full consent among his friends, and eventually, to a wider community. Her family is left shamed, and Chanda takes to the one line of work where a reputation for sexual voracity might serve her well. Seen as an irreversible loss of caste and class, one young woman's fear that her peers might be falling to this led her ultimately to join a Christian organisation that counsels women to remain abstinent until marriage, lest they fall from promiscuity and premarital sex, to prostitution.

Some women I met were also deeply concerned that the availability of a room would lead men to ask for peno-vaginal sex: an act many women were unwilling to consent to until marriage. As Shahnaz, newly in love, and returning every evening to show off new hickies from her boyfriend explained to me, no one wanted a girl with a 'broken seal'. Every man wanted to 'break the seal' himself on the wedding night. In her family, she said, the cousins of the bride and groom often sat outside the door of the bridal bedchamber, eating ice cream, and speculating on what might be going on inside until the couple had finished having sex. Then, when they were done and had opened the doors, the cousins, following the mothers of bride and groom went in to check the sheets for stains of blood – to prove the bride was actually a virgin. There would be too much public shame, Shahnaz said, and too much scandal: there would be no way to explain it just to the man, rather than his family too, and hope he would be broad minded enough to understand. Claiming that she nevertheless saw sexual activity as a good form of exercise more than anything else, Shahnaz was entirely in favour of engaging in other sexual acts – just not this one, that she felt sure men, including

her boyfriend – here she smiled indulgently, and explained that he was a ‘total man’ and hence she expected that this would be his desire too – would ask for.

Sex on a train, one of my roommates, Manasi said to me one day, looking around to make sure others were not listening, was preferable to risking a man asking for ‘our everything’ (*nammaloda ellaam*) in a room. Though she asserted that she herself had never done it, Manasi believed that the semi-private space of a train berth, with its curtains, and the darkness of night; balanced out by the presence of others nearby, to deter going ‘too far’ was the perfect compromise. She had seen many couples take advantage of this on her termly trips back home by an overnight train to Kerala. Similarly others I spoke to mentioned sleeper coaches where also the reclining chairs, and the curtains provided for comfort and privacy, while still being ‘safe’ enough in that people were around and one need not feel pressured to go ‘all the way.’

Consent, Sex and Intimacy

In this chapter, I have examined the contexts within which sexual acts are conducted in public. I have suggested that this questions the argument that places women’s sexuality in post-liberalisation India in the upper middle class consumer spaces of malls, pubs and cafes, to suggest that in fact young women see the public spaces usually presented to them as being dangerous, as places of possibility. Sex in public spaces, as I have demonstrated, mediates the production of public intimacies and is positioned as an everyday form of agency against the disciplinary regimes that identify a lack of sexual presence with the ‘safety’ of public spaces. At the same time, these practices tend typically to mediate the notion of ‘adulthood’ through the hierarchisation of sex acts in the popular discourse among youth – ironically positioning the most ‘mainstream’ of sexual practices as the most ‘dangerous’.

In conclusion, I now examine the ways in which consent is popularly imagined. The year in which I started fieldwork – 2012 – had already been a year replete with public statements on rape and sexual harassment and anxiety about the declining ‘dignity’ of the nation, with the increased reportage of rape when I arrived in May. As argued previously in this thesis, young women’s sexual safety is the subject of a vibrant public discourse that often conflates the very real danger of sexual violence, with middle class anxieties around increasing avenues for young women’s expressions of sexual desire. These connotations were evident in the debates – within and without the Parliament – and among public figures, and my informants alike.

For a Haryana politician who voiced his views early in 2012, rape could be solved by early marriage, and by a change of diet, away from fast food. Bengal’s Mamata Banerjee blamed mothers who allow their teenaged sons and daughters to hold hands with members of the opposite sex: this no doubt created the opportunity for rape she averred. Here again – there is confusion. Marital rape – recognized as a crime since 2006 in India – appears to be non-existent in the Haryana politician’s vocabulary; and indeed his anxieties about rape are deeply intertwined in anxieties also about emerging youth cultures of leisure and sociality that are located in places of consumption and squarely within edifices representing a much lauded, albeit troubled, global modernity. For Mamata, rape seems to co-exist with pre-marital sex on some continuum of illegitimacy: where consent doesn’t appear to hold any importance, and instead the anxiety rests in the possibility that teenaged girls might be sexually active.

We might note here that the 2013 amendments to the Indian Penal Code in response to the Delhi Rape also included an increase in the legal age for sexual consent from sixteen to eighteen years. Many of those I spent time with saw this as a welcome move, suggesting that this would prevent men from taking advantage of sixteen or seventeen year old girls, who

might choose to consent without ‘thinking about the consequences’ – i.e. *risk* here, is not so much risk of sexual violence but risk of the loss of reputation. Sushma Swaraj, the BJP leader of Opposition in the Parliament made controversial statements about how she believed that should she survive, the young woman who had been raped and brutally injured on the Delhi bus in December 2012, would do so as a *zinda laash* – a zombie. More recently, politicians across the spectrum, ranging from Swaraj herself and other members of the BJP, to Congress youth icon, Milind Deora have made statements welcoming the death penalty awarded to the rapists.

This relates to a murky understanding of the categories of *sex* and *rape*. After about two months of hearing the word *rape* used sometimes as a substitute for *sex*, among many groups of young women I spent time with, I began to ask women I met to define what they meant when they said *rape*. Among the responses I got – which ranged from *painful sex* to *sex before marriage*, with only two informants out of a pool of about twenty five even bringing consent into the picture – I noticed a running thread that appeared to cast rape as being illegitimate sex in some form. As scholars like Phadke et al (2011) suggest, anxieties about sexual violence are rife in the urban Indian middle class milieu and often inform regimes of surveillance and control that regulate young women’s access to different kinds of spaces. In converse, *rape* itself appears to be understood within these regimes – an argument that is in line with the Foucauldian notion that resistance speaks the same language as the power it resists (Foucault 1978). V. Geetha (1998, 330) in an article on domestic violence and lower middle class women in Chennai argues that what is at stake is a matter of epistemology: ‘the status of women’s knowledge and pleasure in a context which actively persuades them to view their subordinate role in the relationship as given, natural, and therefore, acceptable and enjoyable’.

The positioning of rape's emotive value within its purchase within a patriarchal framework is further explored in the next chapter, through a study of everyday humour about rape among young women.

5 | Why is Rape Funny? Violence, Laughter and Intimacy

Why is rape funny? Can it be funny at all? During fieldwork, I often asked these questions of others and myself as I heard my informants make jokes about intimate violence – sexual and otherwise – often resulting in sessions of shrill giggling about a black eye from a beating, sore breasts from being groped all day, and other embarrassing forms of bodily harm. Outside these joking situations, these young women expressed outrage at reports of sexual violence in the papers, and spoke angrily of their own fears of sexual violence in the city’s public spaces. They expressed anger at their fathers who sometimes treated their mothers badly, and confronted them on the phone. Yet, among friends, and in the ‘safe’ spaces of the women’s hostel, rape, sexual harassment and abuse within romantic relationships, were often a subject of raucous humour and vigorous, nightlong banter.

This chapter is also a response to the comment I have received many times over on presenting sections of this research in various parts both of the UK and India. A number of readers and commentators have pointed out that my informants seem to giggle a lot: that I often describe embarrassed tittering, sniggering at someone else falling. Laughter, that is, seems to pervade my research. This is not a false representation. Thinking back to my own days in college, I remember hours of raucous laughter almost everyday: times when we sat around a table in the canteen, making fun of someone or the other: in the early days, often me. We laughed about the teacher who said ‘public hair’ rather than ‘pubic hair’ when she was teaching sex-ed and about the girl who had come to college in pyjamas because she thought she was that cool. For my informants, Ranjana’s large breasts always elicited some humour. Boyfriends were subjects of laughter and imitation; as were wardens and deans of hostels; parents, grandparents; the icky sex lives of extended family who noisily ensured everyone had heard about Matthai Uncle’s kinky predilections. My informants did laugh a lot, and I with them. We also got in trouble for laughing a lot. The warden would lecture us on how we

appeared ‘uncultured’ and ‘immoral’ to the servers in the mess, and the watchman when we laughed like that. College authorities told students off for laughing aloud while sitting in the canteen⁵⁶. As has been discussed in previous chapters, many college authorities repeated the widely held idea that young people – particularly young women – were prone to being ‘emotional’, and hence incapable of making ‘right and sensible decisions’ as one lecturer put it. It was laughter that so offended Kamala, a Professor at Arul College, in the interview I describe in detail in Chapter two. Kamala saw the unrestrained laughter of a group of dark-skinned women on the college grounds outside her window, their falling to their sides as they giggled helplessly, as a sign that they were, first of all, ‘SC/ST girls’ – i.e. Dalit or Adivasi – and secondly that they ‘did not know how to behave in public’, something she believed would render them vulnerable. Laughter was a sign of looseness – it was a letting go of the carefully cultivated discipline that girls were supposed to learn on the way to becoming ladies; it was affect gone mad: producing laughter and causing bodies to shake with ungainly mirth rather than showing *vekkam, maanam, soodu and soranai*.

Sometimes this joking was accompanied by physical play-acting. Friends leapt on each other and pretended to roughly touch them, or to pull their clothes off, eliciting shrieks of laughter from the other women around them. Sitting in my top bunk at Teresa Hostel I watched, and was occasionally drawn into the conversation as my roommates trickled in from classes. ‘Did your bra snap today? Look at the load it has to carry.’ Ranjana would slap away Arti’s hand as she tried to grab a breast. They relaxed, settling into their beds, or sitting around on the floor with their laptops and smartphones, browsing the Internet and checking Facebook, as they traded the day’s gossip. As the evening wore on, someone usually put on an

⁵⁶ See Kalpana Ram (2012) on associations between ‘excessive’ laughter and spirit possession in Tamil Nadu, particularly, in the social construction of the figure of the *pey* (ghost).

*item number*⁵⁷ from a recent Bollywood or Tamil film. As the catchy song blared on *You-Tube* or through the speakers attached to someone's MP3 player, my roommates gyrated and shimmied across the room, imitating the dancers onscreen, cheering and egging each other on. Some nights, they really got into it, imitating not only the sexually suggestive moves of the female dancers shown in these songs, but also the men usually shown watching them. They hooted at each other, and replayed film sequences that showed men trying to touch the woman's waist as she danced. Someone yelled out: 'What? Want to rape me, girl?'

Then as the evening wore on, the dancing and banter soon took on another colour, and one of them taunted another: 'Do you know what I would do with you if I were a boy?' Playful chasing ensued, and often ended in the young women involved kissing, or cuddling in one of their beds – still giggling, and often making exaggerated noises of sexual pleasure. While at first I was embarrassed, wondering if I was in the way at a moment of sexual exploration, it soon became clear that this banter sought out an audience. It was loud and exaggerated, often engaging me, and other lookers-on, in its routine. And it was usually about at this time that one of the party participating called it 'rape' – right in the midst of squealing laughter, helpless pleasure as friends threw pieces of food at the couple wrestling on the bed, or begged them to stop as they snorted water through their noses for being unable to stop laughing.

This chapter addresses the context described above by reflecting on jokes that young women tell each other, as a 'diagnostic of power' (Abu-Lughod 1990, 42) in that they are revealing of popular discourses about intimacy, sexuality, youth and violence circulating among middle class women. This humour, I demonstrate, is situated in a domain not of crisis,

⁵⁷ *Item numbers* are musical performances from regional language films that show erotic dance moves accompanied by catchy music. Typically the *item* in *item number* refers to a sexily dressed woman who is performing the dance and draws on colloquial usage in urban India to refer to attractive women.

but of the ubiquitous ambiguities between violence and pleasure that characterise young women's lives. The types of joking play described in this chapter would fall under the category of what Boxer and Cortés-Conde (1997, 277) call 'conversational joking' or 'situational humour', which they define as 'a play-frame, created by the participants with a background of in-group knowledge, encompassing not only verbal features but also suprasegmentals and non-verbal communication.' Situational humour further signals the possibility of ambiguity as a game in the exchange of power. As a form of play that is not fixed or as conventionalised as, say, joke-telling, which is structured by a narrative, with a punch line, told usually by a single narrator, for the benefit of an audience who may or may not find it funny, conversational and situational forms of humour are more open to the manipulations of the participants.

A prominent vein of argument in the scholarship on humour thus examines the joke as a disordering device (Douglas 1999, Oring 1992) – an antirite that offers 'an exhilarating sense of freedom from form in general' (Douglas 1999, 150), whose purpose is to 'disrupt the listener's traditional categories and expectations' (Oring 1992, 92). Building on this work, other scholars (Seizer 2005, Pratt 1993, Goldstein 2003) position the joke more ambiguously: reinforcing social order even as it produces imaginaries in which norms might be differently inhabited. Drawing on Bakhtin (1981) and Freud (1976), this body of work has come to regard practices of discursive distancing as central to the joke, rendering it 'simultaneously delicate and vulgar' (Seizer 2005, 63). This view regards dark humour in particular – on death, rape, poverty and other grim subjects – which might evoke seemingly tasteless, or 'out of place' laughter (Goldstein 2003) as being contingent upon a knowledge of the particular fields of social power in which the joke is embedded (Kramer 2011). A shared sense of humour on these subjects thus marks collective histories and values (Gay 1991) as well as class dispositions (Bourdieu 1984). Joking among women has further been studied as a genre of women's expressive tradition – a subject that has attracted wide debate as an ambiguous site

for the articulation of an alternative common sense (Raheja and Gold 1994, Raheja 1994) that may simultaneously ‘reinforce authority by feigning defiance’ (Guha 1999, 31). This literature reveals a history of women’s use of dark humour in such traditions, to articulate subversive moralities that upend the logic of their oppression in a playful mode, and reveal the contradictions of the normative order (Ciotti 2011).

I first put the question this chapter began with – why is rape funny – to a group of young women I was having coffee with at the Oxford Bookstore’s café, a popular destination for college students, whether they actually went to the bookstore or not, and confusingly for me, referred to only as *Oxford* (‘Shall we go to Oxford after class today?’⁵⁸). Today we were having quiche as we talked about something I had increasingly been hearing on my daily rounds in the College. Some of it was just bits and pieces I had picked up in the aural atmosphere – shouts of ‘fuck off or I’ll rape you ok?’ and ‘what, you got raped or what? Look in the mirror’ as I walked by – and other instances were utterances that had been made by young women I had been intentionally hanging out with – ‘at least if you’d been raped, you’d have got some no? Too bad he only grabbed your boobs’ and ‘Got raped by your boyfriend yesterday? Lucky bitch.’

I examine these forms of banter and play as constituting neither resistance, nor necessarily a dual device that is ‘simultaneously delicate and vulgar’ (Seizer 2005, 63) by virtue

⁵⁸ See Nita Kumar (2006) on the evocative significance of names like ‘Oxford’ – in her context for schools, but as I often saw also for ‘hanging out’ places such as bars, cafes and malls – in bringing a sense of being ‘global’. A place like the Oxford Bookstore – itself entirely unconnected with the Oxford University Press, or any institution in the town from which this is ironically being written – is therefore automatically ‘not local’, joining on its global high horse, places like the popular 10 Downing Street bar. We might link this back to the discussion on brands in Chapter 3 as well, to suggest that the popularity of places such as the Oxford Bookstore and its café – complete with coffee table books and the elaborately put-together casual appearance that appears to blur the line between commercial establishment and intimate space – are implicated in a politics of brand performativity (Nakassis 2012, Newell 2012). While less direct than fake Gucci bags, such spaces evoke a *real* place in the West of which its mimic in the Global South is assumed to be a cheap copy.

of the parodic distance that is set up in the act of narrating the joke. Instead, I suggest, that the rape joke facilitates a playful sideways movement that allows for a break from the calibrations of sexual risk that young women typically engage in everyday (Phadke 2013), in the business of reproducing middle class life. The pervasive discourse of sexual risk, as I have demonstrated, produces an experience of the everyday experience of sexuality as precarious. In this context, joking about consent and desire allows for playful subversions of these discourses. In this it is not heroic or transformative, and instead only constitutes a moment of careless abandon – a break from managing the precarity of being a middle class woman. Writing about Dalit women in North Indian towns, Ciotti (2011) critiques the mainstream argument in this literature that positions women’s subversive cultural forms as separate from everyday life and constituting a protected space of expression. The jokes analysed in this article, like the ribald jokes that Ciotti (2011) examines, spill over into the non-ritualised everyday – they are made on the road, while walking back from College, in young women’s bedrooms, and whispered in classrooms, and circulated via text message and email.

Friendship, Intimacy and Violence

I was absorbed in my book one evening at Teresa Hostel, where I had, by that point, been living for a few weeks, when I heard someone saying loudly, ‘I’ll come and rape you ok, bitch?’ I looked up to see that the speaker was Divya, an eighteen-year-old woman I had met a few days before. Divya lived in a room upstairs but spent a lot of her time in the large dormitory I shared with seven others. These were her ‘real friends’ she had told me many times: the people she felt ‘actually close to’. The senior students – all in their early twenties – who were my roommates had also many times professed their affection for Divya. She was ‘humble’ they had told me, whilst also being ‘smart’ and ‘bubbly’. They considered her a little sister and it was this lot who were her *chechis* in the hostel. They looked after her in a number of ways: taking her shopping, nursing her when she was ill and making excuses to get her out

of trouble with the warden, in return for which she did their chores, fetching them coffee and breakfast, running out to help them recharge their phones and so on. On this day, Divya stood at the door, hands on her hips, giggling as she called out to a roommate in her year at Church College: 'I'll come rape you ok, bitch?' Before I knew it, she had dived into one of the beds, and was now aggressively sitting on, and intimately touching Geraldine, who was now squealing with laughter, as the others in the room egged Divya on.

Later that day, I spoke with Arti and Ranjana, two of my most outspoken roommates about what Divya had done. 'This is why I love her' Arti said proudly, explaining to me that the 'rape' scenario that Divya had played out was a sign that she was 'close' with the group and that she trusted them. On other occasions I had seen Ranjana and Arti themselves deploy this metaphor as they chased each other around, or played physical games with other friends: squirting water on each other, teasing each other about a new sexual experience, or even simply expressing an outpouring of love. Further, Arti and Ranjana qualified that the 'love' expressed the 'rape' enactment was not 'some lesbian thing' but only 'love between sisters' – a form of intimacy that came from their shared appreciation of the joke.

Young women joked about a lot of sexual scenarios in the room – often playing out both fantasies and fears. For instance, one common theme for banter and enactment was the scene of the wedding night. As discussed in chapter five, most of my informants did not expect to have penetrative sexual intercourse until marriage. Hence the wedding night held a central place in their sexual imaginary as a climactic occasion: potentially both 'the most beautiful thing' and an object of great dread. Some feared that they would be in too much pain. Shaheen, who lived next door, anxiously told me how she thought her 'seal was already broken': she believed her hymen had ruptured while exercising at the gym. Ironically, she had only taken up exercise in the hope of attracting a suitable husband and now she had to extra

careful to choose a 'knowledgeable man' (*vivaram ulla aalu*) for a husband, someone who would not suspect her of having previously had sex, just because her hymen was no longer intact.

In exploring this, all kinds of wedding night scenarios were imagined. Given the small, narrow single beds in the hostel, one day, Ranjana and Manasi played out the fantasy of having one's 'first night' with a husband in a train: perhaps on one's honeymoon, or even just on the way to their new marital home in a different city. They wondered what the appropriate level of noise would be for such a scenario, and how to move around in a small train berth, if it was uncomfortable. 'What' Arti added, 'if there was lots of blood and it got all over the berth?' Friendship makes places where precarious positions can be explored within a context of minimised risk. Pretending to smoke, or drink, and often simultaneously playing hyper masculine and lusty roles at once explore multiple axes of transgression, and fantasy at once. However, the distance of the joke, allows these practices to remain discursively located within a domain of fantasy, thus locating them within a place of lessened risk. As Žižek (1997) writes, fantasy and reality share a complex relationship: though the pretext of fantasy is that it is not real, it often allows for the expression of complex desires, that might not be repressed as within a Freudian framework but require distance in order to ensure that the subject of these desires remains within a livable (Butler 1990) place. In a similar vein, Lukose (Lukose 2009, 81-84) writes about how young women in the hostel in Kerala, where she conducted research, often took pleasure in the practice of *chammal* – a teasing banter that aims to upend hierarchies of age and class; while also acknowledging and exploring the boundaries of youthful sexuality and desire.

Rape, as in this case, was often a theme around which young women built intimacy with each other. Sometimes the joking talk about rape would begin with the narration of an

actual, and threatening incident of sexual harassment on the road. This was a common occurrence in the lives of most women, spawning joking statements such as ‘you’ve never been groped on the road? Are you that ugly, or have you never stepped outside your house?’ Often enough, however, my roommates came back from class a bit shaken, and over tea and biscuits, told the others about the ‘eve teasing’ they had endured. Many times, the response to this was humour. As the narrator finished, others would poke her, asking if she wished it had gone further. Mightn’t it have been fun if she’d been raped? She might at least have ‘gotten some [sex]’. One of them would thrust her pelvis outward and walk towards the narrator assuming a theatrical masculine posture, and the narrator – who had likely experienced the sexual harassment no more than a few hours before – would run, screaming expletives and swearing, as the others laughed. Sometimes the woman who had been harassed would respond, in this re-enactment, with ‘Don’t touch my boobs, pervert’ or other angry retorts most women consider too unsafe to actually use in situations of sexual harassment or violence, for fear of aggravating the perpetrator. At other times the woman might walk towards her pretend-harasser, breasts out, daring ‘him’ to come and touch her, gyrating her hips and taunting, ‘come and touch me’ (*enne toda*).

Lawrence Cohen (1995) comments on the eliding between hierarchy and equality; rape and intimacy as central to joking and bantering cultures among youth. He writes that cultures of *masti* or play between men in North India are not so much about ‘sex’ as something that can easily be separated from other forms of everyday sociality, including the production of hierarchy but ‘about a different form of male homosociality which collapses playfulness and penetration into a single coherent desire, we must read them both against and from such a desiring position’ (Cohen 1995, 401). Gender, he writes, is read as split – as ‘simultaneous playfulness and violence’ (Cohen 1995, 421): at once about the violent negotiation of hierarchies and about fantasy and pleasurable play. In the instance described above, for

instance, young women play out both the fantasy of control over the encounter – turning it thus from sexual violence to a playful enactment of sexual desire – as well as that of the angry retort. On the road, and in a situation of sexual harassment, I was advised that retorting would show arrogance (*timir*), which might only goad the harasser into continuing, besides also showing a lack of demure innocence, which might put off otherwise sympathetic bystanders. It is useful to draw attention here to Butler’s analysis of MacKinnon’s controversial formulation of sexual aggression as productive of hierarchized gender roles (Butler 1990). She suggests that harassment and aggression are not directly productive of gender but ‘the paradigmatic allegory’ (Butler 1990, xiv) for its production. This analysis allows us to account for the kind of play between women that reinscribes these gender roles through a replaying of this aggression, with the lines between harassment and consensual rough-talk blurred.

These young women did not see such joking and play as reinforcing any prevalent discourses about rape and demureness. Instead, one of my roommates explained, these jokes were funny because ‘at least with friends, we have to be free’. Their humour lay in the suspension of self-discipline, and demureness that was required otherwise to embody a ‘safe’ and ‘good’ middle class subjectivity. It also established trust – such jokes were never made with anyone that this group of women suspected would tell on them to the warden, or gossip about them with others they could not trust, and who might make a scandal of anything they said. That would be ‘risky’. Indeed, losing the trust of this group came with a high price as I discovered. Months before I started at the hostel, one of their friends had been expelled from the hostel. This woman, my roommates told me, had ‘become spoiled’. They no longer liked or trusted her after a few incidents of her drunkenly repeating some of this girl-talk, a lot of which drew on the friends’ very real everyday experiences, to her male friends. This put the group at ‘risk’ – those men, Ranjana told me, might taunt them, or follow them about, making them look like ‘dirty’ girls. With their respectability at stake, the group decided to cut their

traitor loose. One of them reported her sexual exploits – all discussed previously in such joking scenarios – to the warden. ‘She liked to be raped’ Shahnaz, the oldest in the room, told me, and this, now taken out of the context of the joke, was grounds for her expulsion. In doing this, the young women do exactly what is expected of them as middle class women expressing agency: they avoid risk, reinstating the notions of appropriate sexuality with which I was many times told ‘real life’ ‘actually’ functions over their joking scenarios of transgression, desire and fantasy, and mitigate risk that the two might mix by getting rid of the loose cannon amongst them. The argument made in Chapter Three that friendship is a contradictory resource: on the one hand making places for fantasy, transgression and non-normative intimacies; while also on the other functioning as a site where young women reaffirm hierarchical heterosexual femininities founded on middle class ideals of sexual morality, even disciplining each other in their roles as friends.

Rape jokes were often also thus an instrument in the practices through which young women negotiated status and hierarchy with each other. As Nakassis (2013) notes, college students often negotiate status with each other by setting up hierarchies of age and year in college. Chapter Three has examined how young women play with some of these hierarchies, also using the addresses of male cross-kin relations to further subvert their lack of access to young men’s world of a carefree youth. These hierarchies were also often reinscribed during play, along with hierarchies of gender, through the staging of sexual violence.

It was exam season and Ranjana was studying. The rules of the room dictated that junior students make tea and coffee for seniors during exams so Manasi ran around, as always, mixing endless cups of coffee for the four seniors, planted with books all around them, on four of the eight beds in the room. Ranjana now asked Manasi to quickly make her a cup, and Manasi, stumbling about, managed to spill some, much to the amusement of some others.

Ranjana said, smiling, ‘clumsy bitch.’ Manasi looked up: ‘You’re a lazy fuck.’ This was unprecedented. The seniors often called the junior girls names – saying swear words in English, one of the others had told me, always works to intimidate and rag juniors – but the reverse was a clear break in precedent. Manasi proceeded to affect an exaggeratedly feminised stance and fluttered her eyelashes, saying in childlike tones, ‘fuck-*chechi*’ (fuck – elder sister: this mocks the usual pattern of saying the elder sibling’s name followed by ‘*chechi*’). Ranjana then stood up, rolling up the sleeves of her T-shirt and hiking up her shorts and sauntered toward Manasi in an exaggeratedly masculine affectation, saying ‘What did you say, bitch? What did you say? I’ll show you what fucking is.’ She proceeded to chase Manasi around the room as the others stood and cheered. The scene ended in Ranjana pushing Manasi into a bed and pinning her down while saying, ‘Look at what I’ll do to you’ and touching intimate parts of her body, as Manasi screamed theatrically. The others laughed and imitated Manasi.

This instance, to which my roommates knew I was privy, was often cited back to me as an example of the close intimacy that members of this room enjoyed with each other. If relations had been unequal and hierarchical, I was told Ranjana would have taken Manasi’s disregard for her seniority in swearing at her as an insult and punished her for it seriously. She would have thought Manasi had ‘head-weight’, a colloquial term for arrogance. Conversely, by indulging in this chasing game rather than stand her ground for her right to return insults, Manasi had shown that she was not going to cause ‘unnecessary trouble.’ The metaphor of ‘rape’ here also playfully engages the everyday experience of sexual discipline that young women face, in which sexual violence hangs over them as the ‘or else...’ that disciplines them in other social contexts, naturalizing it in its use here to discipline a ‘junior’ into appropriate behaviour.

Turning Rape on its Head

Joking practices about rape typically also turn the discourse of sexual violence on its head, playfully addressing the discursive impossibility of consent for young women. As discussed in a previous section, all sex outside marriage is cast as illegitimate in the popular middle class discourse in Chennai, thus placing consent not in the hands of individual women, but in the control of families and caste-based communities. ‘Rape’ and ‘sexual harassment’ thus become demure metonyms to mask the disrepute of consent in the sexual act. As such, for many young women, refusing consent was a means of declaring that they came from reputable families who would not allow them to have sex before marriage: a bargaining tool, as a group of nineteen and twenty year olds explained to me, in case the man then marked them as coming from less than respectable stock. It did not necessarily signify the individual’s lack of desire for sex.

This complex terrain of consent would explain, for instance, a popularly repeated joking acronym – PARIS, expanding to Please Allow Raping in School. Used typically by young women, it playfully expresses their inability to consent within legal and societal paradigms of femininity, where they might be, in age terms, ‘too young’, or see consent for sexual activity as belonging to their families, but also the desire for sex through any means, even if they can only legitimately speak of their sexual experience as ‘rape’. ‘Rape’ – recalling Geetha’s argument (1998), discussed in the last chapter, on there being a crisis in epistemology on this – thus becomes an epistemological entry point to understanding ‘sex’, and is hence, in an imaginary that allows for sexual pleasure, desirable and an object of humour. Thus, among many of the young women I met, rape also found a place as metonymic for ‘sex’ itself: ‘did your boyfriend rape you or what?’ for instance, when a roommate returned from a date, and ‘I just want to go and get raped, dude’, as an expression of sexual frustration.

Further, as many scholars argue, the bodies of lower caste women are discursively constructed as sexually undisciplined – always arousing male desire, and always consenting – subjects of governmentality (Rege 2006, 1996, Menon 2009). For many young women of such backgrounds, one means to achieve much-coveted middle classness is to establish themselves as sexually respectable subjects. One popular narrative I heard in women’s colleges in Chennai about rising incidences of urban sexual violence blamed the ‘rape epidemic’ on the increasing migration into the city, and into middle class spaces – colleges, malls, and popular middle class workplaces such as the IT sector – of a growing number of women of lower middle class and lower caste, i.e. OBC and Dalit, backgrounds. These young women, one professor told me, specifying that she was talking about ‘SC/ST women’ – Dalits and Adivasis, classified respectively as the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes – did not know ‘how to behave in public’. Their ‘silly’ and ‘uncivilised’ behaviour, in her opinion, gave the impression that they were not ‘serious’ and instead suggested active sexuality. Such women, this professor told me, were more vulnerable to rape, implying here that their being perceived as always consenting to sex, also then denies them the legitimacy of really refusing to consent. Positioned against such discourses, most of the young women I met attempted to construct themselves as sexually respectable in various ways: if they had a partner, they would proclaim to be ‘a one-man woman’ – i.e. monogamous – and many, in fact extolled the virtues of arranged marriage as ensuring stability and family support, over ‘college romance’ and ‘stupidity’. Within joking scenarios then, it is this logic as well that is turned on its head as young women express sexual desire, and frustration, as in the circulation of PARIS, literally playing the sexually voracious woman, usually assumed to be lower caste and working class, who is asking for it. In making rape jokes then, young women also construct a place to embody an alternative common sense that runs contrary to the compulsions to consolidate and hold on to middle class respectability.

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan explores these continuities between sex, intimacy and rape in her analysis of popular Tamil writer, Anuradha Ramanan's short story *Prison*, which tells the story of a young Brahmin woman who, after she is raped by a Christian and implicitly low-caste man, is thrown out of her home by her angry husband. The young woman boldly goes to her rapist, demanding that he give her a home, and lives with him, as a reminder of his crime, and refusing to address a single word to him, for his whole life. Sunder Rajan writes that in this story the protagonist conflates marriage and rape: 'she sees marriage as a prolonged sexual domination by the male, and rape as a momentary violent aberration, but both as compensated by, and entailing, the man's responsibility for the woman' (Sunder Rajan 1993, 67). This suggests the converse of Geetha's argument above, that rape, is one among many similar indignities suffered by women, and a subversive reading of *Prison* would position rape's status as the most heinous crime within a patriarchal frame in which its heinousness is an attribute of its having interrupted the norms of traffic in women. For Ramanan's heroine, the rape itself – while its trauma is never denied – as a one-time aberration pales in comparison with her upper caste husband's shunning of her: an act which positions him as being indubitably pure in his Brahmin community and simultaneously positions her as a fallen woman and an outcaste. She is forced to sleep on his verandah, and in public places at first, feeling undignified in having to perform intimate activities like sleeping in such open spaces. Much like the rape, this abandonment too strips her of control over her body and its dignity. She eventually defiantly embraces this publicness of her sexuality, earning more and more disrepute as she lives in her rapist's home and walks to the river every morning to fetch water. Ramanan's heroine is, in many ways, an example of a wilful subject (Ahmed 2014): one who stubbornly continues to act as she wishes, refusing the disciplining power of shame, while also eventually showing greater respect for her rapist than for her husband, seeing the latter's abandonment of her as being the greater, more undignifying injury.

We might argue, drawing on Geetha (1998) that the social world in which the protagonist dwells in this story does not allow, as Sunder Rajan (1993) also acknowledges, for a feminist resolution to her narrative. Her embrace of her rapist might be seen in light of Geetha's narratives of women (1998), who steadfastly love husbands who beat them: there is a crisis of epistemology here where 'violence as an experience...represent[s] a point of intersection, of trajectories of hurt, touch, love, fear, hunger and shame.' (Geetha 1998, 308) However, what is particularly interesting in the story is the positioning of a long-term abandonment, and the loss of status that comes with it as being more wounding than rape. The subversive potential in this story, much like in scenarios where young women playfully address rape, lies in disturbing the discourse of 'fate-worse-than-death' that encircles rape, while also playing with the disrepute that attaches to the raped woman as having 'asked for it'. As Menon (2000) shows, this discourse makes little place for agency, pushing the raped woman into the category of 'victim' and 'fallen woman' with no respite. Rather in positioning rape among other abandonments and forms of violence that women face, the young women question the power that the threat of rape holds over them as a disciplining force. In actually asking for it – 'Please Allow Raping in School' – these women playfully, and in a display of wilfulness, embrace the shame of having given consent to sex.

Fantatising Transgression

This notion that good girls always refuse consent was complicated often by fantasies of sexually aggressive men as being dark-skinned, brawny and rough talking. In my room at Teresa Hostel, the young women often bantered with each other, one of them playing 'the rapist' and the other, 'the victim', the former invariably portrayed as a tough, 'barbaric' man, speaking in accents that form the aural register of working class presence in Chennai. The nominated 'man' would swagger theatrically to the 'victim', calling to others to watch, as he

reached out to touch her waist or her breast, commenting on the softness and fairness of her skin. The ‘victim’ would squeal ‘no’, begging the ‘man’ to stop, even as she giggled and asserted that she was from a ‘good family’. The others would egg on the ‘rapist’ – urging ‘him’ to just ‘go and rape her’, commenting that the woman was a slut anyway, and had sexual knowledge. The young woman’s own chequered sexual history would be recited and laughed at – ex-boyfriends mentioned as having been unable to satisfy her. Towards the end, the ‘rapist’ would pin down his ‘victim’ as she screamed theatrically, recalling the heroines of old Tamil and Hindi films.

Invariably the male persona portrayed in this was not the ‘decent’ middle class college student who was considered most desirable for a serious relationship or marriage. Dismissed, jokingly, as *thayir saadam* – rice mixed with yoghurt, i.e. the least spicy dish imaginable – these young men barely figured in these fantasy games. Aggressive masculinities are often associated with being lower caste and working class, and my roommates typically portrayed this in joking scenarios by employing *Madras bashai* – the local dialect of Tamil often associated with these social groups. The figure of ‘the rapist’ was thus always imagined as a rough talking, ‘local’ or ‘*cheri*’⁵⁹ working class man. Reputed to be sexually voracious and good in bed, *cheri pasangka* – *cheri* or local boys - were the subjects of many fantasies of rough sexual encounters. ‘I just want him to rape me’ Manasi, who lived in my room at Teresa Hostel would begin her fantasising, on more than one occasion, as others chimed in, speculating on the hickies that a strong, dark man might give, the squeals and moans that Manasi might issue in the course of the ‘rape’ and how she would never ever admit to it – after all, others would tease, ‘you are such an innocent (*paavam*) girl’

⁵⁹ Chapter Three goes into detail on the notions and connotations of ‘local’ and ‘*cheri*’ in Chennai. In short, ‘local’ typically refers to someone without global references, who is regarded unmediated by upper middle class discourses of comportment, dress and behavior. ‘*Cheri*’ is a caste-inflected term, literally referring to the Dalit settlements outside villages, and to slums in cities, which is increasingly used to refer to anyone seen as being ‘low’ in cultural and social capital.

Further, when middle class women risk their reputations, they place not only class at stake, but often also caste. Desire for, or sexual acts with a man of lower caste typically place women of middle and upper castes on the limits of respectability. These sexual fantasies about dark, brawny strangers then represent the central middle class and upper caste anxiety about ‘respectable’ women’s use of public spaces – i.e. their contact with, and the possibility of their sexual unions with ‘inappropriate’ men. As the student’s comment on Dalit men above suggests, most of the women I met did not see these men as appropriate romantic matches. However, they were central to a sexual imaginary, that cast them as being sexually vigorous, and far more virile than the ‘nerdy’ upper caste men most of these women imagined marrying some day. The ‘wild sex’ that many imagined with these men was, for the feelings of illegitimacy and wrongness it brought up, immediately cast as ‘rape’ – the word here said often with breathy desire.

As scholars like Mankekar (2004) argue, fantasising is often a means of learning to desire. As such, telling jokes in which *thayir saadam* upper caste and ‘appropriate’ men are spurned for more dangerous erotic pleasures with brawny, dark-skinned lower caste men, stereotyped as sexually vigorous allows young women to briefly inhabit a different possibility – one that they typically discipline themselves against. In ‘real life’, I was often told, such men would ‘only bring down the status of the girl’. It was not a ‘responsible’ thing to do, and might cause rupture with family and friends, not to mention scandal. Among friends, however, it was possible to admit to feeling attraction for builders, painters and carpenters, for the *porukki* (letch) in the bus stop and other ‘inappropriate’ partners, even indulge in extended sexual fantasies about such men.

The metaphor of rape is particularly disturbing albeit telling in this case however, because popular media discourse also casts these men as the primary source of danger to young women. The standard imaginary of the rapist is of an ‘uneducated and barbaric’ man as my roommate, Arti put it one day, suggesting that if all men could be ‘educated and civilised’ sexual assault might cease to exist. Jokes about such men ‘raping’ middle class women appear in some ways to reinforce such discourses of lower caste and working class men as posing a risk to middle class women⁶⁰. They allow middle class women to fantasise while still positioning themselves as ‘innocent’ and ‘respectable’ victims of ‘barbaric’ men. By and large, the young women I met saw nothing wrong or amiss in this and agreed with the idea that ‘low class’ – a term that often implicitly referred also to lower caste – men would be ‘shady’ and ‘creepy’, even ‘the sort of guy who would actually rape you’. As such, joking – in so far as it is not a departure from the ordinary affair of everyday life, but only a break from one aspect of reproducing middle class femininity – here allows women to reinforce their social privilege as upper caste and middle class, even as they briefly depart from these ideals in flippant fantasy.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, the image of the lower caste man as rapist recalls Fanon (2008) in traveling between disgust and desire. As a nodal point in the constitution of the figure of threat – the ‘uncivilised’ and ‘uneducated’ contagion – the body of the lower caste man here facilitates the circulation both of the fear of his rough and barbaric ‘nature’, as well as its fantasy. These men, cast as hypersexual, function thus as sites of fantasy about both the potentials and the risks of a departure from civility. In joking about being ‘raped’ by these men, these young women turn on its head the notion of ‘risk’, which ambiguously connotes the risk of sexual violence as well as that of loss of reputation. The fantasy of ‘rape’ might

⁶⁰ See Rajeswari Sunder Rajan’s analysis (1993) of Anuradha Ramanan’s short-story *Prison*. In this story, Rajan points to the woman’s use of her caste status as a means to barter power with her lower caste rapist, as well as the economies of fantasy at play in the Christian man’s attraction to, and desire to rape an upper caste woman.

finally also be read as a tactic to fantasise the devaluation of the upper caste man, the *thayir saadam*, who is discursively positioned as the injured party in middle class and upper caste women's loss of reputation from rape (Baxi 2000): it suggests the greater virility as well as desirability of the lower caste man.

Joking and physical play among young women often also stage the tensions in growing out of tomboy personas, and passionate, often very physically expressive friendships that are seen as normal to childhood and teenage, but strictly censored in college, as 'inappropriate'. As Halberstam (1998) writes, masculinities that find places for expression within childhood practices of tomboyhood are often suppressed in adulthood through their casting as eternally adolescent, regardless of the actual age of the tomboy. A woman in the adult iteration of her gender is by definition, feminine. This was emphasised in college campuses by the requirement that members of student governing bodies of these institutions wear the *sari* to college during any occasion where they might be publicly visible. Similarly, all college ceremonial occasions – the distribution of prizes, and graduation days for instance – require students to wear *sari*. Particularly, most colleges have some sort of leave-taking ceremony that occurs before graduation: this invariably involves speeches about girls 'becoming women' and also typically requires women to come dressed in traditional feminine attire.

These tensions are also aspects of everyday negotiations. There was one day when the usually boisterous Ranjana, whom others in the room had described alternatively as a 'tomboy' and as 'childish' – these terms were tellingly often seen as interchangeable – decided to dress up for class. She had bought a new *salwar kameez*⁶¹ and wore it, *dupatta* and all one morning, with a new pair of earrings, her hair swept up into a chic bun. She wore a bracelet

⁶¹ Tunic top and pajama bottoms: the *dupatta* mentioned below, refers to the scarf that is traditionally worn with this attire.

and two bangles, and finished the outfit off with a pair of fashionable sandals. As she put her things into a handbag, ready to leave, Shahnaz from a neighbouring room, who was visiting, looked at her, lips pursed in amusement, and asked, in their native Malayalam, '*Cerukkan innu kalyanam kazhicha penkutti aayo?*' (Has the boy turned, today, into a married lady?) Another girl joined in saying that Ranjana looked married and beautiful (*nalla kettiya bhangi*). Clearly flattered, the usually sharp-tongued Ranjana, who might otherwise have made a teasing retort, demurely accepted their assessment. *Kettiya bhangi* came up in many ways, and languages throughout fieldwork. The Tamil girls called it *kalyana kalai*. It indicated a pinnacle of femininity – the success of the always failing project of performativity (Butler 1990): the moment of married beauty indicated successful heterosexual femininity like nothing else. In their playful teasing routines then, young women often defined, by processes of abjection, its many 'others'.

Let us begin with another category used in this moment described above – the *cherukkan*. Literally meaning 'small one' this word is used popularly to describe a young, preadolescent boy. It calls to mind Halberstam's argument that women can always be young boys, but full-grown masculinity is kept as the preserve of adult males (Halberstam 1998). Men the same age, as Ranjana –twenty years old – would rarely be described as such. Also, this description of her as a *cherukkan* refers to aspects of Ranjana's own persona in the room, which are illustrative of a range of gender strategies. When I was first assigned to Dorm B2 where Ranjana was one of my roommates, another young woman I knew well warned me of her, describing her as 'loud and foul-mouthed.' As I got to know Ranjana, I found her friendly, boisterous, and unafraid to swear colourfully, whether in English, Tamil or Malayalam – all languages she spoke. Though, like the others, Ranjana dressed up and wore make-up when she went out, when in the hostel she chose, often consciously and strategically, to perform a theatrical masculinity. So, for instance, on one of my first evenings in the hostel,

she interrogated me, in an exaggerated performance of ‘ragging’ – one foot on a chair, and often brushing her hair back from her forehead in the stylised manner popularised by famous film stars like Rajinikanth. This drew giggles from the girls around. Often at such times, others referred to Ranjana using male pronouns and forms of address – *avan* (he) rather than *aval* (she) and *eda* (hey boy) rather than *edi* (hey girl). Ranjana, playing a ‘lesbian’ in her own description would often embrace and touch the breasts of other women in the room claiming to be ‘raping’ them in the process, or would thrust her pelvis suggestively at one of the women, making a sexual comment in a way that mimics the aggressive banter between men and women, discussed in Chapter Three, that straddles the line between play and sexual harassment.

Writing about performances of masculinity by women, Halberstam (1998) makes an important clarification on Butler’s eliding of butch and drag performances all as indicative of ironic performance or gender parody that theatrically produces, and hence demystifies the naturalness of gender identities (Butler 1990). He suggests, instead that while drag includes an element of dramatic parody – an undressing of gender in a staged performance – butch identities are not ironic. They do not seek to demystify and parody masculinity: indeed they seriously transgress the rules of gender, by embodying a socially unintelligible (Butler 1990) female masculinity in everyday life. This then invites us to disentangle and lay out the continuities between performance and performativity as we attempt to discuss whether Ranjana’s ‘foul-mouthed’, masculine persona is butch, or drag. Why is this important? Both butch and drag bring with them transformative potential and the possibility for serious subversion of the social order – but, as Halberstam (1998) points out, this is more certain in the butch case than in drag, which is centred on a staged exaggeration, rather than living an unlivable reality. CJ Pascoe (2007) in her ethnography of youth peer groups in a North American school suggests that abjection is strategically used by youth to parody and distance

non-normative genders and sexualities. While this certainly occurred, I also found that this process of abjection allowed for the exploration of sexual and gendered identities and desires that may not have found space outside that of a theatrical production of the other. So, much as Ranjana, when speaking ‘seriously’ or ‘really’ as she described it often told me she was ‘very girly at heart’, she got to derive immense pleasure from playing the tomboy for her own entertainment, and that of others. She enjoyed putting on a gruff voice, embodying masculinity in the way she sat and stood, and flirting with women. In the latter she also gets to play a ‘lesbian’ as she often gleefully put it, even while avowing her own ‘actual’ assured heterosexuality, and ‘disgust’ at ‘lesbos’.

Indeed, one of the striking surprises for me on the field was the explicit disgust many showed at same-sex desire between women. Women, who attended colleges in Chennai in the 1990s recall a vague, unexpressed discomfort with same-sex erotic activity that occasionally spilled over into the realm of violent policing. The absence of visible homophobia cannot be taken, however, as a sign that such sentiments did not exist at all. As one of these women, who is now a queer activist in the city pointed out to me, and as much of the literature on ‘lesbian emergence’ in India suggests, these years lacked linguistic registers accessible to the middle classes, for the expression of same-sex desires and non-normative gendered and sexual subject positions. This suggests an inverse perhaps of Foucault’s argument (1978) that resistance speaks the same language as the power it seeks to resist, that power often counters resistance in its own currency.

In recent years, new homophobias are seen to emerge in the wake of legal sanctions against same-sex erotic expression – most lately the overturning of a 2009 Delhi High Court ruling that decriminalised sexual acts ‘against the order of nature’ - and nationalist normalisations of exclusively heterosexual attachments, and their fulfilment in the modern

nuclear family, to the exclusion and stigmatisation, as both pre-modern, and licentious, of same-sex attachments (Bacchetta 2002, 1999). Even though Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, the law addressing sexual acts ‘against the order of nature’, is largely interpreted as being inapplicable to women’s sexual relations, women are often interpellated as deviant subjects of the law through other types of legal procedures. Arasu and Thanrarajah (2012) for instance trace a history of queer women’s engagement with Indian courts, demonstrating the lack of a legal language within which to place questions of sexual intimacy outside the frame of heterosexual marriage. Queer women thus emerge as rogue subjects – on the excess of nationally mediated subjectivity.

Ironically, but also indicatively, the vicarious practices of memory that many of my informants engaged in – repeating the stories heard from older family members who had attended university in previous years, in Chennai – cast these previous years, as a sort of simple golden age, ‘before all this lesbian stuff’. Chitra was convinced that ‘this lesbo thing’ did not exist before the media had started reporting on it. In an odd way, she makes a profound philosophical point, i.e. before the social space for the identity was created, it could not have existed as a coherent discursive formation. However, Chitra was angry: it made life hard for her, she told me. Now everyone thought she was a ‘dyke’ for desperately missing her old roommate – a ‘passionate friend’ – with whom she had exchanged long letters months after this friend moved elsewhere to continue her studies, and whom she had enjoyed cuddling on her bed before. To Chitra, these practices of love, however physical were not about sex. In years past, Chitra said, adding that her elder sister remembered this, ‘unhealthy practices’ such as lesbian attraction did not exist: friendships, to Chitra’s mind were purer then. Ranjana was similarly convinced and blamed ‘this new gay thing’ on how ‘forward’ the city had become. It was difficult, she told me, for a girl like herself, who wanted to joke around and tell everyone she was ‘gay’ – and Ranjana often did, usually also touching and

fondling other girls in the room – and not be taken for ‘some lesbo’. For Ranjana, the acts she engaged in, were not ‘sexual’, they were ‘just fun’.

Same-sex attraction is thus seen as a disease of modernity: an effect of pernicious cultural globalisation. As Chitra, Ranjana and other women told me, it was good to be modern ‘but with limits’. In this, it exists along a continuum with rape and fantasies of sex with men of lower caste and class among a set of transgressive and excessive acts, suggesting the inability to control sexual desire. ‘We are not animals’ was a phrase I often heard in relation to sex that, if glibly, sums this up: being human here is located in the capacity for moderation. For Chitra this ‘lesbian stuff’, in particular, was a form of excess that along with excesses in consumerism, and what she saw as a hedonistic culture in which she identified drinking, smoking, promiscuous sex and prostitution as other evils, had crept into India in the wake of globalisation, and were practiced in the name of ‘liberal culture’. This line of argument recalls historical studies of same sex desire in India that suggest a similar conflation between sexual and other excesses in the early twentieth century (Katyay 2013). It was, ‘a bad habit’, and in Arti’s estimation, if any child of hers came out to her as same-sex desiring, she would slap it out of her, much as she might slap her for stealing. As Katyay (2013, 484-485) writes in the case of the *laundebaaṛi* (a habit for men) in the early 20th century then, being a ‘lesbo’ is not so much an identity, or an aspect of sexual orientation but ‘it is instead conceptualized on an awkward sliding-scale of self-fashioning, where one’s path - an ideally unremitting path - towards social usefulness and ideal communal roles has been partially undermined.’ Contrary to *laundebaaṛi*, however, a sphere of play is marked out in which intimate physical contact between women is regarded as not being ‘lesbo’, and only an aspect of close friendship among women. In this sphere, intimate relations are marked ‘not sexual’, but rather an element of a vestigial childhood, as well as a means to fantasise about transgressive desires without identifying with them. As Vanita and Kidwai (2000) show in their collection of literatures on

same-sex love in South Asia, the porosities between passionate friendship and romantic love among young, unmarried women, particularly those in all-women's institutions or in the sheltered environment of the home are many. And indeed, the metaphor of kissing a cousin or a sister was often used to distance the possibility of 'lesbo' attractions. The idiom of incest – of kissing 'sisters' is not unfamiliar to the history of same-sex desire in India. As Dave (2012) writes, much same-sex sexual experimentation occurs within this idiom – she quotes letters written to a lesbian collective in New Delhi where women seek 'sisters' who are sexually inclined towards women to have sex with. It is when women meet within the idiom of kinship that such intimacy is made possible. Indeed then, we might make the Foucauldian observation that heteronormativity makes places for same-sex desire as much as it represses it (Foucault 1977, 1978).

Additionally, then, something of what is inherent in the disgust many express at women who refuse to 'grow out of' such affections into the inevitable linear trajectory out of schoolgirl crushes into heterosexual love and marriage, is a fear of being stuck in temporalities and forms of embodied presentation that suggest a lack of maturity and capacity. As Vanita and Kidwai (2000) also point out, postcolonial homophobias often conflate anxieties about bodies that do not conform to gender binaries with fears about same-sex desire. The *hijra* and the homosexual man are (see also Cohen 1995a) thus often ridiculed together, and form part of 'a homophobic refusal to acknowledge homosexual men as full-fledged 'men' living in mainstream society' (Vanita and Kidwai 2000, 229). The anxieties expressed about lesbians also similarly indicate fears of improperly gendered transsexual or transgendered bodies, cast additionally as 'childish' (Halberstam 2005): stuck in the failure of proper femininity, having attained neither 'manliness' nor proper womanhood. It is worth the repetition that the tomboy is always seen as adolescent – never quite having attained adult femininity. The next

chapter addresses aspects of this theme in greater detail in the context of spectral and scandalous gendered practices.

A final point this chapter makes on play and fantasies of transgression pertains to the theme of disciplinary intimacy explored in Chapter Three, where I have demonstrated that love is often made the basis for practices of disciplining, often also spilling over into the domain of friendship where older friends as de facto elder sisters often discipline and demand obedience from younger women. When younger and older women engaged in physical intimacy and playful flirtation, they engage and play with not only with an anti-lesbian discourse, but also with the implicitly platonic nature of the same-sex disciplinary relationships within which the notion of pedagogic and disciplinary intimacy is developed in young women's lives. In her work on this subject, Kathryn Kent (2004) notes in the context of post-bellum America that same sex desire in such contexts might be seen as an effect of such intimacies colouring outside the lines – literally affect out of control, and emotions escaping the confines of discipline in a context where love and close attachments have been invoked as a site of normalisation. Manasi and Arti were cleaning up together. In the middle of this activity, Arti began to baby talk with Manasi, infantilising her by calling her names like *Kunje* (baby) and *Ponnu-kutti* (my little golden one). Manasi responded to this with some cooing baby talk as well. Soon, in the view of the others, and accompanied by loud laughter, Arti had begun to touch Manasi's hips and chest and they began to cuddle on one of the beds. 'Are you a lesbian?' Arti asked Manasi as they lay in each other's embrace, and one of the others giggled and answered, 'She might as well be – look at her, touching you like this.' A third woman climbed in at this point and further sexual touching ensued, culminating when one of the other roommates came and turned an imaginary key on the backs of the three women (as though they were wind-up-dolls) saying 'Enough now with this. Go study.' At this the game was over, and the three 'lesbians' proceeded to study.

Here, the moment of play was established in baby talk – with both women responding in the same way to it. It was legitimised as play by the loudness of the banter and the exaggerated touching and stroking that ensued, as well as its punctuation by the laughter and banter of the roommates. The moment where Manasi is asked ‘Are you a lesbian?’ is really what negates any real queer potential this moment might have. The boundary here is established between the named lesbians in the play – and lesbian-ness is a terrain then, to which these young women are only curious visitors (de Certeau 1984) It is not their land, and indeed it is a comical ‘other’ that can be joked about. The definite end to this moment of play, with the winding up of these women as dolls, to go do something else – something more ‘real’ and respectable is also interesting. It codes the moment of play in an instance of childish playing with dolls. Indeed the ones who have been doing the playing then are the other roommates – they are here, the children who are taking pleasure at making two girl dolls touch each other sexually, and breaking compulsory heterosexuality in their game. They are, thus, the ones to choose to end it.

This ‘playing with dolls’ also constitutes this sequence as ‘public’ and non-intimate, rather than private and romantic, thus creating distance. As scholars like Säävälä(2010) have noted in the ethnographic setting in India, and as Foucault writes in the broader context of the negotiation of class through sexuality (1978) the location of sex in the bedroom, and exclusively between two romantically involved individuals is a crucial aspect of the moral constitution of the middle-class. The sexual interaction between Manasi and Arti also recalls the forms of intimacies that are often allowed to pass without censure within homes. Arti brought up the many times she and Manasi kissed each other on the lips during an interview I conducted with her. She was alone and hence, she said, felt free to speak. She told me that while she certainly ‘played up sex’ while kissing Manasi – producing pastiche in some sense –

she didn't mean it sexually. Kissing Manasi, or 'making out' with her, was exactly like making out with her first cousin, when she was twelve or thirteen years of age. It was pleasurable and fun and elicited laughs from others: it was a bit of a comic act and so she did it. That was all. Manasi was young, Arti told me, and had never experienced such things: as such, she simply enjoyed 'loving' her. It was, for both women, only a playful moment fantasising the impossible climax of what was a passionately loving relationship, rather than 'really' sex.

Playful and Childish Agency

In this chapter, I explored joking practices among young women in female friendships as a break from the exhausting everyday of being 'good' middle class women. Women's hostels and colleges are, as I have discussed, often the site where such dark experiences become subjects of what appears to be a form of 'gallows humour' – the mocking and defamiliarisation of a familiar, if oppressive social context. I have demonstrated, in this paper, that rape jokes hold the potential to resist discourses that elide the differences between 'sex' and 'rape' positioning women as culpable and vulnerable at once; as well as to reinforce hierarchies of feminine behaviour that build on such discourses. In this, this chapter agrees with the work of Dyson (2010) and Seizer (1997) in seeing jokes as functioning ambiguously. However, it builds on this to argue that the joke represents an instance of lateral agency (Berlant 2007) – a moment where the business of reproducing middle class life through the reproduction of 'proper' gender is briefly suspended, rather than self-conscious or transformative agency. As such, it does not address itself to the space or time of transformative politics but only to the ordinary everyday, in which it constitutes a momentary break from routine. Joking, like Berlant's example of binge-eating (Berlant 2007, 758), is in this case, 'an activity exercised within spaces of ordinariness that does not always or even usually follow the literalizing logic of visible effectuality, bourgeois dramatics, and lifelong accumulation or fashioning'. Agency is, in this case, not so much a vehicle of transformation,

as a moment's respite from the perpetual tightrope of disciplined, responsible living that has been normalized within a social context.

In making this argument, I also demonstrate that young women's laughter stands in an awkward relationship with the regulatory ideal of happiness. Chapter Two draws on Sara Ahmed's critique of happiness (2010b) to reflect on the regulation of happiness as central to 'growing up' – to letting go of 'childish' anger and moving on from melancholy and injury into a future-oriented affective position – and feeling capable. As scholars like Seizer (1997) demonstrate, the ridiculous and comic effect of the incommensurable is central to the joke – something is funny because it points to moments of failure, and an inversion of traditional roles. It disorders as Mary Douglas (1999) points out, by pointing to the radical instability of relationships and radical state of contingency in which happiness and the smooth flowing of social life are experienced. In this sense, laughter appears to be purely subversive. However, as Sara Ahmed points out, sometimes these moments of radical disturbance can go towards reaffirming existing power hierarchies. Her example is of the older white male professor joking that his non-white female research collaborator is his 'wife' – his implication, which stages the inequalities of race and gender here, is that she is the assistant to the important work that he does: the henpecking manager getting him to do the things that must be done, while he does the creative heavy-lifting: something which might, as Ahmed points out, be entirely untrue. In this case, joking goes to affirm *happiness* as the regulatory ideal of maintaining the status quo with a smiling face: to laugh at this joke is to cement the status quo of gender and racial hierarchy in the academe.

The jokes discussed lie somewhere between the ideal of subversion, and the power-affirming misogynist joke: they disturb, without upending, notions of happiness, by laughing at the oddities therein. The young women I met often laugh at events otherwise presented as

‘the happiest day in your life’ – their weddings and the looming ‘first night’ with a new husband – or ‘the most tragic event’ – a rape, or violent sexual harassment – or even ‘failure’ – domestic violence and divorce. Here, laughter is disturbing because it is out of place. The situation is made funny not because it is a victorious moment of feminist subversion, or even Seizer’s ambiguous moment of both distantly-positioned critique (Seizer 1997), but because it represents a momentary lateral movement away from the straight and narrow path of reproducing proper femininity and working towards happiness. The difference is in the conception of subjectivity here. Seizer’s subjects are still intentional and calibrated actors (Seizer 1997), whereas the notion of subjectivity I posit here is closer to Berlant’s overeater (1994, 2007) who simply eats at the end of a busy day, and whose agency is ‘interruptive’ rather than ‘causal’ (Berlant 2007, 776). Laughter here represents a momentary embrace of melancholy, and failure and the successful, happy life suddenly looks ridiculous from this point of view. It is implicated in economies of intimacy among women and binds them together – ‘affect is what sticks’ (Ahmed 2010a, 29) – in the shared exhaustion at the end of a long day, and with the implicit knowledge that when they wake up in the morning, they are going back to the grind.

My informants often linked their ability to exercise such agency with their youth, a period when, I was told repeatedly, ‘nothing matters’, i.e. ‘mistakes’ made can still be written off as childish mischief, rather than wanton wrongdoing. As ‘youth’, sexual peccadilloes could be passed off as ‘silliness’ or ‘immaturity’, I was told, rather than be seen as serious moral misdemeanours deserving of social punishment. As such, it was ironically in these young women’s interests to position themselves as ‘children’ – the non-consenting subjects of statutory rape that a professor quoted in a previous section of this article makes them out to be – when they get ‘caught’ by figures of authority. The use of ‘rape’ instead of ‘sex’ to describe sexual encounters is, in this context, itself a strategy to relinquish agency in the act,

while retaining a claim to respectable, if victimised femininity. As Mody (2008) demonstrates in the case of women who claim kidnapping to overcome the ignominy of having eloped, women sometimes find themselves positioned more favourably when they relinquish agency, positioning themselves as injured and in need of rescue. In turning this context into an object of humour, young women then step, for a moment, away from the project of reproducing respectability, to own agency and desire in acts of sex. The subject here is not the fully self-conscious liberal subject acting in his own best interests, but the precariously positioned subject of governmentality, seeking a break from the drudgery of walking the tightrope. Not unexpectedly, stories of ‘failure’ abound in Colleges in Chennai – most of them centred on the issue of ‘love failure’ but exciting great interest. This thesis has commented on the significance of an economy of rumours in creating notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and building the spectres of the threats upon which a middle class discourse of muscular nationalism, as well as a precarious discourse of gender and pleasure, are predicated. Colleges, as I was quickly reminded, are full of spectres – hanging from every tree, and in every stairwell, was a ghost, and lurking well after her time in every hostel room was a scandal waiting to be reignited. These stories – much like the rumour – are perlocutionary: they make things happen; they circulate affects that exceed them and spread contagiously. The next chapter addresses these spectres, bringing this thesis’ argument about precarious everydays to a conclusion.

6 | Spectral and Scandalous Bodies: Stories of Rupture

This thesis has already approached the spectral quality of the threats that often govern young women's everyday lives. In this chapter, I attempt to examine the ways in which these spectres enter young women's lives through a study of rumours, scandals and ghost stories that circulate popularly in women's colleges. Three of the favourite genres in which stories were told and passed around, and indeed some of the most prevalent activities in college halls and hostels – that circulate among them, I heard scandalous stories and ghost stories almost everyday from the students I spent time with. These genres are linked together in that all three stage a revenant –the spectral return of something from the past, whether an actual ghost, or the scandalous whispers of something that was buried a long time ago whose smell is floating back up above ground. So on different nights, I heard the apocryphal story of the dangerous vodka-soaked tampon, and the girls who tried it and died, that has travelled all around the world and came to pause in Teresa Hostel while I was there, and the somewhat more ridiculous, if telling, story of the girl who had sex with women one too many times and turned into a man.

Haunting here represents a kind of social absence, a spectral 'revenant' (Derrida 2006, 11) that tells the story of social circumstances gone awry, and ruptures the taken-for-granted continuities that constitute middle class life (Gordon 1997). Failures never seem to stop coming back, and these stories rehearse and repeat common 'what ifs' of young women's everyday lives. Every college, I was told, had the story of a girl who had run away with the auto-rickshaw driver, one who had killed herself for love, the lesbian who had gone mad and the girl who had had one abortion.

This chapter examines those who fall through the cracks of the processes that discipline desire and the discourse of romantic love – what happens, in other words, when

love fails, when subjects are unrelentingly wilful and the project of consolidating middle class lifeworlds is fractured? What commentary does this produce on the figure of the capable citizen of a neoliberal polity, on the practices that make ladies of girls, and on the everyday of ordinary middle class life? ‘Love failure’ is a commonly invoked category of experience among the young middle class women in Chennai, and is indeed a widely used English phrase across India to denote failures of love. In particular, love fails when a romantic or sexual relationship does not reach its desired end in marriage, or in the case of those who do marry, fails to find recognition for the relationship with the communities that the lovers belong to – their caste clans, neighbourhood and families (Mody 2008). The discourse of romantic love appears, in this view, double edged: when performed correctly, it is a sign of individual agency in perfect harmony with community ideals, affective capacity appropriately located in the institution of marriage (Rofel 2007) and global values about personal freedom in the fine balance that the middle classes often seek, with ‘Indian values’ (Säävälä 2010, Gilbertson 2013). As scholars like Dwyer (2000) and Brosius (2011) show, narratives of love and romance are central to the nationalist fantasy of middle class life and modernity, and increasingly also to the image of success as a middle class individual. Among the social groups I spent time with, young women who had been in long term relationships were typically seen as more ‘mature’ – further along the path to ‘proper’ adulthood than others – and indeed this was one reason I could never qualify as being a ‘proper grown up’. Even to those who were aware that I identified as queer, the idea that I was still single for most of my fieldwork and was, at the ripe ‘old’ age of twenty-five merely at the beginning of a romance, seemed proof of my failure as an adult.

Conversely then, ‘improper’ embodiments of affect – in a manner that precludes the achievement of this fine balance; and in contravention of the teleological common sense of sexual desire and romantic love – however, posed widely-discussed threats: the loss of reputation, of the hard-won freedoms of mobility, and a degree of autonomy. ‘Love Failure’

risked scandal and ignominy. Scandal ‘stuck’ as many young women told me: it did not ‘go’ easily: it was a ‘stain’ and a ‘blot’, and could ‘affect’ not only the lives of those involved, but also their families and whole caste clans. ‘With freedom comes responsibility’ Chitra once told me, wise and cliché as ever, as we sat on her bed one more night, she reading Freud, I a novel, each interrupting the other occasionally. She firmly believed that anyone who abrogated this ‘responsibility’ in anyway deserved to have her freedom taken away. In the corroborative words of Church College Hostel’s dean: ‘If you don’t act sensibly, we treat you like a child’. Intimacy is thus disciplined in the making of ‘a social field that marginalises and excludes those deemed incapable of a proper embodiment of desire’ (Rofel 2007, 1).

Examining failure as both scandalous and spectral, this chapter tells three stories. First, I narrate the story of a scandalous love affair between the daughter of a filmmaker and a man of much lower caste, that exploded all over the college scene in Chennai in 2013. Second in this chapter is a story that was narrated to me as an ‘almost-suicide’: a story of lesbians who ‘escaped suicide’ and came to live together only to be torn apart again by the parents of one of the women. Finally, I narrate the story of a suicide executed many years ago, which now persists in the public memory of the college as a kind of cautionary tale against ‘love failure’. Writing on scandal and the middle-classes, Tanika Sarkar (2001, 54) characterizes scandal as ‘the quotidian and the domesticated at a moment of rupture, at a point of their eruption into public affairs.’ Sarkar’s interest in scandal is in its role in destabilizing the image of a middle-class that ‘perfectly set in the mould of a rich, successful and extremely erudite intelligentsia’ (Sarkar 2001, 54) in nineteenth century Bengal. While we might not describe the very heterogeneous middle-class that this thesis addresses as a ‘rich, successful and extremely erudite intelligentsia’, it is, as many scholars have noted, a middle-class whose definition of itself is often in negation: it is not the upper-classes and it is not the labouring working classes. A close cousin of the scandal in Chennai’s women’s colleges, was the cautionary tale: always

the story of someone who was distantly known or related to a member of the group among which the story was circulated, who had come to a very bad end. These tales, I place in the framework of ‘the narrative occlusion of antagonism’ (Žižek 1997, 11)– story telling practices whose work is to normalise and obfuscate the erasures and violence within which intersubjectively produced ways of being ‘proper’ come to be constituted. If the surfaces of boundaries and bodies are produced in processes of materialisation (Butler 1993), then these stories naturalise such boundaries, occluding the histories of fear and anxiety (Ahmed 2004a) in which the effects of the cautionary tale are located. They position fear instead as common sense – a natural feeling located in the individual subject as a sign of being an adult aware of risks, and desirous of taking the responsible path. Fear signals the precarity of unworlding (Stewart 2012, 520) – the possibility that a carefully constructed stability could be shattered by a careless moment, or even the whisper of disrepute.

This chapter also builds on the previous chapter’s argument about humour, laughter and the skirting of dangerous possibilities to examine what happens when these possibilities are no longer merely naughty conjecture or fantasy but very much reality: or what potentials the narrating of these stories build in the lives of young women. Addressing the precarious intimacies addressed and described in the previous chapters, this chapter examines the ways in which ‘failures’ spectrally constitute present middle class worlds. Just as I began the last chapter asking why girls tell rape jokes, we might start this one asking why young women repeat scandals and ghost stories.

‘Dragged out’ – Rupturing the Middle Class Bubble

Early in August 2013, the Tamil press had a field day when Dhamini, a student of NT College went to the police about her famous father, the filmmaker, Cheran. The twenty-year-old alleged that her father and his associates had threatened her boyfriend, Chandru with

bodily harm. On TV⁶² she was shown telling the press that if any harm befell her or her boyfriend, her father should be held accountable. She then proceeded to move out of home, to live with Chandru. Within days the issue had blown up. Interview after interview showed Cheran in tears, his wife beside him, blowing her nose, and sobbing. Dhamini was presented as a 'good' and successful young woman – enrolled as she was at NT College – who had been led astray by a power-hungry and manipulative young man and his family.

Cheran's assistant, Ameer meanwhile told the press that he and others had stepped in to speak to Chandru – a peaceful act that they alleged Dhamini had misconstrued as aggression and threat – because Cheran's daughter was like his daughter: they came from the same *ooru* – ancestral town. The clan quickly produced evidence to suggest that Chandru's family was 'immoral'. Chandru's sister, they alleged, was sexually promiscuous and had extorted money from her ex husband, a Muslim, whom she had married at the age of eighteen, and divorced about five years later. On the dramatic *Koppiyam* – a TV show that reports crime and scandal – we saw Chandru's sister, Padma break down as she explained that she was 'not mature' and had been 'misguided' (*vivaram illaama*) when she had eloped with Mohammad Elias, her ex husband.

Ameer's other allegation against Chandru was that he was not an *unmai kaadhalan* – a true lover. Chandru, in an interview aired immediately after the issue had come to light in the press, had alleged that Cheran had subjected Dhamini to a forced virginity test. Would an *unmai kaadhalan* bring up his lover's virginity on TV, Ameer asked. Elsewhere, Cheran made a similar allegation: Chandru, he alleged, had spoken in a *podhu idam* – a public place: the word *podhu* particularly signifies that persons of any class or caste might have been there – about his sex life with Dhamini. Would an *unmai kaadhalan* do such a thing?

⁶² *The News*, 2 August 2013, Raj TV Network.

Chandru, for his part, fanned scandal. He went on in the same programme to say that he had, for two years taken Dhamini all over the city: *oor suththin*. Suggestively he even pointed out that he even took her to the beach. Any viewer in Chennai knows that young couples in the city frequent the beach for sexual activity, and would have made the connection. He follows that up with the question: ‘I was with her for two years. Her father knew this. Would he not know these things, without subjecting her to a virginity test?’ Duly, Raj TV followed up the clip with a shot panning the beach in Chennai, showing a number of couples embracing on the sand. ‘Is love worth this?’ a voiceover asked, as the camera paused⁶³.

The court soon ordered Dhamini to move out of Chandru’s home and to the home of her former school headmistress, who was to counsel her: literally, we might note, returning this young woman to the position of a school-going child. Eventually, she elected to return to her parents. Cheran was shown prostrating before the court, declaring that all parents of daughters had collectively won a victory that day. Amidst allegations that Dhamini had been arm-twisted – by the law and her school headmistress alike - into choosing her parents over her boyfriend, commentators on news websites⁶⁴ and *You Tube*⁶⁵ commended the judgment. A Tamil father, commenting on this *YouTube* link, identifying himself as raising a daughter in the US wondered if the age of majority in India should be changed to twenty-two to ensure such incidents never recurred. He and others referred to Dhamini, a legal major and a university student who had filed the case against her father in the first place, as a ‘little girl,’ who had been taken advantage of.

⁶³ *The News*, 2 August 2013, Raj TV Network.

⁶⁴ Special Correspondent, *Cheran’s Daughter Prefers to Go With Parents*, *The Hindu*, August 22, 2013.

⁶⁵ *Koppiyam: Director Cheran Daughter Issue*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkgLqq23epo>, 7 August, 2013

Over the days that followed it was reported that Dhamini's change of heart had come after she had watched a recently released (2013) Tamil film called *Aadhalal Kaadhal Seivir* (So you Shall Love). This film is pertinent to the arguments made in this chapter. It is set in the tone of a cautionary tale. Shweta and Kartik, college students, start dating at the start of the film, even as Shweta's friend Jenny warns her that *kaadhal* – love – could turn her head, and render her ability to make sensible decisions fuzzy. Ignoring Jenny, Shweta embarks on a casual romance, and soon finds out that she is pregnant. She tries to get an abortion but is kicked out of the hospital when the gynaecologist finds out that she is unmarried: 'we don't need this scandal.' In India where the legal status for abortions makes them less the patient's right, but instead performed at the doctor's discretion, this is an often-heard story with which college students are not unfamiliar. Shweta is by this time convinced that her lack of success in finding a place to have an abortion is a sign that she should carry it to term. In an escalated altercation on this matter, Kartik's father calls Shweta a whore, and wonders aloud how he could be sure the child is indeed his son's, thus dishonouring not only her, but also her family.

At this point, an outraged Shweta decides that she doesn't want anything to do with Kartik, and chooses to have her baby and leave her in a home for abandoned children. The film ends with a montage of the characters' lives two years hence: Shweta and Kartik are each separately unhappy, though they have moved on. The background music – now a lullaby – then rises to a crescendo as the camera pans to a dingy room in the squalid home where Shweta's child lives. She lies alone on a threadbare mat, whimpering as she sucks on her finger. The lullaby mourns for babies without mothers: babies whose birth was a mistake.

Many stories similar to this film – cautionary tales – circulate among young women. Many of them centre on the common occurrence of elopement: the particular issue that had

brought Dhamini's case to light. During a focus group discussion, one group of women told me that under no circumstances would they ever think of eloping. First – they said it showed a 'lack of character.' If one was unable to prove the worth of one's partner to one's family, then perhaps he was indeed unworthy. Second, they told me about how a girl they had known had run away with a neighbourhood handyman. Not only was her life 'spoilt' in that she now lived in a slum with him, in poverty, having forsaken her middle-class status and family, but 'even the auto-rickshaw drivers talked about her' for many months to come. She came to be thought of as the 'neighbourhood slut' – someone with 'no standards' who would 'go with any man' if after all, she had chosen a handyman to elope with.

This group of women also felt their bodies watched and drawn into the local tea-stall conversation of the auto-rickshaw drivers too, as a woman of their class came to be the subject of such a scandal. Symbolically, their sexuality too had been drawn into the public sphere of working class men, and away from the protections that middle classness affords, with that of the girl who had eloped. 'When we elope we bring four outsiders into matters that are for the family' one of them said, using a common idiom in Tamil – *naalu peru* – four outsiders symbolise the voyeuristic crowd: the masses come to judge the family, and peer into its closely guarded private affairs, taking the respectability of the family out on the street in gossip, scandal and talk. The *naalu peru* (four others) were also often brought up in the discussions of Chandru and Dhamini's story. Though the family has recently gained wealth, Dhamini's parents – the film director Cheran and his wife – were careful to emphasise that they were 'ordinary' middle-class people. They didn't want *naalu peru* to discuss their daughter's love life. Indeed this is also the concern when Ameer accuses Chandru of not being a true lover: he brings Dhamini's sexuality, the question of whether she is a virgin to discussion before *naalu peru* – here the viewers of the TV show on which he accused Cheran of having had his daughter subjected to a virginity test.

The *naalu peru* or four outsiders are, in this context, also spectral figures. Laclau (1995) discusses spectrality as emerging in ‘time out of joint’ (1995, 88): in junctures of the dissolution of the common sense continuities that make up ontological class identities, and where the contingencies and emergent states within which such notions of ontology or identity are always precariously held come to be revealed. The *naalu peru* are ‘unhomely’ figures (Bhabha 1992, 141): spectral embodiments of ‘the shock of the recognition of the world in the home; the home in the world.’ This has parallels with the history of the scandal that Burton (1998) tells when she writes of the function of scandal in the colonial public sphere as centrally resting in its role in bringing the Indian woman’s body and sexuality into the public sphere. This public sphere of scandal was ‘an imagined and contested space where unseen communities were drawn together through a shared public spectacle’ (Burton 1998 p. 1123). The *naalu peru* - never a finite group of people but always in a state of not-quite-finite-presence: ‘undecidability between flesh and spirit’ (Laclau 1995, 87) - here constitute the imagination of the leering crowd, bloodthirsty for cracks in the picture of middle class perfection. They are imagined never to quite leave the scene of scandal –scandals ‘stick’ (*ottum*) onto the bodies of women embroiled in them, never quite leaving them, however much they attempt to distance themselves from it⁶⁶. The *naalu peru* are thus revenants – forever threatening to return, and even in their absence always spectrally present.

⁶⁶ Powerful in this context are the two endings of the 1960s short story and novella by Jayakanthan described in Chapter Two, in which, in one ending, the pouring of water on the head of the young woman who has had a sexual encounter – of whose violence she is unsure - is a symbolic effort to cleanse scandal: it is a means of pacification in the setting where the mother fears that the daughter, now shaken by this incident whether because of the pleasure it accorded her, or the trauma, might speak out loud and allow the others in their closely packed apartment building to find out; as well as of purification to force the scandalous act to come unstuck from the body of the woman. The cleansing here is also reminiscent of Brahminised ritual cleansing. In the alternative version, she is heard speaking and for fear of rumour spreading and contaminating his household and name – particularly given that he has a wife and family at stake – the young woman’s brother forces her to leave home and she lives with her uncle in a context where her scandal is stuck to her, drawing her uncle’s unwanted sexual attentions as well as those of others.

Mody (2008) discusses the distinctions made in everyday speech between a 'love marriage' and a 'love-cum-arranged marriage' – a distinction that many of my informants too made, in this context. Usually love marriage is cast as scandalous, whereas love-cum-arranged is desirable. Most of my informants dreamed of the latter – a combination of love and arranged marriage, where one fortuitously falls in love with a man of one's own class and caste – someone with whom one's parents would then arrange a marriage. To many, being 'sensible' was about ensuring that this rather than a 'love marriage' or an elopement occurred. 'An elopement', Mody writes, '...upsets the social order with its implicit declaration that 'love' couldn't wait for an 'arrangement'" (Mody 2008, 158). By eloping and causing scandal, not only does one detract from the possibility of locating oneself within a stable middle class community but also ironically, in this narrative, demonstrates one's lack of maturity, and subsequently also one's ineligibility for the privileges of adulthood. A self-professed feminist, Radhika declared to me one day, discussing this that she would never consider elopement, especially whilst still at college, because one could not live on 'love and fresh air'. To Radhika, who specified that she was not a 'bra-burning type' but a 'modern feminist', her feminism lay in her search for a partner who could support her current lifestyle financially. This discourse of emotional moderation also often feeds into the construction of responsible subjecthood, defined in ways that valorize stability and consolidate middle classness as central to the project of the self, entailed in youth transitions to adulthood.

Eloping also risked 'being spoiled' by the wrong type of man – and it is this risk that is implied in the story that Dhamini returned home after watching a film about a pregnancy out of wedlock. Kalaiselvi, whose friend's tragic story of 'getting a room' with a boy is told in the previous chapter, also told me about two neighbours she had had in her 'native place' – a village near Madurai where she had grown up. This pair of sisters who had lived in the house opposite her own had both, within weeks of each other, eloped with young men from a

nearby neighbourhood and gone to a different town. Kalai had some empathy for them as she narrated this story, emphasising that their parents had been ‘very strict’ with them, and hence left no option but to elope. However, the men they had chosen were, by Kalai’s estimation, not good. For one, they had married down in the caste hierarchy – marrying men who were of OBC status like them but lower down – and for another, these men did not make very much money. Kalai reiterated her theory that *kaadhal* was apt to addle the brains, and emphasised again that she intended never to fall in love. When their parents found them, both girls were brought back but ‘after they had seen them properly’ (*seriya parthadhu-keu apparam*), they discovered that only one of the sisters had returned ‘as she had left’ – i.e. as a virgin. The other sister, though not legally married to her lover, had had sex. She was ‘spoiled’ Kalai told me, and would never find happiness again. Her story, she told me, had been repeated at weddings that members of this caste had attended and every young eligible man now knew. The scandal had indeed ‘stuck’ to this young woman, and would, in Kalai’s reckoning, always return to haunt her, even if she managed to marry and have children. She could, however far she ran, never quite escape her scandal.

The Lesbian Who Should Have Died

Arti, my roommate at Teresa Hostel, was very animated as she started telling me the story about her ‘real life encounter with a lesbo’. ‘Remember those lesbian suicides?’ she began. I remembered all too well. It was the context in which I, and many other women my age in the country, then children, had come to first engage with the category of the ‘lesbian’. They had seemed to happen all at once, or the papers went through phases of discovering them, first in the late seventies and early eighties, and then again in the 1990s and 2000s – the phase that I, and others now in their twenties and beginning to identify in such terms remember – and printed a spate of articles informing its scandalised readers of this new social epidemic. While we had all grown up on the cautionary tale of the very stupid girl who had

run away with the auto-rickshaw driver, or the lab assistant in school, thus forsaking a promising future of social mobility and happiness, the tale of the runaway lesbians seemed to offer a particularly cautionary story of silliness. The teachers in my school and the schools of other friends who remember talked to us when we first started reading these stories in the papers, warning us not to take our friendships ‘too seriously’ – not to ‘get carried away’ by our love for a friend so much as to imagine that we would not need a husband or children. After all, they reminded us, lesbians were obviously not very happy: the relationships, we were told, would be inevitably dysfunctional, and look how many of them killed themselves.

Chitra, who lived in the room next door to Arti had also heard these stories extensively and received the same cautionary warnings from teachers. Indeed, she told me, with pride, her parents had always chosen to send her to co-educational schools to prevent her from developing ‘unhealthy feelings’ for girls. They – and the extended family – had been concerned, she told me, when she got into Church College, a prestigious institution, albeit one quite far away from the small town near Eranakulam in Kerala where she came from, and almost more worryingly, a women’s college. ‘Lesbian feelings will develop’ Chitra told me the evening we met, in the first of many such moments where she would begin a conversation with a declarative statement of this sort, ‘when women are together’. The thought of her living in a hostel, in particular, had worried Chitra’s parents, who feared that she might develop a close attachment to a friend, and want to live with her rather than pursue the happily-married future her sister, who had gone to a co-educational institution and married a classmate, had found. ‘Love marriage’ Chitra told me, again proud of what she saw as her family’s progressive ways, ‘is not a problem’. Her parents believed in her right to make a choice to marry. ‘But’ she told me, grinning, knowing that she was saying something she found ridiculous, ‘it must be a man, not a woman’. And indeed, Chitra felt, her parents were only

protecting her from unhappiness, and what she saw as an almost inevitable sense of failure and eventual suicide.

Later that year when I travelled down to Madurai to speak to activist friends about their experience in hostels, I met someone who is in the business of warning of schoolgirls about the dangers of ‘lesbianism’ as she put it. Uma works for the Tamil Nadu AIDS Control Society (TANSACS) as a sex educator. As such she travels to schools all over the state making presentations and offering counselling sessions on sexually transmitted diseases and birth control. During such travels, she told me, she has many times met – and here she lowered her voice, I craned in to hear – ‘lesbians’. She told me that the first things she usually told students she met were that lesbian love was ‘unhealthy’. It is not only ‘mentally unhealthy’ she told me, but also physically so. Women in love with other women, she told me, tend to be not only depressed and suicidal, but also have fevers and stomach-aches. They lose their ability to eat, Uma went on, and slowly waste away. I first wondered if she was being somehow ironic in a deadpan way, but realised as she went on, urging me to write it all down, that she was in fact extremely serious. Such women, Uma told me, are usually unable to then go on and have a happy family. She herself was unmarried, she told me, and had never had sex besides, but only because she was ‘married to her job’, ironically that of spreading knowledge about sex and sexually transmitted diseases. To her ‘lesbianism’ like HIV/AIDS – the disease she was primarily employed to spread awareness about – was an affliction: one that had to be cured before it ‘caught on’ (*pidikkum*) and threatened not to leave.

So this was the context in which I heard Arti’s story that day – a story I’ve come to think of as ‘eight women and it’, as this is how it was told, among eight roommates, and was about a lesbian whom Arti called ‘it’. So to continue then, Arti had begun her story with reminding me about lesbian suicides. Two women, she continued, had ‘somehow escaped

that’ – the fate of suicide that seemed, in Arti’s mind, inevitable to the lesbian; it was as if the two women she was speaking of had escaped near-inevitable death in a natural disaster – and come to live together in a flat in her neighbourhood. One of them, she told me, ‘was the man one’, and the other ‘the woman one’. ‘It would wander about,’ she continued, as my breath caught at her use, in English, of this impersonal pronoun, ‘dressed as if it were a man’. She laughed at this point, adding that of course, much as ‘it’ might have desired this, ‘it’ didn’t have a man’s ‘equipment’. The ‘woman one’ remained ‘she’ through this narrative: narrated as a good, if somewhat troubled and rather naïve girl for having chosen a manly woman ‘without the equipment’. Eventually, Arti ended her story, with the words ‘it all ended well’. The ‘woman one’ one evening went away with her parents, ‘after some big drama there’, and the neighbourhood later heard she was married to a man: ‘happily married’ Arti added. How did she know the marriage was happy? Had she met this woman since? No, she said, but she was in a ‘normal relationship’ finally, and hadn’t gotten divorced or, to the neighbourhood’s knowledge been mistreated in her marriage. Surely, that indicated happiness. ‘It’ she continued, referring, in her words, to ‘the man one’ – presumably the masculine or butch partner - ‘wandered about for a while, then it moved away’, perhaps, she speculated, in search of another woman. Idly she speculated as an afterthought, ‘or maybe it killed itself.’

Patel (1997) in an essay on unruly gender identities, suggests the importance of the ‘when I saw my first *Hijra* story’ as she calls it, to middle class Indians, in remembering histories of gender disciplining, and the visceral threat of the unruly gender – and loss, of home, of nationhood, and of identity – embodied in the figure of the *Hijra*. Arti’s story about the spectral figure of the lesbian might be seen as a post-2009-judgement⁶⁷, post-LGBT

⁶⁷ I am referring here, of course, to the High Court judgement in 2009 that read down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code that criminalises ‘sexual acts against the order of nature’. Chapters Three and Four discuss aspects of this judgement and its role in both generating a vocabulary of LGBT identification as well as an explicitly discriminatory discourse about same-sex love and queer gender.

version of the same: a ‘when I saw my first lesbian’ story. Arti is not alone in beginning her history of lesbian life in India with suicide and elopement. These suicides and elopements were central to the media ‘discovery’ of female homosexuality in India. Structured as scandals, these stories typically represented the lesbian couple in much the same light as Arti – one of them ‘manly’ and aggressive; the other naïve and the victim of the former’s seduction or even kidnapping. As Arasu and Thangarajah (2012) note, this is often also the narrative about love between women presented in court cases, where typically, the couple is separated on grounds of the ‘manly’ partner having ‘enticed’ her lover away from her natal home, and the lure of a happy heterosexual future.

As Vanita (2007) notes, these suicides and elopements must be placed alongside the suicides and elopements of heterosexual couples – resulting from ‘love failure’ – which also typically feature as scandal in the newspapers, and elicit the telling of cautionary tales. To Arti, the butch lesbian she comfortably called ‘it’ and Lily, the young woman rumoured to have jumped off the balcony of her residence hall many years before, whose story is discussed in the next section, and whom she comfortably referred to as ‘that fool’ represented failures in the making of adult femininity. Indeed, in narrating the story as she did, to me, she was implicitly placing herself at a distance from them – safely refusing to be implicated except as an observing ‘other’ in their failures. Her particular motive in telling me that story was to demonstrate that she herself was not a ‘lesbian’ but only someone who enjoyed physical intimacy with her female friends during what she saw as her ‘transient college years’. As in the scenarios described in the last chapter, Arti liked to kiss and fondle some of her roommates, sometimes touching each other in intimate parts of their bodies as they addressed each other with affectionate names. This, to Arti, did not ‘count’. The ‘real thing’ she emphasised was

Where *Hijra* was the only visibly queer position in society for many decades, increasingly being a ‘lesbian’ or ‘gay’ as well has emerged as socially accessible and visible.

men, asking me how I could possibly imagine that women could feel for each other the way she felt for her boyfriend, and more importantly, why a woman – however ‘manly’ or ‘career-oriented’ – would want to forgo the happiness of a husband and children for what Arti saw as a barren kind of life as ‘it’.

This narrative positions the lesbian as a ghostly figure – a not-quite-human predator, wandering about looking for women to entice away. What makes ‘it’ the more ridiculous is ‘its’ lack of ‘equipment’ – i.e. as a failed man, without a phallus, the lesbian is unable even to perform the violent intentions that Arti reads onto her body. She is failed both as a woman and as a man, and is hence ‘it’, and much like the apocryphal myth of the *Hijra* who steals away male children to castrate; the lesbian is here a ghostly figure of threat to the normalised heterosexual social body, and to the feminine woman whom she threatens with seduction. As a point of humour, the lesbian’s lack of a penis is funny in the same way that the *hijra*’s castration often presents a point of heteronormative humour in middle class Indian life: because it suggests the loss of symbolic penetrative power. Castration is a site for the ‘violent embodying of the truth that phallic power is not uniformly distributed’ (Cohen 1995b, 298). She is ‘unhomely’ – moving between Bhabha’s spectral meanings of this word (1992) and Patel’s meaning of un-domestic (2004), in that she is located outside the space-time of nationhood and domesticity. Her own attempt at establishing something of a ‘home’ with her lover is thwarted by the lover’s ‘happy marriage’ to a man, and she is left again, wandering about, maybe suicidal, but already dead in Arti’s narrative where even her live presence is at best spectral. ‘The intimacy’ as Veena Das (Das 2007, 7) writes, ‘between scepticism and the ordinary is revealed...on several sites, as in the panic rumours that circulate and produce the picture of the other as the phantasmal form from whom all human subjectivity has been evacuated...transfiguring life into something else, call it a form of death, or of making oneself, as it were, into a ghost.’ Her own heartbreak, pain and feelings of alienation are not taken into

count, then because she barely counts as a life and as Das (2007, 16) argues, ‘the criteria of pain do not apply to that which does not exhibit signs of being a form of *life*.’ The ‘other’ lesbian in this story – the woman allowed to be a ‘she’ throughout – then takes the position of having been haunted, even possessed – in any number of meanings of this word – by this spectral lesbian figure. If haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often ‘a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities’ (Gordon 1997, 8), then she is haunted by her lesbian lover, whose spectral presence is the threat that hangs over her ‘happy’ heterosexual future.

This ‘lesbian who should have died’ narrative was echoed also in the widely expressed opinion I heard that the best option for women who had gotten pregnant out of wedlock was death. The life they will be left to live, one earnest nineteen-year-old asserted one evening, was ‘as if she is dead’ – a life that is, presumably disowned by family, dishonoured by society and without the chance of ‘real marriage’ as this young woman put it, ‘or real happiness’. Abortion, she said, would be ‘to take the easy way out’ – i.e. to choose to ‘kill the baby’ instead of killing oneself. This is further deeply reminiscent of BJP MP Sushma Swaraj’s argument in the wake of the rape in Delhi in December 2012, that if the raped woman were to survive her harrowing injuries she would do so as a reanimated corpse – *zinda laash*: a spectral, haunting reminder of a ruined wasteland of a future, and a violently dishonourable past. As Menon (2000) shows, this discourse of rape as fate worse than death reinforces the location of women’s shame and honour in a normatively *pure* sexuality, thus denying women who have suffered violence in any form the right of agency over their futures.

But then, many young women did die in colleges. Indeed, as Vijayakumar (2007), founder of a prominent suicide-intervention organisation in Chennai, notes, adolescents and young people dominate every other category in the statistics on suicide and self harm. And

besides, the many ghost stories in the Colleges in Chennai tell a somewhat tragic story of the prevalence of suicide as well as the silence that resounds around it. The next section examines – through the circulation of the story of a favourite college ghost – the meanings that suicide holds.

Lily – A Comic Death

Many of the small, privately run hostels that accommodate single college going and working women in the city of Chennai in Southern India do not have ceiling fans – nor are they air conditioned. The latter would make the cost of living unaffordable, and the former was simply stated to me by hostel wardens, deans of colleges and students alike as if it were a self-evident fact. Given the extreme heat of this city, particularly in the summer months, with temperatures rising well over thirty-five degrees Celsius, this is a curious state of affairs – far from self-evident. The difficult ventilation is compounded by the fact that many of these hostels also have grilled windows that do not open very far, many of them having thick brown paper pasted over the glass of the window pane – ‘to keep off peeping toms’ – and if the rooms have balconies, they are invariably closed off.

A few months into fieldwork, I finally heard spoken, the rationale behind all this that I had come to suspect: these were all means of preventing suicide by restricting access to the means. I was, by this time, living at Teresa Hostel. Our cramped quarters – with one bathroom shared with the occupants of three other such rooms – on the institution’s second floor opened out onto a balcony that appeared to have been boarded up. The windows had been painted shut, and were frosted dark. This institution, like almost every other hostel for women in the city, has strict curfew rules, requiring women to be back as early as six pm. As such, my roommates and I spent long hours huddled together in our small, sometimes airless room. When, a few days after having moved in, I asked my roommates if we could ask

perhaps to have the balcony opened up for some air, one of them coolly answered as she watched her soap opera on her computer, that a fellow student at a nearby hostel had killed herself jumping off the balcony, and since then, the balcony had been strictly off limits. Another student sarcastically added that while suicide was ‘not allowed’, hostels like this one were ‘slowly killing us’⁶⁸.

In mid-2012 I also spent time with students at an anti-suicide rally in the city, where young women marched – many of them, admittedly to get the community service credits they needed for graduation – on the city’s Marina Beach, carrying placards demanding better mental health services, and exhorting those considering suicide to remember their families, and to stay strong. ‘Weakness’ was a reason I heard mentioned many times during this rally as students explained to me why they thought some people chose to kill themselves. Everyone had problems, I was told time and again, and sometimes these problems would become too difficult to bear, even making death seem a more palatable option. These were ‘tests’ some students explained, unclear on who exactly was doing the testing, or for what purpose, but sure that it was best to use these tests as opportunities to ‘prove [their] strength’, and forbearance. Others brought up a cure-all widely heard mentioned in a variety of contexts in Chennai: ‘just adjust’ – i.e. make compromises and go on living – I would be told, ‘and it will all get better’.

From ‘adult’ authorities in the lives of students – professors and deans of colleges – I heard the explanation that youth was a volatile period when emotions ran high and subsumed rationality in thinking. Particularly women’s youth, I was told, was vulnerable to such

⁶⁸ The student’s comment recalls verbatim Berlant’s conception of ‘slow death’ (2007): the gradual attrition of populations to the point of death, which she sees as an everyday form of violence in neoliberal contexts.

emotional excess – ‘hormones’ and ‘bodily changes’ as well as ‘temptations’ presented in the course of college life were all stated as reasons why young women might consider suicide⁶⁹. Indeed, suicide was placed alongside elopements with unsuitable partners and hard-partying cultures as a sign that youth did not know ‘what [was] best for them’. Authorities typically also saw the attempt to suicide or desire for it, in this narrative, as indicative of slow development towards adulthood. Particularly for women, I was told time and again, ‘life [would be] hard’ and ‘adjustments’ would need to be made – larger adjustments than anyone had faced by their late teens or early twenties. Marriage, for instance, was often brought up as a source of such future frustrations, for which young women needed to steel themselves.

This typically then justified paternalistic cultures of protection within such institutions that exercised *in loco parentis* powers over students, monitoring and policing their behaviour through CCTV cameras, regular checks of rooms, and other forms of surveillance, in order to ‘keep them safe’ – whether from themselves or others. Besides the lack of ceiling fans in many hostels, and the boarded up windows and balconies with which I began this article, other means of suicide prevention included rules against accessing any upstairs terraces in most college and hostel buildings, as well as, in some places, regulations banning knives, or other sharp objects, as well as insecticides, mosquito repellents and other poisonous substances that students might consume for such purposes. Further, most hostels do not have doors that lock, and students are rarely given keys to their own rooms, thus leaving the warden and other hostel officials with full access. This might also be further located squarely within the context of postcoloniality. Suicide, it is pertinent to observe, was a crime in India until December 2014. Under the now-defunct Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code, ‘Whoever attempts to

⁶⁹ This recalls observations made in Wadley’s now-dated work on the ‘powers of Tamil Women’ regarding women’s youth as a volatile period – one of sexual possibility where women have to be guarded against premarital sexual activity, as well as one of heightened emotional sensitivity (Wadley 1980).

commit suicide and does any act towards the commission of such offence, shall be punished with simple imprisonment for a term which may extend to one year or with fine, or with both.’ This could also however be argued to be rooted in colonial governmentality which was centrally concerned both with the construction of the colonized body as not-yet-developed, an object of moulding and evolution at the hands of the colonizer, and for the present, weak, and incapable of reason, as well as with marking itself as the arbiter of death: holding control of how and under what circumstances populations could live and die (Mbembe 2003).

About two months into fieldwork I encountered Lily – or rather her ghost. The moment was banal – two students in the drama club were chasing after each other with bottles of water. They had been rehearsing a version of Yasmina Reza’s *God of Carnage* and I was there in all my ethnographer’s naïveté to ask questions about middle-class values. Suddenly, as the girl who was being chased tired of running around the auditorium she shrieked, ‘Stop. Or Lily will get you.’ When they finally sat down and had caught their breath, I asked them who Lily was, and why she might ‘get’ them. In response (and perhaps I was lucky that these were drama students – I may not have received such a theatrical performance if not), Shanti, the tall, popular president of the Drama club stood up and recited, in mock-seriousness that elicited much clapping and laughter:

Lily O Lily

Help us not to be so silly

As to fall in love with the Dhobi

For we have come here to study.

Intrigued, I probed further, and was told that Lily was a favourite college ghost. She was said to haunt the institution’s main hostel, an old 1920s building, tall and spacious in its colonial

style, with a courtyard in the centre. Lily was said to have been a student living there sometime in the 1950s or the 1960s. She lived in Room 84. Together, we went out and stood before the hostel, and I looked up, past the trellis-screen that now closes in the balcony, to the room where Lily may have lived.

She had, I was told, fallen in love with a *dhobi* – a person who washed the clothes in the college. Cue for more laughter. As such romances go, the warden found out and gated her. Gating – a punishment handed down from British public schools and Oxbridge – is something like grounding, and is still used today. For infractions as small as keeping a messy room, students are routinely gated for a period as long as three months. During this time they are allowed to go to classes, and have to report back immediately after their last class. As one hostel resident, repeatedly gated over a three month period for her messy habits told me, they couldn't go out at all, 'not even for a sanitary pad.' If a messy room got three months of gating, I wondered how long Lily might have been gated. No one knew but I was told she languished for a long time, the proverbial princess in the tower, but her prince did not come. Indeed he was not a prince, but only the *dhobi* who had likely lost his job at the hostel and been told never to come that way again. Disappointed as she was, she then jumped off the balcony – it did not have the trellis closing it then – and died. We don't know if she was trying to escape her imprisonment, or attempting suicide.

There was laughter as Shanti finished the story – at the idea of Lily falling splat in the middle of the courtyard and dying. I could not but recall the end of Hillaire Belloc's limerick about Rebecca (Belloc 1997, 59-64) a little girl who 'slammed doors for fun and perished miserably.' Having just acted very silly in slamming a door, Rebecca dies, knocked down by a marble bust that topples down in the force of the slammed door. The picture that accompanies this is of a flat Rebecca, two-dimensional and quite dead.

And down it came! It knocked her flat!

It laid her out! She looked like that.

(Belloc 1997, 61-62)

Like Rebecca, or any of the other children who die at the end of their very silly behaviour in Belloc's *Cautionary Verses*, Lily is not so much romantic heroine, or tragic figure at Church College. Rather she is both comic and a figure of caution – the cartoon image of a girl falling splat from a high balcony, all for the love of a *dhobi*: a girl who was so 'silly' that her sheer silliness killed her. The actual violence of the suicide – and indeed any consideration of the violence of gating and what may have gone on in her confinement to her room and the college campus, to make Lily feel so helpless in her position – is elided. Butler (1990) comments on the significance of concealment and erasures in the processes of gender subjection: regimes of discipline that produce gender, she suggests, are by necessity concealed under a narrative that casts them as natural – as common sense: a kind of obvious knowledge – that then justifies the erasures and foreclosures of other possibilities that do not stand up to common sense.

Why then was Lily so silly, I asked my informants that day. For one, it turns out that falling in love with a *dhobi* was silly – 'a bit like falling for an autorickshaw driver,' Shanti told me, after she was done narrating the story, 'just stupid.' She went on to tell me about girls who had been caught and expelled from the college a few years ago for having intimate relations with the men who were hired to repaint the ladies' hostel. Unsurprised, mostly because I know I might have said the same thing ten years ago, coming as I do from this context, I provoked her: 'do you think the story would have ended differently if Lily had been so silly instead, to say, fall for a college student like herself?' Shanti giggled shyly, and clarified

that I wasn't insinuating that Lily was a lesbian before saying no, she didn't think so, but then Lily wouldn't be 'spoiling her life' as she was bound to be doing with the *dhobi*. She was clearly showing 'no common sense.' This clearly made her silly. How could she have taken some crush on a *dhobi* so seriously?

Dhobis in Tamil Nadu are largely members of the *vannaan* caste, which is, depending on the sub-caste and region, classified either as OBC or Dalit. Further, as a *dhobi* he is very likely to have been working-class. Interestingly, a recent film, *Madrasapattinam* (2010) tells the story of a romantic relationship between an English girl and a Madras *dhobi* in the 1940s. Though the young woman's family separates them, the *dhobi* is shown in good light throughout the film, and there is nothing 'silly' about this romance. This offered the occasion for comparison. I was quickly pointed to the end of the film where the *dhobi* by dint of his effort becomes an entrepreneur, who creates a project to clean up the city and even educate the community of *vannaan* with whom he lives. Not every *dhobi*, I was told, was likely to be like this. The average *dhobi* would simply have brought down Lily's status by taking her to live with him in his community.

This explanation for Lily's 'silliness' rings very close to a story about college girls' mental feebleness and strength told in Eleanor McDougall's account of life in a women's college in late colonial Madras. McDougall (1943) tells the story of a young woman – the daughter of a rich man who owns a business – who, it is found out, eloped with a young man of considerably lower economic and social standing. McDougall (1943) stresses on the idea that this young woman may simply not have known what to say when so entreated by a man – and flattered by his attentions – to run away with him. Conditioned, she argues, to following the orders of men, and too sheltered at home to have ever learned to make decisions on her own, she conjectures, the young woman said yes, and married this man. In McDougall's

opinion, this was both silly and immature – a clear sign that Indian women needed to be treated like children, protected, and guided by an adult who would make their decisions for them. Like Lily, her foolishness and immaturity are traced to what is seen as a decision clearly lacking in long-term vision: choosing to love, and in the case of McDougall's student, marry, a young man of far lower social standing who, as McDougall suggests and as the young women telling me Lily's story wondered, might be only marrying this woman in order to inherit her fortune.

Lily's story also interrupts the popular teleological understanding of romance, as successful only if it necessarily leads closer to culmination in a successful and socially sanctioned marriage. Lily appears to embrace precarity in choosing to pine after her *dhobi*, despite the likely outcome of this love being either no marriage, or a controversial one that might alienate her from her community, rather than return to common sense. Her suicide seems to seal this fate. As Halberstam (2011) argues, the defining feature of common sense within neoliberal frameworks is the pursuit of practices that prolong life – i.e. the avoidance of risk. Suicide, within this framework then, is the repudiation of this logic: it embraces death, over common sense. The suicide was also taken to imply a lack of responsibility to her family, who I was told, were surely more important than the *dhobi*: why would anyone kill themselves over the loss of a lover who was a mere *dhobi*? And further, as the last line indicated, it was stupid to take college romances – especially such dramatically unworkable ones – seriously. It again shows a lack of 'common sense.'

'Silliness' as an idiom carries significant meaning among youth in Chennai. In films, women who are about to give in to their emotions are reprimanded: 'don't be silly,' and among students, 'silliness' refers to a lack of vigilance: a looseness whether of bodily comportment or of mind. My downstairs neighbour at Teresa Hostel, Darshana, was 'silly' to

many around her for instance, because she was a little loose of limb: she flailed her arms, gesturing wildly as she spoke, and tended to leave her hair flowing down her back rather than tied up neatly, or at least pinned, and sprayed in place as most did. ‘Silliness’ was often linked, also to the dramas of ‘love failure’. ‘Silliness’ among youth was often linked to beginning romances with – rather than simply fantasising about – men with whom marriage was unlikely to be the result of a courtship – for instance a man of a vastly different caste or class. Srivastava (2007) argues that one of the bargains made in the construction of middle class femininity in postcolonial India has been that women who wish to remain safe in public spaces refrain from showing emotions in them. Of course, as Ahmed (2004*b*) reminds us, when we consider ‘not showing emotions’ – this does not refer to all emotions. So for instance, it is usually all right for a woman to demonstrate disdain for romantic advances made towards her, or say, love for a child. However, other emotions, which might cast this woman as being weak, and result in her being taken advantage of, are expected to be kept in restraint. In the film discussed in the first section of this chapter, the protagonist’s best friend warns her of being too emotional at college – giving herself away too easily. This, she predicts, would lead her to make the wrong choices in love and ultimately bring shame to herself. The emotions and feelings of youth today, on the other hand, cause anxiety precisely because they are not in the interior, domesticated space of the home, but come to be expressed when young people are symbolically ‘outside’ – attending college and often also living away from the kin family. As Srivastava (2007) writes, since the 1990s intimacy has left the home, and stepped into spaces of consumption, leisure and pleasure. Opportunities for dating, sex and ‘crossing the line,’ as a range of transgressive practices are described, have also increased.

Contemporary Tamil cinema reflects this. The ‘strong’ or ‘good’ woman as in the 2007 film *Mozhi* (Speech), the heroine only allows herself emotional vulnerability when she is sure she is financially secure and can fully rely on her romantic interest to marry her. The figure of

the *nalla ponnuru* – the good girl – in this filmic narrative performs the same function as the Final Girl in slasher films, a sub genre of horror (Clover 1992). She is the one to be identified with, even as we watch in sympathetic horror at the tragedies befalling those who allow themselves to be led by emotion. She is also the one who succeeds in overcoming challenges through perceptive and calm action, rather than giving in to fear, anger, love, or lust. In *Mayakkam Enna* (2011) – *What an Intoxication* – this figure takes on a somewhat macabre role: she makes the choice to stick by her alcoholic abusive husband as she believes that it is his great genius of mind that is causing him to feel misunderstood and hence react by punishing her in turn. By taking his beating and emotional violence with composed acceptance, she manages to preserve the marriage. All ends well, as the abusive husband finally receives an award for his work, vindicating her, and making him happy enough to stop treating her violently.

Discussing this story many times with many groups of informants, I heard praise for how this young woman ensures that there is no scandal – that not even his friends and hers are aware of the details of the situation – and chooses to stay with her husband despite her family's support for her decision to leave him. Reflecting this view, on a notice board outside a college, that tends to display messages meant to teach 'values and morals' to students, I saw a piece that vindicated this opinion. Berating divorce as *failure*, this short message encouraged young women to 'manage' their marriages efficiently, in the same way that they would an organisation. Ending on a cautionary note, this piece warned young women of loneliness and regret should they leave their partners, 'impulsively'. The cautionary tale is then a means by which the law as a sign of a distant but overwhelming power is brought into the framework of everyday life (Das 1996).

Discipline, in this discourse, is re-figured as the instilling of personal responsibility. A person who is unable to take this responsibility is then treated as a failed citizen: one who does not deserve the rights given to those who can ‘properly’ care for themselves. Wendy Brown (2003) makes the argument that one of the main characteristics of neoliberal governmentality is that within this ideology moral subjects are reconfigured as entrepreneurial subjects – calculating and rational persons whose deservedness of moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for self-care. Rofel (2007, 16) echoes this, writing, ‘Social insurance, as a liberal principle of social solidarity, gives way to a privatisation of risk management, and social work gives way to the self-help manual. Individuals will become experts of themselves.’ In this context, I was told a few times that the ‘Devdas type,’ was out of fashion. The popular hero of an eponymous fin de siècle Bengali novel, Devdas has since evolved into a metonym for lovelorn sentimentality. A member of the Bengali *bhadralok* – the rich, property owning colonial middle classes – Devdas’s rejection in love sends him spiralling into a life of high expenditure, as well as alcoholism, eventually leading to his finding solace in the arms of a courtesan. Nevertheless, now dying of liver disease, Devdas travels to his old lover’s marital home and dies outside it, calling her name. This story and its eponymous protagonist have long captured the Indian imagination, earning currency across the nation in many film versions and translations (Nandy 2001). However, to my informants and their male friends alike, Devdas was passé – a bit of a failure and a relic, someone whose spirit did not fit the times. In other words, he represented the common sense of a more phlegmatic, overtly passionate time, that had now been replaced by a culture where Devdas’s lack of self care constituted a deliberate and unnecessary descent to failure when he might have picked himself up, dusted himself off and moved on.

The Bollywood filmmaker Anurag Kashyap’s retelling of this story in his film *Dev D* (2009) - immensely popular with urban youth – demonstrates the shift in common sense with

regard to 'love failure'. In *Dev D*, Devdas receives a happy ending. He does not die, pining away for Paro, but instead chooses to find closure eventually with an elite escort, who, in the wake of her affair with him, chooses also to leave sex work. Here Devdas – after the brief threat of a total detour away from aspiration and success – bounces back. Devdas of the Bengali novel is set up within this film as a cautionary tale: the implicit narrative that the Indian viewer – inevitably familiar with the older iteration of Devdas – juxtaposes Kashyap's story against. Dev, in this contemporary version, ultimately outgrows the emotions of his youth – melancholy, nostalgia, and suicidal intent. The passion that he retains is now disciplined: 'a form of intelligence,' (Ahmed 2004b, 3) that allows him to advance towards becoming a competent adult. Dev saves himself from the undignified end that Devdas receives by taking responsibility for himself.

However – and here we arrive at hybridised and particularly localised versions of neoliberal discourses – the responsibility valorised in this context, is not only personal. During one peculiar conversation, Annie and Leyla, two avid watchers of the fantasy TV show, *The Vampire Diaries* (2009 – Present), told me that they related to the show: it was very realistic and close to life. Curious how a television programme about the lives of vampires might relate to the lives of two Malayalee College girls in Chennai, I asked them to explain. To both Annie and Leyla, this show held a lot of merit because its chief protagonist Stefan Salvatore always prioritised his responsibilities to his family, over his passion for the female protagonist of the series, Elena. The centrality of this romance to the show, even though Elena briefly lusts after Stefan's somewhat more dangerous and edgy brother, Damon, drew Annie and Leyla to the programme. To them, Stefan was the perfect example of an appropriate man: while showering his girlfriend with affection and love, he still didn't let love drive him away from his family obligations.

Ranjana echoed this sense of personal and family responsibility as being interlinked, in a discussion of her own life. Though she desired it, she told me that she would not go clubbing or have sex while in college because her parents had done an extraordinary thing – unprecedented in her conservative Syrian Christian family in Kerala – by allowing her to attend college in Chennai. For her, as for Annie, it was a mark of maturity and adulthood to feel responsible in this manner to the family: hence something they aspired to. Further, it was – and we re-enter the familiar place of the neoliberal – as they both phrased it, ‘a choice,’ rather than the filial obligation they associated with a past time.

Conclusion: On Being Stuck

What narratives of agency might be recoverable from these stories of spectral hauntings, from the spread of rumours and scandal, and the repetition of stories about failure? In her essay on gay suicide, Puar (2012, 157) calls for ‘dialogue about ecologies of sensation and slow death’: i.e. narratives of attrition that go beyond suicide or death alone, to talk about debilitation and dehumanization as it occurs in the everyday. This is what this chapter has, in some way, responded to, by juxtaposing a narrative of suicide with a narrative of a ‘death that should have been’ and another departure from the straight-and-narrow which seemed to recall spectral threats of loss – the loss of home, alienation from family and community, a pre-emptory sense of melancholy, as young women described the fear of social sneering. As Patel (1997) suggests, at the bottom of the story of the freak-sighting is the fear of the freak within, and the losses inherent therein. These losses, I have demonstrated, are complex, and attend to histories that haunt them: postcolonial histories that create definitions of the ‘human’ and the livable, and to a crisis of representation that render the past unrecoverable and rather re-animating it as spectres that do not seem to let go. Loss, I have demonstrated, linking some of the arguments in this chapter to the examination in Chapter Five, of dark humour, is further also sometimes ridiculous, and communicated through humour: the limerick about Lily and

the laughter about the lesbian who ought to have died. Drawing on Benjamin (2003), we might imagine mourning and humour as aspects of the same fabric that makes up sociality. In Butler's reading of Benjamin (2003, 470), 'mourning is likened to an "interior" region of clothing that is suddenly, and perhaps with some embarrassment, exposed, not only to the public eye, but to the flesh itself...mourning emerges as the lining of the dress, where the dress is, as it were, laughing.'

Forms of spectral agency founded on such practices of mourning and grieving are not alien to the context of Tamil Nadu. We might liken the narratives of ghost stories where women find a context in which to lose the contained bodily comportment expected of them otherwise, and the unruly and misplaced forms of laughter and rapture that accompany some of these narratives, to practices of spirit possession⁷⁰ in which women typically display unruliness, departing from the restraint that they otherwise might practice. As Ram (2012) notes, many of these practices recall movements from childhood – such as running about wildly, swinging the hair about and laughing manically – which taken out of the context of childish play, are permissible only within the ritual realm of afflictive spirit possession⁷¹. The rapturous narration of ghost stories, scandals and stories about spectral 'others' described in this chapter spills from the realm of the ritual, introducing unhomely and un-modern figures of discomfort into everyday life. This form of agency – while deeply ambiguous as to its effects as this chapter has established – is spectral because it remains between tangible and intangible, real and fantastic, rational and irrational, modern and 'backward'.

⁷⁰ Ethnographic studies of spirit possession (Ram 2012, Schulman and Thiagarajan 2006) mark the particularly theatrical nature of women's experience of spirit possession. Unlike the masculine *attam* (dance), the forms of wildness that women embody mark a distinct departure from respectability.

⁷¹ It is worth noting here that the simultaneously childlike and sexually excessive movements of the possessed woman are not discontinuous from each other but make sense within the logic of childishness as understood not as an incapacity for sexual feeling, but a realm of undisciplined or unrestrained desire and sexuality.

In conclusion, I narrate a story of anger and of 'being stuck' as this angry young woman described – an inability to move from the time of trauma, ahead into the imagined futurity of 'what-doesn't-kill-you-only-makes-you-stronger' – and ask what we might make of such practices that, much like Berlant's overeater (2007) refuse to reproduce everyday life, and move onward. This might be examined in light of Benjamin's account of melancholy (2003), which, for him, is the cessation of movement: a deadening, which marks the loss of time and of a history, as well of the possibility of imagining the future as a departure from, and movement forward from this past. Melancholy, for him is situated in bodies that cannot move and are instead stuck, gazing on the object of loss.

Addressing this, I examine here one more ethnographic example that presented a somewhat different, albeit pertinent kind of haunting. Kalaiselvi considered herself a 'smart girl'. She had come a long way, from having grown up in a small one-room-hut in her hometown, where her parents sold river-fish. She was 'not SC' she told me on our first meeting, emphasising that she was 'higher than that'. In many ways, Kalaiselvi was defiantly proud. A small, lithe young woman who competed in national level athletic competitions, she had won a rare scholarship not just to any college, but one in the city. Indeed, her scholarship being a private one, she proudly told me she lived in a hostel where she had to do no domestic labour – she was, again 'not that low'. So she got a packed lunch, and a bus picked her and fellow athletes up every morning and dropped them off at their practice grounds. Later in the day, the same bus returned, conveying them from sports grounds to college, and after classes, back to the hostel. Kalaiselvi got to come to college in track pants and a t-shirt, unlike the *salwar kameez* that women who did not play sports usually wore. So she often laughingly pointed out that despite being from a less privileged background, she looked more modern.

Kalai was also proud because, as she told me many times over, ‘sensible’ unlike other girls who came a long distance away from home ‘and lose their heads’ – usually, she added, over a boy, or because they become frustrated with the college. She told me about a friend who had almost killed herself for love. Others had had flings, she knew, and gotten caught and been shamed, even thrown out. It was not, she emphasised, as if she had no desires, or hadn’t had the opportunity. ‘I’m pretty’ she told me, smirking a bit one day, ‘and thin’, adding that many male teammates had propositioned her, some persistently over many months. But she kept her eye on her goal: to finish college respectably, and find a central government job. Kalai did not want to go back to her village. It was a good place, she told me, but a place without opportunity. She was ambitious, and wanted to do well for herself. She dreamed of living a life where she would take her own daughters shopping in T-Nagar, Chennai’s busy shopping districts, maybe even buy them gold earrings. Her parents were not ‘middle class’ (*mattiyam*) she had told me previously, but now she considered herself to be so, and wanted to marry a man with a good white collar job and an education: a respectable marriage, not only for love, and have children who would have the privileges she did not.

These were all conventional middle class goals, and in fact in many ways Kalai could well have been a poster child for social mobility, ambition and initiative. However, she admitted, despite her ambitions, her clear vision, her desire to do things right, she felt a raging anger at times. She felt invisible she told me – she couldn’t speak English very well so the group of people she could speak to was limited; and this lack of English knowledge also meant that she had found herself patronised by fellow students. Teachers, she told me, were impatient with her slowly translating from Tamil in her mind as she answered in class, and other students sniggered at her. She never understood when the ‘English girls’ – i.e. the girls who had been educated in and spoke English fluently – spoke rapidly, and hence had never been able to participate much whether in the academic discussions or in extra-curriculars. She

felt too embarrassed to ask them to slow down for her benefit: afraid that it would only draw ridicule.

She also knew that ‘a girl from not even Madurai but a small village near Madurai’ would never be elected to the College’s student government – its Cabinet – no, that required speech making from a stage – and that too in English – among other things. She neither had the linguistic ability nor the confidence for that. ‘Those girls will just scare me’ she said, nodding towards the table of urban, upper middle class girls sitting by the *chaat* stand in the canteen. And yet, without being in the Cabinet, she knew she was facing a year more of helplessness, while she sat about in incomprehension, feeling disconnected from the college. She had been told in the past to let it go and move on, to focus on her own goals and to stop feeling angry, but, she told me, she simply could not. ‘I am stuck here’ she said, sadly, ‘and cannot move’. She felt the resentment bubbling up as she came in from practice in the morning, smelled the hot masala dosa and coffee and longed to be able to buy it someday. But the College had struck a deal with Café Coffee Day, a coffee franchise, and now the previously five-rupee coffee cost twenty-five rupees – ‘for less coffee’, Kalai scoffed. Each masala dosa was twenty-five rupees: so that would be fifty rupees for a decent breakfast, money that women like Kalai simply did not have. Indeed, she laughed drily one day, she had gone thirsty all day some days because she often could not afford so much as to buy a bottle of water – each bottle cost no less than fifteen rupees. A vein visibly throbbled in her neck as she told me all of this, her hand to her head.

However, she was also certain she would never become involved in any collective action to change any of this. ‘That is stupidity’ she told me, ‘and too much risk’. Her friend Kumari, who joined us, and was from a similar socio-economic background, laughed her boisterous laugh as we explained the subject of our conversation. ‘No no’ she said, ‘that is too

much risk'. Both the women first of all felt they owed it to their families who had let them leave their villages and come to Chennai for education – something not all parents did for daughters – to stay and finish their degrees without making trouble. But also, 'who'll save us if something happens?' Kumari said, saying that she did not know any of the Cabinet members in the college. Nor did she feel that any of the professors would take her side if she should get in trouble for raising what she felt was class and caste bias in the everyday life of the college. Girls like themselves, she said, are suspect, adding that if she was hauled to the Principal's office and was lectured on her behaviour in English, she likely would not understand, much less be able to talk herself out of the situation. Kumari laughed in response, '*aama avanga ashu-pushu-nnu pesuwanga*' – she will speak *ashu-pushu*, the last onomatopoeic phrase indicating what English, particularly when spoken by the 'posh' upper middle classes, sounds like to these young women. Given the gradual squeezing out of the possibility for safe political spaces on these campuses, young women like her often grit their teeth, sit tight and hope that the status that education in an urban women's college gives them will at least be worth it.

So, Kalai ended, again, she was 'stuck'. She had begun to do badly in her classes, and was afraid her central government job would not materialise, but she could not ask for help, and much as teachers and fellow students told her to do this, she could not overlook her anger and simply work harder. She was not stupid, she emphasised, or lacking in ability. She was simply defeated by the college – and overwhelmingly angry. Much as, she said, she wanted to be purely grateful for her scholarship as she had been when she first arrived, now she felt cheated: drawn into a situation in which she had no power, to a college where, as she pointed out, women of lower caste and class background – 'Tamil girls', i.e. those who predominantly spoke Tamil, but also marking non-Brahmin women – sat on the plastic chairs at the back, away from the upper caste, middle class girls sitting under the fans on the nicer wooden chairs and at the pretty tables. This arrangement, reminiscent of separate caste-

specific eating areas, was an affront to Kalai, one that bothered her, intruded into her mind when she was not in College but back in hostel with others from similar backgrounds, where such divisions were less pronounced. She felt 'stuck' she said again and again, implying the inability to move forward in time: she felt mired instead in her anger, which seemed to have no place. Kalai's anger might be read here as an 'ugly feeling' (Ngai 2005) in that it makes her come undone, and puts her in an undignified position.

The spectres that haunt Kalai's presents here are plenty: not least, it opens up a history of caste-based discrimination in her physical location outside the central spaces of the canteen where the 'English girls' sit. Her marginal position appears to translate beyond the metaphor, as Kalai clearly experiences a sense of invisibility in the College. Indeed, much like the lesbian discussed above, Kalai goes about the institution like a ghost (Das 2007), making no imprint upon it, seething with anger, but having no means of legitimately making herself heard. There is also the very real spectre of failure: of not achieving her goal of getting a government job, finding a way to live in the city, or living her dream of taking her daughter shopping in T-Nagar. Kalai talked about the suicides of others like her – girls who had 'lost their heads' and become involved in love affairs, something she had never done, having stuck steadfast to her goals. She was mocked a bit for her austere stance in this regard but had not budged all this while. Now, having given in to anger, she was a bit shakier. These other women seemed to haunt her too – to return to her and taunt her, asking her when she would succeed in her famously stated goals: if she too wasn't going to turn out inevitably like the others. The last time I saw Kalai she was angry again. Her teacher had refused to let her retake a test she had missed on account of sports commitments. She threw her legs – shod in shiny white sneakers – on a chair opposite as she collapsed in exhaustion and shut her eyes. It seemed like she had given up. Regardless of how well she did for herself, despite her best efforts, her decision

never to be in a romantic relationship, and determination to get a government job and be in a respectable marriage, Kalai could not shake off the feeling that she had somehow failed.

Kalai's story narrates her aspiration to social mobility – her desire to be 'modern', 'urban' and transcend caste – as a story of violent rupture. While she sought to live her life in a linear narrative of self-disciplined progress, Kalai finds herself off-track and caught in the cracks. Her ability to migrate to the city, her scholarship and her steadfast ambitions of a central government job allow her to fantasise transcending caste: a classic narrative of modernity. Tellingly, the ultimate fantasy is one of consumption: she imagines being able to shop with the daughter she hopes to have. The experience of modernity, it is clear, is shot through with suffering, and brings its spectres of pasts that simply will not let go. Kalaiselvi's narrative, like the other stories presented in this chapter suggests the ambivalence of modernity. Even as it is a pleasurable ideal, and indeed an aspiration many are proud of, it rehearses histories of deprivation and suffering. In order to achieve the dream of consumption, Kalai finds that she has to discipline her desires in the present. Yet that too is not enough.

In addressing spectrality and scandal, this chapter seeks to have presented a complex narrative both of the making of gendered subjects and of middle class modernity. Loss and failure, I have demonstrated, become sites for unlikely and negative forms of agency: misplaced laughter about suicide, the frenzied telling of stories about lesbians who 'should have died', and a disabling anger that forms the site for critique of the aspiration to 'modern' middle class life.

7 | Precarious Potentials: In Summary and Conclusion

This thesis has examined ‘youth’ in the lives of young middle class women in Chennai. Setting out a context where young women’s lives are saturated with a discourse of anxiety that justifies the policing and even violent control of their mobility, I have examined practices of discipline meant to ‘educate’ young women into modern, middle class adulthood. I have argued that these practices are sites both for the making of gendered neoliberal subjectivities in India, as well as for practices of agency that fracture and disturb this process.

Organised in five substantive chapters, the thesis explores and unpacks its key themes of youth, risk and pleasure through the lens of governmentality. The chapter that follows the introduction positions youth for women within the context of the histories of higher education in Southern India, particularly drawing on discourses of homeliness that are produced through the curriculum taught to women. This chapter establishes the college as a site both for fantasy and transgression, and positions the college-girl dually within ambitious imaginations of modern mixed-sex publics, as well as nightmares of urban danger and violence. Following this, the thesis has traced the contours of women’s everyday lives through a study of practices of wandering the city, and flirtation. Such practices, I have shown, demonstrate the contradictory ways in which friendship and intimacy between peers structure the possibilities of agency. In Chapter Four, I have taken forward the discussion in the previous chapter on flirtation and sexual intimacy to examine the ways in which the categories of ‘sex’ and ‘sexuality’ are mediated by disciplinary regimes that dictate where and how young people are able to have sex. Such regimes, I have demonstrated also shape the meanings and value attached to consent in a sexual relationship, often blurring the boundaries between violence and love. The chapter that follows further extends the discussions in previous

chapters on intimacy, love and violence by examining the circulation of dark humour about rape, sexual violence and transgressive sex acts among young women. This chapter demonstrates the significance of fantasy, and practices of play through which young women imagine possibilities that are otherwise not 'livable' in their worlds, while also making sense of, and subverting the pervasive discourse of sexual danger that undergirds their lives. Chapter Six extends and completes some of these arguments through a study of scandal and the narration of cautionary tales. Through three ethnographic examples that address 'failure' in the lives of young women, I lay out the spectral landscape in which vulnerability is differentially distributed.

This study's particular focus on youth and sexuality reflects its central concern with discourses of sexual risk and danger that typically saturate young middle class women's lives, mediating their experiences of 'youth' and 'adulthood', indeed even structuring the social meanings of these categories and their implications. Colleges, I have demonstrated, are invested in the project of regulating affective life. It is their 'object-target' (Anderson 2012, 40) in producing certain configurations of youth and femininity as livable. They are engaged in a pedagogical practice of disciplining will towards the production and reproduction of everyday ordinary middle class life. In this, these institutions recall a history of the disciplining of the will that draws both on the colonial inheritance of Christian Missionary-led education in India that enforced Protestant emphases on an active will towards the making of a stable, neatly ordered modern life (Jayawardena 1995); and the discourses of will and wilfulness inherent in the nationalist-Orientalist Hindu thought of this time, which also gave prominence to the will as needing discipline and control towards the making of nationalist life.

Locating gendered experiences of 'youth' in this critical history of pedagogy, the notion of 'adulthood' is positioned as an autonomous state that comes to be realised as the

unachievable ideal of rational, knowing decision-making subjecthood that is central to a neoliberal polity. Just as subjects in contemporary neoliberal societies are never quite as capable as they might be (Jain 2007), leaving room for perpetual schooling and perpetual improvement (Deleuze 1992), so there is always room to be more adult, less wilful, more willing to abide and adjust. In Jeffrey and Young's North Indian context (2013), youth thus do *jugad*, i.e. engage in acts of agency that entail playing rather than resisting institutions, and systems of power. In its converse then, the journey out of youth placed in the narrative structure of the desire to 'grow up' is implicated in these notions of capability and in the normative uses of time and space (Halberstam 2005) and in the appropriate channelling of affect (Ahmed 2004b).

This is further imbricated in a postcolonial inheritance that has been intimately preoccupied with cultivating a range of affective attunements, enshrined for instance in the Constitution's famous 'scientific temper'⁷². We might ask if 'tempers', like the 'atmosphere' that so concerned Marx (1978, 577), too press upon us, enveloping us in a kind of mood⁷³. In this context, women's education has been conceived as serving the purpose of such scientifically tempered lives (Sarkar 2001, Sreenivas 2008) that make us modern and give us the right to govern ourselves, and be adult as a nation. Schooling here is the process of educating the native into citizenship (K. Kumar 2005, N. Kumar 2011), and as I have demonstrated, the citizen into the responsible, hardworking neoliberal subject.

Sex is, in this context, a particularly 'dense point of transfer' (Foucault 1978), acting as a significant nodal point in the affective economies of middle class everyday life. In young

⁷² Indian Constitution, part IV A, Article 51. A. Fundamental Duties, (h) *to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform.*

⁷³ See Anderson (2009) for a discussion of affective atmospheres as spatial formations of intensity that envelope and press upon life, creating emergent circuits of feeling.

women's lives this is of particular importance because of the atmosphere of sexual risk – the public mood of anxiety about their sexuality – in which their everyday lives are located. This thesis uses sex and sexuality as a point of departure to investigate contingencies emergent in a variety of intimate relationships, both sexual and otherwise. Friendships, college romance, and affective geographies of the city and domestic spaces are all examined as scenes of precarity. Intimacy, as Berlant (1998, 282) writes, 'builds worlds; it creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relation'. I have demonstrated that the making of intimacy among young women is a precarious business, located in the space-time of non-heroic and suspended forms of agency. These interstitial forms of agency, as evinced in this thesis, often constitute a break in the practice of reproducing middle class life. They signal an awareness of exhaustion, which might excite 'wasting time' and 'loafing' as in Chapter Three, or induce laughter as Chapter Seven has shown. It is in this context that the idle narration of an interesting story might be the site of fantasy – a rupturing of the effects of organization and governmentality that heals quickly if incompletely – as Chapter Six has demonstrated.

In this chapter, I begin with a final ethnographic vignette that encapsulates many of the themes explored in this thesis, before going on to outline what has happened since I left the field in 2013, and laying out emerging questions, which could constitute potential themes for future research. The final section explores, again, the question of agency, now examining and the uses of negativity in the scene of everyday middle class life.

'Song, Dance, Stunt, Fight, Everything'

'Write about my life' my roommate, Arti instructed me one evening, as we were about to go to bed, 'it has everything in it: song, dance, stunt, fight, everything...' she said, adding that if I wrote about her alone, I would have enough material for a large book. She had hinted many times previously that she was a woman of worldly experience and had experienced

things she believed worth narrating. She had even had a fling with an older man when she was a teenager, she told me one day. Such experiences, she believed, had made her 'a real adult'. Indeed, she told me, though I was a good seven years older, she 'felt older' than me: after all, her life had been more colourful, she insisted, more full of 'drama'. In many ways, Arti had been the ideal informant. She loved to talk, and we had gradually built enough of a relationship that I could ask her the embarrassing questions I did not dare ask others. She had snuck me past the warden whilst I was breaking rules a few times, and I in turn, had been one of the small number of people Arti confided in when she lied to the hostel's authorities about her whereabouts while she visited her boyfriend in Bangalore.

'I'll tell you a story,' she said finally that evening, 'a bedtime story.' Like a child I snuggled up in my bed, covers to my chin, while Arti began her story. She had just started seeing her boyfriend, Varun at this time, she told me, and was fourteen – a romantic age, we mused; the age that Juliet was when she killed herself – and feeling much like the heroine of her own fairy tale, Arti continued. She told me that the story she was about to tell me occurred one evening after school, when Varun came up to her and asked her if she would go on a motorcycle ride with him after her tuition class that day. His brother had bought a new motorbike and Varun had been given permission to ride it that evening. Like many other middle class students, Arti attended extra tuition for Maths and Science after school. These classes would end at the somewhat late hour of seven-thirty pm, after which she usually went home with a female friend, whose parents typically picked the two girls up in their car, and dropped Arti off before driving home. Arti was tempted by Varun's offer but all too aware that the area where she attended her tuition class was full of her parents' friends, and even extended family. If someone saw her on the back of a boy's motorbike, she could get into serious trouble. 'But I wanted to ride' Arti told me. She wanted the feeling, she told me, of gripping Varun's waist as they drove fast along the empty streets, the wind in their hair, and

the thrill of the speed coursing through them. She wanted to experience the city, she told me, as Varun's girlfriend, clinging to his body.

So she told him to come and see her after class, and told her friend's parents that her own parents would be coming by to pick her up later. At seven-thirty, Arti went and sat on the kerb and waited for Varun to show up: her knight in shining helmet. At eight, he was still nowhere to be found, and just as Arti was about to catch an auto-rickshaw home, she told me, she saw him arrive. By this point, she was not only angry but also increasingly aware of the eyes on her: the passers-by staring suspiciously at the teenager sitting by herself in the dark street, the 'aunties' coming up to ask her if she was all right, and if her parents were coming to pick her up. She told Varun she couldn't go riding with him and got into the auto-rickshaw. Varun got angry, she told me, smiling at the memory, and began to chase her auto-rickshaw on his bike, honking aggressively and calling out to her as he passed it, and doubled back to follow again.

The auto-rickshaw driver, alarmed by this display of aggression, assumed that Varun was a stalker, and asked Arti repeatedly if she wanted to call the police or her parents, offering to drive faster and take her home by a short cut. Arti herself was 'overwhelmed' she told me, 'just full of emotion'. She wanted to ask the auto-rickshaw driver to stop, and to run to Varun, she told me: having read this as desire for her. 'But I had no words' she continued, 'only actions', adding to me, the 'nerd' who she was sure (and she never asked, only declared) had never really known such feelings, 'this is how it is when you're in love'. So she leapt out of the auto-rickshaw, landing on the road, and skinning both knees, now calling out to Varun, still overwhelmed with desire for him. Varun, she tells me stopped the bike abruptly, letting it skid away from him as he ran to her.

As she narrated this story, Arti paused, taken with the memory of what she saw as a watershed moment in her relationship with Varun. The intensity of feeling that overcame her in that moment when she was unable to verbalise as much as a request to stop the auto-rickshaw, and the feeling of being so overwhelmed she simply had to jump from a moving vehicle even as she felt angry with Varun, she told me, were love. As Barthes (2002, 48) writes in his *Lovers' Discourse*: 'I am carried away by a powerful tide, asphyxiated with pain; my whole body stiffens and convulses; I see, in a sharp, cold flash, the destruction to which I am doomed.' *Love* had taken her to the edge of a precipice. It had affected her such that she lost her capacity to speak, to verbalise what she wanted: she was overcome, able only to tumble out of the auto-rickshaw, and fall, skinned-knees and all, to the road, ironically the very picture of the victim that the auto-rickshaw driver and the crowd that came to surround her saw her as. Love, in this case, is an 'ugly feeling': one that leaves its subject feeling undignified, unravelled and precarious (Ngai 2005).

There is an illustrative double discourse at play here. On the one hand, Arti narrated this incident as a story in her 'teenage': a time before maturity both in her life and in her relationship with Varun. While she did not see herself as a 'goody goody', Arti also saw herself as having grown 'less emotional, more responsible' over the years. Now, she told me, she was sure that she and Varun would marry a few years after she finished college. On the other hand, Arti saw the affective capacity that she had found in herself through this event to be central to this process of maturing itself. The organization of affect here takes the form of 'adulthood': in her body's capacity to manage and organize its own affects – she no longer felt 'overwhelmed' and 'taken' but saw her love for Varun as a rational and mature relationship – she located her narrative of having 'grown up'.

In its manner of narration, and its context – my ‘childhood’ in juxtaposition with a much younger woman’s ‘adulthood’ as we talked – this story is representative of the central themes of this project: an ethnographic study of what it feels like to be middle class female and young in Chennai, and a study of the circulation of multiple, often not entirely coherently ordered affects in the making of intimacy, pleasure and adulthood in these young women’s everyday lives. As such, I seek to gesture here on the one hand to the experienced gravity of the narratives that have formed the core ethnographic focus of this thesis. The stories narrated here seem piecemeal and small, but they are, to their narrators, whole stories, larger than this or any other project, carrying ‘intensities that are only imperfectly housed in the proper names we give to emotions’ (Anderson 2009, 77), and only partially captured in any account of subjectivity and agency. To Arti, the intensities of love – the ecstatic highs and the catastrophic lows, and her gradual learning to ride them – mediated a *worlding* (Stewart 2010). In experiencing, remembering and narrating them, she engaged in making her world, fraught with the tensions of caste, class, gender and her youth, and yet a domain of affect large enough that it would, in itself, be a book-full of stories: ‘song, dance, stunt, fight, everything’.

Arti’s intimate expression of ‘her world’ also collides with larger critical events and social histories of modernity as a complex, and often emotionally fraught assemblage, by which it is mediated: ‘sensuous particularity’ coexisting with ‘historical contingency’ (Said 1983, 39). As discussed in a previous chapter, Arti is a member of the Izhava caste in Kerala. They were not wealthy, she had told me. Her father had started as an X-ray technician and made much of his money in Dubai. So she saw herself as planning to marry up now that she was dating Varun, a higher-caste Nair, who also came from a far wealthier family. Her father, acutely aware of caste from his own histories as a student in Kerala and a technician in a government hospital, had been intent on privately educating Arti, such that she did not experience her caste as he had done. Arti, perhaps too much of a success of this plan, did not

see herself as being a subject of caste at all. To her mind, her father was an old-fashioned stick-in-the-mud, and her anger at his controlling ways – strict curfews, a strong demand that she do well at school, and the implicit expectation that she marry a politically-aware and socially ambitious Izhava man – often meant identifying as not being Izhava at all. She was ‘an Indian’ and ‘a woman’ she had told me in another conversation, ‘not some Izhava girl’. In many ways, Arti was a perfect child of liberalisation – proud of her individual agency, standing up against any appeal to identity politics, and placing love and choice above all else – and her history recalls the narrative of erasure and embrace of modernity told in studies of this caste (Osella and Osella 2000).

So an important reason why her love story was a song and dance, to paraphrase her, was because it was inter-caste: a fact she was defiantly determined to overlook, and which came back again and again to haunt her. She knew that the precipice she found herself standing on, for love, also cast the spectre of losing home, and the community of her family. Modernity – again recalling other narratives of Izhavas (Osella and Osella 2006) – comes with its pain. Indeed, when her father found out about the motorcycle incident later that day, she found herself frightened as he threatened her with just this: abandonment if she continued on this affair. Another ghost, however, also haunted Arti’s life. She had also feared that day – given that they were in a central location in their city – that if Varun’s family had seen them, she would be taken ‘for the wrong type’: i.e. fulfilling a lower caste stereotype, she would have been seen as someone who had easily ‘gone with Varun’. His family, she told me, would not have taken her seriously. Varun might himself have rejected her as being unworthy of his upper caste family. Now, she told me, that they were trying to ‘make it work’, she was ‘learning to be a proper Nair’: cooking food that his mother cooked, and learning the nuances of Malayalam typical to members of his community. Her father would be disappointed, she told me, when he found out. And indeed, he had no idea that Varun and Arti were back

together at all. But she had decided that Varun was her family now and that her father would have to come around or risk losing her. In accepting her potential husband's home as 'home', then Arti reconciles a fear of loss of home. The modernity that Arti aspires to strangely seems to rehearse histories of caste, and is fundamentally located in the loss that scholars like Miller (1994) allude to in characterising postcolonial modernity as inherently precarious.

On a final note Arti's story is also a reminder of the economies of affect (Ahmed 2004a) in which my fieldwork was implicated. That Arti was telling her tale as a 'bedtime story' to a woman she considered nominally younger, and certainly a 'nerd' as she called me many times, with truthfully less experience than she had with men, curled up in bed, in the mode of slumber-party-excitement: hearing about an older sister's dates when one is too young for such excitement meant something. It meant that Arti was narrating in the tone of heroism – of retrospective wisdom, a tone of amusement at her younger self, seeping in – as she told me about the beginnings of what she saw as a successful and adult romance.

After 2013

I returned from fieldwork in mid 2013: a whole year and a half ago. Many of the women I had spent a lot of time with the previous year have now graduated. Some of them had left the city and moved on to jobs and Masters degrees when I went back in August 2013. Romances I had seen the beginning of seemed to be stable, settled coupledness now, with whispers of potential marriage in the near future. Others, who were only starting their education when I was there, were still in College but a year is a long time in the scheme of things in a three-year-degree. Second year saw a new hostel, new roommates, and 'new drama' as one of them put it, in most of their lives: some of the muddles, friendships, fights and moments of bonding that had seemed intensely important in 2012-2013 were no longer so. Over the summer, many averred that they had 'grown up' a bit, having taken part in

internships around the city, been in the workplace and ‘acted like adults’. One student applied to Oxford, and to my chagrin, did not get in.

In the broader context of these women’s lives, the academic year 2013-2014 saw a greater institutional emphasis than before placed on young women’s safety on the roads. The police in Chennai had mandated starting in January 2013, following the rape of a young woman in Delhi the previous December, that colleges had to prominently display messages for young women on emergency contacts, as well as safety during their daily transit to college and back. Such messages are now ubiquitous, displayed on posters, and typically cited in the everyday discourse of the institution to justify the college’s crackdown on ‘indiscipline’ and ‘unruliness’. If anything, I heard the argument made, the Delhi rape had ‘made things worse’. Towards the end of fieldwork I clearly recall an incident where a middle class man – obviously Brahmin from the caste marks on his forehead – stopped me on the road to lecture me about the inappropriateness of my chatty politeness with an auto-rickshaw driver. When I insisted that I had only been decently polite, and besides, had known this driver since I was a teenager, when he used to drop me off at school, the man looked very angry and insisted that it was because of girls like me, giving men like my auto-rickshaw driver ‘too much space’ that incidents such as the Delhi rape happened. As I walked away from him, speechlessly, he called after me that he was only speaking out of concern for me. Many young women fully identified with this story. Their fathers had begun asking them if they intended to go and get raped like the girl in Delhi if they left home in clothes regarded inappropriate, or at a late hour. At College, this question was posed to them if they failed to meet the dress code requirement of wearing a top long enough to cover the back pocket.

The protests – widely covered in the international press as a watershed moment in Indian women’s struggles for rights and safety – in the wake of the Delhi rape were

remarkable for the reason that they portended this, drawing on the one hand liberal progressive anger at a state that had failed to create a climate of safety for women, and on the other, a discourse of violent retribution, an argument not unfamiliar in India. As Baxi (2000) argues, rape is often seen as a crime against the community and family, and adjudicated as such, through the demand of death penalty for the perpetrators. This demonstrates again, the continued validity of some of the arguments made in this thesis (Chapters four and five in particular) on the complex social meanings of consent and rape.

There was, understandably, a great deal of frustration for many months that followed and I often heard the sentiment expressed that there wasn't enough 'discipline' in India. Chitra believed that this was the reason that women in India did not habitually wear shorts or cropped tops on the roads, as she imagined everyone did in the West. 'There it is possible' she often told me, whether in reference to skimpy clothing, living together before marriage, or homosexuality. She was now determined to leave India soon if things remained 'so unsafe' for middle class girls like herself. Indeed like many others, she saw 'ordinary' life – and here the fact that the young woman who was raped in Delhi had been doing a relatively middle class thing: watching an English film in a very middle class South Delhi suburb – that is middle class life as the thing was under threat. The source of this threat, she and many others identified as the 'swamping' or 'taking over' of 'our spaces', i.e. middle class spaces, by 'local' and 'vulgar' men.

This narrative has unlikely but telling resonances in other incidents that happened in my last months of fieldwork and after. In November 2012, three Dalit colonies in Dharmapuri district were torched by caste Hindus, largely members of the powerful OBC Vanniyar caste in what appeared to be a retributive act after a young Dalit resident of this region, Ilavarasan, married Divya, a Vanniyar girl, also in her early twenties, earlier that

month. Divya's father had, in the days that followed, committed suicide, allegedly in shame after Divya refused to return home. Eventually, Divya caved to pressure and returned to her family home. In July 2013, when I had just returned to India for a final round of fieldwork, Ilavarasan was found dead by the railway tracks: an incident that had been officially recorded a suicide but about which speculations remain. As MSS Pandian (2013) points out, this incident did not occur in a vacuum, but comes from a long history, since the mid-1980s of Vanniyar anxieties about inter-caste marriage with Dalits. Pattali Makkal Katchi, the party founded for Vanniyars in 1989, and its chief Anbumani Ramdoss have, as he points out, have minced no words in building a narrative of a Dalit conspiracy to strip Vanniyars of their social power by ruining their women and stealing their money through extortion after marriage. Much like the discourse of *Love Jihad* (Gupta 2009), which similarly casts Muslims as engaged in a plot to marry and convert Hindu women, this history stages the possibility of violence against women as a means of building a narrative of threat to ordinary life. In the case of the Dharmapuri caste atrocities, the body of Divya's father, after he hanged himself, was, further, displayed during the sack of the Dalit colonies. This grotesque display on the one hand sets up the body of the father, killed, significantly by suicide, as metonymic for Divya's own body assumed to be defiled, as well as serving as a spectral reminder of the now-destroyed ordinary everyday that is avenged in this act.

This was the scene of outrage in which by August 2013, there were seemingly only two popular ideological positions within the student community in Chennai: pro-death-penalty for rape, or rape-apologist. I found myself accused of the latter when I criticised an informant on Facebook for posting repeated demands for the death penalty. Security, it was argued, needed to be tightened, and *cheri* men more closely watched. Students at both Church at NT proudly told me that their colleges protected them by being choosy about what men were allowed on campus. One notable blanket ban was on men from a relatively new men's

college nearby, known widely to be a Muslim-majority institution. Muslim women at both institutions often made it a point to emphasise that they saw themselves as Muslim ‘only after Indian’. One student at NT aggressively told me that I was being over-sensitive when I asked her what she thought about her institution’s refusal to grant a holiday for Id. ‘We have to adjust’ she told me, ‘there are more Hindus’. It was in this clamour for a more efficient, managerially administered, zero-tolerance-policy government that I saw the emergence of a great deal of support for the election of current Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Ranging from glib dreams about seeing India ‘Modi-fied’, i.e. transformed and modernised by Modi, to faith in the BJP’s promise of action over the experience of two terms of Congress inaction, and the growing sense that the middle classes were unsafe in their own cities, many of the women I had spent many hours with seemed to be voting for allies of the BJP. Modi, many made the argument, cared about efficiency and India’s global image enough that he would not allow such ‘barbaric’ occurrences as the Delhi Rape incident. The rhetoric of the BJP as being ‘beyond politics’ espoused in Modi’s speeches where he has explicitly made a point to present himself, as a ‘servant’ of the nation rather than its leader, has a great deal of resonance with these young women. With the BJP doing ‘something’ – as opposed to the Congress’s ‘nothing’ – I heard it said again and again, ‘ordinary life’ could be lived. The economy of the threat that the BJP has worked on – telling Dalits that Ambedkar was anti-Muslim; telling Khap Panchayats that love marriage is the enemy; all balanced on a discourse of the wounded, violated mother nation revived to her ancient glory by her broad-chested sons – thus consolidates already circulating economies of rumour, co-opting them into a nationalist project.

Other things have occurred too: the famous pink *chaddi* campaign of 2008 was recalled in the recent ‘Kiss of Love’ protests against right-wing attacks against students at a café in Calicut in Kerala. While there were no protests, to my knowledge, in Chennai, many women I

had worked with in 2012-2013 expressed support for it on Facebook. If we are to go by the Ministry of Human Resources Development's rolling programme, it might be safe to predict that what are effectively caste-segregated canteens, separate for vegetarians and non vegetarians, will be in place soon, and already being considered at some of the nation's elite educational institutions. Women I met during fieldwork have expressed anger at this: it remains to be seen if Chennai's students will protest. Back in the Colleges, I was heartened to smell rum as I walked past a gathering over a bottle of Coca-Cola, and the maps of the places where the glass pieces on the walls are loose are still passed around.

Questions That Remain

In the writing of this thesis, a few *whys* and *hows* remained unanswered at the end of my research and will probably remain always not quite tied up. The primary focus of this thesis is an ethnographic study of everyday life in Chennai. During this process it often seemed as if the study was lacking a reference to a previous historical study of women's postcolonial periodical literature – particularly in the years between the 1960s and the early 1990s, when both media, and Tamil politics were in continuous flux – and popular cultural constructions of youth and gender in Tamil Nadu, which this thesis attempts in a very small measure but certainly does not exhaustively cover. The study also raised questions about Tamil masculinities and their intersections with caste in the making of youth. While Rogers' work covers this to a certain extent, a study of college campuses from the 1960s to the 1980s – comprising the type of 'hostel stories' I heard from Geetha, Selvam and other activists in the city during this period – that documents intersections between caste and gender in the making of political subjectivities as well as neoliberal selves is called for. As any research project, this exercise also raised questions that emerge as powerful possibilities for future directions in research.

Towards the end of my time as a researcher in Chennai, I noticed the increasing substitution of a discourse of psychological well being for an older discourse of moral policing in the practices through which educational institutions and families discipline young women. The language of ‘student welfare’ and ‘adjustment issues’ was increasingly used by college authorities as well as students I knew to address what might have otherwise been seen as a ‘discipline’ issue or even a question of ‘character’ and morals. For instance, in defending her position that the college did need to ‘deal with’ rather than leave be students who were engaging in premarital sex, Chitra suggested that rather than suspension, the college should consider sending these young women to the counsellor. The space of the therapist’s office would be a place for ‘contemplation’, ‘to think about what they have done’. Much like children in time-out, then, sitting on a stool, facing a wall, thinking about how much extra work they have made for mummy by spilling the jam, Chitra suggests that young women who have engaged in premarital sex, sit down and ‘think about what they have done’ – invoking here an inner disciplinary authority in what appears to be a classic Foucauldian development.

This also reflects on-going interdisciplinary debates on debility and governmentality, which suggest that risk-taking modulates the difference between not only ‘good’ and ‘bad’ subjects, but also capable and debilitated ones (Brown 1993, Berlant 2007). These scholars have suggested that citizens who are seen as irresponsible – for instance, insolvent, obese, or HIV positive – are often stigmatized in this discourse, and further marginalized (Berlant, 1994; Livingston, 2009) as either having brought their fate upon themselves, or more tellingly, failed to ‘grow up’ properly (Halberstam, 2005). Such subjects, these scholars have shown, are often denied autonomy over their own bodies and lives, and treated nominally ‘like children’ in need of further education, and the work of Puar (2012) and Berlant (2007) in other contexts show, often also of psychological care, i.e. counselling into being ‘better adjusted’: a phrase commonly used among young people in Chennai.

As a growing scholarship indicates, the logic of developmental governmentality in India typically marginalises and deprives of autonomy – through acts ranging from displacement (Appadurai, 2000), to forced hysterectomies (Sunder Rajan, 2003)– communities who are seen as incapable of self-care. Youth are central to this narrative because they are, on the one hand, encouraged to aspire to this ideal of self-sufficient and muscular responsibility (Jeffrey et al, 2008; Lukose, 2009), while on the other hand, the pressures of these aspirations often centre ‘tension’ in various forms – over career, marriage, social reputation, and aspirations to mobility for instance – as a representative feature of middle class youth experience, and as affective narratives of the failure to achieve social mobility. Tellingly, an increasingly significant theme of popular Tamil Cinema is the vast expanse of the deserted city at night as the site of young men’s mental breakdown in a context of increased insecurity and precarisation of labour. Masculine frustration is, in these narratives, treated as the cause of sex crimes and road rage. If depression is indeed, as Cvetkovich (2012) would have it, a ‘public feeling’, the question then might be asked: what are the gendered geographies of middle class youth’s affective experience of tension in a context where its expression comes with social anxieties about the unravelling of the delicate balance of middle class life?

Final Notes on Everyday Agency

There were a lot of times I was frustrated during fieldwork, not least because I was afraid I was going to end up writing what sounded like a hopeless narrative. When a student was expelled and a teacher fired early in fieldwork, both for having been ‘caught’ coming out of hotel rooms with a man, I waited and hoped for a whisper of support for them, someone at least expressing anger, the desire for action against this state of things. On the contrary I saw shrugs and diagnoses of ‘they were stupid’. I got told how to ‘get a room’ and not get caught: for instance, never give your real name; and always leave separately. When someone

brought up the dog-mauling story, I waited for the outrage. Instead, again, there were shrugs and responses ranging from ‘they were trying to protect the girls’ to ‘colleges are like that. You have to be smart’. There seemed to be an atmosphere of resignation – what Cvetkovich (2007) diagnoses as a ‘social depression’ – perhaps even of attrition. At best, I was told that these precious years before an inevitable tryst with the burdens of ‘adulthood’ – family over friends; jobs and social mobility over fun – could not be ‘wasted’ in complaining against the college. They were only doing their job of ‘protection’.

Much as I had read the theory, this ethnography was an education in learning not to always imagine agency as sovereign, self-aware and resistant. As this thesis has demonstrated, many young women found positions of empowerment in being co-opted in institutional discourses of discipline, maturity and adulthood. Notably, one young woman confided in me that she had picked NT College because it matched her ‘conservative value system’. She did not, she told me, want to be ‘in some college full of sickle-carrying Madurai people’: a stereotype of what upper caste upper middle class Chennai-ites often imagine as ‘uncivilised behaviour’ that is typically associated with the middle castes from Southern Tamil Nadu. Indeed, she was happy, she said, to be in a ‘Brahmin college’ where ‘non-veg food’ was not served and where most of her classmates were, like her, Tamil Brahmins. She could not imagine, she admitted, studying with ‘a bunch of SC-STs’ as she might have had to do had she taken her father’s advice and gone to a government institution to study law. This, she said, was much better for her: a more nurturing space as she saw it, for her development into a working professional as well as a middle class wife in Chennai, both of which she actively aspired to.

As a substantial scholarship now indicates, both right-wing movements (Sarkar and Butalia 1995) and neoliberal discourses (McRobbie 2004) co-opt feminist ideals, bypassing the

need for feminism in young women's routes to empowerment. In this context, many young women saw their needs as better served through aspirations of becoming the 'good students' who would be nominated by teachers to the student council, or even in simply working hard and keeping their heads down until they had finished and gotten a job, parroting the mantra that all the disciplining that felt distasteful to them was 'needed' and 'done with good intentions'.

I was also acutely aware of the sense of loss that hung over any desire to break away from this cycle of reproducing 'ordinary' middle class life and the burdens of its modernity. Ranging from fears of 'getting stuck' and being 'left behind', rebellion, its spaces shrunk to nearly nothing in Chennai's universities, comes with the danger of total failure: expulsion from college, the impossibility of social mobility, dishonour to parents, loss of home. This was acutely revealed during a workshop that the Tamil feminist collective *Penngal Sandhippu* (Gathering for Women) conducted at a college in Chennai to discuss gender, pleasure and sexual violence. During this meeting, a number of young women expressed the feeling I had gotten many times over during fieldwork, of alienation from the discourse of feminism. Reiterating an argument I have heard from friends in Chennai many times, they talked about feeling judged and called on to give up too much in order to identify with a discourse meant to be liberating. Between being 'improper' middle class subjects, as young women trying to be 'grown up' in particular ways and seeking to build their lives in available blue-prints of what 'adulthood' would look like, and cast as 'improper feminist subjects', judged by feminist scholars in the academe, teachers in their colleges, and activists in the city, as being, in some sense, asleep to their own oppression in the institutions of family, marriage and education, it seemed the former was easier to negotiate. The analysis of agency thus needs to be complicated by a narrative of ethical imperative (Laidlaw 2010) – i.e. why people do what they

do – which then reveals the ways in which aspiration and desire shape action, making for a complex terrain.

It is from this position where subjects are not imagined necessarily as sovereign actors, engaging in aggressive or entirely self-conscious and coherent forms of agency that this thesis conducts its analysis. Negativity and non-sovereignty have increasingly been central to queer imaginations of agency. As Edelman (2014, 3) writes in his dialogic explorations of the negative and non-sovereign with Berlant, such conceptions of agency are rooted in the notion of the narrative as refusing a linear story: ‘This leading toward necessarily entails a correlative “leading from”, the “leading from” or “out of” at the root of “education”. Even in those moments when we imagine ourselves immersed in its permanent middle, the story, so conceived at least, moves through time towards its putative end, where it seems to define the field within which it produces its sense of sense.’ To imagine agency and subjectivity as non-sovereign is deeply rooted in the questioning of what Halberstam (2003, 314) calls an ‘epistemology of youth’ – an understanding of youth as leading from immaturity to adulthood, mediated by education, along a story leading steadily towards a stable future.

In this context, as Muñoz writes (Duggan and Muñoz 2009, 277), in his dialogue with Lisa Duggan on hope: ‘Negative sentiments like cynicism, opportunism, depression, bitchiness are often seen as solipsistic, individualistic and anti-communal affective stances associated with an emotional tonality of hopelessness.’ Can they be sites for agency at all, or for any kind of collective sociality, and then, what of hope? The answer that Muñoz gives is that they can: that people come together over negativity, bitching, attrition and depression, and suggest an emerging climate of dissent without needing to cohere into resistance. Expanding on Sarah Ahmed’s comment on Gramsci’s call for the exercise of an anti-optimistic will as a site for action (2014), we might argue that bitching, opportunism and other

negative sentiments might be a breeding ground for prefigurative agency: the imagination of an alternative, if emergent, future. Wilfulness thus might be ‘an optimistic relation, a way of holding on, of not giving up’. Some of the forms of agency described in this thesis would fit that trope: a means to defiantly reinvent the horizon of possibilities, if through misplaced laughter, acts of ‘madness’ and ‘childishness’ and even through ‘failure’.

In a moment of anger – we were both afraid to call it ‘sour grapes’ – a queer friend, and fellow failed Rhodes Applicant, in Oxford said to me that he thought this scholarship was only for people who lived their lives as if they were sitting in an armchair as old people flipping through an album, seeing themselves in the best possible light: showing off pictures of themselves holding high-school trophies, sports medals, entry to university honours rolls, and eventually positions of leadership in organisations like the United Nations. We had been talking about depression, which has, for both of us, sharply interrupted and fractured such imaginations. We cackled in bitchy joy that day, talking about how we each had skived off sports lessons to explore our then-guiltily-budding sexualities – but then that brings home no medals – and how we had chosen in recent times to go down to London for a protest rather than attend one more seminar, spend one more night in the Bodleian. We recalled ample time in childhood ‘wasted’ as we had existential crises, and nearly got thrown out of school and college a few times. Neither of us could count ourselves of course as anything but mainstream or reasonably successful, despite all of this, and perhaps in our old age would still find ourselves flipping through that photo album, counting our degrees. But what we were feeling then is the exhaustion and attrition that allowed me to connect with many of the young women I met, who, in much more challenging circumstances than mine had ever been, were, in a relatable way, exhausted, tired, wanting to opt out of the gathering of materials for a successful CV, social mobility and hoping finally to get to the point of stability (‘when I have

an income, then I'll have sex with whomever I want' as Chitra put it), when we might do what we 'really' want.

This exhaustion has been the driving analytical and affective force for this thesis and it is through this that I approach the question of pleasure. Living in the ladies' hostels, and in the world of routinized bells, curfews and dogs-that-might-maul if we failed to obey the rules was like living in a baby-proofed world in some sense: it was certainly safe. 'You don't have to worry about locking the door, and who is downstairs, and if the guy next door will rape you' as a resident of Teresa put it, recounting the advantages of living in the hostel, but it would still 'suffocate' as fellow-residents said at different times and 'slowly kill' – causing a gradual attrition, even as it trained young women to be 'proper' ladies. And it is in the context of this exhaustion that I have turned to the profound negativity of bitching, of risqué acts of sex, telling ghost stories, and laughing about sexual violence as narratives of pleasure and agency. While there may be nothing transformative in these acts – and indeed my friend and I in the last paragraph, remain sour-grape-eating academic-hopefuls – there are moments of suspended agency: there is the opportunity to step aside for a moment and acknowledge the exhaustion, the ridiculousness of the fantasy of 'ordinary' middle class life, and briefly, even if incoherently, imagine something else. In telling a story about everyday life, gender, agency and pleasure, I hope, in this thesis, to have constructed a complex picture of what the brink of 'growing up' looks like for a generation of young women who are under an extraordinary degree of pressure to walk a tightrope – balancing a range of expectations – as they try and build livable, successful, and pleasurable lives.

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Abbreviations

AIADMK – All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (Political Party)

BJP – Bharatiya Janata Party (Political Party)

DMK – Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (Political Party)

FC/OC – Forward Class/Other Class

OBC – Other Backward Class

PMK – Pattali Makkal Katchi (Political Party)

RSS – Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

SC – Scheduled Caste

ST – Scheduled Tribe

TANSACS – Tamil Nadu State AIDS Control Society

TASMAC – Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation

Note on Names and Anonymity

All personal names of individuals used in the thesis are pseudonyms. This was done in order to protect the identity and privacy of my informants, and was also requested by the large majority of those to whom I spoke, as a pre-requisite for their participation in my research. Where possible pseudonyms have been chosen to reflect the caste, class and religious backgrounds of informants to the same extent that their real names do. Some participants in this research chose their own pseudonyms.

All the institutions at which fieldwork was conducted – individual colleges and women’s hostels – have also been anonymized, excepting Madras University, which is the large public university to which the institutions I studied are affiliated. As such, I have not cited the college websites where such a citation might otherwise have been appropriate and have attempted, as far as possible to paraphrase rather than use direct quotes from such material. Madras University has not been anonymised because it is essential to trace a history of structural change in Madras University to position on-going practices in its constituent colleges. Further, almost without exception, Chennai’s liberal arts institutions are affiliated to this body. As such, anonymising it would have served no purpose, and I do not believe that using the institution’s real name in this instance compromises the privacy of my informants.

Abstract

Current debates in the anthropology of the Indian middle classes suggest a preponderant theme of balance – between ‘Indian’ and ‘Western’; ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’; ‘global’ and ‘local’. Scholars like Säävälä (2010) Nisbett (2007, 2009), and Donner (2011) demonstrate that the ideal of middle class life is precariously constructed as a median between the imagined decadence of the upper classes and the perceived immorality and lack of responsibility of the working classes. Sexuality and intimacy, it has been observed, are important sites, where this balancing act is played out and risks to its stability are disciplined. Young women have particularly come under a great deal of pressure to position themselves dually as modern representatives of a global nation, who are, at the same time, epitomes of a nationalised narrative of tradition. In this thesis I examine the ways in which young women’s bodies are implicated in the normative reproduction of everyday middle class life, as well as unpacking the social meanings of youth and adulthood for women in this context. Positioning *education*, the social context in which this study addresses young women, as a site for both discipline and transgression, I problematize anxieties about young women’s sexuality as a site that also produces a discourse about youth and adulthood centred on affective capacity and self-governance. Through the lens of the governance of affect, thus, this thesis presents an account of agency: addressing in particular interstitial practices such as irony, play and humour through which young women act.

I conducted ethnographic research for this thesis in 2012 and 2013 at two women’s colleges in Chennai. I refer to these institutions as Church College and NT College. The first is a Protestant Christian institution founded in the early twentieth century by Scottish and American missionaries, and the second is a ‘secular’ college founded in the early 1990s that is deeply Brahminical in its everyday practice, even including daily Ganesha worship and banning non-vegetarian food on campus. As subsidiary sites, I used a Catholic institution

founded in the mid-twentieth century that I refer to as St Francis College, and a non-denominational college founded around the same time by a lay Tamil Christian philanthropist, which I refer to as Arul College. For part of my ethnographic visit, I also lived in a private residence hall – hostel, as it is locally called – that houses students from these colleges. Through interviews, participant observation, group discussions and the analysis of popular culture, this thesis constructs a narrative about youth and sexuality. Through this, it seeks to unpack the professed ‘ordinariness’ of middle class life. It situates these arguments in the gendered postcolonial history of education in which these colleges are located, framing its debate on contemporary histories of youth in colonial discourses that implicate both women’s sexuality and education in the making of contemporary modernities.

The chief arguments in this thesis are organised into five substantive chapters that draw primarily on ethnographic material to examine categories of *risk*, *danger* and *pleasure* as mutually constituted in young women’s lives through everyday practice, as well as the making of the everyday as a precarious and compositional event. Following an introduction that outlines this problematic and its theoretical frameworks, a chapter on the histories of women’s experience of college education explores another contextual parameter of this thesis, which further also sets the scene for the chief arguments I make further on: early and mid twentieth century debates on women’s higher education that frame contemporary anxieties and concerns about young women in colleges, and the histories of the figure of the ‘college girl’ in Chennai. The third chapter ‘Inhabiting Everyday: ‘Wasting Time’ and ‘Sight-ing’” presents a sketch of everyday life for the college girl. Its central concern is with the time and space of youth explored through the idiomatic practices of ‘wasting time’ through *ūr curraratu* – wandering the city – and engaging in flirtation through *sight atikkaratu*: stealing glances. It situates youth, on the one hand, as an affective assemblage, and secondly, examines non-productivity – i.e. ‘wasting’ – as a form of suspended agency. Through this discussion, this

chapter further also explores friendship as a contradictory resource – both affirming dominant discourses as well as making places of playful subversion.

In chapter four, I continue to extend the discussion on intimacy and public space through an examination of practices of sex in public places, which are common among youth. The discursive construction of ‘sex’ as a practice, as well as of notions of sexuality and respectability, I suggest, are shaped by disciplinary practices. This is further positioned as a site of youth agency, facilitating creative re-imaginings of the city, on the one hand, and of notions of ‘risk’ and ‘surveillance’ on the other. Chapter five complicates some previously explored understandings of same-sex friendships, romantic love, and sex, while continuing the discussion of place and sex in chapter six. It examines, on the one hand, how young women make sense of the ambiguous terrains of pleasure and violence in their everyday lives, through humour and play; while also attempting to recuperate an archive of same-sex erotic practices, both in everyday practice, and in the stories told about the intimate spaces of the women’s college and its hostels. This chapter continues the discussion of sexual consent in chapter three and four, as well as of ‘childishness’ – through laughter, playful movements of the body, and mimicking ‘rowdy’ men – as a practice of agency that affords a break from the discipline of being a ‘proper’ middle class woman.

Friendship often carries, the risk of gossip, and scandal often has much to say about middle class lives. Chapter six, ‘Spectral and Scandalous Bodies: Stories of Rupture’ examines what lies at the margins of middle classness and respectability. Sarkar (2001) suggests that the study of scandal and its circulation is a useful practice in the study of gender and middle class lives, because it is in scandal that the everyday practices of dialogue and self-stylisation through which the differences among the middle classes are arbitrated in bids for legitimacy, are made visible. This chapter seeks then to present the argument that scandals and cautionary

tales often enact new forms of exclusion and inclusion mediated by desire, and technologies of self-construction. Exploring these scandals as spectral revenants that threaten to stick to and haunt forever, the lives of young women, this chapter uses three ethnographic narratives to explore the themes of failure and rupture. Ending with a discussion of anger and spectral agency, this chapter brings together many of the thesis' arguments about youth, education and vulnerability.

In conclusion, I summarise and draw together the argument this thesis makes on diverse negotiations with power among young middle class women in Chennai. The concluding chapter also maps some young women's lives after college, and ends by commenting on the kinds of adulthood young women hope to achieve, and often perceive themselves as having achieved after their experience of university education. This chapter also indicates directions for future research, and questions beyond the scope of this project. The thesis ends with a final discussion of everyday agency, positing the significance of negativity and non-sovereignty.

This thesis complements and extends on-going debates on gender, governmentality and neoliberal subjectivity in India both through an ethnographic study focussed on women students, as well as by bringing together a critical enquiry on 'youth' and sexuality as a lens in understanding the precarious construction of 'ordinary' middle class life. My analysis, while extending the scholarship on the implications of socio-economic transformations in India on the experience of intimacy, also has critical implications for advancing anthropological understanding of gendered agency.