Being Single in India: Gendered Identities, Class Mobilities, and Personhoods in Flux

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Abstract This article explores the stories of single women living in the urban metropolis of Kolkata, and in smaller towns and villages of West Bengal, as a means to illuminate emerging possibilities and constraints of selfhood for women in contemporary India. In so doing, the piece examines the ways gendered identities intersect with other forces and ideals at stake, including the institution of heterosexual marriage, class mobilities, and values surrounding individualist versus relational personhood. Because they are positioned outside the norm, those who live singly offer an unusually insightful perspective on their wider society's values and institutions. In these ways, the narratives of three single women and others each illuminate their tellers' intricate subjectivities as well as offer broader social-cultural critique. Their stories reveal the ambiguity, painful consequences, and sometimes hopefulness surrounding the "choice" to be single for women and suggest that social recognition and belonging are even more important than independence and true singlehood in the lives of those who live outside marriage in India. [belonging, class, gender, self, sexuality, marriage]

It is hard to convey in a few words how powerful is the sense in India that marriage is a compulsory norm, particularly for women. At the same time, the Indian news media has featured stories on singlehood as a trait of a fast-changing society—discussing rising divorce rates, increasing opportunities for unmarried professional women to work and live singly, and portraits of the new single women as "happy with their status and not wanting the burden of marriage on them" (Kuriakose 2014). Such news stories tend to be strikingly upbeat, while presenting singlehood for women as a matter of simple individual choice and sign of cosmopolitan middle-class aspirations. For example, a piece called "Why You Should Try Staying Single" underscores being "accountable to only one person—yourself," "discovering yourself," "building a career" and "taking decisions solely based on what *you* want from life" (Lawrence 2014, emphasis original). One gets no sense of the complex social-cultural and political-economic contexts behind women's lives and decisions, nor of how a celebratory notion of autonomous individuals making free choices to live singly does not well capture the sense of ambivalence and constraint, and aspirations for belonging, that single women highlight in their own representations of their life paths. One also gets little sense that single women are not limited to the new breed of younger cosmopolitan professionals.

This article explores the stories of single women of a range of social classes, living both in the urban metropolis of Kolkata and in smaller towns and villages of West Bengal, India, as a means to illuminate emerging possibilities and constraints of selfhood for women in

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contemporary India. Their stories reveal how gendered identities intersect with other forces and ideals at stake, including class mobilities, forms of sexuality and embodiment, modes of kinship and belonging, and values surrounding individualist versus relational personhood. The article also suggests how attention to individual women's narratives—or what Sienna Craig terms "narrative ethnography and a focus on biographies" (2011, 194)—can serve to illuminate the intricacies not only of particular subjectivities but also of broader social processes.[1]

Single women have gained little attention in scholarship on India, and in fact anthropologists and sociologists studying gender have emphasized—rightly so, to a significant extent—the crucial importance of marriage for Indian women, often giving the impression that never-married women barely exist and that life outside of marriage for a woman in India is unthinkable. Susan Seizer, for instance, reflects on how—although in India's large economic centers of Bombay and Delhi she found some lesbian women leading "new-fangled lives" as single women—in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu where she conducted most of her fieldwork "single, independent women are almost unheard of; the prospect of survival—loose from the net of kinship relations that are the basis of social and economic stability—is daunting, and to pursue such an uncharted course seems both foolish and suspect" (1995, 98). Linda Stone and Caroline James comment in a similar vein on "one clear fact of Indian life: the unacceptability of the unmarried adult woman" (1995, 130). Exploring the lives of women living in a Delhi slum, Meenakshi Thapan writes that women "attain respectability and status through marriage and childbearing" and that "marriage is essential to their sense of self-worth" (2003, 77).[2]

Some studies portraying singlehood as an impossibility for women were conducted before the post-1990s era initiating a liberalization of the Indian economy and accompanying broader social-cultural dimensions of globalization. Public commentary and scholarly analysis have noted significant recent changes in gendered norms, particularly among the urban middle classes, including deviations from social expectations of early marriage, and increased opportunities for women to pursue education and work (e.g., Fernandes 2006, 162–68; Radhakrishnan 2011; Sengupta 2007; Waldrop 2012). Yet even among the urban, well-educated middle classes, as Leela Fernandes asserts, in practice "women's lives continue to be constrained by the reproduction of gender inequalities" (2006, 163). Prevailing ethical imaginaries of a normal life and valued subjectivity are that women will be firmly located within families. As Sarah Pinto points out, wider assumptions in the public media and in psychiatry persist that the "unattached woman is a problem to be fixed" (2014, 247). One concern is a dearth of residential options for women seeking to live and work separate from families. Fernandes notes how, as they look for housing and apply for jobs, "single working women must contend with strong gendered ideologies that construct them as a potential threat to the social order" (2006, 165).

In the course of doing research on other projects in India since 1989,[3] however, I have encountered quite a few single, never-married women, of a range of class, caste, rural and urban, life stage, and sexuality backgrounds. These encounters have led me to question

prevailing assumptions and inspired me to probe further. So in 2014, I began to focus my fieldwork in West Bengal, India on the lives of single women. To date, I have made four two-to-three-week fieldwork trips to Kolkata and nearby towns and villages for this project, while also drawing on the narratives of single women gathered over years of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the region since 1989. I combine formal, open-ended interviews with ethnographic research involving "hanging out" with women in daily-life contexts, in their homes and while going marketing, gathering with friends, talking over tea, dining out, seeing movies, attending single women's support-group meetings, and with some of the more English-speaking elite, engaging in dialogue over e-mail and Facebook Messenger. Most single women I have encountered have been very interested in the project, as they feel underrepresented and misunderstood in their wider societies, and are eager to share their stories as part of their endeavors to "find a way to count in the social body," as Sara Dickey (2013, 219) describes the aims of those aspiring to gain recognition and value as middle class in South India. As of this writing, I have explored the stories of 54 women ranging in age from 35 to 92. I have chosen to focus on women in around their midthirties and older, beyond the age generally considered "marriageable" in Indian social contexts.

Regarding terminology, Marcia Ellison, in studying US single women's unintentional pregnancies, deliberately chooses the term "single woman" rather than "unmarried woman" "to avoid defining women by their legal relationship to men" (2003, 339n.2). "Single" has also been emerging as an emic, local category in India to refer to adult women and men who are not (yet) married.[4] Naisargi Dave examines Indian feminist and lesbian activists who, beginning around the 1990s, chose "single women" as a category both to informally organize around lesbianism, as well as to "address the widespread discrimination that all unmarried women face at the hands of family, society, and the state" (2012, 107). A new social movement called Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan (ENSS), or "The Association of Strong Women Alone," has organized low-income "solo" (*ekal*) women in northwest India in a collective struggle for access to land, property, dignity, and "freedom from atrocities," including in its mission widows, separated and abandoned women, and women over 35 who have never married.[5]

Among my interlocutors in West Bengal, people use "single" in English, as well as "unmarried" in English,[6] and Bengali phrases such as *abibahita* (unmarried), and those who "did not marry" (*biye kore ni*) and whose marriage "had not happened" (*biye hae ni*), to refer to persons, men or women, who had not married.[7] Some Bengalis I would speak with about my project would query, "*Are* there unmarried women here [in West Bengal]?" or respond dismissively, as if there's nothing more to study, then: "If a woman remains unmarried, it's just that her parents failed to arrange her marriage." Others, however, helped me find single, never-married women, and soon I began to understand single women as a significant group, and one illuminating of important broader social trends. Importantly, the project for the most part does not include women who were once married, such as women who are widowed, divorced, or abandoned by their husbands. I came to find that the condition of *never having married* puts never-married single women into a unique and anomalous social

category, as if the act of *having once achieved marriage* transfers one into (a comparatively) normal adult personhood, even without the man's current presence.

The women I encountered during my fieldwork encompass a range of life experiences and perspectives, and no one is "typical." Some were highly educated urban professionals, while others were from rural villages, small towns, and the working classes. Some would have been very happy to have had, or still to find, a male marriage partner or lover if various insurmountable obstacles were not in the way; others had no interest at all in heterosexual marriage and all its trappings of domesticity, although without defining themselves as nonheterosexual or queer; while others had taken on a lesbian identity—one that had become more available to women in India, although still hushed in most contexts, ever since the public discourse emerging around the film "Fire," which was released within India to much public controversy in 1998.[8] These women navigated a range of living situations: in private flats, with natal kin, with friends (though this option is rare for Bengalis of all social classes), in working women's hostels, and in old-age homes. A few had given birth to or adopted a child and were raising their children as unwed mothers, in India generally a highly socially and often economically precarious situation. Many women's narratives highlighted the difficulties and kinds of structural violence single women face, including forms of gender inequality, social isolation, economic vulnerability, and feelings of not being recognized as a normal and valuable person. Many also underscored critiques of society: "We have changed, but society (*samaj*) has not caught up with us," or, "Society has changed a lot, but not regarding marriage," or, "Ultimately, the final goal in our patriarchal society is that a woman will get married and have children; if she doesn't, she has no value—she's worthless." Other narratives emphasized fulfillment and pride, in one's strength, education, and/or career.

I focus here on the narratives of three single women, each illuminating their tellers' intricate subjectivities while also offering a lens into broader social forces. I argue that positioned outside the norm, these women are able to see features of their society not easily recognized by others: systems of social class, of kinship and marriage, of gender and sexuality, that they must both work within and strive to redefine as they endeavor to achieve forms of everyday well-being and belonging without being married.

As single women in India seek to actualize new ethical imaginaries of valued personhood beyond marriage, their narratives also challenge cosmopolitan, western-centered liberal assumptions about the normalcy and value of the individual, independent subject. Even as they strive to craft meaningful lives outside of marriage, very few of the women I have come to know articulate their aspirations in terms of a drive for individual independence. As such, singlehood in India contrasts the thrust of the US "epoch of single women" and "invention of independent female adulthood" Rebecca Traister depicts in *All the Single Ladies: Unmarried Women and the Rise of an Independent Nation* (2016, 7). What those crafting a single female life in India desire more than independence, I suggest, is belonging—to be someone who counts, is worthy of recognition, and is intimately connected with others as part of the social body. Tine Gammeltoft highlights in her own work on selective reproduction in Vietnam a central aim of her book: "to point to the existential importance that communal

belonging holds for people" (2014, 231), calling to anthropologists "to pay closer attention to quests for human belonging" (9). Gammeltoft critiques widespread liberal assumptions that posit ideals of autonomy and freedom as universal desires "outweighing other human needs such as the quest for companionship or the urge to belong and be taken care of" (13–14; cf. Kowalski 2016; Mahmood 2005). Taking up insights from such scholarship, I explore single women's stories to help us rethink the category of single—arguing that its conventional connotations of separateness, independence, autonomy, and living alone are conditions few unmarried Bengali women I have met actually live, and even fewer wish to live.

In this way, the study extends work on relational versus individualist modes of personhood that have held the attention of anthropologists for many years,[9] underscoring the centrality of struggles to belong to and with others even among those who may seem to be pursuing individualist aims. The stories shared here beckon us to consider diverse ways of conceptualizing what it is to live well, as single women do the hard work of striving to redefine what is good and normal, aspiring to forge new forms of recognition and belonging within the social body in ways not tied to marriage.

Stories and Lives

Medha[10] is a professor of Bengali in a small town, exactly my age in her midfifties, living alone, and never married. When we met by chance in an outdoor Kolkata market purchasing tie-dyed housecoats, she eagerly volunteered, "You should study me!"

Medha was born into a poor family of the mid-ranking Mahishya caste of farmers and raised in a remote village, eight kilometers from the nearest paved road. Her family often went hungry. Her mother sold vegetables on the foot path. Because of their lower-class status, they were forbidden to wear shoes when venturing near the local zamindar or landlord's home, lest this demonstrate her family's insubordination.[11] Yet Medha was the first girl in the village ever to complete secondary school. They didn't have money for books, but from a young age Medha would read the shopping bags made from old newspapers and would walk after school to a village library four or five kilometers away, returning in the evening carrying books through open fields as the sun set and her mother worried.

After higher secondary school, Medha would trudge eight kilometers through knee-deep mud during the rainy season to get to the paved road where she could catch a bus to a provincial college, all the while struggling to pay the school fees and often going hungry. Medha is now a tenured college professor.

Originally, I assumed Medha had chosen the single life, but this interpretation does not really ring true. Medha e-mailed me the summer after we first met: "Do you mind if I share some personal matters with you? In Bishnupur, as a small town of West Bengal, I've no opportunity to mix up with people from the same sphere of life. On the other side, the educated people of Kolkata are very snobbish about the small-town people . . . . Again as an unmarried woman I have to obey some rules of the Indian morality. The result is very

depressive. I am cornered, cornered seriously. It affects my life as well as my career." One thought I had upon reading this e-mail was that she might be alluding to being lesbian (in her comment, "I have no opportunity to mix up with people from the same sphere of life"), but when I got the courage to ask her over e-mail, while suggesting a lesbian support group I knew of in Kolkata, she replied, "I am not lesbian, I am woman," and later confessed to how attracted she is to men, and how she would love to have a (male) lover, if not a husband. Her current "imaginary boyfriend," as she calls him, is the handsome Pakistani actor Adnan Siddiqui.

Medha gives several reasons for why she is not married, one being that she had become too well-educated. She proclaims: "In Indian society, the groom must be superior to the bride in all ways, in *all* ways—except for looks!" In terms of looks, Medha describes herself as too "black" (*kalo*), short, and "ugly—with unusually high cheek bones and big teeth" to be a sought-after pick on the marriage market. When she was young, in addition, Medha did resist marriage. At one point after she had passed her grade-10 exams, her family arranged a marriage match for her, but she protested, saying, "I won't marry—I will work." Medha went on, "Other girls wanted to get married, dreamed of having husbands, having guests over, wearing jewelry. I never thought this way . . . . Other people in the village would say to my older brother in front of me, 'Why are you letting her study? What will she become? Why aren't you getting her married? What is she going to do—get a job?' After hearing all this, I would think, 'Yes, I <u>will</u> get a job.'"

Later, when Medha finished her PhD and finally got work as a professor, she says:

> "I was thirty-plus. I could have easily gotten married. In Indian society, professors are valued . . . . My brother would go around telling everyone, 'My sister is a professor.' It's like his 'identity.'[12] If there's a professor in the family, they have more family status. But when people spoke to him of eligible men, my brother would be quiet and not say anything . . . . [My brother and his wife] didn't want me to get married because then they wouldn't have a way of getting money."

Benefiting from her generous professor's salary, Medha's natal family has now replaced their crumbling mud hut with a two-story brick home with running water and electricity. Medha's brother's sons all became well-educated and now have their own good jobs in the city—"Due to me! Due to me!" Medha asserts. "Now my family has money, education, status, jobs—because of me."

Medha tells me, "I finally advertised for my own marriage in the newspaper to see if I could get someone good, but I . . . just got a lot of weird and bad men (*ulta palta aje baje lok*) . . . . They all came because of my job—that I would work and bring them money. My brother, sister-in-law, and these men all wanted me for the job. They all wanted my money. I am not valued as a person—only my money is valued."

Now living alone, Medha finds the condition highly unfamiliar, even unnerving. When I went to stay for two nights in her natal village home, Medha put me in a separate room,

laughing while explaining to her kin that "Americans like to sleep all alone with even the door closed!—while we prefer to have 10 or 20 people piled into one room, all sleeping together on mats on the floor, when relatives are visiting!" Medha has paid a deserted mother of two to sleep on the floor next to her bed each night in her rented flat, because she says "how odd it feels" not to have another human being there. The woman reluctantly comes for the income, leaving her children overnight with her brother, and slips out at dawn, tucking her mat and mosquito net under the bed.

The most salient theme in Medha's life narratives is that of not receiving love from natal kin, community, neighbors, and society. Medha reflects: "I have to fight with hostility in every step in my life due to my not being [regarded as] an ordinary person."

Indrani returned to India to build a flat and live above her parents, after receiving a PhD in electrical engineering in the United States and holding a high-salaried job in New York City for several years. She returned to Kolkata when her grandmother became ill, having had enough of US corporate life and wishing to be with her grandmother during her dying days. With a shipload of furnishings from the United States, Indrani created a lovely flat with a roof garden above her parents, while securing another good job in Kolkata. She never gave too much thought to marriage while pursuing her education and career. But as she approached her forties, she began to long intensively for a child.

Having trouble falling asleep one evening while in Kolkata, I rose from bed to check my e-mail and came across this remarkable message:

> Just writing very quickly to say hello and that I am very much looking forward to seeing you again! I got your brief note from Kolkata [last year] just before you returned to the States, and there was a lot going on in my life at that time, and there was no short way of describing it to you. I had actually been in the queue for adoption for over three years and it was going nowhere. Although it's legal for single women to adopt in India (and has been so for at least a generation), there are a lot of biases, as I found out. Every step of the way I had to explain why I was not married and I could not give any answer that was acceptable to them.
>
> It all ended happily, eventually, and that allows me look back and think of the horrendous experience as some kind of test I needed to pass. I can tell you more when we meet. But mainly I didn't/couldn't write back because there was so much uncertainty about the outcome, it was a bit like holding my breath for something and not being able to do or think of anything else. In the end [the adoption] happened just one day before I would have been legally outside the [45-year] age limit for this application!

When she and I met up, Indrani told me more: "My mother used to say that love can happen even at ninety-seven, but there is a time for having a child. I also very much longed for a child." Indrani and her parents passed through many adoption agencies over the three-year period. "Why aren't you married? Why didn't you get married?" the adoption agencies always asked. "'I was just studying all the time,'" Indrani reported replying. "You know, presenting myself as a real nerd. 'I was just studying all the time, and I didn't think of it, and then time passed.'" "'Well,' now glaring at my mother, 'a daughter may be able to forget

such things as marriage, but a mother never should!'" Indrani said she would motion to her mother to not say anything, but just to sit there looking guilty.

Some of the adoption agency women interviewing Indrani over the years found her too pushy, or not demure enough, or needing counseling. So Indrani with her parents went to several counseling sessions and returned to report that they had completed the counseling.

Finally, Indrani with her parents was approved as fit to adopt, with an agency in the neighboring state of Bihar—due to Indrani's good professional position and the fact that she lives with her parents. So she is not really entirely "single"—singlehood makes it virtually impossible to be approved, as there is a strong sense that no one can raise a child alone and that a child needs a family. But would there be an infant available before Indrani aged out? The last weeks were very stressful. Finally, just a day before her 45th birthday, Indrani was given a child! She was six weeks old. They named her Nandini, "daughter who brings joy." Nandini has emerged into a beautiful, healthy, loving, and engaged toddler and beloved to both mother and grandparents. A photo album depicts as many happy, beaming photos of growing Nandini with the grandparents as with her mother, Indrani.

Indrani wonders how and what she will tell her daughter about her background. People ask continually, "Are you married?" "No," Indrani replies simply. Then they wait for an explanation, as to how there is a child? Indrani says little and just leaves them guessing. But she worries about when Nandini can understand more. Another problem is that Indian identification systems—for school IDs, high school exams, driver's licenses, passports—all require providing a father's name, in this patriarchal setting.

Indrani gives hints that she would still like to marry, if it can happen. She commented: "In the United States, nobody would think that a woman past 35 years would be unmarried forever. But here the pressure to marry stops after that age because people think you are old."

Sana arrived one spring evening to a single women's support group in north Kolkata, her short black hair falling to just below her ears, in a modern style now popular among the more cosmopolitan women in the city. Eight women drifted in as the evening came on. We lit mosquito coils and brought in hot samosas from the neighborhood, as each woman, including me, shared her story as to why she had come that evening. Six of the eight women identified as lesbians, while the foundling group saw its broader mission as the fight for rights—to property, income, independence, housing security, and more—for all kinds of single women living outside marriage in West Bengal. Sana was dressed in a *kurta*, a loose Indian-style shirt that can be worn by either gender, and light-washed jeans. She had a reserved demeanor, but she spoke openly and movingly when it came her time to speak.

"This is also my first time," Sana began. "I don't know anything about movements, but Mina invited me." Sana pointed to her friend next to her. Sana narrated: "When I was young, I lived at home with my parents and younger brother. He and I were close in age, and from

a young age, I began to feel a real injustice—that he was treated differently than me, and no one seemed to notice or mind. For instance, he really liked yogurt, and so did I. Once I asked for some yogurt, and they said there was none. But I knew there was! Then my mother explained that the yogurt is for your brother. I felt there was such an injustice, and after that I never asked for yogurt again. Now I buy it and eat it, but I never again asked for yogurt in my parent's home. Then I also felt that my brother could do all these things that I couldn't do, like go out and fly kites with other boys in the fields, and I somehow began to feel that I perhaps should have been born as a boy. They also encouraged and supported his studying much more than mine. But it turns out that I was the one who succeeded more in school: I passed the class-ten exams, and went on to higher secondary. But my brother didn't even pass class 10," Sana said with a small smile of satisfaction.

"Anyway, around the time that I was 15 or 16, I had a very close (girl)friend (*bandhobi*),[13] and we were very close friends, and we began to fall in love and make love (*prem*). At the time—this was around 40 years ago now—we had never heard of 'lesbian' or anything like that, so we thought, you know, that what we were doing was highly unusual (*asadharan*), unnatural (*asvabhabik*) even, and you know, like a—[pause]—sin (*pap*)." The others in the room nodded, and a few filled in the word *pap* (sin) as Sana had paused. "We thought we were the only ones," Sana went on. "But we both felt that we couldn't live without the other."

"By the time I was in my young twenties, however, my family started thinking about my marriage. And we then had no idea of the possibility of not getting married. We thought there was no other way, and that we would have to get married. At the same time, we knew that without each other we couldn't live, so we resolved to somehow maintain our relationship (*samparka*), even though we had to get married. So some families and boys came to look at me, and it was arranged that I would marry one man. It was all arranged, but just two days before the wedding, I felt that this is such a big mistake, I shouldn't go through with it. I wouldn't be able to love him and give him what he wants—a relationship, and children, and family life (*samsar*), and everything. So I told my family that it's a mistake, and I can't go through with the marriage. But they said that we have already made the commitment, and so much expense has already been paid on both sides—all the arrangements for the wedding and gifts and everything—that we must go through with it. So the marriage happened.

"We were married for 13 years. He, that gentleman (*bhadralok*), was a very good man. We became business partners also—he took me in as his business partner [in a Xerox and printing company], so I also began to have some money of my own. I was able over this time to maintain a relationship with my girlfriend. And with my money I ended up buying a small flat, and I decorated it, always dreaming that this is where my girlfriend and I could live together. Eventually after 13 years, I said to the gentleman that we should separate. I couldn't tell him the reason why, but he was very good, and he accepted.[14] And we have still maintained good relations with each other and are still business partners.

"My plan was that my girlfriend and I would be able to live together in my flat. But it turns out that over the years that I was married she had fallen in love with a man—she had never

told me—and they got married." "Is she still married?" we asked. "Yes, she is, and they are happy, and they have a son." Sana paused, and continued softly, "That was very difficult for me, a very difficult time of my life."

"Then eventually after a few years, after looking on websites, and seeing a little news coverage on 'gay' and 'lesbian' issues after [the film] "Fire" came out, I learned about the concept of being a 'lesbian,' and I found the organization Sappho.[15] I received some support there. Through Sappho I met Mina, and we became friends, at first just friends, and then now our relationship is at a deeper level."

Someone asked where Sana lives? Does she live in that flat of hers?

Sana replied, "No, for a long time, I couldn't stay in that flat. It was very painful for me. I had prepared it and decorated it so lovingly thinking of my girlfriend. It was very difficult for me to stay there." Instead, Sana is living with some good friends who treat her "like family"—an unusual arrangement for Bengalis and something Medha herself had sought out for several years without success. Making a home with nonkin, except as a "paying guest" or in an institutional setting like a working women's hostel, is not common.

Sana closed by mentioning softly that she is still not open to anyone about her "identity"—not her family, nor the friends she lives with, nor people at work.

I turn now to analyze key themes emerging from these compelling narratives of three women—to help us understand the particular women's lives, as well as to illuminate broader operations of marriage, class, gender, sexuality, and personhood in India today. One insight I continue to explore is how these and other single women foreground in their narratives not as much individual strivings for independence as ways to belong and have value in the social body beyond heterosexual marriage.

Opting Out of the Conventional Femininity of Marital Life, and Complicating Choice

Opting out of the conventional femininity of marital life as a choice is perhaps the most transparent theme in single women's narratives. Public media and discourse highlight this opting-out theme as well, crafting a vision of the new breed of modern, professional, independent-minded women with cosmopolitan aspirations and no need for marriage. At least in parts of their narratives, most of the single women I have spoken with do tell of having chosen not to marry—because of wishing instead to pursue an education and career (like Medha), or a lesbian relationship (like Sana), and/or to shun the trappings of ordinary domesticity, particularly in its implications for women—where one must be subservient to a man and the social relations and hierarchies within his whole family, and consumed by dressing up, wearing nice saris and jewelry, and all the trivialities and bindings (*atka*) of *samsar* (family-domestic life).

Indrani, who had adopted her beautiful daughter the day before turning 45, sent this e-mail message: "I hope you got home safely! It was lovely to hang out with you. I am sending you the quotation from the novel I mentioned to you:

> I had chafed under the restraints and the ties which formed the common lot of women, and I longed for an opportunity to show that a woman is in no way inferior to a man. How hard it seemed to my mind that marriage should be the goal of woman's ambition, and that she should spend her days in the light trifles of a home life, live to dress, to look pretty, and never know the joy of independence and intellectual work![16]

A standard interpretive framework of choice and resistance to conventional femininity, however, does not capture the complexity of social forces women are negotiating, or the precarity and social critique women face, as they strive to craft a life out of marriage. Pratima, a retired schoolteacher living wholly alone and feeling under the perpetual scrutiny of her watchful neighbors, reflected softly: "I would not advise my students now to be single—I tell them to think about it very carefully." When I told Indrani how 92-year-old Ena-di—who never on her own brought up the topic of marriage in a life narrative emphasizing education and work—had crinkled her nose dismissively when I asked if she had ever wished to marry or have children, Indrani reflected, "Well, she's likely telling you this, because she doesn't want to evoke your pity. It's a story she now tells herself and others."

Ultimately, almost all of the single women I have grown to know express ambivalence about their situation, whether as a central part of their narrative, or a subtle theme; and few really speak of being unmarried as only a deliberate, simple choice. Especially for those who take roads less travelled, making a choice is not always straightforward, and often involves pain and loss. Tine Gammeltoft writes of how "the concept of choice is, in many respects, empirically misleading; it tempts us to overemphasize people's freedom to shape their world as they want to" (2014, 15). The popular notion of "choice"—based as it tends to be on an image of a freely acting agent—does not well capture the sense of ambivalence and constraint in single women's representations of their life paths. Choice, within constraints, is part of the story, for some an important part; but what else significant is going on?

Middle-Class Aspirations and Gendered Mismatches of Class

Single women's narratives also illuminate how strongly class is tied to forms of belonging and how difficult it is to forge intimate social ties across class boundaries.[17] In India's new economy, educated women are finding increased opportunities for white-collar employment, and Fernandes (2006, 162) observes how, as dual-income couples become more common in urban settings, employed married women help propel aspiring marital families into the middle classes (see also Radhakrishnan 2011; Vijayakumar 2013; Waldrop 2012, 603). Little scholarship has been conducted, however, on what happens to her marriage prospects if an unmarried woman—through education and/or employment—achieves an individual class status very different from that of her natal kin.

The class aspirations of their natal kin figure saliently in many single women's narratives. Medha describes how she and her natal kin, in less than one lifetime, transitioned from poor villagers with little to eat, wading through mud, to living in expensive homes, owning televisions and a car, and traveling abroad. Medha related, "I am absolutely a farmer's daughter! A daughter of the earth! My mother sold vegetables from the field on the footpath. She was illiterate—'pure, pure illiterate'! . . . If they could see me now wearing pants,[18] they would go absolutely unconscious! . . . *Now* my family has money, education, status, jobs—because of *me*!" Medha tells of her brother and family's aims: "From the beginning, they wanted to use me to bring them money, that I would work and bring them money. Like some parents give up their children to prostitution to bring them money, I'm just like [those children]." Sukhi-di,[19] 74 years old, without bitterness also acknowledged that her natal kin didn't work to arrange her marriage because they needed her income: She was the oldest and brightest sibling and the first employed; her income supported the family and financed her younger sisters' dowries.

Single women's narratives also expose the problem of gendered mismatches of class. Marriage takes place not only between individuals but between families. If through education and employment a woman achieves a class status much higher than that of her family background, she becomes practically unmarriageable. That is, to rise in socioeconomic status as a woman both outside of marriage and outside of the natal family ends up meaning essentially that there can be no marrying. Medha explained, "I'm a professor now with a good salary—but I don't belong to that kind of family that another professor could marry me . . . . I also can't marry a village boy from an uneducated family." Nayantara, a beautiful, vivacious woman in her midthirties getting to be past marriageable age, told of how she was born into a village home struggling to feed its several daughters, and so was given by her parents to a high-class Kolkata family when she was five to work as their live-in domestic servant. Living with that family for 20 years, Nayantara learned to speak the most polished, eloquent Bengali, cook high-class Bengali cuisine, and read and write by looking over the shoulders of the family's children as they studied. After she was let go and found a job as an office clerk, Nayantara tells of the first time she rode Kolkata public transportation, climbing onto a crowded train where her ears filled with so much screaming that she had to descend to recover and breathe for a few moments before realighting. She had always ridden in her employer's private cars. Her habitus was thus of an extremely high-class girl, yet her background was that of a poor villager. With such a mismatched class assemblage within her one person, she could marry neither into a village nor an elite city family.

Many single women also tell of becoming too professionally high-powered for their female gender in society's eyes. Some education makes a woman more valuable in the marriage market, but too much education and professional success leads to a dearth of eligible grooms (see also Mukhopadhyay and Seymour 1994). As Medha pronounced: "A man must be superior to his wife in all ways, in all ways, except for looks." Author Bhaichand Patel similarly articulates: "To put it crudely, men generally, and Indian men especially, don't like to marry high achieving women. They become undesirable marriage partners" (2006, xii). Such instances of upward class mobility are less problematic for men: Since a man

(and his family) is meant to be ranked higher than a bride (and her family), a man who has climbed social classes can offer a hypergamous marriage to a woman from his natal class, helping then to raise her status through marriage, while together producing higher-class children.

In an era of heightened middle-class aspirations (e.g., Dickey 2016), class change can seem achievable for a highly intelligent and industrious individual woman, but it can make her marriage near impossible and steer her into a state of class and social limbo with uncertain belonging.

Sexuality and the Body: A Lens from Outside

Bengali single women's narratives also vividly reveal the importance of marital heterosexuality and reproductivity to local constructions of womanhood. The force of ideologies of the value of the beautiful, sexual, fertile, fit female body within heterosexual marriage explains why those who come to identify as lesbian are so often compelled to marry (men), and why women who are disabled, infertile, or outside prevailing standards of feminine attractiveness (very often) do not marry, and how difficult it is to be valued in the wider society if one does not fit with conventions of female sexuality within marriage.

Medha herself often mentioned being unattractive according to local standards of feminine beauty as a factor behind her singlehood. Ruma, a clerk in a medical office who resided at the Government of West Bengal Working Women's Hostel, explained simply that she was not a suitable marriage partner because she had lost her uterus and was infertile. Sanjaya, founder and director of a Kolkata-based NGO working to ensure equal rights for girls and women with disabilities, spoke eloquently about the constraining force of norms of female sexuality and the body, for disabled women and ultimately for all women. Sanjaya herself walks with a limp due to having survived polio as a toddler, and she talked with me in her office, her glossy black hair pulled back to reveal large ethnic-style earrings.

"Do disabled women get married less?" I asked.

"They don't get married; it doesn't happen," Sanjaya replied decisively. "No one wants to marry them. Marriage is a kind of business, if I may say. Beauty, ability, and competency—these all go together . . . . Of course there is a love thing, but that love also has preconditions. All these preconditions—a disabled woman doesn't meet them. Or maybe we can say she's the lowest on the marriage market; she doesn't have sale-ability . . . . There are three key criteria: a bride must be fair, she must be beautiful, and she must be physically fit—so she can work from five AM to twelve at night . . . . If a woman doesn't give birth to a child, this is also a disability. Then in ninety-eight percent—no in ninety-nine percent of the time, she will be deserted by the family, and her husband will marry another."

"But our society is so patriarchal," Sanjaya went on, "that a disabled boy will have no problem getting married! However, a mother-in-law looking for a bride for her son will never think

that a disabled (*pratibandhi*) girl is good for her son. Unless a love marriage, and even in the case of love, the family will try with all their might to stop him from [marrying the girl]—and if he does, they will try to throw her out from the house."

Sanjaya described her own situation. Now in her forties, she lives alone in a rented flat in the modest middle-class neighborhood that also houses her NGO. "What I'm doing—I'm doing many things—but I'm not worth getting married to. I may be worth a lot in certain respects—work, salary, profession, even decent beauty, if I may say so—but in fact I'm worthless, because no one wants to marry me. These are common people's perceptions. Because ultimately the value of me, as a woman, is in marriage. My *barir lok* [family, natal kin] won't say this exactly to me, in front of me, but this is what they think."

"Society has not changed," Sanjaya declared. "Ultimately the final goal is that a woman will get married and have children. Our society is so patriarchal. Society has changed a lot, but not regarding marriage."

Single women also speak at length of the hassles, dangers, and slander they face due to being regarded as sexually available and dangerous, as women unattached to a husband and other protective male kin. They face difficulty finding places to live, as landlords suspect single women will bring in male lovers, and they themselves often approach solo female tenants for sexual liaisons. Older single women tell of how women in their fifties and sixties are regarded as especially sexually voracious and bold at that mature age, so that surveillance, gossip, and sexual harassment don't subside until an unmarried woman reaches her seventies and beyond.

Mindful of prevailing stereotypes, many single women through their narratives foreground tales of carefully maintaining sexual propriety throughout life. Others do speak of having sexual and romantic desires, but while stating how impossible these are to fulfill in their societal context. Sanjaya spoke of wishing to find a male partner, if not husband, but added: "If I were to live with a man, or bring a man home, the whole neighborhood would immediately talk! 'What a girl!' They would start beating me; their perception would absolutely change. They would start saying very bad things about me, behind my back, and to my face as well. 'Our children will be ruined!'"

At the same time, some single women who have lived abroad critique heteronormative standards in societies like the United States and the United Kingdom as well. Indrani declared, "It was a big surprise for me in America—I thought women there were liberated, but they're not. My US classmates would say to me, 'Oh, you've never had a boyfriend!' But that's not my identity! I'm not tied to a man. And she was, like, amazed."

Positioned outside the norm, single women offer a penetrating lens into the kinds of heteronormative conceptualizations and institutions that structure the sexualities, subjectivities, and socialities of women—and how sexuality itself can be a form of both belonging and exclusion.

Living Solo as a Peculiar Form of Personhood

Finally, single women's narratives illuminate broader ideologies of personhood and sociality, including the fundamental matter of the suitability or not of any person living alone. One of my Bengali research assistants, then herself unmarried in her thirties while living in her north Kolkata natal home, reported by email her mother's reflections on the notion of living alone: "If living by one's self was that easy and acceptable hereabouts, then other things that we take for granted—like the imperative on getting married, or on looking after one's parents when they're older—would fall apart quite soon. Voluntarily living by oneself outside one's family home when it's not required professionally indicates to my mother (and to me, now that I think about it) an adoption of a lifestyle quite different from what we think of as the Indian or Bengali way of life." A key reason that even those who seem to have resisted marriage maintain such a strong ambivalence about their singlehood is that living singly is not a normal, familiar, unremarked part of habitus for most in India. This is in striking contrast to current trends in the United States (Klinenberg 2012; Traister 2016), where numbers alone reveal a lot: People who live alone make up 28% of all US households (Klinenberg 2012, 4–5), while only 3.7% of households in India are single-person (Dommaraju 2015, 1246–47). For most in India, living with family is key to normal personhood, and for women marriage is the central means of making and keeping one part of a family.[20]

It may come as no surprise, then, that an unmarried woman who lives with natal kin is not generally regarded, by herself or others, as such an oddity. Some women in fact choose to opt out of marriage precisely because they feel so attached to their natal family. Indrani, for instance, told of how much she loves and admires her parents, especially her kind and well-educated father, so that she cannot imagine feeling happier and more suited to life in an in-law's home.[21] Unmarried daughters commonly tell, however, of how their parents favor their brothers as the rightful life-long members of and heirs to a family home, a realization that can cause much pain and insecurity.[22]

If solo residence is so unfamiliar, then what about the possibility of forging ties with nonkin? The answer is that few extrafamily options exist for intimate sociality and coresidence. Sana's yearnings to create a home with her girlfriend never became possible. Keen to find women she might share a flat with in Kolkata, Medha eagerly accompanied me on various research appointments to meet other single women. But nothing worked out: Some were happy living with their natal kin; none had precisely the same class background (an obstacle, it turns out, to coresidence as well as marriage); and most found the notion of sharing a private home with nonkin quite unfamiliar. Working women's hostels do offer one rare opportunity for living with nonkin, and many hostel residents tell of how much they appreciate the sociality and security there. Medha and I were also struck by how many single women were caring for either dolls or the cute infant form of Krishna—Gopal—as a means of forging a sense of cobelonging, coresidence, and caring for another.

Importantly, men in India also face deep-seated pressures to marry and not live alone, a problem that can be particularly critical for gay men. After 20 years of living singly in the

United States, gay Bengali journalist Sandip Roy returned to India, a country where "the idea of a man living alone is baffling" (Roy 2015). Roy reflects, "I had not reckoned that what would be truly difficult was being an unmarried man," not necessarily being gay, "especially an unmarried man living part of the time on his own, away from family. That was what was regarded as profoundly abnormal" (Roy 2015; see also Roy 2008).

Closing Reflections: Possibilities and Constraints of Selfhood and Belonging

Medha, Indrani, Sana, and other single women in India whose stories I have heard invite us to reflect on possibilities and constraints of gendered selfhood in contemporary India. Positioned outside the norm, those who live singly offer an insightful perspective on their wider society's values and institutions. Just as anthropologists argue that we can see the familiar more perceptively when we step outside to make it strange, those who depart from the conventional path of marriage in India are also situated outside of a familiar social identity, and from that position they speak penetratingly about their society's social-cultural norms. Whether told by women who identify as heterosexual or as lesbian, single women's stories may be considered queer in the sense deployed by queer theory: "to make strange, to frustrate, to counteract, to delegitimize, to camp up heteronormative knowledges and institutions, and the subjectivities and socialities that are (in)formed by them and (in)form them" (Sullivan 2003, vi). Here, Lila Abu-Lughod's argument in "The Romance of Resistance" is also useful to consider: Examining resistance, such as to conventions of "normal" femininity and marriage, can illuminate or serve as a diagnostic of the hidden contours of power (1990). Single women's stories help us recognize the workings of gender and sexuality, kinship and marriage, social class and personhood at the center of people's everyday lives—illuminating their tellers' intricate subjectivities as well as offering broader social-cultural critique.

The stories also complicate understandings of the autonomous individual at the heart of much public discourse on the rise of singlehood in modern societies (e.g., Klinenberg 2012; Traister 2016). New possibilities for education, careers, and sexuality seem to be on many women's doorsteps. At the same time, the single women I have come to know in West Bengal seek not so much "the invention of independent female adulthood" (Traister 2016, 7) but rather new forms of recognition, belonging, and intimate sociality beyond the conventions of marriage. For adult women in India, the only certain, "normal" way to belong to a family—with all the social, emotional, and economic security that family belonging can entail—has been through marriage. Yet even for those who do not marry, family and kinship remain extremely important; not to have kin—"persons who belong to one another, who are members of one another, who are co-present in each other, whose lives are joined and interdependent" (Sahlins 2011, 11)—feels precarious and difficult to fathom. Therefore, many work hard to extend conventional notions of gendered kinship to make their own participation in kin relations possible—such as through legitimizing the kinds of lifelong ties to natal kin their brothers have always enjoyed, or adopting or bearing children as unmarried mothers, or cultivating kin-like living arrangements with nonblood companions. Single women's narratives also illuminate how class is not only a form of social inequality

and distinction but also of belonging (Sayer 2005; Dickey 2013) and how difficult it is to forge intimate social ties across class boundaries. In addition, we see here sexuality as a form of belonging and exclusion. Single women's narratives highlight how a woman whose body or sexuality does not meet normative standards of feminine beauty, reproductivity, and heterosexuality becomes excluded not only from marriage but also from social recognition as a valued person.

Even more than cultivating the "rise of the singleton society" (Klinenberg 2012, 16), then, the women whose stories are featured here aspire to craft new ways of belonging. They are striving to extend conventional expectations of what family, class, sexuality, and gendered personhood can entail, as they work to push beyond perceptions that the only way for a woman to count socially and to belong is through marriage. In these ways, we see how individualist goals, such as the motivated pursuit of personal aspirations, intersect profoundly with relational modes of being in the world.

Finally, these stories speak to the place of precarity and optimism in anthropology today. Precarity "has inserted itself into the heart of anthropology itself" (Muehlebach 2013, 298), with anthropology's recent emphasis on uncertainty, human suffering, environmental instability, inequality, oppression, and violence—what Sherry Ortner calls the "triumph of dark anthropology" since the 1980s (2016, 49–58). However, at the same time, Andrea Muehlebach (2013, 298), inspired by Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003) and others, finds "moral optimism" to be "one of anthropology's core and most appealing features" (see also Ortner 2016, 58–60). Ethical practice, as these single women are engaged in, involves not only problematizing social norms but also inventing and aspiring toward new possibilities involving value, optimism, and desire (Dave 2012, 8). To analyze the women's stories featured here only in terms of precarity and oppression would elide much of their content and force. On this note, I close with a final hopeful story and brief postscript: Shortly before this article went to press, Medha contacted me over Facebook Messenger. She had arranged to rent a home in a village near a university town with two other single women! We had met the women the winter before when Medha and I had visited together seeking research interlocutors—one I had myself known for many years. Around Medha's age in their middle fifties, the two women are from an "untouchable" Dalit caste, but Medha is unconcerned. She had not found acceptance climbing up social ranks and is very happy in her countercultural way to make a home with others the wider society considers low. Until she retires, Medha will live in the village part time, but the arrangement gives her a way to imagine a fulfilling future making a life with others. "The most important thing to me is that I'll start a family with that philosopher lady Vidya and of course Bipasha. One needy girl student will also live with us! We start a new family life. Both Vidya and Bipasha are from untouchable caste! . . . I can buy land there! The landlord will make a vegetable bed for me very soon!"

The stories shared here invite us to actively reflect on the ways people forge meaningful lives out of intersecting situations of possibility and constraint, as they also summon us to consider diverse ways of conceptualizing and working towards what it means to live well.

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Notes

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1. Other works exploring autobiographical stories as a means of fashioning (individual and collective) identities and asserting forms of agency include Becker, Beyene and Ken (2000); Carlisle (2012); Lamb (2001); Linde (2000); Lomsky-Feder (2004); Rainbird (2014); and Seligmann (2009).

2. Susan Seymour similarly writes that in the eastern Indian town of Bhubaneswar, "to be unmarried and childless is considered a tragedy for a woman" (1999, 200), and that, "without exception, the young women whom I have watched come of age in Bhubaneswar have accepted marriage as both inevitable and desirable" (p.213). N. S. Krishnakumari remarks disparagingly on the status of single women in Bangalore: "Socially they are boycotted and victimized, psychologically they are subjected to innumerable mental tensions, sexually they are totally vulnerable, and added to this if they are economically dependent they find themselves doubly abused and exploited" (1987, 166). Peter Phillimore (1991), however, examines a rare yet respectable alternative to the married role for women living in the Himalayan Kangra region: the role of the *sidhin*, who renounces marriage and sexuality while remaining in her natal village.

3. These other projects mostly concerned gender and families, but with a focus on aging rather than singlehood (e.g., Lamb 1997, 2000, 2001, 2009, 2017).

4. For representations of being single as a modern, carefree, and at times consumerist phenomenon open to both genders in India, see the collection of essays *Chasing the Good Life: On Being Single* (Patel 2006), and the consumer-oriented "Happily Unmarried" brand springing up in Indian malls and airports, connoting the young urban professional with few family ties and money to spend (http://www.happilyunmarried.com/).

5. For more on The Association of Strong Women Alone, see Berry (2011) and http://www.strongwomenalone.org/.

6. The use of the English terms can signal the category's perceived foreignness and unfamiliarity, as well as (in some contexts) its relation to a cosmopolitan, global modernity.

7. The passive "marriage has not happened to me" (*amar biye hae ni*) is used much more often to refer to women rather than men, but some of my women interlocutors assertively preferred the active *ami biye kori ni*, "I did not marry."

8. Deepa Mehta's 1996 film features two women lovers, sisters-in-law within a joint-family household. Naisargi Dave (2011) discusses how the public dialogue surrounding the film led many women to embrace an "Indian and lesbian" identity.

9. Some notable recent works on the theme of relational or collectivist versus individualist modes of personhood include Gammeltoft (2014, 7–28, 225–35); Glaskin (2012); Ikeuchi (2017); Manago and Greenfield (2011); Sahlins

(2011, 10–15); and Seymour (2004); among many others. Lamb (1997) is one earlier piece examining competing relational and individualist notions of personhood in anthropological studies of South Asia.

10. I use pseudonyms throughout and modify a few identifying details to protect anonymity. As Bengali names all have meanings, I select names that fit my sense of each person. "Medha" means intellect and is associated with the Goddess Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of knowledge, wisdom, and learning. Most conversations took place in Bengali (other than the excerpts from emails in English), although peppered as is common with English terms.

11. Note that class status trumps any concerns over caste here, as both the zamindar's and Medha's family were of the same Mahishya caste. Caste did not figure in the narratives of the next two women, but for readers who may wish to know, I will mention that Indrani's caste is Brahman, and her family is also quite well-to-do, while Sana is of the Bengali Kayastha caste, next in high rank to Brahman, and of around working middle class.

12. Here and elsewhere, I use single quotes to indicate English terms used in an otherwise Bengali conversation.

13. *Bandhobi* is the female form of *bandhu*, friend, and in ordinary usage does not tend to imply a romantic or sexual relationship.

14. One can assume that their families did not so easily "accept" the divorce, given the importance of the larger kin group in marriage, but Sana's narrative that evening contained no mention of their families' reactions.

15. Sappho for Equality is an "Activist Forum for Lesbian, Bisexual Woman and Transman Rights" in Kolkata established in 2003 (http://www.sapphokolkata.in/).

16. Krupabai Satthianadhan's autobiographical novel in English, *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Lif*e ([1894] 1998, p. 131)

17. See also Dickey (2016, focusing on South India) and Sayer (2005, drawing on social theory and moral philosophy), who explore the critical significance of class as a form of recognition and belonging.

18. Pants for women are a sign of modern, cosmopolitan female gender, almost completely unseen in West Bengali villages.

19. "Di," short for *didi* or "older sister," is a sign of both kin-like closeness and respect. Bengalis generally add kin terms to names when addressing persons senior to them.

20. For men in most of India, patrilineal descent is their central means of being and remaining part of a family (see, e.g., King and Stone 2010).

21. Indian parents face an incredible pressure to get their daughters married, and failure to arrange a daughter's marriage is widely seen as one of the largest failures of parenthood. Some parents nonetheless eventually support their daughters' choices not to marry and arrange to leave property in their daughters' names.

22. See Agarwal (1994) for more on women's rights and access to property in Indian law and practice.

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