

# Introduction

## *Thinking Outside Marriage*

It is difficult to convey just how prevalent and taken-for-granted are perceptions in India that it is normal and right to marry. Yet, “single” people have always existed—that is, people living outside marriage, whether by choice or circumstance—and single living appears to be on the rise.

Medha Manna was the first girl in her village to complete and pass grade ten, and she possessed a keen drive for more education and seeing the world. She ultimately received a PhD and became a professor of Bengali in a provincial city several hours by train from Kolkata, the bustling cultural and intellectual capital city of the Indian state of West Bengal. Busy pursuing an education and career, Medha became rather “too qualified” for grooms who might share a similar rural background. She also eventually passed the age of 28, then 30, then 35, by which most Indian women marry. Along the way, her natal kin had failed to really work hard to arrange her marriage, enjoying access to her generous professor’s salary. In some ways, Medha herself had also resisted marriage, coming to see herself as a feminist and adamant that girls and women in India should not view marriage as every woman’s ultimate goal. Life as a single woman had often been difficult, though. Now in her fifties, Medha remarked, “I have to fight with hostility in every step of my life due to my not being an ordinary person.”

Aarini Guha received a fellowship to pursue a PhD in computer engineering at a prestigious US university and then worked in Silicon Valley for several years before returning home to Kolkata in her late thirties. She complained that people both in the United States and then even more so in India were continually astonished that she was single and unmarried. “As if there is only one way to live! And that is to have a hubby!” “There’s a distinct hierarchy in Indian society and Bengali families,” Aarini remarked. “The son is topmost, then married women, and then single women come last.”

Ajay Nag fell in love with their partner, Anindita, when they were both school-girls and had never heard of the concept of lesbian. Same-sex marriage is not legally recognized in India, and gay and lesbian partners face many social barriers to living together. Yet, Ajay and Anindita managed to convince their parents not to arrange their marriages to men—a difficult task—each feeling that they could not live without the other. Now in their forties, Ajay and Anindita both reside in their natal homes with their widowed mothers, spending a lot of time at each other's places, while together running a printing business. Ajay now identifies both as a single lesbian woman and as transgender, having assumed a chosen male name and preferring masculine-style clothing. As the Bengali third-person pronoun, *se*, is gender neutral, I never asked Ajay what pronoun they would prefer in English, but I choose *they* in my English prose as most in keeping with Ajay's gender expression. Ajay has an outgoing and magnetic personality and a vibrant sense of humor, the light of any social gathering. They remarked, "Single women, many of whom choose to be alone, contend with problems and hassles every day: disrespect, sexual harassment, and huge discrimination within society. Marriage for women in any 'patriarchal' society is compulsory. If not married, then she is not considered a full person."<sup>1</sup>

My fieldwork with never-married women in West Bengal, India, over the past seven years has revealed both the immense challenges and the exclusions faced by women living outside marriage, as well as the expanding of possibilities for people to imagine and pursue other worlds. Not only in India, but around the world, single living and opting out of marriage are on the rise. In many countries today, unmarried individuals are the fastest-growing demographic group.<sup>2</sup> The trend is particularly dramatic for women: one of the largest social phenomena of our time, one might argue, is the increasing number of women who are avoiding or outright rejecting marriage in places where it has long been mandatory.<sup>3</sup> This book probes the gendered trend of single living, asking: what makes living outside marriage in India so challenging for women and at the same time increasingly possible?

If one takes a quick glance at India's public media, opting out of marriage does seem suddenly possible for women. A 2019 *India Today* cover story, "Brave New Woman," celebrates "a demographic fact that is fast becoming an economic and political force to reckon with—the single woman." This woman is reported to be "single by choice" and to represent "the rise of the unattached, independent woman, who has rejected the socially sanctioned default setting of married life" (Sinha 2019). Other upbeat news stories feature portraits of the new single women as "happy with their status and not wanting the burden of marriage on them,"<sup>4</sup> and of single women celebrities conceiving and adopting children on their own.<sup>5</sup> The Happily Unmarried consumerist marketing company celebrates single lifestyles with a sense of humor, featuring jokes like "Old people at weddings always poke me and say, 'You're next.' So, I started doing the same thing to them at funerals."<sup>6</sup>

Even ordinary individuals are voicing their support for the trend of being single. An Amazon.com reader from India commented as follows on Kalpana Sharma's 2019 anthology *Single by Choice: Happily Unmarried Women!*: "Young girls [reading this book] would learn marriage is something they can choose or opt out of, not a fate they have to be resigned to."<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, it is difficult to convey in a few words just how powerful is the sense in India that marriage is a compulsory norm, particularly for women. Historically, marriage has been the only familiar path for women to achieve kinship and economic security, respect, and a socially legitimate way of being sexual. Primarily only the most privileged, city-educated, and cosmopolitan elites are the ones who can now embrace single lifestyles by choice; and even then, many battle to make their singlehood accepted in their families and wider society.

Globally popular media depict the enormous importance of marriage in India, with hits such as Netflix's 2020 *Indian Matchmaking*, BBC's 2020 television drama miniseries *A Suitable Boy*, and the 2019 romantic-drama web series *Made in Heaven*. Advertisements featuring radiant brides adorned with glittering gold jewelry rise above Kolkata's thoroughfares and fill women's magazines, declaring how "the bride donning magnificent gold jewelry is a vision to celebrate."<sup>8</sup>

Blogs posted by young single Indian women facing the immense pressure to marry populate the internet. Penned under the name Rutu, one post on the blog *beyourself* opens with a cartoon figure screaming, "For the \$%^&^#Nth time, getting married is not the ultimate goal of my life!!!!"<sup>9</sup> The essay is titled "I'm 29. Single. Woman. Indian" and begins: "Not that any of it matters, unless, of course, you're 29 and single in India. If you are, you know what I'm talking about. Ever since I've turned 20, all my billion brothers and sisters have a new goal in their life: to get me married. . . . I've been born, raised, and spoiled in India, so I know I cannot escape the three ultimate litmus tests for being a *true* Indian: Bollywood, cricket, and marriages."<sup>10</sup> Rutu provides a collection of "eye-roll responses to people accusing me of committing the crime of being single." The list includes the following:

"You won't find a guy like him; he is a prized catch." "I know, but I'm not fishing."

"You have to get married." "Why?" "Because you have to get married."

"Your friend is getting married. Don't you want to?" "If your friend jumps off a bridge, then would you, too?"

"So, are you planning to get married?" "Not right now, mom." "Okay, so would you be finding him yourself, or should we set to work?"

Rutu's blog post also calls to mind Maria Qamar's comic-strip-style parody survival guide for young South Asian women in the diaspora, *Trust No Aunty*. Dressed in a sari with large, dark eyebrows and a concerned glare, the young protagonist's mother asks, "Why aren't you married yet?!!" The girl replies, "I'm only 12, mom, WTF" (Qamar 2017: 11).<sup>11</sup>

By exploring the lives of women who do not or cannot marry, this book makes its first contribution simply by pointing out that single women exist. Before I began my fieldwork on single women, I had come across plenty of anthropological and sociological representations of singlehood in India, all giving the impression that never-married single women barely exist, and that foregoing marriage for a woman in India is unthinkable. Susan Seizer reflects on how—although in India’s large economic centers of Mumbai 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). Susan Seymour 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” (213). N. S. Krishnakumari also 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). 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). Leela 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). Lucinda Ramberg writes of how, to her Karnataka neighbors, “a single unmarried woman constitutes a moral liability” (2014: 29). 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” (2014b: 247). This collective scholarship reports on prevailing ethical imaginaries of a normal, moral life and valued subjectivity—that women will be firmly located, constrained, and contained within families and marriage. The scholarship also suggests that women themselves prize marriage above all else, viewing marriage as central to their sense of identity, self-worth, and security.

As an exception, Peter Phillimore (1991) examines a rare yet respectable alternative to the married role for women living in the Himalayan Kangra region: the role of the *sadhin* (feminine version of *sadhu*, holy man or ascetic). A *sadhin* renounces marriage and sexuality while remaining in her natal village. The decision to become a *sadhin* should be the girl’s own choice, commonly because she did not wish to marry. A *sadhin* tends to wear the everyday clothing of men and

may act in some contexts like men (such as by smoking publicly with men). Phillimore reports that she is still socially classified as female, however, and is bound to celibacy.

In the course of doing research on other projects in India since 1989, I had myself encountered quite a few single, never-married women, of a range of class, caste, rural and urban, life stage, and sexuality backgrounds. Some of these women were in their eighties and nineties, so I knew that remaining unmarried could not exclusively be a modern trend.

What motivated much of my ensuing fieldwork was the puzzle of why, in India, it is so incredibly challenging for most women to not marry. Marriage in varied forms, of course, has been highly common in human societies throughout history, serving often as a foundation for crucial social phenomena like reproduction, kinship, property rights, sexuality, intimacy, and sociality.<sup>12</sup> Yet the rising trend of global singlehood suggests that in many national-cultural contexts, to live outside marriage is becoming quite commonplace. The question facing me was, why is it so very challenging to be a never-married single woman in India?

The book argues that an easily overlooked feature of Indian patrilineal kinship systems that makes being single so challenging for women is that women have essentially no secure kinship without marriage—and in India, secure kinship is crucial for life. Such kinship precarity plays out in various ways. First, some women do not marry because they want to support natal kin—but, even if they make that choice, their brothers often feel no obligation to reciprocate the support. Further, few nonfamily housing alternatives can be found, especially for unattached women beyond the most elite. In addition, despite the current popularity of solo living in places like North America and Europe, living singly is not a familiar or desirable way of being for most people in India. Unless one can land a secure, well-paying job, supporting oneself economically while single is also challenging. Similarly, in a society where taken-for-granted visions see old age as a time for naturally needing, deserving, and enjoying care from kin, single women with tenuous kin connections and no children can feel particularly vulnerable. Regarding sexuality, widespread social ideologies press women to contain sexuality within marriage, and therefore to never be sexually active at all if unmarried. Further, to conceive a child sexually out of wedlock is extremely stigmatized; and although single women in India are legally permitted to adopt and to conceive children through IVE, in practice, they face enormous uphill challenges to be approved for parenthood, while still needing later to continually demonstrate that they acquired these children in sexually chaste, that is, in asexual, ways. The experiences of never-married mothers raising children without a father also reveal the critical importance of the father's name in accomplishing bureaucratic legitimacy and legibility before the state in all sorts of contexts, further highlighting the concrete force of normative marriage-based patriliney in Indian society.

Forces of heteronormativity vis-à-vis marriage crucially impact and constrain men's lives and subjectivities as well, of course, as I also probe in this book. However, it is very often women who face the most significant social and economic consequences for being single. The layered reasons for *why* being a single woman in India is so extremely challenging, and how women negotiate these challenges, unfold over the book's chapters.

At the same time, my research asked, *are* there increasing possibilities for women in India to craft lives outside marriage, despite and amidst such challenges? The book's chapters highlight several contemporary trends that help answer this question in the affirmative. First, educational and employment opportunities are expanding for many women, allowing more girls and women to support themselves and find value beyond marriage. Second, novel nonfamily housing arrangements are on the rise, particularly in urban centers, including single-person flats, working women's hostels, and old age homes, helping make it possible to live outside marriage. Further, India is witnessing expanding paradigms for sexual and love relationships beyond conventional marriage, most pronouncedly among the cosmopolitan elite, involving what many perceive to be "modern" ideals of sexual freedom and agency, and increased recognition of feminist and LGBTQ+ rights.

The book argues that, positioned outside the norm on roads less traveled in both daily life and ethnographies of gender, never-married single women are able to recognize and speak penetratingly about their society's broader social-cultural values and structures—offering what could be considered a queer critique of prevailing systems of gender, sexuality, kinship, pleasure, propriety, respect, social class, and social belonging. In so doing, the book offers a theoretical exploration of how gendered subjectivities are forged and rich ethnographic insight into the conditions of everyday life in contemporary India making singlehood for women both challenging and increasingly possible.

#### MEANINGS OF "SINGLE"

In India, "single" has been emerging as an emic, local category, referring to adult women and men who are not married. The category can be used to signify people with quite distinct marital statuses, including young cosmopolitan adults in their twenties and thirties who are dating and likely still to marry; formerly married widowed and divorced individuals; and those who have never married.

A 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 legal rights, including in its mission widows, separated and abandoned women, and women over 35 who have never married (Berry 2014). 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 and

to “address the widespread discrimination that all unmarried women face at the hands of family, society, and the state” (2012: 107). Ajay, Anindita, and several others in my study had formed a “single women’s” support group welcoming of all single (as in non-married or not currently married) women of any sexual orientation, while catering especially to lesbians.

In my fieldwork, I chose to focus on women who have never married and who are unlikely to marry—being over age 35, generally the age at which women are no longer regarded as marriable in India. Although public discourse and scholarship on singlehood tends to group together people with highly distinct marital statuses, I discovered through my fieldwork how the *condition of never marrying* puts women into a unique social category, outside standard heteronormative visions of kinship, reproduction, adult personhood, and the life course. It is this condition of being never married that has received the least scholarly attention, in India or anywhere.

In contrast, widows have long been a favorite topic of anthropologists, including within India. One could argue, though, that widows are in many contexts not so “single” after all and retain quite a lot of their married status. Conventionally in West Bengal, widows are expected to remain in their in-laws’ home, especially if they have children, and refrain from remarrying. Although Bengali widows face some of the same hassles and stigmas confronting never-married single women, such as being regarded as sexually vulnerable and threatening, conceptualizations and symbolism surrounding Bengali Hindu widows define them in important respects as still married, simply to a deceased rather than living husband (Lamb 1999, 2000: 213–238, 2001). Further, although inauspicious, widows in India are not a highly anomalous social category. Widowed women can be easily socially understood, having followed a normal life-course trajectory of being married. They are also common numerically, “constituting as much as 25 percent of the adult female population in many societies” (Potash 1986: v).

For this project, I wanted to understand the very different experiences of never-married women. Beth Eck similarly wonders, in her study of never-married US men: “Given the declining rates of marriage, . . . it is curious that so little attention has been paid to those who do not marry” (2013: 32). I came to find that the condition of never marrying in West Bengal puts never-married single women into an anomalous social category, different from separated, divorced, and widowed women, as if the act of once having achieved marriage transfers one into (a comparatively) normal adult personhood, even without the man’s current presence. I came to see never-married singlehood as a significant social and demographic category, and I wanted to learn more.

Among my interlocutors in West Bengal, people commonly use “single” in English, as well as “unmarried” in English, to refer to women who have never married. The use of the English terms can signal a category’s perceived unfamiliarity.<sup>13</sup> To refer to older men who have never married, people commonly use the

English term “bachelor.” People also use Bengali phrases to signify being unmarried, including *abibahita* (unmarried) and references to those who “did not marry” (*biye kore ni*) or whose marriage “had not happened” (*biye hoy ni*). Gender identity penetrates the phrasings here, as Bengalis generally use the passive “marriage has not happened” (*biye hoy ni*) to refer to women—articulating that girls’ or women’s marriages “happen,” boys or men “do” marriage, and parents “give” marriage.<sup>14</sup> However, some of my single women interlocutors assertively preferred the active *ami biye kori ni*, “I did not marry”—conveying purposeful agency.

Importantly, local understandings of “single” convey not being married, rather than anything necessarily about a person’s (sexual-romantic) relationship status. We will learn how prevailing social mores pressure single women not to have any serious sexual or romantic relationships at all. Nonetheless, some of my single interlocutors did maintain long-term intimate relationships, and some among the young “singles” crowds in India’s metros are enjoying quite a lot of expanded sexual freedom in what Ira Trivedi portrays as a sexual revolution sweeping through urban India (2014). Since marriage itself or its absence is so very important to configurations of identity, sociality, kinship, residence, and even often friendships—to be “single” as in *not married* is highly significant within everyday life, whether or not a person happens to be participating in an amorous partnership outside marriage.

Noting the dearth of scholarship on singlehood and how privileging marriage can skew knowledge, Bella DePaulo (2017b) and colleagues have called for a singles studies discipline. Perspectives rooted in marriage dominate the academy, DePaulo argues, suggesting that “people who approach their scholarship from a singles perspective have . . . a different set of questions to pose, and a fresh way of analyzing and understanding the relevant issues” (2017b: 1015).<sup>15</sup> To meaningfully understand experiences of singlehood in single studies scholarship, one must delve into the particular meanings and experiences of being single situated within time and place.

## STORIES AND SUBJECTIVITY

As part of the call to explore singlehood in local context, *Being Single in India* features the stories of never-married women from their thirties to nineties, stories which illuminate the intricacies of not only particular subjectivities but also broader social processes. The book also draws on film and fictional stories to illuminate compelling representations of the subjective experiences and broader social processes constituting singlehood in India today.

Anthropologists have used the term “subjectivity” to refer to senses of self and the lived experiences of particular subjects as they forge their lives in relationship with the other beings and social forces of their worlds.<sup>16</sup> The notion of subjectivity includes both the personal and the structural (social, cultural, political, and economic) as mutually arising (e.g., Jackson 2012: 6). Work on subjectivity can

highlight affect, emotion, ethical strivings, individual experiences, and visions of possible lives, “as people grapple with questions of what they are, can be, and must be in the course of living” (Parish 2008: ix). Michael Jackson reflects on how “human existence involves a dynamic relationship between how we are constituted and how we constitute ourselves, between what is already there in the world into which we are born and what emerges in the course of our lives within that world” (2012: 8). In these ways, subjectivity involves the interplay between agency and constraint, or between individual experience and the constellation of cultural, ethical, socioeconomic, and political circumstances that shape, confine, and inspire people’s lives.

Autobiographical and other stories provide an illuminating window into people’s intricate subjectivities as they strive to find fulfillment in life amidst constraint.<sup>17</sup> Stories are valuable in conveying emotion, aspirations, and senses of self—what really matters to persons as they grapple with what they are, must be, and aspire to be as they make their lives. Stories are also valuable in helping both the anthropologist and their readers recognize the variety and complexity in people’s life experiences, resisting easy typification. Through telling life stories, speakers also engage in the making sense of, and often the critiquing of, the broader social and cultural systems that impinge upon and shape their lives (see Lamb 2001). Further, by using stories to insistently focus on the particularities of individual lives, we can better understand the nuance and common humanity in all lives. As Lila Abu-Lughod writes: “The particulars suggest that others live as we perceive ourselves living—not as automatons programmed according to ‘cultural’ rules and acting out social roles, but as people going through life wondering what they should do, making mistakes, being opinionated, vacillating, trying to make themselves look good, enduring tragic personal losses, enjoying others, and finding moments of laughter” (2008: 27).

In these ways, I use the stories shared here to elucidate socially and culturally mediated subjectivities—single Bengali women’s experiences of hope and struggle, laughter and fear, pleasure and disappointment, friendship and isolation, respect and stigma, care and abandonment, belonging and exclusion—as they negotiate singlehood within the contemporary Indian social context.

#### A LENS FROM OUTSIDE

The book also argues that single women, positioned outside the norm, offer a uniquely insightful perspective and sharp new lens on their 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, so those who depart from the conventional path of marriage in India are situated outside of a familiar social identity, and from that position speak penetratingly about their society’s social-cultural norms. In this way, single women’s stories may be considered queer in

the sense deployed by queer theory and offer a compelling portrait of compulsory heterosexuality and patriliney as seen from the margins.<sup>18</sup>

A queer stance stems not from any particular or necessary gender or sexual identity, but rather from a position of externality to heteronormativity.<sup>19</sup> Whether my interlocutors expressed themselves as heterosexual, or as lesbian, or as quite asexual, never-married single women were unique in their positionality as outside their society's prevailing models of marriage-centered heteronormativity. For instance, there were many single women who worked rather than married (chapters 2, 3), and who experienced forms of nonnormative sexuality—such as by having sexual relations with women, or not at all, or with a male lover outside marriage, or by pleasuring oneself (chapter 5). These practices positioned single women as queered subjects in queered situations vis-à-vis conventional systems of gender, sexuality, adulthood, kinship, old age care, reproductive futurity, and sociality.<sup>20</sup> This queered positionality often put single women in situations of social limbo and uncertain belonging. Their identities were often confusing to others, who did not know how to place them. For instance, Medha would say that people with whom she interacted casually in public, such as rickshaw drivers and vegetable vendors, seeing her as an adult, middle-aged woman but without the visible signs of being married (e.g., having *sindur*, vermilion, in the part of the hair), would assume she must be a widow and go so far as to ask sympathetically when “he” had gone.

From their position of externality to a “normal” body, sexuality, kinship, and marriage, many women were able to recognize, make visible, and critique prevailing ideologies that essentially tie feminine value to marriage. Sanjaya Dey, a middle-class woman in her forties, was one who would offer up powerful, piercing social critiques, as I would rush to turn on my recorder or pull out my notebook to capture her insights. Sanjaya was successful in leading an internationally recognized NGO focused on disabled women's rights, had a vibrant circle of both straight and lesbian friends, and was charismatic and eloquent. She had survived polio as a toddler and was left with a slight limp. For this reason, she was deemed unworthy to marry.<sup>21</sup>

“I may be worth a lot in certain respects—work, salary, profession, even decent beauty, if I may say so,” Sanjaya articulated. “But in fact I'm worthless, because no one wants to marry me.”

It pained me to hear Sanjaya say this; she is a beautiful, magnetic, brilliant person.

“Because ultimately the value of me as a woman,” Sanjaya continued, “is in marriage. These are common people's perceptions. My family won't say this exactly to me, in front of me, but this is what they think.”

Anthropologist and queer studies scholar Brian Horton articulates how the project of queer critique has centered on denaturalizing normality, with special attention to gender and sexuality (2017). Tom Boellstorff writes of the affinity between the lenses of anthropology and queer studies, commenting that

“anthropology has always been a bit queer, and queer studies has always betrayed an anthropological sensibility.” With their “shared analytical agendas,” both anthropology and queer studies aim to question and destabilize notions of the normal (Boellstorff 2007: 2). Queer studies and anthropology both do what many in anthropology have called “making strange”—“unsettling assumptions and showing that what counts as ‘common’ sense depends on time and place” (Boellstorff 2007: 19).

With the standpoints of anthropology and queer studies in mind, I gradually came to realize that this project is not only about single women—although single women are its main interlocutors. Rather, the narratives of single women were allowing me to recognize and make visible systems of gender and sexuality, kinship and marriage, personhood and the life course, and social class more broadly—systems that often felt so “normal” and taken-for-granted to other Bengalis that they had trouble seeing what was going on. I came to realize, for instance, that in some ways maybe single women were not the real or primary problem of my research, but rather marriage was—or the ways gender inequality is so intertwined with the institution of marriage in Bengali Indian society. In this way, my project also contributes to the emerging field of critical heterosexuality studies, aimed at examining the taken-for-granted assumptions that surround dominant heterosexual institutions such as marriage, shaping gender and sexual identities.<sup>22</sup>

Here, Lila Abu-Lughod’s (1990) argument in “The Romance of Resistance” is useful to consider: examining resistance to, for example, conventions of “normal” femininity and marriage can illuminate or serve as a diagnostic of the hidden contours of power. Single women’s stories help us recognize the structures surrounding gender, sexuality, kinship, marriage, and social class that operate so powerfully in everyday life.

Queer studies, like feminism, is also useful in my thinking for emphasizing visions of possibilities for change. Central to queer critique is not only the problematizing of existing norms, but also the imagining and aspiring toward new possibilities (e.g., Dave 2012: 8; Muñoz 2009). José Esteban Muñoz writes that we can feel queerness as “the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. . . . We must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. . . . Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (2009: 1). Anthropologists, too, have emphasized the importance of moving beyond the “suffering subject” of the “dark anthropology” so prominent since the 1980s, to explore the ways people not only contend with inequality and oppression but also strive for well-being through practices such as pleasure and care, hope and change (e.g., Ortner 2016; Robbins 2013).

To envision and work toward a better world was very important to many women in my study, who appealed to me to write not only about their challenges

but also about the ways they were achieving new forms of value and pleasure in their lives and envisioning more equitable futures.

SINGLEHOOD, INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM,  
AND THE PROBLEM OF CHOICE

As single women in India seek to actualize new imaginaries of gender, sexuality, and personhood beyond marriage, their stories complicate understandings of the autonomous, free individual at the heart of much public and scholarly discourse on the rise of singlehood in modern societies. By thinking through single women's stories, I underscore how a celebratory model of autonomous singlehood—unfettered free subjects able to choose their life paths—is neither ethnographically nor theoretically convincing. An ethnographically situated and person-centered approach is called for.

According to prevailing public and scholarly imaginaries of singlehood, it is the ideal of freedom of choice that is driving the steep decline in marriage rates around the world. For example, Elyakim Kislev announces that his book *Happy Singlehood* “charts a way forward for singles to live life on their own terms” (2019a: back blurb). He advocates that societies develop a “clear and more benign image of singlehood” to “allow individuals to freely choose whatever lifestyle fits them best,” in accordance with their “true feelings,” as opposed to “attitudes enforced by social norms” (2019a: 5).

In *The Unexpected Joy of Being Single*, Catherine Gray declares: “Singledom is a choice” (2018: 9). Eric Klinenberg, in his best-selling *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone*, writes: “Living alone helps us pursue sacred modern values—individual freedom, personal control, and self-realization” (2012: 17–18).

*India Today's* featured story “Brave New Woman” also celebrates India's new single woman as “single by choice,” “celebrating her freedom.” The story announces: “The urban Indian single woman is answerable to no one but herself. . . . Her life choices are her own. . . . More than economic independence, it is the freedom to be who you are that is the attraction of singlehood” (Sinha 2019).

I can certainly see why such models of freely chosen, happy singlehood are appealing to so many authors and readers. The idea of being “free from social norms,” able to define one's own identity and chart out one's own life path, resonates with the “modern sacred values” of “individual freedom, personal control, and self-realization” that Kislev and Klinenberg articulate as so dear to so many people. As a North American, I know how much I and my students love to imagine that we are free to choose whatever and whoever we wish to be.

At the same time, as an anthropologist, I study how people everywhere have a hard time recognizing the ways their personal aspirations are shaped by powerful social and cultural forces. In the United States, for instance, although there is

not the same pressure as in India to be legally married, most people experience a strong socially-culturally mediated sense that they “should” be coupled up, in a “relationship,” with a sexual-romantic partner. Moreover, modern American society places tremendous emphasis on romantic partners, expecting the partner to be all things at once, from best friend, to erotically satisfying lover, to economic helpmate, to intellectual colleague, to soulmate with the capacity to continuously promote their partner’s personal growth.<sup>23</sup> Relatedly, many forms of “singlism”—implicit bias against single people—persist in the United States, lurking in the workplace, in the media, in religion, in laws and policies, and in everyday lives (DePaulo 2007).<sup>24</sup>

So, I wish to argue that the common rhetoric of individual freedom and choice to explain singlehood is both empirically misleading and theoretically naïve. First, it tempts us to exaggerate people’s freedom to shape their worlds according to their own desires.<sup>25</sup> How can one speak of single individuals simply “freely choosing whatever lifestyle suits them best,” free from “attitudes enforced by social norms” (Kislev 2019a: 5), without paying close attention to the local social-cultural and political-economic contexts that powerfully shape people’s options and aspirations?

Second, the discourse of freedom of choice tends to presume that aspirations for individual freedom and autonomy are universal desires. However, we will come to see how Indian single women’s stories challenge Western-centered liberal assumptions about the normalcy, value, and universal desirability of the individual, independent subject.

On the first point, anthropologists have long scrutinized the ways agency and constraint work inevitably and intricately together in human social-cultural life. Models of contemporary singlehood that posit a notion of agency as “free will” exercised by autonomous individuals making free choices elide the pervasive influence of culture on human intentions, beliefs, and actions. If we think of agency as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn 2001: 112, 118), a core insight of anthropological practice theory is that individuals create their societies and lifeworlds just as society creates them.<sup>26</sup> Anthropological understandings of human social-cultural life and practice emphasize the social influences on agency: “human actions are central, but they are never considered in isolation from the social structures that shape them” (Ahearn 2001: 117). As Lata Mani articulates in her critique of the ideal of personal freedom underlying much contemporary neoliberal discourse: “We live in an interdependent world with finite resources, in obdurate sociocultural contexts that we are compelled to negotiate at every turn, and within a matrix of possibilities shaped by these constraints as well as our own personal inclinations, strengths, and weaknesses” (2014: 27).

Further, even as many strive to craft meaningful lives outside marriage, the single Bengali women I have come to know rarely articulate their aspirations in terms of a drive for individual independence. For one, most do not find it comfortable, familiar, or desirable to live completely alone or independently.

Chapter 1 explores how solo living is extremely rare across genders and communities in India, and how living independently is widely regarded as a quite peculiar lifestyle and form of personhood. As Sarah Pinto articulates, freedom and even self-determination may not always be clear indexes of the “good.” Integration in family and community life does not come without constraint, and yet “what might be called ‘independence’ can be a lonely, sad existence” (2014a: 253).

I suggest over the following pages that what those crafting a single female life in India desire more than independence or the “rise of a singleton society” (Klinenberg 2012: 16) is belonging—to find new ways, beyond marriage, to count, to be worthy of recognition, and to be intimately connected with others as part of a social body.<sup>27</sup> As such, singlehood in India contrasts the thrust of the US “epoch of single women” and “invention of independent female adulthood” which Rebecca Traister depicts in *All the Single Ladies: Unmarried Women and the Rise of an Independent Nation* (2016: 7).

In my fieldwork with single Indian women, some did speak with a language of choice and individual decision making, and this is a paradigm we see featured in Kalpana Sharma’s 2019 anthology of narratives by mostly elite single women from India’s metros: *Single by Choice: Happily Unmarried Women!* I found, however, that it was primarily only women from highly elite cosmopolitan backgrounds who were able to embrace singlehood as a distinctive lifestyle emerging from a claim to freedom of choice; and even for these women, complex social-cultural and political-economic forces were at work behind their decisions. The common emic conceptualization that marriage “happens” to women, rather than that marrying is something a woman “does” (see note 14), also belies a theoretical model emphasizing free choice and agency. Further, a strong majority, 70 percent, of women in my study did not see themselves as having actively chosen not to marry (chapter 1). Rather, evading marriage was very often a consequence of other pressing life decisions.

Especially for those who walk on paths less traveled, making “choices” is often challenging, complicated, and painful. I aim to illuminate through the book’s diverse and intimate stories how single living is not best understood as the product of simple free “choice” nor as only “happy.” Scholarship intentionally focusing only on “happy” singlehood, as in Elyakim Kislev’s 2019 *Happy Singlehood*, lacks the nuance and complexity that an intimate, person-centered ethnographic examination can offer.

In these ways, *Being Single in India* urges readers to rethink the notion of the autonomous, free individual foregrounded in recent singles studies scholarship, while challenging liberal assumptions that posit ideals of autonomy and freedom as universal desires.<sup>28</sup> The book argues that understanding singlehood can only be grasped through the thickness of cultural specificity and attention to the intertwined phenomena of freedom and constraint constituting agency in human social-cultural life. In so doing, the book opens up new approaches

for understanding gender, sexuality, subjectivity, and singlehood in the world today.

### ON FIELDWORK AND FRIENDSHIPS

Several years into my fieldwork, I went to stay for a weekend with Indrani and her family. Indrani (featured in chapter 6 on never-married single moms) had adopted six years earlier a wonderful baby daughter with her parents' help. The four lived together very happily in their spacious family home in the desirable Deshopriya Park neighborhood of south Kolkata. Indrani's mother smiled when I described my research topic, "What fun! You can just hang out with your friends!" She was teasing me, and we laughed. But in a way she was right. I had never before pursued a research topic where fieldwork and friendships so overlapped. That weekend, as Indrani shared experiences of being an unmarried woman and single mom, we also enjoyed chatting about other matters in both our lives, hunting for lovely folk art in a large outdoor market, strolling around a shaded park while her daughter and little friends played, enjoying tea and *dosas* in an outdoor café, and sipping whiskey in the evening while sharing more stories and confidences. It was indeed fun!

I defended myself to Indrani's mother, though, insisting that I was not merely hanging out with my former friends! Most of the women in my study—Indrani being one of two exceptions—I had met only through the research itself. Nonetheless, several of the women interlocutors in the project did become close friends.<sup>29</sup> I will explain more how and why in a moment. First, let me back up a little to introduce my basic research methodology.

In 2014, I began to focus my fieldwork in West Bengal, India, on the lives of never-married single women, making over the next seven years (through January 2020) eight short fieldwork trips to Kolkata and nearby towns and villages for the project, while enjoying into 2021 ongoing virtual conversations with several of my closest interlocutors. I also draw on the narratives of single women gathered over years of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the region since 1989.<sup>30</sup> I combined the eliciting of life stories and formal, open-ended interviews with ethnographic research involving "hanging out" with women in daily-life contexts, what anthropologists call participant observation. Such participant observation-research included spending time with women in their homes and while talking over tea, dining out, going shopping, gathering with friends, attending single women's support group meetings, taking weekend getaways, talking by phone, exchanging WhatsApp messages and video calls, and with some of the more English-speaking elite, engaging in dialogue over email.

The book is based on the stories and experiences of fifty-four core interlocutors, never-married single women ranging in age from 35 to 92. These interlocutors include highly educated urban professionals and rural day laborers, women who evaded marriage both by choice and by circumstance, those who identify as

heterosexual and as lesbian, and women living in a range of housing—with natal kin, entirely alone, in government hostels for working women, and in old age homes. My analyses are also bolstered by insights gained from everyday conversations with countless others, both married and single, in the wider community.

I chose to focus on women in their mid-thirties and older, beyond the age generally considered “marriageable” in Indian social contexts. In fact, even beyond 22 or 28, depending on the social class, it becomes difficult to be considered a suitable bride (chapter 1).

I located the fifty-four core participants mainly through snowball sampling, where existing participants recruited future subjects from among their acquaintances. I would also visit villages where I had long had connections to ask about any never-married women in these communities. Most single women I encountered were very interested in the project, feeling underrepresented and misunderstood in their wider societies and eager to share their stories as part of their endeavors to “find a way to count in the social body” (Dickey 2013: 219).

During interviews and participant-observation research, I was often accompanied by one of three research assistants: Hena Basu, MA; Anindita Chatterjee, PhD; and Madhabi Maity, PhD. I chose other Bengali women as assistants who were either single themselves or, in Anindita’s case, living at the time quite independently from her husband, who was working abroad. The presence of these other women researchers helped facilitate lively and intimate conversations, and ensured that I did not miss the nuances of Bengali discussions.

Recent anthologies and media stories celebrating the rise of single women in India have focused almost exclusively on the elite cosmopolitan classes.<sup>31</sup> Because of how important class distinctions are in India and my wish to probe the intersections of class and gender, I sought out never-married women across rural-urban and social-class contexts. The core group of interlocutors included 35 women living in the large metropolis of Kolkata, 10 from smaller towns, and 9 from rural villages. In terms of social class, the group included 9 elite, 21 middle-class, 14 working-class, and 10 poor participants. Nine participants were from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities, designated by the Government of West Bengal as groups facing social and economic discrimination in the past and/or present. In terms of religious identity, I focused on Hindu women—the majority group in India as in the state of West Bengal (Muslims being the largest minority)—while one participant had converted to Christianity.<sup>32</sup>

Class designations were based on my and my research assistants’ assessments and often the participants’ expressed identities. I use “elite” to refer to those who tend to prefer English to Bengali, have affluent and professional backgrounds, and have spent time both abroad and in India. Although people in India often use the broad category “middle class” to include this elite globally oriented cosmopolitan group, I prefer to reserve “middle class” to signify those falling between the elite and working classes, what some of my interlocutors would refer to as the “real”

or *ashol*, middle class. Among my interlocutors in West Bengal, this “real” middle class refers broadly to those who are basically economically comfortable, with enough to eat, a large proportion of whom are salaried employees, who are able to afford core consumer household goods such as refrigerators and televisions, who speak some English but often prefer Bengali, and who see themselves as well above the rural and urban poor surviving day to day in laboring jobs. To refer to the “working class,” Bengalis often use the English term “labor,” a category referring to those who work hard to make a living but are not suffering from severe food and housing insecurity, unlike the rural and urban poor (*gorib lok*) struggling to get by as daily workers and landless laborers.<sup>33</sup>

As will become apparent as the chapters unfold, class identities tend to be tied at least as much to one’s family background as to one’s own individual socioeconomic circumstances, such as one’s own job, income, and/or education (see Dickey 2016: 36–37). This becomes highly relevant in the stories of someone like Medha, who as an individual achieved a class position as a university professor far beyond that of her impoverished rural family background, giving her a mismatched class status in her one person, making it almost impossible to marry (chapter 2).

Readers familiar with India will easily recognize signs of class distinction in my ethnographic descriptions, knowing how to visualize the ways rural village settings are so distinct from urban ones in India, and how urban class statuses are materialized through divergent forms of housing and consumption, such as how dining on the meticulously wiped floor of a one-room urban apartment signals a working-class status as distinct from the elite status enacted through sipping green tea or whiskey in comfortable chairs on the open-air verandah of a three-story private home. To help readers less familiar with India’s social class divides, I aim to indicate people’s class positions as I introduce them.

Caste is one important category I did not engage with substantively. Caste is less visible to me as an outsider than are the enormously conspicuous distinctions of social class in India. Further, my interlocutors rarely brought up caste directly, while frequently highlighting how the vast divides of social class impact experiences of singlehood in profound ways. Nonetheless, caste remains a formidable social distinction in India, intersecting with both social class and gender in crucial ways, akin in some respects to how race operates in the United States.<sup>34</sup> Throughout, I use pseudonyms for both first and last names, and when the last name reflects a person’s caste identity (as is common), I have chosen a pseudonymous surname signaling the same or similarly positioned caste group.

My most elite interlocutors often spoke with me in English, the language they also tend to use with their friends and peers. Most other conversations took place in Bengali, the primary language spoken in West Bengal and the neighboring nation of Bangladesh, although peppered as is common with English terms. I use single quotes to indicate English terms used in an otherwise Bengali conversation.

I audio-recorded and then had transcribed many of the life-story interviews and other conversations, while I also in addition, and sometimes instead, took copious handwritten and laptop notes. The book's quoted conversations and narratives come both from audio recordings and reconstructions from elaborate fieldnotes, where I aimed to capture speakers' verbatim statements as closely as possible, while then typing up the conversations from notes shortly after the events. I pored over these notes and transcriptions, searching for common as well as divergent themes. My research assistant Hena also searched out for me relevant news stories, literature, films, and other classic and contemporary media on singleness in India.

The women whose stories I share encompass a range of life experiences and perspectives, and no one is "typical." Some saw themselves as having deliberately opted out of marrying, while for others, the life path to non-marrying was much more nuanced and complicated. Some would have been very happy to have had, or still to find, a male marriage partner if various insurmountable obstacles had not been in the way; others had no interest in marriage and all its trappings of domesticity, pursuing careers instead; while others had taken on a lesbian identity, slightly more possible for women, especially in India's metros, over the past few decades.

The women navigated a range of living situations: in solo residences, with natal kin, in working women's hostels, in old age homes, and (in just one case) with friends, an option rare for Bengalis of all social classes (chapter 1). A few had given birth to or adopted a child and were raising their children as single mothers (chapter 6). Many spoke at length of the hassles, dangers, and slander they faced due to being regarded as sexually available and potentially dangerous to the social-sexual moral order (chapter 5). Mindful of prevailing stereotypes and societal judgments, many single women foregrounded tales of carefully maintaining sexual propriety throughout their lives. Others had found ways to express sexual agency and enjoy lovers against the prevailing social grain (chapter 5). Some assented, without overt challenge, to a constrained and marginalized place in society as women outside marriage; others offered penetrating critiques.

The identity and positionality of the researcher always plays a role in the research. I sometimes found myself feeling reluctant to divulge that I am married, as if my marital status—as well as my heterosexual and cis-gender status when I was hanging out with queer-identified individuals—would erect another boundary of difference between us, in addition to the obvious differences of nationality and often social class. People seemed not to be surprised that I was married, though. Moreover, the day-to-day freedoms and autonomy I experience while conducting fieldwork in India give my sensibility and routines there some affinity with those of single women. At least it seemed that way to me. I usually travel for fieldwork without my husband or daughters. This means that I do not need to be home at a certain time, cook for a spouse or children, or check in with family before deciding

whether to go out in the evening or on a weekend trip. I am also accustomed to being rather alone and often a bit lonely while doing fieldwork. Doing research on singlehood meant that I was meeting many other women in similar positions of autonomy and aloneness. This mutual singleness laid the groundwork for developing friendships. At the same time, I and my interlocutors were aware that my singleness in India was temporary, and close interlocutors like Medha and Aarini would notice and comment on the kinds of prestige my married-with-children status provided me, as people we met together in cafés, trains, and fieldwork interactions would ask for and then “ooh and aah” over photos of my family.

Not everyone became a close friend, of course. Some women I only met and interviewed once. It was Medha who became my closest friend and collaborator in the project.<sup>35</sup>

First appearing in this chapter’s opening lines, Medha is a professor of Bengali in a small provincial city, exactly my age in her early fifties when we first met, 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!*” We quickly became friends, communicating not only during my visits to India but also by email and WhatsApp messaging and video calls while I was abroad. We both happen to be fanatic about organic and healthy foods; our birthdates are just three days apart; we share similar feminist sensibilities; and we both love meeting people from all walks of life, exploring the world, growing plants, teaching our students, and enjoying tea and conversation in cafés. Most importantly, Medha’s brilliance and critical insight gave me a depth of understanding about Bengali society and single women’s lives I could never have achieved without her. Medha was eager to accompany me on many fieldwork excursions, not only to help me and to enjoy being out and about, but also to see if she could make some like-minded single women friends. She had a wonderful way of asking intimate personal questions that I as a foreigner and married person likely would not have been able to pose—motivated in part because she herself really wanted to know—like, “Was it really hard for you to control your sexual urges when you could never have sex your whole life?” Or, “Did you never have a boyfriend or someone you liked?” Medha’s insights and stories are woven through each of the book’s chapters.

I was also struck by how avidly other single women interlocutors sought me out as a friend, companion, and confidante. The eagerness of some women to spend time with me helped me see how excluded many were from ordinary opportunities for intimate social interaction. When I would ask single women if they had friends, the majority would reply that they had none or very few (chapter 7). Single women would commonly respond something like, “I did have friends in school, but they are all married now.” Once women are married, they often no longer have the freedom to go out socializing with their former girlfriends. Married women might make new friends among neighbors, other mothers at their children’s schools, and the wives of their husbands’ friends. But it is often difficult for single

women to mix in such marriage-centered circles. Some mentioned as a further deterrent that married women refrain from inviting single women to social events where husbands will be present, worrying that their husbands will be attracted to the single women, viewed as sexually alluring and available because uncontained by marriage (chapter 5).

Further, it is not common in Kolkata and its surrounding towns and villages for a solo woman to indulge in outside pleasures on her own, such as stopping at a tea stall enjoying street food snacks, dining at a restaurant, or traveling (chapter 7). I myself had often eyed with some envy groups of college girlfriends, married women with their children or husbands, or men (either solo or in groups) who could easily enjoy such public indulgences. The one year when I brought my two daughters with me for fieldwork (in 2005–2006 for a project on old age homes) ended up being so fun for me, as I could buy the girls treats in public, while then also partaking myself.<sup>36</sup> So, I could well understand how some women whom I first solicited as research participants would then wish to continue to hang out with me as a companion with whom to do fun things, such as having picnics; going to movies, cafés, restaurants, and art shows; and going on a Himalayan trek.

Further, many women welcomed the opportunity to talk with me about their lives, aspirations, and struggles. When I thanked her at the end of her life-story interview, Rachana Sen, a single professor of history, also thanked me, remarking that the interview had given her a chance to reflect, too. Kumkum Roy, a journalist who had given birth to a daughter through IVF (chapter 6), said that she could disclose things to me that she would not tell others in her society, because she felt I would be more accepting as a foreigner. Madhuri Saha, who worked as a domestic servant, asked with a tone of curious pride when I had turned the third page of my notebook, “Does every life take a few pages?” Others who had gathered around to listen to us (privacy was rather unavailable in urban-poor settings) remarked that she was happy that I was interested, because usually no one would think her story important.

One morning in 2015, the day after I had landed in India for a return fieldwork trip, I arrived at Medha’s Kolkata apartment, eager to see her. Upon entering, I remarked regretfully that I had accidentally left behind at my guesthouse the small gifts I had brought for her from the United States. Medha laughed and exclaimed exuberantly, “I need no gifts. I am so happy inside—I have so much to say! You know that my problem is that I have no friends with whom I can really share and mix. I’m going to say it all to you, and *that* will be my gift from you!”

In the following pages, I do my best to convey the stories, aspirations, and predicaments of the single women I came to know. 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 reimagine what is good and normal, aspiring to forge new forms of recognition and belonging within the social body in ways not tied to marriage.