
Education and Work

Medha was born into an impoverished family of the mid-ranking Mahishya caste of farmers and raised in a remote village, eight kilometers from the nearest paved road. She became the first girl in her village ever to graduate from secondary school. She went on to the university and received a PhD, becoming a professor of Bengali in a provincial college. After we had already known each other for several years, Medha invited me to her apartment for a delicious home-cooked meal and to record her life story.

“In the house where I was born, both of my parents were small farmers,” Medha began, recalling a time about fifty-five years earlier. “We owned a tiny piece of land that they farmed, and they worked on other people’s lands as laborers. They had a lot of children, but most all died, like from malnutrition, gynecological problems, and miscarriages. I’m the thirteenth child. Thirteenth! But only three of us survived.

“My mom was ‘illiterate,’ completely ‘illiterate,’” Medha went on. “She couldn’t write at all, not even to sign her name.”

Medha told of how their family often went hungry and had trouble even buying rice. Her mother would sell vegetables on the footpath. Because of their lower-class status, they were forbidden to wear shoes when venturing near the home of the local zamindar (property owner), lest this demonstrate her family’s insubordination.¹ Class status trumped any concerns over caste here, as both the zamindar’s and Medha’s family were of the same caste.

Despite their poverty, Medha’s father had always admired education. He himself had had a few years of schooling as a boy, “at a lower-class school,” and he encouraged his own children to study.

“I would study all the time,” Medha recalled animatedly. “I didn’t do work around the house or farm. I loved studying! My brother didn’t love to study; he had good handwriting, but he wasn’t good in studies.” Medha’s older sister was

already married off by then. “I *was* good in my studies,” she recalled proudly. “I always taught myself and studied by myself, and I always got good results.

“In that remote village, I had no access to country or world news,” Medha recollected. “We didn’t have money for newspapers or books. But when I was in class (or grade) one, I would go to someone’s house in the next village over, and I would ask them to save their newspapers for me after they were done reading. . . . I would go once or twice per week, get the newspapers from them, read them, and then return them to the family. I would also read the shopping bags made from old newspapers. Back then, we didn’t have plastic shopping bags; all the grocery bags were made from old newspapers. . . . In a different faraway village, there was a village library. I would go there after school, walking four or five kilometers to get books. My mother used to worry at night when I wasn’t home yet. I would return at night carrying my books, walking through the open fields.

“I also listened to the radio whenever I could,” Medha went on, describing her avid thirst for knowledge. “So, I learned about what London is, what America is. And all the places I learned about in books and on the radio, I wanted to see! I used to think that if I had two wings, I would just fly away from this place.”

After higher secondary school, Medha would trudge eight kilometers, during the rainy season through knee-deep mud, 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.

As her life story unfolded, Medha conveyed several reasons for why she was not married, one being that she had become too well educated. She proclaimed, as shared also in chapter 1, “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 not attractive enough to be a sought-after pick on the marriage market—too “black” (*kalo*), short, and with larger teeth and higher cheekbones than considered ideal.²

When she was young, though, Medha did actively resist marriage. At one point after she had passed her grade ten 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. . . . So, that gentleman [her prospective bridegroom] said, ‘I won’t marry her. She doesn’t really want to marry, so I won’t marry her.’ He said, ‘This girl doesn’t want to marry. Why are you all forcing her?’

“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 *will* get a job.’”

Years later, when Medha finished her PhD and finally got work as a professor, she recalled, “I was 30-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.’ If there is 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.”

In conventional Bengali kinship systems, a woman after marriage is part of her husband’s family and only tenuously related to her natal kin. In practice, many married daughters and sisters continue to visit and support natal kin in large and small ways, especially those who are earning and able to maintain some financial independence. However, the prevailing sentiment is that a married woman’s income and labor belong centrally to her marital home, and it is difficult to predict ahead of time whether a husband and in-laws will allow their wife/daughter-in-law any financial independence.

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. Supported by Medha’s income, Medha’s brother’s sons all became well educated, and now they have their own good jobs in the city—“Due to me! Due to me!” Medha asserted. “Now my family has money, education, status, jobs—because of me.”

Medha recalled, “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. . . . 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 with her brother and sister-in-law, Medha put me in a separate room, laughing while explaining to her kin, “Americans like to sleep all alone with even the door closed!” She told me, “We prefer when relatives are visiting to have ten or twenty people piled into one room, lying on mats on the floor, all sleeping together!”

A few years earlier, after we had first met, Medha emailed me upon my return to the United States:

Do you mind if I share some personal matters with you? In Vishnupur, as a small town of West Bengal [where Medha teaches and rents an apartment, while owning an additional apartment in Kolkata], I have 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. [These “rules of the Indian morality” concern powerful ideas about respectability and sexuality, such as that solo women should not be out in public having fun or associating with men (chapters 5, 7).] The result is very depressive. I am cornered, cornered seriously. It affects my life as well as my career.

One thought I had had upon reading this email was that Medha 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 email, while suggesting a lesbian support group I knew of in Kolkata, Medha replied, “I am not lesbian, I am woman,” and she later confessed how attracted she is to men, and how she would even love to have a (male) lover, if not a husband, if such could be possible. Her current “imaginary boyfriend,” as she called him, was the handsome Pakistani actor Adnan Siddiqui.

Two salient themes in Medha’s life narratives are, first, that of not belonging—of not receiving love from natal kin, community, neighbors, society—of feeling terribly isolated and excluded. We will see how this exclusion stems both from her unusual status as an unmarried woman and from her mismatched class. Medha combines in her one person both her impoverished rural background and the education, income, and profession of the cosmopolitan elite. For purposes of forging social ties—whether through marriage, friendships, or a wider community—Medha’s class limbo excludes her. Medha articulated: “I have to fight with hostility in every step of my life due to my not being an ordinary person.” I continue to explore these themes in the pages to come, as Medha’s and other women’s narratives illuminate the intersections of gender, class, sociality, and subjectivity in unmarried women’s lives.

Second and more optimistically, Medha’s narratives highlight how education and work have led to her empowerment and the vast opening up of opportunities. Her education and income did give Medha the two wings she aspired to as a young girl, the wings she needed to fly away. Medha has now traveled widely in India, Europe, and the Middle East, has crafted a meaningful career, and has established independent economic security. Over the following chapters, readers will continue to get to know Medha and the unfolding of her life obstacles and opportunities, forms of constraint and agency, and experiences of exclusion and belonging, oppression and pride.

This chapter focuses on the stories and experiences of the many women in my study who saw their aspirations to study and/or work as primary reasons for not marrying. Increasing recognition of the value of educating women and accepting women’s desires to work are two backbones of a revolution taking place around the world regarding women delaying and foregoing marriage (Inhorn and Smith-Hefner 2021). In India, it is now near universal that parents wish to educate their daughters at least through grade eight and often much longer, a trend that has increased since the Indian Parliament passed the landmark Right to Education Act in 2009.³ Further, most girls and women express a desire to work.⁴ Indian media stories have publicized the growing trend of urban women over age 30 who are giving careers a priority over marriage (e.g., Ali 2017). At the same time, ambivalence persists in the wider society as to how much education and work are

valuable for women; and recent studies report India with one of the lowest women's workforce participation rates in the world.⁵ Why?

I suggest that one important answer is tied to the clash in many people's minds between work and marriage for women. The drive for education and/or work was the primary reason for not marrying for more than one-third of the women in my study. A good number of these women were not directly opposed to marriage per se, but they realized that marrying would interfere with their aspirations to study and work.⁶ Girls and young women, and their mothers, widely report that continuing education and entry or reentry into the labor force after marriage is highly dependent on the uncertain support of a husband and in-laws. Considering global trends, Rebecca Traister suggests that if societies' institutions of marriage do not change to open up more space for married women to work, the result will be that more and more women will abstain from marrying (2016: 238–240).

This chapter explores what happens to Bengali women's gendered identities and life opportunities when they enter the labor market, giving work and/or education a higher priority than marriage, and eventually—due to deliberate choice, becoming “excessively” accomplished for their gender, and/or aging out—no longer finding marriage an option. I also explore the related problem of what I call gendered mismatches of class. If through education and employment a woman achieves a class status much higher than that of her natal family background, she becomes practically unmarriageable. In an era of heightened middle-class aspirations, class change can seem achievable for a highly intelligent and industrious individual woman, but can make her marriage near impossible and steer her into a state of class and social limbo with uncertain belonging. Exploring women's aspirations to learn, work, and earn, we can see the overlapping and blurring together of constraint and freedom, exclusion and possibility, as single women build their lives.

EDUCATION AND ITS TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL

Medha's life-story narratives shared with me over seven years reveal many themes, a central one being her drive for education. She described having an “immense thirst for knowledge” and an “extraordinary pull for outside things—first to leave this [natal] village; then to learn about the rest of the world.” Her drive for education was the main reason, initially, for her not marrying. She insisted, to her parents when they were alive, and then to her brother, that she *must* continue studying. At one point when her family said it was finally time to stop studying, she screamed and shouted and refused to eat for three days until they relented.

The drive for education was also a salient theme in other single women's narratives, and for more than 20 percent a primary reason for not marrying. The majority in this group were from urban middle-class and elite families, and these unmarried women pursued studies up to the bachelor's, master's, and

doctoral levels. Kalyani Majumdar, from a middle-class Kolkata background at age 73, told of how her marriage had been arranged when she was 14. The wedding was to take place the following day, when a member of the groom's family suddenly died. Some proposed postponing the wedding in the face of this inauspicious tragedy, while Kalyani's parents wished it to proceed. Kalyani herself made this unexpected turn of events into an opportunity to resist marrying. She said, "No, let me study more." So, the wedding was called off. Kalyani continued her education through the bachelor of science level, and forged a life and career as a single schoolteacher. Other women conveyed how schooling opened up their worlds, gave them visions of possible life paths, engrossed their inquisitive minds, brought them a sense of pride and confidence, and gave them skills they could use to support themselves economically and socially (see also Chaturvedi and Sahai 2019).

Not all women pursuing education over marriage were from the urban middle and elite classes. Manjuri Karmakar, born in 1952, grew up in a large, poor family in a small town, from a caste group recognized by the West Bengal Government as among the Other Backward Classes.⁷ When I met her in her mid-sixties, Manjuri told of being devoted to studying ever since she was a young girl. We met one evening in the small city of Midnapore, several hours from Kolkata, introduced by two professors I knew from a local college who saw Manjuri as a paradigmatic example of a single woman by choice. Manjuri lives in a crowded household of twenty-one members, including three married brothers, her multiple nieces and nephews, and a few grandnieces and grandnephews. Manjuri took us to the small room where she does tutoring, its teal-colored walls lit softly by a kerosene lamp. She pulled out her diary, a ledger where she had recorded all of the schools she had attended, from childhood through to her MSc degree at age 54, and the various teaching jobs she had held, up to her present position at a college. She exuded pride and passion, while dressed simply in a white sari with red border—a traditional symbol for women who serve others in society.

Growing up, Manjuri was the only daughter among four brothers, and she demonstrated at a young age a much greater talent for studying than her brothers. The family was immensely poor. Recognizing her talents, her father took her from school to school to gain admission and a scholarship through the reservation system for Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes. Her schoolmasters recognized that she was "such a 'brilliant' girl" and helped her gain money for books. Manjuri would walk more than an hour each way to and from school.

In her life story, Manjuri seemed uninterested in the topic of marriage, never bringing it up on her own. When Medha, who was with us, asked why she had not married, Manjuri replied straightforwardly, "I loved studying too much, and I decided I only wanted to be a teacher, and to sweep in front of my own house," that is, to stay living forever with natal kin in the household of her birth.

She pulled out a paper published by the principal of the college where she now serves as a chemistry laboratory assistant and teacher, reading a passage aloud proudly in English:

Coming from a poor and illiterate family of a very remote village of Midnapore [District], [Manjuri Karmakar] is a 54-year-old college teacher. Despite tremendous financial and circumstantial problems, she got her MSc degree at the age of 54. She is the only working person [with a regular, salaried job] in her family of 21 members. Her higher education made her able to look after her family and become a respectable person in her family as well as society.⁸

Manjuri added in Bengali, “God has been leading me for my whole life, my whole life.”

Across India, expanding opportunities for girls’ and women’s education are giving many young women more agency over when, whom, and sometimes whether, to marry.⁹ Recognizing the value of education for girls and women as the foundation of a strong, progressive society and economy, West Bengal’s chief minister, Mamata Banerjee, instituted in 2013 a cash-incentive scheme to keep girls in school longer while delaying marriage. Mamata Banerjee, popularly known as “Didi” (elder sister), is herself known to be unmarried and the first woman to hold the office of chief minister of West Bengal, an office she has held since 2011.¹⁰ Called Kanyashree Prakalpa, Mamata Banerjee’s flagship girl-child empowerment scheme offers an annual scholarship of INR 1,000 to girls ages 13 to 18 from economically stressed families if they remain unmarried and in school. This scheme also offers a one-time grant of INR 25,000 (more than US\$300, or around the cost of a high-end refrigerator in India) to any young woman from an economically disadvantaged family once she reaches the age of 18 if she has remained unmarried and enrolled in an institution of education or vocational training. The funds go directly into the girl beneficiary’s bank account, of which she must be the sole proprietor.¹¹ As of July 2021, more than 7 million female students had participated in the program.¹² In 2017, the United Nations bestowed its highest award for public service to the West Bengal Government for the Kanyashree project.¹³

Public posters advertising the program are displayed across West Bengal in both English and Bengali, depicting smiling schoolgirls in uniform, often riding cycles, declaring: “I am a Kanyashree Girl. I am Progress,” “I am Courage,” “I am Determination,” “I will read, write, and advance” (figure 1).¹⁴

Partly because of this scheme and the public dialogue surrounding it, Bengalis in both rural and urban areas are commenting that girls and women these days have more life-path and economic-security options than previously. They can choose marriage *or* education and work, pushing off marriage, at least for a period, while engrossed in their studies.



FIGURE 1. I am a Kanyashree Girl. I am Progress. Credit/source: Kanyashree Prkalpa.

“These days, girls are saying, ‘I’m going to study. Then I’m going to work. I’m not going to get married now.’” I was chatting with a group of men and women from a mixed-class and -caste neighborhood of a Birbhum District village I had been visiting for thirty years. Learning of my current project on women who do not marry, they wanted to catch me up on the marriage and gender trends they are now witnessing.

“Our daughters are becoming much more aware. They all want to become independent,” Chobi, my friend of thirty years, declared. “And these [educated] girls are saying, ‘We don’t want to marry just any kind of boy.’ They are becoming very discriminating.”

“Girls these days are going for studies and a career,” a married female neighbor of about 50 added animatedly. “If the career doesn’t work out, they will then look for another option—marriage. Moreover, after studying, they can get a better husband. So, either way, a girl will at least be able to eat.” It was striking to me that this conversation presented marriage as a *second* option for a female life trajectory, and clearly articulated both marriage and education as paths toward economic security.

It is for these reasons that some people in Bengali villages have begun speaking of a perceived shortage of girls available for marriage. “We worry more now about marrying our sons than marrying our daughters!” Chobi exclaimed. “There’s a huge ‘crisis’ in finding girls!” Alice Tilche and Edward Simpson (2018) report similar discourses in rural Gujarat, where women’s increase in education has led to their ability to be more choosy about whom they marry, resulting in a marriage squeeze and threats to masculinity for men.

Becoming “Too Educated” for a Woman, and Other Visions of Education and Marriage at Odds with Education’s transformative potential, is tied not only to the opening up of possible paths toward economic security and fulfillment, but

also more implicitly to socially ambivalent impacts upon female gender itself. For one, not all women immersed in education tell of deliberately choosing never to marry. Instead, for many, “age happened” (*boyesh hoyeche*) gradually as they pursued their studies, or they became “too qualified” to find a suitable match. Aarini, the computer engineer in her forties from an elite Kolkata family, recalled, “I never thought that getting a PhD would mean I would not marry. But time passed, and then I was too old. . . . In the US, 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.”

In India, people widely say that some education makes a woman more valuable in the marriage market, but that too much education can be a problem in several ways. First, extensive education can lead to a woman becoming too old to marry—if while studying she passes the age (depending on the context) of 25, 28, 30, or 35 without tying the knot. In rural areas, even among families aspiring to reach the salaried, white-collar classes, parents and kin will become quite anxious about her advancing age if a daughter keeps pursuing more and more education without marrying by age 22 or 25. Among cosmopolitan families in Kolkata, the pressure to marry, and the ability to marry, dies down after around age 35, an age cutoff that implicitly connects a woman’s marriageability to her reproductive potential.

Second, becoming highly educated can lead to a dearth of eligible grooms and an implicit sense that the woman is no longer conventionally feminine. Recall Medha’s statement: “A man must be superior to his wife in all ways, in all ways, except for looks.” Author Baichand Patel 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). Medha commented further: “Because I know so much, no men like me. Everyone thinks that the man should be above the woman. They respect a man for his knowledge, but not a woman.”

A joke in China pertaining to “leftover women” unmarried past their twenties resonates with such perspectives: “There are three genders in China: men, women, and women with PhDs” (Fincher 2014: 43)—implying that education transforms femininity so much that PhD-holding women become like an alternative gender. Zachary Howlett further notes how, for women in China, “obtaining an advanced degree—particularly a PhD—can make it exceedingly difficult for them to find a husband. For this reason, people call ‘female PhD’s’ (*nü boshi*) the ‘third sex’ (*disan xingbie*), a chauvinist label that testifies to the discrimination they face in the marriage market” (2021: 193).¹⁵

Indeed, it is common for women professors in Indian universities to be single. One distinguished professor in my study commented that at least half the women professors in her large English department were never married.

Some discourses about how a woman’s education, professional drive, and age put marriage into jeopardy resonate also in the United States. A June 1986 *Newsweek* cover story, “The Marriage Crunch,” opened with the headline, “Too Late

for Prince Charming?” The cover was adorned with a graph depicting a precipitous drop in marriage chances for college-educated women after age 30, while the inside story announced that single women over 40 had a better chance of being killed by a terrorist than getting married (Garber 2016; McGinn 2006). Although that infamous line was later retracted as a joke “first hastily written as a funny aside in an internal reporting memo” (Barrett 2006), the piece’s core message—“that single women have been, essentially, undermining their romantic goals by focusing on their professional ones”—still “feels true” to many people (Garber 2016).

One also frequently hears in India suggestions or explicit statements that too much education interferes with a woman’s docility and adaptability, and her ability to perform household work, making her less attractive as a wife. Taking a morning walk around the lanes of a village I was visiting one bright day in January 2020, I came across a large household of women preparing for their new daughter-in-law to arrive and the major wedding festivities that would ensue. We chatted about the bride—she was reported to be very fair and attractive; she was 14 and had just completed class eight. I asked if she might still continue her education after marriage. The mother-in-law-to-be replied, “No, we don’t expect so. Educated girls don’t apply themselves to household life,” or literally: “Girls who read and write [or study] (*lekha-pora meyera*) don’t do household/family life (*shongshar kore na*).”

One evening in a crowded ladies’ compartment on a train heading into Kolkata, several of us got to talking about when we would marry our daughters and how much education they are pursuing. My two unmarried daughters at the time were ages 23 and 26; I shared some photos. Another woman’s daughters were still unmarried and studying, at ages 22 and 24. She reported that their (male) doctor, however, had recently cautioned that too much studying causes hormonal imbalance in girls. Girls and women are naturally soft and gentle (*norom*), the doctor had said, but too much education ruins that softness, making marriage difficult. When I reported the conversation to Aparna, a single Calcutta University professor, assuming she would agree with me that the doctor’s theory was unfounded and sexist, Aparna commented that she had also heard similar cautions about too much studying leading to hormonal imbalance in young women. Aparna believed there to be some scientific basis to the theory.

I am afraid that I did not carefully pursue the underlying logic of this theory with either Aparna or my train companion, and these two women interlocutors seemed themselves a bit uncertain. Just what kind of hormonal imbalance was at stake? And how might marriage—or sex? or childbearing?—cure this imbalance? The theory seemed to resonate with other prevailing doxic ideas—that women naturally and automatically *must* get married—only in this case moving beyond social concerns to tie the marriage imperative directly to a woman’s body and health.

Medha later described the history of women’s education in West Bengal. In the early twentieth century, those developing British-influenced middle-class *bhadralok* (respectable, gentlemanly) lifestyles began to educate their women so

they would make better wives and mothers for educated men and children.¹⁶ “And now women have become *too* educated! There’s nothing more to it!” She gave a scornful laugh.

There are also those who believe it inappropriate for daughters to move around too much “outside” (*baire*) to places like school, particularly after reaching puberty.¹⁷ Such ideologies are conveyed in both explicit and implicit ways, and were revealed more in the narratives of older single women recalling attitudes in their youths, signifying some changes in social attitudes. Minu, a never-married woman in her seventies raised in a lower-middle-class family in a semi-urban town, told of how her father had failed to arrange her and her sister’s marriages, being too ill and intoxicated. He also prevented Minu and her sister from going to school after they reached puberty, which could have given them an alternative path to economic security.

Minu recalled, “My father would say, ‘Why will girls go outside?’ Mother tried very hard to send us to school, but she didn’t succeed—she could not win. A doctor who came to treat Father for a back tumor even asked, ‘Why aren’t the girls studying?’ ‘No, I don’t like it,’ Father replied. The doctor offered, ‘I’ll get them admission to a nursing school.’ But Father said no.” Minu worked as a live-in domestic housekeeper for more than thirty years. She later shared a home with her sister, purchased by her employer when she retired.

The award-winning 2018 documentary short film *Period. End of Sentence* contends with the topic of puberty and schooling for girls (Zehtabchi 2018). Coproducer Melissa Berton, upon winning the Academy Award for Best Documentary (Short Subject), declared in her acceptance speech, “A period should end a sentence—not a girl’s education.”¹⁸ The film taps into the global tide of growing concern about menstrual equity, which in the United States includes promoting open conversations about menstruation and lobbying against sales taxes on tampons. In the developing world, menstrual equity includes dispelling shame and danger associated with menstruation and allowing menstruating girls and women to access basic menstrual products and go to school (e.g., Sommer et al. 2016). In 2019, I began to see graffiti around Kolkata demanding sanitary napkin vending machines in every school (figure 2).

Further, barriers to education for girls and women in India extend far beyond the practicalities of menstrual hygiene. Menstruation opens up fears about an unmarried daughter’s vulnerability to pregnancy and signals in many minds her core domestic role as wife and mother. Despite the Kanyashree Prakalpa education scheme and the importance of education in many of the life-story narratives of the never-married single women in my project, around 40 percent of girls in West Bengal continue to be married before age 18, above even the high national average of 26.8 percent.¹⁹

National reports on girls and education also show a drop-off in the numbers of girls in school after grade eight,²⁰ and researchers wonder why. Some speculate



FIGURE 2. We demand sanitary napkin vending machines in every school. Photo by author.

that it is not menstrual hygiene but housework demands that keep girls above age 14 out of school (e.g., *Time* 2019). But I feel that both arguments miss the point of sexuality—the pervasiveness of social-cultural ideologies that girls and young women after puberty are sexually vulnerable to being assaulted, mixing inappropriately with boys out of wedlock, getting pregnant, and threatening their own and their family’s respectability. Such attitudes are also evident in the “anti-Romeo” squads active since 2017 in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, ostensibly to protect women from sexual harassment in public spaces. Women’s rights activists have criticized the squads, which involve both plainclothes and uniformed police officers and police-sanctioned vigilante groups, for their heavy-handed tactics and moral policing, as they target and publicly shame young couples in parks, colleges, and markets.

Of course, many girls and women across India continue their education through secondary school, college, and advanced degrees. However, through my years of fieldwork in West Bengal, I have found that especially in rural communities,

attitudes about female sexuality are a powerful reason so many girls stop their education and marry before age 18.

Moreover, many women, both married and single, criticize Bengali society for continuing to emphasize the value of marriage over education for girls and young women. Chobi related, “When giving a daughter’s marriage, the whole extended family will help out. They will all pitch in to offer money. They will say, ‘Don’t worry. We are here.’” We had just been discussing the tremendous costs of a daughter’s wedding—including the wedding feast and all the required gifts and dowry items, such as gold jewelry, brass pots, stainless steel dishware, expensive saris, a bedframe and wardrobe, often a motor scooter or refrigerator or television, and sometimes cash.²¹

“But,” Chobi exclaimed, “if a girl wants to *study*, no one will help! Studying requires plenty of expense, too, but no one will come forward to help!” Further, I gleaned through numerous conversations that for many parents, the primary value in educating daughters was to enhance their chances of marrying well rather than to achieve education for its own sake (see Chaturvedi and Sahai 2019: 81).

We see through these conversations and narratives both the persistent marriage imperative and education’s ambivalent transformative potential. Education can open up worlds of information and possible lifeways that would have otherwise been out of reach. Advanced education can also transform gender in ways that make the highly educated woman at odds with conventional notions of femininity and wifehood. For women who reject such models of femininity for themselves, the value of education is clear; but some would prefer to pursue the world-expanding path of education without necessarily precluding marriage. Such stories of the gender of education highlight once again the overlapping nature of possibility and exclusion, exclusion and possibility.

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH WORK

Nine women in my study conveyed their commitment to work as a central reason for not marrying. Ena-di, from an urban elite family at age 92, declared, “If you get married, you have to be subservient to somebody, somebody’s slave. I was in a job that involved frequent transfers—Delhi, Kolkata, Bangalore, then back to Delhi. I could not have held that kind of job as a married woman.” She was born in 1923 to a well-established moneyed family in East Bengal, and she completed a social sciences master’s degree at the London School of Economics before returning to India to work for the Government of India in the Ministry of Industry. Her father, a physics professor, reportedly did not mind that his daughter remained unmarried while pursuing her career; and it was Ena-di, not her brothers, who lived with and cared for her father in his last years.

Polly, also from an urban elite family, described herself as “single by choice” and recalled that her feminist-oriented parents never pressured her to marry but

rather emphasized her career. “They always expected that I would have a brilliant career, and work very hard to achieve it.”

In her mid-forties, Polly reflects in her life-story narrative: “I was never tied down by most gender stereotypes. . . . I had a grandmother who tried to teach me to cook and be domesticated, but my parents thought that a complete waste of time. My mother was supportive of my having a demanding career, but she was not one with a demanding career herself.”

Earlier Polly had described her mother as “absolutely brilliant, but also very domesticated. Until this day, I’m amazed that she could be happy.” Perhaps Polly’s mother supported her daughter’s career path in part as an outlet for her own ambitions.

Polly continued, “Initially, we lived with a joint family. Ma would call me, lock me in a room with her, and have me study. This would irritate my [paternal] grandmother. ‘Do you think your daughter will be a judge? What will happen when she marries and doesn’t know how to cook or do any housework?’ But secretly Ma went on training me the way she wanted.”

Then later, as her mother was expecting a second child and in order to give Polly the best chance to succeed, Polly was sent at around age 10 to England with one of her aunts. “So, from the very beginning, I had a very, very cosmopolitan upbringing,” Polly recalled. She came back to India for college, then to the United States for a PhD, and then back to India, where she landed a highly competitive job as a professor at a leading university.

Polly continued: “At that time, for a little while, I did experience some pressure from my family to get married, especially from my grandmother. But then I got cancer when I was about 28, and after that, nobody cared anymore.” In West Bengal, it is common for prospective brides with serious illness, infertility, or disability to be considered unsuitable for marriage, even if the affliction has healed (chapter 1; N. Ghosh 2016, 2018). In Polly’s case, the cancer and its treatments did not impact her fertility, and she regained perfect health. However, she recalled that “Ma would say, ‘My daughter will do exactly what she wants.’ She had thought the cancer was psychosomatic, from the pressure my grandmother and others were putting on me to marry.” So, the question of marriage was dropped. Polly reflected:

Standing where I am standing now today, I’d say that I’ve had quite a good life. I am one of those lucky people who can do the things I like to do. I eat when I want to eat. I can write a paper until 3 a.m. in the morning, and then get up at 7 again to work on it some more. . . . I learned to really appreciate life after having cancer. . . . Every moment I try to be productive. . . . I have relationships with men sometimes, and lots of good friends—girlfriends from my youth and graduate school. I’m very sociable. I have parties, and I love to cook. . . . I can be alone, but very seldom feel lonely. . . . I take life as it is.

Polly’s cosmopolitan milieu gave her social opportunities and sexual freedoms not available to most women.

Not all who choose a path of work over marriage, however, are from the well-educated classes, like Ena-di and Polly. Subhagi, a Scheduled Caste day laborer from the countryside in her mid-fifties, deliberately chose to work rather than marry, so that she could continue living with and supporting her natal kin through her labor and love. Subhagi's exuberant glowing manner makes it hard not to feel convinced that she is telling the truth that she purposefully chose not to marry. "This is my fulfillment—that we are all together and having enough to eat," Subhagi declared.

Subhagi was born into an impoverished family, members of the Lohar caste, one of West Bengal's officially designated Scheduled Caste groups of historically disadvantaged people formerly known by caste Hindus as "untouchable." She was born around 1960 in the middle of four sisters and one younger brother, and while the children were all still very young, both parents began to ail, her father with one hand paralyzed and her mother with cancer. They struggled to have enough to eat. Subhagi worked hard to support the family—through caring for the village schoolmaster's young children, washing dishes and clothes in other people's homes, catching and selling fish, and working as a day laborer planting and cutting rice in the fields. "I was the one who worked so that they could eat," Subhagi recalled with pride.

Subhagi herself took the steps to arrange her sisters' marriages, with her uncle's help, having horoscopes made for each of them and for herself, too. "Everyone came to look!" she recalled. "And my sisters were very attractive and fair looking (*pariskar dekhate*). I would say, 'Whoever you like, you can choose and take away.'"

"And did some also like you?"

"Yes, they did!"

"It's not like no one liked you?"

"No, no, no, no!" Subhagi exclaimed, while laughing. "But if I were to go, then my sisters and brother would have to go from house to house begging. I was the one feeding them by working! If I were to go away, what would people say?"

"I would tell [the men]," Subhagi recalled, "Please forgive me, brother. Please forgive me," pressing her palms together in a prayer gesture. "For these children, there is no one else to look after them. . . . I would say, 'Even if you take me without dowry, I will not go. I will not go.'"

"So, men did want to marry me," Subhagi affirmed, "but if I went, who would look after my siblings and parents?"

Over her years while young and unmarried, Subhagi took care to not dress up at all, "so that people [i.e., men] would not do anything to me, 'touch' me or anything."

"Someone might have fallen for her!" women neighbors listening in exclaimed. "People might have looked at her, and something might have happened!"

"Still today, the whole village knows!" Subhagi laughed with pride. "Still today, the entire village knows what I did for my siblings."

“With all this, I am happy, I am very happy. *This* is where I was born!” Subhagi exclaimed, expressing the privilege that men have to remain belonging to just one family and place within conventional virilocal residence patterns. “Since I was young we were all together here, so I am so attached to this place. I have never left this place since I was young—from here I have not gone *anywhere* else at all!” she said proudly.

“And here there are grandchildren now,” Subhagi added, hugging her brother’s son’s daughter to her chest as she spoke.

By this time, Subhagi’s parents had died and her sisters married off to other villages. Subhagi lives in her natal home with her brother and his family—his wife, son, son’s wife, and grandchildren. They all do what they can to contribute to the family’s sustenance. Subhagi is proud to still work hard so they all can eat, describing serving her family as a moral-spiritual practice. She avowed, “Serving (*seva kora*) the people in this family, the happiness I receive is incomparable. Compared to serving a husband, and compared even to serving God, then serving one’s family is the best!”

Each of these stories, from Ena-di, Polly, and Subhagi, reveal the ways work can serve as an important instrument for economic empowerment for women and offer a means of livelihood and fulfillment beyond marriage. Medha also often speaks of how much her job and its income mean to her. Her financial independence gives her an economic security that she still never fails to appreciate after growing up so poor, often without enough to eat. Her earnings also enable her to pursue pleasures and hobbies that she alone chooses, such as buying exotic organic foods, searching for lovely folk art to decorate her two flats (the rented one near her college and the one she owns in Kolkata), taking meditation-retreat vacations in the mountains, and even traveling abroad.

Subhagi’s story also reveals the ways a woman’s passion for work does not necessarily represent a shift in gender norms toward self-actualization and away from a primary focus on familial responsibility. Subhagi was proud of her work but narrated her central motive as working in order to serve (natal) kin, not to develop her own separate aspirations. Relatedly, many working women express feeling uncomfortable openly spending their earnings on themselves and their own pleasures, pressed by their social communities to direct their income toward kin, a theme explored further in chapters 3 and 7.

GENDERED MISMATCHES OF CLASS

Single women’s narratives of education and work also illuminate how strongly social class is tied to forms of belonging, and how difficult it is to forge intimate social ties across class boundaries.²² Leela Fernandes observes how, as dual-income couples become more common in urban settings, employed married women help propel aspiring marital families into the middle classes (2006: 162).²³ 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.

Marriage takes place not only between individuals but between families. If through education or employment, a single woman achieves a class status much higher than that of her family background, she becomes practically unmarriageable. I came to realize this fact most vividly through single women who had achieved dramatic class mobility as individuals, like Medha, who put it clearly: “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.”

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. Technically, if someone like Medha could find a bridegroom with precisely the same class assemblage—a man from an impoverished village background who had achieved a PhD and a prestigious white-collar job—this could work as a match. But such a man is hard to find and would have as potential marriage partners any number of less-educated women from his village background who would be marrying up in a normal pattern. We see how to rise in socioeconomic status as a woman both outside of marriage and outside of the natal family propels a woman into class and family limbo, essentially foreclosing the possibility of marriage.

Nayani’s Story of Class and Family Limbo

A vivacious woman in her mid-thirties getting to be past marriageable age, Nayani was born into a village home struggling to feed its several daughters. In order to eat while earning money for her family, Nayani was given by her parents at age seven or eight to an elite Kolkata household to work as their live-in domestic servant. Recall that Nayani was our host at the Valentine’s Day lunch described at the opening of chapter 1.

A few years after this lunch, Nayani invited me over to see her new one-bedroom flat. She was thrilled to have been able to purchase a home of her own, made possible by a generous gift from a never-married woman Nayani had befriended in an old age home—a home where Nayani’s former employer, an elderly unmarried “aunt” (*pishi*), had also lived.

Nayani’s three-by-three-meter bedroom-cum-sitting room was lovingly arranged with a single bed covered by a lavender cotton spread, a stuffed navy-blue armchair adorned with hand-stitched decorative pillows, a small lace-doily-covered table for eating, and a cabinet for clothing upon which sat a simple television. In the corner next to the armchair was a second small cabinet topped by three shelves upon which Nayani’s toiletries and *puja* (worship) items were arranged,

including framed photos of the Hindu deities Durga and Krishna with Radha, and a lime-green Buddha statue. Warm afternoon sun rays shone through the open door leading to a small verandah, decked out with flowering plants and overlooking the rooftops of neighboring flats hung with drying saris, in the densely populated working-class neighborhood of Ganguly Bagan in south Kolkata.

After we enjoyed generous cups of tea with homemade *papri chaat*, the popular street snack made of diced potatoes, chickpeas, crispy wheat chips, and tangy tamarind chutney, Nayani launched into her life story. My research assistant Anindita was also present, and the two hit it off, being of similar age and outgoing temperament. Anindita had also recently completed a PhD dissertation on the relationship between domestic workers and their employers (A. Chatterjee 2019). Nayani's life-story narrative unfolded as follows:

"I never imagined that I would not marry. But, you see, my family condition was not good, and so I thought I should do something for them." This was the first reason why Nayani had continued to work even after reaching marrying age, to be able to continue sending money to her family and help with the cost of her sisters' weddings.

"What happened to me was that I came to Kolkata at a very early age," Nayani explained. "I was studying in class three. I stood first in class three, in fact, and got promoted to class four. It was at that time that I came over [to Kolkata]."

Anindita interrupted, "Wow, it must be noted that you were very intelligent!"

"Well, that is something I now understand," Nayani replied. "I was good in my studies. I stood first in mathematics. But there was no one to guide me with my studies. I mean, what a shame, if I had the opportunity now. But at that time, I never realized the importance of education. I was a kid then, maybe just seven years old. I was living in a village, and in villages, people do not focus much on education. . . . Hence, I never realized the importance of education at all." She spoke as if she held herself responsible for having had to stop schooling as a young girl.

"It was right at that young age that my parents placed me in Kolkata in the care of my aunts [employers] and left." As is common in Bengali servant-employer relationships, Nayani used kinship terms to address the members of the family for whom she would work for the next twenty years. Nayani's experiences call to mind Ananya Roy's work on "distress migration" practiced by rural-to-urban women laborers in Kolkata. Roy writes of the "working daughters" of landless and destitute rural families "who are sent off to work as fulltime maids in Calcutta, rarely returning to the village during their years of wage-earning work" (2003: 40, 246). In Nayani's employer's large, three-story home in the affluent Ballygunge neighborhood of Kolkata, there was Pishi (literally, father's sister, an unmarried older woman), Pishi's younger brother Meshomoshay (mother's sister's husband) and his wife Boro Mashi (mother's elder sister), their only daughter, Didi (older

sister), and two grandmothers, Thakurma (paternal grandmother) and Dida (maternal grandmother).

Nayani continued: “I later heard that during my childhood there, I would just sit on the verandah and cry. I mean, I had come away from my home at a very young age. What could I do?”

“To an unknown place,” Anindita murmured.

“Oh, surely,” I added.

Nayani continued: “There’s another point you must understand. In our home [in the village], my father was such a type that he did not allow us to visit anyone else’s house—I mean, not even relatives’ houses. Once it so happened that I went to a relative’s house. One of my older sisters was married already, and I visited her in-laws’ house. Well, on that day, you see, since I had never visited them before, they did not give me any opportunity to return home.” They insisted she spend the night. Nayani recalled:

At that time, there was no telephone communication. So Baba [father] could not sleep the whole night. When I finally got home the next morning, Baba asked angrily, ‘Were you kept chained there?’ As a result, what happened was that during that whole childhood period, I had no habit of going anywhere at all. So, when I was brought and left there [in Kolkata], I could not understand what was happening. It seems that I would cry so hard that mucous would pour from my nose, sitting out there on the verandah.

Since she had so little connection with her own family after that point, Nayani gradually tried to believe that the members of her “aunt” and “uncle’s” family were her own. She related:

Not all people are able to accept an [unknown] person as their own. . . . When I began understanding things better, I did come to know them as my own. I did not have much attachment with my parents. There was practically no meeting with them. Hence, I came to look upon Meshomoshay [uncle] as like my father, you could say, and a friend, and Boro Mashi [senior aunt] as like my mother. . . . Gradually as I grew up, I became like their daughter. Even now, until today, their relatives give me that respect as the younger daughter of Meshomoshay.

Here Anindita interrupted: “But there is a distinction between ‘like a daughter’ (*meyer moto*) and ‘daughter’ (*meye*).” Despite frequent discourse in elite Bengali households that domestic servant and their employers are “like family” to one another, unequal power relations lie at the heart (A. Chatterjee 2019; Ray and Qayum 2009).

“True, there is a difference,” Nayani agreed, laughing slightly. “I am getting to that.”

Nayani described how close she became during the early years with her employer family’s daughter, whom Nayani knew as Didi (older sister).

I was there for many, many years. I was so friendly with Didi that during the time of [Durga] Puja [the largest Bengali festival of the year], we would go out together. Didi held no job then, so she had no cash at hand, but whatever pocket money Meshomoshay gave her, the two of us would share. On one such occasion during Puja, we went out together, and after putting together every last coin, we had just enough for one plate of mutton and two luchis [puffy fried breads]. And the mutton itself was just one piece.

So I said to Didi [using the intimate second person pronoun, *tui*, reserved for close childhood friends and young children], “You eat.”

Didi said, “No,” and the two of us enjoyed together in this manner, sharing from the same plate. It was like that. . . .

In addition, Didi was extremely stubborn and short-tempered. Whenever she had an impulse that she needed a particular thing, then she absolutely must have it and would not listen to any reason. If she did not get it, then it meant that she would stop eating for two days. It was my job to go to her. I had to feed her with my own hands, manage her. I had to do that. I mean, she was of that temperament. After all, she is the only daughter.

She being the only daughter, her father and mother wanted to pour everything on to her—including, they would have her learn painting, dancing, singing, playing the sitar—they did all that for her.

This was of course in stark contrast to how Didi’s parents nurtured their domestic servant Nayani, whom they never sent to school, a fact that Meshomoshay only much later regretted, when he was an old man. Nayani continued,

However, whatever Didi no longer wished to study, she would absolutely refuse to go further. I mean, she did not complete any of these lessons. For instance, on one occasion, a teacher came to teach her singing, and on that day, Didi decided that she no longer wished to learn singing. So, she went inside the bathroom and locked herself in. She was like that.

Then her wedding took place, and she went away to Delhi. Even that wedding was an enormously huge affair. Her mother was not too happy, as Didi had chosen her own husband [rather than having an arranged marriage]. Anyway, she left for Delhi. . . .

Then, whenever Didi would quarrel with her husband, she would come back from Delhi to stay with us. Sometimes she would even leave her daughter with me and return to Delhi. Her daughter would stay only with me. My intimacy with Didi was so intense that whenever she would come from Delhi, she would always insist that she sleep in my room. There was just a single bed in my room. Well, it is understandable that prior to one’s wedding, we two slept together which is otherwise no problem. Now that she had a daughter, the three of us would still sleep together in the one single bed.

Around this time, Nayani also began providing a lot of care for the older members of the family. “Boro Mashi suffered for a long time from a bad kidney. She had to undergo dialysis, and all sorts of tests. The entire responsibility was on me. . . .

I used to get so involved with everyone. . . . When I first arrived, there were even more elderly people there—both Thakurma [paternal grandmother] and Dida [maternal grandmother]. Later they both died. But initially they all were there. What happened is that after my arrival [as a young girl], the responsibility for these two [grandmothers] also fell on me.”

As Nayani reached marriageable age, she realized how much she could help both families if she continued to work and earn rather than marrying. Her natal family needed her income, with two sisters still waiting to marry. Nayani was also busy looking after the three old people remaining in her employer’s house—Boro Mashi, Meshomoshay, and Pishi. “The responsibility for maintaining the entire household practically fell on me,” Nayani recalled.

Anindita interrupted to ask, “While you were helping to arrange your sisters’ marriages, you never thought about your own wedding?”

“No. No, I did not think about my own self then,” Nayani responded. “I had responsibility for two families.”

The yearlong dialysis expenses for Boro Mashi had depleted most of the money Meshomoshay and Mashi had saved for their old age. Didi also continued to spend her parents’ money lavishly. Nayani recalled in a low-spirited voice, “During those days, the pension income was also quite little, and with even less savings, I had to maintain and manage the family accordingly,” doing the household’s marketing carefully and minding the household bills.

At the same time, the family’s elder members were becoming more and more dependent on Nayani’s care. “Meshomoshay would not let me go. When he was alive, I would look after him and take him to the doctor.” It was around this time that Meshomoshay began to voice his regret that he had never sent Nayani to school or “really treated me as a true daughter.” “He began to feel that he should have given me at least a little education,” Nayani related.

Meshomoshay’s unmarried sister, Pishi, also depended on Nayani:

With Pishi, she at first was very independent. She was unmarried and ate in her own room downstairs, and would go out with friends. In the early days, she would get a little mad at me, but then we began to get close. . . . Then when she grew older, she developed a huge fear—“If Nayani gets a different job, who will look after me?” . . . She became very dependent on me. I even tried to get her counseling. And if anyone would bring up the matter of my marriage, Pishi would get very angry with them.

This kind of co-opting of poor women’s domestic-labor work to undertake the social reproduction of rich families is depressingly common, underwritten by ideologies of naturalized social class differences—ideologies and arrangements I will continue to highlight over the following chapters.

Gradually—she is not sure how it happened—Nayani began to hear talk that someone put into Didi’s mind that Meshomoshay might hand over all his property in his will to Nayani and not Didi. “The reason was that there were constant

conflicts between Meshomoshay and Didi. . . . As a result, someone must have put this idea into her mind. . . . Otherwise, you see, until then I never had any difference of opinion with her!” Suddenly Didi stopped talking to Nayani and began to harass her and try to spoil her reputation.

This is when Nayani made the painful decision that she must move out of the Ballygunge household where she had lived for twenty years and which she had come to think of as her own.

By that time, Nayani was also earning a very modest wage of 1,000 rupees, or about US\$13.50 per month, working part time for the human rights organization, Sachetana, where Nayani met and learned from many eminent feminists, gained clerical office skills, learned to sew, and “experienced the joy of education.” Nayani’s job with Sachetana was to interview other female domestic workers about their working conditions and recruit them for education.

Nayani’s elder brother was renting a small one-room shack in a slum in Kolkata, and Nayani joined him there. But the shack was not well built, and the neighborhood was unsafe. “It was very difficult to adjust living elsewhere,” Nayani recalled. “I had grown up in one kind of environment, and I could not get used to this new environment—dirty, unhygienic, crowded. I felt great unease, and I began to feel sick. My appearance deteriorated. . . . It’s OK if I eat or don’t eat, but I want to live in a good environment.”

While trying to manage on her own, Nayani was still often called back to the Ballygunge home to care for Meshomoshay and Pishi. Boro Mashi by then had passed away.

Nayani described the day Meshomoshay died: “I wasn’t talking with Didi then—very little. The day that Meshomoshay died, I took him by rickshaw to the hospital. I can still recall how his face was swollen, and he could not speak properly. He lay on my shoulder, and he reported that since yesterday, he was not feeling well, ‘but what did your Didi say, do you know?—That she did not have time.’

“She did not have time,” Nayani repeated in a low, pained voice. “When we got to the hospital, I did not have the kind of money at hand that I could use to admit him. The doctors also did not even say to admit him. As we were returning home and going up the stairs, Meshomoshay collapsed. I cannot forget the scene. He could not go any further, and I was not able to carry him. I was calling and calling for Didi, but she was not coming to help. *Bas* [no more]. Right there was his end. This was a terrible experience for me.

“That was my last experience in that house,” Nayani said.

Pishi, Meshomoshay’s unmarried sister, had become the only remaining member of the once-large household, along with Didi, who lived there on and off. Pishi continued to phone Nayani to ask her to visit. Nayani refused to enter the house again but would meet Pishi outside at a local tea stall. Pishi would tell of how so many things—necklaces and money—were being stolen from the house now that Nayani no longer worked there.

Nayani could see that Pishi was getting sick from not being looked after properly. So Nayani explored all the different old age homes springing up around Kolkata and settled on the one she liked best, arranging for Pishi to move in. Pishi's pension was enough to cover the fees. At first Pishi was angry, but she came to realize that at home she was not getting her meals at the right time or adequate care, so she agreed to move into the old age home. Nayani continued to visit her once or twice per week until Pishi also passed away a few years later.

Nayani recollected her feelings about the "Ballygunge matter." "I received immense pain, when all the tensions erupted and I decided to move out. I had felt that they were my own." Nayani paused. "But now I'm thinking that it is good that that all happened, and that I left that home. If I had stayed with them wrapped up in their lives, I would not have realized that they were not truly my own. Now I have established my own life and independence."

Upon coming down from the roof carrying her sun-dried laundry, Nayani added, "Another thing: After you get married, you can't do anything for your own family. That is another problem with marrying. . . . If I were to earn after marriage, the money would have to go to my in-laws' household (*shoshur bari*). If I don't marry, I have the freedom to work and earn for myself and my own family."

In Bengali kinship systems, as noted above, a woman after marriage is part of her husband's family and only tenuously related to her natal kin, a theme I explore much further in chapter 3. It is difficult to know in advance whether a husband and in-laws will allow their wife/daughter-in-law to continue working and control her own income.

Nayani's new friend at the old age home was able to give Nayani money to buy an apartment precisely because this friend herself had never married, while earning and controlling her own income through a steady career. With no children of her own to pass on wealth to, she felt very happy to help Nayani buy a place of her own.

Nayani urged us to have second cups of tea with biscuits, while reflecting on her situation. She enjoyed being able to work and earn for herself and her natal family, but added, "Still, since I am a single woman, people can say bad things. Whether in cities or villages, I have to face all those sorts of issues."

Nayani, like Medha, was also contending with a complicated social class assemblage within her one self. Living with the elite Ballygunge Kolkata family for twenty years, Nayani had learned to speak the most polished, eloquent Bengali, cook high-class Bengali cuisine, and live in a posh environment, with running water, polished floors, and Western-style furniture. Nayani described the first time she rode Kolkata public transportation after leaving the Ballygunge home, 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 re-boarding. She had always ridden in her employer's private cars. She felt extreme unease in her brother's "dirty, unhygienic, crowded" rented shack in an "unsafe neighborhood." She only feels comfortable living in a "good environment" (*bhalo poribesh*).

Nayani's habitus was of a high-class girl, yet her background in society's eyes was that of a poor villager and slum dweller. A concept developed and made famous by Pierre Bourdieu, with roots in earlier work by Marcel Mauss, habitus may be understood as culture and social class anchored in the body—the totality of learned and ingrained habits, beliefs, skills, dispositions, styles, and tastes, including aesthetic distinctions between the respectable and vulgar, “good” and “bad” environments.²⁴ These distinctions and habits are embedded in the body and sense of self through daily practice and upbringing, and are at the foundation of the ways persons classify themselves and others. A common sense of taste, Bourdieu writes, “unites all those who are the product of similar conditions while distinguishing them from all others” (1987: 56). With Nayani's incongruous habitus and mismatched class assemblage within her one person, she could marry into neither a village nor an elite city family.

Nayani's friend Nita had explained Nayani's situation of class mismatch at our Valentine's Day lunch: “There's a problem Nayani faces. The people in her village get married to others from the same village, but since she has lived in the city, Kolkata, most of her life, her ways of thinking are quite modern (*adhunik*). She cannot get along with the ways of life of the villagers. She cannot marry and live with a guy from a village.” Likewise, no boy from an elite city family would find Nayani herself a suitable match.

Nayani's mismatched class assemblage not only impedes her marriage chances; it also pushes her into a state of family and kinship limbo. Nayani painfully came to realize that although she was “like” a daughter within Meshomoshay's household, she was never their “true daughter.” The distinction between Nayani—a domestic servant who becomes like a daughter, and Didi, the pampered real daughter—is a focal theme in Nayani's life-story narrative. Didi received all of the money, education, and privileges, although Nayani was the one who gave the most love and care. We see poignantly how the rich are able to incorporate non-kin to supplement their own possibilities for social reproduction, and how gender, class, and marital status work together as vectors propelling an uneven distribution of care—themes explored further in chapter 3.

And, by residing in the elite Kolkata household for so many years, Nayani loses her relationship with her own blood family. She tells of almost never seeing her parents again after she is dropped off in Kolkata at the tender age of seven, and how she is called to the village of her birth now only when they need money. After Nita had explained Nayani's inability to marry a village boy due to her “modern” city upbringing, Nayani commented: “My only family and I also do not ‘match.’”

Nayani related how she brought her mother once to Kolkata to see her newly purchased apartment, but that the “class factor” made her mother uncomfortable with the other people in the neighborhood, and her mother had no idea how to use household appliances like a gas stove. Even though Nayani showed her how to turn the gas flame on and off while going so far as to make guiding marks on

the stove switch, Nayani came home once to find a strong gas odor in the kitchen. “Can’t you smell that?” she scolded her mother. “How dangerous!”

“I have no real *bhab* [intimacy, like-mindedness, relationship] with Ma. I mean, I have never freely talked with my mother, ever. I have been here away from such a young age.”

For those like Nayani and Medha—with a mismatched class status making marriage unfeasible and family relations tenuous—what about the possibility of forging ties with non-kin? The answer is that few extra-family options exist for intimate sociality and co-residence. Keen to find other women she might share a flat with in Kolkata, Medha eagerly accompanied me on research appointments to meet other single women who might become friends or housemates. But nothing worked out: some were happy living with their natal kin; most found the notion of sharing a private home with non-kin quite unfamiliar; and none had precisely the same class background—an obstacle, it turns out, to co-residence and intimate friendships as well as marriage.²⁵

CONCLUSION

New possibilities for education and work are on many women’s doorsteps. Each of the women featured in this chapter pursued work or education as a desired path toward economic security and a prideful sense of self-worth. Several of these women were delighted to have used education and work as a means to escape marrying. Yet, other narratives underscore the gender inequality built into conventional marriage systems, in which a woman who becomes “too” educated in society’s eyes is taken out of marriageability, whether she chose to be unmarried or not. Further, the stories of Medha and Nayani highlight the ways naturalized hierarchies of gender and class interpenetrate, making marriage near impossible for a high-achieving individual woman who rises, unmarried, far above her natal class background, while fostering a shaky sense of social belonging. This harkens back to the idea of using queer studies as a lens because of how single women who work rather than marry are so unique in their positionality, as queered subjects in a queered situation vis-à-vis normative systems of gender, kinship, marriage, and social belonging.

We see how aspirations to learn and work can both expand and contract women’s life-course possibilities in complicated and intertwined ways. This leaves some of my interlocutors arguing that what they want most now is a society that more fully and unambiguously recognizes the value of education and work for women, without propelling them into social limbo.