

## Sexuality and Love

It was on February 14, Valentine's Day, when I returned to Boston from a fruitful fieldwork trip to India in 2019. The following day, settling back into my home routines, I happened to have National Public Radio switched on, playing a segment on Singles Awareness Day. Who knew that the day following Valentine's Day was Singles Awareness Day, with the unfortunate acronym of SAD? NPR host Steve Inskeep began: "This next one goes out to all the single people out there. It is Singles Awareness Day. Couples have Valentine's Day, but single people have SAD."<sup>1</sup>

I learned from this NPR segment that restaurants and bars around the country offer perks to single people on this day, like discounts on cocktails. Phoenix tiki bar owner Dana Mule announced: "We even have a fire pit on our patios. We allow people to bring a picture of their ex to burn in the fire pit." Co-host Rachel Martin added, "A picture of your ex will also get you discounts at the Knoxville Tennessee School of Beauty."

My mouth opened in amazement. I entered one of those post-fieldwork moments, when during the first few days upon arriving home, one can see one's own society more sharply, lending it an estranged sensibility.<sup>2</sup> The story encapsulated some of the striking ways singlehood is experienced and understood in the United States so differently than in India. In the United States, no one would imagine that a "single" person had never had an "ex," whose photo they could conjure up to throw into a bonfire. Single in the US context signifies not currently coupled. But not never coupled. Single also might signify not currently sexually active. But not never sexually active, not even with oneself. Some research also suggests that single people in the United States are having sex more often than married people are (DePaulo 2017a).<sup>3</sup>

Just a few days earlier, Medha and I had been interviewing together Rinku Sen, a 64-year-old never-married woman from an upper-class family who had recently retired as a schoolteacher from an elite girls' high school in Kolkata, and who now lives alone in her family's grand old home in the small university town of

Shantiniketan, the favorite nature getaway for well-off Kolkata Bengalis. Rinku's only brother, technically sharing half inheritance rights to the home, lives abroad as a surgeon in Malaysia, and Rinku's parents had both passed away. Rinku had been narrating her life story in English, when Medha suddenly interrupted to ask intently in Bengali, "Not having any sexual relations your whole life, how difficult was it to control your 'urges'?"<sup>4</sup>

"Hugely difficult (*bhishon kothin*)!" Rinku replied vehemently.

"Me, too!" Medha rejoined.

Rinku reverted to English to continue discussing topics too taboo for her to discuss easily in Bengali: "The older I grew, I became more conscious. I gradually began to feel a loneliness. Then I gradually realized this to be a sexual loneliness. To recognize this as a physical urge comes a little later. First, there is an inchoate desire; you don't *know* your desire. . . . This is something that tormented me when I was younger—tormented me like hell. Sex, society, social attitudes about sex, and taboos about sex—all used to torment me. Now my knowledge is more whole."

Later that evening when Medha and I returned to the two-bedroom cottage we had rented in central Shantiniketan for our fieldwork trip and pleasurable getaway, Medha brought up Rinku's conversation about sexuality. Medha and I had traveled to Shantiniketan to pursue some local single women contacts and enjoy the rural town's peaceful surroundings. We were sitting drinking green tea on the verandah of our Airbnb cottage encircled by vibrant green mango trees and a lovely kitchen garden.

As I was writing up some of the day's notes in the dimming evening light and Medha was browsing the internet on her phone, Medha turned to me to pronounce, "'Sexuality' must be a huge 'pillar' in your book. It has to be. People in this society are obsessed with controlling women's 'sexuality'! *This* is why there is such pressure to get them married, and why we cannot accept it if a woman is single! And 'society' even exerts a huge pressure on single women to control *all* their sexual urges—to not even 'masturbate'! This is a huge problem for single women! Remember how Rinku-di said that this was a huge problem for her? Right! I said it was for me, too!"

I told Medha that I had noted to myself during that conversation that I wanted to ask her about this very topic—whether masturbation or pleasuring oneself was an option for single people.

"No, not in this society!" Medha replied emphatically. "It is considered an offense (*aparadh*) and a sin (*pap*)! People do it; they do do it sometimes; but then they feel like they did something filthy (*nongra*)."

She asked me about the English terminology I had just used, "to pleasure oneself," finding the phrase rather more accepting than other Bengali terms she had encountered. She then commented: "But one thing in this society you have been seeing—women are not supposed to pleasure themselves! Not for sex, or anything! You are supposed to focus on your *family*! Sexual pleasure is for producing *children*—and especially a son!"<sup>5</sup>

Rinku's and Medha's comments highlight the ways Indian society has long treated female sexuality as profoundly dangerous and as best contained within marriage, controlled by a man to whom a woman is legally married (see Mitra 2020). Such ideologies are inflected by class, and some of the most elite women in my study conveyed that they had no problem pleasuring themselves or taking lovers, participating in what Ira Trivedi describes as a broad sexual revolution sweeping through urban India and especially among the urban youthful middle classes (2014). Novels such as *Almost Single* (Kala 2009) and *Losing My Virginity and Other Dumb Ideas* (M. Banerjee 2011) offer up portrayals of single, solo-living, cosmopolitan Indian women approaching or just reaching their thirties who boldly embrace their sexuality, pursuing erotic encounters with various men (before ultimately marrying). The award-winning *Lipstick under My Burkha* unapologetically gives platform to women's sexuality, featuring self-assured female characters such as the unmarried Leela (although soon to enter into an arranged marriage), who resolutely enacts her sexual desires with another man, willfully defiant of sexual-moral social imperatives (Shrivastava 2016).

Nonetheless, Deepa Narayan found through more than six hundred interviews with well-educated middle- and upper-class women in India's major metros that most women felt uncomfortable about their own sexuality. Although they might articulate intellectual ideas about gender equality and a woman's right to sexual pleasure, in practice, they had been taught from a young age that women's sexual parts were dangerous and shameful. When Narayan casually asked women what word they used for girls' genitals in their native tongue, "most women either giggled or looked uncomfortable. Some did not answer. Some said they had forgotten. Some suddenly looked very serious. Some averted their eyes. Some said don't ask technical questions and get into scientific matters. It turns out the most frequently used word for women's genitals by women in Delhi is 'susu,' the same word as urine" (2018a: 135). In reading this passage, one of my research assistants commented further how *susu* is also taught to children as the word for "private parts" for all genders, functioning as a noun for both private parts and urine, and as a verb for urinating, adding: "The shocking thing isn't the definition but the fact that adults are still using it as the primary way to name their genitals." Ira Trivedi further tells of how "like most Indian kids who came of age in the '90s, I thought sex was bad, something so awful that it must never be talked about" (2014: 34).

The single women of this study—all who had grown up in the 1990s or decades earlier—tended mostly to feel much like Medha and Rinku, that their single status left little opportunity for an active sexual or love life. More exceptions came among the elite, some of whom were successful in creating satisfying romantic and sexual relationships outside marriage, facilitated by participation in a cosmopolitan public culture emphasizing perceived "modern" or "Western" notions of sexual freedom, as well as their privileged access to private spaces such as independent apartments and cars. In certain respects, lesbian women also experienced more

possibilities than heterosexual women for having relationships, since lesbian love was invisible to much of the society, excluded from social and cultural recognition and interpreted instead as homosocial friendship.<sup>6</sup> Medha developed a relationship in her fifties, toward the end of my fieldwork for this project. But many among my interlocutors never had had—or did not feel that they could reveal to me—any life experiences involving the actualization of romantic love or sexual desire. Further, single women across social classes and sexualities must contend in all sorts of irritating and constraining ways with powerful public sentiments about the dangers of a single woman's sexuality when uncontained by the sanctioned framework of marriage.

This chapter takes sexuality as the focal lens, probing why so many view a woman's sexuality outside marriage as so threatening, along with single women's penetrating critiques. In addition, the chapter explores women's narratives of past and present sexual and romantic experiences and desires, revealing the transgressive paths some women succeed in taking to form partnerships outside marriage. We see the ways agency for single women involves the intertwined processes of problematizing resilient norms to invent new gendered and sexual possibilities while also strategically conforming to hegemonic demands of gendered and sexual respectability.

#### VIOLENCE, STIGMA, EXCLUSION: THE LIABILITIES OF UNATTACHED SEXUALITY

As Medha articulated, and as I have begun to explore in previous chapters, the marriage imperative for women rests strongly on ideologies of the impropriety and dangers of an unattached woman's sexuality. Families and the wider society exert a tremendous pressure upon girls and women to contain their sexuality within compulsory heterosexual marriage, or, if single, to vigilantly guard their sexual purity. Such expectations are changing to some degree, especially among the youthful urban middle and elite classes, such as on college campuses and in hip, upscale metro neighborhoods like Bandra in Mumbai. But the single women I came to know who came of age in the 1990s or earlier recalled very little sexual freedom. Further, Trivedi found that young urban Indian women who had become sexually active worried that their prospects for marriage would be jeopardized if potential grooms and their families learned of any premarital sexual activity. As a result, sexually active young women in India's metros are increasingly seeking "re-virginization" surgeries to tighten the labia and repair the hymen in hopes that this will make them appear physically virginal on their wedding nights, while urban medical doctors report that abortions among young people are also on the rise (2014: 41–42).<sup>7</sup>

Why? Social control over female sexuality, including the vigorous guarding of female chastity and desire, is a common feature of gender and sexuality systems

cross-culturally. In her classic “The Traffic in Women,” Gayle Rubin writes of how the smooth function of kinship systems involving the exchange of women in marriage requires constraining female sexuality (1975). Rubin elaborates: “It would be in the interests of the smooth and continuous operation of such a [kinship and sex/gender] system if the woman in question did not have too many ideas of her own about whom she might want to sleep with. From the standpoint of the system, the preferred female sexuality would be one which responded to the desire of others, rather than one which actively desired and sought a response” (1975: 182). To Rubin, of course, societies shape and constrain the sexualities and desires of persons of all genders, including men (1975, 2011a, 2011b); but “the asymmetry of gender—the difference between exchanger and exchanged”—tends to entail a much greater control over female sexuality (1975: 183).

What is important for my purposes here is the question of how and why single Bengali women experience such immense constraints over their sexuality when living outside the dictates of heterosexual marriage. Like Gayle Rubin, I am concerned with how configurations of gender and sexuality “are located in specific times, places, and cultural contexts” (2011a: 2). What explicit ideologies and tacit sets of assumptions underlie the sexuality systems of contemporary West Bengal, with which the single women in my study must contend?

In everyday conversations and interviews, Bengalis across social classes and rural-urban contexts conveyed remarkable consistency when explaining societal ideologies as to why marriage is so important and an unattached woman’s sexuality so dangerous. The most elite were often exceptions in their own lives, participating in a cosmopolitan culture in which dating, taking lovers, and accepting a woman’s right to sexual pleasure were possible. However, even cosmopolitan women were able to articulate their society’s prevailing sexual ideologies. These interrelated ideologies include the following:

- Single women are sexually vulnerable, especially if living apart from natal families, not protected by male kin.
- Single women are sexually unfulfilled, and therefore easily available and unusually susceptible to temptation (therefore also posing a threat to properly married men and their wives).
- Single women are at risk of becoming pregnant outside of marriage—endangering the reputation of not only the girl or woman herself, but also her entire (natal) family.
- Single women are at risk of rape and other forms of sexual violence, for to be unattached and “loose” can invite violation.<sup>8</sup>

An implicit and sometimes explicit assumption running through these ideologies is that a single woman is at risk of becoming, or is in some ways already like, a sex worker or prostitute—the paradigmatic example of the morally threatening sexually active woman outside marriage.<sup>9</sup>

Strictures surrounding female sexuality are also connected to concerns over caste and class endogamy, the practice of marrying within a prescribed group. Often in the name of “safety,” families and communities curtail their unmarried daughters’ movements in public spaces in order to keep their daughters from forming relationships with “undesirable” men—seeking to uphold (upper) caste purity and class status.<sup>10</sup> The *Hindustan Times* reports that 57 percent of people surveyed in India’s metros declared that neither they nor their children would marry into castes considered lower than their own (Wadhwa 2007). In her work on Brahmanical patriarchy in early India, Uma Chakravarti (1993) examines how women were regarded as “gateways” of a caste, which needed to be guarded in order to protect the caste’s purity. As Shalini Grover finds, “Caste-endogamous arranged marriages continue to ensure a family’s prestige and status and to preserve the normative kinship order” (2018: 32).<sup>11</sup>

Ideals of caste endogamy, however, do not explain all dimensions of the social control of unmarried female sexuality, such as why communities deem it unacceptable for a young unmarried woman to be sexually involved even with a partner of the same caste and social class (that is, someone who could make an eligible groom, although the possibility of swiftly arranging a marriage can be a reputation-saving remedy in such a case). In questioning the idea that women’s sexuality is controlled primarily in order to preserve the purity of the caste, Janaki Abraham argues that we must look beyond caste alone to examine the complex ways in which “patriarchy and caste meet-and-mesh to protect male privilege and power” (2015: 183). To Abraham, caste endogamy “is reproduced less as a value in itself and more of an ideal critically tied to power and [various, intersecting] forms of social status” (2015: 183).

As family life in India “requires that women serve as the social barometers of family honor,” the behavior of an individual woman reflects on the entire kin group (Dewey 2009: 132). The danger and dishonor of an unmarried woman’s sexual impropriety implicitly spreads (one could say, is socially contagious)—traveling from the individual woman to her sisters and the rest of her family, to her neighborhood and the wider community. One of my Bengali research assistants commented over email: “Internalizing the danger of having sex since childhood, becoming socialized with the correct sexual-gender norms to be followed—these are all a part of our gender awareness program within our households while being raised. If one transgresses the normative order, she disrupts the system, hence she is out of the system altogether [can be ostracized and expelled], since she will be spreading a different meaning of sexual life and a different gender awareness.”

Many single women, like my research assistant, explained their society’s sexual rules and assumptions in order to criticize them. Sanjaya—who ran the NGO for disabled women’s rights and had founded the single women’s support group introduced in chapter 4—strongly critiqued her society’s attitudes about women, sexuality, and marriage. After describing a particularly atrocious case of rape that had

taken place in rural West Bengal in 2013, when five men had brutally assaulted a menstruating rural schoolgirl returning home after an evening tutoring session, Sanjaya told of how within a few months, most of the postpubertal girls in that village had been withdrawn from school by their families. Sanjaya's single women's support group had gone to talk with some of the village girls who had organized a small movement to protest the rape.

As Sanjaya recounted: "The families married off their girls. 'We don't want to take that risk,' they said. 'Menstruation has started; let's get her married.'"

Sanjaya explained that it is less stigmatizing for the girl's family if she gets raped *after* she is married. "Otherwise, people will say, 'A girl got raped in your house. You have a bad girl who got raped.' As if she wanted to get raped! 'You sent your daughter in the evening to have tutoring. She talked to boys. She was dressed like that. So it is natural that she got raped. It's your fault. Our girls don't do like that.'" Her voice betrayed her antipathy and rage.

Much of the everyday talk about the urgency of girls' marriages accentuates not only the broader goal that female sexuality be contained safely within a sanctioned marital union, but also the narrower yet urgent goal that a girl not become pregnant out of wedlock. Recall that Mrs. Chatterjee in chapter 1 spoke of the natural "biological difference" between boys and girls, and the related risk of pregnancy, as the central reason people worry if a girl or young woman remains unmarried for too long. Retired schoolteacher Rinku from this chapter's opening declared, in part to explain why she had never dated or had an affair, "If a girl gets pregnant without getting married, the collective guilt of the whole society is put upon her." Bengalis in the early twentieth century used the term *arakshaniya* to refer to an unmarried daughter after puberty who could no longer be safely kept or protected (*raksha*) in her natal home (Majumdar 2004: 448).

Asha, a married woman from a high-caste but poor rural family whom I have known since her girlhood, first introduced in chapter 1, had a daughter who at age 15 began flirting with a boy from a Scheduled Caste community in the adjoining neighborhood of their village. Upon finding out about the situation, the daughter's family quickly arranged the girl's marriage to a suitable groom from their own Brahman caste, despite the fact that current Indian law prohibits the marriage of girls below age 18.

In the conversations that ensued when I visited with Asha and her two grown married sisters a month after the young girl's wedding, the sisters' talk emphasized how none of them had wanted Asha's daughter to fall into the same predicament faced by Asha's sister Mithu thirty years earlier. At that time, I had been living in the sisters' village neighborhood as a dissertation researcher.<sup>12</sup> As an unmarried girl of 16, Mithu had become pregnant, violated by two men, a father and son, known to her from her same neighborhood. The pregnancy caused immense trauma to Mithu and her family, and when the matter became public (despite the family's success in terminating the advanced pregnancy with the help of a local

midwife), the news jeopardized Mithu's and her three younger sisters' chances for marriage. Finally, after several years had passed and the lack of marriage situation was growing quite dire, village people ended up saying, "Let a girl's marriage happen," and they refrained from gossiping about Mithu's pregnancy when a prospective groom came to visit. Mithu at last was able to marry, and she bore two children: a son and a daughter. When her daughter turned 13, Mithu swiftly arranged the girl's marriage.

It is important to note that it can be possible for people to find ways to overlook the fact of a *married* woman's sexual assault or liaison outside marriage—even a pregnancy from someone other than her husband—because her marital status gives her and her kin a kind of plausible deniability. In one case in a village I had been visiting for years, a young woman who had stayed in her marital home for only one week following her wedding returned to her natal home, where she gave birth to two children several years later. In her natal village, she continued wearing the signs of a married woman—vermilion in the part of the hair and red-and-white marriage bangles. She never visited her husband again, and several pointed out to me how the facial features of her son and daughter, two years apart in age, resembled those of a married man in her village neighborhood. But people could look the other way because the mother was technically married.

Many of the experiences single women face—such as feeling sexually vulnerable and compelled to modify daily behaviors to guard their reputations and safety—are also faced by women more broadly. A 2018 Thomson Reuters Foundation survey, "The World's Most Dangerous Countries for Women," listed India as the most dangerous country.<sup>13</sup> This finding dismayed many in India, who challenged the survey's methodology.<sup>14</sup> However, social scientist Deepa Narayan, author of *Chup: Breaking the Silence about India's Women* (2018a), argues that India must face the reality of sexual violence. Narayan's own research, based on interviews with six hundred women and some men across India's cities, found that "a majority of [India's] women do not feel safe alone on the streets, at work, in markets, or at home, even though they have learned how to cope with this existential anxiety" (2018b). The minority of women in Narayan's study who reported that they *did* feel safe had learned to modify their behaviors in order to feel safe: "They don't go out alone unnecessarily; come home at night before dark; get permission to go out; are always careful and alert; and censor their speech, their clothes, and their body posture" (Narayan 2018b).

The sense of an accepted informal curfew for women after dark—"Of course, bad things could happen to women after dark!"—and other everyday cautions that women take to feel safe naturalize what Sharon Marcus terms a "rape script" that women internalize—that it is "natural" for women to be vulnerable to assaults (1992: 390–393, 398; Dewey 2009: 129). US readers should take note that the United States also figured in the Reuters report as the world's tenth



FIGURE 3. Priya's Shakti: "Loose girl! No one will stop us!" Credit/source: Priya's Shakti, [https://www.priyashakti.com/priyas\\_shakti/](https://www.priyashakti.com/priyas_shakti/), p. 6, accessed July 18, 2019.

most dangerous country (see note 13), and US women practice many of these same measures to stay safe.

The popular Indian comic book "Priya's Shakti" tackles such ideologies underlying sexual violence.<sup>15</sup> In the wake of a brutal gang rape on a Delhi bus in 2012, "Priya's Shakti" was created to raise consciousness among young people and the wider public. The storyline features Priya, a woman who has herself experienced a brutal rape and the ensuing social stigma and isolation. The goddess Parvati is horrified to learn about the sexual violence women on earth face on a daily basis. Inspired by the goddess, Priya breaks her silence, inspiring thousands to take action against sexual violence around the world. "Priya's Shakti" captures the ideologies single women and their married peers encounter daily—the harmful notion that solo means "loose" and inviting sexual assault (figure 3). Medha commented, while narrating her life story: "In India, there isn't a girl who has not been 'sexually harassed.' I have also been harassed. . . . There isn't a single girl in India who has not been sexually harassed in her life."

It is because single women are viewed as sexually loose, vulnerable, and dangerous that many landlords will not rent to them. Some Kolkata apartment complexes even have explicit written rules forbidding single women tenants. Others require that the parents of a prospective single woman tenant sign an agreement that their daughter will not come home after 9 p.m., drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, or have male visitors (S. Ghosh 2013). The fear is that single women might bring in lovers, be secretly a prostitute, tempt the upstanding married men in the

environs, or be subject to sexual assault. Then the reputation of everyone else in the building also suffers in a form of social contagion, especially any families with unmarried daughters.

Aarini, the computer engineer who had returned to Kolkata after receiving her PhD and working in the United States, told of how religious ashrams across India also often prohibit single (Indian) women visitors (although solo Western women travelers seem to be acceptable). Aarini loves to travel and has a spiritual sensibility. She finds ashrams safe, desirable, and affordable places to stay. She gets around the no-single-women rule by booking a double room in advance and communicating that she will be traveling with her aunt. "Then when I show up, I inform them that my aunt got ill and could not accompany me. If I told them it was my *mother* traveling with me—this wouldn't work, because a good daughter should stay home to care for her ill mother! But if I tell them it's my aunt, there's no problem!" Aarini laughed. But she resented having to engage in such ploys, which also prevent her from visiting the same ashram twice.

Returning from an autumn trip to the Himalayas, Aarini described how one ashram made her wait outside with her luggage for four hours after her "aunt" did not show up. Aarini had talked briefly with two European women solo travelers who had smoothly entered the ashram. She pleaded her case to the ashram's monks, telling them that she herself had resided in the United States for many years.

"Why should that make a difference?" I asked.

"Oh, they think Western women can take care of themselves and are very independent," Aarini surmised. As Aarini's next lines elucidate, monks may also perceive Western women as already "loose" as well as alien, and thus not in need of their paternal protection.

"What's their concern about single women, anyway?" I was keen to hear Aarini's understanding.

"For one, they are worried that the monks will be tempted," Aarini replied. "For two, they are worried that I might bring in a lover. For three, if something were to happen and they wanted to kick me out, they could not just kick a single Indian woman out into the streets. They could kick a man out, or a Western woman, but they would feel that they needed to protect the Indian woman and not expel her. So they don't want to take the responsibility."

Eventually, the informal curfew of dusk setting in changed the situation enough to require the ashram to assume responsibility for Aarini. The monks let her in as the evening grew dark. "This is what we have to deal with every day," Aarini protested.

Malobika Ganguly, the store clerk in her fifties who lived in the Government of West Bengal Working Girls' Hostel, described how terribly trying it had been for her to find a place to stay as a single woman. She at first dismissively gave her reason for not marrying as, "Maybe no one liked me!" Later she told me how she

feels some repulsion toward men (implying in particular repulsion regarding the thought of engaging in impure sexual relations with men). Things had been going basically fine until Malobika's mother, with whom Malobika had always lived, died when Malobika was 46. They were a working-class family and did not own a home. Malobika's income as a store clerk was sufficient to pay for her food and a modest rent; but she needed to find a place to live. I realize now that I never learned why she could not continue to live in the rental apartment she had shared with her mother.

"I thought I had found a place," Malobika recollected. "But then the landlord asked, 'Who will live here?' 'I will live alone,' I replied. And so he no longer wanted to give it to me!

"I was *very* distraught!" Malobika recalled. "*Where* would I live? A girl cannot live alone on the streets! I was weeping and weeping, and I was so mad at Gopal." Gopal is the deity Krishna in his baby form, whom Malobika worships and cares for daily, keeping a shrine in her room. Malobika speaks to Gopal, a very dear guardian figure for her, using the intimate second-person pronoun, *tui*, generally reserved for close childhood friends and children.

"I was walking and walking and walking here and there searching. I'm a female person, right? I can't just live alone on a footpath!"

Finally, someone told Malobika about the working girls' hostel. She filled out all the forms and pleaded with them to let her in. "Not today, tomorrow," they would say. She struggled for nine months like that, most of the time living in her sister's marital home (*shoshur bari*, literally "father-in-law's home"), not a socially acceptable or comfortable situation.

Malobika continued, "Then finally I said to Gopal, 'Today, if you don't make arrangements for me—.' And I received a room!" That was in 2011, five years before she and I first met and eight years before this conversation.

Mindful of prevailing stereotypes, many single women also foreground stories of carefully maintaining sexual propriety throughout life. Recall how Subhagi of chapter 2, the Scheduled Caste day laborer proud to have supported her natal family her whole life, described how she always took care to avoid dressing up, 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!"

Sukhi-di also highlighted her strategies for guarding her sexual propriety when describing her work traveling around rural Bengal as the only woman with a team of UNICEF researchers. As first reported in chapter 3, Sukhi-di's male colleagues were shy about dressing and sleeping together in the same barracks, but Sukhi would treat her colleagues like brothers and comfortably sleep in the same room, matter-of-factly stretching a sari across the room as a barrier. She smiled proudly when describing how she would keep a knife under her pillow for protection at night whenever traveling or living alone.

The imperative to guard their sexual propriety leads to all kinds of daily exclusions for many women. Single women professors tell of how their married colleagues do not like to invite them to social events, out of fear that married male colleagues—or the male husbands of married female colleagues—will be tempted to start up an affair with the single women. The two unmarried sisters in their thirties, Nabami and Srabani, from a rural Scheduled Caste community who lived with their widowed mother, described the restrictiveness of their daily lives. They had not married due to their family's poverty after their father died when they were seven or eight; they had to support their mother. A few of their kin and neighbors also commented that prospective grooms had not liked them for being "too black."<sup>16</sup> Often, as I note in chapter 1, a higher dowry can compensate for perceived bodily imperfections, such as dark skin color; but Nabami's and Srabani's kin lacked the resources for even a small dowry.

Nabami, the older sister, described the cloistered life of unmarried girls as her younger sister Srabani listened: "If we go out and mix with anyone, people will criticize us. They will slander us, saying, 'She is vulgar!' [conveying people's perceptions that any social mixing outside their household involves immoral, indecent sexual behavior]. So, we don't mix with anyone at all. At least I have my sister here; together we can talk a little."

Nabami then went on to tell of being excluded even from family events where men will be present. "We can't go to anyone's house where there will be boys or men, either married or unmarried. Even if it's a family event, like a festival or a wedding! We face this kind of problem. We can't really mix with anyone at all."

Sanjaya, who lives alone in a working-middle-class neighborhood near the NGO for disabled women that she directs, told of how she would be very happy to find a male partner, if such an occurrence could be possible. But she added: "If I were to live with a man, or bring a man home, the whole neighborhood would immediately talk! 'What a girl!' They would start beating me; their perceptions would absolutely change. They would start saying very bad things about me, behind my back, and to my face as well. 'Our children will be ruined!'"

One afternoon after interviewing Bukun, a never-married rural woman in her forties from a working-class family, Medha and I invited her to come enjoy a cup of tea with us out at the public tea stall on the main road. Bukun hesitated, at first declining. She said she had barely ventured out of her natal family home for years, after it had come to pass that she would not marry. She spent her days cooking, sewing, and caring for her brother's children. Medha and I worked to persuade her to join us. Finally, we succeeded by telling her that single women in my country go out all the time, and that Medha herself, a Bengali never-married woman, loves to travel and dine in public. We three walked to the roadside tea stall and together enjoyed hot milky tea with freshly fried samosas while sitting on long wooden benches out in the open air of the spring afternoon. Bukun spoke softly with us and kept her gaze down, as the local men in the tea stall smiled and made casual

teasing remarks about our unusual outing with their village's normally cloistered unmarried woman.

Pratima Nag, in her early sixties and recently retired as a schoolteacher, lived alone in a rented Kolkata flat in the middle-class neighborhood of Salt Lake, Kolkata. She narrated, describing her life as an unmarried woman who lived alone:

I was always careful to lead a highly restricted life. I absolutely went straight from school to home. If I returned a little later in the evening, people would talk. I never allowed any male visitors. . . .

It was difficult to find places to live. The landlords would want to know, "Why are you leaving home to come live here? If you're not married, then why aren't you living with your parents? If your parents aren't there, then why not with your brother?"

I would explain, "I have no mother, no father. My brother lives in Shantiniketan [three or four hours by train from Kolkata], and this is where my job is."

"You should go live with your brother," the landlords would say.

"But if I have no job there? I don't want to simply depend on my brother as his big sister. . . ."

People, still now [that I am retired and older], are watching my every move. That you came this evening, maybe you did not notice, but the neighborhood people surely noticed you! Tomorrow, everyone will talk to try to figure it out. The servant girls will all talk among themselves and then gossip with their employers. . . .

I can't mix at all. I don't like it. . . . Our society is not yet ready for a single woman to live alone. . . . I tell my students now, "You should think very carefully before you decide not to marry. To live alone [as a woman] is a very restricted, difficult life."

One evening after Medha and I had listened to Manjuri Karmakar of chapter 2 tell her life story, focused on education and supporting her economically struggling natal family of twenty-one, without ever bringing up marriage, love, or sexual yearnings, Medha exclaimed to me, feeling almost angry: "It's not natural or even possible to have no sexual feelings! *Everyone* has sexual feelings, no? She *says* that she is happy and that she never thought of love, but—"

I interrupted to ask, "Do you believe she *says* she's happy, but that she's really not?"

"No, not that. She's not lying. But she *killed* herself (*nijeko mere pheleche*) to be where she is now. She killed herself!" Medha went on, "Manjuri has no desires for herself! But *I* can't be like that! I will never be like that!" Medha uttered with force, anger, protest, and pride. Not directing any desire toward oneself is at once humanly impossible, she felt, yet socially imperative—a terrible quandary to endure.

My thoughts turned to Nita of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, who felt compelled to quash all her individual desires to serve her family of birth, ultimately leading to a tragic death. I was spending a few days in Medha's flat near the provincial college where she teaches. The next morning as Medha was preparing for us a healthy breakfast of steamed cabbage and boiled peanuts,<sup>17</sup> she commented, "'Sexuality' in Bengali

society is hugely important for your study! Did you know that Kulin Brahmans used to marry fifty wives and have sex with all of them, but the wives usually could never have a real sexual life at all?<sup>18</sup> Men also have affairs all the time. This is ‘patriarchy.’ Men have so much sex, yet they so control the ‘sexuality’ of women!”

Dominant ideologies about the need to control women’s sexuality help explain material from previous chapters, too. Bengalis may not articulate the problem of single women so bluntly, but the implicit ideology is that the risk of sexual impropriety from the unmarried woman spreads—from the individual woman to her sisters and the rest of her family, to the people in her building (apartment house, ashram), to the whole neighborhood. People quarantine the source of contagion (cloister her away from other men) or expel it—get her married off, refuse to rent her a room, keep her from settling down in the family home, separate her from others.

Durba Mitra’s (2020) intellectual history of modern Indian social thought surrounding sexuality exposes powerful historical foundations of such present-day ideologies. Focusing on the period from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s in colonial Bengal, Mitra examines how British officials and Indian intellectuals utilized a common language linking the control of female sexuality to the evolutionary progress of Indian society. Marriage became regarded as essential to discouraging sexual promiscuity, with chastity “the sole imperative of the modern Hindu woman” (2020: 67). Administrators, doctors, sociologists, and social critics wrote of the “need to safely transfer a woman from the protection of the father to the protection of the husband” (184) and were “contemptuous of all women outside marriage” (190). Social analysts argued that “it was the perpetual surveillance in the institution of heterosexual monogamous marriage that would save women from their otherwise inevitable fall” (202). *Indian Sex Life* in these ways “tells a history of social strictures that have organized, disciplined, violated, and left a void in the place of women’s desires” (Mitra 2020: 1). Ideologies change and evolve over time, of course, yet Mitra’s intellectual history of modern social thought reveals roots of powerful logics about sexuality that continue to hold sway in present-day India.

Contending with such powerful ideologies constraining women’s sexuality, some single women nonetheless negotiate opportunities for love and desire, as I get to shortly. Elite women especially often have more room to maneuver. First, I look at how the push for self-chosen “love” marriages among today’s elite proves a barrier to those who see themselves caught in a cultural limbo between conventional and modern systems of love and marriage.

#### “ARRANGED” AND “LOVE” MARRIAGE IN CULTURAL LIMBO

Although the majority of marriages in India are still arranged by parents and extended kin—while usually now also including opportunities for the prospective

bride and groom to meet one another and express preferences—so-called love marriages are becoming increasingly popular across social classes and rural-urban contexts, and especially within India's metros.<sup>19</sup> Love marriage is often interpreted as a marker of modernity, and several elite women in my study felt that their parents and others in their cosmopolitan circles rather expected them to find their own match, as part of their participation in modern culture. At the same time, several felt that they had not received any cultural training in how to date or find a partner on their own. This experience of feeling caught between two worlds—of arranged marriages and love marriages, of convention and modernity, of “East” and “West”—became a central reason for not marrying.

Aarini, who booked travel to ashrams with her “aunt,” described contradictions in elite families like hers in the way girls are raised. On the one hand, daughters are taught to uphold Indian gendered conventions as “good girls” by not dating or having boyfriends. These strictures are changing now among the urban elite, where parents may allow or even encourage their daughters to date and socialize in mixed-gender circles as long as they do not have sex or get pregnant; but for the women in my study, all over age 35, most had not participated in more permissive singles dating cultures. At the same time, those in well-educated elite circles are beginning to find arranged marriages unfashionable.

Aarini recalled, “When Ma came to visit me in the US, she asked, ‘Where is your boyfriend? Where are you hiding him?’ I told her, ‘If I had a boyfriend, you would see him! I’m not hiding anything. And you *told* me not to get one!’ ‘Yes, that’s true,’ Ma said, ‘but I didn’t expect you to listen to me.’”

Aarini’s parents arranged a few meetings with potential grooms. Aarini tells of meeting one or two for very awkward encounters: “I had no way of evaluating them, whether they were good or not, a good match for me or not, never having really mixed much with men, never having dated, and having gone [when young] to an all-girls school. It was very awkward. I couldn’t choose any of them for marriage. And that was that.”

Aarini, now 45, remarked, “Previously, girls like me would be married through arranged marriages by age 20, and we would simply accept what came our way.”

“Would that have been better for you at all?” I asked.

“Absolutely not!” Aarini replied. “But yet—” She described a catch-22 situation of negotiating a liminal space between the old and new: “Girls growing up these days of my class are told both that we should not mix with any boys, *and* that we should go ahead and choose our own husband! Our parents say, ‘That’s fine—you can choose your own—you decide whom to marry.’ But we are given absolutely no training in how to select a husband! I have absolutely no way of knowing who will be good to marry, and who not!”

Rinku, age 64, from this chapter’s opening, told a similar story. When Medha forthrightly asked Rinku why she had not married, shortly after we had been introduced by a mutual acquaintance, Rinku replied, “I can tell you that, but I will

need to do it in my long, roundabout way.” She thus began her two-hour narrative, speaking loudly and articulately in English with almost no interruptions, a good storyteller. We were seated on plush chairs in the sitting room of her old family home. At one point, a domestic staff brought us tea and biscuits as Rinku spoke. Rinku highlighted a theme she labeled “cultural difference.”

“My father was a surgeon,” Rinku began. “His boss was very impressed by my father and sent him to England for further medical studies. I was about two years old then, and my little brother age one. . . . My mother was also very well educated. She looked for and got a job in London with the Indian High Commission—quite an exclusive job. . . .

“So, the first five years of my schooling took place in England, from ages 5 to 10. After that, my father had the option to stay on in England, but my mother was especially keen to come home—she was very homesick. And although my father had gone abroad to get more training and work, he was committed to coming back to serve his country.”

Before heading home to India, Rinku’s parents decided to tour Europe together, and they sent their two children, ages 10 and 9, back to India with their grandfather. Rinku continued: “So, my first encounter with India was without my parents! Yes! And India was even more different back then than it is now! I couldn’t even speak Bengali. All this before I was 10 years old! The real shocking part of it—that I would be coming away from England *forever and ever*—grew on me gradually. That I will have to stay here in this country forever, whether I like it or not.

“I’m sorry for all these details,” she interrupted her narrative, “but if you want to understand, I need to explain all this.

“While my father was trying to find a suitable job in India near a good English medium school, my mother educated us at home. She also taught us about the very different Indian educational and social systems. . . . Being a girl, this all was not so easy for me—adjusting to the new systems.”

Eventually, Rinku graduated from an elite English medium high school, and went to college to study English. Her brother followed in his father’s footsteps to become a doctor. Rinku continued to miss England.

“About the marriage question, I have to say,” she continued, “I had friends who were boys when I was very young; but I did not come across any boys whom I could admire. I had comparatively such a high intellectual background. And I was constantly comparing the culture of the West with the culture of the East. The cultural difference was so sharp! . . .

“In India, I found there was a lot of male chauvinism. I was of an age that girls were not only getting married but also looking forward to it.” She jiggled her shoulders, imitating the girls’ eager anticipation and flirtatious ways. “I was not feeling that way. I did meet some boys, but I did not feel a strong attraction—they seemed more like brothers. . . . And I had a very strong anti-chauvinist feeling. . . .

“So, my first reason for not marrying was that anti-chauvinism in me is very strong! I have this in my personality. My second reason has to do with cultural difference—the way in which one approaches marriage in their country [England] and in ours. . . .

“I finally went to England again after many years. . . . Father came to realize how much he had tormented me, his daughter, by pulling her out of that culture. Father said, ‘You didn’t marry; I didn’t pay for a trousseau.’ A dowry was out of the question for our family [that is, they were too modern to participate in dowry exchanges]. ‘So, if I can instead pay for you to go back there to England, I can give your personality back to you.’ I was in my mid-thirties then.”

Rinku completed an MA degree in English and resided in England for a few years before returning to India to work as a schoolteacher in an elite English medium girls’ high school in Kolkata until she retired.

“It was my luck in life that neither my father nor my mother pushed me to marry,” Rinku went on. “Father said, ‘You have your right to have your own opinion.’ . . . My mother did worry a little. Both parents would say, ‘If you like someone, then let us know. If you find someone, tell us, rather than eloping. Or let us know if or when you want us to arrange.’ . . .

“I could see that here [in India], what would be normal would be an arranged marriage. . . . But, I felt when I was growing up,” Rinku continued, “that I was very against arranged marriage—that someone else would choose for me. Of course, with good intentions. But if I say yes just to please them, and then later if I am in a swamp, they won’t be able to lift me out. That is, the parents and kin take the responsibility only to *choose* the person—but after that, you’re on your own! If the marriage fails, *I* am the one to have to face the consequences—not you who arranged it! . . . And because of all the cultural differences and my strong anti-chauvinist feelings, I could not find any boys or men I admired enough to choose to marry on my own.”

Rinku said that she remained single and avoided all sexual relations throughout her life.

#### LOVE, DATING, ROMANCE, AND DESIRE

Given prevailing social expectations that single women should be vigilantly asexual, it is not surprising that many women in my study did not emphasize or even bring up, when narrating their life stories to me, any experiences with love, dating, romance, or desire. In addition, no woman in my study ever brought up having once fallen in love with an unrequitable love partner as a reason for never marrying, although this is a story I have heard from unmarried Bengali men.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, some women might have identified as asexual if the category as an articulated sexual identity—that of neither wanting nor needing sexual contact with another person to feel fulfilled—had been more familiar to them.<sup>21</sup>

Experiences with love and desire did figure importantly, however, in some women's life-story narratives and daily conversations. Some of these stories emphasized love that was not, or could not be, consummated. Recall Sukhi-di disclosing in her life story, "That no sexual arousal took place, and that I did not love anyone—I cannot say that. *I also fell in love!*" (chapter 3).

Rachana Sen, a history professor in her fifties from an upper-middle-class family, told of how she had had a strong emotional and physical attraction to someone when she was younger, and how he had wanted to marry her and take her to America with him, where he had been offered a good job. But Rachana had declined. It had been a very difficult and painful decision at the time, but Rachana had not wanted to leave Kolkata or her budding academic career. Moreover, she was repelled by the superficial social life of dressing up, gold jewelry, saris, and parties that she envisioned went along with marriage. "I think I would have been trapped," Rachana reflected. "I was uncertain at the time, but now I think it was the right decision to say no." Other men had approached her from time to time since then, but Rachana asserted, "I cannot allow myself to be involved with a married man."

About one-fifth of the women in my study did share stories of pushing against norms to pursue sexual relationships that were sometimes very meaningful for them. Of these women, only one had been living in a rural area at the time of her relationship. I tell her difficult story, "Navigating Being an Unwed Village Mother: Suravi's Story," in chapter 6. The other nine women all hailed from the urban professional or elite classes, at least at the time of their relationships—a class positioning that carries with it some opportunities for privacy and sexual freedom.

Shoumi, a geologist with the Geological Survey of India who also does some work as an independent consultant and researcher, has maintained a years-long relationship with one male partner. Now in her early fifties, Shoumi spends months each year living together with her partner, but she describes herself as too independent and too devoted to her career to wish to get married. She travels in highly elite circles, both in India and abroad. Her wealthy surgeon father, now a widower, supports his daughter's independence. Shoumi moves between the family's large Kolkata home, where she created her own flat above her father, and the family's beautiful summer place in Kalimpong, in the Himalayan foothills of West Bengal. Shoumi finds her love life to be happy and satisfying; but she warned Medha, as the three of us talked over green tea one evening on the verandah of Shoumi's home, that Medha should absolutely not take her as a role model. Medha had just divulged to us that Shoumi inspired her. Shoumi reminded Medha that although both women hold PhDs and earn salaries, Shoumi's elite social class gives her freedoms, opportunities, social and economic security, and forms of privacy that would be very difficult for Medha to achieve.

Yet, love also figured importantly in Medha's own life story. In college, she had had a big crush on one boy. The boy, Medha's best girlfriend, and Medha used

to spend a lot of time together, talking, studying, and sharing tea and coffee at student cafés. Medha had thought the boy liked her, too, but then her best friend and the boy announced their plans to marry. Medha felt heartbroken.

Medha spoke of how love and romance play such a huge role in movies and literature. “Imagine!” she said. “I was in my forties and still a ‘virgin.’ I had never experienced something that everyone deems so important in human life!” Medha then described:

In my forties, I was into a bad guy. . . . He told me a lot of heartwarming things. He saw that I was single, and he thought he could ‘use’ me and get a lot of money from me, and he really did take a lot of money from me. Since I was so completely alone, I fell prey to his sweet, sweet words, and he took about 5 lakh rupees [about \$7,000] from me over four to five years. . . . He said sweet things to me, and I thought, “No one in this world thinks of me. . . . This is the only person who calls me and thinks of me.” He acted like he loved me. I knew it was an act, but I was just ‘helpless.’ This was a mistake. I was 44 years old at that time, and I continued that relationship for four to five years before I really realized that he was using me and that I had to stop.

Then, a few years after sharing this difficult story, Medha sent me a WhatsApp message with unexpected news: she was excited to have started up a relationship with an older divorced man, and she felt that she might be falling in love.

Even before this point, Medha had confessed that she falls in love easily—mainly previously through having crushes on public figures, such as a distinguished Indian journalist she took me to see lecture, and the handsome Pakistani actor Adnan Siddiqui, whom she eagerly watched on television. She had met her new “boyfriend” (using the English term), Safal, while on a European tour for Bengalis. She described how they had gradually gotten to know each other on the two-week tour. He would wait for her in the mornings so they could eat breakfast together at a table for two. They began to sit with each other on the tour bus. He respected her intelligence and education as a professor. He also found her innocence as a never-married woman alluring. He made her feel attractive and valuable. (The other Bengalis on the tour apparently disapproved of the budding relationship, and cautioned Medha not to spend so much time with Safal.)

After they returned to their homes in West Bengal, Medha and Safal would speak on the phone every evening, sometimes for hours. When he came to visit her in the college town where she works, he respected her by booking a room in a hotel rather than staying at her place. When she was sick once, Safal brought Medha food, washed her clothes, and sent them out for ironing—tending to her as a family member (*barir lok*) would in a way she had not experienced since childhood. Eventually, the two did sometimes discretely spend the night at each other’s places, and they took a few trips together, posing as husband and wife, to the ocean and the mountains. She was 58 when they met, and he was in his late sixties.



FIGURE 4. Why should not single elderly people fall in love? Credit/source: Pixbay.

One evening when I was in town, Medha, Safal, and I gathered at Safal's apartment in an upscale high-rise complex in south Kolkata. Medha had found a Kolkata-based organization on Facebook, Thikana Shimla, which offers not only residential accommodations for senior citizens but also social gatherings focused on matchmaking for elderly singles, including widowed, divorced, and never-married persons. Medha read animatedly to us from a Bengali essay on the Thikana Shimla Facebook site, accompanied by an image of an older man and woman sitting affectionately together on a park bench (figure 4): "We invite elderly men and women to dispel their loneliness and fall in love (*prem korun*). . . . Why should not single (*ekaki*) old people fall in love? Old people's marriage or 'live in' is nothing especially new. Abroad, these things have been current for quite a long time. A lot of 'dating sites' have even been established for old people abroad. . . . Just keep in mind, you are not committing any offense or sin. You are just wanting to live in joy for another few days [until life's approaching end]."<sup>22</sup>

Over the following months, Medha would exclaim: "Who could have ever thought that at this old age, I could find this kind of love?" She spoke to me by phone when I returned to the United States: "I would never have believed it! . . . To have a person. Just talking with someone—this little is so much. That one person is there. . . . I had been so lonely—dreadfully alone."

Gradually, after the first honeymoon-type months passed, Medha found Safal to be not feminist or intellectual or politically liberal enough to seem a perfect match. After about two years (at this current writing), Medha prefers to see Safal as a close friend rather than a boyfriend. During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period in India, they talked with each other by phone most every day.

Sukhi-di and several others also spoke of the importance and naturalness of love and sexual attraction, even if they had not been able to fully participate in

such experiences. When describing how she had fallen in love in her girlhood years but had then pushed her suitor away, Sukhi-di reflected, as I shared in chapter 3: “All people should get married! I personally think so. If not, why would have God created us that way, with different reproductive systems? Creation and re-creation will not happen if there is no marriage.” Then, when telling me and my research assistant Anindita of how sexual desire will naturally be awakened in everyone, whether or not they can act on it, she recited lines from a poem to illustrate her point: “Whether the flower blossoms or it does not, the spring will definitely come.” When first hearing of Medha’s boyfriend, Sukhi-di had exclaimed in delight, “I wish I could rush over to meet him right now and see them together!”

Sanjaya also commented thoughtfully, speaking mostly in English: “Sex is an important part of an individual’s life. It cannot be undermined in any way. But that should not undermine all other parts of life. . . . No violence, no pressure. Sexual life should be enjoyed and mutually respectful, with a good understanding between two partners.” Sanjaya felt sad and even furious at times that she had not been able to experience such a sexual partnership, because of how her limp from surviving polio as a toddler had made her unmarriageable in society’s eyes.<sup>23</sup> Yet, she and others in her single women’s support group, most of the rest of whom identified as lesbian, were animated in their discussions of the value of an egalitarian and mutually enjoyable sexual relationship.

#### POSSIBILITIES FOR LESBIAN AND QUEER LOVE

In her important *Queer Activism in India*, Naisargi Dave invites readers to conceptualize lesbian activism as creatively inventive, involving both the problematization of existing norms and the imaginative invention of heretofore unimaginable possibilities (2012: 8). I found this imaginative labor to be taking place in the small single women’s support group I was invited to attend, in a bustling, working-middle-class neighborhood of north Kolkata, founded by Sanjaya and her two close lesbian friends, Ajay and Anindita.

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

“This is also my first time,” Sana began. “I don’t know anything about movements, but Mina invited me.” Sana pointed to her friend next to her. Sana narrated: “When I was young, I lived at home with my parents and younger brother. He and I were close in age, and from a young age, I began to feel a real injustice—that he was treated differently than me, and no one seemed to notice or mind. For instance, he really liked yogurt, and so did I. Once I asked for some yogurt, and they said there was none. But I knew there was! Then my mother explained that the yogurt is for your brother. I felt there was such an injustice, and after that I never asked for yogurt again. Now I buy it and eat it, but I never again asked for yogurt in my parents’ home.

“Then I also felt that my brother could do all these things that I could not do, like go out and fly kites with other boys in the fields, and I somehow began to feel that I perhaps should have been born as a boy. They also encouraged and supported his studying much more than mine. But it turns out that I was the one who succeeded more in school: I passed the class ten exams, and went on to higher secondary. But my brother didn’t even pass class ten,” Sana said with a small smile of satisfaction.

“Anyway, around the time that I was 15 or 16, I had a very close girlfriend (*bandhobi*),<sup>24</sup> and we were very close friends, and we began to fall in love and make love (*prem kora*). At the time—this was around forty years ago now [around 1978]—we had never heard of ‘lesbian’ or anything like that, so we thought, you know, that what we were doing was highly unusual (*asadharan*), unnatural (*asvabhabik*) even, and you know, like a—[pause]—sin (*pap*).” The others in the room nodded, and a few had filled in the word *pap* (sin) as Sana had paused. “We thought we were the only ones,” Sana went on. “But we both felt that we couldn’t live without the other.

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

“We were married for thirteen years. He, that gentleman (*bhadralok*), was a very good man. We became business partners also—he took me in as his business partner [in a printing and copying company], so I also began to have some

money of my own. I was able over this time to maintain a relationship with my girlfriend. And with my money I ended up buying a small flat, and I decorated it, always dreaming that this is where my girlfriend and I could live together. Eventually after thirteen years, I said to the gentleman that we should separate. I couldn't tell him the reason why, but he was very good, and he accepted. And we have still maintained good relations with each other and are still business partners."

One can assume that their families did not as easily "accept" the divorce, given the importance of marriage in the larger kin group; but Sana's narrative that evening contained no mention of their families' reactions. The two had had no children, and I got the sense from Sana's narrative that perhaps she and her husband had not engaged in (regular? any?) sexual relations. This may be why her husband readily agreed to the divorce. Because Sana had not felt that her marriage had been genuine (as when she articulated, "I would not be able to love him and give him what he wants—a relationship, and children, and family life, and everything"), I feel that her life story resonates with those of other never-married women. Sana also never referred to the man she married as a "husband," but instead as "that man" and "that gentleman."

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

There was a collective sense of deflation in the room, and several let out breaths. "Is she still married?" we asked.

"Yes, she is, and they are happy, and they have a son." Sana paused, and continued softly, "That was very difficult for me, a very difficult time of my life.

"Then eventually after a few years, after looking on websites, and seeing a little news coverage on 'gay' and 'lesbian' issues after [the film] *Fire* came out, I learned about the concept of being a 'lesbian,' and I found the organization Sappho.<sup>25</sup> I received some support there. Through Sappho I met Mina, and we became friends, at first just friends, and then now our relationship is at a deeper level."

Someone asked where Sana lived. In the flat she purchased?

Sana replied, "No, for a long time, I couldn't stay in that flat. It was very painful for me. I had prepared it and decorated it so lovingly thinking of my girlfriend. It was very difficult for me to stay there."

Instead, Sana is living with some friends who treat her "like family"—an unusual arrangement for Bengalis, and something Medha herself had sought out for several years without success. Making a home with non-kin, except as a "paying guest" or in an institutional setting like a working women's hostel, is not common.<sup>26</sup>

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

Scholars such as Ruth Vanita (2001, 2012) have revealed how a variety of sexualities and sexual practices were recognized in India's more ancient past. However,

under British colonial rule, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code banned all sexual activities “against the order of nature,” including same-sex sexual acts, as “unnatural offences.”<sup>27</sup> Portions of this 1860 law were struck down as unconstitutional in 2009, but were then reinstated in 2013. Finally, on September 6, 2018, the Supreme Court of India ruled unanimously that Section 377 was unconstitutional “in so far as it criminalizes consensual sexual conduct between adults of the same sex.” Through this 2018 decision, the Supreme Court legalized gay sex (although not gay marriage).<sup>28</sup>

Among the women in my study, all over the age of 35, few mentioned any familiarity with or exposure to the concepts of lesbian or gay while growing up. For the four self-identified lesbian women, it was Deepa Mehta’s *Fire*—and the enormous public reaction it provoked—that spurred their own awareness of lesbian and gay sexualities as a named identity. Mehta’s 1996 film—often regarded as the first mainstream Indian cinema to explore homosexual love—features two sisters-in-law within a traditional middle-class joint-family household who become lovers. The film’s unprecedented lesbian themes led to riots outside cinemas in India, with protesters arguing that the film showed things “not part of Indian culture” (S. Ghosh 2010; Nath 2016). Yet, the public controversy surrounding the film also spurred a broader feminist and lesbian social movement, leading many women to embrace publicly for the first time an “Indian and lesbian” identity (Dave 2011). Filmmaker Mehta recalls in an interview: “That night after *Fire* was attacked, there was a vigil by candlelight at Regal [Cinema]. As far as the eye could see, there were women and men with placards that said, ‘We are Indians and we are lesbians.’ I was like, ‘Holy shit, this is cool’” (Nath 2016).

Since *Fire*, LGBTQ+ public cultures and activist movements have become more visible and prominent in India, especially in large metros like Mumbai and Delhi. Still, homophobia does not disappear easily, and many find lesbian identities to be even more stigmatized than gay male identities. As Gayle Rubin argued in her classic “The Traffic in Women”: “As long as men [and families] have rights in women which women do not have in themselves, it would be sensible to expect that homosexuality in women would be subject to more suppression than in men” (1975: 183). At the same time, since lesbian women can be legible to the public as homosocial friends, some find it easier to meet up with a lover in a café, rickshaw, or apartment, compared to the experiences of single heterosexual women, who find it socially impossible to socialize with a man for even just a cup of coffee, let alone for a visit to her home. Nonetheless, many lesbian women feel angry and isolated, contending with deep social pressures to keep their sexual identities invisible.

Cofounders of the single women’s support group where I met Sana, Ajay and Anindita, now in their forties, were proud to have become increasingly public and activist around their lesbian identities beginning in the early 2000s, pushing against heteronormativity. Both from middle-class Kolkata families, they fell

in love in their girlhood years. At around age 15 or 16, the two became intimate friends and began to make love before they had ever heard of the concept of lesbian, thinking they were the only ones, like Sana and her girlfriend in the story above. In college, Ajay recalls seducing numerous other women lovers in the girls' dormitories, while always frightened that they might be caught and expelled or, worse, arrested and imprisoned. All the while, Anindita had remained Ajay's primary partner and true love.

Ajay and Anindita each managed to avoid marriage, while remaining in their natal homes. Anindita's older sister had had an arranged marriage ending in divorce, a fact Anindita used in arguments with her parents against her own marriage. Ajay had begun in their twenties to express themselves in increasingly masculine terms, taking on a male name and dressing largely in masculine-style clothing.<sup>29</sup> These forms of gender expression have helped convince Ajay's family that Ajay is not really the marrying or marriable type.

Neither Ajay nor Anindita have directly "come out" to their families, while each spends a lot of enjoyable time participating in the other family's home life. Both Ajay's and Anindita's widowed mothers now praise their daughters for all the devoted parental elder care they provide.

Focusing on queer lives and kinship in Mumbai, Brian Horton suggests that we pay more attention to queer attachments to natal kinship, while heeding how queers in India may strategically employ forms of silence and nondisclosure—such as choosing *not* to come out, the act so valorized in universalizing models of queer rights and recognition—as acts of familial care. Horton suggests that "queers often inhabit heterosexual kinship networks through the interplay of contestation and submission" (2017: 1059), and he proposes that "inhabiting contradictions between queer and normative—failing to ever be fully one or the other—is perhaps the substance central to queer experience" (2017: 1061).

As lesbian activists, Ajay and Anindita first joined Sappho for Equality: The Activist Forum for Lesbian, Bisexual Woman, and Transman Rights after graduating from college, shortly after Sappho was founded in October 2003. Later, finding Sappho a bit too elite and snobbish, they founded, together with their disability-rights-activist friend Sanjaya, the small, alternative single women's support group I attended, welcoming of all single women of any sexual orientation, while catering especially to lesbians. In their smaller group, the women converse primarily in Bengali rather than in Sappho's English.

It is still not easy to live openly as a lesbian or queer couple in Kolkata. Negotiating overlapping possibilities and constraints, Ajay and Anindita have found ways to cultivate a lifelong relationship amidst warm kinship ties and a vibrant circle of single women and lesbian friends. Watching Ajay and Anindita together, I sense possibilities for women's queer love expanding. The couple now runs a printing company. While making deliveries, Ajay drives a motorcycle dressed in shirt and

pants, while their partner Anindita rides in back, her long black hair and brightly colored scarves flowing behind her.

### CONCLUSION

Single women's stories of sexuality and love invite us to consider the ways people forge lives out of intersecting conditions of possibility and constraint. The cultural logics of the dangers of female sexuality uncontained by marriage underlie the puzzle of why Bengali society makes it so difficult to be an unmarried woman—thwarting single women's access to housing, to respectability, to social belonging, to possibilities for embracing sexual desire. Single women are presumed to be either vigilantly asexual—a difficult life path, although one that can ultimately bring some respect; or, if they engage in any sexual activity at all, dangerously hypersexual. Positioned outside the norm, single women maneuver around, succumb to, and dynamically critique such logics. Their stories help us see the ways agency for single women involves not only pushing against but also strategically conforming to resilient norms of sexuality. Describing the society that pushed her to remain celibate forever, Rinku asked, “But *who* makes society? *We* make it! *We* make it *bad!*” later adding, “But we can change.”

Bearing witness to expanding public cultures of sexual liberation among the cosmopolitan elite in India's metro cities, this chapter's stories also reveal how profoundly differentiated across layers of class are single women's experiences of sexuality and love. Most of the new single women who are successfully seeking sexual experiences outside marriage and on their own terms are elites. It may be hard for these cosmopolitan elites, participating in what Ira Trivedi (2014) views as a groundbreaking sexual revolution sweeping through urban India, to change the ways Indians across classes experience love and sex in the future. Perhaps they will. We shall see.