

A Daughter's and Sister's Care

Medha and I sat on the broad steps of the Dakshinapan Shopping Center in south Kolkata, a faint evening breeze rustling our hair and scattering dust particles across my notebook. We were enjoying small plastic cups of lemon tea, reluctant to part ways after a day of fieldwork together. Set back from the bustling street, the shopping center's wide steps made a pleasant meeting place for other small groups of friends and young lovers.

"You know, I haven't hardly visited my natal village since we went there together last year," Medha commented. Dada, Medha's older brother, and Boudi, her brother's wife, were the only two who lived now in the place of her birth, her father's home. An unmarried Bengali girl or woman ordinarily speaks of her natal home as her "father's house" (*babar bari*). Once she is married, the name changes to *baper bari*—also translatable as "father's house," but with a modified meaning—a married woman's father's house, which is no longer the girl's or woman's "own." Since Medha had never married, she appropriately still called her natal home her father's home, *babar bari*.

"But they don't want to see me—they won't even feed me when I visit." Medha was hurt when the last time she did visit, she overheard her sister-in-law complaining to her husband, "Does she think this is a hotel?"—criticizing Medha for showing up and expecting someone to cook for her.

"I am absolutely a farmer's daughter," Medha declared. "My mother sold vegetables on the footpath. She was 'illiterate,' 'pure illiterate'! Now my family has money, education, status, jobs—due to me! Due to me!" As described in chapter 2, Medha's professor salary had helped fund the education of her three nephews and a lovely two-story home for the family, with electricity and indoor plumbing supplied by a large water tank on a spacious roof deck.

"This is another big reason I did not marry, you must know," Medha continued. "My parents, and even more so Dada and Boudi, wanted my salary. An Indian professor has a very good salary. If I married, the salary would go to my husband,

his family, and our children. So, they did not try at all [to arrange my marriage]. They even opposed it and interfered.”

Medha and I had made the trip to her natal village the year before, traveling by Medha's car, driven by a young man from her village whom she hired occasionally as her driver. I had sat with Dada, Boudi, and Medha on their front verandah as we talked about the past.

Medha's parents had given birth to thirteen children, but only three survived—the oldest sister, now married, then Dada (older brother), and finally Medha, who came much later, after ten miscarriages and infant deaths. “Before, all babies were delivered at home,” Dada explained. “We didn't even have one rupee for medicine. Right at home! Sometimes babies died, and sometimes the mothers even died. We would put the babies on the ground surrounded by poison powder to keep the ants and bugs away.”

“My oldest son was also born like that,” Boudi added.

Boudi had married into the family when she was just 13 and Medha was 6. “How hard I worked to raise the kids and this sister-in-law (*nonod*) here,” Boudi said, referring to Medha. “I had to raise the kids, do all the household work, and cook.” Her mother-in-law had been too busy laboring in the fields to be able to take care of the household chores.

“Sometimes we couldn't even eat because we were so poor,” Dada recalled. “We would eat puffed rice soaked with water.”

Nonetheless, Medha and Dada had both been very engrossed with studying while growing up. Their father loved the idea of education. Dada was the first boy in the village from an “ordinary home, not a zamindari [landowning] house” to graduate from high school. Dada was so proud to have landed a job as a school-teacher with a salary and pension. Medha was the first girl in the whole village from any family to graduate from class ten.

Boudi recalled, “When our sons got a little older, Medha continued to do all her studying, and then she got a job. Because of Medha's job, she helped a lot raising and educating the children. First one son got a job, then the next son, and then the next. They all have jobs now, and so do two of our daughters-in-law.”

Dada reflected, “In my kind of house, with my kind of background, the idea that my sons would get jobs [*chakri*, referring to a “real” job with a regular good salary, such as in a company or for the government]—that idea would never have entered my head! I could never have even imagined it!”

“Now we also own two *bighas* [one-half acre] of land. We grow rice and peanuts,” Boudi added with pride.

“But back then,” when Medha was little and Boudi was newly married, Boudi recalled, “I didn't even have a blouse or petticoat to wear under my sari, we were so poor.” Ordinarily, saris are worn over a blouse and petticoat rather than tied over a bare body. The absence of these two essential items shows the direness of

the family's economic situation. "I was only worried thinking about how we would manage to educate our sons."

"Before, the lower classes like us could not even walk with shoes on by the zamindar's house, or it would be a disrespect," Dada recalled.¹

Medha turned to me and said in English, "Write that down! Before the lower classes couldn't even walk with *shoes* on before the zamindar!"

Dada turned to say softly and fondly to Boudi, tapping her shoulder, "How poor we were. What a transformation."

He pointed to the driver Medha had hired, who was now washing her car at the edge of their property, and said to me, "The boy who drove you—that driver boy's grandfather is the zamindar. My grandmother used to be their maid. We could not even wear sandals while walking in front of their house. And now he is driving our (*amader*) car!" He used the first-person plural possessive—ours—to refer to the car which Medha had purchased. "Imagine that!"

"We tried to get Medha married," Boudi stated (in an attempt, I felt, to uphold before me their reputation and sense of decency). "With one boy, but it turns out he wasn't good. Then she got a job." Boudi paused. The topics of marriage and class mobility were not unconnected here, as both income and marrying contribute to a respectable status. "Maybe it's just her fate," Boudi continued. "The older sister was married, and this one [Medha] is unmarried. *Jai hok* [so it goes]," Boudi uttered, reconciled.

We had a nice visit. I spent two nights, explored the village, enjoyed Boudi's cooking, and admired their beautiful, high-ceilinged home, adorned with wood doors and trim, ceiling fans, indoor plumbing, and a bathroom. The front verandah looks out to a pleasant hammock hanging between two trees and a pond where Dada fishes. The wooden shutters at the home's back open to expansive views of vibrant green rice fields.

Several months later, when Medha needed an emergency operation to have her uterus removed, however, no one came to help her. This deeply pained Medha and made her feel terribly insecure, cut off from affective kinship ties. She feels that Dada and Boudi, and now her nephews, want her only for her money.

"Other than taking my money, they don't want anything to do with me," Medha remarked. "After Baba [Father] died, I have no one who is my own (*aponjon*)."

This chapter explores the experiences of women who, as daughters and sisters, prioritize caring for their natal kin over marrying. That their parents and siblings needed their industrious labor, income, and care was the key reason for not marrying for a good many (10 of 24) of my interlocutors from poor and working-class families. Yet, prevailing Indian kinship systems deem women and girls to be only transient members of their natal families, expected to move on to join a husband's family in marriage. Srimati Basu writes of an Indian daughter, "Ties to the natal family are supposed to be severed, and she is to become an inseparable part of the affinal family" (1999: 129). Scholars and the public are well able to recognize these

expected, familiar gendered kinship patterns for women who follow the normal path of marrying. While even married women aspire to keep the natal home an important affective space to continue to visit and receive love, it is only by marrying out and away—and by remaining in these marriages, even if troubled—that women ordinarily secure a place within kinship and all its hoped-for material, social, and emotional benefits (Basu 1999, 2015).

Partly because not marrying is still so comparatively rare for women in India, little public and scholarly attention has been paid to women's experiences of kinship when they do not marry. The ideology is that a husbandless sister and daughter should be supported by her natal kin both affectively and materially. But what happens in practice? This chapter highlights how poignantly precarious a woman's place in any family can be if she chooses to or is compelled to make a life path outside marriage, in a society where family and kinship are key to social and economic security. The chapter also spotlights how gender, social class, and marital status intersect to produce the unequal distribution of the labor and goods of care.

BECOMING THE BREADWINNER: A DAUGHTER'S AND SISTER'S CARE

That a natal family needed or wanted their income emerged as a key incentive to forego marriage for ten, or near one-fifth, of the women in my study, including Medha, Nayani, Manjuri, and Subhagi, among those we have already met. Further, even when women did not present supporting natal kin as one of their chief reasons for not marrying, the majority of my single women interlocutors spoke of caring for their own parents and often siblings as a central feature of their lives.

As we have begun to see, the convention in Bengali families is that sisters and daughters marry out and away from their natal homes. Their labor from that point on is expected to support their marital families, whether that labor takes place in the household—through cooking, cleaning, and caring for young children and old parents-in-law—and/or in the outer world through earning money. In contrast, a son conventionally works to support his own parents and natal family, while eventually bringing in a wife who can contribute to the labor. In this arrangement, a son's marriage supports his family of birth, while a daughter and sister's marriage takes her away and cuts her off, rendering her “other” (*por*).²

In practice, many married women continue to support their own parents and siblings in various ways, especially if earning their own income and if their husbands and in-laws allow them some autonomy over their own movements. Shalini Grover finds among the urban poor in Delhi, for instance, that married women regularly “visit their parents to assist them with chores, to look after them when they are sick, to attend to other siblings, or simply to drop in on the way home from work” (2009: 17). Yet, a traditional Bengali and wider Indian saying goes that parents should not accept even one sip of water in a married daughter's

home. Further, women cannot be certain that their in-laws will continue to allow them to work after marriage. Gowri Vijayakumar observes how the young working women she studied in a small town outside of Bangalore “often insisted that life after marriage was out of their hands, impossible to predict. . . . Even if their parents currently allowed them to work outside of the home, as part of their new families, they would act in relation to their in-laws’ preferences” (2013: 785).³ As Nayani articulated when I was visiting her new flat, “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.”

To be sure, sons also often move away from their parents, especially in the contemporary era of rural-to-urban and transnational labor mobility. Still, the expectation is that a son and daughter-in-law will provide some income and care labor to support the son’s parents and any remaining unmarried siblings, even if they live away, while a married daughter’s income, affections, and labor will end up being directed elsewhere. Such kinship and virilocal postmarital residence patterns lie behind some single women’s decisions not to marry—so as to be able to go on supporting their families of birth.

Among the unmarried women who emphasized that they could not marry because their natal families were depending on their income and domestic labor, two main groups emerged. One consisted of women from very poor rural backgrounds (like Manjuri, Nayani, Subhagi, and Medha), and the other consisted of women from East Bengal refugee families. Following the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 upon independence from British rule, hundreds of thousands of Hindus flooded into Kolkata (then Calcutta) from the Muslim-majority districts of East Bengal claimed by Pakistan. Many of these refugee families had been middle class or higher in their homeland, and their women had not worked outside of the home. The massive displacement left once well-off families struggling to survive, propelling women out of the home to earn money (P. Chakraborty 2018: 2; Weber 1995: 207). They became teachers, office workers, tutors, tailors, and small shop managers. Josodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta write of the refugee woman in West Bengal as “the tireless breadwinner, changing the digits of feminine aspiration of the Bengali *bhadramahila* [gentlewoman]” (2006: 6). Sometimes it was an older daughter or sister in a family who turned out to be the most industrious, intelligent, resourceful, and accomplished—managing to earn more or better than her brothers and parents. With little siblings and old parents relying on their earnings, many such women felt unable to marry.

The memoir “Becoming the Breadwinner” (B. Chakravarti 2006) is both an example and an exception. Bithi’s suitor waited for her for many years while each supported their refugee families. Bithi’s suitor had promised when first proposing marriage that money would be sent to her family, but Bithi refused. She recalls: “I wanted all my brothers and sisters to get properly settled before I could get

married. I am grateful that he waited for me. We married only in 1967 [thirteen years after they “had developed a deep understanding”] when all my brothers and sisters had got jobs and our family started having a decent income” (154). “I am grateful that he waited for me” (154).

Other scholars have examined the ways employed married women are helping to propel the upward social mobility of their marital families, as an in-marrying wife's salary bolsters her conjugal family's ability to purchase status-rich consumer goods like refrigerators, microwaves, washing machines, color televisions, and cars (e.g., Fernandes 2006; Radhakrishnan 2009). Yet little attention has been paid to the breadwinning capacities and strategies of unmarried daughters and sisters. How may the earned income of an unmarried daughter contribute to her own natal kin's class mobility and security? We can see from this chapter's opening scenes how Medha's drive to become a professor lifted her natal family from desperate poverty to the comfortable middle classes. Then, what happens to a woman's own experiences of kinship belonging when she sacrifices her marriage prospects in order to devote herself to supporting her family of birth?

Some women who devoted their lives to serving natal kin rather than marrying felt proud and sustained by this life path. We saw how Subhagi of chapter 2—a Scheduled Caste day laborer who pushed away suitors in order to stay taking care of her little siblings and ailing parents—felt so proud and sustained by this decision. Even after her own parents died, she maintained a secure, vital place in her home of birth, with her brother, brother's wife, nephew, nephew's wife, and little grandnephews and grandnieces. Recall Subhagi exclaiming: “Serving 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!”

Bhakti Chatterjee at age 68 also recalled proudly her years of supporting her natal kin. She was the oldest of eight siblings, born into a large, conservative, educated Kolkata family. Her father, a freedom fighter in the nationalist movement against the British, married late and had irregular income. Whatever little he had, he would spend on those in distress, while opening the doors of their home to other freedom fighters seeking food and lodging. Bhakti loved to study, and at age 15 when her parents and other senior kin began talking about arranging her marriage, Bhakti pleaded with her father to allow her to continue her studies instead. Against the objections of other relatives, her revolutionary-minded father agreed. By the time Bhakti completed her studies and took up a teaching job, she had become the family's primary breadwinner. Her father soon passed away, and Bhakti applied herself to educating her brothers and sisters, getting them married, and caring for her widowed mother. “Like a banyan tree, I gave shelter to my family for forty-one years,” Bhakti related with pride.

Though Bhakti expresses no regrets—at least not to me, as we spoke in the old age home where she now lives—the trajectory of her life story conveys not only the pride, pleasure, and sense of belonging that can come from devoting oneself to

natal kin, but also the ultimate tenuousness within prevailing kinship systems of women's connections to their natal homes. By focusing on single women's experiences, I came to realize how *the tenuousness of natal family belonging is true both if a woman marries and if she does not*. After Bhakti's mother died, she no longer felt comfortable living in what had now become the home of her brothers, their sons, and the sons' wives. On her own, she made the decision to move into an old age home after coming across an advertisement in a local paper. Her schoolteacher's pension pays for her modest expenses, while she continues to turn over the balance of her monthly pension to her nephews.

Time and again, never-married women tell of how after their parents die, they have no real kin to rely on or call their own. This is so even when they have been the family's key economic provider for years. As Medha expressed, "After Father died, I have no one who is my own (*apon*)."

The transience and displacement of the unmarried breadwinner daughter is powerfully portrayed in the classic 1960 Bengali film directed by Ritwik Ghatak, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, often held up as one of the greatest Bengali films, and recommended to me as essential time after time by Bengalis learning of my interest in never-married single women. I reflect on this classic story at some length because of its powerful resonance with many of my fieldwork materials and the themes of this chapter.

"HOW DO I ENDURE YOUR LEAVING,
MY DAUGHTER?" NITA'S SACRIFICE
IN *MEGHE DHAKA TARA*

Meghe Dhaka Tara (The Cloud-Capped Star) features the tragic story of a beautiful daughter of an impoverished formerly middle-class family from East Pakistan struggling to get by.⁴ Although the 1947 Partition of Bengal is never explicitly mentioned in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the film takes place in a refugee colony on the outskirts of Kolkata. The protagonist Nita sacrifices her own desires and life goals in order to support her natal family, and she ultimately meets a heartbreaking end. Although reviews and commentary highlight the film's portrayal of the plight of Partition refugees,⁵ it is Nita's struggles as a paradigmatic unmarried daughter/sister that grabbed my attention and resonate powerfully with my data. We see Nita's tremendous sacrifice for her natal family, a cultural ideology of marriage as the only viable future for a daughter, resulting in tragedy if she fails to marry, and the poignant theme of a daughter's ultimately fleeting place in her natal home.

The film's narrative unfolds through Nita, the eldest daughter and sole breadwinner of the family, sacrificing her own goals for the sustenance of her parents and siblings. In the opening scenes, we see Nita with her thick black braid and plain white cotton sari walking home on the rough gravelly road of the refugee settlement. One of her sandals suddenly snaps; she looks down, sighs, removes

her sandals, and continues on, barefoot. Signs of economic want are everywhere. Nita's father, a former school headmaster, talks with Ma about how responsible and intelligent Nita is—"doing not one but two private tutoring jobs, bringing home 40 rupees every month! And taking MA classes!" (Ghatak 1960: 5:55).⁶

The whole family is after Nita for her earnings. Nita's unemployed beloved older brother (*dada*), Shankar, who is devoted to classical singing, begs Nita for a few coins to pay for a shave. Ma is despondent and peeved when Nita does not hand over the full sum of her earnings for running and feeding the household. Everyone is excited on the first of the month, knowing that Nita will be paid. Over several pay periods, Nita gives money to her older brother for shaving and spending, to her younger brother Montu for new sports shoes, to her little sister Gita for a new sari, and to Ma for food shopping. Her highly educated father, who loves Yeats and Wordsworth, also asks his daughter for a little money, while entreating her not to tell Ma. Nita does not purchase new sandals for herself. Even her love interest, Sanat, asks Nita for money as he pursues his dreams of receiving a doctoral fellowship in science, while putting off getting a job.

Sanat is important to the narrative from the beginning. Shankar, Nita's older brother, comes upon Nita secretly reading a letter and pounces on her, teasing, "What, a love letter? So late in life?" (We presume Nita to be in about her early twenties.) Shankar grabs the letter from Nita and reads aloud, "At first, I did not recognize your worth. I thought you were ordinary. But now I see you amidst the clouds, perhaps a star, veiled by circumstances, your aura dimmed" (9:30). Sanat visits Nita and her family periodically, and Nita's father seems to find him an eligible suitor, pleased by his ambitions to pursue a PhD.

Woven through the unfolding plot, we encounter the cultural ideology that if circumstances are right, men, not women, and eventually sons, rather than their fathers, should be the primary breadwinners. Ma chastises her oldest son, Shankar, for not earning, while spending his time just singing and sitting at home: "Have you no shame? Dining off your father? And the little girl [Nita] works all day long just to foot your bills? While you spend your time in singing. . . . Does any young man just sit at home?" (22:00). Later Ma laments to Nita, "If Shankar had been a man, then you would not have had to take all the burden" (50:00).

As Shankar remains unemployed and Father gets older and frailer, it becomes clearer and clearer to Nita and her mother how much responsibility lies on Nita's shoulders. After Father seriously injures himself by tripping and falling on the train tracks, the doctor pulls Nita aside to say, "Such an injury in old age—it will take a long time to mend. Now the responsibility of running the household will be on you" (35:00). When Nita quits her MA studies to get a salaried clerical office job, she tells Sanat, her suitor, "What else can I do? So many at home are depending on me" (39:00).

Under these circumstances, Ma becomes increasingly afraid that Nita will depart in marriage. When Sanat visits Nita, Ma looks on with fear and a

scheming face. She allows Nita's younger sister Gita to flirt with Sanat by bringing him tea and strolling with him by the ponds and fields as Nita is out doing her tutoring.

One evening, Sanat and Nita are sitting on a bench in the train station before Nita's commute home. Sanat tells Nita that it is unbearable that she has quit her studies to work. He promises that he will get a job, saying that he could easily get a job, allowing her to return to her studies.

"Then, our wedding?" Sanat asks softly (42:30).

Nita replies, "It cannot happen now."

"Why not?"

"How could it happen? If I leave the household today, then my old father, my little little brother and sister—"

Sanat responds dejectedly, "That means, until then, for all those days—"

"We will have to wait," Nita interrupts.

"Why should we wait?" Sanat utters sharply.

"Don't be silly." Nita gets up to leave for home. Sanat tells her that he will come visit in a few days.

Meanwhile, back in the colony, the local grocer scolds Shankar, "The lot of you is eating off the labors of one sister, destroying her future. Aren't you ashamed? . . . Aren't *you* the elder brother?" (44:30).

Returning home, Nita devotedly checks in on her dozing father, and then sits with Ma, their shack dimly lit by the light of a kerosene lantern. Ma is mending; Nita is reading. Ma tells Nita that she believes Father will never get better or earn again.

"Don't worry, Ma. I am here," Nita consoles her.

Ma protests, "I do worry. After all, you too may have your own hopes. . . . The truth is, you are my sole support." Ma sobs, "But even you scare me. . . . What if you too go away?" (50:50).

Later that evening, Shankar tells Nita how badly he feels that he and the rest of the family are exploiting her. "Your whole future. Your marriage," Shankar worries, equating the promise of a future for his sister with marriage (and not, for instance, with Nita's passion for education), recognizing that Nita's self-sacrifice for her family is preventing her from pursuing that married future (53:37).

Nita declares, smiling dreamily, "If someone loves me, if he really loves me, then he will surely wait for me. It doesn't worry me. I absolutely won't marry right now." Yet when Nita soon discovers that her suitor Sanat is romancing her younger sister, Nita's anguish is acute.

Shortly after, carrying in dried laundry to where Father is reading, Ma asks her husband whether he has thought of getting their younger daughter Gita married. Father replies, "Only after Nita. One should think serially" (1:09).

Ma protests, "But *you* educated Nita. That is why she can run the household."

Father states, "Finding a groom for a working girl is less difficult."

Ma responds sarcastically, "OK, get her married fast, and you'll have time to suck your big fat toe. . . . If Nita marries, what will happen to this household?" (1:09:57). Ma stomps out.

Father calls after her, uttering with pain in his voice, "But to exploit this innocent daughter all her life—"

Ma, from the next room, scolds, "Without her, what will you eat?" (1:10:10).

Gita soon announces to Nita that she is getting married. "To whom?" Nita asks. "Does Ma know?"

"To Sanat," Gita replies sweetly. The camera holds on Nita's devastated face as she fights back tears.

Shortly before Gita's wedding, Father grasps Nita's hands and looks penetratingly into her eyes. "At one time, they married off their daughters to dying men," he says, recalling the former practice of Kulin Brahmin polygamy, where young daughters were nominally married to elderly men of the very highest Brahmin caste, who could have dozens of wives.⁷ "And now we're supposed to be educated, 'civilized!'" Father's tone rises in vehemence. "We educate our girl, wring her dry, and destroy her future!"

Nita is taken aback. Her voice breaks as she gasps, "Oh, Father. It's time for your tea—I'll go get your tea" (1:13:46).

Nita rushes out and picks up a little girl in the courtyard who is visiting for the wedding. "Would you like some sweets? You haven't had sweets yet?" Nita asks, drying her eyes on the edge of her sari.

Meanwhile, Shankar leaves home to try to earn a living as a singer in Bombay, and younger brother Montu is injured in an accident at the factory where he had taken up a job. As Nita tends to Montu in the hospital, her nighttime fevers and coughing fits worry a nurse, who advises Nita to get an X-ray. Nita refuses. "What if I am really ill? I'm the only earning member" (1:27).

As Nita becomes increasingly sick—coughing blood into a damp towel and splashing water on her face during feverish nights, hiding her illness from her family—a melancholy, haunting song plays in the background. Sung by many female voices and repeated throughout the film's closing scenes, the wailing lament is a wedding song, usually sung at the moment of a young bride's departure from the home of her childhood:

Come my daughter Uma to me. . . .
 Let me bid you farewell now, my daughter!
 How can I endure your leaving, my daughter?
 Let me bid you farewell now, my daughter.
 You are leaving my home desolate, for your husband's place.
 How do I endure your leaving, my daughter? (1:30)

Shortly thereafter, Nita meets up with her former love, Sanat, who is now her brother-in-law. Sanat still shows feelings for Nita, and Nita confesses that she now

understands that she herself is to blame for much of her own suffering—“because I have never protested against any injustice. That is my sin (*pap*)” (1:34:30). Paulomi Chakraborty notes how Nita’s confession makes clear that “the film does not preach or even morally sanction the kind of gendered violence to which Nita allows herself to be subjected” (2018: 197). Yet, viewers cannot help but feel that Nita’s sacrifice is valorized, even as we deplore the injustice.

Finally, during the film’s culminating scenes, Nita’s family discovers that Nita has a serious case of tuberculosis. Elder brother Shankar is now a famous singer; sister Gita is pregnant; younger brother Montu has recovered from the factory accident while earning a solid financial compensation; and Ma hopes that their refugee shack will soon be replaced by a concrete two-story home. As Nita is lying feverish, hallucinating about happy childhood memories, her helpless and agonized father comes in, at first seeming to comfort Nita affectionately, stroking her forehead (1:50:09). Torrential rain is pouring outside.

Then, Father hands Nita a small cloth bundle, and tells her, “I’ve packed your clothes.” While weeping, Father says to his daughter, “You go away. You go away,” making a shooing away gesture with his hand. “They are dreaming of a two-story house! You have been ‘successful’! You have put them on their feet, dear. It matters little now if you are no longer here. They pity you now. You were not made for carrying the burden, but you had to carry the burden.”

Father’s weeping increases, as his voice takes on a loud and sermonizing tone. “Now you are the burden yourself! There is poison in your breath. This room is now for the newborn” (1:51:35). Father weeps, “Go away, dear. Go away. Go away.” Father walks out of the room, turning his back on his daughter, into the dark rainy night (1:51:59). Nita stares, huddled with her small sack of clothing, dressed in a simple white cotton sari, hair loose. At once the most cherished and least cherished, the most important and least important, Nita is now expendable.

As Nita opens the door and steps out into the stormy night, the melancholy song plays again: “Come, my daughter Uma, to me. Let me garland you with flowers. . . . Let me bid you farewell now, my daughter. You are leaving my home desolate, for your husband’s place. How do I endure your leaving, my daughter?” (1:52:40).

In the end, Shankar brings Nita to a tuberculosis sanatorium in the hills. He visits her some time later, bringing news of home. His income has indeed built the family a two-story house. Gita and Sanat’s toddler son gets such a thrill running up and down the stairs, “giving Father hell,” so full of life and laughter.

Nita begs, her desperate cries resounding across the hills, “Brother, but I really, really wanted to live! Brother, I love life! Brother, please just say once that I will live! I will live! I will live!” (1:58:45).

“But the mountains remain indifferent and unyielding,” Paulomi Chakraborty writes. “Nita’s cry meets only emptiness” (2018: 189).

The melancholy song plays again as the film closes, lingering even after the screen has gone dark: “Let me bid you farewell now, my daughter. You are leaving

my home desolate for your husband's place. How can I endure your departure, my daughter?" (2:00:30).

DAUGHTERS AND SONS, SISTERS AND BROTHERS,
LABOR AND LOSS, FUTURES

What is striking about this remarkable emotional film for my purposes is how much it resonates with central themes in many never-married Bengali women's life stories. I will shortly introduce Sukhi-di, an older East Bengal refugee woman whose life circumstances overlap with Nita's.⁸ We also see how refugee status and economic exigencies can push women out of the home to earn a living, although here due more to necessity and circumstance rather than a drive for emancipation from conventional gender roles. Relatedly, we see how the Uma lament—"How can I endure your departure, my daughter?"—takes on a double meaning: it comes to signify not only the poignant emotional pain of losing a beloved daughter in marriage, recognizable to all Bengalis, but also the matter of economic dependence on a daughter's labor. Nita's mother explicitly articulates their family's dependence on Nita, arguing with Nita's father: "If Nita marries, what will happen to this household? . . . Without her, what will you eat?" (Ghatak 1960: 1:10). But such economic dependence on a daughter and sister's labor is at the same time not normal in Bengali kinship systems and can be viewed and experienced as exploitation, especially if not reciprocated with future material and emotional support.

Although not the expected norm, being an essential breadwinner as daughter and sister is a familiar theme among never-married single women from poor and refugee families. One impoverished rural widowed mother with no sons and two unmarried daughters in their thirties at first explained that the family lacked money for dowries. She then commented, "If my daughters get married, then I will have to live and cook alone. Who will look after an other Mother (*pore Ma*)?"—conveying the sense that a married daughter's husband's kin become her "own" (*apon*) and her natal kin "other" (*por*). This widowed mother explained that a married daughter will look after her ma "maybe for two or three days. Then the people from the in-laws' house (*shoshur barir lok*) will say, 'Just stay there for a few days, then come back home.'"

This widow's older daughter, Nabami, had landed a job as an aide in a nursing home, commuting by cycle, and the younger daughter worked as a day laborer in the rice fields and in a brick factory. When I asked the daughters if they were disappointed not to be married, Nabami replied matter-of-factly, "Whether we marry or don't marry, either way, we will have to work to eat." She paused. "But if marriage does not happen, then of course there will be sadness."

Recall how day laborer Subhagi begged visiting potential grooms not to choose her for marrying, underscoring in her life-story narrative, "I was the one who worked so that they [my parents and siblings] could eat." Sukhi-di, the second-oldest

daughter in a large refugee family from East Bengal, also told of how she could not get married “because I had to take care of all the siblings.” Now 75 and residing in the Government of West Bengal Working Girls’ Hostel in the Gariahat neighborhood of Kolkata, Sukhi-di recounted how her father died when the youngest of her twelve siblings was just one month old and Sukhi herself around 19 or 20. Sukhi and her oldest brother became the family’s primary breadwinners, her brother in the coal yards and Sukhi balancing several jobs, including as a schoolteacher and telephone operator.

Like Nita of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Sukhi did have a suitor whom she loved. She recalled pushing away her suitor, knowing that her mother and siblings depended on her: “I told him that if you want to marry me, then you’ll have to wait for another ten to fifteen years. By then we will be an old man and old woman! What will be the use then?” She persuaded him to move away from Kolkata and find someone else.

“Finally, later, he did marry,” she recalled, still with a sense of love in her tone. “Why wouldn’t he? All people should get married.” Sukhi-di had excluded her own self from “all people” here, though.⁹

An unmarried daughter’s and sister’s economic labor is often intertwined with her daily household and emotional-care labor. Bengalis commonly tell of how daughters are more “loving” than sons, even though daughters are supposed to be merely transient members in their natal homes. A group of elderly widowed mothers in a village replied to my questions about daughters versus sons: “When you give birth to a daughter, yes, sadness happens,” one woman mentioned quietly, expressing their society’s patrilineal ideals.¹⁰ “But we realize now that girls love their parents more. We are sad when they are born, but we realize now that daughters love their parents more.”

Indeed, many of the single women in my study told of how they cared for their aged parents, especially mothers, cooking for them, nursing them through illnesses, loving them, and supporting them in all sorts of daily ways—much more so, they reported, than did their brothers and sisters-in-law. Nayani also described all the daily household and emotional care she provided in her role as “like a daughter” (*meyer moto*) for her employer Pishi. This led to a situation, as Nayani describes, where “if anyone raised the topic of my marriage, Pishi would get very angry with them” (chapter 2).

Despite the vital economic and emotional support daughters and sisters often provide for their parents and siblings, their place in their natal homes tends to be quite precarious. This is another central theme in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*—the transient and insecure place of daughters and sisters in their natal families. Paulomi Chakraborty’s compelling analysis of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* emphasizes this theme, as she reflects on the film’s melancholy refrain: “Let me bid you farewell, my daughter. You leave my home desolate [for your husband’s place]. How can I endure your departure?” (2018: 183). This wailing lament is a wedding song, sung by women

as a young bride departs the home of her childhood to relocate “to the unknown, often unfriendly and hostile, house of her in-laws” (P. Chakraborty 2018: 183). The song is addressed to Uma, identified in Bengal especially with the goddess Durga as daughter when she arrives on her once-yearly visit to her natal home during the autumnal Durga Puja festivities. (Durga Puja is the largest Hindu Bengali holiday, akin in some ways to Christmas in Western countries, when schools are closed for several weeks, families gather together, and gift-giving is practiced.) The song echoes the sadness of the goddess Durga’s departure each year after the four-day-long sacred festivities.¹¹ As Chakraborty writes, the imagination that anthropomorphizes the departure of the goddess “also echoes the heart-breaking but banal displacement daughters of Bengali households suffer” (184). In this way, the film’s lament “provides an associative sense of loss and violence that exceeds Nita’s death and includes the violence of the paternal giving away of daughters that marks gendered everyday life. It reminds us that within patrilineal marital arrangements in Bengal, as elsewhere in South Asia . . . , women are the ‘original displaced persons’ (Bagchi and Dasgupta 2003: 3–4)” (P. Chakraborty 2018: 185).¹² Chakraborty’s analysis highlights the everyday violence of the giving away of daughters in marriage as they are displaced from childhood homes.

Chakraborty seems to have trouble making sense of Nita’s never-married status, however, explaining it as an “anomaly, as a sign of a world turned ruthlessly exploitative, an out-of-the-ordinary event caused by the Partition” (2018: 185). I have also not been able to find any other analyses or reviews of the film that contend with Nita’s never-married status. Yet to me, the never-married status of Nita is hugely significant, as it is also in the eyes of many Bengalis—some never-married women themselves—who have recommended the film as crucial for my project. In the Bengali patrilineal kinship system, women regularly experience displacement from their natal homes both if they do marry *and if they do not*.

More than half of the participants in my study—30 out of 54—resided in one fashion or another with natal kin as their primary living arrangement, but many experienced these arrangements to be highly insecure.¹³ In Bengali kinship, the relationship between brothers and sisters is regarded as ordinarily easy and warm. However, “if an [adult] sister goes to live with her brother, their love is seen to be hierarchical and difficult” (Inden and Nicholas 1977: 25). For instance, two single women slept only on mats in the corner of halls or storage rooms in their fathers’ and now brothers’ homes, clinging to maintain their rights to even these small spaces, as their brothers’ wives would prefer to expel them.

Unmarried Nita in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* is driven out from her family home, ultimately to face an abandoned death. Her father tells her, “You have put them on their feet, dear. It matters little now if you are no longer here” (Ghatak 1960: 1:51). Such a statement would never be made to a son. My research assistant Hena, also never-married, commented to me via email regarding stories like Nayani’s of chapter 2 that she was helping transcribe: “Girl children and young women get

displaced from their own families and are never accepted back, although their earned money is welcomed.” Medha told Hena the incident of how she had overheard her brother’s wife complain that she has been cooking for Medha since she married at age 13 and is tired of it, complaining to her husband when Medha visited her natal home, “Does she think this is a hotel?” Hena exclaimed, indignant, “Why don’t you just cook for yourself, then? No one should ever relinquish their place in their father’s home.” But the reality is that, once adult—even if their income and labors have been used to establish and sustain the family—both married and unmarried women are no longer regarded as normal, regular members of their father’s and brothers’ patrilineal households.

Aarini, the never-married computer engineer in her forties who had worked in Silicon Valley before returning to her ancestral home in Kolkata, was adamant about her right to be in the family home, but she still felt insecure about her future there. She had refurbished the whole three-story house with furnishings sent by ship from America, moving into the top story above her parents. Her brother and wife, with their children, were currently living separately, although everyone knew they could and might at any time wish to return to the lovely ancestral home in a posh Kolkata neighborhood. Relatives reportedly criticized Aarini’s decorating efforts, insinuating that this was all part of her strategy to inappropriately lay claim to the home.

People would ask, “Oh, you’ve moved back in with your parents?”

Aarini would reply, “No, it’s my *ancestral* home, my family home. It’s *my* home, too.”

Friends would respond, “I mean, it’s great if you think that way, but—”

Aarini told of how before she left to pursue a PhD in the United States, when her parents were trying to arrange her brother’s marriage, no one would give a bride to a son with an unmarried older sister. Prospective brides’ parents would ask, “Is the property to be divided between the two siblings?”

“I felt that my parents wanted me to get out of the way,” Aarini recalled. “So, the minute I announced I was leaving for the US to get a PhD, everything fell into place, and my brother married.”

Later Aarini commented, “Bengali parents will say, ‘I love my daughter so much, but *still* she wants her share in the assets?’” Aarini told of how her own ties and birthrights to the house are deeper and more emotional than her mother’s, who only married into the family; but no one else sees it that way.

After we had been dining out and chatting one evening, Aarini sent me a follow-up email: “Hi Sarah, One more insight—the same attitude which enables men to get paid more for the same job, relative to their women colleagues, helps sons get more credit just for being the son, even if the family owes more to the daughter.”

Sanjaya, who runs an NGO for disabled women, commented similarly, “Regardless of the laws, Bengalis believe homes rightfully belong to sons and wives. If

parents die and there are brothers, the unmarried sister is a soft target. For some time now, the law has stipulated that daughters and sons are to get an equal share of their parents' property. But in reality, brothers throw away their sister or get her to sign away her portion."

In terms of laws, the Hindu Succession Act, passed in 1956 in India and amended in 2005 and 2020, theoretically gives daughters an equal birthright to inherit joint Hindu family property, and this law has been hailed as a major moment for gender equality (Agarwal 1994; Basu 1999; *Hindu* 2020). Yet, in her examination of the contemporary workings of property law in India, Srimati Basu details how few women in practice lay claim to natal family assets. Drawing from interviews in middle-class and poor neighborhoods of Delhi, Basu explores how people across genders and generations very often do not believe that an adult woman should receive either property or maintenance from her natal kin. Such views are tied to common "rationales based on the idea of women's separation from the natal family at marriage" (1999: 123). Negotiating such rationales, married women are often reluctant to claim parental inheritance out of fear they will be regarded as uncaring and greedy, and to keep natal family relations harmonious and supportive (1999: 117–143).

Basu's research highlights "the idea of marriedness as the prime form of women's property" (1999: 224).¹⁴ For women who are not married, claims to material support and affective belonging through kinship are fragile. As I also often found, Basu observes how "husbandless daughters," both single and divorced women, "were at best grudgingly given small portions of family property and more often expected to make their own way and support themselves through wages" (224).

The insecurity of a daughter and sister in her natal household means, to many, that it is only through marriage that a woman can achieve a secure future. This is another cultural principle portrayed in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. The film equates "the future" (*bhabisyat*) and marriage for Nita at several explicit moments, such as when brother Shankar tells Nita how badly he feels that the whole family is exploiting her: "Your whole future. Your marriage" (Ghatak 1960: 53:37). The local grocer scolds Shankar: "The lot of you is eating off the labors of one sister, destroying her future. Aren't you ashamed?" (44:30). When Nita's father is pressured into giving his younger daughter's marriage rather than Nita's, he bemoans, "We educate our girl, wring her dry, and destroy her future!" (1:13). It is at the very moment when Nita realizes that her marriage to Sanat will not happen, as she descends the stairs from his flat in anguish, that the poisonous rattle of tuberculosis is first heard emanating from her throat. The film's two married women, Ma and little sister Gita, do have a future and security—through their husbands and sons. Unmarried Nita is sacrificed, with no secure place in the kinship system after she labors to establish her natal family.

SUKHI-DI'S STORY OF WORK, LOVE, AND SACRIFICE

I close this chapter with a portrait of Sukhi-di, briefly introduced above, whose life story resonates with many of this chapter's themes regarding a daughter's and sister's care, including her labor and loss, love deferred, and insecure future. Sukhi-di, in her seventies over the seven years of my fieldwork and friendship with her, was born in 1942 in Barisal, East Bengal, five years before the region was transferred to East Pakistan. Along with hundreds of thousands of other Hindu refugees, Sukhi's family migrated to Kolkata, where Sukhi became the third-oldest sibling of twelve. "I was the one to look after all my brothers and sisters," Sukhi-di pronounced, presenting her responsibility to support her parents and siblings as the central reason she never married. Her life-story narratives also resonate with themes in chapter 2, as Sukhi found pride in her working life and the independence it gave her.

A bright and industrious young woman, Sukhi pursued her education up to the BA level before her father died, and then quickly found ways to earn money to support her family and contribute to the marriage dowries of her many younger sisters. Her father, a film director, died when her youngest sister was a tiny infant and Sukhi about 19 or 20. Sukhi and her oldest brother became the family's primary breadwinners. Neither married. Sukhi was like a second mother to all the little ones.

Sukhi-di proudly recalls how she juggled several jobs, including as a successful schoolteacher even with no formal training, and next as a telephone operator, coming first out of two hundred in the telephone operator class. Sukhi then moved on to work as a field researcher for UNICEF and the Asiatic Society. She would travel around rural Bengal as the only woman with a team of researchers. Some of her male colleagues were shy about dressing and sleeping together in the same barracks, but Sukhi would matter-of-factly stretch a sari across the room as a barrier, and manage herself just fine. To one male coworker she declared, "You're just like my little brother—and such a big bed, what will happen?" She invited him to share the single bed with her. "I got into bed and slept just fine!" Sukhi recalled, laughing. "But he stayed in a chair all night long."

Sukhi-di loved her work and independence. "I lived in places all by myself," she recalled. "I was really brave and never scared! You constantly have to have precautions. When I lived alone, for safety, I always kept a knife under my pillow!" she exclaimed proudly.

One evening during the 6 to 7 p.m. visiting hours at the Government of West Bengal Working Girls' Hostel, where she now lives, Sukhi-di pulled out a framed photograph taken when she was around 16 and her parents were considering arranging her marriage. Sukhi looks beautiful in the black-and-white frame, with long black hair and a subtle Mona Lisa smile. My research assistant Anindita asked, "When your brothers and sisters got married, and you made all the arrangements for their marriages, did you not ever think about your own marriage?"

Sukhi-di replied vigorously, “That a female person (*meye manus*) would not think about marriage? That would never happen! A girl will *definitely* think about it!”

Sukhi-di continued passionately, this conversation taking place after I had already known her well for five years. “That I wouldn’t be aroused by ‘sex?’” She used the English term. “‘Sex’ will of course be aroused!”

“Look,” Sukhi-di went on, “within every person’s life, whether beautiful or not, that person faces a moment when she stands in front of the mirror and says, ‘Well, today I’m looking quite attractive! This is a *rule*. . . . Therefore, that my own ‘sex’ [sense of sexual desire] was not aroused, that is not the case! That no sexual arousal took place, and that I did not love anyone—I cannot say that. *I* also fell in love! But, I did not bind him to me.”

“Hmm,” I commented softly, “You had other commitments,” thinking of the deep responsibility she had felt for all her siblings.

“Yes, I had other obligations,” Sukhi-di agreed. “I was the one to look after my brothers and sisters. How could I discard so many little brothers and sisters and leave?”

Sukhi recalled, as partially reported above: “I told him, ‘If you want to marry me, then you’ll have to wait for another ten to fifteen years. By then we will be an old man and old woman! What will be the use [she implies, of having sex and of reproducing] then?’ At that time, it was *his* ripe age to get married. But he was saying, ‘No, I will not marry if not to you!’ Then I said, ‘If you wait so long, then you won’t be able to be fulfilled, and neither will I be fulfilled.’” She used the term *bhog* (to enjoy), in this context connoting sexual enjoyment. “Neither of us will be happy! How is that necessary? I will be fine,” she had insisted.

“So, reluctantly, perforce, he ran away from Kolkata, taking a job and moving to another place. Finally, later, he married. Why wouldn’t he? 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.”

Anindita and I sensed the enduring feelings of love and memory in her voice.

After Sukhi-di helped to establish all her younger siblings in life, as they married and moved on to create families of their own, she needed a place to stay. She was then in her forties.

“I could not think of entering into marriage then at an age when, according to our society, it is not acceptable to marry. I had to live somewhere,” Sukhi-di recalled. “My father had passed away and my brothers were all living somewhere else. I would have to live with my married sisters,” not a normal Bengali kinship option. “I did not have enough money to buy an apartment.”

Some friends and a former professor told her about working women’s hostels, so she began to investigate. The one she liked—run by the Government of West Bengal, very affordable and in the desirable bustling Gariahat neighborhood of

south Kolkata—had a hundred-person waiting list. “But I said to them, ‘Why can’t you give me a room? I’m living in someone else’s house and I need a place to live. I don’t have any relatives here.’ I also implored, ‘I’ll just live on a balcony!’ After fifteen days, they said I could live here! That was in 1989.” Sukhi-di was 47 at the time, and thirty years later at this writing, she still lived in the same three-person room on the third floor of the hostel.

Sukhi-di never gave much thought when she was young to how she would care for herself in old age, but her situation had now become quite precarious. She stopped working at around age 70, has no pension, and depleted her savings by paying for knee replacement surgery when she was 72. Her eight surviving siblings occasionally drop off a bit of money or a new sari. Sukhi keeps a doll above her bed, dressing him fondly in warm clothes in the winter, grinning as she calls him “my son.” She climbs up and down three flights of stairs to and from her room for her daily marketing, and she prides herself on staying fit and thin. From March to November, she walks at dawn to exercise daily in a nearby pool, the only woman near her age to partake.

One evening Anindita asked Sukhi-di while we three were together, “Do you ever feel—?”

“Loneliness?” Sukhi-di completed the question. (I was uncertain whether loneliness had been the intended topic.) “Yes! I feel lonely *very* often! This is the reason I say to everyone now that everyone needs one person. If you do not have a person beside you, it does not work. It is for that reason that marriage is necessary. You would be living with each other. Not that it always happens well, but at times it does happen that you really like a person, isn’t that so?” she queried enthusiastically. “Then even if he would have died after forty years of marriage, some memories would be there that one could live with. And his children would be there, and then the grandchildren. I could live with them all, and my days would pass nicely. But now, I am completely alone. If I look all around, it is like a desert. I am *completely* alone. No one at all!

“These kinds of hopes and memories,” Sukhi-di reflected, “these days they come to me a little more often, now because I am old.”

Like Nita of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Sukhi-di sacrificed her own opportunity for romantic love, marriage, children, and a secure future, while fulfilling her breadwinner role as daughter and sister to her East Bengal refugee family. Although Sukhi-di often presents herself as an optimistic and resilient person who is proud of her successful working life and who continues to receive love from siblings and a few girlfriends from her youth, she, like Nita, finds herself in the end to be ultimately alone. She compares her desolate situation to living in a desert.

Sukhi-di worries about where she will go next if she can no longer manage shopping and cooking for herself or climbing up and down the three flights of stairs at the Working Girls’ Hostel. And what if the management expels her for being no longer a “working girl”?

“Maybe I would go to an old age home. It would have to be cheap, though. If it’s in my fate. Or maybe I would go to one of my sisters. But all my sisters live in their in-laws’ houses, not their own households. If they are both unmarried, sisters can live together; but that has not happened. Each of my sisters is in her *shoshur ghor* [in-laws’ home]. I would put them into trouble. If I go to someone else’s house like that, it would be *very* inconvenient. Strained . . . but whatever is in my fate, that will happen. This is my life. Wherever I go next, God will take me. It’s not in my hands.”

One evening some days later, Sukhi-di commented softly with regret, “My life did not happen” (*amar jibon to holo na*).

CONCLUSION

In closing this chapter, I invoke Marshall Sahlins’s definition of kinship as “mutuality of being”: “people who are intrinsic to one another’s existence” (2011: 2), “persons who belong to one another, who are members of one another, who are co-present in each other, whose lives are joined and interdependent” (11). Kinship is vital to most Bengalis’ senses of self, well-being, and life. Listening to their stories, I came to well understand why single women would work so hard to maintain ties with their natal kin, even amidst obstacles, because for a woman outside of marriage, the natal family is the only family she has.

Some women in my study did succeed in upholding wonderful, secure, mutually sustaining relationships with natal kin, including Subhagi and Manjuri in chapter 2, and all three never-married single moms featured in chapter 6. In the next chapter, I also tell of how Sukhi-di’s siblings stepped in later, during her time of crucial need amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, to offer support. Kinship is not an inflexible institution.

Yet, narratives like *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and those of other unmarried daughters and sisters highlight the ways normative Indian patrilineal kinship systems are not set up for non-marrying women—and how kinship can involve not only “mutuality of being” but also inequalities and exclusion. Even when women choose not to marry so that they can support their natal kin, their brothers often feel no obligation to reciprocate that support. Unmarried daughters and sisters are routinely called on to care for natal families—from cooking, to child and elder care, to financial provisioning—yet they feel unentitled to receive reciprocity of care in return (“Does she think this is a hotel?”). In these ways, we see how marriage unevenly distributes labor and care within families, not just between men and women, or among women by age cohort (such as mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law), but among women according to marital status.¹⁵

The narratives in this and earlier chapters also bring into sharp relief the ways social class connects with gender and kinship to generate the uneven distribution of the labor and goods of social reproduction and care. It is only women from financially struggling families—like Sukhi-di, Nayani, Srabani, Nabami, and

Nita of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*—whose care labor is required by their natal kin in ways that end up precluding marriage. We saw further in chapter 2 how Nayani’s employers—who treated her “like a daughter”—so relied on her care that Nayani’s unmarried “aunt,” Pishi, threw a fit each time the possibility of Nayani’s marriage was raised. Yet, after the wealthy family’s care needs were exhausted, they released Nayani nearly kinless into the city. As I relate in chapter 1, Medha herself was able to hire an impoverished woman to sleep at her house, contributing to Medha’s support as a successful independent professional and dispelling her loneliness, but also taking the woman away from her own children. In such ways, well-off single women are able to incorporate non-kin to enhance their possibilities for care and social reproduction, while the impoverished are left with no recourse beyond kin, in a system where kinship for women without marriage is very fragile.