

Never-Married Single Moms

One lovely February day in 2019 while I was in Kolkata, Indrani invited me to come stay the weekend at her home. I could spend time with her vivacious, growing six-year-old daughter as well as Indrani's parents, who lived just below her in the first two stories of the family's three-story home on a sought-after, tree-lined Kolkata street. Indrani would also invite over a single-mother friend, Mithun, and her young daughter. The two girls could play together, while Indrani and Mithun would share with me stories of being single mothers in India. It sounded fun as well as enlightening. I always loved Indrani's home and company. I was happy to accept.

Among many other topics, Indrani and Mithun shared stories about how they and their daughters respond to persistent questions about the fathers. Both Indrani, who has never been married, and Mithun, who is divorced, had adopted their daughters. Mithun taught her five-year-old daughter Aanshi to reply to such questions by pronouncing, "My mom is both my mother and father." But recently some kids at school retorted, "That's impossible." Aanshi had cried.

Indrani and her daughter Nandini had then spoken about this problem for a while. "What should Aanshi say?" Nandini ended up making a lovely WhatsApp video message for Aanshi, which Aanshi had loved. Dressed in a bright yellow frock and smiling confidently, Nandini told her young friend, "Don't let those children bother you! . . . Also, if you speak in English, then no one will mind about the father issue." It seems that Nandini already realized the cultural capital that English proficiency can bring, which can also serve to silence other children not fluent in the language.

Enormous importance is placed on having children in Indian social worlds, and this chapter explores how it is possible to have a child on your own. Media stories are reporting an upsurge of single mothers in India, focusing on single celebrities and other elite cosmopolitans, while grouping together divorced, widowed, separated, and never-married women.¹ These stories are often upbeat and

celebratory, like one titled “On Her Own: 3 Courageous Women Share What It Means to Be a Single Mother in India,” featuring the byline “This International Women’s Day, we introduce you to some truly incredible Indian women whose stories define resilience, courage, and inspiration” (Raja 2019). A United Nations Women report relates that 13 million, or 4.5 percent, of Indian households are now run by single mothers.²

Being a never-married single mom can also be very challenging, however, partly because of how strongly the society is set up for women with husbands and children with fathers. “Is It Easy to Be a Single Mother in India?” the *Times of India* asks, replying, “It’s hard to fathom the magnitude of challenges that single mothers (widows, divorcees, separated, or single parent by choice) face every day in India,” including financial struggles, stigma, sexual harassment, unending questions, and the difficulty of balancing work and childcare (Vajpayee 2019).³

This chapter focuses on the stories of three never-married single moms navigating diverse life paths. The first, Suravi, is a rural woman from a high-caste yet poor family who conceived her son through a relationship with a neighbor. She has managed to raise her son amidst much hardship and challenge, while continuing to fight for her and his legal rights and for social respect. The next is Indrani, my weekend host, an urban professional woman who adopted her daughter. The third, Kumkum, is a successful Kolkata author who conceived her daughter through IVF. Each of these single moms lives not only with her child, but also with extended natal kin.

No one trajectory of single motherhood emerges from these three stories. The women whose voices are heard here lead multifaceted lives, balancing the challenges and stigma of single motherhood with a range of motivating aspirations and opportunities. We will see how their stories illuminate not only the lived experiences of particularly situated individuals but also both changing and enduring configurations of kinship, gender, and sexuality in a wider Indian society.

NAVIGATING BEING AN UNWED VILLAGE MOTHER: SURAVI’S STORY

Medha had been keen to show me her natal village, and we made the weekend trip together, described at the opening of chapter 3. One motive for the journey was to give me the opportunity to meet one of Medha’s childhood friends, a woman she described in English as an “unwed mother.” Medha had known the unmarried mother, Suravi, since girlhood, growing up together in the village just two years apart in age. Suravi had raised her son, now 21, with much difficulty in village society, and she continued to live there with her extended natal family.

Rising before 6 a.m. on my first morning in the village, I went out to take a brisk walk with Medha’s sister-in-law, Boudi. Boudi and I complimented each other on our fast walking pace, while Boudi introduced me to neighbors carrying out their

morning routines. She explained my research interest in unmarried women. “You have one of those,” a neighbor woman said to Boudi in a tone conveying a hint of discussing something shameful, referring to Medha. Another female neighbor mentioned in hushed tones, “There’s a woman who had a child outside marriage—would you be interested in that type of case?” Boudi replied that, indeed, Medha was planning to introduce me to her.

Shortly after, as we continued our walk, Boudi pointed out “the boy’s” house, recalling how he and a village girl, “a *kumari*”—a term referring to an unmarried girl or daughter, sometimes translated as “virgin”—had fallen in love. They had even made love (*prem korechilo*) without being married! The girl got pregnant, “and then of course no one else would marry her,” Boudi said. “The boy got married to someone else.”

“And her child?” I asked.

“Yes, she’s raising him—with much difficulty. When he was in school, he couldn’t write his father’s name [on the school forms]. Imagine! In this society. The mother’s name doesn’t matter at all—only the father’s. And he can’t write down his father’s name.”

Medha later added, as she, Boudi, and I were talking over a breakfast of hot milky tea and puffy luchi breads with spiced potatoes, “Imagine what suffering (*kashta*) she endured! In this village society.”

Later that morning, Medha and I dropped in at the unmarried mother Suravi’s home. While we waited for her to return from giving tutoring lessons to some village children, we met several of the household’s family members, who offered us stools on a verandah of mud walls and thatched roof, facing the home’s inner walled courtyard. Suravi still lives in the natal home where she was born and raised. With her now are two brothers, her mother, her married brothers’ wives and three children, her own 21-year-old son, and her son’s young wife and infant.

Arriving back from tutoring dressed in a fresh blue-and-green-checked cotton sari and her long black hair pulled into a knot, Suravi was happy to greet Medha after several years. I explained the research project and asked if Suravi would like to participate. Suravi agreed, asking, “Where should I begin? Right from my childhood, or from this episode of mine?”

Suravi’s son, Srijesh, and the other women of the household gathered around us as we spoke, listening in and occasionally helping to fill in details. Throughout, Suravi’s son would coach his mother, “Speak slowly/clearly, Ma (*aste aste bolo*). Let her write. Tell her carefully.”

“Start from your childhood,” Medha and I replied together. Then Medha added, “In your life story, when you first began to experience pain and suffering, tell all about that.”

“Well, when I was very young,” Suravi began, “when I was absolutely a young child, I didn’t suffer at all.”

“I also told Sarah the same!” Medha exclaimed.

“I absolutely didn’t suffer when I was very little,” Suravi reaffirmed.

I recalled other Bengali women’s life narratives, which almost always emphasize a very early period of happiness and care within the natal family, receiving love and affection from parents and other relatives, with few responsibilities, constraints, or worries (e.g., Lamb 2001: 17, 24).

“Then as I grew up gradually, bit by bit, I became a little older,” Suravi continued, “and so many little brothers and sisters came along. We were four sisters and three brothers, and I was the oldest. And Father was the only one earning. He was alone, and there was no one else to earn,” indicating that they were not living in a joint family with other members to pool resources. “So, what happened is that, whatever was remaining of our land, our [agricultural] fields, Father sold to feed us. And then we became extremely poor.”

They were a Brahman family, often deemed to be the “highest” caste, but caste intersects with class in varying ways. Although historically disadvantaged caste groups remain heavily concentrated in the lower economic classes, even Brahman families can suffer from poverty.

“I began working in other people’s homes, in Kolkata,” Suravi continued, laboring as a live-in domestic servant around eight hours away from her Medinipur village, undergoing an arduous journey by foot, bus, and train. “Whatever money I would earn, I would send back home, so that my brothers and sisters could eat.”

In this way, Suravi’s young life followed the familiar pattern of the oldest daughter in poor families working to support natal kin rather than marrying—like Nita in *Megha Dhaka Tara* and other women featured in chapter 3. Standard practice in Bengali families is that same-gender siblings should get married sequentially in order of age. But this did not happen for Suravi. “While I was gone in Kolkata,” Suravi narrated, “one of my sisters got married, and then after I arrived back home, another sister’s marriage happened. Then my youngest sister’s marriage took place.”

It was around this time, when Suravi would have been nearly 30 years old, that she started a relationship with a neighboring young man from a financially well-to-do, high-caste (but not Brahman) Kayastha family.⁴

“After that, after the last of my sisters married, a person who lived in a neighboring house—I’ll tell you his name—let the name be there—when I’m telling everything else, then his name too should be there,” Suravi asserted. We will come to see how Suravi’s years of struggle for respect and social recognition have included striving to publicly proclaim her son’s father’s name. “Let the name be recorded,” Suravi went on. “My son’s father’s name is Kalaparan Kundu.”⁵

“The connection [or relationship, *jogajog*] was with him only,” Suravi emphasized her overall sexual purity, that she had not engaged in romantic or sexual relations with anyone other than this one man.

“After the connection took place—” Suravi paused, so Medha jumped in, “A ‘love affair’ developed.”

“Yes, it developed,” Suravi added.

I interjected gently, “This happens in my country all the time.”

“It really happens?” Suravi asked.

“Yes, in their country, all people’s ‘love affairs’ are always happening!” Medha exclaimed.

“I see. So, then what happened,” Suravi continued, “is that he adorned me with vermilion in a temple.” Vermilion in the woman’s hair parting is a key symbol of Hindu marriage. “And then, as we were preparing to go to the registry for an official marriage, after the marriage in the temple, I conceived a child.”

We see here how important it was for Suravi to present herself as being married before she conceived the child. The groom’s act of placing vermilion, or *sindur*, in the part of the bride’s hair is a central ritual in Hindu weddings. Medha later explained, as did my Bengali research assistant working on transcribing this recorded interview, that unregistered and socially ambiguous marriages can occur this way—where a couple goes secretly to a temple to perform the vermilion-giving ritual. Whether or not a couple in fact goes to a temple, telling the story of performing a private vermilion marriage ritual within a temple is itself a performance aimed at giving the relationship legitimacy and symbolizing marital status. From then on, Suravi has worn red vermilion in her hair part, along with the red-and-white *shakha pola* bangles signifying marriage for Bengali women. Further, importantly, she does not see herself as unmarried. Medha later reflected further to me about Suravi’s wearing the signs of a married woman and speaking about a temple wedding: “She presents herself as married. She fell into *such* danger, she faced *such* extreme humiliation by ‘society,’ that for survival, she needs to put on this disguise.”

Suravi continued: “Then, assuring me that we would register our marriage, he escorted me to the registry office. But then what happened was that on our way there to the registry, he fled back.” I surmised from Suravi’s narrative here and my knowledge of Bengali village society that the groom would have been experiencing at this point a great deal of turmoil, knowing how tremendously disapproving his family would be were he and Suravi to marry—a marriage that his parents had not arranged, and with a woman older than their son, from a lower socioeconomic class, from a different (although socially-deemed higher) caste, and who was already pregnant (so, lacking in “good character”).

“So, then I went to his home,” Suravi recalled. “When I arrived, my mother-in-law and my sister-in-law began to beat me, and they threw me out into the road. They beat me up severely.”

Medha interjected, “They beat her severely. Severely.”

“Yes, they beat me up ruthlessly,” Suravi described. “They tied these two hands of mine with a rope and threw me onto the road. . . . They attempted to murder my son, the son in my womb. They kicked my stomach with their feet, viciously, trying to kill him. Please write about this ruthlessness, this cruelty,” she said to me.

“They dragged her thrashing down an unpaved road!—down this very unpaved road,” Suravi’s brother’s wife shared.

“Then I came back to my home, right here. To my father’s house. And my son was born here.

“When I was pregnant,” Suravi went on to describe that trying time, “I would never eat for the whole day, the whole day. When this one was in my womb, I would weep the whole day. All I would do is weep the whole day long. I wouldn’t eat for the whole day. I couldn’t even eat one little bit.”

Suravi recalled that around this time, the village council held a meeting to try to resolve the dispute between the two families. In some cases in West Bengal villages, if a woman becomes pregnant out of wedlock, a village council will intervene to persuade the two families to accept the couple’s marriage, or require the male party to provide monetary compensation to the woman. “But since I have no money, there was no one to stand by me, to represent me,” Suravi explained, and so she received no support.

Medha interjected, “Right! Write this down, Sarah. Make a note of this!”—how money plays a crucial role.

“I am impoverished,” Suravi explained. “There was no one to support me. At that time, I was so poor, I didn’t even have food to eat. Our financial condition was extremely miserable. My father by then had also had a stroke and was not well.

“So, once again, I came back to my father’s house,” Suravi continued. “After coming back, I struggled a lot. To earn money, I gave tuition [tutoring lessons] to children, even though I am not so educated.”

Medha jumped in here to praise her friend: “She actually was really good in education. She passed up to the eighth grade. And that was a time when most girls here were not studying.”

“Yes, and considering the state of education now, I can even put a tenth-grade student to shame,” Suravi added proudly. “So, then, living like that, giving tutoring lessons in other people’s homes, I slowly brought up this child with great difficulty.”

“Did your family support you in this matter?” I asked. “Or did they blame you?”

Suravi, her son, Medha, and the others listening in all replied at once.

“Absolutely everyone blamed me as a bad woman!” Suravi exclaimed. “My father, my mother, absolutely everyone blamed me!”

“The neighbors all talked,” Medha added.

“When a bad reputation occurs, it sticks on,” Suravi’s brother’s wife stated.

“Everyone said bad things about me!” Suravi recalled.

“At that time, everyone called it bad,” her son added.

“At that time, her mother, father, everyone—”

“My father, my mother, absolutely everyone blamed me,” Suravi emphasized. “But then, could they throw me out? They could not throw me out.”

“Even though they all showered abuses, does any parent want their own daughter to struggle with pain and hardship?” Suravi’s sister-in-law queried.

“My father was still alive at that time,” Suravi recalled affectionately. “Father died when my son was just four years old. But until then, Father raised this son of mine, taking him in his own lap and carrying him on his back.”

Suravi then told of her ongoing “war” (*juddha*) and “struggle” (*sangram*) with her son’s father and his family, and with the state, to achieve justice and legal recognition of her son’s paternity. From birth certificates, to voter identification and ration cards, to admission cards to appear for school examinations, to bank accounts and passports, the father’s name must be provided in almost every official document needed by Indian citizens. Some of these rules are slowly changing, as courts come to recognize the increased prevalence of single mothers in India. For instance, in 2015, the Supreme Court ruled that single women could legally claim sole guardianship of their children without naming the father or needing his consent (Joshi 2018)—quite a momentous change. In 2016, the Ministry of External Affairs passed a new rule stating that the name of only one parent on the passport is enough (Dabas 2016).⁶ Yet, as Srijesh was growing up, the father’s name was required. At the same time, Srijesh’s father and paternal grandfather worked hard to block Suravi from entering the father’s name on her son’s legal documents. Starting when the boy was an infant, Suravi recounted, “I lodged a lawsuit [to force Srijesh’s father to acknowledge paternity]. But even in the case of a lawsuit, there was no one on my side, because I had no money.”

“No, it’s because you were a woman—a woman!” several others listening in interjected.

“Well, I informed the Women’s Commission, too,” Suravi said.⁷ “In Kolkata,” her son added.

“But there, too, money can hush up things,” Suravi explained, suggesting that her son’s father’s family had provided a bribe to stop the complaint.

Then, when Suravi’s son was preparing to appear for his major tenth-grade Madhyamik exams, having provided his father’s name on the school forms, his father went to the High Court in Kolkata to lodge a case to have his name deleted from the boy’s papers. Srijesh related, “My father made a lot of efforts to remove his own name from the school board forms, but by the grace of God, it never happened.”

“What happened? Did he lose?” I asked.

“Yes, by losing I mean,” Suravi replied, “what I did then with great hardship is that I hired a lawyer and restarted a case in the Kolkata High Court. I had no money alright, but I was convinced that God is there. Even if no one [person] was there with me, God was there. I said I would conduct a DNA test. He [my son’s father] was even applying to the Election Commission to cancel my own ID card [where Suravi had listed him as husband]. So, then the BDO [Block Development Officer from the rural local government] came and conducted an enquiry. And the BDO gentleman learned the truth and left.”

Medha added indignantly, “Because he is powerful, because he has money, and being a man, you can see he is harassing her in so many ways! He has no right to go to the court! Only Suravi has the right to go to court—she and her son. They have the right.”

I asked Srijesh, “Did you ever face any bullying or difficulties in school?”

Suravi clarified, “Because of your father?”

“Yes,” Srijesh replied pensively. “I mean, I used to feel upset in the sense that everyone else had one thing—everyone else, all my classmates, all the other kids, would call their father ‘father’ (*baba*). But I couldn’t call my father my father. From this there was pain. One other point was that I had to express my identity (*porichoy*) with great difficulty. I mean, the open declaration that here is my father—it was always difficult for me to reveal that identity.” Boys and young men in this village society are very often introduced by their father’s names, as so-and-so’s son.

“And have you told how that man has married again?” Medha encouraged Suravi to relate.

“Yes, he has married again,” Suravi replied.

“And he has fathered a son also,” Srijesh added. “That son resembles me a lot.”

“They look exactly the same!” Suravi added. “I mean, both look just like their father. Neither looks like each one’s mother.”

“And if my father, myself, and that brother were made to stand in one place, then all three of us would appear as sons of one father—as if we were three brothers, looking just the same! We all look exactly the same,” Srijesh proclaimed.

Srijesh went on to express, however, how much he loves and admires his mother. “I want to draw your attention to one point,” he said to me. “That is, whatever I never received from my own father, my mother compensated for that. She never let me feel lacking for what my father did not give me.”

Other family members concurred, offering their praise. “Whatever his father was supposed to have done, his mother fulfilled it all.”

The family women gathering around—the young man’s mother, aunts, and grandmother—all praised Srijesh, using the diminutive *tui* second-person pronoun to call him affectionately such a good boy; a nice, kind, and loving boy; a generous, considerate, and intelligent boy. “All is well that ends well,” one proclaimed, while another offered the young man blessings: “You grow old and live a long life.”

We see in this narrative and Suravi’s other stories how she navigates strategies for survival and respect in a social environment highly condemning of unmarried motherhood.⁸ First, she presents herself as married, even when not legally or widely socially recognized as such. She wears all the signs of a Bengali Hindu married woman, tells of how her son’s father married “again” and “a second time,” and emphasizes how she had been married in a Hindu temple before conceiving the child.

Second, Suravi worked hard to claim a legitimate father for her son—initiating legal cases demanding the father to accept paternity, freely pronouncing the man's name, and having her son observe all the *ashauch* (death-impurity) rituals of an ordinary male lineage member when anyone in the father's family dies.⁹ Death-impurity rituals vary by gender and kinship connection to the deceased, and Suravi underscored how her son Srijesh observes the full set of rituals of a regular male lineage member of his father's family: "When someone dies in their family, we too perform the rules of *ashauch*. I make him [Srijesh] shave his head, cut his nails, perform the rituals, do everything."

Third, Suravi lived an impeccably sexually pure life after that one incident. No one in the village could claim that she had ever taken up with any other man. Fourth, she was able to maintain good relations with her natal kin. Although they severely criticized her at first for becoming pregnant, they never disowned her, and the large joint family continues to eat together and care well for each other. Each smaller family unit funds their own major expenses—food, clothing, and so on—but Suravi described how they all eat food cooked from the same hearth, sit down together for shared meals, and offer each other emotional support and love. Finally, Suravi drew on her intelligence and education to find ways to financially support herself and her son, by offering tutoring lessons and securing a modest salaried job with the UNICEF-funded Integrated Child Development Services.

Because it is so important to Suravi that she present herself as married, I have been reluctant to label her in this writing as "unwed," a category that goes against Suravi's own assiduously crafted public and inner persona. At one point during our interview conversation, Medha turned to me and instructed, "Please write down that all the signs that a Bengali 'married woman' uses, she wears all of those." However, "unwed" (in English) and "*abibahita*" (unmarried) were terms others in the village regularly used to describe Suravi. Then, after taking me to meet Suravi, Medha posted on her Facebook page a photograph of me while talking with Suravi and her son, a notebook open on my lap, labeling the post: "Sarah interviewing an unwed mother with her son in my home village."¹⁰ One of Medha's Facebook friends, a Bengali man who can easily recognize the visual signs of a Bengali Hindu married woman, commented: "I just noticed the woman wearing *shakha pola* [married woman's bangles]—trying to think what dynamics might have prompted 'an unwed mother' to do so, if she is 'outed' as unwed anyway?!" Medha posted her reply: "She has to show the society, a village society, that the person who cheated her, married her secretly in a temple. She took this disguise to protect herself and her son so that she can live at least."

I admired Suravi's sense of resilience and pride, and the feminist outlook she and her kin seemed to employ to blame other people and forces in society rather than the single mother herself. They critiqued the injustices of class and wealth inequalities, disapprovingly describing the father's family as "extremely comfortable materially" and "very affluent." They also blamed gender inequalities woven

into the legal system, arguing that Suravi could not prevail in her legal disputes not just because she was poor poor, but also because she was a woman. Suravi's whole household also forcefully criticized not only the one responsible man but also his father: "His father, too, is an extreme rascal (*prochur bodmas*)!" "Right, that grandpa of mine—" Srijesh jumped in. Others completed Srijesh's sentence: "He is the one at the root of all evil."

Yet, despite her resilience, Suravi shared toward the end of my visit that she still often feels ill, has trouble eating, and has difficulty sleeping night after night, "from enduring all this hardship (*kashta*)." I commented softly, "There's a lot more hardship in women's lives, compared to men's." Suravi concurred: "Tremendous hardship."

ADOPTING AS A SINGLE MOTHER: INDRANI'S STORY

Indian adoption rules have long allowed single parents of either gender to adopt a child. The Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act of 1956, still basically in effect, states that any male or female Hindu may adopt a child if the parent is sound of mind, not a minor, and has the capacity to care for a child—provided that a male parent, if married, has the consent of his wife, and that a female parent is *not* married, "or, if married, whose marriage has been dissolved or whose husband is dead or has completely and finally renounced the world or has ceased to be a Hindu or has been declared by a court of competent jurisdiction to be of unsound mind."¹¹

More recently, in 2015 and 2017, India's Central Adoption Resource Agency (CARA) instituted updated and more transparent adoption procedures, acclaimed for making adoption a little easier for single parents, whether never-married, divorced, widowed, or separated.¹² The adoption regulations of 2017 delineate that "any prospective adoptive parent, irrespective of marital status and whether or not he has a biological son or daughter, can adopt."¹³ Some restrictions pertaining to gender and marriage exist, including that single males may not adopt girl children (while "a single female can adopt a child of any gender"), and that "no child shall be given in adoption to a couple unless they have at least two years of stable marital relationship."¹⁴ Further, the new guidelines aim to fast-track adoptions for financially secure single women over the age of 40, to facilitate their success in being matched with a child before they reach the 45-year-old age limit for adopting a child under age four (Dhar 2017; Khan 2020).¹⁵

Public media report that single-parent adoptions are on a steady rise in India. One report reads: "A sizeable number of people, both single women and men, are opting to don the role of a parent by going in for adoptions. Adoption agencies, which earlier showed a staunch bias against unmarried men and women, are now more prepared to consider them as prospective parents" (Nair 2018). Another story reports that single adoptive mothers have varying motivations for taking the

step, “the underlying theme being that they didn’t see motherhood and marriage as connected experiences” (Khan 2020).

Statistics indicate a pronounced rise in single people, especially women, seeking to adopt in India. In just three years, from 2015–2016 to 2018–2019, the number of single women registering to adopt through CARA grew from 286 to 589 (Khan 2020). The numbers for single men seeking to adopt are also on the rise, although much lower, jumping from 21 in 2015–2016 to 71 in the first quarters of 2019–2020 (Khan 2020).

A smaller fraction of prospective adoptive parents ends up receiving a child, however. The *Economic Times* reports that only 75 single women adopted a child through CARA in 2015–2016, 93 in 2016–2017, 106 in 2017–2018, and 121 in 2018–2019 (Bhatt 2019). Stories also abound in public media that adoption agencies are still biased against single parents for not fitting into standard heteronormative molds, persistently querying prospective single mothers, “Why didn’t you marry?” And single fathers, “Are you gay?” (Bhatt 2019; Khan 2020).

Having trouble falling asleep one evening while in Kolkata, I rose from bed to check my email and came across this remarkable message from Indrani. This was toward the beginning of my research project on single women, about five years before my weekend invitation to Indrani’s home.

Just writing very quickly to say hello and that I am very much looking forward to seeing you again! I got your brief note from Kolkata [last year] just before you returned to the States, and there was a lot going on in my life at that time, and there was no short way of describing it to you. I had actually been in the queue for adoption for over three years and it was going nowhere. Although it’s legal for single women to adopt in India (and has been so for at least a generation), there are a lot of biases, as I found out. Every step of the way I had to explain why I was not married and I could not give any answer that was acceptable to them.

It all ended happily, eventually, and that allows me to look back and think of the horrendous experience as some kind of test I needed to pass. I can tell you more when we meet. But mainly I didn’t/couldn’t write back because there was so much uncertainty about the outcome, it was a bit like holding my breath for something and not being able to do or think of anything else. In the end [the adoption] happened just one day before I would have been legally outside the [45-year-old] age limit for this application!

Indrani had returned to India several years earlier to build a flat and live above her parents, after receiving a PhD in electrical engineering in the United States and holding for several years a high-salaried job in New York City. She returned to Kolkata when her grandmother became ill, having had enough of US corporate life and wishing to be with her grandmother during her dying days. With a shipload of furnishings from the United States, Indrani created a lovely flat with a roof garden above her parents, while securing another meaningful and prestigious job in Kolkata working with green and alternative energies. She never gave

too much thought to marriage while pursuing her education and career. But as she approached her forties, she began to long intensely for a child.

When she and I met up, Indrani told me more: “My mother used to say that love can happen even at 97, but there is a time for having a child. I also very much longed for a child.” Indrani and her parents passed through many adoption agencies over the emotionally intense three-year period. “Why aren’t you married? Why didn’t you get married?” the adoption agencies always asked. “I was just studying all the time,” Indrani reported replying. “You know, presenting myself as a real nerd. I was just studying all the time, and I didn’t think of it, and then time passed.”

The agents would turn to glare at Indrani’s mother, she recalled: “Well, a daughter may be able to forget such things as marriage, but a mother never should!” Indrani said she would motion to her mother to not say anything, but just sit there looking guilty.

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

Finally, Indrani was approved as fit to adopt, with an agency in the neighboring state of Bihar—due to Indrani’s good professional position and the fact that she lives with her parents. So, she is not really entirely “single.” True singlehood in terms of living on one’s own without parents or other kin makes it difficult to be approved, as there is a strong sense that no one can raise a child alone, and that a child needs a family.

But would there be an infant available before Indrani aged out? The last weeks were very stressful. Finally, Indrani received notice that there was an infant, and could she and her mother come right away? There was one other family also being summoned—a younger husband and wife couple who had been infertile. The agency would meet with and interview both groups and decide to which the child should go. When Indrani and her mother arrived, though, the person who was supposed to interview them was not there; it turns out she had gone out of station and would return the following Monday. Indrani and her mother hadn’t expected to spend the night and had brought no traveling bags with them. Plus, the following Monday was dangerously close to Indrani’s 45th birthday. What if the woman didn’t turn up again? Indrani was quite frantic. She made phone calls and sent emails. Isn’t there anyone else who could do this interview? Also, couldn’t they please select Indrani for this infant, as the other couple is still young and would have other chances to adopt, but this is Indrani’s *very last chance*. If it doesn’t happen this time, it cannot ever happen.

Finally, Indrani reached a woman in the adoption agency who was sympathetic, a single woman herself who had adopted a child. So, just a day before her 45th birthday, Indrani was given a child! The infant was six weeks old. They named

her Nandini, “daughter who brings joy.” Nandini has emerged into a beautiful, healthy, loving, smart, and energetic little girl, beloved to both mother and maternal grandparents. A photo album depicts as many happy, beaming photos of growing Nandini with her grandparents as with her mother, Indrani.

Indrani’s father, now 80 and with a tall stature, gentle smile, and warm twinkling eyes, explained to me how he had arranged all the papers legally so that his daughter fully owns the upstairs flat that she had built, so that there will be no problems later on. “It’s completely in her name, all hers,” he emphasized. One central life duty of an Indian father is to ensure that his children are settled and taken care of for the next generation. For a daughter, this usually means arranging her marriage, but setting up a daughter with a secure home accomplishes many of the same objectives. Indrani’s case shows how fathers can and often do care for their unmarried daughters, even when brothers do not. Indrani’s brother once complained that their parents were giving so much help and attention to Indrani and her child, but their mother reportedly replied, “Look, you have help raising your children and running your household—from your wife. No one can raise a child alone.”

Indrani’s upstairs flat, beautifully constructed with fine, tasteful, sturdy materials, contains two spacious bedrooms with baths, a large living and dining area, a lovely modern kitchen, and verandahs at both the front and back. The real gem is the roof, which Indrani’s mother also enjoys and maintains. The roof level is full of plants—some flowering, some edible—a bamboo-latticed pavilion, a wooden swing, sitting chairs, and the sky open to the moon and stars at night and warming sun in the winter months. Right off the roof garden is Indrani’s office, constructed also as her daughter’s play room, with low cabinets filled with toys and children’s books, and a soft rug and futon mat on the floor. Nandini sleeps at night mostly with Indrani’s mother, who felt that Indrani’s sleeping habits—staying up working far into the night—were not good for a child. Once when Indrani thought maybe Nandini should sleep with her, her mother missed Nandini so much that Indrani returned the girl. A gentle male domestic worker, whose daughter the family educated and is now attending college, brings Nandini up to her mother in the mornings after the child has awakened and had her milk.

Indrani wonders how her daughter’s unusual background will impact her life. People ask Indrani continually, “Are you married?” “No,” Indrani replies simply. Then they wait for an explanation as to how there could be a child. Indrani says little and leaves them guessing. But she worries about when Nandini can understand more. Indrani also protests how Indian identification systems—for school IDs, high school exams, driver’s licenses, passports—all normally require providing a father’s name, in this patriarchal setting.

Indrani sometimes suggests that she might still like to marry, if it can happen. She seems to indicate that if she married, it would be to a man. She had participated in a few awkward match-making situations, including a singles event

for forty-plus persons. Now, she says that if she can find someone naturally, OK; if not, not. She related how the adoption agency counselors would ask her whether she planned to marry, seeming to prefer that she promise not to marry, as dating and marriage could jeopardize the child. Indrani would reply firmly, “If I marry, it will be a package deal—me and my child. If a man won’t accept both of us, then I wouldn’t marry him; this would disqualify him.” She added to me, “Of course, I wouldn’t marry a man who wouldn’t accept both me and my daughter!”

Indrani commented that most of her female Indian colleagues in the engineering field are also unmarried, having become too highly educated, professional, and career oriented to be attractive to Indian men as marriage partners.

Indrani’s story highlights a vibrant life, replete with meaningful work, economic security, friends, and a successful quest to create and sustain intimate ties of love and kinship beyond marriage and patriline. In December 2019, after the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act, which excludes Muslim immigrants from pursuing paths to Indian citizenship, Indrani, her mother, and her daughter were active, going to protests. One attendee snapped their photo together as each held up protest signs, posting the photo on social media with the label: “Three generations of aware and responsible citizens.”

Over that weekend I spent at Indrani’s home, she told me how a neighbor woman around her parents’ age whom she hadn’t spoken with in years suddenly asked Indrani the other day, “So, there is no husband? You never married?” “No,” Indrani replied. “Well, that’s fine,” the older woman responded after a brief pause. “If you marry, your life is rubbish; and if you don’t marry, life is rubbish.” As I relay it on paper, this snippet of dialogue sounds a bit grim; but Indrani reported the exchange to me with a smile. Her sense was that the older woman was intending to convey the reality that, whether married or unmarried, a woman’s life falls under the patriarchal structure; and in this way, she voiced support for Indrani’s progressive choices as a single adoptive mother.

EMBRACING UNMARRIED IVF MOTHERHOOD: KUMKUM’S STORY

Kumkum had looked forward to being a mother ever since she was a young girl. As she reached her late thirties still unmarried, she recalls thinking, “One can get married after 50, but you cannot have a child then—at least not a child from your own egg and womb. That’s what I wanted.” So Kumkum began the process of searching for a fertility doctor in Kolkata who could help her conceive a child through IVF.

Kumkum grew up as the only child of well-to-do parents in a spacious three-story home on a quiet lane in the sought-after Ballygunge neighborhood of south Kolkata. In college, while studying to be a journalist and creative writer, Kumkum recalls how so many boys and men were interested in her, finding her very beautiful.

“I delighted in this attention,” she recalled, “and I found it very fun! But like a woman in a sari store—facing so many beautiful saris—it was hard to choose! Plus, I’m afraid I wasn’t very sensitive about their feelings. I was young and didn’t understand many things.”

Eventually, Kumkum did move in together with another man, a fellow artist. Her parents highly disapproved. The two were heady in love with each other and their creative work, becoming successful in publishing and art shows. They introduced themselves in public—such as to neighbors and travel agents—as a married couple. Yet, gradually Kumkum found herself insufficiently attracted to him, while also describing herself as “too demanding,” “reluctant to compromise,” and “difficult to live with.” So, the relationship lasted no more than several years, and Kumkum moved back in with her parents. Her elderly father died a few years later.

It took Kumkum two years to find a fertility clinic and doctor who would accept her as an IVF patient. No formal policies or laws prohibit single women from conceiving through IVF, but individual doctors are often reluctant to take on single women. Similar to their experiences in the adoption approval process, single women seeking motherhood through IVF in India tell of persistent questions: “Why didn’t you marry?” “Why don’t you marry first, and then come back?”¹⁶ Once Kumkum even attempted to disguise herself as a married woman, putting vermilion in the part of her hair and donning the typical red-and-white bangles of Bengali married woman. “But the doctor asked me to bring my husband along to the next meeting,” Kumkum said. It also helps if an unmarried woman comes to the IVF clinic with family members, to demonstrate a wider family support system. However, Kumkum wanted to take this journey on her own, without her mother’s help. Her mother, further, was not always approving of Kumkum’s decisions. Finally, Kumkum found a doctor who would accept her, and she gave birth to a wonderful, healthy daughter at the age of 40.

Kumkum and I hung out together on several occasions at her colorfully decorated home—enjoying tea, hot pakoras, mutton curry, domestic red wine, and conversation, sometimes joined by her three-year-old daughter and mother. A few themes stood out to me from our conversations. One concerns sexuality. Kumkum’s experiences reveal how much the sexuality—or, really, asexuality—of the single woman becomes socially enforced as a matter of public concern, playing out through experiences surrounding IVF.

At one point, I asked Kumkum if she thought Indian society looked rather favorably upon IVF single mothers as sexually pure, because they were conceiving and bearing a child through a kind of intercourse-free “virgin birth.” Kumkum laughed doubtfully at my theory. She delineated all the ways that people kept trying to regulate her sexuality while displaying their suspicions regarding her sexual propriety.

First, it was a problem that her sperm donor was known to her. “I’m revealing this news to you,” Kumkum remarked, “because you’re a foreigner and won’t judge

me.” But she felt that she generally had to keep this information secret from those in Bengali society “because some things just wouldn’t be accepted.”

Her sperm donor had been a close friend of Kumkum’s in her college years, and he had loved her then, but she had not gone for him. However, they had stayed in touch. He was an amazingly talented artist and now a brilliant professor. He had been the first one to inspire Kumkum to pursue her passion in creative writing. She asked if he would consider being a sperm donor, and he agreed. Kumkum told of the day of the IVF procedure:

When he was supposed to give the sperm [at the clinic], I was all ready. My body was ready. I had taken medicine to produce more eggs. But his father was dying right then; it was difficult for him to get away. Also, he is a reserved fellow, and I think he was feeling awkward. So, I was worried that he wouldn’t come. But, finally, he came and was able to produce the sperm! I was so grateful that I kissed him on the cheek, right in the clinic! Now, in Indian society, this is not done—a public display of affection between a man and a woman. Although it was on the cheek and not on the lips—but, still this is not done. So, he was a bit surprised, and I’m sure the doctor and others in the clinic were, too!

Kumkum told also of how when she was once discussing the IVF process and the identity of her sperm donor with a few close relatives, an aunt told her to stop sharing such “indecent” information. Now, Kumkum rarely divulges having any kind of personal relationship with her sperm donor, to avoid being construed as sexually inappropriate. Social mores suggest that to exchange sperm in a medical clinic is too sexually intimate an interaction for an unmarried couple.

Kumkum went on to explain how difficult it had been to get her daughter admitted to a top nursery school due to doubts about her sexual morality. “At our first school interview, the principal asked me, ‘So, why didn’t you get married, and why did you have a child this way?’ They demanded that I produce the birth certificate and medical records to prove that there was no father.” If the school could become convinced that the child was not conceived sexually out of wedlock, OK, but they were suspicious. News media on single IVF mothers report similar stories: “Despite furnishing a birth certificate, a letter explaining how her son was born, and the hospital’s discharge certificate, officials at [one top-notch Kolkata school] asked [single mother] Anindita to provide an affidavit stating that ‘the child has no father and that he was born through IVF’” (Wangchuk 2020).

One neighbor man, seeing me coming and going from Kumkum’s house, mentioned to me how concerned he is for the daughter, as the girl gets older—how everyone, in school, in society, in official documents, will be constantly asking about her father. Kumkum herself complained how people are continually asking her about the father, criticizing how there is “such emphasis in this society on having a father.”

Importantly, like the other single moms featured in this chapter, Kumkum lives not only with her child, but also with natal kin—in this case, her mother and the family’s long-term live-in domestic *kajer meye*, or “work-girl,” Rina, who helped to raise Kumkum herself when Kumkum was young. Kumkum’s mother and Rina are the primary caretaker of the newest family member while Kumkum is out working. Kumkum believes that Rina disapproves of her manner of giving birth, however, and that Rina would treat Kumkum with more respect if she were married. Kumkum and her mother also often quarrel. However, Kumkum says that she cannot imagine moving out, leaving her widowed mother alone, and depriving her daughter of her grandmother’s love and care. She also feels that her decision to bear a child is one of the most meaningful of her life.

MAKING KINSHIP WITHIN AND BEYOND LINEAL MASCULINITY

In diverse ways, Suravi, Indrani, and Kumkum—three single mothers raising children without a husband—are reconfiguring patrilineal conventions to expand forms of gendered kinship and reproduction. In thinking about these women’s kinship strategies, I find useful the concept of “lineal masculinity” developed by Diane King and Linda Stone. Lineal masculinity is “a perceived ontological essence that flows to and through men over the generations,” and a fundamental feature of patriliney in many societies, including widely in South Asia and the Middle East (2010: 323). For Hindu Bengalis, the concept of *bongsho*, or lineage (literally “bamboo”) is at the heart of conceptualizations of patriliney. According to conventional patrilineal discourse, father and son form central, structuring parts of the continuing lineage. Like bamboo, with its series of linked and growing nodes, the *bongsho* is conceptualized as a continuing succession of males—linked fathers and sons—passed on through semen and shared blood, a male line of descendants from a common “seed” ancestor (*bij-purush*). King and Stone find that notions of lineal masculinity are frequently undergirded by semen-as-seed and womb-as-soil metaphors (2010: 331). Leela Dube writes that the seed-soil metaphor for procreation is found “almost all over patrilineal India. . . . The seed is contained in semen, which is believed to come from blood; hence, a child shares its father’s bloodline. . . . Males are the transmitters of the blood of a patriline. The mother’s role is to nourish and augment what her womb has received” (1997: 76).

One everyday practical consequence of such patrilineal models in India is the requirement to provide a father’s name on myriad social and legal documents. I have noted that recent court challenges are loosening a few such rules, including now permitting a mother’s or other legal guardian’s name to appear in lieu of a father’s name on a passport. However, paternity remains a powerful form of social and legal identity in endless contexts.

Suravi, Indrani, and Kumkum expand possibilities for gendered kinship both within and beyond lineal masculinity in several core ways. First, a woman as a wife would ordinarily provide the womb to nurture her husband's seed but not the core essence of the lineal or familial identity for her child. Yet, by being in a sense "both the mother and father" to their children, these single mothers are reproducing the next generation in some novel ways. Could one say that these mothers pass on their own (father's) patrilineal identities to their children, through a sort of matrilineal patriline? It is difficult to answer this question strongly in the affirmative, based on only three cases and varying circumstances. Recall that Suravi worked hard to define her son socially and legally as part of his biological father's patriline rather than her own. Srijesh had assumed his father's surname, observed the same death rituals that his father's family observed, and attempted to provide his father's name on all his legal documents. Yet, Indrani's and Kumkum's children had no sense of having a different father, and they shared their mothers' and maternal grandfathers' surnames. As more unmarried Indian women choose to have children, it will be meaningful to investigate whether they and their families consider the possibility that unmarried daughters can extend their own patrilines of birth by bearing and raising children without marrying.

Further, it may be *because* they are raising children that each of these single mothers' relationships within their natal families is so secure, because of how the single mother's parents and wider kin become so attached to and invested in the child. Becoming a mother may be one way for an unmarried woman to buttress her natal family relationships.

Thinking through these materials on single mothers who are challenging norms of conventional lineal masculinity has also helped me see how single Bengali men—such as gay men who shun heterosexual marriage—in certain respects face even more familial pressure to marry than women. Amy Brainer also explores widespread understandings among queer communities in Taiwan that men face even more family pressure than women to marry and carry on the patriline (although Brainer complicates this public sentiment, not wishing to suggest that lesbian women face no family pressures). As one gay man Brainer interviewed articulated, "If a woman can't find a suitable husband, the family will be like, 'It's OK, don't worry; we'd rather you be single and happy and have a good job than marry into a family where you have to work very hard and have a more difficult life'" (2019: 44).

At first, I had trouble recognizing the immense reproductive pressures non-marrying men can face in India, because of the way a single woman's sexuality is such a crucial matter of family and public concern. Parental conversations conveying the sexual dangers of leaving a child unmarried and vulnerable to disgraces like pregnancy out of wedlock, for instance, center on daughters and not sons. We saw how Suravi's male lover had no problem getting (re)married, while Suravi's (re)marriage was out of the question in her rural context.

However, I gradually came to see that—in relation to *ideals of lineal masculinity*—it is men who face even more pressure to marry, and how then both men and *married* women face the immense pressure to produce progeny. Given norms of patrilineal kinship in most of India, it is not surprising that for married men and women both, experiences of infertility can entail immense stigma and pain (although it is still women who bear the most social blame for being “barren”) (Bharadwaj 2003, 2016; H. Singh 2016). In Egypt, Marcia Inhorn (1996, 2006, 2015) explores similarly how men who are deficient in patrilineal reproduction due to infertility may experience a great threat to their masculinity. Susan Greenhalgh explores how non-reproduction impacts experiences of masculinity among involuntary bachelors in China, known as “bare sticks” (*guanggun*) and “not real men” (2012, 2015).

Because of my focus on women, I had little contact with single gay men during my fieldwork, but Jayaprakash Mishra’s ethnographic research with thirty-two self-identified gay men from the neighboring eastern Indian state of Odisha reveals how failure to conform to the heterosexual marriage imperative can cause men to experience massive feelings of guilt (2020). The men interviewed from semi-urban and rural areas of Odisha poignantly conveyed a powerful sense of the inevitability of marriage out of indebtedness to parents and to continue the family lineage. At the time of the interviews, 12 of the 32 respondents (aged 27 to 42 years) were married to women. Among the rest (unmarried), six were searching with their families for marriage alliances with women, and two were engaged to women (J. Mishra 2020: 357). One unmarried interlocutor articulated, “I know deep down somewhere in the back of their mind, they [my parents] still expect that someday I will find a suitable girl, will get married, will have kids and will uphold their family lineage” (362). Another interlocutor remarked: “Moreover, I want to get married, as I am the only son in the family. Somebody has to take the family lineage forward” (361). Emphasizing the tremendous significance of the family lineage, Mishra describes how “fathers, in particular, regard their sons as extensions of themselves” (360). Exploring queer attachments to natal kinship in Mumbai, Brian Horton tells of how Ram, a gay male activist working for LGBTQ+ inclusion, recalled, “When I came out to my mother, she called me *vansh mrityu*, the death of the clan” (2017: 1060).¹⁷

So, despite the near ubiquitous obligation for both genders to pursue marriage and heterosexual reproduction as central dimensions of adult personhood, we can see how—by not being the core bearers of the ontological essence of lineal masculinity—single women may enjoy a *certain* flexibility regarding potential kinship paths that some men find even more challenging to achieve.

CONCLUSION

The flurry of new media on single mothers in India paints a celebratory picture of women transcending entrenched forms of gender inequality. “Meet the Choice

Mothers: Single Women Who've Opted for Parenthood without a Partner" proclaims: "Even a decade ago, families and society would have judged these women. But times have changed" (Mathew 2019).

However, three women's stories highlight how enduring challenges interpenetrate novel opportunities for never-married single motherhood. These challenges include, first, that to conceive a child sexually out of wedlock remains extremely stigmatized. Second, the wider society strongly expects every child to have a father. Further, although single women are legally permitted to adopt and to conceive children through IVF, they face enormous uphill challenges to be approved for parenthood, while continuing to need to socially demonstrate that they acquired these children in sexually chaste, that is, in asexual, ways. Additionally, access to adoption and especially new reproductive technologies for single mothers is largely restricted to the most cosmopolitan, urban elite. Whether these elite single mothers will usher in enhanced scripts for gender, kinship, and reproduction across social classes, time will tell.