AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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This thesis outlines dominant ideologies and practices that affect women's authority in the urban social milieu of north India. Theories that consider the causes of social stratification by gender as well as social movement patterns are useful for understanding the durability of gender roles. The utility of these theories for understanding the patterns of social organization in India is discussed. Additionally, I report on interviews I conducted with police, non-governmental organization founders and individuals who are involved in and affected by women's issues, in order to outline potential variations in existing practices.

In urban India, traditional and contemporary social practices meld into a proscribed, often volatile cultural setting in which women's roles are stringently defined. In the city of New Delhi, reports of "bride burnings" or murders attributed to family conflicts over dowry have surfaced during the last decades of the 20th century, and resulting protest movements have sparked governmental and grass-roots level reforms. Extreme cases of violence against women are indicative of troublesome

cultural ideologies, including the social and economic devaluation of women. Urbanization has intensified financial negotiations in marriage alliances, and a woman's social worth is increasingly measured according to her market value.

A Women's Movement comprised of various interest groups has contributed to the dialog on the social climate of north India, and feminist advocates have sought to redefine women's roles. Within the hierarchical structure of the Hindu culture, concepts of kinship and community take precedence over personal agendas, and social action is thus driven by family values as well as movement ideologies. State policies designed to address social ills such as domestic violence are ineffectual because they do not address the extant causes of abuse or constraints against women. Independent organizations and activist groups have recognized the need to work within traditional norms in order to advance women's movement objectives, despite the restrictions inherent within patriarchy. These tactics risk accomplishing little social change, and may at times perpetuate practices that limit women's activity.

Countering the Subjugation of Indian Women:

Strategies for Adaptation and Change

by

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University Libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Dawn J. Moyer, Author

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Countering the Subjugation of Indian Women: Strategies for Adaptation and Change

1. Introduction

The aspects of culture which reflect social hierarchies in India have been the subject of study for decades, and women's issues are particularly relevant to anthropological research centered on social change. Women have long been central to political and social movements in India, providing support and impetus for various reform efforts. There has been more recent attention, however, to specific program agendas that address women's issues, such as violence against women. State policy changes and social movements to support mistreated women have attempted to influence practices that adversely affect women. The purpose of this thesis is to explore recent changes in policy and social practice, and examine the ideologies that shape the conceptions of women's roles.

1.1 Urbanization and Change

Contemporary trends and traditional customs are continuously woven into new social practices in urban areas of India, and women find ways to adapt to changing circumstances and cultural expectations. Increasing rates of divorce, reports of spousal abuse and violent threats against women by family members have precipitated actions by grass-roots organizations and the development of state programs to address issues specific to women. Additionally, government mandated resources such as specialized police jurisdictions and legislation have arisen from an increased public

awareness of women's issues. The most effective strategies in use for addressing the needs of women, however, appear to be those developed at the grass-roots level.

For more than a century, independent organizations in India have targeted a variety of issues and improvements to women's social status. Educational and property rights campaigns of the nineteenth century led to women's involvement in the struggle for Independence in the early part of the twentieth century. A growing feminist consciousness and an increased awareness of governmental inadequacy led to a surge in women's activism later in the century, and beginning in the 1970's, women's groups led reform efforts and political movements aimed at women's causes. Feminist ideology has influenced civil movements, as state policies and societal awareness have continued to grow and change.

With increasing urbanization and improvements in technology, changes in family structure and gender roles have emerged. India's cities offer a range of economic opportunities, and as families migrate toward urban areas, urban population increases. Theories of economic and social "modernization" equate urban market processes with high levels of gender stratification, and women's subordination. Women's work is devalued, and so their status within society is diminished. Practices that represent the quantification of female worth, such as the north Indian custom of dowry in marriage, have been correlated with the overall devaluation of women and a shift in marital alliance patterns.

Social factors also contribute to a willingness to constrain women, and in the urban milieu, traditional notions of community accountability have been infused with "modern" ideologies. Contemporary women's movements have promoted the re-

evaluation of these ideologies and deliberated the effects of social reform and family values on women's empowerment. Feminists advocated for state intervention into women's issues, but have expressed frustration at the ineffectiveness of such measures to change dominant belief systems. Recent trends in women's advocacy have recognized the importance of the social and family context in generating change, and have adapted their agendas as a result.

1.2 My Research into Women's Programs and Circumstances

This thesis first presents an overview of the historical social factors that have contributed to the subordination of women, and the cultural values which continue to perpetuate gender roles. Ideals of womanhood and conceptions of a feminine demeanor are woven into mythology and spirituality, as well as polity, and so are integral to an understanding of gender. Social reform efforts and challenges to women's roles have formed the backbone of a women's movement in India, and so movements will also be discussed in relation to cultural change. The problems and resistance that such movements encounter will additionally be examined as they affect movement ideologies.

I will report here on research I conducted in Delhi in 1996 to assess the state and non-profit programs for women. In particular, I will present data from interviews with local police crime units, the founders of a feminist grass-roots organization, urban community members, and finally, the case study of a divorced, middle-class Hindu woman in a suburban colony in New Delhi. These data provide a framework

for analyzing economic theories of stratification and social movement theories that attempt to assign causality to women's problems. These issues are in a constant state of transition, and it is for the purposes of understanding and promoting success for women's empowerment that this study is intended.

2. Social History & Setting: An Overview of Women's Issues

2.1 Ideals of Womanhood

Religious traditions among Hindu Indians have for centuries fostered beliefs

about women's special powers and traits of the feminine to which every woman

should duly aspire. Goddess worship, myths and folk legends about women contribute

to the valoration of certain feminine ideals in both rural and urban communities

(Preston 1980: 9), and many beliefs and customs practiced for centuries are still

evident in contemporary ideals of womanhood. Changes in family structure and

traditional gender roles in urbanizing North India have led some social reformers and

women's rights activists to address the difficulties inherent in the struggle to integrate

new cultural mores with traditional practices. Many women grapple with social

ambiguies as they seek community acceptance for unprecedented life circumstances

(especially evident in cases of divorce, which are becoming more common). Women

may work outside the home while maintaining a household or even while raising

children, a practice more acceptable in urban areas where fewer social restrictions

dictate everyday behavior. Divorce and widowhood are still highly stigmatized, even

among middle class urban communities, although urban women are not as

marginalized in these circumstances as they are in rural villages. It is the uneasy

juxtaposition between new and old which has led to reform efforts aimed at redefining

women's roles and reclaiming status.

Codes of acceptable female behavior are still prevalent in urban settings and

fostered among families of all classes. For women of a variety of religious

backgrounds raised with traditional Indian customs, feminine traits of grace, modesty and self-effacement expected of girls are not viewed as limiting, but instead provide guidelines for approved social conduct. The characteristic of submissiveness in marriage is still often expected of young women given a "proper" upbringing (Kalakdina 1975: 91). Current interpretations of the standards by which both men and women are enculturated note that one's individual needs or desires are ordinarily secondary to the needs of the community. Feminist advocate Madhu Kishwar suggests that "the vast majority of Indian men and women grow up to believe that the interests of the family are primary and take precedence over individual interests," (1997: 2). Women are thus expected to maintain a level of compliance with female-specific roles and practices that are best realized within community and family settings. The ideals of womanhood are inherently connected to the standards of the larger society, and as such, are not easily challenged, though many more women in the rapidly changing urban environment are finding ways to adapt such standards to their individual life circumstances.

Ubiquitous Indian feminine ideals have their roots in religious and historical movements such as the social reform efforts of the 19th century or in unification efforts proposed by spiritual leaders like Mahatma Gandhi. Ideas about women's "nature" and theories about intrinsic feminine qualities extracted from folklore and religious texts were the basis for appeals to women in the politically charged milieu of pre-independence India. Notions of India as the "motherland," combined with idealistic characteristics of it's citizenry as selfless, pacifistic, maternal beings led the nation to

embrace uniform goals and adopt the "higher" elements of the feminine essence, for the betterment of society as a whole.

2.1.1 *Gandhi and the Perpetuation of the Feminine Ideal*

Spiritual and political leader Mahatma Gandhi utilized traditional religious and gender identities in his desire to enlist women in the struggle for freedom, and through his radical views on the women's rights (Desai & Krishnaraj 1987; Fischer 1962) he validated women's frustrations with patriarchal conventions and venerated women's subordinate roles by acknowledging their importance to the nation. Anthropologist Maria Mies proposes that the attitude of moral superiority with which the Indian Ideal of Womanhood was propagated was "greatly due to the fact that it was woven together, at least partly, by the great men of the Independence Movement, above all by Mahatma Gandhi" (1980: 123).

Gandhi was revered by many for the attention he paid to widows and lower caste issues, in a time when there was very little debate about such topics. Few leaders of such esteem spoke of equality, and Gandhi advocated this among all levels of stratification, regardless of caste, gender or religion. Women, he suggested, were especially neglected and in need of uplifting reform:

> Congressmen have not felt the call to see that women became equal
> partners in the fight for (self-rule). They have not realized that woman
> must be the true helpmate of man in the mission of service. Woman
> has been suppressed under custom and law, for which man was
> responsible, and in the shaping of which she had no hand (Fischer
> 1962: 301-302).

"He more than anyone else fought against the oppression and humiliation of women" suggests Mies (1980: 123). Women's roles were to be maternally supportive of the Independence movement and movement leaders, in the same way that India itself was Mother of all her inhabitants. The great spiritual leader felt that it was this virtuous "nurturing" instinct that would draw women into non-violent activism, and Gandhi promoted this ideal as a way to advance the dialog of the movement without raising the ire of the masses.

Critics argue that the success of Gandhi's appeal as a leader for many lay in the fact that he was "reaffirming and not contradicting" of existing gender-specific standards (Desai & Krishnaraj 1987: 151), and was thus able to bring together people with varying agendas and interests. His belief "in (women's) nonviolent and self-sacrificing nature" (Desai & Krishnaraj 1987: 151) served to essentialize women and further idealize their socially proscribed roles:

> Of all the evils for which man has made himself responsible, none is so degrading, so shocking or so brutal as his abuse of the better half of humanity-to me, the female sex, not the weaker sex. It is the nobler of the two, for it is even today the embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge (Fischer 1962: 246).

His response to women's complaints about molestation and acts of violence by men, Mies suggests, was to point to the Hindu goddess Sita as a model, who Gandhi admired for her "self-sacrifice and her ability to suffer injustice without talking back" (Mies 1980: 124). His conviction that "the inner-purity and determination of a woman would suffice to resist even physical violence" was evidenced in his advice to women to "die rather than to yield to the 'brute desires' of a man" (Mies 1980: 124). The level

of spiritual attainment to which women were to be more inherently capable perhaps further muted the voices of active resistance and promoted the silent suffering of a morally upstanding and self-sacrificing gender.

The focus on nationalism and women's identities as maternal, pacifistic beings integral to the freedom movement obfuscated the issues that women's movements of the later part of the twentieth century would continue to struggle with. In her description of Gandhi's teachings, Mies describes the images with which he promoted the idea of woman's natural "constitution" which still prevails today: "A new myth of the Indian woman had to be created, that combined all the womanly virtues which Hinduism preached for several thousand years with the virtues of the modern woman" (1980: 123-124). His efforts to unite India for a common cause contributed to women's conceptions of self worth, as well as the overall ideology of womanhood as part of a larger whole, including family and community. Just as a mother has obligations to her family, so did India's citizenry have an obligation to their country and one another.

2.1.2 *Tradition and Marriage Practices*

In traditional Hindu family structures of north India, marriage is a consideration for families as well as for the individuals involved, as it affects relationships and alliances within the community. Public control over one's private life has long been an aspect of Hindu culture, and marriage was no exception: "it was indeed a concern of the whole community, as endogamy was one of the fundamental aspects of the caste system with a bearing on social rank. Transactional modalities,

rituals and rites in a marriage were therefore part of a public spectacle, supervised and often monitored by the community," (Bandyopadhyay 1995: 14). Caste hierarchies are thus part of a normative system that helps define, determine and also legitimize the social structure. Marriages are important unions designed to reinforce and lend authority to the process of social order.

A Hindu wedding is customarily arranged by relatives of the bride and groom, and requires the transfer of property from the family of the bride to the family of the groom. "Dowry or *daan dehej* is thought by some to be sanctioned by such religious texts as the Manusmriti (van Willigen 1991: 255), and is thus believed to be a religious obligation of the father of a woman and a matter of religious duty. At the time of the marriage, authority over a woman is transferred from her father to her husband, and the dowry given as part of the marital alliance is understood to be a contribution which will stabilize the marriage, benefit the daughter, and possibly enhance the prestige of the donors--the bride's family (Mandelbaum 1970: 106). The traditional exchange of dowry includes cash gifts given to the father of the groom to become part of his common household fund, and household goods, often used by urban newlyweds as they set up postmarital residence.

The reputation of the bride's family is in question upon the arrangement of a marital alliance, and so, important among the presentation of goods by the bride's family is a wedding celebration. This is one aspect of the dowry in which the family of the bride can participate. As an overt display of generosity and a significant indicator of social status, the village level celebration provides an opportunity for the parents of the bride to "activate a network of gift-giving involving families of different jatis

[castes] as well as kin…Establishing a wider range of gift-giving brings returns in power as well as in prestige to a magnanimous donor because the recipients are more apt to support the gift-givers in the perennial contentions of village life," (Mandelbaum 1970: 109).

Traditional rules of endogamy, or marriage within one's caste or status group, are widely practiced in rural villages, but in urban areas, education or other indicators of status may serve to increase the prestige of a family, and thus allow the possibility of a marriage between caste groups (Mandelbaum 1970: 653). For a man, marriage to a woman of lower caste is possible if she brings a large dowry and meets traditional standards of acceptability, including the consideration of such traits as good demeanor, health, diligence, fairness of skin and even physical attractiveness (van Willigen 1991: 256; Mandelbaum 1970: 105). A young woman should be within the range of optimal marriage eligibility age, lest she raise suspicions about the reasons for her unmarried state (Mandelbaum 1970: 105).

Education for women is subject to the concerns of family, and due to perceptions about proper eligibility ages, it is preferable not to postpone marriage for the pursuit of academic studies. Indeed, the value of an education is further weighed against the need to match a daughter's educational level with that of a potential husband's, and so some families fear that "education worsens the dowry problem" (Mandelbaum 1970: 652). Marriage arranging is thus a primary consideration when a family contemplates the education attainment of a girl.

There are many theories about the utility of dowry practices and institutions which perpetuate the practice far beyond the close-knit village community.

Contemporary adaptations of such traditional customs have emerged from functional

and social practices which allowed for relationship building and reciprocity, none of

which are evident in today's urban marital arrangements. Westermarck, for example,

suggested that dowry originally served as a social marker indicating the legitimacy of

the spouse and offspring, and that it was a mechanism for defining women's roles and

property rights in the new household (1921: 428). Other theorists like Murdock

(1949) saw it simply as an economic contribution serving as a confirmation of the

marriage contract. Friedl (1967) and Mandelbaum (1970) described the practice as a

means to suit a woman to her affinal home, since her presence causes an upset in

existing social relationships- for example, disrupting the inherent loyalty between a

son and his parents (Mandelbaum 1970: 63). Dowry has historically been seen as a

sort of anticipated inheritance by which a widow is assured of support, and provision

for her offspring (Friedl 1967; Goody 1973, 1976) and is described as an expression of

the symbolic order of society. Dumont (1957) more generally assumed that dowry

expresses the hierarchical relations of marriages in India and the lower status of the

bride. It's continued utility and the resulting social stresses in the urban arena have

been the subject of activism and social criticism, and will be discussed further in the

third part of this chapter.

2.1.3 *Efforts to Control Women*

The traditional north Indian family structure is patriarchal, and at the village

level, virilocal. A woman, upon marriage, will live with her husband and his family,

and she will assume a subservient role in the household- beneath that of her mother-in-

law, sisters-in-law and any elder women (all of whom are of a lesser status than the household men). Her position in the household will remain difficult until she has given birth to a male child (Tyler 1973: 136). From that time on she is treated with the respect accorded motherhood, but she may not retain authority or power in the household until her son is married, and her daughter-in-law joins the family.

Rules of inheritance ensure that women, whether in the status of daughter, wife or widow, rarely receive any family property, but that they are entitled to maintenance by their male kin (Mandelbaum 1970:35). In the case of widowhood, a woman may stay on with her affinal family, working to contribute to the household, or in some regions she may eventually be re-married to her husband's brother (levirate marriage), though this too is prohibited among the highest caste of Brahmins (Wadley 1994: 135). In villages where a woman might receive property upon the death of her husband, her husband's brother may marry her, in order to keep the property in the family (Wadley 1984: 135). In many regions of north India, however, the position of the widow is among the lowest in the social order.

The social effects of widowhood on a woman are stigmatizing, and her status as a "polluted" or spiritually impure individual has dire consequences for her, including a predominant practice of disallowing widow re-marriage. The "eternalist concept of marriage" (Bandyopadhyay 1995: 17), or the belief that a woman's wifely duties and loyalties to her husband are carried over into death have contributed to prevailing sentiments that widows should not join again in a marital alliance, and must in fact remain celibate for the remainder of their lives. Her sexuality must be

controlled through strict codes of moral behavior, although Bandyopadhyay notes that "such restrictions were not applicable to the widowers," (1995: 17).

Traditional customs of widowhood include the practice of *sati*, in which a widowed woman, prostrate with grief, demonstrates her fidelity and devotion to her husband by throwing herself on her husband's funeral pyre (Tyler 1973: 136). This "selfless act" also spares her family the task of assuming care for her. The practice is now outlawed, and occurs only rarely- though newspapers like the New Delhi Hindustan Times carry occasional articles about such acts (personal contact, Delhi). The role of the surviving widow is that of hapless laborer- suspected of fostering sexual desires and ill will toward those around her: "Not only is she suspected of making aggressive sexual advances toward the men of the house, she must be closely watched lest her pent-up sexuality vent itself on outsiders and disgrace the family," (Tyler 1973: 136). Few middle caste widows remarry, due to the negative perceptions of their purity. For this reason, a young widow will return (if possible) to her natal family, where she may count on her brothers for support.

Practices essential for maintaining the purity of one's body and spirit are important in the conception of rank, or caste distinctions. Any deviation from such codes would "lead to the fall from the ascribed rank, or loss of caste, which implied the denial of interaction with the local community and sometimes even of essential social services," (Bandyopadhyay 1995: 16). Conducting oneself in a manner appropriate to one's jati or caste, and acceptance of the ranked order of society has traditionally been important in maintaining access to Hindu society (Bandyopadhyay

1995: 16). An association with an "impure" widow thus has larger implications for one's purity and community perceptions of social standing.

Endorsements for the practice of widow remarriage and the removal of restrictions on women's activities were salient in the social reform movements of the 20th century. Gandhi advocated for a societal acceptance of widow remarriage and argued for the cessation of the practice of seclusion (purdah) and veiling, which are linked with conceptions of purity:

> (Why) is there all this morbid anxiety about female purity? Have women any say in the matter of male purity? We hear nothing of women's anxiety about men's chastity. Why should men arrogate to themselves the right to regulate female purity? It cannot be superimposed from without. It is a matter of evolution from within and therefore of individual self-effort (Fischer 1962: 246).

The practice of seclusion, or confinement of women to the home, also arose from the desire to control women's sexuality and activities outside the home, and has ordinarily been practiced by upper and middle caste families, in which a women's labor is not critical (Mandelbaum 1970: 38). The appropriation of this practice by a number of social groups has led to an increasing incidence of seclusion among lower status families as well, as a process of "sanskritization," or an attempt to raise the status of lower ranking jati members by imitating the practices of the upper castes (van Willigen 1991: 259). Limiting women's activities allows a family to control public perceptions of purity and morality within the home.

Notions of autonomy for women are thus associated with uncontrolled desires and rampant disregard for social order, and have been carefully manipulated in village

communities as well as urban ones. Within urban areas, restrictions on women's activities have been lessened, with fewer women in purdah, and advances in dialog on topics like widow re-marriage by women's movements. Diminished restrictions on divorce and remarriage have resulted in changing perceptions of traditional social codes (Khanna, in press), although within most social strata, such practices are still highly stigmatized for women.

2.1.4 *The Status of Motherhood and Stigma of Divorce*

For the Indian woman, the important titles worn throughout her life reflect the scope of her duties and her succession of relative roles: she is daughter, sister, wife and daughter-in-law, and in her ultimate achievement, mother of sons (on whom she may depend, later in life). To fail in fulfilling these obligations to one's family is to forfeit the approval of community and the status accorded motherhood. The role of motherhood, both as a security in childrearing years and as a respected social position, is of vital importance in situating a woman within family and society.

Motherhood is considered one of the highest achievements for a woman: the benefits include increased social status (especially if she has provided the family with a male heir) as well as security in old age (Kalakdina 1975: 91) and a recognized position of value within the family. The favor bestowed by family members is a significant factor in the retention of women's traditional roles. Indeed, "there is no doubt that the woman who accepts this role and plays it out to perfection, the ideal Indian wife and mother, is revered and loved," (Blumberg 1980: 3). The limited duration of the child-rearing years, however, and the diminished role of the family

"matriarch" in today's urban nuclear households leaves a woman's status beyond "mother" somewhat ambiguous.

Women who are stigmatized for being separated or deserted, in rural and in urban areas, are granted only marginal status in community life (Kumari 1989: 79). In cases of divorce or abandonment, a woman is often held responsible: "In most cases [in rural villages] it is common to believe that divorces take place due to either a quarrelsome and/or promiscuous wife. Physical diseases and/or sexual problems are also attributed to her," (Kumari 1989: 79). For a divorced couple whose children are married off, the urban wife and mother is left without an active social role, since the status afforded mothers is indelibly linked to the institution of marriage. For female-headed households, economic opportunities are diminished due to obligations to child-rearing tasks and the high degree of stigmatization in employment outside the home.

Those women who find themselves in deteriorating or abusive marriages do not often retain a variety of options or rights in the case of divorce. Marriage laws, written long before women's advocacy groups organized to protest legal disadvantages they suffered in marriage, have long favored fathers in battles over child custody or in disputes about maintenance payments (a form of alimony) made to non-working women (Flavia 1991: 13). Additionally, payments which are made in marital agreements (i.e.: dowry) and often continued throughout a marriage by a woman's family are rarely rescinded upon marital separation. Although marriage and divorce laws vary by religion, the penalty for women in cases of divorce in all Indian religions is both economically and socially damaging.

2.2 Movements and Changing Ideologies

2.2.1 *Early Social Reform in Colonial India*

During British occupation, India experienced an influx of "western" thought, and endeavors to "uplift" or empower peasants and women (indeed, all oppressed groups) were inspired by the stirrings of Indian social agitators and reformers of the early nineteenth century. One early social reformist, a British-educated Bengali Raja named Ram Mohan Roy, advocated in the nineteenth century principles of "reason and individual rights" (Liddle and Joshi 1986: 19) for all people and publicly denounced the caste system and abuses on women. Roy demanded civil and political rights for all oppressed groups and was among the first social reformers to campaign against the practice of widow immolation or *sati* (Liddle and Joshi 1986: 20). As a promoter of such "radical" ways of thinking, his small elite organization, founded in 1828, was a considerable influence on women's groups, which emerged later in the century (*Towards Equality*, p.52-4).

Movements aimed at social change began to propel public perceptions of morality and issues affecting women, without overtly critiquing traditional social structures. Most social reform groups of the nineteenth century, including those which focused on gender issues, were headed by men, and, as a consequence, the groups "did not attack the prevalent patriarchal system in any way" (B.Ray 1995: 179). Rather, the attempt was made to improve the condition of women within the frame of

patriarchy[1]. Women's roles remained largely the same in the nineteenth century, even

as organizations began to challenge some of the "more ugly and unpalatable forms of

oppression and 'backwardness'" (Talwar 1989: 206), such as restrictions on widow

remarriage, child marriage, and purdah.

2.2.2 *Urban and Rural Expressions of Resistance*

The formation of social reform groups in the 19th and early 20th centuries came

primarily from the educated, urban middle classes and as such did not focus on issues

of class as a factor in gender oppression, though this would eventually surface in

feminist debates of the mid-to-late twentieth century (Mies 1980: 8-9). In his analysis

of women's writings in journals and magazines in the early twentieth century, Vir

Bharat Talwar suggests that the earlier need for reform among the urban educated

stemmed from "the conflict between the needs of an emergent 'educated' urban

middle class and the norms of the older, feudal joint-family system" (1989: 205).

Such reforms were an attempt to change the older patriarchal system and bring it in

line with the material needs of the urban middle class. Talwar maintains that urban

middle class families, themselves no longer "productive units" but places which

fostered emotional fulfillment, began to redefine the roles of women, and hence the

earliest women's movements were largely confined to urban areas (1989: 206).

Talwar links women's rights organizations of the early twentieth century to an

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[1] I will refer the reader to Vir Bharat Talwar in his description: "The term patriarchy is used (here) to mean not only the system of familial organization in which the father as head is vested with primary rights, but also to mean *all* the extant economic, social, political and cultural systems which 'naturally' grant the first place to men rather than to women." (p.205, 1989)

awareness of gender issues brought about by nineteenth century women's travels outside of India. Upper and middle class women who "crossed the bounds of familial and cultural restrictions of a patriarchal society" (Talwar 1989: 206) and went to study abroad caused the first stirrings of pre-feminist ideological discourse, he suggests. Women-led movements began to appear, then, as Indian women returning from studies overseas brought an awareness of their "rights" and they began to view traditional women's roles as limiting. Many women returned to India with western models of feminine ideals modeled on the Victorian Englishwoman, and these were combined with traditional feminine Indian cultural traits reflecting a morally superior "glorious ancient" pre-colonial period (B. Ray 1995: 180). Bharati Ray maintains that among the elite colonial Indian classes, this led to an ideology of an educated and 'modernized' wife who aspires to "learn household skills and... to become a good mother and housewife" (1995: 181).

It was not only among the urban elite and educated or literate classes, however, that gender discussions were fostered. Forms of oral expression utilized by rural North Indian women, for example, such as songs or proverbs, often reflected a willingness of women to challenge dominant patriarchal practices and social hierarchies. In her analysis of Indian proverbs, songs and women's use of language, Gloria Raheja proposes that such forms of expression "articulate a subversive moral perspective that is invoked by women as they negotiate their identities within the constraints set by patrilineal kinship in northern India" (1994: 52). Speech or songs as expressions of female solidarity and resistance to gender roles, she suggests, reflect challenges to the dominant ideology, and are viewed by some as "rituals of rebellion"

(Raheja 1994: 50) against oppressive codes of conduct. These and other responses to patriarchal customs are evidence of a continuous movement among Indian women to come to terms with their womanhood.

2.2.3 *The Movement for Independence and Women's Involvement*

Many South Asian historians locate the origins of a formal women's movement in India within the anti-imperialist movement of the nineteenth century (B.Ray 1995; Kumar 1995; Liddle and Joshi 1986; Mies 1980; Shah 1989). Bharati Ray suggests that the culmination of activity related to the Independence movement "provided new forces and influences... to shape the contours of women's consciousness" (1995: 181). Encouraged by men who saw the importance of enlisting women in the struggle against British occupation, many more women were in fact drawn into the Independence movement on Nationalistic, moral and even religious grounds. In her account of the recruitment of women in the Nationalistic efforts of the early twentieth century, Ray describes the attempt to bring women into the movement:

> ...the nationalist appeal was to the indigenous Indian concept of women as the embodiment and transmitter of traditions. Moreover, the nationalist leaders subtly converted the socio-economic struggle against the British into a worship of the motherland, which was in its turn transformed into a mother-goddess" (B.Ray: 183).

Indian National Social Conference (NSC) reformers also contributed significantly to the movement for independence from the British in the late 1800's, as the initiation of the foundation of the Indian National Congress focused attention on the movement for Independence (Liddle and Joshi 1986: 20). The National Social

Conference itself had established as its goal the nationwide emancipation of women, and many contemporary historians and researchers believe that at this point in history the issues of women's social reform and the country's independence from British colonial rule became entangled (Liddle and Joshi 1986; Talwar 1989; B.Ray 1995). The NSC led a campaign against the ban on widow remarriage, it discouraged child marriage; the organization and other reform groups took up the question of education for women and set up a small number of girls schools (Liddle and Joshi 1986: 20). It would be years, however, before education became an option for most women, as social practices continued to relegate women to traditional domestic and family roles.

Many of the women and men who chose to lend themselves to the freedom movement in India did so as an act of patriotism. The first organized efforts on behalf of women's groups across the country focused on the good of society and not on the individual needs of women themselves. From these early efforts, feminist organizations in India have been largely composed of urban and middle-class women, and as such they could neither represent women's issues as a whole nor motivate women to seek social change (Kumar 1995: 64). The connection with the freedom movement did, in effect, generate social discourse on women's issues and help to change ideas about women's life situations. An increased "political and social awareness" arose within the middle classes of the 20th century as did a growing feminist consciousness among women (B. Ray 1995: 177). Challenges to traditional, family-centered social roles and the "artificial dichotomization of the 'male' sphere of the public and the 'female' sphere of the domestic domains" (B. Ray 1995: 178) which was also a Victorian legacy, led many women to ask important questions about the

culture of patriarchy: "The ethos of housework as a woman's only work and wifehood or motherhood as the supreme fulfillment of her life underwent an alteration, since it was proclaimed that a woman also had obligations to the motherland, outside the parameters of the home," (B. Ray 1995: 202). Women began to enter the world of politics, both through gaining social awareness and gathering support for organized efforts to win the right to vote. The concept that women were inferior to men was slowly eroded as intellectual and activist women's organizations began to nurture discussions on women's roles in society (B. Ray 1995: 203). It wasn't until several decades after independence, however, that women's movements began to focus on their particular needs and agitate for changes that would improve conditions for women and change gender ideologies.

2.2.4 *Contemporary Women's Movements and Ideologies*

Feminists as well as traditionalists have struggled to reclaim the notion of a feminine ideal, and present-day social and political agendas continue to shape the identity of the Indian woman and her roles. In her description of the economic limitations and cultural barriers of patriarchy, Maria Mies' description of the "Indian Ideal of Womanhood" (1980: 122) depicts a standard not only "oriented towards the idealized and revitalized mythical figures of women from the epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, but also as anti-image to the Western reference image, the temptation of which was seen as a danger for one's own cultural identity," (Mies, 1980: 123). Indian feminists have worked to define the women's movement in opposition to Western feminism, with a unique emphasis on dignity and self-

preservation. Feminist advocate Madhu Kishwar describes the differences in Western and Indian ideology:

> Feminism in the West came as an offshoot of individualism: the doctrine which holds that the interests of the individual should take precedence over the interests of the social group, family, or the state. However, in India, despite the cultural diversity among its various social, caste and religious groups, there is a pervasive belief shared equally by men and women that individual rights must be strengthened not by pitching yourself against or isolating yourself from family and community, but rather by having your rights recognized within it (1997: 2).

The feminist journal Manushi continues to propel dialog about Indian women's issues and feminist principles, as well as human rights issues and contemporary political practices for rural and urban women of all classes. The magazine urges women to reconsider the ideals of the Indian woman and take strength from a shared heritage: "Our cultural traditions have tremendous potential within them to combat reactionary and anti-women ideas, if we can identify their points of strength and use them creatively," (Kishwar & Vanita 1984: 47). Articles on family, abuse, law, sexuality, social and political topics appear in Manushi's monthly magazine, and feminist expression continues to drive public awareness of women's issues. Such efforts to bring women's matters into public awareness have lent authority and power to the women's movement, and indeed, various organizations have emerged from larger social issues and women's agendas.

Women's organizations have arisen to draw attention and assistance to women faced with extenuating circumstances or dire problems, and many are focused on particular causes deemed problematic, such as divorce, dowry or widowhood. In her discussion of women's lifecourse perspectives, Rhoda Blumberg (1980) suggests that

the responsibilities that women assume, based upon roles spelled out in "sacred literature, law and practice" have not necessarily diminished with the increase in the number of organizations devoted to women's causes (1980: 3). Without grassroots organizations, however, abused or threatened women would find little economic or emotional support, especially when so many are distanced from families in urban areas.

Recent feminist actions in India have not been limited to educated and middle class women, and although feminist campaigns of the late 1970's and 1980's were dominated by city-based groups, a similar growth in feminist consciousness took place in certain rural movements. Demands for independent women's organizations "came from the women themselves, who raised the issues of wife beating and landlord rape through the mahila sanghams (women's committees)" (Kumar 1995: 65). Agricultural laborers movements also emerged from women's involvement in local politics, and some efforts drew support from student's associations as well as political groups.

Concerns about the (lack of) earning power among women and the problems of maintaining dual roles (wage earner and mother) gave way to movements aimed at economic reforms for women. The Anti Price Rise movement of the early 1970's, for example, was taken up by a Working Women's Organization, the Socialist Party, Congress, as well as non-political middle class housewives (Desai 1986: 295), and drew support for social issues at the same time. These actions have proven effective in drawing attention to the economic and social issues of lower caste women.

Women's work has largely centered on domestic duties and unremunerated labor within the household, and as such has isolated women from social settings which

are conducive to the formation of friendships and alliances. Those women who have become employed outside the home have helped found a number of organizations to address issues central to working women (the Self-Employed Women's Association, or SEWA, is one example). The dedication of organizations like SEWA to the expansion of cooperative ventures for women in both rural and urban areas is viewed by many as an "effort to build empowerment" (Calman 1992: 101). The process of organizing economic cooperatives often leads to communication and activism about social issues important to women, such as dowry practices, rape, physical violence, and alcoholism (Kumar 1995; Calman 1992). SEWA emphasizes the "critical importance of unity, organization, and self-reliance for solving these problems" (Calman 1992 101). Women's "Toilers' Organizations" in Maharashtra in the early 1970's, for example, formed in reaction to issues facing working women but also moved on to address social issues that concerned them. Members literally took matters into their own hands by moving from village to village destroying liquor casks to demonstrate against abuses which are often attributed to alcoholic episodes (Kumar 1995: 61; Kishwar 1984: 135). Women who organize such efforts target behaviors which impose hardships on women and families, and their joint efforts have often proved much more productive than laws or regulations which are aimed at similar issues.

Women's organizations have rallied against acts of violence toward women, such as rape and domestic abuse (Kumar 1995; Calman 1994). Groups like the Bombay Forum Against Rape (which is now called the Forum Against the Oppression of Women) have agitated for changes in the Indian Penal Code to protect women's

rights, even forming alliances with political affiliates such as the Socialist and Communist parties to demonstrate for stricter legislation (Kumar 1995: 71). Laws, however, do not address the cultural causes of such practices, and so advocates continue to drive public awareness campaigns that are aimed at bringing a social conscience to the treatment of women.

In her analysis of Indian women's organizations and movements, Leslie Calman reports on the actions taken by the government of India on behalf of women, which she purports "have been prompted, ideologically and materially, by international feminism" (1992: 49). Following a 1967 United Nations Declaration of the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, the government of India constituted a Committee on the Status of Women (CSWI), which released a report in 1975 entitled Towards Equality, detailing examples of the inequalities and abuses of women, as well as suggestions for society-wide improvements. The authors of the document advocated for improvements in women's rights, and stated that "equality for women (fell) not only within the moral scheme of 'social justice' but squarely within the developmental needs of the nation as a whole" (Calman 1992: 50). Women's rights organizations and advocacy groups have utilized the results of this study since it's publication to bolster arguments for legislation and social changes which would institutionalize equality. Diane Mitsch-Bush suggests, however, that these actions involve mutually opposing goals—protection and empowerment (1992: 602).

The publication of Towards Equality did little to impose structural changes on society, and in fact it's writers argued that "the government bears sole responsibility neither for the inferior position of women nor for its remedy" (Calman 1992: 50).

Laws which would protect women, the authors suggested, were in advance of social norms, and would only be marginally effective because of "the normative and structural unpreparedness of the society to accept their goals and means" (Calman 1992: 50). As the only comprehensive study of it's kind to have ever been documented in India, however, the study carries a great deal of authority. The notion that the government of India favors social reforms benefiting women has met with cautious optimism by some advocates and cynicism by many others concerned with the efficacy of bureaucratic solutions to social ills.

2.2.5 *Politics and Change*

Politics in India have long been infused with social and religious ideologies, and the increasing popularity in the 1990's of the "Bharatiya Janata Party" (BJP) and other fundamentalist Hindu political parties has accompanied a shift in social movement concerns and a divisiveness on a national level. The promotion of "Hindutva" or a "purposely vague concept of Indian culture" (Rahman 1999: 2) by political parties has centered around Hinduism, and socio-political agendas have targeted social conservativism and religious intolerance as a factor in Indian nationalism (Bilgrami 1996: 11). Women have been drawn into this movement through grass-roots organizations and income-generating programs for women sponsored by Hindu nationalist parties (Banerjee 1996: 1214). Traditional social roles are reinforced in Hindutva political messages and through the creation of a social niche for women that "challenges the notion of female emancipation that Indian feminists have been trying to disseminate in their country," (Banerjee 1996: 1214).

One party, the "Shiv Sena," has actively recruited lower and middle-class Hindu women through economic and ideological incentives designed to give women a sense of empowerment (Banerjee 1996: 1213).

Although these politically fundamentalist organizations have used feminist issues to attract more women, traditional roles are emphasized, and feminists are portrayed as supporters of Western culture (Butalia 1996). It is this "clever balance between tradition and change" (Banerjee 1996: 1218) that enables such organizations to thrive. The Shiv Sena, for example, organizes rituals emphasizing the primary female role of wife and mother, while at the same time encouraging women to "transcend their domestic role(s) to enter the public realm of political action" (Banerjee 1996: 1218). Leaders within the organization also take action to resolve disputes between husbands and wives, even at times threatening husbands who abuse their wives (Banerjee 1996: 1218). They thus promote a sense of community within a political realm focused on the preservation of social order (such as the family) and ritual empowerment.

The Shiv Sena's construction of ideals of Hindu womanhood based on rituals and ceremonies may instill a sense of comfort and belonging that is lacking in feminist agendas (Banerjee 1996). Without challenging or alienating those who work to maintain the social order, the political leaders of the Shiv Sena are able to draw women together for movement activism by offering them space in the public sphere. This has granted some women a sense of empowerment in the context of traditional social norms and practices.

2.3 Problems and Resistance to Social Practice

2.3.1 *Employment*

Women's work outside the home is often viewed by both sexes as secondary to domestic responsibilities, although this does not necessarily indicate a lack of authority in household matters. Wadley and Jacobson suggest that a gendered division of labor (domestic vs. remunerated) is not entirely indicative of male dominance, but rather is a factor of established gender roles: "women are usually dominant in home activities- in matters relating to birth, child care, housework and food preparation" (1977: 62). In Patricia and Roger Jeffrey's account of rural North Indian village life, however, they conclude that most women cannot manage substantial economic resources unless permitted to do so by their "domestic authorities," including a husband and his family (Jeffery and Jeffery 1994: 137). "There is a widespread disapproval among Indian women themselves of the employment of women outside the home, even for those women whose educational level might make them employable in a range of respectable white collar jobs" (Jeffery and Jeffery 1994: 137). Authority for women is thus bound up in domestic responsibilities and household tasks.

Class or caste awareness often contributes to the ideal of the housebound wife, as the middle-class preference for "stay-at-home" wives and mothers has emerged as a mark of status, isolating women from communities (Kandyoti 1988; Mies 1980; Wadley and Jacobsen 1977). Traditional patriarchal institutions of North India perpetuate practices which constrain women, such as purdah or restrictions on widow remarriage. Kandyoti notes that the seclusion enforced by these practices "further

reinforces women's subordination and their economic dependence upon men"

(Kandyoti 1988: 280). In urban areas, however, the practice especially limits women

whose extended families are often far away. Managing the household is itself a

challenging task, especially as the nuclear family residence gains favor and there are

frequently no other adult family members in the home during the day to lend support

with household responsibilities. For the urban family, a woman's willingness to stay at

home with the children is an essential economic component, albeit an unremunerated

contribution.

For those women who must retain work in order to sustain the household, there

are few support networks available to assist in the simultaneous responsibilities to

family and job. Child "day care" is highly stigmatized, and thus has not received the

support of women's movements or political agendas and is largely unavailable (Desai

1986: 294). Improvements in technology and production have further reduced the

need for women's labor, and as a result, more women find employment working in the

"unorganized sector" (Desai 1986: 295- 296), which provides poor wages and working

conditions. Women who must work outside the home have been forced to live within

the economic and social constraints of a rapidly industrializing urban setting, usually

without the support of social welfare or governmental programs.

2.3.2 *Education as a Mechanism for Empowerment*

Since Independence from Britain, women receive more schooling than they

ever have in the past, although the female illiteracy rate in India remains one of the

highest in the world (Verma 1997: 1). The question of women's education has long

been the subject of debate within the larger context of women's rights. To many activists and theorists, education of women was a primary goal, needed in the struggle to advance women's status in Indian patriarchal communities (Bhasin 1995; Jeffrey and Jefferey 1994). Formal education for Indian girls first gained approval among the urban middle classes of the 19th century, as women's organizations took interest in the issue and began to challenge traditional methods of educating daughters within the home, (Desai & Krishnaraj 1987: 150). The practice of women's seclusion lent preference to this type of education, as it allowed for "learning over a number of years which could often be continued-- or even started-- after marriage" (Desai & Krishnaraj 1987: 150). Isolation from other students was seen as a protection for daughters, and it also insulated young women from the influences of the larger society, preventing the formation of relationships or affiliations with those outside the family.

Conflicting opinions of the importance and use of an education for a daughter (whether it will make her a better wife, or make a marriage arrangement easier or harder, for example) continue to make dialog on educational issues difficult for young women. In regions where families do regularly send daughters to school, the objective of an education is often still tied to gender roles and societal expectations, and as such is often concerned with practical knowledge rather than academic rigor. "While women were to be educated and 'modernized'," suggests Bharati Ray in her discussion of early twentieth century feminist efforts, "they were to bear all the traditional responsibilities of a respectable home and depend totally on the male head of the family" (1995: 181). The goals in the education of young Indian women have thus been largely symbolic and are more closely linked to social practices and status

than to survival strategies. It is expected that an educated woman will contribute socially to the family and community, rather than economically: "Educated women are not only raising their own socio-economic status but they are enhancing intellectual horizon of their children, uplifting the socio-economic conditions of their family and playing a significant role in raising their family status," (Mishra 1992: 43). These values are especially prevalent in economically privileged upper and middle class families, who are more likely to have the financial resources to allocate for a daughter's education. "Lower-middle" class families may also retain the same values, but find it necessary to first train daughters in practical skills and household duties.

Challenging traditional codes of social conduct for girls, such as the practice of purdah (seclusion of women within the home) can be problematic, if not impossible, for an isolated young woman. Girls, for example, are not often afforded the same opportunities for study as boys, since they need to learn more practical skills necessary for their future home-making, and these can take precedence over purely academic subjects, such as literature or science.

Achieving an education equivalent to that of their male peers' has not been an option in many regions of India and is even today contested in many regions. The 1959 Indian Committee on Women's Education aimed to close the gap between the education of women and men, and in 1966 the Report of the Education Commission officially recognized this as a priority, although for economic reasons "women's education was functionally subordinated to the goal of '*development of productivity*'" (Mies 1980: 132; italics mine). Making India a more efficient and strategically successful nation was a goal that the Education Commission identified in its advocacy

of publicly funded education. Colleges and Universities were urged to prepare women for their housewife-mother roles, with emphasis on the ever-greater importance of the economically supportive roles of women and the duties of women to serve society (Mies 1980: 132).

Although formal education at all levels has since become more widely available to women in present day India, it does not necessarily lead to economic stability for families or employment for women. The obstacles to pursuing work outside the home after marriage often outweigh the benefits, especially when one is responsible for domestic duties such as family and household. The types of education parents prefer for girls as opposed to that available to boys reflect these traditional expectations (Ray 1995; Wolpe 1978; Desai & Krishnaraj 1987), and thus the choice of coursework and the level of attainment for young women is often gender based.

Educational pursuits for girls are also more closely linked to class or caste status: poorer, working-class families often cannot justify sending a daughter to school when the assistance she provides in the household or the income she contributes is so important. For middle or upper caste families, on the other hand, the decision to educate a daughter often reflects a desire to improve the pool of potential marriage partners, since those with formal schooling have an increased chance of being matched with a young man of a "better" background (Jeffery and Jeffery 1994: 152; Blumberg 1980: 75). There are perceived economic benefits to education for Indian daughters as well: "Educated women are economically more valuable: they cost less in marriage arrangement(s), can manage household finances, tutor their children (saving tuition fees) and be potential earners," (Jeffery 1994: 128). Employment potential is

increasingly seen as an advantage for middle class families (Blumberg 1980: 75),

although the types of jobs women may find are still limited by responsibilities to

family and social customs which dictate "proper" work for women. In addition, a

woman's earning power may not be enough to justify her absence from the household,

and in fact, may be viewed as a detriment to her role in the family:

> Formal education and a job with regular income do not necessarily
> enhance a woman's status in the family. In fact, she may have to be
> doubly subservient in order to prove that working outside the house
> and bringing in an independent income have not corrupted her or
> caused her to deviate from the 'womanly' path (Kishwar 1984: 29).

The economic value of an education then, is affected tremendously by societal

determinants as well as practical factors for women of all castes and economic sectors.

The potential for employment or social benefits may be seen by families as an

advantage for arranging a marriage, but traditional expectations are still pivotal in the

perception of women's education.

2.3.3 *Urban Marriage and Dowry Dilemmas*

Hindu marriages are still largely arranged according to traditional rules of

endogamy, or marriage within one's social group. The family and community

alliances which characterize village marriages, however, are less pronounced in urban

areas, and patriarchal practices such as virilocality are infrequent, as young couples

prefer to establish their own residence upon wedding. The loss of village-level and

extended family involvement in the pursuit of marital alliances has resulted in a

relaxation of standards for marital practices, and divorce is now more frequent in

urban communities than in rural village life (Mandelbaum 1970: 223; 227). The social stigma of divorce has, however, remained. The traditional practice of providing a dowry has served to further complicate marriages and separations, and it's importance throughout a marriage is often manifested in inter-family disputes. Without the involvement of village councils or family elders, some women have found marriage practices to be difficult, if not impossible to manage.

The dialog of the recent Indian women's movement reflects a continued desire to challenge patriarchal ideologies and the structures that limit or endanger women, such as marital demands. The tradition of dowry is still practiced throughout most of India today, with increasing public attention to its negative consequences. Terms for marriage, especially among urban middle and upper class families, can include large demands of the bride's family for household goods, elaborate wedding festivities and even sums of money to be given to the family of the groom. Some dowry items are given to the bride and are thought to represent a woman's security (Caplan 1985: 47), and usually include jewelry or household items that will remain her property. Recent trends indicate that the amount of jewelry given to a bride is usually determined more by the groom's family than by the bride's (Caplan 1985: 47). Cash goods (money and/or luxury items such as furniture, appliances or even automobiles) are demanded by the parents of a highly educated or well-employed groom. "Parents buy their way into a family of suitable status, as determined by her husband's occupation and income level," (Caplan 1985: 48).

The practice of dowry has been appropriated by members of society at all levels, even spreading to lower caste families who may adopt the practice as a symbol

of higher status (a form of "Sanskritization"), reflecting a desire to take on the customs

of higher castes (Blumberg 1980: 79; Van Willigen 1991: 259). While many families

lament the necessity these financial obligations and the practical constraints that such

economic liabilities pose, the practice is becoming increasingly widespread, especially

among urbanizing communities (Caplan 1985: 48). The parents of the urban bride may

feel that they must agree to large payments in order to get their daughter "well-settled"

in a comfortable home, and hence the necessity of providing for a daughter's marriage

often justifies the taking of dowry in a son's (Caplan 1985: 47; personal contact, 1996

New Delhi).

Numerous feminist organizations have drawn attention to the effects of such a

devaluation of women in marriage, evidenced in cases of dowry related "domestic

disputes" and violent episodes resulting from arguments between families over dowry.

The demands for valuable items by a groom's family can cause household strife for

years, as dowry provisions are not only meted out during weddings, but often continue

throughout the marriage. Daughters are caught in this financial tug-of-war, argue

women's advocates, and the consequences can be dire:

> Kanchan Mala Hardy, 19, was burnt to death in the bathroom of CA
> 1/34 Tagore Garden, New Delhi. She died, apparently, because her
> parents, who had given her clothes, jewelry and household articles
> worth Rs 20,000 as dowry, could not afford to give a refrigerator, a
> TV set and Rs 10,000 more (Kishwar 1984; 228).

Such an emphasis on this economically troublesome exchange has led women's rights

organizations throughout India to fight against dowry, as it is seen as one of the

primary causes for women's subordination and victimization. The government of

India added section 304(B) (IPC) "dowry deaths" to the Criminal Procedure Code in

1984 (Flavia 1991: 9), acknowledging the increasing incidence of dowry related

deaths and making dowry violence punishable. The practice of dowry (and reports of

related violence) did not stop with the act, however.

Organizations that campaign against dowry have sought to frame it as a

problem that needs to be addressed at the local level as well as through the legal

system. Feminist publications began editorializing the problems of dowry exchange in

the 1970's, with criticisms of the media and society which perpetuate the process:

> 'Woman burnt to death. A case of suicide has been registered.
> The police are inquiring into the matter.' For years, such three
> line news items have appeared almost every day in newspapers
> and gone unnoticed. It is only lately that dowry deaths are being
> given detailed coverage. It is not by accident that fuller reporting
> of such cases has coincided with a spurt of protest
> demonstrations (Kishwar 1984: 246).

Women's advocates demanded that action be taken on behalf of the countless women

who fell victim to dowry and domestic violence each year, and their efforts spurred

reactions by government and NGO groups which focused energies on reducing the

incidence of such events.

Non-economic factors also affect the process of arranging a marriage, and may

come into play in dowry negotiations; a woman's education, physical attributes, age,

income, occupation, family background, place of residence and personality are all

features that may be worthy of consideration in an arranged marriage (see Appendix

A). With a noticeable flaw or an undesirable attribute, a woman may prove to be a

more costly match, and unmarried women may commit suicide to relieve families of

the burden of providing a dowry (van Willigen 1991: 369). Self-arranged marriages (sometimes called "love marriages") are gaining societal acceptance, but family representatives still carry out negotiations for the exchange of dowry, and the marriages themselves are not considered as stable. Without the emotional, financial, and other help, the marriage may flounder (Caplan 1985: 42).

Families considering the eventual marriage of their children must plan ahead for the expense of the dowry that they must provide for each daughter, as well as the expense of an education or skills which may make a girl an eligible match. The rapid rate of inflation has caused economic hardships on many parents, when calculations made in her childhood do not prove to be sufficient for her marriage (Caplan 1985: 48). Anti-dowry activists have drawn attention to the preference for male children which they link to the economic pressures created by dowry, and which has indirectly led to a devaluation of girls and women. For many families concerned with planning the costs of their children's marriages, modern technology like sonogram and ultrasound equipment has proven effective in lessening the economic risks of pregnancy, and it has contributed to an increase in the practice of female-selective abortion, a consequence of which is a disparity in male and female birth ratios. "Women are becoming a party to the destruction of their own species as they are unable to break out of the vicious cycle of undervaluation by others and by themselves," reported a voluntary women's group, Tinnari (Verma 1997: 2).

A daughter's marriage takes a long time to prepare, and due to changing expectations, dowry payments may be demanded of a bride's family for years after her marriage (Caplan 1985: 48). Agreements and transactions made in the early stages of

a marriage may be disputed in later years, as the groom's family makes extra

demands, or as the bride's is unable to fulfill commitments. Dowry payments can be

so continuously burdensome that additional daughters are financially condemning, and

families feel that they can not take the chance of having a daughter because of the

economic liability (Khanna: in press).

The institution of dowry differs among cultural groups and regions, but its

roots in religious practice (van Willigen 1991: 255) have firmly instilled the concept

of women's dependence and servility into cultural value systems throughout India.

Reformers who have initiated campaigns against the practice have succeeded in

enacting legislation prohibiting dowry, and the government has established special

Crime Units at local police stations in New Delhi where inspectors serve as

intermediaries in disputes which may erupt in violence. The reality of social practice,

however, has shown that little change has resulted since the law banning dowry was

enacted in 1962 (Van Willigen 1991: 257), and suspicious reports of women's "deaths

by burning" continue to appear regularly in Indian newspapers. Thus the

consequences of dowry expectations have had the most dire effect on brides

themselves, and such reports have received the attention of anti-dowry violence

protesters as well as feminist activists.

2.3.4 *Domestic Violence and Support for Women*

Growing attentiveness to domestic violence has resulted in governmental

programs and independent organizations that provide assistance to women and

children who flee dangerous homes. Victimization varies from physical abuse to

emotional mistreatment or threats by various family members (See Appendix B).

Manushi magazine reported on the conditions at a Women's Centre in Bombay, and

the range of harassment cases that were evidenced there:

> The majority (74 out of 102) were married women who were being
> abused by either their husbands and/or in-laws. The most frequent
> abuse was beatings, which were at times brutal. Other 'creative'
> ways that husbands and in-laws victimized wives included trying
> to incarcerate a normal wife in an asylum for the insane,
> threatening to kill the wife if she did not conveniently vanish from
> her husband's life, restricting her mobility to the extent of
> assaulting her if she looked out the window, bigamy and
> extramarital affairs, non-support, starving the wife, throwing the
> wife out of the marital home while refusing to part with her
> jewelry and other belongings, demanding that the wife hand over
> total earnings, and demanding that the wife stop working (Manushi
> magazine 1991: 19).

Practical problems such as where to live and how to earn a living raise dilemmas for

women, as social and economic pressures create immense difficulties. Those who do

not return to live with their natal family still rarely live on their own. Leslie Calman

notes that "nearly all women, even unmarried urban professionals, live in a family

setting," (1992: 138). For the fugitive woman, hostels run by social service agencies

or the government are often the only option.

Legally, a woman does not have a claim to her marital home in the event of a

divorce, even if she helped finance it (Calman 1992: 138), nor do inheritance practices

provide for women. Small "maintenance" payments may be provided for her upon

divorce, but prior to divorcing many women have few economic supports. Battered

women's shelters are few, and many do not admit women if they have their children

with them; in 1985, the government opened Delhi's only shelter for women with children (Calman 1995: 138).

Women who may wish to leave non-violent homes have still fewer options, and so must rely on relatives or other personal resources for support. The lack of infrastructure for such support networks is attributed, at least partially to the fundamental conservatism of the state in relation to rape and domestic violence; new laws are merely slight improvements over the old (Calman 1992: 140). On a small scale, autonomous women's organizations try to provide both courage and resources for victims of abuse, and many offer individual counseling and provide limited material resources (personal contact, New Delhi 1996). These centers and the organizations that support them were products of women's reform movements, and continue to lobby for state programs and legislation that supports victims. Feminist activists continue to agitate for legislative change and public awareness of such problems, but the process is proving to be a laborious effort.

2.3.5 *Legislation and Societal Awareness of Women's Issues*

Grass roots organizations have long recognized the need for public awareness and support for women's issues, and in urban areas in particular, women's groups still strive to advance community-wide awareness of crimes against women. The societal debate about the definition of rape or similar acts of violence has a long history of ambiguity, and complaints of harassment against women have commonly been labeled "Eve-teasing" and are rarely punished (personal contact, New Delhi 1996). Women who have attempted to report cases of harassment or abuse to the police have often

found little support or follow-up, and eventually find the system too difficult to use, returning in frustration to the abusive household. Reported cases of violence or deaths perpetrated by in-laws and husbands, many of which might have been prevented by preliminary police intervention, led anti-violence protesters to insist upon special attention to women's issues by local police. "Crime Cells" (originally called "Dowry Cells" because they dealt primarily with disputes over dowry) were located at police stations in New Delhi and were staffed with female inspectors and police officers trained to deal specifically with "women's problems." The effectiveness of such centers is questioned by some women's rights advocates and social reformists, who advocate for stricter laws and continued campaigns for social reform.

Women's advocacy groups lobbied in the 1980's for further governmental attention to crimes against women and drew public awareness to the "trivialization" and carelessness of the police when hearing women's complaints of violence (Kishwar 1984: 214). Family Courts, originally called "Women's Courts," were established in 1984 by the "Family Courts Act" with the intended purpose of "restoring family unity" (Menon 1989: 155). The courts provide counseling and individualized treatment for Indian families, and in particular for women. They were instituted with the understanding that:

> Women and children are the victims in most cases of family litigation and they are the people who need most protection of the law. As such the approaches and procedures of the family court ought to be considerate to the problems of women and children and appropriate supportive services for such treatment must be available (Menon 1989: 155).

Staffed almost entirely with female legal personnel, the special courts attempt to expedite an otherwise long and arduous process which is not amenable to a family's best interests. Additionally, one suggested function of the courts was to make the process of pursuing legal action less threatening for women, who might otherwise avoid the process of litigation altogether (National Public Radio, 1995), and whose needs might be neglected altogether in a normal court of law. The special courts carry out the same laws as ordinary courts, but may retain additional services such as medical and psychological expertise (Menon 1989: 158-159) which may assist in settling a case. The counselors, advocates, judges and professional personnel of the Family Courts purportedly proceed with the family advocacy agenda necessary to support individual complaintants; they do not, however attempt to address the larger social inequalities which create the need for such specialized courts in the first place.

Women's advocates are critical of the courts and the way that they function. The difficulty and expense in navigating the system, the "family" agenda which does not support women's individual rights and freedoms, and the "haphazard" institution of the courts which do little to support women's self-esteem are all complaints that women's editorials in the feminist journal Manushi outlined in a series of articles critiquing the court system (Flavia 1991: 9-16). Flavia goes on to suggest that "Under the present Act, the court officials, both judges and marriage counselors, are committed to preserving the family and not necessarily to the interests of the woman. Such reconciliation efforts often jeopardize the woman's interest and may even prove fatal to her" (1991: 12-13). The initial purpose of the courts has been compromised,

they argue, by bureaucratic mediocrity and an apathy to women's suffering (see

Appendix C).

3. Theory

In order to understand the components of Indian culture that perpetuate gender roles and women's subordination, I will examine the framework of two theories that explain the existing social order, and outline their implications. Economic theories of gender seek to explain the system of stratification in India that leads to the devaluation of women, and the root causes of oppression. Social movements theories offer interpretations of social reform by examining the individual contributions of organizations to larger movement agendas.

3.1 Economic Theories of Stratification

Theories of development and gender within anthropology have sought to explain the ways in which industrialization and "modernization" have complicated economic and social organization, leading to social and gender stratification in developing societies. Laurel Bossen suggests that as societies increase in complexity, more elaborate socio-political systems emerge and social strata become necessarily segregated (1989: 318-350). Theories which implicate increased food production and it's accompanying sedentism with a specialization of labor, for example, are used in anthropology to explain the predominance of stringent social hierarchies in complex societies (Kottak 1999: 136), such as in the labor specialization represented by India's hierarchical caste system. The development of classes or strata has historically been attributed to the mechanization of labor and technological change which accompanies

industrial capitalism (Plattner 1989 : 380). In developing countries, stratification may also be derived from existing patterns of social organization.

Socioeconomic theorists presume that an increase in levels of technological development leads to economic opportunities and increased political power for the growing middle classes (Lenski 1966; Giddens 1973). Rae Lesser Blumberg associates economic autonomy with greater self-esteem for women and a stronger voice in household decision-making (1989: 3). Many gender theorists argue, however, that an increase in technology and stratification is exclusionary, further exacerbating inequalities among social groups and is particularly detrimental to women, since the significance of their labor is measured in terms of market values (Desai 1986: 289). The high degree of gender stratification in patriarchal countries like India is in part ascribed to the devaluation of women's work under capitalism and the subsequent restriction of women's labor to unremunerated domestic tasks or informal sector employment (Blumberg 1995: 4).

Laurel Bossen utilizes these economic theories to assign causality to the increase in the practice of dowry in India: "the direction of payment is at least partly a cultural reflection of economic contributions by sex: where women do farmwork, bride wealth is paid [to the bride's family]; where men are farmers (and especially if they own land), they may be able to demand a wife who brings dowry,"(1989: 345). This emphasis on the economic contributions of women to the family is used as an explanation for the implementation of practices that limit women's authority.

The effects of industry demands on social organization have also had implications for women's social obligations and roles. Stuart Plattner describes the

process by which capitalism supports the preponderance of smaller family units and an increase in the economic independence of the nuclear family: "Parents and children lived separately from relatives who could help out with economic needs, which made workers dependent upon the wage relation and forced labor to flow wherever industry demanded it,"(1989: 380). Increased technology and development thus causes a shift in level of family organization, and for women, this can adversely affect economic opportunities, as child care and household obligations interfere with access to employment.

In her 1970 study of economic development and gender, Esther Boserup determined that the integration of technology, increases in population and agricultural changes were more likely to marginalize women, and that their workloads would continue to rise as the degree of autonomy that women enjoyed in these societies decreased (Boserup 1970). Opportunities for women in the "developed modern world" argued Irene Tinker (1976: 33), are restricted, even as familial obligations become more burdensome. Barbara Miller (1981) further elaborated on this idea, in that women's access to social support in various forms is related to their productivity and that patterns of excluding women from economic production roles varies by caste, with fewer restrictions on lower caste women and greater high caste restrictions on women's employment. The acceptance of social practices which limit women's activity, such as purdah or employment strictures within the family isolates women and precludes the formation of "cohesive groups" with other women (Kessler 1976: 45). Mobility, however, is essential to the development of social movements, as "A group has a better ability to define, publicize and negotiate its worth than a solitary

individual," (Bossen 1989: 330). Middle and upper caste women thus are more limited by social conditions in their capacity to effect social change and gain economic independence.

3.2 Social Movement Theories

Societal attentiveness to gender issues has led to pressure for governmental policies that support women, and social movement theorists have sought to interpret the relationship between the state and family in the democratic, free-market nations (Mitsch-Bush 1992: Calman 1992). The success of a social movement, for example, is defined largely by gains in policy reforms such as legislative changes or by the establishment of regulatory agencies instituted to affect social practices (Jahan 1995: 103). Women's movements in particular have concentrated their efforts on issues of public policy in social reform, and in the case of women's rights, governmental redress has been targeted as an important step to attaining social awareness.

Frequently, movements aimed at social reforms and changes in state policies have not been proven to affect conditions of everyday life for marginalized people, however, nor do legislative changes necessarily lead to substantial improvements in social institutions (Mitsch-Bush 1992: 589). In her analysis of policy reform aimed at domestic violence against women, Diane Mitsch-Bush assesses the factors that she considers instrumental to any assessment of real social change:

> If we define women's movement success as having access
> to institutionalized political decision-making channels or as
> getting policy reform legislated, we ignore the ways that
> liberal democratic states themselves are structured by

> gender inequality. Simply getting legislation passed or new agencies established may strengthen the capacity of the state to incorporate women's movement demands without addressing the foundations of such demands (Mitsch-Bush 1992: 590).

Social movements, in fact, are often viewed as a reaction to the failure of government programs to address human rights issues or socioeconomic crises. Evidence of corruption among governmental officials in India and the increasing lack of confidence in state institutions led women to mobilize movements aimed at environmental, political and social reforms (Calman 1992: 3). Such a diversity of objectives is not necessarily detrimental to movement effectiveness. The decentralized structure of the Women's Movement in India, Calman argues, has resulted in the capacity to engage simultaneously with many levels of government and society, and may be essential for building rights, economic and political power, and status (1992: 4).

The disparity between the implementation of state policy reform and ideological change in a society is especially troublesome for women's movements aimed at securing women's rights and ending domestic violence. The assumption that the family constitutes a domain separate from polity and economy makes the issue of gendered social reform a complicated task for social activists (Mitsch-Bush 1992: 588). Legislative changes and policy implementation are celebrated by activists as successful steps toward improving women's agendas. With an inevitable loss of momentum that follows successful reform efforts, state policies that cater to movement ideologies will likely do little to affect long term social change. Movement

proponents in fact often question the very notion that state structures themselves can affect real change.

Leslie Calman situates the rewards and strategies of successful social movements in the ability to change public perceptions of society and government, as well as in the individual rewards of community, personal autonomy, access to decision making and self esteem (1992: 9). A recognition that state policies alone cannot facilitate empowerment is an essential component of the women's movement in India. She suggests that:

> their concern is as much to recapture from the state a space within civil society in which there can be meaningful participation and thus personal and community empowerment. This requires resisting the expanded capacity of the industrialized state to control social and cultural life, and regaining from the state the means of production of symbolic goods... of information and images, of culture itself (Calman 1992: 9).

Calman notes that the state is but one of several institutions, including religion and the family, that should be seen by movement participants as factors which may constrict or facilitate women's ability to make important decisions about their lives. All are important considerations in the process of affecting social practices and cultural change.

In order to understand the mechanisms through which movements achieve change, it is essential to consider the intersection of social and state influences, as well as movement ideology. In order to transform social consciousness, the women's movement in India must "name and analyze the problem of women's inferior status and power, and point the way toward their transformation," (Calman 1992: 10).

Additionally, small groups with specific purposes draw a great deal of attention to various causes, and fundamental changes often begin at the grass roots level. In order to gain empowerment, movements and organizations necessarily have to become involved in political action and social unrest. These are important parts of the process of affecting social change, and enable women to become empowered personally, familially and socially.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Questions:

In preparing for my visit, I established a list of resources and planned to conduct interviews with users and administrators associated with the women's courts. My plan was to use the following questions as a guideline for my study/project:

- How does the legal system work for women?

- Who is using the women's courts?

- How effective is the system in meeting the needs of women?

- What types of cases do the women's courts hear?

- What other methods do women use to find solutions to or discuss their problems?

I conducted a preliminary literature search for information on women's legal aid organizations in New Delhi, arranged to meet and talk with women from an Indian women's journal, contacted women's legal aid organizations and lawyers, and looked for published accounts of the workings of the courts.

4.2 Setting & Informants:

In August and September of 1996, I spent four weeks conducting fieldwork in urban New Delhi, during which time I stayed at the home of a 39 year old Hindu woman and her two teenage children, a daughter age 12 and a son 17. The Sinha family was in a difficult economic situation, in that the husband and father had left the

family, and the remaining three family members had spent the nine year interim adapting to his absence.

The Sinha family resided in the neighborhood of Dr. Khanna's family, and as such, I was privy to information about their living arrangements, and was able to establish a rapport with them within a brief period of time. Dr. Khanna arranged my stay with the family, and I was considered a "paying guest"- an economic benefit for the Sinhas and a comfortable setting in which I could conduct my research. This living arrangement provided me opportunities to partake in "purposive conversations" (Fitchen 1990: 19), acting as participant/observant in the daily activities of an urban, middle class Indian family. During my stay I was involved in daily household activities and was able to develop a relationship of mutual trust with my host family as well as with some of their neighbors, relatives and friends. I visited the Hindu temple for prayer with Anita and her children, went to market, visited relatives and ate regular meals with members of the local community, and I was encouraged by my informants to ask questions (and answer a few as well), as they repeatedly expressed interest in my research.

As both guest and family friend, I was in contact with the Sinhas' friends, relatives and neighbors with whom I was able to maintain casual and semi-structured conversations. Nearly all of my informants were of a middle class background, though it was not possible in all cases to ascertain the caste, as many people were reluctant to label themselves and others in this manner. I have used fictitious place names when necessary in order to protect the confidential nature of the interviews, and for the privacy of my informants, I have also changed the names of people represented here.

In addition to the open-ended interviews with the aforementioned community members, I conducted semi-structured and formal interviews with three people from two agencies in New Delhi that provide assistance to women in need. My plan had been, from the outset, to focus on those governmental agencies which address the legal needs of families, and those of women in particular. Once there, however, I quickly decided that my time would be better served discussing these issues with those women most directly entrenched in the frustrations and ambiguity surrounding the struggle for autonomy.

4.3 The Iterative Process:

Using the iterative process of conducting anthropological research (Bebee 1995), I restructured my focus and the questions I asked of my informants based upon the information I found to be most interesting and useful while I was there. In discussing issues of autonomy, social obligation, and survival strategies with Indian women themselves, I found that my research questions began to center less on formal channels of resistance and change, and more on strategies of adaptation. For this reason, I chose to focus my attention on discussions with women whose circumstances did not clearly fit within existing social structures and whose needs were not served through governmental or legal channels. As a result, I came away with information from the following organizations and individuals:

- I conducted two semi-formal interviews with three women from a grassroots organization that acts as a liaison between women and the legal system (Shakti Shalini);

- I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven female and two male New Delhi police officers at two different "Women's Crime Cells," and at the regional police headquarters in a suburb of New Delhi.

- I completed detailed, semi-structured ethnographic interviews with a total of 12 men and women, ranging from 12 to 50 years of age, in the community where the Sinha family lived and in the north Indian village where Mrs. Sinha is from.

4.4 Questions I asked:

4.4.1 *Of Residents:*

- What do you think of the practice of dowry?

- Have you heard of dowry problems?

- Why do you think dowry problems occur?

- How do you think "women's" issues (i.e.: dowry) should be dealt with?

- Do you think the government is doing anything to help women in dealing with dowry problems? Should it?

- How will you plan your children's weddings? (Will you ask for/accept dowry?)

- What would you do if your child came to you and told you they had fallen in love and wanted to get married to a person of their own choosing?

- Do you think education is important for daughters?

4.4.2 *Of Women at Shakti Shalini:*

- What kinds of cases are referred to your organization?

- What are the procedures you advise women on in the case of divorce?

- Where do you begin when someone comes to Shakti Shalini with a harassment complaint?

- What is Shakti Shalini's role once a client has been introduced to a lawyer or counselor?

- What kinds of assistance does Shakti Shalini offer for emotional support? Living support?

- What kind of assistance does Shakti Shalini offer men? What types of family matters might the organization prefer not to handle?

- How do you think conditions for women in India can be improved?

- Do the women who come to Shakti Shalini primarily live in urban areas?

- Do the Women's Courts serve the needs of men and women or are they primarily for women? How do you think that affects the outcome of a case?

4.4.3 *Of Crime Cell Personnel:*

- What are the procedures for a woman filing a complaint?

- What kinds of cases do you most often see (here)?

- How long has the Women's Cell been operating?

- Is there any special training that officers receive?

- What do you consider the principle problem for women who seek assistance?

- How has your job changed in the last 5 years?

- How do you address violence cases?

4.5 Problems I encountered:

Due to the distance I had to travel to reach the city from the suburb where I stayed (50 minutes to two hours, depending on mode of transport), and the difficulties I encountered in locating addresses for agencies, I was not able to contact the number of organizations that I had originally planned for my visit. Often simply locating an agency or a person with whom I might address queries required repeated attempts by telephone and at last resort an attempt to locate an address. There were several agencies for whom I had an address and a telephone, but where neither was accurate, and for whom I was not able to procure forwarding information. Additionally, problems with telephone communication including poor audibility, lack of accessibility and a propensity of mis-published or changed telephone numbers required more of my time than I had planned. Daily power failures, sometimes for several hours, (and in one instance for several days) made the sweltering summer temperatures themselves an obstacle to long outings.

I found that my conversations with people at agencies or in formal settings were often more fruitful if I was casually engaged in discussion and let the informant guide the process. Often my informant willingly allowed me to observe the details of

their daily jobs or activities, or ask casually inquisitive questions. I would take notes as we talked, and this was normally acceptable. At several locations, however, I found that as soon as I tried to ask more formal structured questions, I was informed that I was not allowed a "formal interview"- and several times explicitly: "You will not mention any names." As promised I have changed the names of all of the discussants I interviewed.

A factor which impacted my productivity but for which I found no practical solution was the social perspective I encountered on time. Throughout my visit (and I had mistakenly believed I had prepared for this before I arrived) I retained a moderate level of frustration with the ease others seemed to feel, (but in which I felt lacking) in waiting. As a first-time visitor to India, I was not always clear about phrases such as "just now," which seemed to average between ten minutes and an hour, and after politely inquiring several times and with several people, I was often left with conflicting opinions of the same set of information. This standard applied to situations as diverse as waiting for the bus to meeting with an interviewee, and I did not develop a sense of consistency or the ability to predict these sorts of hurdles before I left the country. If I had the economic means to stay on for several more weeks or months, I might have become more efficient in my research tactics.

A final note on my research strategies: I am not a speaker of Hindi, and required the assistance of (and am grateful to) Dr. Sunil Khanna for translation and mediation in the visits to the offices of Shakti Shalini. Therefore the information resulting from the interviews there is a product of both Dr. Khanna's and my notes, observations and recollections.

5. Data

5.1 Women's Crime Cells in New Delhi:

In order to attempt to understand the relevance of the legal system in urban

North India to women, I visited three "Women's Crime Cells" in urban and suburban

neighborhood police stations in New Delhi during a three week period in 1996. By

meeting with police inspectors and discussing the services being utilized by women, I

hoped to gain some insight into the utility of such services for women who were faced

with difficult or threatening marital circumstances. The Crime Cells were advertised

on television, and so I thought it was likely that there were women who knew about

the system, but who would not be likely to use it.

5.1.1 *Community Support for Women:*

Preliminary discussions with middle class community members, in particular

my host family as well as neighbors and one relative who was visiting, elicited

positive responses to queries about the necessity of the Crime Cells, but people were

often skeptical about the police themselves:

> The government must do something about these cases- we hear
> about them in the newspapers and on the T.V. The police- they
> don't do anything about it when someone complains, but this dowry
> system makes problems for so many people. It is illegal, you know
> (to accept or demand dowry)
> — Raj, male (age 17)

The role of police in the community was perceived as important, and yet there was a general distrust of police officers or inspectors themselves, as reports of corruption and abuses of power were widely circulated.

Many individuals were sympathetic to the needs of women who may have complaints of "dowry abuse" or spousal abuse, but felt that few would seek out such services:

> Oh, yes. It's very bad. Women are treated very badly here. They can go to the police station, but then their husbands will be even angrier with them. The Crime Cells are there to help those women, but I don't know how many of them will go
> - Kalpana, unmarried female (age 24)

While there was an awareness among the people in the middle class suburbs of New Delhi of cases of abuse or dowry threats, because of the stigma involved and potential consequences to the family, many people felt that the services would not be utilized by those women who most needed it.

5.1.2 *Visits to Police Station "Women's Crime Cells"*

In several visits to different "Women's Crime Cells" in New Delhi police stations, I asked questions of personnel in order to ascertain their perceptions about the purpose of their duties consulting with women. It was my understanding, based upon conversations with police personnel at the first two stations I visited, as well as on discussions with residents of New Delhi, that the Crime Cells provided a service to local families by intervening in marital disputes and family conflicts. This was especially relevant in light of recent media (and grassroots organization) attention to

cases of physical abuse and violence which had not been adequately investigated by the police, or which had never made it to the point of a formal complaint.

5.1.3 *Meeting with Female Inspectors*

At the primary police station that saw the majority of the complaints in the area, I interviewed several female Inspectors and one male Commissioner, both individually and in small groups. I asked about their experiences dealing with women's complaints and family disputes, and tried to ascertain their perceptions of their own roles within the community, and their methods of addressing domestic problems that are not normally discussed among neighbors, friends or family. I was also interested in the types of cases that were most frequently brought to the police stations, as well as the expectations of the complaintants.

I was offered lunch, and was thus able to spend time informally chatting with and observing four female inspectors, all of whom appeared to be between 40 and 50 years old. Several of the women with whom I spoke referred to themselves as "counselors" whose duties were to "counsel couples to reconcile." Inspector/ officers, they told me, were trained as police officers, with weapons training, and additionally with instruction in psychological counseling, and in counseling women to "become independent" (financially). The women seemed to enjoy the level of responsibility involved in their jobs, and they confidently assured me that their year of training at the Delhi School of Social Work had been good preparation for this work: "We deal with all kinds of cases."

When I asked about the types of cases they see, and the reasons a woman might come to the station, three of the women told me that they see women for a variety of reasons. There are those who complain of matrimonial abuse or extramarital relations, and also there were cases of dowry disputes, sometimes involving accusations of physical abuse. The majority of the time, they emphasized, they settled "family quarrels," and the officer may or may not file a crime report.

The duties the women performed at the Police Station ranged from typing or notetaking to counseling individuals who came in with complaints. Part of the job, one woman told me, was to help people to "save their marriages":

> Sometimes a woman will come alone, and sometimes with her mother, or another family member. We listen to their complaints, and then call her husband to come and discuss this with her. Sometimes we call in other family members to be interviewed.
> - Uma (police inspector)

The inspectors told me that they worked to help with "reconciliation and restoration." Asked how they approach this task, an inspector said: "The woman will come, and at her request, we will call the husband. Our first effort is to work toward a compromise. In the case of a divorce, it goes to the Judiciary Court, not to the police station."

When I asked about whether they saw cases of dowry related deaths, one of the woman told me: "Oh yes, all the time!" Demanding dowry is a crime, they told me, and most cases are "recommended out" if the man or his family demands dowry. "He can be arrested," they told me, though I was not told how often this occurs. Asked how they deal with cases where a death is suspected to be related to a dowry dispute,

she quickly responded that: "Well, it's really not our jurisdiction," and she referred me to the Chief Commissioner.

5.1.4 *Meeting with the Police Commissioner*

I met with a Commissioner, P.K.- a man in his early to mid 50's in a disheveled and dimly lit office which bustled with people who arrived and left while he made telephone calls. Between visitors and phone conversations he discussed with me the more extreme cases they saw at the Crime Cell:

> In burning cases, the victim is rushed to the hospital, and the local police visit the hospital and record the woman's statement. They would then initiate the prosecution. We see cases of murder, dowry, rape, burning... all include a medical examination at a government hospital. Each district has a department to deal with the medical legal cases.

The Commissioner differentiated between matrimonial disputes, however, and cases of domestic violence. The Social Platform of Police, P.K. told me, looked after "matrimonial disputes." If there was no "settlement" (solution), the couple was counseled, in order to "reunite the family if possible." They then try and restore household or personal items belonging to both the man and the woman (often items given as part of a dowry, and returned to the woman), and if this is not possible, then they are referred to their local police department for registration of the case. Asked if these disputes ever involved accusations of abuse, he responded that "In cases of violence, we will make an investigation."

Mr. P.K discussed the special circumstances of some of the women who come to the Crime Cells: "Probably ninety percent of the women who come here are

domestic housewives, and they are more interested in reuniting the family. We don't see many cases of women who are seeking divorce." When I inquired about the nature of the complaints of the women who appear at the station, the Commissioner told me that there was a range of circumstances for which women come seeking intervention. He pointed out, however, that they did not see too many cases of violence because "those women are too afraid to leave the home, or involve the police. Most of those cases are never heard." The main purposes of the Crime Cells, he offered, were for "negotiations" or "removing problems" for women.

Thirty of the inspectors at this the largest of the Crime Cells were women, Mr. P.K. told me. "There are also counselors at the Ministry of Social Welfare who refer people who are scared of the police, or people who need more counseling." He emphasized the counseling role that the inspectors played at the station. Mostly they were involved with "family misunderstandings," he informed me, where there was "interference by the in-laws" (dowry demands). "Most cases involve a woman who wants police intervention for reconciliation."

5.2 Shakti Shalini

At the offices of a NGO/grassroots organization for women in urban New Delhi, I discussed with its founders the issues, problems and solutions presented by marriage laws and traditional patriarchal practices such as dowry exchange. The non-profit, women-run organization called "Shakti Shalini" (woman power) had been established when the mothers of two young women who had died of "dowry abuse" found little police follow-up support in the cases of their daughters' deaths. They

encountered a dearth of resources to help with domestic violence and dowry abuse problems, and so they formed the organization to help other families avoid such tragic circumstances. "Krishna" told us that it was the only one of its kind in New Delhi, and that they provide advice, legal aid and sometimes shelter for women who are abandoned by their husbands or who leave a marriage due to abuse.

5.2.1 *Assistance for Women*

Shakti Shalini does not advertise, nor do they ask for payment for their services. The people who work with and for them may be paid through donation funds if necessary, and all of their consultants, lawyers and aids are employed elsewhere and contribute their time and efforts to the NGO at little or no cost. The women and families that the organization assists reside largely in the economically deprived "slums" of urban New Delhi. Shakti Shalini provides help with legal matters handled through the courts, and acts as a liaison between women and the police, lawyers, judges and charitable organizations- all free of charge. "The legal system isn't weak," Krishna told us, "it's the enactment of the law that's the problem." They work to help women navigate the bureaucracy of the legal system which functions to serve a population of more than ten million people. "No one should have to go through these problems alone," Krishna told me. "We know it's difficult to live in a household where you are not respected. Every woman wants to have the respect of her family."

Since its inception, the organization has assisted women with divorce, especially in cases of abandonment or domestic abuse. They work to help a woman

become self-sustaining by providing for immediate needs such as shelter and clothing, and in helping women develop self-confidence by assisting with education, counseling, emotional support, child care, as well as employment networking. They try to work with the New Delhi Police Department and the Women's Crime Cells to "alleviate the fear, anxiety and exploitation by the police and lawyers" so that the process of utilizing the "system" is easier for women. "The thinking of the officials is very police-oriented. Cases brought to the Crime Cells are often heard without lawyers, and the magistrates may hand down swift and quick judgments, but it's a bureaucratic nightmare."

The organizers of Shakti Shalini perceived a need for intervention on behalf of women who may find the bureaucracy daunting. "We deal with the Dowry (Crime) Cells daily. The idea for that [the Crime Cells] is a good one, but the thinking behind it is faulty. They are not very useful or productive for most women," Krishna told us. She described the inadequacies of the "system" and the difficulties women who wish to lodge a complaint are faced with: "We aren't open Saturday, Sunday or holidays, so from us, immediate help is not always available. Sometimes the police will tell [a woman], 'Go to the Dowry Cell,' even though it isn't open. If she waits until Monday to go, the bruises may be gone, and she has no case."

Because women face many problems such as abandonment, abuse or rape, Shakti Shalini aids women with a variety of issues in addition to dowry. The Crime Cells and the NGO also assist women and families in cases of property rights, domestic abuse, or even murder (or threats thereof). The special "Family Courts" were established to address specific problems for women such as dowry or domestic

violence. These issues were simply catalysts for social awareness and spurred

demands for action by a range of women's organizations.

5.2.2 *Family Advocacy*

Originally Shakti Shalini had focused on aiding women in threatening

situations and provided an important resource and an alternative for women who had

nowhere else to turn. After several years, however, its founders discovered that their

services were being "abused". Women were utilizing the socially approved resources

of Shakti Shalini to attain a divorce where it would otherwise have been highly

stigmatized, if not impossible. Krishna explained that:

> [there were] women who miscommunicated their situation, at
> times, to find legal backing when they wanted out of a marriage.
> In one case, a woman came to us and told us that her husband
> was beating her. We immediately stepped in- the police came
> and arrested her husband... and then we found out from talking
> to neighbors and relatives that she had been having an affair all
> along. She just wanted out of the marriage.

The women who sought help from Shakti Shalini were using one of the few avenues

available to them- one that provided them a socially acceptable exit from the marriage.

The significance of a complaint of spousal abuse (real or not) provided a woman a

legitimate reason for a divorce, where previously no other acceptable means had been

available. While these incidents were not routine for Shakti Shalini, a growing

number of questionable complaints led the organization to adjust their strategies and

forced them to reconsider their objectives and the ways that they viewed the family.

The original mission of the organization, to assist in preventing harm to women

threatened with dowry abuse, was expanded 1994 to include issues relevant to families as well as to women.

It was at this time that Shakti Shalini shifted its focus from purely dowry-based issues to more general concerns of the resettlement of women and concerns over abandonment. The organization began to involve other family members in cases of marital disputes, in order to consider the husband's viewpoint, and what was "best for the children." A uniquely non-Western feminist consciousness emerged from the realization that a woman's situation cannot, in many cases, be separated from the family context. Krishna told us: "A wife can get a new husband, and a husband can get a new wife, but children can never get new parents." The role of Shakti Shalini, then, as advocate and liaison was modified to include family advocacy and counseling.

5.2.3 *Mediation*

The urban offices of Shakti Shalini seemed small and unassuming at first glance, though on my first visit a legal hearing was being conducted in the outer office, with family members, lawyers and a mediator present to officiate. Shakti Shalini offers this service as an alternative to legal redress, since the founders believe divorce to be a last resort for a desperate woman. Krishna described the organization's views on such drastic, but often-necessary measures: "in divorce, women and children lose." Negotiating compromise in the modest setting of the NGO, the mediator attempts to reunite the family first, and if reconciliation is not possible, then divorce proceedings may be initiated:

> Most women do not want a divorce. It's very difficult to try and live on your own, without the support of family. We are concerned for women, but also for the children in these cases. A woman with children will have a hard time without the support of her family. It's not fair to the children.

5.3 Case Study: An Urban Family

5.3.1 *Background and History*

Mrs. Anita Sinha is a thirty-nine year old divorced[2] Hindu housewife and mother of two, living in a middle class suburb of New Delhi. She and her two teenage children live in a modest apartment with few belongings, though they take pride in the suburb in which they reside, which is nearly beyond their economic means. They are middle class Hindus, having adopted many of the social standards and values of the suburban community in which they reside. For example, Anita attempts to maintain the middle class distinction of a wife in seclusion, and she rarely ventures out of the house unattended. The family is of a Merchant caste, and maintains close relations with family members from Anita's hometown in mountainous North India, spending several months each summer with her family. The powerful influence of their families necessitated the development of a mutually agreeable "myth" of a brief separation, which enabled Anita to preserve the family unit, and which enabled both husband and wife to maintain family prestige and dignity.

Anita had been deserted nine years previously by her husband, and she and the children continue to live in the residence she had established with her husband when

they had moved to New Delhi in 1990. The apartment is still owned by her husband, who pays the utilities each month, but who provides no other restitution, other than tuition for the children's education. Anita is not employed outside the home, although she has a college education in classical Hindi literature.

Anita and the children enjoyed living in their "colony" in New Delhi, which was less densely populated than some of the other city suburbs, and was relatively safe. The children spent warm summer evenings with nearby friends, strolling the narrow streets lined with cars and chatting about school. Anita sometimes ventured out during these social hours as well, when she would meet up with neighbor families and exchange pleasantries. Parents would discuss their children's' activities and check-in on elderly neighbors. Young children played "tag" and took turns daring one another to come speak to me. At such times the colony had the feel of a small village, and as I became familiar with the faces around the neighborhood, I sensed the community pride with which these families conducted their daily routines, and the comfort which made the chaos of the congested urban areas seem far away.

The proximity of the city environment was occasionally glaringly evident, however, when the tranquillity of the colony was disrupted for a time. "There was a murder here last year- a servant woman killed the family she worked for," the children told me. "Everyone was shocked. It took the police a long time to sort out who did it. No one ever thought that this woman would do that. She cleaned other people's houses too. Lots of people knew her." Since then, a police officer visited each home in the area one evening a week, inquiring about the number of people living in the

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[2] Anita and her husband have mutually consented to a divorce, but do not acknowledge this with family or friends, due to the high degree of stigma associated with divorce among Hindus.

household and about their employment and daily activities, for the purposes of maintaining security in the colony. For Anita, questions about the family were awkward, and so she let her son explain to the officer that there were four family members normally living in the apartment. They did not tell the police officer that Mr. Sinha had moved out.

Anita felt that her children were receiving better schooling in the city than they could in the remote northern region where she was raised. Her seventeen year-old son and twelve year-old daughter attended the same private English-speaking schools that many other neighborhood families sent their children, and they worked hard at their studies each evening. "It's very hard for an Indian to get a good job right now," her son Raj explained. "For even the most menial jobs there are hundreds, if not thousands of applicants. That's why it's important to do well in school."

Anita met and fell in love with her husband while she was a student studying classical Hindi at a small college near her hometown. They married at age nineteen:

> We met while in college. I had a 'love marriage.' Most Hindus
> have arranged marriages, but my husband and I met and decided
> to ask our families to arrange our marriage. Most women don't
> even know their husband until they are married.

Anita is from a small city in North India, and she and her children tell vivid stories of the beauty and history of the Himachel region. In the 1980's, she and her husband left the north for Bombay, and later New Delhi, when he found employment there. After ten years of marriage, she discovered that her husband was having an extramarital affair, and when she confronted him about it, he abandoned her and the children. He has since remarried and he has a child with his second wife. Anita does

not believe she was ever legally divorced, and she and her children do not

acknowledge Mr. Sinha's new relationship. The children do not go to see their father

in his new home, although he does make occasional visits to the colony to see them.

5.3.2 *Adaptation and Survival Strategies*

The social stigma of the divorce was difficult for the family, and so they did

not discuss it with community members or visitors, even though it was understood by

some neighbors that Mr. Sinha had moved out. Upon meeting the family, I was told

by Anita's seventeen year-old son Raj that his father was "away on a trip." I came to

learn that this was the way that Anita and her children portrayed Mr. Sinha's absence

to neighbors and friends. The situations where an explanation was required were

infrequent enough, and the ruse had credibility, since her husband worked for an

Airline. The family would simply explain to their neighbors and friends that he was

away from home for "some time", and would return later. It was preferable for them

to sustain the illusion of a congruent family residence, and Mr. Sinha's presence was

of utmost importance in maintaining the appearance of a "proper" family.

Each of the members of Anita's nuclear family has continued to maintain the

façade with neighbors and friends for the period of nine years since Mr. Sinha left. It

was not until I had stayed with the family for several days, in fact, that Raj confided in

me that his father did not actually live in the household. This revelation brought

mixed emotions about his father, who Raj both idolized and at times chastised. Raj

felt that his father's absence had put all of them in a difficult position:

> It's really hard, especially around festivals and holidays. We can't always keep saying he's gone away on a trip. I'm sure people are wondering by now why he never comes out.

The young man was forced to take on the role of the male "head of the household" at times too, which he and his mother agreed was a difficult task. "I can't go to the power company to complain when the electricity has been shut off," Anita protested, "and they won't listen to him [Raj]—he's just a boy." She was in many ways still dependent upon her husband, at least until her son could take on more of the responsibilities of the household head. Anita did not fill that position herself, preferring instead to retain her traditional title and role as wife and mother. Indeed, the title "Mrs. Sinha" was an important designation for Anita, and she spoke wistfully of her husband's remarriage, as she felt that it diminished her own title: "I don't know if he's really married to her- although he says he is. She uses his name. Now there are two Mrs. Sinhas." Anita's deftly constructed façade had been breached by the formation of her husband's new family.

In her struggle to meet the standards of womanhood, Anita sought to sustain her title and status, requiring of herself restrictions that a family structure would ordinarily invoke. She refrained from those tasks in which she would need to travel unaccompanied, and she did not seek paid work outside the home. This latter fact created some conflict for her, as it perpetuated her dependence upon the husband to which she was only tangentially linked. As an adaptation strategy, Anita had recently begun taking in "paying guests," though she was careful to keep this fact from her (ex) husband. Mrs. Sinha also dutifully maintained the household and looked after the children (and guests), shunning assistance and stating "It is my duty," as if to reinforce

her socially sanctified position within the home. If she had sought employment, she would likely have had a difficult time finding work, as she had few marketable skills and an education that was more symbolically meaningful than practically useful. Her most viable survival strategy was to continue to maintain her socially sanctified role as wife and mother as long as possible.

With her strong desire to retain her role as wife, requiring a feminine dependence upon a male household head, Anita was conscious of the concept of guardianship. "Who is your guardian, Dawn?" she asked me one day. I explained that I was no longer dependent upon my parents, as I did not live with them, and as I was economically independent, I was "sort of my own guardian". "When you get married, will your husband be your guardian?" she probed further. "Well," I responded, "we will probably both be guardians of each other, I suppose. Who is your guardian, Anita?" She replied without hesitation: "My husband." Though she had little expectation that he would return to the family, Anita still held tightly to the relative identity she was granted through the socially approved practice of marriage.

5.3.3 *Looking to the Future*

Anita often spoke about her husband in the present tense, with a mixture of pride and sorrow. She showed me pictures of the family when they were together, and she told me how much she enjoyed their marriage. "Isn't he handsome?" she asked me, smiling. "He was a very good husband." She would then become quiet and reflective. "Do you think he will return to me?" she asked me one afternoon. "I don't know if I would take him back anyway," she mused in answer her own question.

Anita felt that it was unlikely that she would ever date or remarry: "No one else would take me and my children." She was frequently pensive about her life and the changes since her husband had left. "I was only thirty years old when he left. I never thought anything like that would happen. My love life was over in only a few years. It was all over, just like that."

The only connections Anita still had with her husband were the few household finances to which he contributed, and his occasional meetings with his children. He had talked for years about selling the apartment, since it was worth a lot of money. If the children lived with him, he told them, he could sell the apartment, and Anita would be left to live on her own. She did not know where she would go if this were to happen. "My brothers take care of my mother, and they all live together- it's already too crowded." The children resisted living with their father, telling him that they preferred to live with their mother. "I wouldn't want to live with his new wife anyway," Amrita told me. For the time, Mr. Sinha continued to pay the utility bills, although there was some question about how long he would do so, and often the children had to prompt him in order to ensure that the electricity or water would not be shut off. Were it not for the children, it is unlikely that Mrs. Sinha would have been able to secure much economic support from her husband.

Since the separation, she had maintained a close relationship with her brothers in her home village, but would likely never return to live there. "Krishna is so good to me. He is a very good brother, and very well educated," she said of her eldest and most successful sibling. "He is well liked in the community. He's very successful."

When her husband's family had learned of the breakup of her marriage, however, Anita said that they had blamed her.

> They told me, 'You must have done something wrong. Why would he just leave?' I tried to explain that I didn't do anything, but they only blamed me. I must not have been a very good wife, they said. My brothers though, they have always believed me.

Anita's son would likely take over the guardianship of his mother when he reached adulthood, and indeed, at seventeen he readily affected the posture of a responsible household head when possible. "I would like to become an airline pilot," he told me, "but it's a long time to train for it, and it's very expensive. Also, I wouldn't want to be away so much." After he marries, it is likely that he and his wife will continue to live with his mother and sister, and he will take on the responsibilities of the absentee "Mr. Sinha."

6. Discussion

6.1 Stratification and Women's Subordination:

The social inequalities that affect women's roles in urban India have been traced to the institutionalization of economic systems which stratify society by labor skills and devalue women's work in the private sector. Esther Boserup (1970) drew a parallel between the decline of women's productivity within capitalist economies and the subordination that women experience socially. As industrialization forces women into the informal sector, she proposed, their economic value declines, and hence their social status is also undermined. In order to apply this to the situation for women in north India, however, one needs to consider that social status is affected by tradition and custom as much as economic production.

Economic theories can be useful in evaluating the causes of women's subordination, although there are numerous cultural factors that simultaneously affect economic and social practices. Within a shift to sedentary agriculture and the development of industry in India, for example, came increased restrictions on women's activities, notably through such practices as seclusion, restrictions on widow remarriage and the enforced dependence of women on male wage earners. According to Miller (1981), such conditions are less prevalent among lower castes, however, due largely to the need for women's income. This theory would indicate that lower caste women, by measure of their household contributions and earning capacity, are granted more social mobility. In fact, the women that Shakti Shalini serves, mostly residents of New Delhi's slum communities, have indeed been empowered to seek change in an

organization that will assist them in asserting their rights, and if necessary, their independence. Their economic potential may have benefited them by enabling these women to contemplate a life away from the abusive home and take action in their own best interests. They have not necessarily been granted household authority, however, and it is ordinarily their abused and victimized status that brings them to the shelter.

Rae Blumberg suggests that economic autonomy can contribute to increased household authority and self-esteem for women. Cultural factors, however, complicate the notion of autonomy as a desirable trait, inasmuch as commitment to family directly conflicts with ideas about financial independence or authority. Autonomous women are social anomalies-- and the perceived need to restrict their activities persists among middle class urban Indians. Criticisms of Western feminist conceptions of "independence" as degrading and selfish further reduce the desirability among Indian social activists to promote women's autonomy.

Economic theories that advocate autonomy frequently disregard commitments to child care, and indeed, economic independence for an Indian woman with children is nearly unthinkable. For Anita, motherhood was her primary obligation, and she was able to make this a priority because of her husband's financial contributions to the family. For many women, however, commitment to the duties of motherhood presides over decisions to seek employment, despite the dependence upon other family members that this may induce. To further complicate analyses of such patriarchal practices, it should be noted that women themselves often perpetuate the very stereotypes and practices which limit them, for purposes of retaining status—even when it produces economic hardship. In the case of Anita, she did little to facilitate

her economic independence from her husband at least partly because she was conscious of the loss of social status that it would include. The link between economic dependence and perceptions of a woman's roles is a powerful one.

Conceptions of women's value in society have long been tied to their contributions to family and ideals of status, traditionally through inheritance and childbirth. Laurel Bossen (1989) has suggested that an increased emphasis on dowry over time in India is symbolic of a shift in valuation as well as an overall reduction in women's worth. The perpetuation of this practice, sometimes to extremes, further indicates that women's value is measured largely in terms of economic potential. The low value placed on women's domestic labor and the practice of seclusion common in northern agricultural villages have been used to explain the practice of providing dowry in marriage. In the case of an educated, employable (or employed) woman in the urban setting, a considerable dowry is also essential because the value of her education is weighted against the convention of marrying her to a better educated man (which, due to market forces, requires yet a greater amount of dowry). Thus, an increase in women's earning potential or educated status is not an absolute increase in her status, but must be gauged relative to her potential husband's social standing.

Economic assessments of stratification correlate industrialization with an economic (and hence social) devaluation of women. In village traditions of marriage alliances, for example, a woman's purity and worth are measured by the reputation of her family as well as a general awareness of her kin, her demeanor, and her caste. In urban communities, families also arrange marriage alliances, and a woman's status, physical attractiveness and worth are important contributing factors (see Appendix C).

Dowry has gained importance as a primary indicator of worthiness in a marriage, and it readily serves as a mark of distinction for the family of a young woman. The dowry gifts have surpassed lineage or community alliances as the primary measure of value for an eligible bride. As items pass from the bride's family to the groom's family, the economic legacy of a woman is passed from one "guardian" (her father) to the next (her husband's father). This re-enforces her dependency upon family members and indelibly links a woman's value to economic factors.

Dependence upon others and the observance of ritual purity has long constricted women's activities, especially widows and unmarried women. In the urban setting, divorced women have become pariahs in the way that widows are in the village, as neither widow nor divorcee is able to maintain her social worth without the watchful eye of a guardian male. As dowry nearly equals purity as an indicator of worth in the urban setting, the recent practice of "bride burning" may be seen as an adaptation of the traditional practice of "sati." Family members unsatisfied with the reliability or worth of a daughter-in-law may in fact purge her, rather than accept responsibility for her well being. In the same way that the widow sullies those associated with her, the degraded social value of the insolvent bride corrupts the family.

Market based theories explain measures of social value in terms of economic potential, and link gender stratification to changes in the industrial economy. The noted increase in the urban practice of dowry is evidence to support this view, as women's worth is measured by material wealth in economically "modern" communities. Efforts to improve one's marketability in marriage, however, are

influenced by the different measures of status applied to men and women. For an educated, employed male, the investment of an education can be realized as an increase in market value. For women, however, rules of protocol affect her in relative terms- she must marry someone at least as educated as herself, and thus continuously increase her marriage liability. Social factors such as negative perceptions of autonomy are also relevant to social value, since women's economic independence is not viewed as a desirable trait but something to be controlled. Social responsibilities to family and community thereby continue to shape women's roles and status as well as their "worth."

6.2 Movements and Organizations for Women

Social movement theories address the ideologies and strategies that organizations utilize to create social change. The larger women's movement in India has emerged from the efforts of numerous small specialized interest campaigns, each of which has it's own agenda. Working toward goals of policy and awareness, their actions have drawn women into a movement of reform and rebellion.

The Social Movement theories outlined in this thesis assume state policy reforms and social awareness to be effective indicators of social change. Indeed, awareness is ordinarily a primary step in the promotion of movement agendas, and legislation can further validate movement ideologies. Social movement approaches can also be variously affected by larger political and social processes, such as the Hindu nationalist agenda. In the case of fundamentalist political efforts such as those promoted by the BJP, ideologies are sometimes reinforced by political momentum.

Traditional notions of womanhood and family have been a primary component of the Hindutva agenda, and this has served to bolster their political ideologies.

In assessing movements based on public policy and regulation, it is tempting to point to legislative changes as evidence of "social advancement." The women's movement in India, made up of various special interest organizations and campaigns, pressed for and witnessed the administration of numerous laws and programs to benefit women in the previous three decades. Awareness of dowry crimes increased, and legislation against the practice of demanding dowry was established in response to social criticisms largely propelled by the women's movement. These gestures, however, do not remedy the causes of dowry practices, violence against women or female subordination. They aim to criminalize extreme actions, rather than attempt to shift ideologies.

Diane Mitsch-Bush proposes that state policies have not been proven to affect conditions for marginalized people or to improve social institutions that perpetuate subordination. State policies are necessarily specific to behaviors, and as such, are exclusively useful to a specialized category of people. Laws designed to protect women from violence, for example are useful in apprehending abusers, but will not affect the root causes of such violence if societal forces prevent a woman from reporting the abuse. Societal factors also have helped Anita Sinha maintain her lifestyle, without the support of laws or organizations. Laws that protect a woman's individual rights in divorce are helpful to a small segment of society, but for Anita, the stigmatization of individualism was a significant influence. Additionally, she strives to

identify herself with middle class Hindus, and so would not likely appeal to an organization that serves poor or lower caste women.

Social movement theories emphasize the ineffectiveness of state policy alone to address social change, but acknowledge that policy and community reforms are important mechanisms for mobilizing support. The loss of movement momentum attributed to gains in legislative policy (perceived to have more of an impact than they actually do), is evidenced by the ideological shifts that Shakti Shalini reported since the organization's inception. The organization was formed by angry women who were outraged at the practice of dowry violence and deaths—spurred in part by personal experience and the impetus of protest movements. With eventual improvements in anti-dowry legislation and public awareness of dowry violence, however, they underwent a shift in emphasis. The agency began to assume the agenda of state programs (such as the Crime Cells and Courts), which focus more on general "family needs," rather than specific women's problems. Dowry, domestic abuse and marital conflict—all detrimental to women—are now situated within the larger context of family and community.

Calman suggests that religion and family are factors that may influence movement agendas, and indeed, Shakti Shalini considered that changes in urban communities have destabilized families. Social conditions that normally create marital bonds were eroded in the urban milieu, resulting in family problems. Thus, as an adaptation of their original mission, the women began to replicate practices traditionally ascribed to village elders or community members, and they confronted men and women about their failures in marriage. Their attempt to restore community-

level values to a non-traditional urban social order reinforces Calman's observation about the importance of value systems in movement ideology, and parallels the actions of fundamentalist "family values" political organizations. Shakti Shalini adopted the family centered approach of the right-wing nationalist movement without overtly advocating political ideologies. This suggests an overall shift in social perceptions of women's issues, which organizations like Shakti Shalini support in their everyday endeavors.

The Indian women's movement also seems to have shifted its emphasis from infrastructural reforms to community responsibility, perhaps in reaction to the failure of government programs to institute real changes. Individual concerns are important, advocates proposed, but in order to improve conditions overall, women's needs must be considered within the larger social context. The individual and community are interdependent, suggested Madhu Kishwar (1997), and feminists began to articulate the importance of community efforts in improving conditions for women. Social Movement theory suggests that this level of involvement has the most significant effect on women's conceptions of personal, familial and social empowerment. The process of "naming and analyzing the problem of women's inferior status and power" (Calman 1992: 10) will help women affect substantial change.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations:

The current social climate in urban north India is at present unfavorable to women's social empowerment, and the continued devaluation of women has caused family tensions and frustrated advocates for women's issues. Activists recognize that any movement aimed at social change must consider the patriarchal environment and work within it, and this is what organizations like Shakti Shalini and Manushi attempt to do. By avoiding challenges to the system that creates oppression, however, these organizations are at risk of losing their effectiveness and compromising a women-centered agenda for one that favors family. Without an ability to affect her own ideologies and behaviors, a woman is limited to proscribed gender roles and limited household authority. Larger social endeavors such as those promoted by the Hindu nationalist political parties further contribute to the continued subordination of north Indian women by reinforcing traditional values and by framing family ideals in opposition to those of the feminist movement.

Women's rights activists and organizations in India have demanded an end to the apathy that has enshrouded women's issues, and state policy reform has validated women's complaints (like dowry) without addressing the causes. Legislation and political support for women's issues are, however, important steps in the process of raising awareness and creating cultural change. Cases of bride burning and domestic violence have been brought to the attention of the public by dedicated social reformers, and agitation against such remarkable acts of hostility toward women has drawn perfunctory support for women's causes. The Women's Crime Cells and

Family Courts are, as of yet, neither a solution nor a preventative. At their most efficacious, they are symbolic of a societal acknowledgment of the need for women's services. Without further improvements to such services, few substantive social changes will result.

7.1 Police Action

The training that Crime Cell personnel receive continues to perpetuate a distinction between family issues and the polity, and inspectors' directives to "reconcile" the marriages of those who seek police intervention only undermines the effectiveness of the law. Cases "suspected" of being abused are registered and "looked into". Evidence or complaints of abuse must not go uninvestigated, or public perceptions of police authority can suffer irreparable harm. Policy that is "pro-family" should not be perceived as "anti-action."

Reports of police harassment or corruption have tainted public perceptions of officers and investigators, and this undoubtedly affects the usefulness of the Crime Cells as intermediaries. Previously advertisements on television increased awareness of the units, and other sources of media might be utilized as well to improve perceptions of the police and the crime units. Police presence in neighborhoods and local courses in self-defense taught by officers might also instill a sense of security in vulnerable individuals, and break down barriers between community and law enforcement.

Bureaucratic apathy and corruption promotes cynicism among India's citizenry, and an unwillingness to address crimes against women directly has created

skepticism of the political order to affect change. Actual incrimination for crimes committed against women may draw further attention to the seriousness of violent acts, and incarceration for abuse or dowry violations would send a strong message to society and to families and individuals who exploit the practice of dowry.

7.2 Shakti Shalini and Support for Women

Economic authority is viewed as an important factor in women's empowerment, and organizations like Shakti Shalini are invaluable resources for disseminating educational and practical information about programs that enable women to help themselves. The organization should consider ways that they might create positive perceptions of autonomy, including improving perceptions of autonomous women as "family centered" and focused on community. Providing mentoring or job shadowing for economically disadvantaged women might affect these perceptions and help to challenge the association of autonomy with "individualism" and focus instead on "cooperative empowerment" within the community and family. Female centered and administered employment agencies or cooperatives could increase the willingness of women to enter the work force, and provide social support networks reinforce the accomplishments of women.

Family obligations affect earning potential, and for poor women, economic mobility is complicated by childcare duties. Shakti Shalini should include family planning and education programs which promote smaller family size in their services, with an emphasis on the financial and social benefits. For working women, Shakti Shalini could introduce support systems that would help to facilitate child care and

provide needed assistance. Cooperatives and day care centers would ease pressures on working women and provide social networks for women . These would enable women to consider economic opportunities and personal goals in conjunction with obligations to family.

Similar support systems for divorced or abandoned women could reduce the level of stigma associated with marital separation, and increase awareness of the rising incidence of divorce. Because it is undesirable for a woman to live alone, urban women's organizations and the Indian government should provision for cooperative living centers for single women. Families could share responsibilities (in the same way that joint families do), and reduce the economic and social disadvantages of living alone. The potential significance of increased self-esteem and confidence in the area of social change could greatly benefit future generations of girls and women.

7.3 Future Implications

Contemporary measures of women's status have been derived from traditional belief systems and economic factors, culminating in marriage practices which continually devalue women. Recent urban adaptations of dowry practices, for example, have entailed the manipulation of economic and social factors to establish the market value of women, and this has situated women's efforts for betterment in direct opposition to normative measures of well being. Educating oneself and improving one's social status is thus not necessarily economically beneficial, and such measures become self-defeating. In the current urban social milieu, self-improvement is potentially damning for women.

The practice of dowry is itself a symptom of a social system in conflict, and government programs or grass roots efforts only address portions of the larger problem. Patriarchy itself is rarely questioned, and is even perpetuated by women, and so contemporary practices only exacerbate hierarchies that exist within family and community, and which subordinate women. If women's rights activists were to promote feminine ideologies that incorporate concepts of autonomy and impute value in the individual, those women on the margins might finally be able to inhabit an acceptable social niche. Without fundamental challenges to the social order, many women will continue to be marginalized due to the extraneous factors by which their values are determined.

Indian women have long struggled to refine their roles within patriarchy, and the formation of a movement has emerged from a range of independent issues. Women have begun to reshape the culture which created their condition, and gain empowerment. Utilizing existing channels while they endeavor for new ones, the activists of India have succeeded in affecting policy and societal change. The greatest improvements will emerge, as Leslie Calman posits, as women move toward meaningful participation and personal and community empowerment (1992:9).

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Appendices

Appendix A

The Hindu - Classified

Matrimonial - Brides Wanted

Tamil Speaking Muslim, 29/165, M.Sc., Engg., well settled own Business, seeks fair, good-looking, homely, well educated, good family background bride. Box No.HOL-2145, The Hindu, Chennai - 600 002, India.

Vadama Kousigam Sathayam, B.E., M.S., in USA, 31/160, very fair, handsome, seeks bride, preferably Software background, India or USA. Reply: Box No.HOL-2146, The Hindu, Chennai - 600 002, India.

Tirunelveli Saiva Pillai, 25/165, Computer Professional, Owns Institute, Rs.20,000/-, seeks educated, good-looking bride, India/Abroad. Reply: Box No.HOL-2147, The Hindu, Chennai - 600002, India / Ph: 91-044-4872682 / E-mail: ambai47@hotmail.com

Alliance For Hindu, 33/180, Athletic boy, Vice President, Leading German Bank, Newyork, H1 Visa, Green Card in December'99, MBA (IIMA), MBA (Wharton, Leading US Business School), cultured family, brother, sister employed in US, seeks fair, good-looking, 25-31/160, India/US based Graduate girl, good family background, early marriage. Caste/Language no bar. Reply with Bio-Data indicating Age, Height: Box No.HOL-2148, The Hindu, Chennai - 600002, India.

Broad Minded Christian parents invite matrimonial correspondence for their Son, Professional, US Citizen, 38/170, fair, handsome. No bars. Please forward details to: P.O. Box No.1429, Levittown, PA-19058 / E-mail: wellieboot@aol.com

Karkathar Vellala Pillai, 35/175, CA/ICWAI, PR Singapore, seeks fair, Tamilian, Computer Science Graudate girl. Reply: Box No.HOL-2149, The Hindu, Chennai - 600 002, India.

Back to Classified

Appendix A

The Hindu - Classified

Matrimonial - Bridegrooms Wanted

Thiyya Girl (Kannu, Madras based), good-looking, 32/155, Ph.D., recently employed Canada. Proposals invited from highly qualified boys, well employed, USA/Canada. Send detailed Bio-Data, horoscope: Box No.HOL-2138, The Hindu, Chennai - 600002, India.

Vadama Powruguthsam Chitrai, B.E., USA employed, 26/166, seeks suitable USA groom. Reply with horoscope: Box No.HOL-2139, The Hindu, Chennai - 600 002, India.

Vadama Powruguthsam Moolam(II), B.E., System Analyst, 28/165, seeks suitable USA groom. Reply with horoscope: Box No.HOL-2140, The Hindu, Chennai - 600 002, India.

Tirunelveli Saiva Pillai girl, Sathayam, 26/158, Computer Professional, B.E., USA, H1 Visa, visiting India mid-June'99, seeks suitable groom. Respond Bio-Data, horoscope: Box No.HOL-2141, The Hindu, Chennai - 600 002, India / Phone: 91-0452-605069 / E-mail: manohara@microsoft.com

Iyengar Girl, 30/160, US employed, Computer Professional, beautiful, fair, innocent Divorcee after brief marriage, no encumbrances, pleasant and easy going, seeks educated, clean habits groom from respectable family. Caste no bar. Reply: Box No.HOL-2142, The Hindu, Chennai - 600 002, India / E-mail: sr325@hotmail.com

Choose the right partner to make a happier home. You are below 27, exceptionally qualified (IITs, IIMs, CAs, Doctors, etc), Tamil Brahmin, preferably Brahacharnam (Non-Kashyapa Gothram) with good family background and earning enough to lead a comfortable life to match today's lifestyle. Send your horoscope for a career minded girl (B.Com.(Hons), Shri Ram College of Commerce and Masters in Business Economics, Delhi University) who is being groomed by parents to takeover a highly professional Advertising Agency based in Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore and Chennai. Correspond: Box No.HOL-2143, The Hindu, Chennai - 600 002, India (or) E-mail at: a_invited@hotmail.com
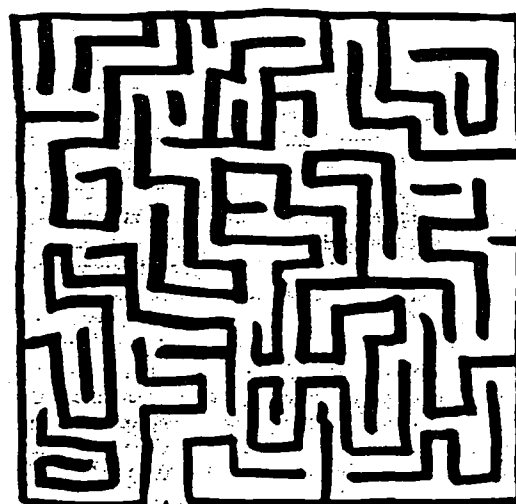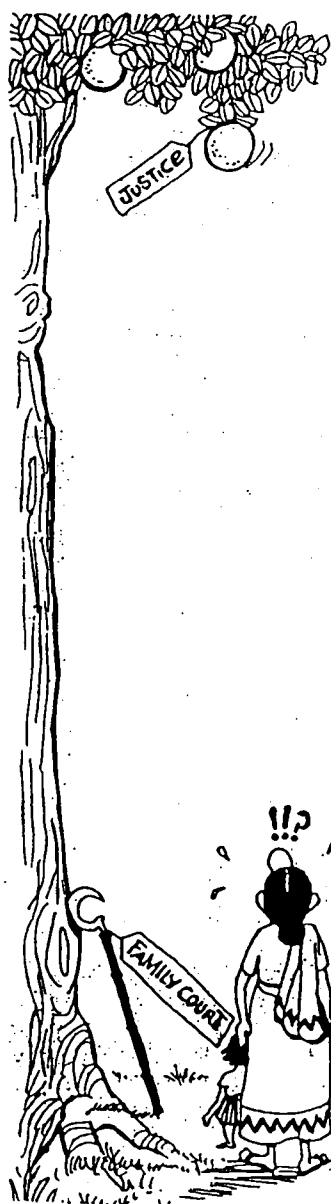
Appendix B

Principal problem for each of the women served by the Women's Centre, Bombay during the period April 1990 through April 1991		
1)	Beatings by husband	- 15
2)	Other harassment by husband	- 6
3)	Thrown out of the marital home	- 12
4)	Desertion by husband	- 9
5)	Extra-marital affair of husband	- 6
6)	Bigamy	- 10
7)	Harassment by husband and in-laws	- 12
8)	Dowry harassment	- 3
9)	Sexual harassment	- 2
10)	Single women being harassed by family	- 3
11)	Authoritarianism of parents and guardians	- 3
12)	Services (Jobs, Shelter, Scholarships etc.)	- 16
13)	Miscellaneous	- 5
	Total	- 102

Appendix C

FAMILY COURT