



Marital migration overwhelmingly affects women in India and their dislocation extends to the womb.

7 OUTSIDERS AT HOME

When they want to express displeasure about a daughter's behaviour, many Indian mothers are given to saying, *Is this how you'll behave when you go to your own home?* They don't mean a home she owns. Quite the opposite. They mean a husband's or in-laws' home where she will be an outsider and each gesture, each meal could turn into an indictment of her upbringing.

My mother never asked much of me by way of chores. She didn't discriminate between me and my brother, but when she wanted to pull me in line, she too was liable to say, *Is this how you'll behave when . . .*

She assumed it was just a matter of time. Someday, I'd live with in-laws and would have to be on my best behaviour, twenty-four-seven. It was, and is, the done thing. The census of 2011 shows that 'marriage' is the single biggest cause of internal migration in India and, in this category of migrant, women comprise 98.4 per cent. There remain strong taboos against men who move in with wives' families, and the *ghar jamai*, resident son-in-law, is often an object of ridicule.

There are old sayings in Hindi that raising a daughter is like tilling someone else's field, that she is *parāya dhan*, an asset that belongs to someone else. You couldn't afford to grow too attached, for she would not stay. So, while you hoped the husband's home would become a true home for her, you schooled her to act like she belonged marginally, constantly appeasing the owners of *that* home.

Most marriages in India continue to be arranged, which means the couple is not in love when the woman moves in.

Surveys from 2018 show that, even in urban areas, over 90 per cent of people in their twenties have had arranged marriages.¹ What this means is that women must learn to live with strangers.

We have always understood that living with in-laws is fraught. Folk songs and literature are strewn with metaphors and images of the *maika*, *pīhar*, *naihar* or *bābul kā ghar*. A father's home, a maternal homestead. The metaphor has been extended to mean homeland by poets such as the exiled ruler of Avadh, Wajid Ali Shah. His popular nineteenth-century composition 'Babul Mora Naihar Chhooto Jaaye' (Father, my home is slipping away) is written in the voice of a bride for whom the threshold of her childhood home is now transformed into a foreign land.

The metaphor has also been extended to the spiritual-temporal schism. A popular song from the Hindi cinema of the 1960s spells it out rather directly: 'Vo duniya mere bābul ka ghar; ye duniya sasurāl', 'The other world is my father's home; this world is my in-laws' house'.² The natal home was thus the true one, the one you ached for.

A distinct genre of songs of *bidāi*, leave-taking, was written for both: the bride and those who must let her go. They never fail to move me for they are pleadings on the part of the girl not to be sent away, or blessings that the girl is so well loved in the new home that she forgets her own family.

There was a finality to this leave-taking, and to underline the cleave, a woman's natal family would rarely visit. In many north Indian families, fathers would say that they did not even drink water in their daughters' home. It was a symbolic double lock on a shut door. A woman could visit her parents, at leisure and with her husband's permission, but she must not think she could return at will. Additionally, she couldn't presume that her parents were welcome in *that* home; her in-laws must have no excuse to resent her on the grounds that her family cost them the slightest bit of trouble.

In the global west, too, a sense of grief accompanies traditional weddings. Fathers 'give away' brides, and their loss is real. An unmarried daughter could be counted upon for her labour, her

time, her affection, and could be chastised. A married daughter was off bounds.

A wedding may be joyful, but marriage was also financial cleavage. A girl was showered with gifts, assets apart from jewellery and money. To secure her happiness, even her safety in an alien environment, the in-laws were showered with gifts too. This was done even by families that could ill afford it, and many fathers courted ruin by taking hefty loans or mortgaging land to pay dowries.

Families were also under pressure to let go of prepubescent girls. Naturally, little girls would not control their own wealth, nor would money and gifts be returned very easily if they were widowed or deserted.

Until the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to be free of a husband was to risk homelessness. Divorce or annulment was not permissible for Hindus. Widows were not always welcome in their fathers' homes. Many Hindu widows committed – or were made to commit – sati, where they were burnt alive along with dead husbands. A total of 8,134 cases were recorded just between 1815 and 1828, before sati was outlawed in 1829.

Strict rules were formulated for widows while they lived. Eating simple meals, without spices and even without salt, frequent fasts, or eating only one meal a day, wearing only one colour, no jewellery, no make-up, no hairdos. Sometimes their heads were shaved. Many widows were sent away to pilgrimage sites like Mathura and Banaras,³ where they sang hymns and chanted and hoped for the bare minimum:⁴ a place to sleep, a roof, a bit of bread.

Inheritance rules changed with the Hindu Succession Act of 1956. Women could now will property as they liked, but it was only in 2005 that the Indian laws were amended to let daughters inherit an equal share.

Muslims have their own Personal Law, which does ensure inheritance, albeit not an equal share for daughters. However, even this unequal share is not always given despite it being a Quranic obligation. Part of the reason inheritance is difficult to secure is marital dislocation. How do you tell your brothers

that you want them to give up the land they've worked, or that you want them to sell half of the house in which they live?

What families offer instead is a dowry. Trouble is, dowries are not home. Money can buy a woman a room she legally owns, but it can't buy social support or safety.

If a husband was abusive or demanded money, every effort was made to dissuade a daughter from returning to her parents. I have heard of more than one acquaintance – upper-class women of my own generation – whose parents sent them back to their husbands and in-laws despite complaints of abuse.

In the old days, brides – especially upper-caste women whose mobility was limited – were told by mothers and grandmothers to remember that once the *doli* (a palanquin in which brides were carried away) was set down in the husband's home, they must try to leave only on the *arthi*, the funeral bier. It was part advice to make the marriage work, part warning not to come running back if they were in trouble. And trouble there most certainly was.

Dowries turned into a form of extortion and torture, and that special category of South Asian homicide: dowry death. So frequent was the phenomenon of 'bride burning' – young wives being set on fire so the crime could be explained as a kitchen accident – that in addition to existing anti-dowry laws, in 1983, new laws were enacted to allow the police to arrest a husband or his family members as soon as a wife complained of harassment. It did give some pause to the violence and its methodology, but it hasn't prevented murder.

In 2011, I was at a courthouse in a small town in central India where I met a man fighting to get his daughter's killers punished. His lawyer, a woman, kept referring to a *hādsā*, an accident or incident, and for several minutes I didn't even realise that the daughter was already dead and that this was not a compensation suit but a homicide.

I had to bite down gall to keep talking to that father. His daughter told him about the demands, the threats. But he didn't take her away from her husband's home. He didn't even

tell his daughter to leave and file a police complaint about harassment. Who knows what he told her? To hang in there?

He kept saying that he had already forked over a large dowry, of his own volition. When I asked why, he stared, as if it had never struck him that he should not have. As if all fathers don't know the risks of sending a girl into a hostile and greedy environment.

Listening to my arguments, his lawyer had sniffed and said, it's a social evil. Society would have to change. It hasn't changed. In 2017, offences registered under the Dowry Prohibition Act numbered 10,189; dowry deaths numbered 7,466. These are just the ones reported. Most families do not report until there's actual violence or if wives are thrown out, or threatened, or until women's fathers meet their demands.

Most people do not want to deal with such fears and pressures. So, they start to dislodge daughters as quickly as possible. It begins with being ejected from the first home we all have – the womb – and then the second one, the nourishment of our infancy. Female infanticide and foeticide have been persistent trends in India, where the sex ratio is 919 female infants to every 1,000 males. Sex determination tests are rampant. Sex selective abortions are an illegal industry.⁵

If they survive, daughters are breastfed less than sons, and the disparity increases as they grow.⁶ They get less protein.⁷ Women are more often vegetarian⁸ and not always of their own volition. Female students in institutions like the Banaras Hindu University have complained that they are not served meat at all in their hostels.⁹

The emphasis on being thin, diminutive, compliant, sweet natured – somehow *manageable* – is well documented all over the world, with the possible exception of matriarchal and matrilineal societies.

I myself do not remember when and how I picked up the notion that 'boys eat more', that this was a scientific fact, and in accordance with justice. The assumption was, sons needed to eat more because they were out more, doing physical labour. They worked the land, ran errands, or went rowing and horse-

riding. Besides, overfed men were excused: a paunch was seen as an attractive sign of prosperity.

Despite being the daughter of a very active mother who worked very long hours, it took many years for me to wonder whether feminine labours were less physical, and what justice there was in daughters *not* working the land, or just riding out for pleasure.

The roots of feminine dislocation run thousands of years deep, extending not only to assets but to our bodies. The ancient Indian text, *Artha Shastra*, estimated to have been written in around 150 CE, describes how women's movements were to be curtailed, as long as the women were not courtesans, in which case they were encouraged to travel even with battle expeditions.¹⁰ A wife had to take permission from her husband to 'go on pleasure trips and could not leave the house when he was drunk or asleep'. If women committed adultery, punishments included nose and ear being cut off.

Slavery, too, existed, and one route to freedom was for a female slave to give birth to a child fathered by her master. But if a non-slave woman had sex with a male slave, that is, a man of her own choosing, her punishment was death.

There was little difference between a wife and a slave in the sense that both were uprooted, physically and psychologically. A woman's sexual choice was easily overridden. She didn't control the fruits of her labour and, just like slaves, couldn't leave. It was not for nothing that wives in many cultures referred to husbands as lord and master.

That men continue to think of themselves as masters of women's bodies is evidenced by a global trail of blood; 58 per cent of female homicides globally are women killed by partners, in-laws, or their own families.¹¹

Many women are also internally dislocated, distanced from their well-being to the extent that damage to, or humiliation of, their own bodies appears acceptable. In India, the National Family Health Survey released in 2016 said that 52 per cent of women believe it was okay for husbands to beat wives, and at

least 31 per cent of married women experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence by their husbands.

Cases of ‘cruelty by husband and his relatives’ are reported as a distinct category of crime, and 110,000 cases were reported in 2016. This is barely a fraction of the hundreds of millions who admit to actually suffering cruelty. They do not report either because they have ceased to think of damage to themselves as cruelty, or because they have nowhere else to go. It is hard to live in the marital home, with in-laws, after all, if a woman gets her husband arrested. An awareness of how police and judicial systems work – the time, the expense! – does not help.

For unmarried women too, most perpetrators of sexual violence are relatives (27 per cent).¹² If a woman reports her own family, where does she go?

The alternative is the capital ‘H’ Home: a shelter where she must live among strangers, subject to the will of the state. If she is able to leave and find a personal shelter, however ramshackle, she is afraid of assault by outsiders who see that she no longer has the protection of her kin.

In many Indian cities, single women are not welcome. I have had trouble renting homes myself, although I did have the support of my family. The bodies of unattached women – not so different, after all, from the ‘unguarded’ woman of the ancient texts – are seen as sites of trouble: men are likely to take an interest, regardless of their own marital status, and all interest is monitored. As unattached individuals, women are seen as unworthy of independent living.

If home is a place of safety, where, then, is home for women? Privately, most women accept that it is not a place of absolute safety, nor a place where they can be who they are. It is a roof, meals and, with any luck, some piece of your heart. The true home is elsewhere.

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My mother didn’t consciously pass on to me the expectation of feminine dislodging. It just slipped in through the cultural cracks.

Part of me acknowledges, Mom was not wrong in her assumptions. In *that* house, I would likely be subject to harsher scrutiny. Husband, mother-in-law, even sisters-in-law could tell me what to wear, where to go or not go, at what time. Earning their disapproval would make my position at home more tenuous.

A girl has to be prepared to surrender freedom, custom, politics. Friends and cousins parroted these assumptions: *A girl has to be adjustable*. Pliancy was a virtue. Obstinacy was a failing. Homely was a virtue. Unrestricted mobility – going where you wanted, with or without permission – was inconceivable.

The Indian Human Development Survey released in 2016 found that 74 per cent of Indian women need permission from parents, husbands or in-laws to step out of the house, even if it was just to see a doctor; 58 per cent need permission to go to the grocery store. Although 27 per cent of women had paid jobs, only 5 per cent felt they had any real control over who they would get married to.

That I grew into womanhood with a feeling of dispossession that I could not articulate is not surprising after all. My body, my city, even my culture was not my own to inhabit. Obstinate and argumentative, I was the opposite of most feminine virtues advertised in the matrimonial columns of the newspapers. Worse, I was afraid that I might actually be persuaded, seduced, scolded into inhabiting those virtues and surrendering my selfhood.

In major and minor ways, women are prepped to ‘move’ against instinct. A wife’s personal appearance and behaviour is the depository of both, the culture she marries into *and* the culture she inherits. In migrant communities, there is greater pressure on women to carry the baggage of ‘home’ on their bodies. This could mean covered heads or veils while men have wholesale abandoned traditional attire, or colleges forbidding jeans for female students. It is understood that men adapt to be accepted into better paying jobs. For women, it is understood that they will struggle against their own convenience.

Besides, the assumption that, through marriage, a woman surrenders her whole self puts her citizenship, and that of her

children, in jeopardy. In Nepal, a debate has raged about discriminatory laws that do not grant citizenship through maternal descent. If a woman marries a foreign national, her children may not be acknowledged as citizens.¹³

In India, there is a worse problem, with married women themselves being at risk of disenfranchisement and detention as 'foreigners'. The National Registry of Citizens drawn up in Assam left out 2.9 million women because they 'failed to establish blood links with their paternal families'.¹⁴ They no longer had documentary proof of being 'from' their fathers' home address.

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My mother has seen me find my feet in new cities, pay rent, even cook. She's stopped asking me to fall in line, lest I move into a less forgiving household. Sometimes, though, hesitantly and wistfully, she talks of me leaving. Not leaving her home; leaving *her*. Who knows if I'll be welcome, she says, in *that* home?

I can tell her that she will be welcome in *my* home. But how can I guarantee her welcome in a home in which I am uncertain of my own place?

I am among the lucky 5 per cent of women in my country who can choose who to marry. For my generation of financially independent women, some of the biggest emotional negotiations are about place: the right to live on our own, to live with neither parents nor partners, to discuss with potential partners whether we can move into a neutral place rather than with *his* family? And can our old parents also live with us?

The paradox is that those of us who can negotiate our place are rarely called 'homely', no matter how many homes we make.