

Immobility and "Unfreedom": Dowry's Violence in the Lives of Poor Indian Women¹

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The paper discusses the traditional Hindu custom of dowry in its modern manifestations, with a focus on case study in Calcutta. Dowry, once a custom of Hindu upper castes of India, has, especially since Independence (1947), become pervasive across all castes, classes and religious minorities today. In a cultural context where men are traditionally held in higher esteem than women, dowry (in cash, gold, and in kind) given by the bride's family to the groom's, finds a pernicious niche in "modern" India. Where existing scholarship discusses the ongoing murder of young brides for dowry, there is little that comments on the violence that this custom perpetrates in terms of ill health, exhaustion, the threat of sexual violence, and mental anguish in the lives of poor women. Often single parents, these women work at menial jobs to pay for rent, and family expenses, as well as dowry for a daughter. The abuse of dowry has exacerbated the increasingly female face of poverty in India, and has added to the violence of poverty itself in women's lives. Where nationalist and political rhetoric promotes mobility for its citizens, poor middle-aged women are effectively immobilized by having to pay dowry, and "violated"—economically, in health, and in hope.

My paper discusses the traditional Hindu custom of dowry in its modern manifestations, as it impacts the lives of poor women in contemporary India. Once a custom of Hindu upper castes, dowry has, especially since Independence (1947), become pervasive across all castes, classes and religious minorities today. This is associated with rapid industrialization and a growing consumer economy, urbanization, migration by rural populations to cities, and a rise in poverty. In a cultural context where men are

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traditionally held in higher esteem than women, dowry's ambiguous parameters as "gifts" (in cash, gold and in kind) given by the bride's family to the groom's finds an efficient and pernicious niche in "modern" India. Where a considerable corpus of scholarship discusses the ongoing murder of young brides for dowry, there is little that comments on the violence that this custom perpetrates in terms of ill health, exhaustion, the threat of sexual violence, and mental anguish in the lives of poor women, effectively single parents, who work at menial jobs not only to pay for rent, their children's education, healthcare, and food for their families, but also to pay dowry for a daughter. The constraint to pay dowry has exacerbated the increasingly female face of poverty in India, and has added, in great measure, to the violence of poverty itself in women's lives. Where nationalist and political rhetoric, in a free and secular country, promotes mobility for its citizens, poor middle-aged women are effectively immobilized especially by having to pay dowry, and are left destitute—economically, in health, and in hope, distinctly "unfree" (in Amartya Sen's term, 2000).

I recorded the stories of women like Usha, whose life-story illustrates this paper, while doing field research on cultural obstacles to poor Muslim girls' education in a South-west Calcutta slum community.² Many middle-aged women from this, and other slums (*bastis*, 'unplanned settlements') work as part-time cooks, maidservants, or in-home masseuses in middle and upper-middle class homes, like the high-rise where I was residing. While certain common patterns emerge in the hardship of these women's lives, such as dead, missing, drunken, philandering, bigamously married, or out-of-work husbands, and consequent penury, the issue that looms with special menace is that of dowry,

which they will have to pay at a daughter's wedding. In their early to mid-40's, with a Grade 4 or 5-level education in the general "absence" of their men, my informants are effectively single providers for their families, earning a meager and uncertain income, making on an average \$12 to \$30 a month.

No welfare system provides a safety net for women like Usha, although some *bastis*, like the one where I did my research, are served by non-governmental organizations providing free day-care, health clinics, "awareness" programmes on STDs, AIDS, reproductive health, even the "evil" of dowry, as well as subsidizing children's education in Municipality-run schools. However, dowry runs rampant through *basti* communities. In a 1998 survey of a hundred Muslim families in the *basti* where I worked, over fifty percent of the families told that they had given dowry for a daughter, while fifteen percent admitted to demanding dowry for a son.³ More typically, women like Usha rely on the goodwill of an extended (and also poor) family, or on benevolent middle-class employers for loans, or turn to money-lenders, sharks to whom they are then bound for years to come. Already failing to make ends meet, the pressure for a woman to then find resources to pay dowry, at three times or more her monthly income, exacerbates the violence of poverty itself manifold. Where, as my respondents told me, their parents paid no dowry for them, today they must pay dowry for their daughters. This "modern" imperative has grievous and violent consequences for these women, by way of physical exhaustion, mental anxiety, consequent ill health, fear of sexual violence, and social humiliation. Usha's story speaks for itself and, in its bare bones, is the story of many like her.

There is substantial critical scholarly comment on the traditional Hindu custom of dowry,⁴ the giving of cash, gold,

furniture, clothes (also televisions, microwave ovens, and cars, in today's economy) by the bride's family to the groom's. The literature addresses dowry's history, its cultural connotations, its sociological parameters (as a hypergamous marriage practice that accords the groom's family a higher social status than the bride's), its role in impeding women's education, and its implications for lowering the status of Indian women in general, (Jeffery & Jeffery 1994; Kishwar 1999; Oldenburg 2002; Raheja & Gold 1994; Sharma 1984; Srinivas 1989). Present-day dowry as extortion, and the dowry-related murders of young brides, especially over the last twenty-five years, have been seen by scholars as concomitant with the "modern" opening of the Indian economy to capitalist, free-market forces, and consumerism, rapid industrialization, urbanization, and migration from rural communities to cities (Mandelbaum 1999; Willigen & Channa 1991). Where today, despite the law against dowry (1961, amended in 1984 and 1987), increasing numbers of young women continue to be murdered in connection with the custom (23,000, between 1994-1998, Maddawatta 1999), especial attention, in academic as well as other writing, is paid to such overt violence especially in middle and upper classes. At least one underlying cause of such violence is seen to lie in the law, which denies women the right to inherit natal property (Agarwal 1988 and 1994; Kishwar 1999).

Dowry persists, in strength, in contemporary India, not only because it is structurally entrenched, both culturally and socially, but because it also carries the weight of a powerful intangible, that of social prestige (Ifeka 1989). Where dowry involves prestige for both giver and taker, women themselves are divided. As mothers of sons, they

aspire to, and compete for, the wealth and prestige that a large dowry brings, and thus are themselves invested heavily in a patriarchal custom's inequities and violence. The mothers of daughters too can say with pride that the large dowry they paid has meant a "good" marriage, that is, it has purchased a groom with a job or business, possibly a home of his own—in other words, their daughters have moved up in the world, however relative such mobility may be.

Other scholarship notes the swift, and modern, spread of this once-upper caste Hindu custom among non-Hindu minorities like Christians and Muslims as well as among poorer classes, and lower castes (Ifeka 1989; Jehangir 1991; Menon 1981; White 1992). This is explained variously as a culturally legitimized means of upward class mobility, related and increased social prestige for both the giver and taker of dowry, as also a process of caste-related Sanskritization.⁵ Roulet (1996) notes that where traditionally dowry was given in a context of trust, its modern practice involves demands made in the context of mistrust, where the very ambiguity of the custom leaves it open to manipulation and contestation, and out of reach of the law. Where once the father of the bride was required to give a gift to the groom's family, to the extent that he could afford, today, in contexts of "modernity," such "requirement" has become highly negotiable, at best, and extortionist, at worst. In the context of poverty, dowry proves to be especially heinous, and "modern" expectations distort a tradition with a new and special harshness.

Indian nationalists at Independence saw modernity as the promise of development (Chakrabarty 2002). Amartya Sen (2000) suggests that we understand development as "freedom," where conditions are created so that people may

make choices from a range of alternatives, which Sen defines as access to education, work, financial security, good health, freedom from hunger, self-respect, shelter, in all, a quality of life. The lack of such conditions (which Sen calls "unfreedoms") might then be seen as obstacles to the very possibility of achieving that quality of life.

In a context of poverty, access to education, work, financial security, health and safety—broadly, "mobility"—are especially problematic for women, where both cultural and economic imperatives affect such access. Bharati Roy (2005) has noted the increase in women-headed households in India, and has observed that the female face of poverty can be related to structural adjustment programmes and a globalized economy. These have largely favoured men over women, and have cut back on public or State assistance for social programmes like education and health. Where men have relatively greater access to formal work, women are marginalized and forced to enter the informal economy as casual labour.⁶ Choices, especially for poor women, are further limited, and a globalized economy has not ensured a quality of life for the majority of Indian women, but rather, reinforced gender inequities.⁷

Expanding on the concept of "mobility" allows for a more nuanced understanding of how dowry impacts poor women's lives. Thus, geographic mobility, a move from rural areas, often in other States, to urban centers in search of work, usually into *bastis*, have special consequences for women, isolating them from the safety of kin and village community. Spatial mobility, in *bastis*, which are crowded immigrant communities of strangers, restricts women's ability to go to school, or to work, since their presence in public spaces is invested with cultural implications of dishonour. Both of the

above blocked "mobilities" affect intellectual mobility, such as access to literacy, and a completed education, information about good nutrition, reproductive health, even medical facilities and resources. Finally, economic mobility is non-existent or minimal, since low levels of education and poor health do not allow for remunerative work. When dowry payments are compulsory and factored into all of the above, a poor woman's troubles are multiplied manifold, as Usha's story reveals. Where, for a poor woman, a move from country to city can mean isolation, and therefore danger, far from family and community; where a curtailed education at middle-school level leaves her with little by which to earn a living wage; where an early marriage, at puberty, and, often, several children in quick succession leave her in ill health and dependent; where moving alone in public spaces in search of work is also dangerous, and casts doubt on her reputation, the constraint to also pay dowry for a daughter and then go deeply into debt, leaves her effectively *immobilized*, with few if any choices, distinctly "unfree."

It needs also to be said that failed promises of modernity, and blocked mobility, also impact the lives of poor men, in turn contributing to the feminization of poverty. Across the *basti* women of all ages told me of men in their lives—brothers, husbands, sons—who were out of work, often by choice, or did not contribute to their impoverished families. One reason at least, I was told, was that men wanted "*chakri*" (a formal job), and not "*kaj*" (informal work, daily wage labour). The former carries prestige, the latter does not. Since so many poor men too have had an education cut short by middle school in order to supplement the family's income,⁸ a "*chakri*" is out of reach. Some had absconded without reason, or, I was told, because of shame that they could not provide

for their family. In the lives of two other women whose stories I also recorded, one husband worked for a daily wage cleaning dishes in a hotel, but generally spent his meager income on alcohol. The other, with a more remunerative income as a security guard, also spent a large proportion of his much-needed salary on alcohol. Usha's husband had taken up bigamously with another woman, abandoning her while their son was around eight, and she was pregnant with their daughter. Men are, in numbers, evidently "absent" in their roles as fathers and providers, immobilized themselves, effectively immobilizing their families, leaving women like Usha to be the sole providers for everything, including dowry. Her story follows.

USHA'S STORY : Usha, educated till Grade 4, was married off at thirteen after her Hindu family emigrated to Calcutta from the north-central Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Her two older sisters, married to men within their community in U.P. are, she told me, "doing well," unlike her. Usha herself became pregnant with her older child, a son, at 14. When pregnant with her second child, a daughter, her husband took a second wife (bigamously), and Usha was cast out of her in-laws' home (about 1988). He lives with his new family, and his four children in Calcutta. Initially given refuge by an uncle, Usha soon found herself and her young children unwelcome in a poor family, and found the work of sweeping floors at a beauty parlor. Here she learned the technique of massage, and then set forth on her own as a peripatetic in-home masseuse and beautician. She educated her young son till Grade 4 in a State-subsidized school,⁹ then pulled him out and set him to work as a domestic for an Air Force officer's family, to help ends meet. In 1996 she married off her seventeen year old son to a girl of 15, for a dowry of \$100 in

cash, a gold ring, and a watch. She could not ask for more, she told me, since the boy was poorly educated, and had no real income. Between 1996 and 2001, when I first met Usha, this young couple had four children. In 2002, they had their fifth. Over the five years I have been talking with Usha, her daughter-in-law has been frequently anemic and bedridden, when Usha has had to pick up the slack, despite a long day's labor providing her services to clients all over the City.¹⁰ She has supported this large family, paying them \$2 a day for food, since her son has been either without work during that time, or working for a pittance on daily wages, selling tea from a shack on the pavement, working as a waiter with a catering company, or delivering ready-made meals to middle-class homes. She has also had to pay for a grandchild's treatment for hepatitis, and another for a fire-related accident. I have assisted her with treatment for her son, once for a large abdominal abscess, and another time for a severe vitamin deficiency that left his arm temporarily paralyzed. In 2004 Usha told me that she had persuaded her daughter-in-law to get a tubal ligation procedure performed.

Till 2001, Usha's brother had helped her financially and also, she told me, provided her with moral support after her parents' deaths, but he was killed in a work-related accident that year while transporting iron rods. At his death, his wife and her brothers refused to give Usha a share of the money he had saved towards the dowry for their (his and Usha's) youngest sister. In 2001, Usha was bargaining with a potential groom's family, and negotiating their dowry demands for her sister, then eighteen, with a Grade 10 education, and already "old" by community standards. Her income at the time-and subsequently-has been around \$75 a month, depending on the availability of clients. The dowry

demand stood at more than three times that amount, simply in cash. Additional demands included gold jewellery for both bride and groom, and a suit for the latter. Hard negotiations resulted, she told me, in the groom's family reducing the cash demand to around \$75. Usha was desperate to see this deal through, even paying in installments so that the (potential) relationship would not be severed by the groom's family.

Usha pays \$20 a month in rent for her single room, which, at the time I first met her in 2001, she shared with her daughter (then 13) and sister. When I asked why she lived an hour's journey by bus from the city, since the fare ate into her meager income, Usha told me that it was safer to leave her sister and daughter alone in this particular *basti* while she was away at work. Usha had pulled her daughter and sister out of school by the time the girls reached puberty (at 12 or 13, or Grade 6 or 7).

Dowry looms large in this decision. A pubescent girl seen in public, on her way to school, runs the risk of *badnam*, or dishonour, and will subsequently need a larger dowry to counter such *badnam*. Or, such dishonor means that the girl may be potentially unmarriageable. This too is obviously not an option for an already poor family (or single parent) since an unmarried girl is not only an economic burden but also a sexual liability.¹¹ However, an illiterate girl costs more in dowry, so she must be educated to an optimum, allowing for a bargaining chip during dowry negotiations. In a crowded slum community of strangers the danger of *badnam* is exacerbated. If the rhetoric of modernity holds out education as a path towards upward mobility in contemporary India, this is effectively blocked at puberty for many poor young girls.

Usha married off her sister in 2002, borrowing to meet the

costs of both dowry and wedding. Today, she said to me, her monthly income goes to meet only the interest on that and other loans she has taken from a money-lender, especially to meet crises of health in her family. She is frequently behind on her rent, and threatened with eviction by her landlady. Having "arrived," her sister, Usha said to me in 2004, rarely visits, and is haughty and dismissive around her impoverished older sister. "After all I did for her," she observed quietly to me. Over 2003 and 2004 Usha informed me about other marriage proposals and dowry demands for her daughter. She failed to meet the very high cash demands from one family, especially the boy's mother. She refused another herself because no cash demands were made at all. In the current climate, this suggested, ironically, that something was "wrong" with the boy, and that his family was desperate to marry him off. This boded ill for her daughter's future. I last met Usha in the summer of 2005, when she informed me that her daughter was to be married later that year. The latest dowry demand stood at over \$300 in cash, which she said, she would borrow from a money-lender. Her daughter, she told me, was depressed, and desperate to be married. I know that, in 2005, Usha was already paying her month's income in interest on loans she had previously taken.

Discussion and Conclusions

Usha, paying for her son's family as well as her own household, and also for dowry for her sister and daughter, is literally "mobile" as she moves, in public, from job to job, working year-round, without a break, and for a pittance, in the high heat of an Indian summer, in torrential monsoon rains. She is "modern" in ways she herself had never been prepared for, with little schooling herself and little by way of

wherewithal to earn a living wage. However, she finds herself caught between such “modernity,” and its promises of mobility, as well as a tradition that demands she be a mother, therefore responsible for her family, where such tradition seems not to constrain poor men to the same degree of responsibility, as fathers and husbands. She may not flout such “tradition” easily—especially when poor and in need of help from employers, community and family by whose rules she is bound. She is a wife (no matter how “absent” her husband), and a mother—differently for sons,¹² and for daughters—a grandmother, and the sister of brothers and the other sister, all social roles held in high esteem, invested with sentiment and emotion, and punished if transgressed. She must leave her home, that private space, where she herself, as a woman, had expected to be sequestered, and traverse the crowded streets of the city, through the day, but also sometimes late into the night, as work demands. If *ghar* (home) symbolizes tradition, the world of women, that which does not change, and *bahir* [*baire* or ‘outside’ in Bengali] stands for modernity, the world of men, change and promised mobility (Waldrop 2004), then for Usha such neat categories are not easily an option—she weaves between home and outside world, private and public, problematically.¹³ She is the provider: for food, for the many illnesses in her extended family, for all the exigencies life throws at her, including a landlady threatening eviction for late payment of rent; and the provider of dowry for a sister, a daughter. In debt, and exhausted, she says, again and again, as she tells me her story, “I am broken. My heart is broken. I have suffered greatly.”

Her fate, she says, has everything to do with being far from family and community. An orphan, and unprotected,

no one, says Usha, is there for her. Once, she says, it used to be different. Everyone gave what they could. But today, people look out only for themselves—*mehengai bad gayi*—‘Greed has increased.’ Even when she demands \$2 from her husband, he demands that she sleep with him in return (she does not comply). She mourns that she is completely alone.

Usha, when I first met her in 2001, had, despite her already turbulent past, a luminous quality to her, a brightness of complexion, a strength in her pleasantly plump body. When I met her last in the summer of 2005, her complexion had dulled, her eyes were sunken in dark pits, her exhaustion, both mental and physical, were evident. She had paid in blood to facilitate, with dowry, the “mobility” of her sister, then her daughter, into marriage. Over the years I have seen her exhausted to the point of dropping, and loaned her money for laboratory tests to check for diabetes, it turned out to be malnourishment and extreme exhaustion. She has come to me and wept, saying she and her grandchildren have not eaten in twenty-four hours, could I lend her \$2? She repaid me the \$2 in installments. I have had her provide her services to me after my knee surgery, at fees she charged, less because I needed the massage than because she refused to accept monetary assistance as anything other than loans, or as payment for services rendered. But, my assistance over the years has been short-term and minimal. If I learned her story, I realized that she was simply grateful that there was someone—anyone—to listen to her at all.

An increasingly globalized economy in Calcutta (and in Indian metropolises generally) makes itself manifest in large, glitzy, air-conditioned shopping malls, expensive Starbucks-style coffee shops, stores advertising Nike, Reebok, Benetton,

or electronic goods, expensive restaurants providing different styles of cuisine, an exponential increase in numbers and types of cars, and a statistically expanding middle-class with evidently higher disposable incomes, as active consumers. While this has meant higher salaries for some, the greater availability of and access to consumer goods, and the promise of a material mobility, the gap between rich and poor increases in India, as it does across the globe. India has today the highest number of poor in South Asia (according to the Human Development Report of the UN Development Programme, 1999), per capita expenditures on education and health have followed a downward trend, 88% of mothers are anemic, with high rates of infant and maternal mortality, and, of 134 million children illegally at work across South Asia, some 100 million are Indian (Maddawatta 1999).

Women like Usha provide an invisible buttress for the upper and middle classes against the actual down-and-dirtiness of the realities of cooking a meal, washing clothes, taking out the trash, or in Usha's case, physical comfort to those who need her services, and who can well afford to pay for these, facilitating the increasingly luxurious lifestyles of the upper and middle classes, both men and women.¹⁴ Their unceasing work not only allows the more fortunate to distance themselves from the physical labor that a household requires for its maintenance, but also to further careers, and afford a level of physical comfort and well-being, ease and rest—an unaffordable and unthinkable dream for the women who serve them.

In other words, while those who have always been privileged are able to be mobile, in new ways, with new things (kinds of cars, washing machines, electronic goods), women like Usha are running in place, going nowhere. Her

immobility is especially entrenched by the death or blocked mobility of the men in her life—her brother, husband, son. The cessation of mobility for her son—in his minimum schooling, his poor health, his lack of drive, income, and sense of responsibility—directly impacts her, as she scrounges to feed his family and see to its medical needs. Her asking her husband for assistance holds the threat of coerced sex.

The pressure of dowry effectively immobilizes her by placing her in deep debt—even while offering the mobility of marriage and a better life for her sister and daughter. It sets her against other, and also poor, women, mothers-in-law of prospective grooms, competing for scarce resources, and also aspiring to material mobility, and prestige—as takers—with whom Usha negotiates and bargains. Her late brother's wife takes the money which he had kept for his younger sister's dowry, and which Usha must now pay. Her landlady threatens to throw her out for late payment of rent; her newly married, pregnant and now (relatively) upwardly-mobile sister treats her with indifference, if not contempt.

Postcolonial feminist theory directs us to unique forms of patriarchal oppression in developing nations, but has also critiqued the hegemonic assertions of some Western feminists in their (implied) devaluation of women in their roles as wives and mothers. Narayan (2003) notes the high value given to Indian women in both those roles, especially as mothers, but also that this needs to be seen in its complexity. Such a "norm," by definition, implies a valued role for a woman, within a system, protected by safeguards such as a responsible husband (in his valued role as provider), and adequate resources. Where the foundations of the system itself are jeopardized by poverty, when a wife/

mother is effectively single, has little by way of resources, and, moreover, has to pay dowry for a daughter, such “value” results in violence—to her person, and her dignity. She is forced to take on the roles of husband/father, and wife/mother, and expand the latter role to its “modern” and impossible limits. So, despite her abandonment by her husband, Usha walks, ironically, between “home” and the “world” dressed and adorned like a married woman, wearing vermilion in the parting of her hair, glass bangles, vivid printed saris, the bright red bindi on her forehead, as she heads out to the city. She is still young enough, and this, she hopes, will protect her from that world’s inhumanity. The inequities in her life, manifest as exhaustion, ill health, and anguish, are embodied, literally, on her very person.¹⁵

Chakrabarty has observed that tradition and modernity need to be seen in their complexity, rather than in terms of a “sterile opposition,” and notes that “we need to reengage our ideas about modernity in a spirit of constant vigilance” (2002: xx). Modernity, he says, should be understood in its historical and social context, and translated ultimately in the interests of social justice. If social justice can be understood as opportunities equitably available to all, to all possibilities of mobility, the freedom to choose from a range of alternatives, such freedom, in the lives of women like Usha, is noticeably absent. Dowry, in its ambiguities, and its ability to evade the law, is effectively entrenched across all classes, castes and religious communities in India today because it weaves itself so efficiently into “modernity” and its promises. For an Usha, dowry is the *coup de grace*, the final blow, the particular violence in her life. It is primarily responsible for limiting such choices that she has, directly implicated in the cessation of mobility in her life. It is in such cessation that

the violence of “unfreedom” lies. In conclusion, there is another, and fundamental “mobility” especially not afforded to poor women—a voice to express the injustice and pain of their lives. Where so many other choices are not hers, her lack of voice, her enforced silence in the face of injustice, is yet another, and basic, freedom denied. This paper attempts to redress that hiatus.

NOTES

¹ This paper is a revised version of the paper I presented at ISTC/ ASPECT Conference, at Roanoke, VA, May 18-21, 2006, organized by Virginia Tech, and is being published in an electronic volume of the Conference Proceedings (SPECTRA). It is dedicated to women like Usha, whose story I tell in this paper, and who continue to live their lives in great hardship, but do so with uncommon courage and humanity.

² Since the focus of my research was on issues of minority status, poverty, gender and education, I have to date five such life-stories on record.

³ These figures probably do not offer an accurate picture, since dowry's illegality keeps many families from admitting the truth. Other surveys in Muslim communities suggest over 90% of respondents participating in dowry (Jehangir 1991; Menon 1981).

⁴ My respondents use the Bengali term *nagad*, ‘cash’, to distinguish the monetary aspect of dowry, from other items on the list, which include gold jewellery, utensils, clothes, furniture, etc. Another term, *chahida* (‘demand’), also commonly refers to the entirety of demands. *Bardan*, a ‘gift to the groom’ by the bride’s family refers to the original meaning of dowry, before its modern extortionist manifestation.

⁵ A term coined by the renowned anthropologist M.N. Srinivas (1989), Sanskritization involves a kind of mobility unique to

Indian caste-based society, where economic mobility for a caste group goes hand in hand with symbolic mobility, that is, acquiring the customs (such as vegetarianism, or the giving of dowry) associated with higher castes.

⁶In terms of worldwide trends, there has been a 47% increase since 1970 in women living in poverty, despite two decades of international development efforts (Gunewardana 2002; Kingsolver 2002).

⁷"...poverty is not necessarily related to the economic potentialities of women but rather their vulnerabilities based on gender discrimination." (Gunewardana 2002 : 14).

⁸In the Southwest Calcutta basti where I did fieldwork, the drop-out rate for girls by middle-school was 60%, that for boys, 40%.

⁹Several such schools serve the bastis of Calcutta, but even their low costs are unaffordable for families who can barely put food in their children's mouths even once a day.

¹⁰The couple lived, at some distance from Usha, in a room owned by Usha's mother (who died in 1992, following the earlier death of her husband), and was, at least, saved the expense of rent.

¹¹"The women I have spoken to always mention that they want to marry their daughters off early because they don't have a way of protecting them while they are away at work. Often the young girls themselves fall in love with local toughs and run away or end up being sexually active." Dr. Shamita Das Dasgupta, personal note, 2006.

¹²In 2005 Usha told me in great agitation that she had borrowed \$75 from a moneylender to set her son up in business in central Calcutta, selling flatbreads (*chapatis*) and potato curry. However, he had been inattentive, and had had his stove stolen.

¹³Pateman critiques the feminist conclusion that private and public worlds are separate, noting that these "are actually interrelated, connected by a patriarchal structure," and that the domestic sphere is at the centre of civil life. What should be of

concern is how (inequitably) women enter the public sphere (Pateman, 2006: 158).

¹⁴Ehrenreich, commenting on the "Brazilianization of the US economy" critiques the "virtual existence" of upper classes as being increasingly removed from cleaning dirt (2006).

¹⁵See Davis (2001), where the author argues that feminist theoretical abstraction must not forget the real women who literally "embody" social and cultural inequities.

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