University of London

London School of Economics and Political Science

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Women and Gold : Gender and Urbanisation

in Contemporary Bengal

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UMI Number: U123024

UMI

Dissertation Publishing

UMI U123024

ProQuest

Abstract of thesis

The thesis is based on data collected during a twenty months period of fieldwork undertaken in Calcutta, India. The main concern is with the effects of processes of urbanisation on middle-class women's lives in a heterogeneous neighbourhood. While focusing on members of the Bengali Hindu majority comparative material drawn from data referring to the Bengali Christian and Marwari communities is incorporated.

Initially the socio-economic history of different castes and communities and in particular the Subarnabanik Bene (goldsmiths and sellers of gold) occupational and ritual patterns as well as educational standards are investigated. In the following chapters the effects of socio-economic change on marriage patterns (love- and arranged marriages) and their evaluation as well as various types of marriage transactions undertaken are described and interpreted. In the course of the remaining chapters household structures, women's work in the domestic sphere and female employment as well as redefined concepts relating to segregation and seclusion are analysed. Throughout the thesis various aspects of women's ritual activities, reproductive behaviour and kinship relations are investigated in a rapidly changing urban setting.

Within the given context concepts of gender- and community-identity are explored and the influence of long-term and recent economic changes are analysed. Different meanings of phenomena like dowry, seclusion or the joint family and ideologies employed to legitimise the same are described with reference to traditional and modern practice. The domestic sphere identified with women and kinship is interpreted as linked to concepts of status within the urban setting where caste and community affiliation are among a number of defining features of group

affiliation such as class and regional origin. Relations between gender and community are explored within the context of the locality and its history. As an overall hypothesis the flexibility and modern content of assumedly traditional concepts and practices is demonstrated.

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Note on Transliteration

Most Bengali terms are spelt according to the Bengali spelling and pronunciation rather than the sanskritised version using diacritical marks. Apart from some colloquial expressions and a few terms commonly used in the literature the spelling has been adjusted to Samsad Bengali-English dictionary. The inherent vowel is therefore often represented by 'o' rather than 'a' and the consonant 's' has mostly been transcribed as 'sh' where this is the appropriate pronunciation to keep words recognisable. Frequently used terms can be found in the glossary.

Introduction

A central theme of this thesis is the impact of urbanisation on the lives of middle-class women in a Calcutta neighbourhood (*para*). The neighbourhood chosen is part of the wider area called Taltala and the locality is heterogeneous in terms of caste, class and community, with Bengali Hindus, Bengali Christians and Muslims as well as South Indian Christians, Punjabis and Marwaris living in close proximity to each other. The thesis focuses on the middle-classes, and whereas most people in the neighbourhood belong to the Bengali-speaking Hindu community, I have also collected information from Bengali Christian and Marwari women.

Specific aspects of neighbourhood life have been studied previously, but to my knowledge no long-term fieldwork has been conducted in a locality of Calcutta (e.g. Beech 1971; Sinha 1972; Lal, Dutta and Mondal 1982).[1] The data presented thus contribute to the overall body of literature on the social organisation of localities and cities in particular (e.g. Vatuk 1972; Siddiqui 1982; Maitra 1982).

Given the heterogeneous character of the neighbourhood in terms of class, caste, ethnic and religious origin, the fact that different groups often live in close proximity to each other in the urban setting remains a point of focus throughout. While different "*jatis*" have been studied in the urban setting, recent studies which address the implications of multicultural environments on the subcontinent tend to investigate conflict, tensions or communal violence (e.g. Das (1991) 1992; Das (1991)1993; Roy 1994; Kakar 1995). Whereas communal conflict and a history

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1 Most studies of localities are surveys and provide little detailed information on the wider setting. Studies investigating particular minorities or occupational groups like artisans are often based on data from one locality. Studies of gender related subjects conducted in the city are either quantitative or rely on data from different localities (e.g. Sarma 1964; Standing 1991; Engels 1996).

of communal violence are important factors in the context of this study, its focus is on everyday perceptions, interactions and various types of diversification, adjustment and difference. Reflecting recent feminist concerns, the construction and representation of differences is investigated (see Moore 1994). However, rather than using media images and written sources to depict distinctions shaping community and gender identities, new types of status formation are highlighted through an analysis of marriages, kinship and property, women's work, and mobility. Here, as in other contexts, identification with communal images is strong but is depicted within a local hierarchy that is informed by wider historical change and the experience of urbanisation.

In the course of the study, new distinctions based on standing (as acquired social status) reflect class and associated structures and the restructuring of communal identities according to the demands of a modern socio-economic setting. But the latter constitute only part of what accounts for the determinants of group affiliation (see Jeffery and Jeffery 1998). Thus Bengali middle class women's lives reflect gender roles cast in the "traditional" mould of caste affiliation, but class and community play an important role as well.

Within this context, various aspects of marriage and kinship patterns constituting gender identities of all women concerned are addressed. The significance of women's work, their ritual involvement and the influence of the locality are analysed. Whereas numerous studies provide detailed accounts of rural women's involvement in kinship roles and economic activities in relations to the local social structure, no detailed ethnographic study of a neighbourhood in an Indian metropolis has been undertaken from a gender perspective (e.g. Vatuk 1972; Rozario 1992; Kotalova 1993; Gardner 1995). The aim of the study is

therefore to provide data from this particular neighbourhood, in order to avoid over-generalisation and facilitate a more differentiated look at familiar assumptions about gender images and women's experiences in the urban context. Whereas the cultural specificity emphasised by scholars working on Bengal is not denied, wider historical processes are depicted and comparisons with other regions are drawn.

Gender and urbanisation in the region

Social change and processes of urbanisation in Indian cities have been the subject of numerous studies, and whereas early writings focused on migration and industrialisation, more recent work explores communities and urban ways of life as well (see Singh 1986).

Among the subjects investigated, migration, shifts in family structure and household composition, employment patterns, housing and development in the urban context have all been explored by social scientists during the post-independence period (e.g. Sarma 1964; Vatuk 1972; Sharma 1986). With reference to the city of Calcutta, most of this research was determined by direct planning concerns, but the cultural aspects of city life and the social context of specific groups in the past and present figure prominently from the 1960s onwards (e.g. Bose 1968; Sinha 1972, Siddiqui 1982). Consequently, scholars focused on socio-economic development, the emergence of urban elites and their lifestyle, and community and class formation (e.g. Broomfield 1968; Timberg 1978; Banerjee 1989). Sociologists, historians and anthropologists explored various aspects of historical as well as contemporary culture in the city charting demographic, ideological and behavioural change, including class and community issues, as well

as the proliferation of nationalist and left-wing movements (e.g. Knopf 1969;

Beech and Beech 1971; Bandyopadhyay 1990; Das (1991)1993; Béteille 1991;

1996; Chowdhury 1998).

Gender issues figured prominently in colonial discourse and debates on the

impact of modernisation in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century urban Bengal,

but it was the emergence of the women's movement in India and abroad that

introduced a new set of questions and a different perspective (see Singh 1986).

The early studies and political debates focused on a generalised notion of

the "status of women in India", defined in accordance with shastric and legal

norms (e.g. Goody and Tambiah 1973). In contrast, more recent research explores

the economic and social context of the life of women belonging to different

backgrounds, age-groups and communities. Thus from the late seventies onwards,

studies investigating the economic conditions and cultural systems governing

women's lives were guided by questions of hierarchy as related to women's

position in the family. Related legal structures and the division of labour came to

dominate explorations of gender issues.

In the urban context the changing situation of professional and urban

middle-class women constituted one main focus, while the planning needs of

government agencies and the socio-economic determinants of the lives of poor

women emerged as a second line of enquiry (e.g. De Souza 1975; Wadley 1975;

Mukherjee 1978; Jeffery 1979; Mies 1980,1982; Papanek and Minault 1982; Jain

and Banerjee 1985). Numerous studies using quantitative as well as qualitative

methods were conducted in the field to determine changes regarding gender roles,

the division of labour, and the opportunities for women in the home and the public

sphere. Through these studies scholars gained an insight into the more universal

aspects of gender relations in South Asia, but whereas women figured largely as victims of oppression and exploitation in the beginning, an interest in their participation in different movements, political activism and resistance soon emerged (e.g. Omvedt 1980; Chattopadhyay 1983; Desai and Patel 1985; Stree Shakti Sanghatana 1989; Basu 1992). Within this framework the focus shifted from an assumed universal "Woman" towards a stronger emphasis on gender as a socially constructed cognitive category, and on the diversity of lives and experiences in a historical as well as a comparative perspective. Thus recent work reflects on the way femininity, sexuality and gendered subjects are constructed and represented within specific contexts, e.g. legal proceedings, media and traditional images. Different women rather than "Woman" are portrayed and their roles and activities as family members, legal subjects, or members of political parties, institutions or communities are discussed (e.g. Kotalova 1993; Hasan 1994; Kumar 1994; Chowdhury 1998).

Gender issues have always played a prominent role in anthropological studies of a wide range of subjects like caste, law, the division of labour and religious symbolism. Relevant findings were mostly understood as a supplement to more extensively researched areas, and although some studies focused exclusively on related issues, women's experiences and social roles were mostly subsumed under the topics of kinship and marriage (e.g. Vatuk 1972; Goody and Tambiah 1973; Inden and Nicholas 1977). Most anthropological studies investigate gender ideologies and women's lives within this framework, but numerous scholars choose to privilege a gender-centred perspective for further studies of traditional anthropological topics (see Collier and Yanagisako 1987).

A further line of inquiry into ideologies and cultural images more recently led to investigations of hegemonic perceptions of gender identities as presented by nationalist discourse in the past and present, whereas some scholars emphasised strategies of resistance, agency and counter-ideologies employed by women in different contexts (e.g. Engels 1989; Basu 1992; Raheja and Gold 1994; Harlan and Courtright 1995; Sarkar and Butalia 1995; Jeffery and Basu 1998).

Although most long-term studies were undertaken in rural areas, a number of studies undertaken investigated the specificities of the urban setting and provided comparative insights into continuity and change of e.g. kinship and marriage practices, women's economic roles, education and health related issues.

Of women and gold

Urban centres have existed in the Indian subcontinent for many centuries and some of toady's cities like Banaras or Delhi combine a modern and a traditional face. In the case of Calcutta, a comparatively short span of time led to rapid industrialisation and a more or less complete incorporation of the newly formed city into modern processes of production, networks of business and commerce, the prevalence of older links notwithstanding. Thus even though the history of the region and its urban centres dates back much further, a different type of urban life from that known in pre-colonial cities like the court town of Murshidabad or the pre-Moghul trading port of Saptagram developed in this metropolis (see Morrison 1969; Basu 1980; Chakraborty 1991). Furthermore, although all cities depend on the surrounding areas, Calcutta developed from the start as an urban centre with satellites and dominated its hinterland in an hitherto unknown way.

With reference to Bengal, gender and urbanisation have been discussed side by side, from early colonial times onwards, by the local intelligentsia and colonial administrators alike (see Chatterjee 1993). The role of urban elites in shaping gender ideologies, introducing female education, and modernising the role of women in society has been analysed extensively by social scientists, who refer to the pre- as well as post-independence period (e.g. Borthwick 1984,1990; Karlekar (1991)1993; Engels 1989; 1996; Chowdhury 1998). Within this context, the achievements of reformers who campaigned for later marriages, female education and women's participation in the nationalist movements are highlighted, and this emphasis fuelled the common-sense notion of measuring social advancement and progress according to an abstract notion of the "status of women" (e.g. Chakraborty 1963).

Within this context, urban life-styles are often depicted in terms of progress, general advancement of migrating groups and less orthodox adherence to so-called traditional norms of seclusion, segregation and social mobility. Such perceptions are normally attributed to middle-class life-styles and are understood to affect women belonging to families whose male members are in white collar employment. In urban Bengal such notions are closely linked to the role of education and the construction of "culture" as markers of distinction and refinement.

A complementary imagery related to such gender ideologies and changes attributed to urban-rural distinctions nevertheless exists. Processes of urbanisation, which came to signify modernity in this context, have not been perceived unambiguously. Not only the experience of migration, but colonial rule, industrialisation and city life itself are at times represented as negative experiences by specific age-groups, communities and individuals. This perception is not only

confined to the foreign visitor, because Calcutta's inhabitants also refer to the assumed corrupting effect the "modern" city has on "traditional" employment patterns, relationships, customs and mores.

An early example of the representation of such changes and challenges is the use of the phrase "women and gold" (*kaminikanchan*) in the teachings of Ramkrishna (see Gospel of Ramakrishna).[2] While the city and city-life became emblems of progress, affluence and relative freedom from traditional restraints to social mobility, the influential religious leader's nineteenth century discourses highlight the ambivalence encountered. The idiom emphasises the illusory quality of the real world, but the very usage of the phrase indicates the new quality and extent of the temptations faced by the middle-class householder in the city.[3] Thus, what may be taken as a literary phrase emphasising men's attachment to the world is, if put into context, a means to criticise modernity encountered in/as the urban environment. It can however also be understood in a more traditional manner, as depicting women's proverbial spiritual power or dangerous sexuality, their attachment to the world, their real life interests, and their domain, the home, that presents an obstacle to the individual's religious and worldly success.

Mapping the urban and the urbane

In this thesis the meanings of the phrase "women and gold" are addressed, and while much of what is said refers to the structures within which women's and men's lives take place as well as the relationship between them, the perspectives of

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2 Sarkar analyses the teachings of Ramkrishna and the development of this new movement as an expression of and reaction to new colonial socio-economic structures (Sarkar 1992).
3 Whereas in some instances the imagery of the sexually dangerous woman is evoked, other examples refer explicitly to the corrupting effects of new life-styles with their need to search

women in the neighbourhood are given most attention. The emergence of the middle class and working class in the city of Calcutta have been described in detail by historians and served as an example of wider processes of urbanisation and industrialisation (e.g. Chakrabarty 1989; Broomfield 1982; Mukherjee 1993; Fernandes 1996). Other studies have explored more recent socio-economic changes, such as household patterns, economic opportunities and community activities (e.g. Owens 1971a; Eade 1983; Sen Gupta 1985; Standing 1991). Within different contexts, the culture of the city, its literature, art and architecture as well as crafts and popular culture, also became subjects of research (see Siddiqui 1982; Banerjee 1989 (1990)). Furthermore, aspects of the political and psychological climate that developed as part of a distinctive Calcuttan middle-class life-style, defined in terms of refinement of body and soul, and the accompanying institutions and regimes of power, have been highlighted (see Ray 1995; Chatterjee 1996, Chowdhury 1998). Thus just as the male-dominated sphere of business, money and relationships outside the home changed, the "inner realm" both within the individual and the home did not remain unaffected. Within this context gender relations were reorganised, a development particularly obvious among members of the newly emerging middle classes in the city. While city life shaped strong class affiliations, other types of group identity emerged which are inseparable from the status of women and are signified by the latter. Thus the term *jati* came to refer to a wide range of groups and "communities" like caste, ethnic or religious community over a period of one hundred years.

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employment under the colonial masters. Ramkrishna uses the idiom extensively while talking to members of the reformist *Brahmo Samaj* and his Marwari followers.

The urban context is characterised by the proximity of different groups, which do not necessarily occupy separate economic and residential spheres. Numerous examples testify to the use of "women", or more often "Hindu women", "Muslim women", "Christian women", "Bengali" and "Marwari" women, as signifiers of changing hierarchies, male experience, family, caste and community structure and modernity. This is perhaps most obvious in the case of Bengali middle-class women, who constitute the majority of women in the study. Whereas their lives differ from the experiences of their mothers in many respects, changes in the social structure and life-style of this particular group have been depicted mostly by using written sources like the autobiographies of high caste, educated women (e.g. Forbes 1977; Karlekar (1991) 1993; Engels 1996). The reality of privileged daughters belonging to *bhadralok* (educated elite) families changed considerably as multiple accounts depict, and by the turn of the century schooling, late marriages, access to a limited number of professions and political participation were common in many affluent families. A small number of women moved up into the *bhadramahila* (women belonging to the educated elite) category once the segregated domain of the *andor mahal* (women's quarters) had been discarded, but many middle-class women remained barely educated housewives, confined to the inner parts of the house and the domestic sphere. The majority did not become the civilised, highly educated wives of influential civil servants, professors or doctors, but change affected their lives equally strongly, though differently. Apart from the large number of peasant and working-class women experiencing processes of marginalisation and exclusion, Bengali urban middle-class women were subjected to more ambiguous modes of incorporation. The continuing urbanisation in the region, and the emergence of an urban life-style,

dominated by distinctions based on complex new forms of status, affected all men and women, even though they were mediated by class, caste, community and religious affiliations (see Sangari 1995).

History and physical surroundings

Although most houses in the area date back to the 1870s and 1880s, the neighbourhood formed part of the earliest colonial settlements. Little is known about the pre-colonial history of this area, but it can be ascertained that it formed part of the first phase of colonial development.[4] During this period the main trading posts were established near the river Hooghly, and Europeans and "Natives" settled in the surrounding bazaars.

Although it is often stated that Calcutta, like other colonial settlements, comprised a "white" and a "black" town, the processes which lay at the heart of its development prevented this pattern from emerging clearly. Even the earliest attempt of European settlers to mark their presence by building a Fort near the river Hooghly to establish a well protected trading post did not lead to racial segregation (see Chakraborty 1991). A distinctive pattern developed nevertheless, in that the Europeans and their institutions were predominantly located South of Janbazaar Road and the "Natives" remained North of this axis.

The Taltala area, including the neighbourhood we are concerned with, formed part of the "European" settlements in the beginning, although no rigid separation between these and the quarters predominately inhabited by "natives" occurred. Together with the Fort, the loosely scattered settlements surrounding its

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4 An overview of the early colonial history though largely from a European perspective is provided by Moorhouse in his excellent monograph of Calcutta (Moorhouse (1971) 1986).

site grew further and by the late eighteenth century Taltala formed part of the city

and was situated close to the administrative inner heart. It is mentioned as

Talpukur Bazaar (*tal*-palmtree; *pukur*-tank) on early colonial maps, like the one

published by Colonel Mark Wood published in 1784/85, and the map published in

1794 by Upjohn, which indicates settlement patterns as well (Government of India

1996). By this time some efforts had been undertaken to improve the

administrative and fiscal structure of the developing city, and the improvement of

the bazaars next to the Fort was under way. The period following this first century

saw the emergence of a residential quarter with mortar and brick buildings next to

slums, in what was considered a middle-Calcutta township (Bandopadhyay 1981).

Given its extremely convenient location, businessmen and those working in the big

markets of Central and North Calcutta settled here, and heavy migration took

place from areas of Bengal and other regions. After some of these settled here, the

area came under the administration of municipal authority introduced by the

middle of the last century, which allocated funds for drainage, lighting, water

supply and educational facilities (see Basu 1981).

The structure of the neighbourhood reflects demographic developments

which have been recorded from the late eighteenth century onwards. Thus an

estimated 27000 people lived in the Taltala area by the year 1872, while the

number of inhabitants rose to 38000 in 1931 and reached 69000 in 1951 (see

Ghosh 1981). Since then the numbers have been fairly stable but are difficult to

compare over time, because the municipal wards have been restructured so that

Taltala belongs to two different units today.

While the large majority of early inhabitants were slum-dwellers, the area

drew increasing numbers of middle-class people from the middle of the nineteenth

century onwards. Located in the centre of the city, the neighbourhood attracted businessmen and wealthy professionals, who built their own houses, which were subdivided into numerous units by their descendents. Thus today the streets are lined with buildings and hardly a single palmtree can be spotted. Most houses were built in the nineteenth century around a courtyard designed for a single family. Today hardly any of the buildings has not been extended and separate households may occupy single floors or rooms of formerly generously laid-out buildings. All middle-class houses are two to five floors high and only very few new apartment buildings appeared, although speculation in real estate thrives. While some houses still show traces of their former splendour, like cast- iron verandas, stained glass windows and marbled floors, the next-door neighbour may be living in a one-bedroom dwelling that forms part of one of the established slums (*basti*) in the neighbourhood. It is here where most of the business activities are generated, and although the lower floor of a residential building may be used as a workshop, most commercial units can be found in these *bastis*.

In the streets, diversity of class and religious affiliation is reflected in the architecture, which includes the pompous houses of rich merchants and the accommodation of recent non-Bengali migrants next to each other. Yet another feature of these Central and North Calcutta neighbourhoods are the places of worship, but given its history Taltala boasts the highest number of churches and related institutions like Christian schools in the city. Not only is the main seat of Mother Theresa's nuns situated at the border of the neighbourhood, which accounts for the occasional tourist spotted on the main road, but Jesuit schools and other institutions, South Indian and East Bengali parish churches can be found next to Hindu temples and mosques. The temples in the neighbourhood are rather

small and inconspicuous, and are devoted to Shiva, Kali and Shitala. Shitala's temple is the most important one and in among the very few temples in Calcutta, apart from the famous Kalighat, where a weekly blood sacrifice (*boli*) is performed. Other main sites of worship include the *dorga* (seat) of a Muslim saint visited by members of different religious communities and the local parish church, which has a statue of the Virgin Mary revered by Christians and Hindus alike. But whereas the Shitala temple, the *dorga* and the church are situated on the main road, testifying to the heterogeneity of the neighbourhood, countless small temples and mosques are tucked away in bylanes.

On most days, the neighbourhood is busy with economic activity in the morning and again after a break in the late afternoon. Then the markets located close by are open and goods are transported from here to there, and shoppers and schoolchildren accompanied by their mothers fill the streets. These are generally narrow and every lane has countless bylanes which cannot be entered by cars, although occasionally a taxi driver ventures into one of them, thereby causing a major uproar among the inevitable bystanders. The latter are young men, most of whom are unemployed, who spend their time in the local teastalls. Older men are either preoccupied with their work in a shop, workshop or on their way to office, or they are on their way to the market but rarely spend much time in the streets. Middle-class women are not normally seen to chat with neighbours in public, but are rushing to and from the school, bus stop or market. Only working-class women may perform some of their household duties like washing in full view of passers-by. Whereas middle-class people, especially women rarely spend more time than necessary on reaching their destination, the neighbourhood comes to life during the yearly Hindu festival of Durga *puja* celebrated in the month of Ashwin

(Oct.-Nov.), when her victory over the threatening demons is celebrated in all neighbourhoods by installing images of the Goddess and her children in beautifully decorated tents (*pandals*). At this time everybody joins the crowds at least on some occasions, and most families walk around in the evening to visit some of the *pandals*. Busy in the early morning, the *para* is quiet by noon and the noisy crowds return only after the main heat has subsided in the late afternoon. This is the time for the family to gather and those returning from office to take a light meal before going to the market to fetch fresh items for the evening meal. If one has to spend time chatting to neighbours or meeting a doctor, this is the right time to do it. By nine p.m. the streets are deserted again and apart from some who return from work or a visit to relatives, only those needing public space to wash the dishes are still outside. It is solely on special occasions like the *pujas* that most inhabitants take part in public activities and the whole neighbourhood seems to enjoy the cooler evenings and late outings, when the otherwise deserted "park" and streetcorners are turned into decorated avenues for the deities and *pandals* which are visited by hundreds of *parar lok* (neighbourhood people) and outsiders.

The fieldwork

The fieldwork in Calcutta was conducted between October 1995 and April 1997. The site of fieldwork was selected for the heterogeneity of the wider area although the locality is inhabited by a majority of Bengali Hindus. The fieldwork comprised of regular visits. In many instances these took the form of informal chats rather than formal interviews. Thus much of what has been incorporated into the thesis results from these discussions, but many semi-structured interviews supported the material collected in this manner. I conducted the latter with the help of a female

assistant in the beginning and as my competence in Bengali increased by myself. Throughout the period language classes were attended, and TV as well as some written material, like women's magazines and newspapers were accessed.

Living in the area turned out to be impractical, as housing is limited and all families occupied mostly tiny flats without spare rooms. It was however no problem to travel to the area on a daily basis and to stay overnight for the festivals, during which period the most intensive participant observation took place.

Apart from considerations of space, the families we are concerned with were keen to maintain a high degree of privacy throughout the study, and it was only towards the end that frequent unannounced visits became possible in many cases. This was partly due to the fact that I did not have any previous contacts in the neighbourhood and was introduced by the local councillor as a researcher rather than a friend of a family well-connected here. This role of the unattached and unmarried female researcher had shortcomings, as women, most of whom are much older to me, could neither relate to me as a young woman due to the official role, nor treat me as their equal. But the neutrality had its advantages in that I was seen as a neutral actor with regard to local politics, both as a foreigner and a "young" woman.

Although most of the data were collected during the interviews in Taltala, the wider framework of the study depended also on written material about Bengal and Calcutta, and the many long discussions with friends and academics, in the course of which some questions were raised, some points confirmed and doubts aired. It is in this sense that the fieldwork benefited greatly from my previous

experience in the city and the many different perspectives on the subject provided by those living in the neighbourhood and outsiders.

The setting

The thesis focuses on Bengali Hindu middle-class families, which are politically dominant in the neighbourhood, but do not constitute the majority of the inhabitants. The families we are concerned with are lower middle-class families who live in derelict houses or flats. The majority of the male members of these families are in government service or run their own businesses. Most women with whom I worked are housewives. Unlike many South Calcutta neighbourhoods, Taltala is characterised by its conservatism, and middle-class women are not normally educated as highly as their counterparts in other areas. Thus while all the women I know are literate, schooling beyond class five became the rule only amongst those younger than sixty, and even among those below thirty-five, few passed the university-entry exam. Among the younger women few have ever been in regular employment, apart from some exceptional cases in which a daughter-in-law is allowed to continue with her job after marriage. Most households consist of two generations at some stage, and although joint families comprising brothers living together for more than a couple of years are rare, parents stay with one married son while his other siblings move out if given the chance. All families are involved in community activities and the majority of men are active in local politics and well connected in the neighbourhood. The number of women with relatives in the area is high, and while many elder women married into the neighbourhood from outside, almost all participants have uncles, aunts or siblings living close by. Although many women married into the neighbourhood from

elsewhere, some have remained unmarried in their parental home and others have married within the *para,* thus spending their married life in this familiar environment. The women in my study range in age from 13 to 74, and the majority of them are Bengali Hindus, while some are Bengali Christians and others are Marwaris. Many of the women interviewed know each other because they live on the same street or are related to the local party committees through which my contacts were established initially. Mostly women who were the *"ginni"* or mistress of the house took part on a regular basis, but in some cases their husbands were involved as well and other women like sisters-in-law participated as well.

The atmosphere in the neighbourhood is dominated by its proximity to the centre of the city and its mix of slums, middle-class houses and manufacturing units. Although close to the busy trading areas of central Calcutta, most of the neighbourhood retains a fairly residential aspect and is unaffected by the heavy traffic and numerous pedestrians found on the two main roads constituting its Northern and Western boundaries.

Local politics are dominated by the Hindu majority and caste affiliation played an important role in determining the settlement and economic patterns of its middle-class inhabitants, but members of other communities live in the *para* and surrounding areas. Thus most inhabitants of Taltala are Muslims and among them migrants from Hindi-speaking areas are very prominent. These migrants are mainly working class and live in the numerous slums, although a tiny minority are wealthy like most of the Bengali-speaking Muslims. In the pre-independence period, a high number of Bengalis speaking Muslim families belonged to the middle class of the neighbourhood, but almost all of them left for East Bengal or

predominantly Muslim occupied areas of the city after 1947. Unlike the Taltala area, the neighbourhood itself has however never been a locality mainly inhabited by Muslims but was known as a settlement of Hindus belonging to the sweeper caste before it turned into a residential area with a mixed population. Even though families of different language groups and ethnic origin settled here, Bengali Hindus hold most political offices, organise the main community events, and represent the majority of its middle-class inhabitants. It seems therefore justified to highlight residential histories and settlement patterns in the light of caste affiliation in some detail.

Castes and settlement patterns in the neighbourhood

To establish the significance of caste in a heterogeneous neighbourhood today is not an easy task, for the majority of Calcuttans are reluctant if not hostile about any discussion of the subject. Exceptions in the neighbourhood are normally members of Brahmin and high status "Kulin" Kayastha families, who may possess extensive genealogies and a wider range of written sources relating to caste and descent. Nevertheless, the main feature of any discussion of caste is the occupational pattern by which the social status of different groups is determined. Furthermore, as many of the women pointed out, the importance of customs and in particular the *bichar-achar* (customs of the house, rules of the house) serves as an indicator of caste differences and life-styles.

The main castes which I shall discuss in this context are the Brahmins, Kayastha, Subarnabanik Bene and agricultural castes (Sadgopes and Kaibarta). The Subarnabanik Bene, however, will be described in particular detail, because - in outlining some of the features of the caste system in Bengal as well as class-

based status distinctions,- the Subarnabanik will illustrate more general processes relating to status and standing.[5] Although the neighbourhood is mixed, the just mentioned castes have long been dominant and their members are prominent among middle-class families.

The Brahmin families in the neighbourhood belong to different sub-castes and since it was first established, a particular area has been predominantly inhabited by Brahmin families from West Bengal. Some locals refer to this part of the neighbourhood as a separate Brahmin *para*, which it might have been earlier.

These West Bengali Brahmins are mostly in service and the professions and own one or more houses in the neighbourhood; they are well connected, respected and known throughout the wider area. One of the reasons for the high esteem in which they are held is the fact that many of their houses contain a temple in which powerful idols (*murti*) are installed permanently or during house-*pujas* (*thakur bari*). In relation to discussions of caste, the Brahmin families are still important as organisers of house *pujas* (*bari puja*), and participants and guests in community *pujas* (*para soloana puja, srabajanin puja*); they are the archetypal *bhadralok* of the area. Most families refer to a legendary event when they settled in this *para* and they consider themselves, the Subarnabanik Bene and some specific agricultural castes to constitute the original property-owning inhabitants.[6]

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5 Many important changes have been outlined with reference to the three high castes or the upwardly mobile agricultural castes (e.g. Broomfield 1968; Bandyopadhyay 1990). By privileging the perspective of a more ambiguous case common features as well as crucial differences appear.

6 Numerous slum settlements existed already and the area was not inhabited by members of these castes alone (see Bandyopadhyay 1981). Furthermore many dwellings in the slums were occupied by Muslims, and more affluent members of the community lived as owner-occupiers in large buildings at the border of the *para*.

Thus all three groups claim special relationships with the area just a similar combination would appear to be dominant in many villages of West Bengal.[7]

Many of the old families of the area inhabit impressive houses built by an ancestor, which may include a Radha-Krishna temple in the inner courtyard of the house where a permanent idol (*murti*) was installed. Although the building may comprise a number of separate flats, it has usually been divided numerous times since, and only the worship of the deities still links all descendents living in the house. While the daily worship is carried out by family members, the main *pujas* are big events during which numerous guests are fed and many members of other castes from the neighbourhood send offerings to the temple.

While many of the West Bengal Brahmins settled in the area early in the nineteenth century, most Brahmin families from East Bengal arrived around the time of partition. However, since the neighbourhood was established, students came from all districts to live in one of the many student messes. Among them Brahmins and Kayastha from East Bengal figured prominently, and they often settled in the Taltala area after they gained a position in government service.[8] A woman whose husband's family originally lived in Dhaka recalled that her husband studied in Calcutta and shared a flat with some other students.[9] The flat used was then handed over by the landlord to her husband's younger brother who rented it when her husband moved back to Dhaka, where she stayed with her in-

7 A "Brabecha"-Club (Brahmin-Bene-Chasi-Club) representing this was founded in the neighbourhood in the 1940s (Ghosh 1981).

8 The location and social role of these messes around the turn of the century has been outlined by Berwick in his description of Calcutta's student society. It is significant that the majority of the students lived in hostels which segregated the student community according to regional origin and religion as well as caste. He specifically mentions the exclusion of two Subarnabanik students from the Eden hostel (Berwick 1993:287).

9 This pattern became very common before partition due to the high number of East Bengali students of marriageable age coming to Calcutta (e.g. Engels 1996:41ff).

laws while he completed his studies. When they came back to Taltala in the 1950s after a number of postings in other parts of India, they moved in with this brother-in-law and soon afterwards her own brother, her in-laws and other relatives arrived from East Bengal as refugees. After some ten years of sharing the same flat most relatives had left and today her husband, her youngest son and his family share the tenancy right in the flat. Although the family are Brahmin and respectable they are not influential in the neighbourhood, and the fact that they rented the place from a Bene owner exemplifies a more typical pattern of ownership and economic status.

The same holds true for most Kayasthas who do not occupy a particular area in the *para*, but often live in rented accommodation. Nevertheless some Kayastha families from West Bengal have been settled in the area for a long period of time and own property in the neighbourhood, which was acquired during the second half of the nineteenth century. The migration of well-to-do Kayastha families involved in the professions seems to be of more recent origin since the houses of prominent West Bengal Kayastha families were built only two generations ago in the part that used to be called Hari *para* and was in fact earlier inhabited by sweepers (*hari*) (see Bandyopadhyay 1981).

Since the Kayastha established themselves as one of the three high status castes in the nineteenth century, members of the group constitute *bhadralok* par excellence. On the other hand, many high status families belonging to this caste settled in Calcutta from as early as the eighteenth century onwards and their numbers increased drastically with the rise in opportunities in government service (Mukherjee 1993). The majority of the Kayastha living in Calcutta are from East

Bengal and many of the East Bengali Kayastha constitute low status sub-castes.

Commenting on the access of low status groups to higher education, Deba Prasad

Sarbadhikari, a member of the legislative Council and himself from Taltala, noted

that "so long as a man does not aspire to be a "Ghosh", "Bose" or Mitter, he could

take any Kayastha surname and get admission to any mess" (quoted in Berwick

1993:278). Many members of high-status groups (*kulin*) in the caste were actively

involved in *bhadralok* culture and life-style, and consequently worried about the

permissive structure of their own caste, which allowed individuals to pass as

Kayastha in an urban environment. Opportunities to claim Kayastha status were

enhanced during partition when the majority of Hindus fled from East Bengal (see

Sircar 1978:104-105). Like the Brahmins, members of this caste are mostly well

educated and employed in government service, while distinctions between East and

West Bengal are of minor importance.

Apart from Brahmins and Kayastha, agricultural castes and artisans like

weavers entered the neighbourhood early and Sadgopes and Kaibartas must have

been among the first migrants who permanently settled in the area. Both castes

were highly mobile during the nineteenth century and many members became

businessmen and belong today to the educated middle class. Like other castes, the

members of these two who lived in the city founded caste organisations and

campaigned in order to enhance their status, but are traditionally involved in

agriculture and are amongst the dominant castes in many districts. The history of

the Sadgope and Kaibarta movements is well documented and closely linked to the

recent political history of Bengal, in particular the Independence movement and

later the success of the CPI(M) in the rural areas (see Sanyal 1981;

Bandyopadhyay 1990; Chatterjee 1997).

The majority of men belonging to these castes are in government service or own some small business like a printing press. Often links with the rural areas existed long after migration but declined some time ago, when those employed here moved to Calcutta. However, these families are very well integrated into the neighbourhood and their low-caste status is rarely mentioned. Many became accepted as respectable (*bhadra*) and educated, so that their low-caste status was transcended through middle-class life-style. Nevertheless, caste status is not forgotten and both, Sadgopes and Kaibarta are less often seen as potential *bhadralok* than the three high castes Brahmin, Baidhya and Kayastha.

Nevertheless, the Subarnabanik Bene constitute the most influential group in the neighbourhood and belong to a caste grouping of merchants and artisans, referred to collectively as Bene. Subarnabanik are influential in this neighbourhood economically and politically. Recently the Congress) Councillor was elected from this group, which reflects the influence of the community in the area. Subarnabanik Bene represent the largest single group among the middle-class inhabitants of the neighbourhood, which consequently is often perceived of as a "Bene *para*".

Many Bene families settled in Central and North Calcutta at the beginning of the nineteenth century and a large number of houses in Taltala and adjacent areas are still owned by members of this caste. Among the Bene in the neighbourhood most families belong to the so called Subarnabanik Bene (Sonali Bania, Sonali Bene), a group traditionally producing and selling gold.[10] Today the

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10 It is not entirely clear whether the Subarnabaniks were gold-sellers, gold-producers or both, though the latter is the commonly employed contemporary definition. Nicholas distinguishes between the medieval terms Svarnakara (makers of gold and silver ornaments) and Kanakabanik or Svarnabanik (testers of the purity of gold and silver). He maintains that the contemporary

majority of men are businessmen and own shops, workshops, or even small factories in different areas, while a considerable number are employed in government service. Some of the influential Subarnabanik families in the neighbourhood trace their arrival in Taltala back to male ancestors who migrated by the middle of the last century. Typically a woman married into a wealthy Bene family told that the founding ancestor, a merchant in clothes and other commodities, migrated from Burdhwan District and built a house in this *para*, after his profits allowed his family to join him in the 1860s. The sons of this ancestor then expanded their business activities and managed to acquire a number of houses in this neighbourhood, many of which are still owned and inhabited by related families. After establishing themselves, many of the land-owning families in the countryside and wealthy urban businessmen started a house-*puja* during the festival of Durga *puja*, which continues to this day.

Structure and chapters

Chapter 1. The emergence of the urban Bengali middle classes is outlined using the example of the origin, history and status of the Subarnabanik Bene. In particular ritual status and caste position are linked with occupational patterns. Changes and upward mobility within the caste structure under colonial rule as well as the variables constituting middle-class identities in this context are explored. The ideal of *bhadralok* culture and its influence on lower status groups is discussed with reference to contemporary distinctions.

Subarnabaniks originated from the Svarnabaniks mentioned in medieval Bengali myths (Nicholas 1995:149).

Chapter 2. Arranged marriages and the related rituals as well as the underlying markers of status and group affiliation are described. Changes in the way marriages are arranged and preferences are discussed with reference to occupational status and economic standing.

Chapter 3. The increasing number of love-marriages and the way different unions are evaluated in accordance with caste and community stereotypes are focused upon. The practice of inter-caste and inter-community marriages in the neighbourhood is outlined and the discourse surrounding these marriages, which is used to express a wide range of other concerns, is explored.

Chapter 4. Various types of marriage transactions common among Bengali Hindus are described in detail and interpreted within the framework of existing work on dowry and bride-price. Types of gifts, payments and expenses are distinguished and analysed with reference to the direction, changing content and, in particular, the shifting intentions of the giving and receiving parties at different in times. In the course of the chapter the significance of such gifts as women's inheritance is described within the context of contemporary practises of marriage transactions, property rights and legal action.

Chapter 5. The domestic unit, household composition and family patterns are analysed, and particular attention is paid to the underlying ideologies and the economic and social condition of women's lives within this urban context. Within the chapter the relation between gender and marital status, seniority and hierarchies in the household, as well as attitudes to female employment and economic involvement, are focused upon and analysed.

Chapter 6. Women's work as relating to housework, reproduction and the body is the subject. The activities of women linked and attributed to the domestic sphere

are described in detail and the ideological role of "progressive" motherhood, the ritual work of women and their role in the maintenance of kin-relations are explored. Particular attention is paid to the micro-politics of food and eating, the importance of individualised "customs of the house" as distinctive indicators of group identities and the reproduction of the body as the work of women.

Chapter 7. Finally, ideologies of seclusion and *purdah* widespread in the past are linked to contemporary practices, and the politics of social space and women's mobility in the urban setting. The relationship between the domestic and public spheres is analysed with special reference to middle-class notions of appropriate forms of women's behaviour at different stages of life and the socialisation of women within the urban environment is explored. Thus the tension between women's involvement in community activities, children's education and kinship as opposed to their expected confinement to the domestic sphere is investigated. Furthermore the specific conditions underlying female mobility in a heterogeneous neighbourhood, as well as the resulting attitudes and notions of community as linked to constructions of gender, are identified, and discussed.

Main analytical points

Throughout the thesis, various aspects of women's lives are investigated in a rapidly changing urban setting, with particular reference to gender and communal identities. The meaning and significance of "social institutions" like arranged marriages, dowry, seclusion, and the joint family as well as their legitimating ideologies, are discussed with reference to traditional and contemporary practice. The domestic sphere identified with women and kinship is interpreted as linked to concepts of status within the urban setting, where caste and community are among

a number of defining features of group affiliation, which also includes class and regional origin.

The central argument of the thesis is about the flexibility and modern content of assumedly traditional concepts and practices and the everyday discourse on distinct communal identities in relation to gender roles, kinship, women's work and class. In many respects, the women in Calcutta described in this thesis exemplify the common usage of the Bengali idiom of "women and gold" (*kaminikanchan*), whereby women are symbolically equated with gold, and both signify the mundane world which is opposed to spiritual progress. The negative use of the idiom is however opposed with material which emphasises the ambiguity of processes of urbanisation and middle-class women's lives in the city. Taking real women their relationship with the proverbial gold is explored within this particular urban setting. This may also be read as an attempt to highlight women as subjects in relation to processes of urbanisation and modernity.

Within the thesis it shall be demonstrated which structures determine middle-class women's lives in this specific context and in how far the "traditional" serves the purpose of modernisation. Furthermore gender stereotypes and constructions are explored outside their representation in legal, fictional or media discourses, but through kinship and marriage, housework and a focus on the local environment.

Chapter 1: At the margins of *bhadralok* culture

All groups introduced so far can claim middle-class status by virtue of economic and employment history as well as the necessary broad educational standards. But whereas Brahmins and Kayastha are considered to be respectable (*bhadra*) due to their ritual status and the link with attributes of *bhadralok* culture, the agricultural and merchant castes are seen as low status groups. While the status of the agricultural castes is considered to be below the two other groups, they are not only accepted as clean Shudra, but single families are considered to be as much part of the middle classes as the high status castes. There exist however crucial differences between Brahmins, Kayastha, agricultural groups and Subarnabanik Bene in terms of status and its links with economic mobility.

1.1 *Bhadralok* as a reference group

In order to explain the problems involved in any assertion of status according to nineteenth century categories and the importance of establishing the relationship between caste hierarchies and class-based notions of distinctions, general historical and social features and the rise of one low status group are to be analysed. This may enable us to trace continuity and changes in the way status is ascertained and the way differences of class and caste as well as gender ideologies are linked.

The emergence and influence of the *bhadralok* (gentlemen) elite and the culture associated with it has been the subject of numerous publications and will not be discussed here (e.g. Broomfield 1968; Borthwick 1984, 1990; Banerjee 1989; (1989)1990; Mukherjee 1993; Karlekar (1991)1993). The *bhadralok* constituted a mostly high caste (Brahmins, Baidhya, Kayasthya) property owning

group in nineteenth century Calcutta to which access could be gained by virtue of economic standing rather than ritual status. In theory members of all castes could make it into the *bhadralok* category, but not all high castes belonged to this lose group. The majority of Calcuttans, including less wealthy members of higher castes, were not considered to be *bhadralok.* The *bhadralok* "class" was identified with culture, education and economic standing, although the latter was not the decisive factor as educated men did not always command extensive funds. Thus social and economic standing overruled caste affiliation to a certain extent and it seems to be justified to speak of the *bhadralok* as predecessors of the Bengali middle class. However, I am reluctant to agree with some of the above mentioned scholars who use the term as a synonym for middle class (e.g. Broomfield 1968). It seems appropriate to describe the nineteenth century *bhadralok* as a (widely imaginary) reference group in contemporary Bengal. A comparably cautious remark has been made by Srinivas, who, after acknowledging the role of the *bhadralok* as a new elite, qualifies: "I shall not call them the "middle class" inasmuch as the term is used in different senses by different scholars, and I am not certain that the new elite - for example, Ram Mohan Roy, the Tagores, and Swami Vivekananda - always hailed from, or formed the "middle class"(Srinivas 1966: 60).

The contemporary use of the word does not indicate a group, but a whole set of cultural values like decency, education, politeness, descent and modesty etc. Certain castes will be seen as potential *bhadralok,* although not all members belong to the category. Thus the three upper castes, Brahmins, Baidhyas and Kayastha are potential *bhadralok* in an abstract way, and one would expect a good family to belong to one of these castes rather than others. In this respect

bhadralok signifies a peculiar culture and history rather than a class, although middle-class values and life-style form part of the definition and are partly derived from notions of *bhadralok* culture.

1.2 Occupation as determining caste status in Bengal

The common notion of caste hierarchy as developed during the nineteenth century in Bengal defines the following basic groups: Brahmin, Baidhya (Vaishya) and Kayastha are regarded as upper castes, amongst whom the first two castes and the better (*kulin*) lineages of the third caste wear the sacred thread, while other Shudra groups are regarded as lower castes, divided into clean and unclean castes. The latter are differentiated into non-polluting (*jol*) and polluting (*ajol*) castes with reference to the effect of cooked food and water touched by members of the upper castes (Bhattacharya (1886)1995:180). It is important to note that the merchant castes of Bengal (Bene) are seen as low status Shudra and that many consider them to belong to a polluting sub-caste as well. Thus the considerable confusion about the status of the Bene today is not a new phenomenon and can be attributed to the assumed existence of two exclusive categories within one "caste" namely *jol* and *ajol* sub-castes as part of the wider Bene group. Below these rank the groups which are considered to be untouchable and of low status as a whole, but again the status assigned varies and many groups managed to be accepted as agricultural castes in the nineteenth century. Typically the fact that a group is placed below the clean and unclean artisan and agricultural castes implies an involvement in particular types of occupations such as sweeping or oil-pressing.

It has been argued that the caste structure of pre-colonial Bengal was less rigid than the system prevailing in other regions. Furthermore, it is assumed that

with the exception of the Brahmins, the occupational status did not really ascribe caste or ritual status in Bengal. This holds true only partially, because although all castes including Brahmins could own and even work the land, agricultural activities were perhaps the only field in which the system was less rigid. While service and traditional artisans' occupations like pottery, weaving, trade in particular items and the production of articles like metalware, jewellery, conchshell products etc. did not imply that the castes involved were excluded from landholding in all regions, it appears they were sharply demarcated as artisans and thus non-agricultural castes from the 13th century onwards (Nicholas 1995). However, agricultural activities and the possession of land were not limited to the agricultural castes and artisans were often involved in agriculture as well as the selling and the production of other goods.

The Subarnabaniks were among those castes traditionally participating in agriculture, trade and moneylending, a combination which, according to Bandyopadhyay, enabled them to act as *baniyans* (*banya*) to the British. Like the Sahas (distillers and sellers of liquor) and the Gandhabaniks (sellers of scents and spices) they could establish themselves as traders and owners of property in the city of Calcutta.

According to Mukherjee, Subarnabanik Bene were among the first recognisable groups permanently settled in Calcutta and the number of properties owned by Bene rose constantly during the first half of the nineteenth century. He found that Bene owned 691 premises in 23 of the 44 streets he analysed as early as 1806, while the numbers reached 1686 premises in 31 streets in 1854 (Mukherjee 1993:33). The expansion of the economic activities of the Bene contributed to the development of commercial sites and areas in North and Central Calcutta and in

1852 the Subarnabanik constituted the main property owning group in some streets of the old Calcutta quarters, e.g. along Chitpore Road (Mukherjee 1993:48). They were thus a highly successful commercial group in these neighbourhoods and a list of leading men in Calcutta compiled around 1840 contains the names of four important Subarnabanik Bene whose occupations are given as bankers and businessmen, moneylenders (*shroff*), *dewan* and *banyian* (partner and administrative assistant or translator) (Mukherjee 1993:n.p).[11] These occupational patterns indicate the main activities through which the Subarnabanik emerged as an economically well-off group during the early colonial period. Following such involvement of Subarnabaniks in foreign trade and banking more and more Subarnabaniks migrated to the city. Many of those moved away from the traditional selling of gold and became moneylenders, traders and shopkeepers. Although a small sub-caste, the Subarnabaniks were soon among the most influential single groups in the city and invested heavily in the newly developing real estate market in those areas where "natives" could buy property and build houses.

The changes brought about by colonial rule and migration to the city led to a further erosion of the existing caste system, within which economic success and ritual status had been present as competing indicators for some time. Thus Bandyopadhyay notes that "despite the Brahmin laws, a caste in Bengal, at least since the eighteenth century, was not a hereditary occupational group." In 1795, Colebrook reported that every profession, with few exceptions, was open to every description of persons. Brahmins are often employed in the most servile office and

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11 Mukherjee points out that fortunes were not necessarily made by those who belonged to the traditional aristocracy (*abhijat*) of *zamindars*. Nevertheless Bandopadhyay states that like other

the Shudras often elevated to situations of respectability and importance". In 1815

Hamilton confirmed this view by stating that "commerce and agriculture are

universally permitted to all classes and under the general designation of servants to

the other three tribes, the Shudras seem to be allowed to prosecute any

manufacture. In this tribe are included not only the true Shudras, but also other

castes...()...daily observation shows even Brahmins exercising the menial

profession of a Shudra" (Bandyopadhyay 1990:136).

1.3 The low status of the Subarnabaniks

While the above indicates the ambivalent status of occupational patterns as related

to caste status, the case for changing notions of status group affiliation can be

overstated as the problems with the *bhadralok* category imply. This can be

exemplified by analysing the status of the Subarnabanik Bene, a ritually low status

group with an artisan and merchant background who emerged as a successful

economic force in the city. It is often assumed that the low status of the

Subarnabaniks can be explained through their trading and business activities

which are expected to result from corruption, cheating, inborn greed etc. However,

Nicholas' reading of the medieval sources suggests that a wider culturally specific

notion related to the activities of traders and producers of gold predated the

success of the Subarnabanik Bene as entrepreneurs during the colonial period.

Thus Nicholas observes that in the episode he refers to, two merchant castes are

sharply distinguished from the general category of mixed castes of the higher order

and not assigned status according to their origin from a mixed union like all other

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castes, the Subarnabaniks of the time relied on a combination of trading and agricultural activities
which backed up their new endeavours (Bandopadhyay 1990:104).

castes mentioned. The category including most merchants classified as "high mixed" castes explicitly excludes those who make and sell things made from gold "Most of the high mixed castes remaining after the removal of the first four are groups that get their livelihoods either directly through trade or by selling the specialised products of their occupations. The absence from this list of the castes who make and sell things made of gold, and their presence in the medial category, are striking anomalies that are rectified in part by the designation of their occupations among the high mixed castes, although they are not moved into this category" (Nicholas 1995:152). Thus although caste status was not only assigned by the profession that a caste traditionally followed, certain castes could not overcome the predicament of the low status attributed to them whatever their source of income, while other castes with a comparable profile could advance their standing as a group to a certain extent. A closer look at the history of the Subarnabaniks in Calcutta suggests that in the case of this sub-caste the fact that they were traditionally dealing with gold, which is particularly significant in Bengali culture, provided the pretext for their exclusion from the respectable middle castes and later the *bhadralok*.

The ambiguity related to the status of the Subarnabaniks still dominates public perception and despite the efforts of educated leaders to challenge this, the reputation of the Bene and the Subarnabaniks in particular rests on the traditional occupation rather than ideas linked to the origin of the caste or sub-caste. Bhattacharya's assessment by the end of the nineteenth century reflects the notion of the caste status of all Bene to date when he notes that "the word Baniya is a corruption of the Sanskrit word Banik which means "merchant". The Banyias are certainly entitled to be regarded as Vaishyas. But the Banyias of Bengal do not

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wear the sacred thread, and the best are looked down upon as inferior Sudras. The

Banyias proper of Bengal are divided into two classes, namely 1. Suvarna Banika

- gold merchants 2. Gandha Banika spice merchants. Besides these there are two

other classes, namely, the Kansa Banika and the Sankha Banika, whose profession

and caste names entitle them to some extent to be regarded as Baniyas, but who

are not popularly taken to come under the category" (Bhattacharya

(1896)1995:158). Even though he completes his description by praising the

achievements of some Subarnabanik scholars of the time, his contempt for the

profession and economic conduct reflects notions about the caste and its status

prevalent today. While he mentions that although the Banik or Banyia are entitled

to Vaishya status as cultivating and manufacturing castes, they were seen as

Shudras and among them the Sonar Baniyas (Subarnabanik) were regarded as

unclean sub-caste. (Bhattacharya (1886)1995:158).

Today the Gandhabaniks (spice merchants), Subarnabaniks (sellers of

bullion and goldsmiths), Kanshabaniks (sellers and producers of brass utensils)

and the Shankhabaniks (sellers and producers of conchshell products), sometimes

even the Tambulibaniks (sellers of betel leaves) are subsumed under the Bene

category. The three latter castes were not necessarily defined as members of the

Bene caste in the nineteenth century, although Bhattacharya mentions with

reference to the Kanshabaniks and the Shankhabaniks that their profession and

caste name "entitle them to some extent to be regarded as Baniya" (Bhattacharya

(1896) 1995:158).[12]

12 Two medieval sources, the *Brihad-dharma* and the *Brahma-vaivarta*, list the different non-Brahmin castes of Bengal using broader categories of high castes, mixed castes, and unclean castes (Majumdar (1943)1971: 568ff). The myth of the origin of castes in Bengal based on the thirteenth century *Brhaddharma purana* (*Brihad-dharma*) states that the Kanshabaniks and the Gandhabaniks were by virtue of their origin from the same mixed union like the Gandhabanik

very loosely connected caste of merchants with reference to the *varna* model. Nevertheless a problematic ritual status of the Subarnabanik category can be supported by using precolonial sources. By accepting the *varna* model as point of reference, most castes in nineteenth century Bengal could be ranked according to their origin from the Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishya (Ambastha) and Shudra of the Veda. Most *jatis* claimed links with the ancient Vaishya, and the Baidhya succeeded in presenting themselves as the Vaishya of Bengal. The Bene groups claimed Vaishya status on account of their origin from a marriage between a Brahmin father and a Vaishya mother. While this claim was supported by all merchant groups, the Subarnabaniks had to gloss over the fact that medieval sources distinguish between the upper mixed and the lower mixed castes by defining the latter not only as offspring from a union between a Brahmin father and a Vaishya mother but the second marriage of the offspring of this union with a woman of the mother's group (see Nicholas 1995). These marriages "from the mother's side" (*mayer stor*) were condemned by the medieval texts and are still seen as causing inauspicious confusion of the hierarchies implicit in marriage relations as expressed through the idiom of "bad blood" (Fruzzetti, Östör and Barnett (1982)1992:22; Nicholas 1995). [13] Thus with reference to ritual status Subarnabanik Bene are seen as an unclean caste, a fact reflected in the use of

nineteenth century the Subarnabaniks were regarded as part of a Bene merchant caste (Bhattacharya (1896) 1995:158).

13 "The special status of the Subarnabaniks recorded in the myths of origin cannot easily be explained but seems to be closely linked to the fact that they are involved in trading with gold. While one principle employed to group castes in the myth is the degree of mixture and the direction of the union from which the group originated the second operation of the Brahmins aimed at grouping castes with the same ancestry differently, and thus points at other than *varna* criteria. In case of the latter classification the Svarnabanik are excluded from the first category and assigned a place in the second category. Thus the Svarnabaniks of the thirteenth century were among the "Shudra of the Shudras", along with washermen, distillers, fishermen" (Nicholas 1995:153).

While he presents the Gandhabanik and Subarnabaniks as Bene sub-castes

proper, the sellers and producers of brass utensils (Kansabanik) and of conchshell

products (Shankhabanik) are excluded, although both share clean Shudra status as

opposed to the unclean Shudra status of the Subarnabanik (Sonar Baniyas)

(Bhattacharya (1896) 1995:158-159). Thus the Subarnabanik occupy a special

position vis-à-vis other Bene castes who are clean Shudras and are sometimes

understood to constitute a different caste below other Bene groups.

The peculiar situation in which a caste contains clean and unclean Shudra is

unique and may be attributed to the fact that although the Bene are seen as a group

of merchants, this is a less well defined caste than any other and comprises of

groups with widely different occupations who do not intermarry. The notion of

Bene which parallels Bene to Baniya is perhaps the result of a redefinition of the

Bengali caste system in accordance with a simplified *varna* scheme. It seems more

likely that all groups referred to as Bene today were seen as merchants before, but

had little in common. However vis-à-vis the rest of society these were non-

agricultural groups. This might explain the category Bene as a *jati* as result of

migration to the city in which all groups with comparable occupations or economic

activities were perceived as one Bengali merchant caste. However, the

Subarnabanik's status may have become even more ambivalent within this

framework than as a separate group. Given the fact that the Bene never constituted

themselves as a caste with sub-castes but that every sub-caste is a separate

endogamous unit, the Subarnabanik can only be understood as a sub-caste in a

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among the high mixed castes (*uttama samkara jati*) (Majumdar (1943)1971: 367ff, Nicholas
1995:145ff). Thus they belonged to a category which ranged above the Subarnabaniks, who were
classified as a medial or intermediate mixed caste (*madhyama samkara jati*) which originated
from a repeated marriage with the same group (Nicholas 1995:146). However, by the turn of the

"fallen Brahmins" (*patita* or *barna* Brahmins) who are Vaishnavite Chaitanite Gossains (see Bhattacharya (1896) 1995:99; Nicholas (1995:149).

The unclean status of the Bene is a phenomenon firmly rooted in the history and regional particularity of the caste system of Bengal. Nicholas' analysis of the popular myth of Vena and Prthu dating back to the thirteenth or fourteenth century focuses on the origin of castes in Bengal, as depicted in the Brhaddharma Purana. Following this model two of today's Bene sub-castes, the Ghandabanik and the Shankhabar (Shankhabanik) are labelled high mixed castes (*uttama samkara jati*), while the two other groups belonging to the Bene category, Svarnakara and the Svarnabanik, are defined as medial mixed castes (*madhyama samkara jati*) (Nicholas 1995:146). Although the difference between the two terms is not entirely clear, both castes involved with gold, either as manufacturers or traders, are excluded from among those other artisan castes which are known as high mixed castes. This goes to demonstrate that the ritual status was determined by the occupational status even though origin plays a predominant role in establishing status in all other cases. But while social mobility brought about during the colonial period gave many low status groups the chance to advance their standing, the Subarnabanik were confronted with the impermeability of a system which valued involvement with agriculture and land ritually and economically, and perpetuated the negative assertion of their ascribed group characteristics. Thus even though the fact that Subarnabanik were involved in trading and moneylending etc. is still cited as the reason for their low status, it is the specific link between ritual and occupational status as well as the history of the group within the urban context that supports such judgements.

1.4 Movements to enhance the status of castes: ritual status, occupation and status

In addition to traditional ways to establish status, new attributes were introduced during the colonial period. Scholars analysing the rise of the *bhadralok* elite pointed out that for all castes in the city of Calcutta and the *mofussil* towns these included particular occupational patterns closely related to achievements in the field of education as well as the gain of landholdings in the countryside and real estate in the metropolis (e.g. Broomfield 1968). Furthermore within the newly established social framework, involvement with reformist politics and the discourse of modernity signified by the debates on "the status of women" and later nationalist aspirations, became relevant venues of individual and group advancement (e.g. Borthwick 1984; Engels 1989; Chatterjee 1993). But not all groups took part in modernist debate and overcame caste and ritual status as signifiers of social standing. Thus while members of the three high castes were increasingly drawn into higher education, clerical and professional employment and the related equalising life-style, historians exploring caste and mobility among the agricultural groups emphasised that the majority of those claimed higher caste status according to "traditional" patterns of emulation and exclusion (see Sanyal 1981; Bandyopadhyay 1990).

In the early days all castes of considerable economic means with numerous members living in Calcutta were active in the *dals* of the time, the "social factions, formed under the leadership of a rich man, a *dalapati*" (Mukherjee 1993:149). These *dals* were multi-caste organisations founded in early nineteenth century Calcutta. Although the majority of *dalapatis* belonged to Brahmin or Kayastha groups some of the leaders were from other castes and affluent Subarnabaniks

played an important role in such organisations. The patron-client relationships which developed were not only structured by caste status but by economic status, and non-Brahmins or Kayasthas emerged as influential patrons of localities, the arts, and reform movements, which sometimes led to a redefinition of their (sub-)caste affiliation. But social mobility was not limited to the individual line or family. Early nineteenth century Calcutta offered new opportunities for fortunes to be made by individuals as well as sub-castes involved in particular trades. A number of upwardly mobile units took the chance and started to emulate high status groups by adopting practices like wearing the sacred thread, the life-cycle rituals of high castes, changing their food habits, prohibiting widow remarriage, withdrawing women from agricultural work, and paying dowries. Some groups even embraced the practice of *kulinism* common among Brahmin sub-castes and introduced marriages with dowries to higher status groups and the burning of widows (*sati*).[14]

The *dals* and their patrons played a crucial role in these attempts to redefine caste status because acceptance had to be acknowledged by the high status groups and the forum for any discussion about the ritual status of a group was the *dal*.

Nevertheless towards the middle of the nineteenth century many castes felt the need to organise themselves more strongly in urban single caste groups. Thus in addition to membership in the (localised) multi-caste *dals* existing in some areas, most castes constituted an exclusive *dal*. These assemblies preceded the organisation along caste lines that became a prominent feature of Calcutta's social fabric following the first phase of the *dals* (Mukherjee 1970:70-71). Thus the

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14 Up to 40% of the reported sati cases in Bengal between 1815 and 1827 occurred among upwardly mobile agricultural castes (Bandyopadhyay 1990:118).

Subarnabanik who were seen as an unclean caste of very low ritual status, claimed clean status and aimed at their recognition at the same level with other merchant (sub-)castes who were accepted as Banyia in accordance with the *varna* model (Bandyopadhyay 1990:101). Such attempts to assert a caste's or sub-caste's high status were common at the time and like the Jogis and the Sahas, two other unclean castes, the Subarnabaniks acted as a group thereby adopting a strategy employed successfully by the Kayastha and the Baidhya who attained high caste status which goes unchallenged to date.

During this early period of urban development, new economic and social opportunities led to a rise in claims to higher status among many castes and sub-castes in the city of Calcutta, which were based on notions of ritual purity and high status practice. The latter were often linked to the occupational profile of a group. Within this setting changes in the profession and relative wealth of a caste or sub-caste nurtured aspirations for a redefinition of status. However, such movements were not confined to the urbanising setting of nineteenth century Calcutta but were rooted in earlier attempts of different groups to enhance ritual status and social prestige often expressed through religious movements like Vaishnavism. Thus claims to higher status and movements, which promoted a restructuring of the caste system predated colonialism and the processes, which occurred during the nineteenth century have to be interpreted within the context of movements among the Bengali lower castes from the thirteenth century onwards (Bandyopadhyay 1990: 136; Sanyal 1981).

Parallel to the formation of caste organisations, Calcutta saw the emergence of new social movements which were not based on caste and aimed at a fusion of western ideas and reformed Hinduism. A variety of societies and assemblies like

the *Brahmo Samaj* were initiated and supported by members of the *bhadralok* elite, and debated particular social issues rather than the ranking of castes. Wealthy and educated Subarnabaniks joined these organisations and tried to address dowry, child marriage and education among members of their own caste. Some attempts were made by these *bhadralok* to introduce "enlightened" views among members of the caste-based Subarnabanik societies (Bandyopadhyay 1990:120pp).

Thus the "Saptagramyia Subarnabanik Hitasadhani Sabha" was founded in 1878, later followed by the "Bangyia Subarnabanik Sammilani", founded by the prominent merchant Rajendra Mullick. At that time the Bene, and in particular the Subarnabanik who are perceived today as a group lacking education and a history of learning, figured prominently among those who adopted English education as a means of access to promising positions and trade with the foreigners in Calcutta.[15] However, the need to educate women which dominated nineteenth century discourse among the Calcutta *bhadralok* did not influence the Subarnabanik as strongly as other castes.

In the light of what has been stated so far it seems only natural that by linking themselves with the ritually high status groups of their own caste, they gained recognition as Bene rather than as Subarnabaniks. But judging from today's perception, such a blurring of sub-caste distinctions resulted rather in a redefinition of the status of all other Bene groups. Contrary to the aspirations of the Surbarnabanik, other Bene groups were increasingly identified with the low status of this very influential and well-to-do sub-caste in Calcutta, which had

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15 The 1901 Census shows the percentage of literacy in Bengali among male Subarnabanik in 1901 as 32.3% rising to 45.1% in 1911 and a literacy rate in English as 15.14% in 1901 and 21.87% in 1911 (quoted in Bandopadhyay 1990:109).

reached a degree of organisation and wealth hitherto unknown among them. While the Subarnabaniks were formerly concentrated in some districts of West Bengal, formalised organisation on a large scale was only achieved after their migration to Calcutta, and the rising literacy rate among male caste members served as a means of uniting the newly rich sub-caste. After the early attempts to enhance the ritual status of the group had failed, the Subarnabaniks turned to organising themselves around matters which reflected the changing occupational patterns in the city. Consequently the "Subarnabanik Yuvak Samiti" formed in 1907 focused on the wider organisation of the caste including the districts. Later transformed into the "Calcutta Subarnabanik Samaj", the society arranged a conference of Subarnabaniks from all over Bengal in 1916 which took place in Calcutta. In the aftermath of the conference, local committees were set up, which sent representatives to the meetings of the Sammilani, the regular provincial conference headed by the Calcutta Samaj (Bandyopadhyay 1990:146-147). That the leaders of the sub-caste understood that education was a predisposition of high social status in the new urban setting which reflected upon the social structure in the villages, is clear from Bandhopadhyay's account of the activities of the Samaj, which concentrated on education, vocational training and the advancement of trading opportunities among its members: "Their first emphasis, of course, was on education and for this purpose scholarships were offered to needy students, a free hostel was set up in Calcutta and libraries were established both in Calcutta and the interior…()… Besides general education, vocational training was another area of interest for the Subarnabanik community leaders. It was deemed essential particularly for the advancement of their traditional trade. Young members of the caste were therefore encouraged to take advantage of the existing facilities of

technical education available in the country and in some cases were sent abroad for such training. Under the auspices of the "Calcutta Subarnabanik Samaj", a Commercial School was also started at Chetla, for providing knowledge in such subjects as book-keeping or typing which the organisers considered essential for the pursuit of their business in a new modern environment. Other collective measures or proposals to promote business activities included plans to start joint-stock companies or establish co-operative banks, discussion and publication of articles on modern business methods or agricultural techniques and providing regular business tips through the journal" (Bandyopadhyay 1990:147).

The priorities outlined by the Samaj still govern the activities of the society existing in Calcutta to date. However, the noticeable shift which took place between the first organised efforts to enhance the status and the priorities of the sub-caste organisation at the beginning of the twentieth century, imply that the problem, which lay at the heart of the low status of the sub-caste, could not be solved. While many Subarnabaniks were given an opportunity to study, the stress on vocational training proves that its members were still involved in the production of goods. Thus although many Subarnabaniks living in Calcutta were well-off businessmen, others had their own workshops and manufactured different products amongst which the traditional production of jewellery must have been of foremost importance. The Subarnabaniks did not dissociate themselves from the sphere which defined them as "unclean" in the first place and extended their activities into less polluting but no doubt not very respectable spheres of business.

A related point can be made with reference to the promotion of "enlightened" ideals so closely linked with the emergence of *bhadralok* life, which failed to attract the attention of most Subarnabaniks. Although Bandyopadhyay

states that wealthy caste members adopted the discourse on social reform and later

on nationalism as part of the rhetoric used by the Samaj, the majority of its

members remained highly suspicious towards attempts to integrate the sub-caste

into the modernist and anti-British movements in the period before 1930. As

traders, the Subarnabaniks were interested in stability and were not really

dissatisfied with the development of colonial rule in particular, as their interest in

agriculture was limited. The exclusion of Muslims from many positions important

for foreign trade had opened new possibilities for the sub-caste and their success

in Calcutta had enabled them to take part in urban life on an equal footing with

high status castes. The loyalty towards the British, which was expressed at the

beginning of all meetings of the Samaj, faded only by the middle of the 1920s but

the leaders of the Subarnabaniks did not embrace the Independence movement and

in particular Swaraj (self-rule) wholeheartedly because they were still aware of the

considerable social change colonial rule had brought about, in which they

participated successfully without any inhibitions from their low caste status.[16]

While the well-to-do members of the group were accepted as *bhadralok* and

participated in the Independence movement (not least by contributing large

amounts of money) together with other educated members of the upper class, the

majority of the Subarnabaniks joined the nationalists only reluctantly. Although

prosperous Subarnabaniks accepted the importance of *jatiya itihas* (history of the

nation) as equally relevant as *jatir itihas* (the history of the caste), the interest of

the small scale shopkeepers and traders lay with the colonial government

(Bandyopadhyay 1990: 163). This became obvious at times of social crisis such as

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16 Echoes of this new experience of freedom from social restriction in urban areas could be found throughout the journals published by low caste societies in Calcutta, like the *Subarnabanik*

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the Calcutta riots of 1926 or the great Bengal famine in 1943. In both cases the distribution of stocks in the urban areas was hampered by hoarding, and manipulation of supplies, in the city as well as the urban areas. While the literature focuses on the Marwaris who were involved in trade and storage as well as the stockmarket, it can be assumed that the small and middle sized shops and warehouses owned by the Bene were looted in riots and that they were involved in the large scale hoarding during the famine as owners and traders of stocks and warehouses (see Greenough 1982; Das (1991)1993).

By the time involvement with the Independence movement became a strong new status determinant in Bengal during the last two decades of British rule, the first partition of the province and later the "man-made famine" helped to mobilise the rural masses under urban *bhadralok* leadership. In many districts agitation for the nationalist cause depended on the local agricultural castes, which were not necessarily of high status. Nevertheless, the political turmoil helped to raise the level of unity across caste lines among the Hindu population and gave rise to a new political scenario in which the urban middle class and the land-owning agricultural castes united and established new political patron-client relationships (Chatterjee 1997:79ff). This process excluded those who directly gained from trading with the British and whose main interest lay in the city rather than the agricultural sector, amongst them the Bene and the Marwaris. The reluctance to join the Independence movement voiced by the journals of the Subarnabanik Samaj was based on the profits made by all traders, big and small, in Calcutta and the wide range of investments the Subarnabanik were involved in. As a group

Samachar, which stated that "an age of equality among the Hindus has again been ushered in" (cited in Bandyopadhyay 1990:155).

involved in trade and owning stocks, shops and warehouses all over Calcutta, the

Subarnabanik achieved social mobility but gained a bad reputation for hoarding

and blackmarketing, speculation and serving the British to the last day. As a caste

they remained conservative and were never accepted as *bhadralok*, although many

Bene belonged to the *bhadralok* community, and while many traits of their low

status could be overcome by the equalising effect of middle-class life-style, the low

esteem attached to the sub-caste on the basis of their involvement in trade and

production remained a feature firmly rooted in public consciousness.[17]

1.5 Gender issues: the advancement of women as status marker

Gender issues like dowry, *sati*, widow remarriage and *purdah* emerged as markers

of status with the development of middle-class lifestyle, which were debated not

only between colonial rulers and "natives", but equally fiercely contested among

the urban elite and within caste organisations (see Broomfield 1968; Borthwick

1984; Bandyopadhyay 1990; Karlekar (1991)1993; Chatterjee 1993). But

whereas the advancement of women's status and the education of girls gained

much attention in scholarly accounts of nineteenth century Bengal, the fact that the

majority of members of lower castes did not take part in these developments and

many actively refused any attempt to impose new notions of femininity, conjugal

relations and family structure, has rarely ever been taken into account. Thus in an

exemplary case it can be stated that the Subarnabanik Bene among others did not

really invest in one of the most important fields of activity among the *bhadralok*,

the propagation and practice of female education. While the number of women in

17 Kling cites examples of public ridicule of fellow Subarnabanik students by high-caste classmates, the public perception of the antisocial greed and mistrust attributed to the group (Kling 1969:80).

the city grew constantly as more and more families moved from the districts and lived permanently in Calcutta, the Subarnabanik organisation attempted to raise the level of female education among its members. Despite the surprise expressed by Bandyopadhyay about the fact that the Subarnabanik were among the first to organise a women's conference, the sub-caste was not only backwards in terms of women's education at the time, but remained disinterested in this and related issues as a group. Even though, as Bandopadhyay points out, some of the caste organisations initiated belated campaigns to deal with gender related issues like dowry and widow remarriage, the overall interest in these problems was limited (Bandopadhyay 1990:47).

Female education had become a focus of attention from as early as the 1850s when the first institutions for girls were opened in Calcutta and many of the more educated high caste families started to educate their women at home (Chakraborty 1963; Karlekar (1991)1993); Engels 1996). But while these women gradually emerged from the enclosed world of the *andor mahal* (women's quarters also known as *antahpur* or *zenana*) and some of them joined Calcutta University from as early as 1878, the majority of women in Bengal remained illiterate (Chakraborty 1963:51ff).

Furthermore, although many families accepted the need of schooling for daughters, a large number of women were now more confined to the domestic sphere than their mothers. As part of an effort to enhance their status, many low status castes embraced various forms of seclusion (*purdah*), which was rigidly adhered to among the high status groups in Calcutta during the nineteenth century. Whereas it is difficult to discern whether or not Bene women were secluded in pre-colonial and rural Bengal, the urban trend was clearly towards seclusion and in

particular wealthy Bene families became known for the rigid seclusion of women in the traditional *antahpur* (women's quarters) as late as the 1960s.

With the call for female education, which was first adopted by the progressive Brahmos, Bengali Christians and the Anglo-Indian community, the redefinition of traditional female and male spheres was directly linked to the social standing of a family, caste or community. Although, contrary to what is generally assumed, the number of girls attending schools remained very low until the 1920s, as compared to the Madras or Bombay presidencies, the self image of the Calcutta *bhadralok* and the discourse on modernity were directed towards educational issues, which became synonymous with the modernisation of *purdah* (Engels 1996:198). Linked to other political issues like the Age of Consent Act and the situation of widows, female education remained a comparatively contested area and different approaches were developed until the necessity of institutions and curricula was widely accepted with the merging of social and nationalist movements (Engels 1996:14ff). However, regional and community differences were important determinants of efforts towards social reform, and closely linked to the relative status a group maintained in Calcutta. [18]

With the introduction of female education, attempts to redefine the female sphere and women's culture so aptly described by Banerjee were under way (Banerjee 1989; (1989) 1990; Borthwick 1984,1990). As part of the general concern with status, women were expected to become more obviously cultured and many traits of the female sphere in the *antahpur* were to be refined or cast off

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18 In her analysis of nineteenth century discourses on gender roles in colonial Bengal Engels depicts the links between traditional attitudes towards child-marriage and the success of campaigns for female education. Thus she observes that in Burdhwan District the high number of under-age widows and the low levels of female literacy were intrinsically linked. In general,

altogether. This process did not prove successful in the case of the Subarnabanik Bene whose women apart from some exceptions, never became *bhadramahila* or cultured in the nineteenth century sense (see Borthwick 1984,1990).

In addition to the extreme and belated adherence to conservative practices of high status groups like seclusion, the need to educate the female members of the family during the first half of the twentieth century was reportedly low among some castes and sub-castes. Many women emphasised that given the generous dowries accompanying Subarnabanik brides a need for well educated girls did not arise, and although the Bene were regarded as a low status group, the economic status attached to the sub-caste in Calcutta made marriages outside the endogamous (sub-)caste not desirable.[19]

It is very difficult to discern whether or not seclusion in any rigid sense was established in the lower castes and sub-castes as part of an attempt to emulate high caste attitudes. Perhaps what is labelled *purdah* or seclusion in the case of lower castes was the withdrawal of women from outside work in the rural areas, which became a means to claim higher status, but was certainly not necessary among the Subarnabanik, who were rarely involved in agriculture. The lack of outside education emerged as an additional indicator of seclusion although schooling was available in most *mofussil* towns and many districts as well as in the *antahpur*.

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female education was more common among East Bengali (high-caste) women who were less often confined to the *antahpur* than their sisters in the western parts of the province (Engels 1996:57ff).
19 Given that quantitative data on the educational level of women belonging to different castes do not exist, some indications can be inferred from other phenomena as related to the fieldwork conducted. The educational level among the mothers of all women from the neighbourhood was reportedly very low. This does not imply illiteracy but a low rate of school attendance. In relation to marriage the community experienced a rise in expectations of matriculate brides only recently and the marriage age is still below the average of other middle-class families, although no instances of child marriages in previous generations were reported. In fact, although the numbers of unmarried women are particularly high in Bengali middle-class families, they are comparatively lower among Subarnabanik Bene.

Nevertheless, female education seems to be the main area in which lower castes like the Subarnabaniks adhered to the ideal of *purdah.*

From the point of view of a middle-class group with no intention to join the civil service and thus little need for educated mothers this was entirely feasible. While men gained higher education mostly in subjects related to business activities, married women were relegated to housework and devoted their time to these duties, entertainment, and worshipping. But as they only gradually developed a direct link with the high caste rituals, *shamshkaras* and forms of worship, they continued to perform old-fashioned *bratas, pujas,* and practices which were so successfully branded as superstition by the reformers that many of the educated upper-caste women from *bhadralok* families could not indulge in such activities but had to follow the *sastrachars,* shastric rituals (see Banerjee 1989; (1989)1990; Engels 1996:52). By virtue of their attachment to worldly goods and business, so aptly expressed through the proverbial idiom of "women and gold" (*kaminikanchan*) communities like the Subarnabanik could not participate in the refined and pure sphere of culture which produced and reproduced the *bhadralok* elite. As a sub-caste neither did they command an adequate tradition of classical knowledge and ties with the learned castes, nor did their ritual status leave any doubt about the qualities (*gunas*) of a group which was constantly involved in business activities for the sake of profit. Furthermore, unlike the Marwaris, the Bene never became a relevant merchant group beyond the borders of Bengal and did not invest in high profile ventures after the initial phase of crude foreign trade had come to an end (Kling 1969).[20] This group of traditional merchants belongs

20 Kling describes attitudes towards business in Bengal by drawing from journals and traces the negative qualities attributed to business activities and various investment patterns of the majority of high castes, although his analysis remains illustrative (Kling 1969). A comparison of the history

beyond doubt to the urban middle classes but lacks a high and respectable social

status due to their close relationship with "women and gold" and the related life-

style.

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of the Marwari and Bengali business communities is provided by Timberg, who follows Kling's
line of argument (see Timberg 1971,1978).

Chapter 2: Arranging Marriage

The area which involves assessment of status and group affiliation most obviously is the realm of marriage, and a variety of factors are important with reference to arranged marriages. Consequently, although educated and urban Bengalis are reluctant to address caste as an existing marker and would more often agree on class as the main factor, the former and its relation to the latter are of foremost importance where marriages are concerned.

Within this chapter common ways of arranging a marriage are described and a variety of factors constituting a "match" are explored. Thus the question of different attributes of a desirable groom and bride are linked to wider notions of class and caste as well as individual preference. The various adaptations to middle-class requirements are discussed with reference to Bengali Hindu marriage patterns and the effect of urbanisation on rituals, closeness of marriages and unions between members of different backgrounds are analysed. Finally, such marriages are interpreted as part of wider status-enhancing strategies of a kin group and specific types of upward mobility.

2.1 The main criteria for arranged marriages

During the last two years of a daughter's education, or after a son has completed his studies and/or gained a good position in business or government service, parents of young adults start their search for a match. This task, which is never easy and always time consuming, is part of the obligation a father has towards his children, and in contemporary urban Bengal the mother is involved in it together with her husband. Prior to this, future marriage(s) of one's children have been

borne in mind while other decisions were taken, such as the number of children a middle-class couple might have or the schooling of children, the age of retirement or the construction or purchase of a house. When the time for the marriage has come, members of the immediate family and friends are informed about the need for a good groom (*bor*) or bride (*bou*). In particular the paternal aunts of the son or daughter concerned are encouraged to check and enquire amongst relatives and acquaintances and keep their eyes and ears open during wedding receptions in order to find out about prospective candidates (Roy (1972) 1975:75pp). While these measures often prove successful, much effort is directed towards newspapers carrying matrimonial pages, which feature hundreds of grooms and brides from all over the country and sometimes abroad. These advertisements are kept short and to the point and normally consist of age, height, the caste and/or sub-caste (*jati*) and *gotra*, position and/or level of education as well as father's occupation and often the number of siblings, property and the place of residence. Girls may in addition be described as homely, beautiful, fair or handsome etc. Parents of a potential candidate, be it a boy or a girl, carefully select ads to be answered and the parents of girls will most probably put in one themselves.

The columns contain basic information of the type mentioned and indicate characteristics of the family searching for a groom or bride. Thus just how much is said about caste in detail tells whether the family is looking for an exact match in terms of caste, sub-caste and *gotra* and the professional status of a groom or his father or the prospective bride's father will determine whether the ad is worth answering or not. Furthermore the way they describe their own status gives the reader an idea about the emphasis put on descent, caste and regional origin. To

start with, caste as well as region, East Bengal (*banal*), or West Bengal (*ghoti*) will be important points in question.

2.2 Caste, occupation and status

Apart from endogamy, caste membership in Bengal does not really imply any prescriptive rules or fixed marriage circles. Although *gotra*-exogamy (exogamous marriage groups) is understood as binding, it is often ignored (Das Gupta 1986:16). But while there are many instances where *gotra*-exogamy is neglected and *gotra* membership temporarily changed during the marriage ritual (temporary adoption by the mother's brother is a provision used in case a spouse belongs to the same *gotra*), caste membership remains decisive for the purpose of marriage. Hence theoretically parents searching for a groom or bride can go for anybody of the same caste, irrespective of whether the person is of the same *gotra* or belongs to another *gotra*. The rule of *gotra*-exogamy seems to be a means for excluding marriage between prohibited relatives sharing blood, such as those belonging to the same line (*bangsha*) defined as seven ascending male generations on the father's side (*satpurush*) and three male generations on the mother's side (*tinpurush*).

In practice, sub-castes play an important role as well, mainly because certain castes encompass a wide range of different status groups or (sub-)castes such as a number of Kayastha groups from East Bengal, which are considered to be of lower status than the majority, in particular if a claim for Kayastha status can be traced back to the nineteenth century. Sub-castes may be hierarchical status groups within a caste (like different Brahmin sub-castes) or different occupational groups (e.g. cultivators and fishermen) or artisan and manufacturer groups

belonging to the same caste (e.g. different Bene groups) as well as regional groups said to belong to one caste. Often the same sub-castes occupy diverse positions depending on the region of origin (see Nicholas 1967).

Brahmins are grouped along a rigid hierarchy and will not easily accept a groom or a bride from a lower order of their own caste. Brahmins seem to be more inclined to maintain regional divisions and a West Bengali Brahmin family will not normally accept a partner from an East Bengali background. Moreover, sub-castes like Rarhiya Brahmins who practised *kulinism* in the past, often try to arrange a match with *kulin* Brahmin families.

Although members of the caste are not present in the area where fieldwork has been conducted, the Baidhya as a high status caste are worth mentioning, as they are known to adhere to caste endogamy more strictly than other groups. Due to more or less general high economic status and prestigious white collar employment, their status is widely accepted as one of a learned high status group, with highly educated girls and boys alike.

The Kayastha, perhaps the biggest middle caste of Bengal are often middle-class and in white collar employment (at least in Calcutta), and a wide range of sub-castes as well as regional groups exist (Bhattacharya (1896) 1995). Kayastha families from East Bengal frequently search for a bride or groom from East Bengal, although in the light of further criteria this preference will not generally be decisive and differences among members of the same caste will be considered where necessary. However, Kayastha and other groups will try to come as close to what they assume to be equal status and thus if other points cannot easily be matched caste is a first step in the right direction.

These three high status castes are followed by the clean agricultural castes and the trader and merchant groups (Bene) described above. Bene are normally bound to emphasise caste endogamy and differences between the occupational groups play a prominent role. Members of the Bene caste are always quick to point out, that theirs is a special group and thus they would not even think of marrying their sons or daughters to members of other groups, and that caste or sub-caste endogamy should be maintained.

Non-merchant agricultural castes, members of which are also present in middle-class neighbourhoods, are often of clean status and are considered to belong to high status groups vis-à-vis artisan castes. Furthermore, some members of artisan and agricultural castes have enhanced their status and migrated very early in high numbers to Calcutta, e.g. (Chasi-) Kaibarta, Telis and Sadgopes. Educated parents who belong to one of the agricultural castes do not really have much choice and will try to maintain caste and regional endogamy, mostly by taking grooms and brides from rural areas, where a higher number of caste members live. As today many among them are in white collar employment and government service, the rural background of a potential spouse might pose a problem. Thus like in the case of the Bene, educated members of these castes are difficult to marry off, but often the rural connections will help to find a suitable partner without consulting the newspaper first.

Given the fact that caste is a criterion for matches it should be emphasised that it is evaluated in relation to other variables. To find caste members as such is not difficult, but it is often difficult to find a caste member who is an adequate partner for marriage. Thus caste constitutes a separate variable, but is significant only in combination with other variables where marriage is concerned, although

much of the literature on Indian marriage and kinship systems suggests that it constitutes the primary focus for match-making. Moreover, the particularities of (sub-)caste status in Bengal are hard to trace, often negotiable and the classification changes over periods of time. In general, few Bengali middle-class parents accept a groom or bride on the ground of his or her caste alone, but related features will normally be mentioned, such as the range of occupations of a caste, regional variations, reputation as linked to the educational status of a caste and equal compound descriptions, which are expressed in terms of "culture". In this respect the preference for marriages between members of families which are of equal status is important. Thus in cases where caste matches, but the factors contributing to other characteristics of status like occupation, descent and wealth are not congruent, the parents of a groom or bride will not take up negotiations.

Middle class families search for a groom in a particular occupation, but in general a range of combinations between education and occupation of father and son, property and position is taken into consideration and thus advertisements for a groom might point out the occupation of the girl's father as well as the position of her brother(s). In the strata of society we are concerned with here, occupations are normally within the three fields of government service (ranging from middle officers in the police service to clerks and accountants, doctors in service, rarely IAS or other more reputed positions), employees in business (government undertakings or big Indian companies) or self-employed owners of business. Parents are looking for a groom who is in *chakri*, a term designating any white collar position and a bride whose father and perhaps brothers are in service will expect the groom to be of equal standing. Education in the case of grooms is mostly a means to achieve government service employment and thus what exactly

a person studied or the type of school is less important if a position has been secured. However, English medium education is an advantage to find a job and thus ranked higher than instruction in Bengali. The more important question is whether the subtleties of distinctions between different types of service, e.g. service in a central government department or the West Bengal state government (the latter's salaries are lower), or the advantages of a groom with a position in the income revenue office or a bank as compared to the Ministry of Culture can really be established to the full satisfaction of the prospective bride's parents. The same initial questions need to be answered as far as the bride's or the groom's father or brother(s) are concerned and nowadays sometimes the bride herself is a working girl. Because most of the women in this particular area are not in employment, the rare case of a working mother of either bride or groom can be neglected.

In many instances the family of the prospective partner are involved in business (*byabshay*) rather than service. Business as a category includes everything from running a shop to a larger unit with employees manufacturing consumer goods or an artisan's workshop. In this context the term refers to a family business owned by a father and later his sons, or the father's brothers and their sons. Given the possibilities for fission, parental interest in someone from a business background focuses on questions of ownership and inheritance. A groom in business is less desirable if the business is not run by his father alone and a shared business, whether a corner or sweetmeat shop or a unit manufacturing iron grills, makes it more difficult to marry off a son. In the case of a bride's father in the same situation parents might decide in favour of the family more easily, because their son will not be involved in the business himself and whatever the profit the parents of a daughter-in-law are expected to give generously to their

daughter. Moreover, owners of business might have more cash at their disposal than a service-holder's family. But in general business is an unpredictable affair and the ups and downs are not smoothed by social security guaranteed in a government office. Thus in most instances a groom in service or a father of a prospective bride in service are preferred even amongst members of those castes which are known to be involved in business and trading traditionally (e.g. the Bene). Employment in a private company is evaluated according to the status of the company, whether it is a multinational, an Indian government or government of West Bengal undertaking, well known or established, and the status derived from a position depends entirely on the reputation of the company and the office of the person concerned.

While young women may be in short term employment (e.g. travel agents or a laboratory) a young man has to search for a more stable position and will have to perform well if his parents are to be successful in finding him a bride. This holds true for a girl's brother as well, whose position is crucial for his sister's marriage. Although a distant cousin working with a multinational or as a doctor will be mentioned during the negotiations, this person will ultimately not care for the daughter in the way her brother should, who is also responsible for her and her children in times of crisis. Because Bengali marriages initiate very close long-term relationship between affines, the parents of a daughter and her brother will expect her to visit their house and themselves visit her in-laws' house frequently on an informal basis. Furthermore, it is the duty of a brother to support a widowed sister and her children, which partly explains the emphasis on the number of brothers and their social standing as far as a girl's marriage is concerned.

While the main criteria for choosing a groom include education, it is linked to caste, family background and occupation of the father, because in itself it does not guarantee a good position. Similarly parents of a boy are looking carefully into the educational background of a prospective daughter-in-law. Her achievements in this field will often be more important for a first contact between the parents of a boy and her own father and mother than her looks, because all parents have a very clear idea beforehand of what educational level is preferable. Today these middle-class families are looking for a bride who finished her class twelve exam, sometimes even a BA, and they might easily accept a matriculate bride with a pass for university studies. This exemplifies that the content of higher education for girls does not play a significant role. As a daughter-in-law will more often than not never be in employment, a girl without any experience in the labour market who spent up to two years after finishing school in her parent's house waiting to be married is sometimes as suitable as a bride who holds a degree in languages, home sciences, or comparable subjects. The pattern of female white collar employment common among upper-middle class families in Calcutta in other neighbourhoods has not emerged here. However, there are exceptions to this rule as far as lower-middle class families are concerned, most remarkably employment in service and teaching (preferably at a girl's school) and the rare case of students of medicine or science in general.[21] These educational achievements for girls create new patterns of open marriage competition and are considered an invaluable asset for a girl's chances to marry.[22] Highly educated girls, who might be difficult to marry off are

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21 Any employment in government service will provide a woman with a number of benefits like maternity leave, access to loans etc. and may not easily be discarded.

22 This type of hypergamy is comparable to what has been described by Upadhya as the prevailing practice among the newly emerged rural-urban elite of Andhra Pradesh (Upadhya 1990:44ff).

not common but as reported for other areas parents may face problems to arrange a match for a daughter who continued after a BA, which certainly is one of the reasons to marry her off at that point. However, government service, meagrely paid as it is, gives many a young daughter-in-law a chance to continue with her working life at least until children are born, because her husband's family will not easily give up advantages like housing, loans, paid leave etc. Nevertheless, in general Bengali parents from a lower-middle class background do not search for a working girl.

2.3 Parents' involvement in marriage negotiations

The pressure to continue with an investigation of the background which follows the preliminary sorting out of a number of suitable boys and girls is now increasing and the father of a candidate will not take the decision by himself. Mothers play a crucial part in marriage negotiations and are perhaps more firm in what they want, as they are the ones who have to spend most of the time with a new daughter-in-law and mothers of prospective brides will have to cope with their daughter's grief if the new son-in-law (*jamai*) or his family are not as good as expected. Married life implies compromise, but how a daughter will cope with her new duties is a source of concern to the mother who has to see to it that the setting is acceptable. In addition the prospect of further relations with the in-laws' house accounts for the caution with which the particularities are evaluated. Whether the daughter can adjust (*moniya neoya*) to the situation and the matching of the two families determines the future relationship and ultimately affect the status of both houses in a number of ways.

As the pressure to arrange the marriage during the next season builds up, evenings are spent replying to letters and going carefully through those received, which are at this stage accompanied by a very detailed family history of both the mother's and the father's family of a candidate, and a photograph. These accounts are completed by the bride's or groom's father and the lists include the descent and place of origin of grandparents and parents, occupation of as many relatives as possible, and information on the economic status of the family.

Marriage negotiations are in general treated secretively and are not discussed with outsiders, even kin are not normally consulted by the parents of a prospective bride or groom. There are a number of reasons to conceal the activities at this stage which go beyond the fact that to talk openly about marriage arrangements in front of children and in particular the daughters concerned is a matter of embarrassment (see Roy (1972) 1975). In order to support their cause parents have to disclose their own socio-economic details and may still not reach their aim, but the alleged status has been spelled out in writing and will become subject to criticism and challenge. A statement once made has to be supported by facts and figures which are not normally discussed with relatives and neighbours in such detail. The moral values involved are much harder to trace, but in general an arranged marriage should aim at equality of status and not be directed towards hypergamy (Nicholas 1967:72; Fruzzetti 1982(1990):111). This entails an effort to find a groom or a bride from an acceptable family with a good reputation, a matching range of positions as far as the male members of the affinal family are concerned and comparable assets in terms of property and descent. But while this ideal of equal status, which is normally expressed in terms of a good family of the same background, is the norm, many families are trying to secure a match with

someone of higher economic means (see Caplan 1984:229). Thus to search for a

well-to-do groom will be part of wider arrangements regarding the dowry of a girl

and the occupation of a boy but should not be revealed. On the boy's side a good

match will be expected but not openly discussed, as the prospective bride herself

should be modest and her family of equal standing, otherwise the parents will earn

a reputation of greed and bad morals.[23] The girl's parents have to make sure that

the diverse "voluntary gifts" are made without giving the impression that they

cannot afford the relation with a family of the presumably same status and are

thus under even more pressure than the groom's parents to conceal the

negotiations. Moreover, the girl's family may have to avoid any impression of

"selling the daughter" and are therefore careful to maintain the emphasis on equal

standing (see chapter 4).

2.4 The muddle concerning isogamy and hypergamy

Hypergamy has played a prominent role in analysing North Indian systems of

marriage and kinship in relation to social status (e.g. Dumont (1966)1970a;

Madan 1975; Parry 1979). With reference to Bengal the hypergamous marriage

pattern of *kulin* Brahmins which linked different ranked status groups as part of

the wider caste has been aptly described by Inden amongst others (see

Bhattacharya (1896)1995; Inden 1976). Whereas most North Indian systems

oscillate between institutionalised or obligatory hypergamy and a hypergamous

preference described by Dumont as a "milieu", the idea that marriage is governed

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23 The atmosphere of severe status competition makes any discussion of marriage arrangements impossible. Concealment of all related activities is part of the ongoing negotiations. The manner in which lower status groups often discuss a marriage to be arranged is not acceptable among middle-class families.

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by hypergamous preference or prescription in most of Northern India has gained

wide acceptance (see Dumont 1964:89; Pocock 1972:94ff; Madan 1975:32).[24]

The hypergamous pattern adhered to by *kulin* Brahmins matches the kind of

institutionalised hypergamy and restricted exchange described for other areas and

groups, e.g. the Rajputs (Inden 1976; Parry 1979). However, a number of scholars

suggested that hypergamy is not the governing principle among Bengali Hindus in

general and that despite the well known hypergamous marriage practices of *kulin*

Brahmins and some Kayastha groups in the past, other Hindu castes do not

practice institutionalised hypergamy or even display a tendency for such a

marriage pattern (Fruzzetti and Östör 1976; Fruzzetti: (1982) 1990:111ff;

Kotalova 1993:163ff). Thus Davis observes that in the case of a mixed village in

West Bengal 98% of all marriages were not of the hypergamous type but clearly in

line with the often stated preference for equal status of both *bangshas* and an

isogamous preference (Davis 1983:71).

In an attempt to redefine Bengali kinship and marriage as part of wider

culturally specific systems of meaning and social relations, scholars like Fruzzetti

and Östör drew from South Indian models rather than the neighbouring regions.

Arguing that Bengali notions of personhood lie at the heart of kinship structures,

their work draws on material from Tamil Nadu and compares the former with the

prevailing ideas on which marriages in Bengal are based (Fruzzetti, Östör and

Barnett (1982) 1992). Such a comparison seems to be justified in the light of the

strong influence widely attributed to the practices of high status groups on the one

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24 Madan suggests that hypergamy among the Kashmiri Pandits is of a less institutionalised and more individual kind. Thus he states that "the fact of equal ritual status of wife-givers and wife-takers not withstanding, the milieu in which marriages take place is hypergamous"(Madan 1975:32).

hand and the fact that in South India hypergamy is prevalent among Brahmins,

but all other castes follow isogamous marriage patterns. Most non-Brahmin castes

in Bengal prefer marriages with a closely related house, and exchange marriages

(*badal biye*) are common (Dumont (1966)1970a:119ff; Fruzzetti

(1982)1990:112). While it is widely assumed that the giving of dowries is related

to hypergamous marriage patterns, the fact that in such reversed marriages even

higher dowries may be expected casts doubts on the universality of such a claim

(Fruzzetti (1982)1990:34ff). Although bride-givers and bride-takers are

distinguished within the ritual context and gift-giving relationships, in which bride-

givers are bound to contribute more and their gifts exceed those received, this

neither leads to permanent groups of wife-givers and wife-takers, nor are these

inequalities reflected in the terminology (Fruzzetti and Östör (1982)1992).

Especially in the rural areas, a general preference for close marriages with already

related houses and a known locality is often expressed. However, the changing

social and occupational structure may lead to less predictable unions among

members of all groups as observed by Gardner among Muslims in Bangladesh

(Gardner 1995:175ff).

Nevertheless the absence of a preference for cross-cousin marriages among

Hindus in Bengal, which explains and facilitates the isogamous emphasis in the

case of South India and even the less straightforward case of Maharashtra, raises

considerable problems regarding the prevalence of isogamous marriage patterns in

Bengal (see Trautmann 1981; Bénéï 1996).[25] The adoption of high caste customs

like *shamshkaras*, prohibition of widow remarriage and dowries have led to

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25 Bengali Muslims practice patri- and matrilateral parallel cousin marriage as well as cross-cousin marriage (see Gardner 1995:171ff).

changes within Bengali society particularly pronounced during the colonial period. Thus a number of scholars refer to marriage amongst Bengali Hindus, Muslims and Christians as hypergamous, although the marriage preference in question is related to modern competitive patterns prevalent in the marriage market, rather than hierarchically organised relationships between groups of affines and the rules governing hypergamous marriages characteristic of North Indian kinship systems (e.g. Rozario 1992; Engels 1996). Apart from the fact that many groups practised bride-price until recently, even accounts of contemporary regional variations assume that peasant communities (Christians and Hindus alike) practise hypergamous marriages because dowries have been introduced and the wife-takers are generally seen as superior to the wife-givers (e.g. Engels 1996:42ff; Rozario 1992:145ff). But the terminology differentiates between relatives through marriage and relatives belonging to the same *bangsha* only with reference to the actual marriage in question, and the fact that dowries are accepted by members of all communities today (including the isogamous South Indian non-Brahmin castes) cannot serve as an indicator for hypergamy.

Many Hindu castes in Bengal adopted dowries and marriage rituals based on sastric ideologies practised by Brahmins. What emerged was an ideal marriage ritual firmly rooted in the ideology of *kanyadan* as the most prestigious form of marriage. Nevertheless *kanyadan* rituals do not contradict an emphasis on isogamous rather than hypergamous marriage alliances, which allow for exchange marriages and the preferred repetitive marriage of a daughter to her paternal aunt's husband's line (*bangsha*) prohibited in most parts of North India (Fruzzetti and Östör (1982)1992:42). The notion of bride-givers and bride-takers as affinal

categories following specific codes of conduct towards each other is certainly very strong in Bengal. This does not however imply that the direction of marriage cannot be reversed in the next generation. It is crucial to note that a family, who gave a bride to another family, may in the next generation take a bride from the same family, thereby changing the pattern of obligation and gift-exchange implied. This possibility, rather than the ideology of blood-purity elaborated by Fruzzetti and Östör, is the most important distinctive feature of the Hindu Bengali kinship and marriage system, which allows for an extremely flexible approach to alliances between lines previously either unrelated or related (Fruzzetti Östör and Barnett (1982)1992:20). Rather than assume that every marriage, which aims at an individual connection with a family of high social standing and economic means represents hypergamy, other indicators and changing definitions of status have to be taken into account.

2.5 *Adan-pradan* : affinal relations and code of conduct

In some cases the problems seen in close marriages are related to the influence the parents of a groom want to exercise over a daughter-in-law, and often mothers feel that a son's wife should not belong to a related family, either distant relatives or neighbours, as this increases her autonomy. In other instances a family may feel that a close marriage with a previously related house and male line may have the advantage of predictability, which does not imply that marriage transactions exclude a dowry. In this case the obligations resulting from the implicit inequality between the two lines are still emphasised, and marriage between close relatives or a repeated marriage are interpreted as safe, and may therefore be even more costly than other matches. A related point can be made with reference to gifts given to

affinal relatives after marriage. While the obligation to give gifts to a daughter's husband is emphasised on different occasions like the annual ritual of *jamai shosthi* or the marriages of his wife's younger sisters through a feast or gifts presented to him in his wife's parent's house, the only gifts given to his wider kin group are given to them on the occasion of Durga *puja*. Like other festivals and life-cycle rituals the *pujas* provide an opportunity for gift exchange. However, during the festival the same type of gifts are widely distributed amongst one's relatives in general (*attyia*) and one's relatives in marriage (*kutum*) because the affines of a daughter form part of the group of people who are related to the house in a wider sense (Inden and Nicholas 1977:15ff). The most significant feature of these gift-giving relationships (*adan-pradan*) is the absence of gifts given to a daughter visiting the house on other occasions than annual festivals or life-cycle rituals. Married daughters visit their paternal home (*baper bari*) regularly and are not expected to take back presents which go beyond the occasional packet of sweets on their return to their in-law's house (*shashur bari*). The absence of more formal gift-exchanges between the wife-givers and the wife-takers is remarkably different from the patterns observed in other parts of North India (e.g. Vatuk 1975:169; Madan 1975:241).

A daughter's parent's affines, in particular male members of her husband's family can expect utmost hospitality and deferential behaviour in her father's house and are treated as honoured guests but in turn the father of a daughter may as well go and visit his daughter in her in-law's house and expect to be treated if not equally well still in an adequate manner. Contrary to what is the case in many North Indian settings, these visits do not bear any wider obligations and the father of a daughter-in-law is not expected to present gifts or reject or pay for food and

shelter on the basis of the inferiority as wife-giver. Thus a daughter-in-law's relatives are frequent visitors in her in-law's house and her husband's relatives do not normally expect prestations on these occasions.[26]

Moreover, the role of the maternal uncle within the framework is less pronounced, as far as material goods are concerned. A wife's husband is customarily responsible for his sister's well-being and expected to give special presents to all his sister's children, regardless of their sex on the occasion of their wedding. Like his sister a nephew and niece are very close to their *mama* (maternal uncle) and are encouraged to visit his house regularly. Although a brother is expected to visit a married sister, he does so only if the in-law's allow her to maintain a good relationship with her parents and later her brothers. But the most important obligations within the affinal relationship are those of a brother towards his sister's children, even though these are more personal and limited to the relationship than the formal exchange of gifts.[27]

The distinction between wife-givers and wife-takers commonly used in the literature refers only to the inequality resulting from the marriage itself and can never be turned into a general ideologically supported distinction of a local or wider kin group. Although the difference between *jnati* (those sharing substances) and *kutum* (those related by marriage) may suggest that one's own people are distinguished from the relatives by marriage (like son-in-law or his father), a son's relatives in marriage are *kutum* as well, even if a different code of conduct

26 This is remarkably similar to the pattern described by Bénéï for Maharashtra (Bénéï 1996:122).
27 Both the sister's son and sisters's daughter observe impurity periods after the death of a maternal uncle or his wife. Thus the maternal uncle is present as MB to his nieces and nephews rather than a wife-giver on the occasion of their marriages. However, his contributions do not go beyond what can be expected from the maternal uncle on account of the very close relationship he maintains with his sister's children, and therefore he does not normally contribute to the wedding of his sister's daughter, unless his sister is widowed or in an otherwise precarious situation.

prevails. Thus a major line is drawn between any *kutum* and any *jnati* and all of them are *attiya* (one's own people) in certain contexts. During life-cycle rituals for example all people related to the house participate and although the imbalance between wife-givers and wife-takers is signified through the different code of conduct imposed by the relationship, both parties are expected to participate on equal terms and share the rituals and feasts. As the everyday interaction may extend even further, the *attiya* of *kutum* (son-in-law's brother; daughter-in-law's sister) and the *kutum* of *kutum* (e.g. son-in-law's sister's husband; daughter-in-law's father's sister-in-law) belong to the undifferentiated *kutum* category and often maintain close relationships. This is frequently the case with relatives who live in the same neighbourhood and given the generally rare adherence to village exogamy even more often found in rural areas (see Das Gupta 1986:36ff; Gardner 1995:172).

It has been suggested that women in North Indian villages are particularly dependent on ties with their natal village, and often develop close relationships with men and women who are connected with their parent's locality. Relationships for example with men who enter the village they married into as labourers, or women who marry into other houses sometimes transcend caste and class distinctions (e.g. Raheja and Gold 1994). In Bengal the notion of a "village brother" or "sister" is less significant, as in many cases marriages take place within the same locality. But if a woman married far away she may be more dependent on such ties and develop a friendship with someone from the same village. Nevertheless, unlike women in other regions, she still might not refer to such persons using consanguine terms. In using a neutral form of address she refers to a person belonging to the locality of her parents as *parar attiya* (or more

colloquial *parar lok*) if such a relationship has to be expressed, thereby signifying the relatedness in general (which implies the code of conduct of those who share something) rather than agnatic kin relations (Östör and Fruzzetti (1982)1992:16). The use of the terms wife-givers and wife-takers is therefore an analytical one and does not always reflect a fixed group which can be defined apart from the wedding itself, but a category generated by each particular marriage, which emphasises different relatives united by the appropriate code of conduct within a specific context. This is emphasised within the wider kin group, although particular gifts on the occasion of festivals and life-cycle rituals are given to the people living in a married daughter's in-laws' house. However, gifts are not given to the *kutum* of the daughter's in-law's house, the wife-takers of one's wife-taker's, who are treated and addressed like general *kutum,* but cannot expect the same adherence to a deferential and extremely polite code of conduct. The lateral extension is minimal and only significant if marriages have to be arranged but does not imply a pattern of refused commensality or special obligation (e.g. Parry 1979:308ff).

2.6 New forms of upward mobility

From what has been outlined so far, the remarkable difference between the kinship and marriage structures prevalent in regions like U.P., Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and urban Bengal can be discerned. With reference to the latter, what is described as hypergamy is often a general tendency to marry one's daughter to a family or line which is economically better-off. The difference between bride-givers and the bride-receivers signifies in this context an expression of the upward mobility and the advantages expected from such a match, but in most cases these unions are in line with the general isogamous pattern as exemplified in Bengali

Hindu marriages. However, the symbolism used is very often drawn from distinctions which emerge from the inequality created between two individual lines towards each other during the rituals and the obligations following a marriage. Often the code of conduct adhered to while dealing with affines, the necessity of a dowry etc., are expressed in terms of the "groom's house" and the "wife's house". The difference implied does not however inform a generalised notion of inferiority or superiority as the units of equivalence constructed are based on the line (*bangsha*) and not a wider group which could be described as a sub-caste.

In the setting we are concerned with here, nobody would ever admit in public that marriage partners could come from different backgrounds, but with further changes in the social structure and less strictly adhered to rules of endogamy in general, as well as changing occupational patterns, I would argue that affiliation to a family of higher social standing has become a strong priority (see Pocock 1972). This is partly the result of middle-class life-style in an urban setting, which is competitive and allows for a limited degree of upward mobility. Perhaps the feature defining Bengali Hindu marriages as different from other North Indian patterns is the positive connotation of equal status as a guiding ideological principle which limits the pressure on a girl's parents to find a groom who belongs to a higher status group. But a good match is a match with someone from a family of high social status.[28] Thus the isogamous preference might be a guiding principle, but this is often transcended into a match with a groom of equal caste and descent but higher economic and educational standing. This form of marriage is common among the upper middle class but less frequent among the

28 In her work on Muslim peasants in Bangladesh Kotalova analyses the culturally specific notion of a lack of suitable partners for marriage as part of the wider framework regarding scarcity and abundance (Kotalova 1993:132ff).

strata we are concerned with here, although in particular the Bene are known to marry off their daughters with generous dowries and thus may marry their girls to a wealthy family more often than others. Because bride-givers are at a disadvantage towards bride-takers, a family with an educated son can look for a bride from a family whose economic standing may be superior to their own in one or the other aspect. However, in individual cases the direction may be reversed and a common pattern is the marriage of a girl from a family of high social standing to a family of lower economic or educational status. Such instances are particularly common in case of second marriages of a separated or divorced woman, whose parents inevitably have to compromise on the groom.

Nevertheless, this is not necessarily favoured and rather reflects individual circumstances than inferior status groups marrying into higher status groups. Moreover, even members of the Bene castes, who always provide a generous dowry with a bride emphasise the importance of matches between families of equal status and differences are not openly displayed unless the reputation of the line is enhanced by linking themselves with a superior socio-economic setting. This becomes more obvious if the meaning of occupation within this context is taken into consideration, which constitutes the new basis for a different form of status differentiation.

Although equal ritual status is the norm, occupational and career opportunities may differ even within one generation, and parents of a groom who studied medicine may try to find a girl from a family of higher social standing and sometimes ritual status than their own. The same holds true for the better positions in government where the prospect justifies ambitious attempts to find a daughter-in-law from a slightly better background, which may mean high ritual status or the

position of a father. With general access to education the number of "good" brides increases and assets of a more general sort are expected, in particular property. At the same time many parents are actually educating a smaller number of children than in the past, so the pressure to marry off three or four daughters is less often felt. A strong tendency towards economic inequality between the families of the bride and the prospective groom, which is expressed and fuelled by unilateral payments, has developed. Thus marriage negotiations are always a very sensitive issue and the dangers of linking oneself with a family of inferior social standing or disputed reputation have to be avoided by any means.

While economic circumstances play a dominant role in the decision to marry a daughter or a son to a spouse belonging to a particular family, the impression that parents are actively searching for a groom or bride from well-to-do background has to be avoided at all costs. Often the problems arising due to such efforts are expressed in terms of "bad" wealth and a neighbour may mention that a family in the locality married a daughter to someone whose father acquired his assets by illegal or anti-social means. But although everybody knows that corruption forms part of all government jobs, these positions are exempted from the notion of bad wealth.

2.7 Meeting the prospective affines and settling the details

The contacts established by the first series of letters are in many instances not satisfactory and the additional information revealed leads sometimes to a termination of negotiations. Refusal of a marriage offer is as delicate as the negotiations themselves and should take place as early as possible if the reputation of both parties is to be kept intact. Rumours about rejected girls whose parents

tried hard but did not convince the family of the groom to agree can be frequently heard. In all cases the parents of the prospective spouse should be as polite as possible if they turn down an offer and even these opportunities of enhancing one's status are not often mentioned because a suitable match has not been found yet. Again, refusal leads to gossip which in turn might give the family a reputation for being arrogant or greedy and thus the termination of marriage negotiations is generally not openly proclaimed. Once a family agrees to the broad outline of the proposed match the fathers of the prospective candidates have to meet for further negotiations. After more questions have been asked in writing, the chosen counterparts are visited and the fathers of the prospective bride and groom meet for a discussion of open questions. Both sides want to get an impression of the kind of family they are dealing with and these meetings are very serious and important for the parties concerned. At this stage a number of other factors, such as the wider family background apart from education and occupation and the characteristics of the would-be-parents-in-law or the candidates themselves become eminent.

But marriages do not only take place between the two nuclear families concerned, and thus an enquiry into other features of the line's reputation and standing is undertaken. This includes previous marriages and relations of the *bangsha* in question, their relationships with neighbours and other members of the caste, as well as the important people in the locality and how wealth was accumulated, as well as diseases and social acceptance of the family (see Fruzzetti, Östör and Barnett (1982)1992:22). In an urban middle class setting such enquiries focus on the social standing in general rather then questions of commensality, and the relationship with other houses in the neighbourhood as well

as general affiliations with *bhadralok* sometimes takes a curious turn, including landlords, political parties and distant acquaintances.

These meetings take place in the bride's parents' house and often the father of a groom has to travel a considerable distance to meet the girl and her parents.[29] This first meeting is sometimes preceded by an investigation in the neighbourhood, which used to be part of the old style of arranging marriages wherein a match-maker (*ghatak* or female *ghataki*) would supply information about the family. In many cases parents decide on someone from a neighbourhood known to them, so that friends and relatives in the area can find out about the family, and the meeting will take place with first-hand-knowledge about the reputation of a boy or a girl. Marriage negotiations initiated by a relative, who for example saw the girl concerned in a neighbour's or relative's house and was in a position to enquire about her via other common acquaintances, are much safer and many parents prefer these to other ways of finding a bride or groom. However, irrespective of the way in which the initial contact was established, the meeting between members of the two families in order to find out about the "real" setting is an important and often decisive affair. The prospective bride is asked to dress up and serve the guests some food, and nowadays she will often be expected to sit with them and answer a couple of questions about her education and other accomplishments like singing or dancing, carefully watched while performing the role of a perfect daughter. The men will later proceed towards serious negotiations, and issues which have been avoided so far are mentioned now, in particular the question of

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29 Custom has it that "seeing the girl" (*meye dekha*) will most probably lead to marriage, but in urban areas it fulfils the need for further investigation of the setting.

different marriage transactions and the dowry, which is mostly introduced in a roundabout way.

Middle-class Calcuttans are generally extremely hesitant to talk about dowries. Often the existence of dowries as part of arranged marriages amongst Bengalis in general is denied. In this setting, dowries are a complicated matter, as mentioning the issue directly would be interpreted as rude and immoral, although it certainly occurs sometimes. Judging from what has been revealed, the most indirect ways are chosen to bring up the subject. Moreover, different types of transactions are involved, which are judged separately and discussed between the parties concerned.

Many gifts presented at Bengali weddings are exchanged between the parties and are interpreted as bilateral prestations expressing the equal status of both parties. Thus what constitutes a dowry may be contested in general and other more acceptable gifts may serve the purpose of demanded unilateral transactions (see chapter 4).

In many cases the refurbishment of a house or necessary capital for a business provide the pretext to ask for a dowry and helps to hide the embarrassing fact that money is involved as part of a marriage. Comparable inhibitions in relation to Indian systems of marriage are mentioned in the literature, although in specific contexts parents seem to be prepared to talk about sums and "demands" quite openly (e.g. Sharma (1993)1994:343; Roulet 1996; Nishimura 1998:161ff).

By the end of the day both sides will have an impression about the feasibility and the further prospects of the negotiations and the bride's family are eager to meet the expectations, knowing that any failure to do so may result in the termination of negotiations. At this stage, not all the details have been settled and

it takes another round of meetings to discuss the particularities and "demands" to be fulfilled as well as the setting for the actual wedding, which is often a source of conflict during the negotiations.

2.8. Qualities of brides and grooms: education, siblings and household composition

Apart from the dowry other questions are raised which are related closely to the qualities of grooms and brides and outline the problems involved in arranging a marriage. At the age of marriage, a daughter within this social setting completed her education and is not normally in employment, although at times a young woman joins the workforce for some years. But whether or not the prospective in-laws are searching for a working girl, once she is married her career will come second to her duties as a wife and mother, and thus qualities directly related to this future role are the yardstick to evaluate her education and professional career. This explains why an underpaid teacher with regular hours and holidays and other benefits like maternity leave is preferable to an employee in a travel agency, and a young woman working in a bank is favoured over a laboratory assistant. Furthermore, her formal education will often be complemented by informal education like dancing and singing classes, a beautician or handicrafts course, which are believed to provide her with an opportunity to teach or work from her home. The emphasis on such qualifications is not on a mere leisure time activity or the possible extra earnings alone, but the cultural values imposed on such activities which are seen as a way of bringing out the best in a girl and indicate the degree of culture of her paternal family. Many parents consider these accomplishments as equally valuable as her formal education, because all these

capabilities are part of the completion of a girl closely resembling bourgeois ideals prevalent in nineteenth century Europe. Recently the relatively new prospect of giving tutorials at home has become something worth considering for the parents of a prospective groom, and has changed the way in which higher education for girls is evaluated.

Young women of marriageable age are not expected to be knowledgeable about housework, but they are normally capable of cooking everyday meals and can prepare some exotic (often not Bengali) dishes, because although they will learn everything from scratch in their in-laws' house, every housewife has particular items she prepares "with her own hands", a thoroughly middle-class expression which at the same time signifies status, as it hints at servants available, and acquired special skills. Housekeeping in general is rarely an important subject of marriage negotiations but the number of servants working for the family and the number of women in the house the daughter will enter are crucial factors for the parents of a girl, who do not want their daughter to become the first and only daughter-in-law marrying into a household with little or no hired help and this concern is often an important point emphasised by the girl's mother.

Furthermore, the number of siblings a daughter or son has is significant in all constellations. Thus a daughter with a brother will be preferred by most potential in-laws and will be more often than not described as the searched for "family girl". The question of joint family life finds mention as well, for in general all parents of potential grooms prefer the girl to have some experience with a joint family (*ekannoborti poribar*), which is expected to develop a sense of responsibility and sociability with relatives, both qualities much needed in a daughter-in-law who has to "adjust" (*maniye neoya*) to her in-laws' house. A

single or only daughter might have more to inherit in addition to what is given to her at the time of marriage, but a girl without sisters (and this includes cousins) is more often than not fairly spoilt and not a "family girl" used to cooperate with sisters (-in-law), cousins and aunts. However, all these details are carefully evaluated as part of the economic and social status and can be made up for by other important factors. Not surprisingly looks and features, especially skin colour are of utmost importance with a girl. A bride should be fair and neither skinny nor fat, look healthy and have long black hair as well as a beautifully shaped face, ideally look typically "Bengali".[30] Beauty and behaviour in general account for much and a daughter with a fair skin will always be married off eventually while the proverbial black girl (*kalo meye*) from a lower middle-class family without other particular achievements has to wait for her marriage to be arranged with more anxiety. Nevertheless compromise regarding the looks is accepted as long as other factors are satisfying and a dowry can often make up for the lack of grace or dark skin. Serious problems prevail in case parents of a less good looking daughter cannot afford to pay a generous dowry due to their economic situation or the number of daughters to be married off. While brides as prospective mothers of the in-laws' grandchildren are carefully examined in terms of features and skin colour, grooms do not necessarily have to look beautiful, in fact their appearance is a matter of luck as far as the would-be wife is concerned and shortcomings like glasses are no obstacle to a match.

Looks might be negotiable but height and age of the potential groom or bride have to match and find mention in all advertisements. Both variables cannot

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30 Most brides do not match all the criteria and features and looks are a constant source of worry for the boy's mother may not get a chance to see the bride before the wedding except for photographs.

be disputed and exclude certain matches from the start, because a prospective husband has to be taller and older than his wife. Although compromise can be made with regard to skin colour, features, education, economic background and to a limited extent even caste, a groom can neither be younger nor shorter than the bride. While a husband might be much older than his wife, he should never be her age and the two have to match in height. Parents do not select someone who was born the same year and by rule of thumb one can say that a groom in these families will be not less than two years older to a bride. Height, which might seem to be a mere matter of taste is equally well defined. It is not sufficient for the groom to be simply taller but they have make a good-looking couple in the eyes of others, well matched meaning not too different in height or weight.

Consequently, a young man should be of medium height and weight but whenever there are other points to be made in his favour, and as long as the rules outlined above are adhered to, looks are the last thing to worry about for the bride's parents. They have to pay more attention to the way he earns a living, the house the couple is going to live in, the reputation of the family and whether they live jointly or not, in rented or owned accommodation etc. A boy with a good job might have a couple of sisters and as long as these are married this poses no problem for the girls. However, a high number of younger siblings (in particular a number of younger sisters) whose education and marriage will have to be supported by the elder brother are problematic. Young men whose fathers died early find it difficult to marry if they are elder brothers to a number of siblings and often do not marry at all.

In case the mother of a potential groom is deceased, the parents of a girl will feel equally ambiguous about the advantages an alliance with this particular

family has, because their own daughter might be alone in catering to the needs of the father-in-law (*shashur*) and the family. In these cases it largely depends on the availability of elder sisters-in-law for a girl to be married into the family. In general parents with more than two children will face difficulties to find a suitable match, and single daughters are favoured over girls with a couple of sisters, as long as they have some experience in living in a joint family household. In turn a girl with at least one brother is more desirable than a girl with only female siblings, who together have to take care of their own ageing parents and cannot necessarily count on support from the sisters' houses. Elder daughters can often not be provided with as much as a single daughter because marriages of their younger siblings are still to be arranged, and in turn younger sisters are often not married off as well as the eldest for whom the parents arranged a marriage in order to pave the way for further good alliances. The ideal is a bride with an elder brother to support her (not least in rituals) and figure as maternal uncle of her children. While an elder and perhaps unmarried sister of the groom is all too often a source of discontent, a boy with many brothers will have a number of sisters-in-law to help his own wife with the housework but will only inherit a portion of his father's property. In such cases the number of brothers may be a point against the match and the girl's parents carefully weigh up the pattern involved.

While inheritance and the position are the most important criteria for choosing a groom, women are judged according to the amount the parents are prepared to invest at the time of marriage and their social qualities. Daughters in Bengali families traditionally share in their father's property but custom demands that they hand over whatever they inherit to their brothers in return for support in times of crisis (see chapter 4). Like in other North Indian contexts, marriage

expenses and the dowry represent a daughter's de facto portion of the father's property and are defined as *pre mortem* inheritance.

To find out about obstacles to the intended union, the horoscopes of the two candidates have to be matched, which are taken by the parents together with their daughter's or son's birth horoscope to an astrologer, who is expected to claim exceptional circumstances in case inconsistencies exist. The astrologer identifies appropriate dates for weddings which have to take place on auspicious days within certain auspicious periods. These dates have to correspond with important events like marriages in the wider family, death and birth pollution periods in the house, and long term mundane business like examinations and absences of important actors.

2.9 Going public: Relatives, invitations and organisation of the wedding

While arranged marriages are the concern of a person's parents and no formal consent of the candidates is necessary, a tendency towards involving the daughter or son has emerged. Often the final candidate's photographs are shown to a prospective groom or bride and he or she might even be asked to meet two or three of the candidates whose parents initially answered their fathers' letters. These meetings take place in public, which might sound a bit surprising given the fact that the parents took care not to involve anybody except close relatives into the matter before. Often elder male relatives chaperon the prospective groom and bride to a restaurant and introduce them to the other side, where a younger uncle takes care of the conversation and some male relatives have the chance to look at the bride or groom. As one would imagine, the situation is extremely embarrassing for both candidates and the young woman and young man will hardly look at each

other, trying not to put the marriage arrangements at risk by a slip of tongue.[31]

The meeting is in public and a normally more expensive version of the traditional seeing the girl (*kone* or *meye dekha*) during which the relatives of the groom's house visit the bride's house to "see" the bride and are offered the first of a serious of feasts, although the *meye dekha* is normally staged after an agreement has been reached (see Roy (1972)1975:76ff). Often the son is given the choice among three prospective candidates, and most parents will assume that the final decision they take meets with the approval of their daughter. A well-behaved son or daughter will let his or her parents know that whatever their priority this will be accepted, because the final decision is taken by the elders. After all, children are not expected to know about the arrangements and importance of other factors apart from looks. In more conservative families a daughter never gets the chance to meet the boy and finds out only at her wedding day what the groom looks like.

As soon as the horoscopes have been compared and a final agreement has been reached the preparations for the wedding begin and a period of skilful planning starts, during which large scale receptions and the actual ceremony have to be organised. Within the next months the "dowry" is handed over to the parents of the groom (at least what has been asked in cash), and these payments should ideally be made as early as possible. This is the only way for the prospective bride's parents to enforce the verbal negotiations, however unstable the result might prove to be. As bride-givers they cannot afford to take a risk by challenging the groom's side through arguments about the terms and conditions of the demands.

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31 Alternatively the two may go out and meet in a better coffee shop or restaurant where they try to keep a conversation going while at the same time avoiding jeopardising their prospects, which is particularly important for the bride-to-be (see Roy (1972)1975:76ff).

By now the planning process of the actual wedding starts, and none of the parties involved can turn back the wheel easily, although some time will pass until the day defined by the astrologer as auspicious enough for an important ceremony arrives. Normally the days chosen are within the main marriage season between November and the beginning of March. Alternatively some more weeks in late spring (April-May) and a couple of days in summer, are periods with a number of auspicious days and parents do not easily agree upon any date outside the main marriage season during which virtually every street will have its *biyer bari* (marriage house). By now most people related to the house of the groom or bride are aware of the finalisation of a marriage agreement and speculations, fuelled by well placed pieces of information regarding the identity of the groom or bride, his or her family, descent, occupation of father and the status of the family are exchanged between neighbours and relatives alike. Because various rituals are conducted in both houses, therefore a number of relatives and friends help with the arrangements and keep both the father and the mother of a son or daughter busy during the months leading up to the wedding date.

Among the important tasks is the distribution of invitation cards, which are common among urban families today. These decorated cards contain the first piece of information and have to be handed over personally to all invitees. The cards are carefully scrutinised by the invited themselves and others as wedding invitations are proudly shown around on social occasions. At this point the parents of the couple go public with whatever they achieved during their efforts to secure a good match and whatever grudges they may bear, proudly announce that the very difficult task of arranging the marriage of a son or a daughter has been completed. Most families are eager to invite as many guests as possible for the reception and

distribute invitation cards widely among neighbours, friends and relatives as well as colleagues everyone who is linked to the house should be invited, relatives as well as those related to the house (*somporko*) (Fruzzetti and Östör 1976:117). The cards are beautifully designed and decorated with auspicious symbols and *alpona* (rice flour) designs and are given to the invitees in the name of the eldest members of the paternal and sometimes maternal lineage (*matri bangsha*) of a prospective bride or groom. This chore marks the first involvement of the wider group of relatives, since even if the wedding takes place in two months time, the parents of a boy or girl cannot normally cope with all the visits to be paid on their own. Within a certain radius and in relation to distance or closeness of a relationship or age (in case respects have to be paid) other relatives like the mother's brother or father's elder brother might help to complete the task.[32]

The cards normally bear the names of the eldest male or female member of the *bangsha* of the prospective bride and groom as hosts, although the bulk of the work and expenses is not normally shared among members of a line. This position of the eldest can be taken by a woman or a man and the name given might be the name of the bride's or groom's paternal grandmother, who since she became a widow acts as elder of the "house". Unless separation occurred, an elder father's brother might take that place, in particular if the family lives jointly, but often the parents, (father's and mother's names) are given. In order to indicate the position of the mother's *bangsha* in Bengali families, the mother's father's name may be given as well next to the father's father's name, which will always be printed.

Along with the places of residence and the address of the marriage halls where the different receptions are held, other indicators of status are provided with

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32 The visits follow patterns used on similar occasions like the *pujas*.

the invitation cards. Above, all caste (and sometimes sub-caste) can be inferred from the family name and the area where one lives might allow conclusions about region of origin and economic status. Apart from this information concerned, the venue is often subject to speculation and one of the hotly debated points during marriage negotiations. Today many families rent a marriage hall for the reception organised by the groom's and the bride's side respectively. Although receptions on other occasions take place in the house of the family, wedding-ceremonies and marriage receptions are difficult to organise in a flat or even a house in these areas of the city. Thus to rent a marriage hall has become the accepted practice, and the location chosen indicates economic means of the families involved. Marriage halls may range from a school rented out, the roof and top floor of a house not yet completed or rented out for weddings, to a complete house or floor only used for that purpose or one floor in an otherwise commercially used building like a hotel, and most people can tell from the address what will be the likely setting for the ceremony and the receptions.[33] Both families have to invite on separate occasions. But whereas amongst (Bengali) Hindus the bride's family has to provide adequate space, food and the budget for the main reception, during which the most important rituals are performed, in Bengali Christian families the main wedding ceremony takes place in church and the groom's side is responsible for the most important feast.

Once the hall and the catering services have been arranged gifts, decoration, vehicle and arrangements for the rituals have to be taken care of. Given the fact that rituals conducted in Calcutta today are much shorter than weddings in rural and small town Bengal, as described by Fruzzetti, or marriage ceremonies during

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33 However, marriages may take place in the house of affluent relatives.

the nineteenth century (e.g. the lavish feasts arranged by wealthy urban families and *zamindars*), one might draw the conclusion that weddings have become less elaborate and less complicated (see Fruzzetti (1982)1990). This apparent change occurred partly due to the fact that Bengali marriages of well-off families in the countryside and later in Calcutta took a minimum of five days and relatives travelled long distances to attend the wedding feast of a cousin. But apart from the disappearance of some elaborate customary rituals (in particular women's rituals) and the fact that hiring caterers became a standard feature of the receptions, the enormous effect of the commercialisation of weddings led to the emergence of new signifiers of refinement and status. Therefore one can perhaps state that the focus shifted towards the effort it takes to get things done in time, provide necessary funds and mobilise help and that arranging a marriage might have become even more complicated than it used to be.[34]

Decisions on the hall to be rented, catering services provided, and meals to be served are again a matter of negotiations between both parties, and the choice of vehicles might be subject to demands on the side of the groom's family, as all provided facilities contribute to the reputation of the houses involved. The endless and often not amiable discussions about the organisation of the wedding itself and the rituals to be performed can leave the parents of the girl desperate and worn out. In addition to the public display for which they are responsible, they have to provide a wide range of people from the groom's side with gifts. These gifts are part of the reciprocal prestation of tatty, which is sent by the groom's house on the occasion of *gay holud* and is given with the bride when she enters her husband's

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34 In particular the division of labour as framed by overall relations within the caste system has disappeared apart from the ritual roles of barber and priest. While in the villages many services

house for the first time on the day of *bou bhat* (the bride's first rice) (see chapter 2). A list containing names and relation of the groom's relatives is handed over to them for this purpose fairly early. Although the bride's side compile a comparable list for the groom's side (a practice particularly important amongst families from West Bengal), prestations given to the groom's relatives are more numerous and a wider circle of relatives has to be presented with clothes or cosmetics. As a rule, all relatives who have a close relationship to the groom and his parents and the seniors of the family are presented with clothes, which should be of high standard, like a beautifully printed or woven good quality sari, a particularly fine *dhuti* or a fancy T-shirt for a younger brother. The bride's relatives will receive similar items at the wedding day with the turmeric sent for the ritual of smearing the body with turmeric (*gay holud*), but normally they refrain from nominating as many recipients as the groom's side. The obligatory gifts to the people from the bride's side are handed over as part of the traditional *tattya* items, including saris for the bride, a whole fish, sweets and cosmetics, but only the elders and directly involved or related women and a few men "from the house" can expect saris or *dhutis* respectively.

Regarding the reception organised by the bride's house, the groom's parents are determined to invite as many guests as possible and the number is a constant subject of complaints on both sides. While the bride's family desperately tries to limit the number of guests, the groom's side puts pressure to increase the quota. Like dowries and other payments, these expenses form part of verbal agreements between the parties concerned and there are no explicit rules for solving a conflict

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are still offered automatically on the occasion (though not necessarily for free) in an urban neighbourhood helping hands are hard to come by.

which might arise. However, once the wedding day has arrived, both sides have already created a collective audience and will most probably not withdraw even if they feel that the amount of money and splendour promised is not really satisfactory. To fulfil expectations on the bride's side is generally less important because they cannot afford to disagree with whatever the groom's parents demand and are constantly reminded of the fact that they are the house of the girl, no matter how well the plans for the wedding have been designed. At this stage the bride's family have already mobilised whatever resources they command. There are a number of tasks which can be performed by relatives and friends, and in fact the status of a family is partly derived from the number of people they can count on to support them on occasions like these. This does not only include close relatives but neighbours and friends alike on whom one depends to organise and conduct the numerous rituals and receptions.

Before the wedding takes place, a number of professionals have to be contacted, among them the caterers, priests (*purohit*), barbers (*napit*) and suppliers of particular items, like jewellers, fishmongers from the bazaar and others. Again the effort involved and the deals struck depend on existing links of the family. The quality of goods and services, a central concern of Bengali urban life in general, often depend on the relationships established during endless negotiations and the more influential a family is in a locality, the more likely they are to be served better and receive goods ordered for a fair price and in time. At this point the gender specific division of labour and responsibility is clearly at work. The female members of a bride's or groom's house are now busy shopping for gifts and packaging them in the most elaborate ways. They organise the women's rituals, which are part of the marriage but take place separately and

comprise of a small number of female participants. At the same time the male members of the family are still dealing with different costly items to be bought like furniture and the general organisation of service people, meals, vehicles and lighting etc.

2.10 Conspicuous consumption: The wedding feast

The meal served to the guests on the occasion of the wedding organised by the bride's side, which often takes place in a marriage hall but sometimes in a temporary tent-like construction on the roof or in the backyard, is of utmost importance. Such wedding feasts changed considerably during the last twenty years and the food served has become a new way to secure a reputation as a host since the catering services took over. Even in a Calcutta slum catered food is ordered on the occasion of a marriage, and while Bengali food is often served sometimes the preferred food resembles items offered by restaurants. This Northwest Indian ("Moghul") food has become fashionable, and even though older persons bemoan the disappearance of the Bengali feast they happily tuck into *kebabs* and mutton curries. With the new arrangements the community involvement and even the activities of the families on the occasion of marriages changed. While previously the whole village assisted with the marriage of a well-to-do family and the women of the family arrived some days in advance to prepare the meals, today's catering services cook the meals in the hall and bring their own equipment (Banerji: (1991)1993:159). But in many lower middle-class families shopping and serving the meal are still important tasks and the "buffet" has not yet replaced the traditional seating order.

On such occasions food is served by members of the family in both houses and the cooking should ideally be supervised by a younger man from the family if the head of household is preoccupied with other tasks. The cooks employed by a catering service ought to be Brahmins and are normally known in the locality if the wedding takes place in a lower middle-class family. In upper middle-class houses catering services may be provided by a restaurant and seldom consist of Bengali dishes. However, a "traditional" wedding feast still served in lower middle-class Bengali Hindu households starts with a fried item, mostly aubergine or a gourd-like vegetable (*patol*) followed by fried fish (e.g. *bhetki*), and a variety of boiled lentils (*dal*), a boiled chicken curry and then a fish curry which go either with bread fried in ghee (*luchi*) or a rich rice preparation (*pulao*) accompanied by vegetable curries. Once the main courses have been finished the sweet and sour chutney and traditional Bengali sweets (e.g. *roshogolla, pantua*) and sweet curd (*mishti doi*) are served and followed by *pan* to complete the meal. The new acceptance of North West Indian or Muslim dishes at receptions led to the introduction of mutton- fish- and chicken-*kebabs*, multi-layered fried *paratha* bread and a rich *pulao*, which are served with fried vegetables and non-Bengali sweets like *kulfi* as a desert.

What used to be a community effort, namely the production and distribution of a sumptuous Bengali meal at weddings, has become a commodified service which can be evaluated not only in terms of the number of guests and dishes but quality and origin of the food served, as well the location of the feast. The parents of the bride or groom are aware of the competitive character of weddings and will do their best to arrange everything professionally. Thus tasks performed by specialists today include the decoration of the marriage hall or tent and the

vehicles, the packaging of the gifts (*tattya*) handed over and displayed in front of the guests, bridal make-up, and catered food on different occasions. In the past many of these activities were conducted by female family members and related women as the skills involved were handed down over generations but today the aspired reputation can only be secured if a number of services are provided by specialists from outside. Thus although the *alpona* (rice-flour) designs in the house are mostly drawn by a gifted female member of the family they are normally copied from booklets published by artists and the packaging and decoration of gifts and sweets which form part of the *tattya* previously done by women is often provided by specialists. Women's skills like *alpona*, decorating the *tattya* and drawing of sandalwood-paste designs on the bride's face have become a commodity service and only upper-middle class families will voluntarily opt for the "traditional" in doing these themselves (see Banerji (1991)1993: 157).[35] If possible a session in a beauty-parlour is booked in advance or a girl from the neighbourhood is asked to come on the wedding day and apply the bridal make-up for a fee using an expensive set of modern cosmetics.

All these expenses add to the bride's parents' worries because to them the standard of a wedding is nearly as important as the dowry in terms of money and status. The neighbours participate in the wedding either actively in providing services and help or passively as guests and a mistake or a disaster during the ceremony or the reception inevitably leads to embarrassment and gossip. Thus the parents are heavily involved in the preparations, while they try at the same time to conceal where they had to compromise on the quality of purchase and service.

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35 The vehicle used by the bride and groom and the venue are decorated with flowers and cloth, and particular attention is paid to the mats (*madur*) or stools (*piri*) on which the couple are seated during the main ritual.

Every arrangement and all goods are subjected to close scrutiny and sometimes harsh criticism by the groom's relatives and even the vehicle ordered, the dessert served, the lighting, cards and seats provided for the bride and groom as well as the saris worn by their own relatives and the music played during the ceremonial welcome (*baron*) are assessed. The reception organised by the groom's side and the feasts which go with both ceremonies are as competitive as the reception in the bride's house, but the additional burden of the marriage ritual itself and the inferior position of the bride-givers account for the tension prevailing in the bride's house.

2.11 Staging tradition: Wedding rituals

While feasts and gifts on the occasion of weddings are evaluated in terms of quality and quantity, rituals which evolve around the couple and the houses concerned are a matter of agreement and are not competitive in any direct sense.[36]

A clear distinction between the actual wedding that takes place in the bride's house or the hall rented for the purpose and rituals in the groom's and the bride's houses respectively can be discerned. These rituals vary according to caste, status and region and many rituals previously performed are abbreviated or cease to exist in an urban setting (see Fruzzetti (1982) 1990). Thus it is impossible to state that Bengali marriages comprise of a fixed set of rituals, but the following main rituals will be performed as part of all Hindu marriages, starting with the ritual of "smearing the body with turmeric" (*gay holud*), followed by the main wedding ritual including the gifts of a virgin (*kanyadan*), the subsequent marriage

36 Roy describes the widely accepted shastric rituals favoured by middle-class families (see Roy (1972) 1975:82ff) whereas Fruzzetti focuses on women's rituals (*stri achar*) still performed in

(*bashi* or *uttara biye*) and the ceremony of *bou bhat*, the first meal served by the daughter-in-law in her in-laws' house (see Inden and Nicholas 1977:40ff). In addition the ceremonial welcome (*baron*) of the groom and his party as well as the welcoming of the bride in her in-laws' house are normally performed and worth mentioning.

For all rituals guests are invited and served food, and although significant variations exist, the essential role of these ceremonies is agreed upon. With reference to other rituals, and the structure and content, a considerable degree of tolerance is displayed; after all, the rituals have to fit into the general schedule of the wedding and this depends on other factors like the availability of space, catering services, relatives etc. The more elaborate the different rituals and feasts, the more expensive and auspicious a wedding might appear but whatever is not crucial for public display has become less important and in this sense those parts involving more than the immediate relatives are highlighted.

The ritual of *gay holud*, which takes place first in the house of the groom's parents is often referred to as the first ritual in the *biyer bari*, the house where a marriage is taking place, but is preceded by offerings to the ancestors (*nandimukh*), *pujas* and ritual bathes in both houses. The ritual itself is a women's ritual (*stri achar*) and the invitees should have living husbands (*eyo*), while the groom is the only male and unmarried person to participate in the first part of the ritual, which is repeated in the bride's house.[37] The groom is standing among the women and his mother, who is the main actor in the ritual, smears his body with a

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many households (Fruzzetti 1982). A number of women's rituals common in rural areas have been described by Roy most of which cease to exist in urban settings (Roy: 1984).

37 These women (*eyo*) are considered to be more auspicious than other female members of the house. The gay holud is concerned with t143he fertility of the couple signified by a number of objects like plantain tree, young coconut, turmeric and the presence of eyo (see Nicholas 1967:69).

mixture of turmeric, sandalwood, and mustard oil. A number of formalised questions are asked and the women who take part in the ritual smear the groom's body with turmeric in a playful manner. Afterwards the same mixture of sandalwood-paste, turmeric and oil, is sent with the gifts (*tattya*) to the bride's house accompanied by young and unmarried women from the groom's house, where her body is smeared with turmeric. Following the completion of *gay holud*, which is nowadays performed on the day of the wedding, the groom and bride respectively take a bath and are then made-up, either at home or in a parlour, which is a time-consuming procedure. The groom's party (*bor jatri*) arrives afterwards at the appointed time at the venue where the wedding will take place and is ceremonially welcomed by the women of the house (*baron*). After the *baron* he is seated in the area designated for the marriage next to the bride's father, and the *purohit* begins to chant *mantras* in the presence of barbers (*napit*) from both houses, who are present throughout.

These marriage rituals closely resemble the ones common among different castes in Northern India, but the elaboration is a matter of convention, caste and interest of the families concerned, who have discussed the rituals to be performed beforehand. The central features of the main wedding ritual are performed in the following order. The first main part is the preparation of the groom by the *purohit* of the bride's side, until the girl, who has been waiting in a separate room, is brought and carried around the groom seven times, her face covered with a betel leaf. By taking away the leaf, the groom performs *mukh dekha* (seeing the face, also called *shubha dristhi*, the auspicious glance). The latter is accompanied by ululations and is an extraordinary joyous occasion. Both are seated next to each other and after another set of *mantras* has been completed, the exchange of

garlands between the bride and the groom takes place (*mala badal*). Afterwards the sacrificial fire (*hom*) is lit by the priests who again recite the appropriate mantras. In front of the sacred fire the ritual of *shampradan* (giving of one's own; the complete gift), the gift of a virgin (*kanyadan*) is completed, in which the father or guardian of the bride hands the responsibility for her over to her husband (see Inden and Nicholas 1977:42). The couple then walk around the fire seven times (*saptapadi*) with the end of their clothes bound together (*gant-chara*). The priest is giving offerings on their behalf to the fire, which is "witness" to the wedding (*agni sakkhi*) and thereby the core of the actual wedding rituals is completed.

On this occasion or during the "leftover" marriage (*bashi biye*), which is performed in many houses up to two days after the wedding takes place, the groom puts vermilion in the parting of the bride's hair (*shindur deoya*), with a ring he received in the bride's house during the welcoming ceremony (*jamai baron*).[38] This, together with the conch shell and iron bangles she receives from her father's house and her in-laws' house respectively, signifies her new status as a married woman and potential mother. The putting of vermilion is often considered to constitute the final marriage ritual, and *shindur deoya* can be performed while the sacrifice takes place. If arranged separately, this ritual is again attended by relatives from both houses and a meal is served to all guests, but it can be shifted between different settings. After the rituals have been completed the couple are led to the *bhashor ghor*, the room they share during this night, but they are not left

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38 Inden and Nicholas among others mention the subsequent marriage (*uttara biye*), which is often referred to as the bashi biye (leftover marriage) in the groom's house (see Inden and Nicholas 1977:44-45 and Roy 1984:20-21). Roy emphasises that the ritual at the heart of this ceremony, a vedic worship (*kusandika*), may as well be accomplished before the *saptapadi* (seven steps) are taken, while Inden and Nicholas single it out to form part of the subsequent marriage. The vedic sacrifice which Inden and Nicholas single out as the most important part is described by Roy as a ritual adopted by "rich and affluent" people and therefore common in urban weddings.

alone. Relatives and in particular the young people of the house are expected to entertain them with jokes and games. On this occasion married women of the house may expect the guardian of the groom to pay them a small amount of money for their services and the *stri achars* they performed (see Roy (1972)1975:86-87).

After the series of rituals on the wedding day has been completed, the next set is performed on the occasion of the arrival of the bride in her in-laws' house when the first rice cooked by the daughter-in-law will be served (*bou bhat*) and begins with a ceremonial welcome (*baron*) given to the bride's party, who arrive with the traditional gifts (*tattya*) (see chapter 4). Tradition has it that she prepares a meal for her in-laws and their guests, who are served this first rice with a coin on the plate by the new daughter-in-law herself. She may receive the iron bangles (*loha*), which are ideally plated with gold, on this occasion, which together with vermilion, two conchshell bangles (*shankha*) and a red bangle (*pola*) she receives from her father's side symbolise marriage. In addition, a coin and some precious jewellery may be given by her in-laws' house. Although the *bashi biye* can take place in both houses, the ceremony in the in-laws' house is the most significant and thus the ceremony in the girl's home is rather short. If the *bashi biye* is performed in the girl's house, the women of the house may repeat most of the rituals performed the previous day, thus the bride and groom are standing on a grinding stone (*shil*) and are purified with water, vermilion will be put on the bride's head, and *hom* as well as *saptapadi* will be repeated, whereby the bride's *gotra* will be changed. The bride's mother, who did not participate in the previously conducted rituals is present throughout and serves the couple food. Thereafter the bride and groom are blessed and greeted by the bride's relatives and the daughter of the house throws paddy, a coin and mud from a mousehole (*indur*

math) behind her, thus symbolically giving back whatever she received in her father's house.

Whatever the content of the *bashi biye* rituals in the bride's house, the ceremony performed in the groom's house is more important in contemporary Bengal. On this occasion, the new affines (excluding the bride's mother) gather for the first time in the groom's house and share a meal. While the ceremony is performed at different times in East Bengali and West Bengali households, the main structure remains the same and even among Bengali Christians and Bengali Muslims *gay holud* and *bou bhat* constitute indispensable features of marriage rituals to be performed in all houses (see Kotalova 1993:190ff; Rozario 1992:136).

The ritual of *phul shojja* (lit. night of the flowerbed; consummation) takes place after the *bashi biye* and before the *bou bhat* ceremony has been performed in the house of the groom (Roy (1972)1975:89ff). However, often the first night in the in-laws' house is seen as an inauspicious night (*kal ratri*) among West Bengalis and the spouses are separated. In many households the husband has to avoid his wife during the day after the wedding. The newly wed are seated and play with the women of the house, who decorated the bed with flowers for the night. On the next day the couple may visit the bride's house, to which she returns some days after the marriage for a short while for the ceremony of opening the knot (*jorbhanga, jor bhangte jaoya*). Customarily the knot tying the clothes together was opened only at this time and sometimes the bride receives the conch shell bangles only during this last rite.

2.12 Guests and hosts

During the rituals the set of guests changes but most close relatives are present throughout, although guests are not expected to sit through the long ceremony itself. While the parents of the bride or groom give many items as *tattya*, guests are not expected to give expensive presents (*upohar*) or huge amounts of money, and gifts given by relatives, friends and neighbours on the occasion of first seeing the bride (*mukh dekha*) or in her in-laws' house (*bou bhat*), are rarely ever mentioned (Fruzzetti (1982) 1990:45).[39] Seating arrangements during the receptions reflect the esteem in which guests are held, and while senior relatives and the other party are given priority, members of the household do not sit and eat with the guests. Lack of space does not allow everybody to eat at the same time and thus groups which reflect closeness and status guide the chosen pattern. But generally all invitees are expected to sit next to whoever is asked to be seated at the same time. Although commensality can be restricted in a limited way caste is clearly overruled by class on these occasions and apart from the special treatment of close affines, the rest are more randomly seated. During weddings, non-vegetarian food is served, but often provisions for vegetarian food are made and one vegetarian item should always be offered. Throughout the different feasts, young men from the neighbourhood help to serve the guests, who are free to ask for second or third helpings of any item served. The order in which the dishes are served follows the one maintained during meals taken during other festive

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39 This constitutes one of the main differences between Bengali and e.g. Marwari wedding ceremonies.

occasions like Durga *puja* and resembles the strict customary pattern of Bengali meals in general. Thus vegetarian dishes are served first, followed by fish and/or meat dishes and finally chutney and sweets are served. The main meal taken at the reception during which the wedding is performed starts while the rituals are still going on, and a number of guests are fed and leave shortly afterwards. Given the number of guests and the limits of space in an urban environment the role of the hosts is to indicate when and in which order groups are seated and provided with their meal after which they are ushered out of the room because others are waiting. During the meals they keep an eye on the plates of their guests and should also take the opportunity to talk briefly to each person of importance, a task often taken over by female members of the house.

Whatever the actual arrangements, gossip, praise or disapproval will most certainly cover a wide range of topics like the bride's looks and dress, the groom's position and features, the marriage hall, decorations, number and size of gifts, the food served, the vehicles and music played, guests invited, dresses worn etc. Apart from the proverbial concern with poisoned food and dowry payments or the auspiciousness of the rituals, both sides worry about the public evaluation of the wedding. The parents of bride and groom are aware that their acclaimed status is subject to close public scrutiny, and have attended too many marriages themselves to be in doubt about the caution a positive impression requires. Among the concerns the encounter with the in-laws of a son or daughter, who expect to be treated as honoured guests and may ask for particular favours, is crucial for the successful wedding and as such calls for sensible hosts. In particular, in-laws of a daughter are extremely difficult to satisfy and situations in which the carefully planned setting for the wedding has suddenly changed in accordance of their

demands are neither unknown nor unexpected. While one can always send someone to fetch soft drinks for the groom's party, it is hardly possible to arrange for other furniture or different food on short notice like this, even though the bride's parents will try their best to meet any demands made. Contrary to what is customary in other parts of North India, both families expect to be closely related and have to maintain exchange and visiting relationships, which are initiated by the marriage negotiations and tested during the wedding itself. Thus if the groom's family is not attended to in an appropriate manner, the daughter, who leaves for her in-laws' house shortly afterwards, bears the brunt of their complaints. But although the bride's parents are in an inferior position, the new in-laws should try to maintain good relations with their affines, who are after all often prepared to help out if the need arises.

Even in isogamous marriages the two parties concerned occupy different positions vis-à-vis each other throughout the wedding rituals. However, as far as expenses, prestations, and resulting visiting patterns are concerned, inequality between the two families or lineages results from the arranged marriage, only because towards other than the *kutum* group (those related by marriage), both families are of equal status.

While the husband's family is in many cases eager to establish itself as superior receivers of gifts and respect, the wife's parents and her immediate kin are in an ambivalent position, because although they are of equal status, they are expected to treat the new relatives in an extremely polite fashion. Thus the girl's family may feel inferior to her in-laws' family with whom they are now linked and have to cooperate as part of the wider kinship network.

By adhering to the ideal of *kanyadan,* the wife-givers and wife-takers are separated and are linked within a relationship which is by definition one of inequality, but towards the rest of society they are of equal status. While the wife-takers are receivers of payments and gifts as well as a daughter-in-law, the wife-givers, in order to maintain their prestige and secure a bright future for their daughter, are prepared to satisfy the demands and fulfil the obligations involved.

Chapter 3: Love-marriages

Marriage patterns and the underlying rules have been at the centre of writings on South Asia where kinship, caste, legal issues, gender relations or change and modernity constituted subjects of discussion. Although a wide range of marriage practices across the subcontinent have been compared, categorised and differentiated with reference to the effect on caste and the position of women, it is assumed that the relevant and legitimate form of union is an arranged marriage. Love-marriages or "self-arranged marriages" among higher castes and the middle-class are rarely described in detail, and without further analysis defined as abnormal, westernised and comparatively rare occurrences. If these unions find mentioning they are defined as mere symptoms of change. Thus writing on kinship and urbanisation in the early seventies, Sylvia Vatuk, whose work has become a standard source of reference for those interested in urban middle-class life in India, remarked in a matter of fact way that "in Ganeshnagar and Kalyanpuri, marriages based on personal choice are not entirely unknown. But they are rare - considered deviant and regarded with strong disapproval, both in abstract discussions and for actual cases. Older conventions prevail even though many young people, particularly boys in their late teens and early twenties, profess a desire for more control over the choice of their mate" (Vatuk 1972: 87). More recent literature still repeats this view even though an increasing number of love-marriages take place in urban areas although the majority of all unions may still be arranged (e.g. Nishimura 1998:54ff).

During the nineteenth century marital relations among the upper-class of Calcutta were redefined and the ideal of "comradeship" and emotional ties

between spouses became a desirable ingredient of marriage. Even "love" was encouraged, though not as a predisposition for marriage but a welcome development afterwards. However, the cases cited by scholars like Chakravarty exemplify that such incidents were limited and mostly occurred among those who were influenced by Brahmo reformism and the elite (e.g. Karlekar (1991)1993:122ff; Chakravarty 1995:301ff).

The wider need to redefine the conjugal relationship in order to meet the new requirements of middle-class life in the cities was felt early in colonial Bengal, and issues related to marriage rules, age of consent and the education of women were debated among those who belonged to the educated *bhadralok* (see Broomfield 1968; Borthwick 1990; Engels 1996). Although they promoted female education, later marriages and the ideal of mutual consent as a basis of conjugal relations, arranged marriages were seldom interpreted as an obstacle to the much aspired modernisation of society. Rarely parental authority and custom were condemned as openly as Satyendranath Tagore, member of the famous Tagore family of Calcutta, expressed it, who wrote to his young wife Jnanandanandini, whom he addressed with the honorific term "brother", as early as 1864:[40]

"When we were married you had not attained the age of marriage. We could not marry independently. Our parents arranged it. Isn't it true, brother?... as long as you do not attain the age, get educated and improve yourself in every respect, we shall not enter into the relation of husband and wife. Doesn't it agree with your views? You know how much I love you (...) I have written to my father that I

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40 To address a woman with a male kin term was an honour in nineteenth century Bengal and is still done in songs sung by women in some areas as reported by Raheja and Gold (Raheja and Gold 1994).

shall keep waiting for you, as good seed waits for flowering" (cited in Chakravarty 1995:304).

While the influence of such ideas on the majority of the population of Calcutta was limited, the overall effects of socio-economic change were felt by all members of the newly emerging middle class. Gradually female education became part of everyday life and the age of marriage rose constantly, nevertheless love-marriages remained exceptional for some time. Thus Fruzzetti emphasised that this form of marriage was known in the small Bengali town where she did research in the 1960s as elopement (*polanyon kora*) and gave rise to considerable tensions between the couple and the parents. In other cases such marriages were known to be a solution in difficult circumstances, like dowry related problems and adoption (Fruzzetti (1982) 1990:10-12). Judging from the writings of other scholars, this holds true for many urban settings until recently and therefore love-marriages have rarely been analysed (see Caplan 1984; Nishimura 1998:54ff).

In the following sections I shall try to outline some of the features of love-marriages and the perception of such unions in the context of an urban neighbourhood of Calcutta. A surprisingly high number of so-called love-marriages can be found in a traditional setting like this. Moreover, people in the neighbourhood distinguish between different types of love-marriages and subtle differences are not only significant with reference to gender relations and the impact of western ideas but reflect processes of socio-economic change, community relations and the general concern with social status in a competitive setting. Thus talk about love-marriages may be revealing in many other respects and may be taken as an opportunity to reflect on social relations in various ways.

In order to establish where and why love-marriages occur and how these fit

in with the assumedly rigid adherence to the norm of arranged marriages within

one's own *jati,* a closer look at love-marriages in the neighbourhood can provide

more insight. Furthermore, by analysing marriages which are not arranged, the

ways in which marriage, kinship and caste are linked may be traced and

interpreted within a changing social setting.

It is often argued that arranged marriages are *per se* prescribed in Hindu

texts and that love-marriages are illegal or less sacred (Fruzzetti (1982)1990:112).

But marriage by choice (*gandharva*) appears in post-shastric law not only as

marriage of an eloped couple and this fact indicates the problems of generalising

about the status of love-marriages, in particular those which came about in a less

dramatic manner. A more valid interpretation of such unions in the light of classic

texts suggests that these marriages are inferior not because they are based on

"love" but rather on the failure to bestow the gift of a virgin in the prescribed

way.[41] Furthermore, the case of "self-arranged" marriages violating the principle

of endogamy needs to be taken into account, as marriages between members of

different castes or religious affiliation are among the most prominent "love-

marriages" in contemporary South Asia (e.g. Streefkerk-Hubbeling 1979).

Nevertheless, although "love-marriage" might be a general definition for unions

not initiated by the gift of a daughter in marriage (at least in the strict sense), not

all love-marriages represent deviations from the rule of caste endogamy and thus

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41 Among the eight modes outlined by shastric law, four constitute *dharmaia* (in accordance with religious and moral duty) and four are non-*dharma* unions. Marriage by choice (*ghandharva*) belongs to the latter category including the mythological unions between princesses and their spouses (*svayamvara*) (Kapadia (1955) 1981:135p).

these unions do not necessarily constitute unions "against the hair" (*pratiloma*).[42]

Intra-caste love-marriages may cause tension within a community or family but

can be accommodated within the system as far as status and *jati* are concerned.

Many of the love-marriages which took place in the neighbourhood are marriages

within the same caste and would be considered "following the hair" (*anuloma*)

from a shastric point of view. These unions are perfectly legal and not immoral as

long as the couple did not elope and marry without their fathers' consent, thus

violating the important principle which is the necessity to give a girl in marriage,

the gift of a virgin (*kanyadan*).

In the light of this, different types of love-marriages have to be

distinguished, and whereas an intra-caste love-marriage might be easily interpreted

within the classical framework, particular types of marriages violate the rule of

caste-endogamy. Among the marriages initiated by a couple themselves, inter-

caste and inter-community marriages may constitute a problem.[43] In order to

determine the meaning of love-marriages in the given context, the perception of

love-marriages in general and different types of love-marriages have to be

analysed.[44]

3.1 What is a love-marriage ?

In popular consciousness as well as scholarly writings, some confusion exists as to

what represents a love-marriage and "real" love-marriages in the Indian context

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42 Milner remarks that the emergence of the opposition between *anuloma* and *pratiloma* marriages with the inherent preference of hypergamous over isogamous marriages is not implied by the *Dharmasastras* which emphasise isogamous marriages (Milner 1988:148-149).

43 Inter-community refers to religious affiliation, regional origin outside Bengal and language differences.

44 The data collected by Debi suggest that the following analysis of the findings from one neighbourhood support the general tendency she describes for the sample of 324 women in

are being contrasted with "arranged love-marriages". The latter are apparently arranged marriages between two partners knowing each other, whose parents carefully arrange for them to actually meet before the negotiations start.[45] Furthermore, it has even been suggested that marriage of a chosen partner does not constitute a love-marriage where the parents arrange for the reception and exchange of gifts after the couple decided to marry (Caplan 1984:228). However, this is not the case with the Bengali definition of a "love-marriage", which alternatively is also called "one's own marriage" (*nijer biye*).

Within this context, love-marriages are defined in opposition to arranged marriages. Thus the absence of initial contact between the elders is crucial, because every contact preceding the marriage between elders of the two families concerned is interpreted as arranging a marriage, so that the union would not be of choice based on love and secret meetings before the marriage took place. A love-marriage is initiated by the couple concerned and preceded by often very subtle forms of courtship between the two, although occasions might be rare and acquaintance superficial. It is nevertheless the initiative of the couple which determines the definition of a proper love-marriage. The primary concern with parental influence is reflected in statements about marriages found in the neighbourhood. In a typical case, a young woman from a middle-class family meets the son of neighbours or a friend of her elder brother and falls in love with him. They meet in the neighbourhood and exchange notes, and might even sometimes meet outside the locality in a coffeeshop before they decide to get

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employment (teachers, office workers and technical personnel) she studied in the 1980s (Debi 1988:1957ff).
45 Such marriages "by introduction" are popular among the upper classes e.g. in Bombay and South Asian migrants in Britain (e.g. Prinjha 1998).

married.[46] Once the decision is taken, their parents are informed about their intention and the latter may only then take up negotiations with their counterparts. Although the couple are often allowed to marry, tension and serious problems with the parents are expected and these form part of the concept of "one's own marriage". Thus a woman who married a young man from the neighbourhood and whose marriage was interpreted as a love-marriage by her sister disagreed on the basis, that "I knew my husband, because his family where friends of my parents, I met him in the *para*, but ours was an arranged marriage because there was a meeting and a function and all and no problems with the parents". In another case a mother-in-law, whose daughter-in-law insisted that hers was a love-marriage, objected stating that the two had been to school together, but that it was the daughter-in-law's brother who came and enquired about the possibility of marriage negotiations. She insisted that therefore her son did not have a love-marriage but a conventionally arranged marriage. Although in the latter case a more conservative mother might not want to admit that her son entered a pre-marital relationship, her definition of a "real" love-marriage is consistent with the general idea about the difference between these two forms of marriage. Thereby love-marriage has to be an agreement between the bride and groom only and a certain degree of conflict with the parents as well as a preceding romantic flirtation are expected. Vague as it may be, the boy and the girl establish some kind of contact, even though what is described as a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship often involves very moderate forms of courtship.

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46 Five respondents married a partner from the same *para*, and a number of such unions originating in the same neighbourhood were pointed out.

Many of the meetings do not lead to marriage although women may not normally talk about these relationships. The fact that a girl or a boy wanted to marry, but were prevented from doing so because their parents did not give their consent, is a matter of shame in this setting and will not be openly discussed with strangers. Most families are concerned about any relationship between boys and girls in the neighbourhood and mothers try to prevent their daughters from openly mixing with boys in public on a regular basis. However, girls and boys are expected to fall in love and parents who do not allow a girl or boy to marry once a relationship has developed are seen as selfish and often blamed for their greed. Because parents should act in the best interest of their children, the happiness of one's daughter or son is seen as the major concern of fathers and mothers. If parents refuse to agree to a love-marriage this is certainly interpreted as a cruel act towards a son or a daughter. Furthermore it may be suspected, that the family are looking for a better match in terms of social and economic status. This, however, is unacceptable behaviour and although all arranged marriages are based on the assumed good economic background of a spouse, parents cannot openly display a concern with property and income. Following the same logic, refusal of a proposal for an arranged marriage causes considerable embarrassment and is hardly ever mentioned in the presence of outsiders because one might be suspected of greed.

In general love-marriages are not met with disapproval *per se*, and hardly any family in the neighbourhood is in a position to judge too harshly because in every wider family such unions occurred. Thus all women claim a high degree of tolerance towards love-marriages and emphasised the interest of the couple concerned by drawing on notions of general humanism. In a typical twist following such statements of good intentions, some of the love-marriages found in the *para*

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are then discussed and graded according to a hierarchy of desirable and least desirable marriages. As we shall see certain types of love-marriages are interpreted as difficult and whether or not love-marriages are discussed in the context of a particular union determines if love-marriages are presented as a problem. Thus it has to be established what constitutes such notions and how different types of love-marriages are distinguished and evaluated.

3.2 Different types of love

Contrary to the view put forward by some scholars, marriages are not judged according to a division between right and proper arranged marriages based on appropriate forms of conjugal love, a combination of devotional love (*bhakti*) and erotic love (*prem*) on the one hand, and love-marriages based only on *prem* without devotional love on the other hand (see Fruzzetti (1982)1990: 12). Although both forms of love should ideally be present as part of a successful marriage, this does not imply that the two features cannot coexist within a love-marriage. Furthermore, according to the local interpretation, they do not automatically come about within an arranged union either. While the most common idea about falling in love relates these unions to sexual desire and physical attraction, the main concern is with the type and the basis of marriages rather than the moral quality of *prem*. The reason for a different interpretation partly evolves from the fact that women are very often less well read and do not always have the scriptural explanation at hand. But in their view one cannot assume that within a love-marriage *prem* cannot be substantiated by *bhakti*. Besides, *bhakti* is often not present initially but presents the ideal form of conjugal devotion to be developed within a mature relationship. Thus they are not

questioning the superiority and necessity of *bhakti* or devotional love as part of a

fulfilling conjugal relation, but challenge the assumption that love-marriages

inevitably lack *bhakti*. The concern is rather with specific characteristics of *prem*,

which in their view constitutes part of a successful marriage but is insufficient as a

basis for unions due to its unpredictable and less permanent nature. Another

aspect indirectly guiding women's notions is the fact that *prem* may be defined as

an egalitarian kind of love which is less difficult than *bhakti* and *sneha* both of

which represent hierarchical forms of love (see Inden and Nicholas 1977:22ff

Osella and Osella 1996:30ff).

However, with reference to love-marriages, the term for the emotional tie

which is colloquially used is more often *bhalobasha*, which translates as

"fondness" and denotes a form of love present among relatives and friends, and

often mutually expressed between siblings. Within the context of love-marriages it

has a romantic rather than a sexual connotation and is expected to develop after a

boy and a girl fell in love initially. Senior women frequently emphasise the

advantages of love-marriages in terms of emotional fulfilment and mutual

understanding between the partners, which in their view is more easily realised

within a love-marriage and thereby indicate the wide acceptance of the redefined

conjugal ideal accepted in contemporary Bengal (Debi 1988:57; Borthwick 1990;

Chakravarty 1995).[47] Thus *bhalobasha*, a form of love which is not necessarily

hierarchical and not mere physical attraction defines the difference between love-

marriages and arranged marriages, the latter of which implies the possibility of

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47 The influence of Vaishnavism and Tantrism in Bengal has often been interpreted as facilitating
alternative constructions of gender roles expressed in the notion of love as highest form of worship
(e.g. Engels 1996:74ff). Although Vaishnavism as an organised movement was present in urban
nineteenth century Bengal it was marginalised as part of the formation of a "modern" middle-class
domesticity and surfaced tamed in the teachings of Ramkrishna (see Sarkar 1992).

equality. The distinction between *prem* as erotic love and attraction and *bhakti* as devotional love is apparently less prominent in an environment strongly influenced by *bhakti* movements and the related idioms of love. Thus within the context of Radha-Krishna worshipping, the difference between *prem* as continuous love and *kam* as lust is emphasised rather than the opposition between *prem* and *bhakti*, both of which signify the devotional mode of loving worship (*prem-bhakti*) in Vaishnavism (Marglin 1984 (1995):305ff).[48] Here, while ideally *prem* and *bhakti* form part of all relationships between humans and deities, *kam* is identified with sexual relationships and ideally marriage. Thus it is significantly different from the devotional modes of love. The notion of a continuum rather than a clear division between *prem* and *bhakti* may present a more adequate picture of how conjugal love is perceived in contemporary Bengal, which has been influenced by Vaishnavite notions of devotion, reformulated in a modern and acceptable way by Ramkrishna and his followers during the nineteenth century.

Women often refer to *bhakti* as an appropriate form of worship and the kind of love a devoted wife develops for her husband, but Radha and Krishna are rarely mentioned whenever marriage is concerned, and reference is made directly to the relationship between them only as lovers or within the ritual context. Although the illicit nature of the relationship is not denied, the couple and in particular Radha are worshipped by many Bengalis, and mothers take their daughters to the temple on the occasion of Doljatra. The most pronounced notion emphasises the selfless nature of Radha's love (*prem* as selfless love) for Krishna rather than the fact that

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48 The assumedly negative notion of *prem* is challenged by a further differentiation of *prem* and *kam*, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Marglin, who describes different types of sexual union displayed and enacted in the Jaganath temple of Orissa, suggests a more differentiated framework, in which both are distinguished not by the erotic or sexual connotation but by continuity (Marglin 1984 (1995):305ff).

the lovers are committing adultery, which enables Radha to give freely and commit herself against all odds (Kinsley (1986)1988:90ff; Roy (1972)1975:62ff). As Kinsley points out, the model of extramarital love is precisely the setting within which Vaishnavites place the fulfilled relationship between devotee and deity (Kinsley (1986) 1988). Within this framework, marital love is characterised by lust (*kam*), but the selfless love which Radha develops for Krishna is of a less momentous type and part of wholehearted worshipping. Such modes of love are also often displayed by married women and young girls, who worship Gopal or Krishna as a child in form of an idol (*murti*). Because Radha is not married to Krishna she is not bound to be the object of desire but can also be a mother to him who treats her mischievous son with leniency. Under the influence of the nineteenth century devaluation of Vaishnavite popular culture, this loving worship is encouraged by middle-class mothers in young girls (see Carman (1984) 1995; Miller (1984) 1995: 25). But given the strong presence of the couple depicted as archetypal lovers in popular culture, including print and visual media, related notions are influential and serve as an imagined ideal, in particular among unmarried young women. Thus in a typical move, Roy describes the way young urban women imagine themselves in the role of Sita, Savitri or Behula, the devoted wives or as a heroine depicted in novels consumed. Nevertheless, she may at the same time long to be Radha and enjoy romantic love, the notion of which is strongly influenced by movies and TV soap operas depicting love and different types of unions (see Roy (1972)1975:32ff).

While East Bengalis used to sing wedding songs during marriage ritual which openly referred to the Radha-Krishna imagery, these are rarely known in

urban areas today.[49] But cassettes featuring Hindi movie-songs are used regularly to accompany the different women's rituals and draw heavily on Radha-Krishna myths.

3.3 Accommodating love-marriages

It is striking that once the relationship has been recognised by the parents of a boy or a girl, the fathers frequently proceed with the negotiations common in arranged marriages and follow the same pattern. Thus, irrespective of how the parents came to know about the intention of their children, they tend to meet and arrange for the wedding and the receptions to take place, unless one side disapproves too strongly to organise the "function". Thus love-marriages initially create tensions between parents and children, but the former are often eager to limit the damage to the reputation of the house and carry on with the normal preparations for a marriage.

Contrary to what has been stated by Fruzzetti and others, the wedding itself might not differ in size, expenses and structure. In many cases a dowry is even paid when a girl marries her chosen partner (pace Kannan 1963: 69; Fruzzetti (1982) 1990:12: Nishimura 1998:71). Indeed, a substantial amount may be given with the girl and here as with all other expenses, it depends on negotiations what the actual content will be. Generally the compulsion to pay a considerable amount of money as dowry is less strong in the case of a love-marriage, mainly because the groom's family will not easily withdraw from the scene once the intention to marry has been announced by the prospective partners. This is partly due to the

49 There are numerous examples for songs like this, e.g. the wedding song collected and translated by Roy from Sylhet District "Shyam, the paramour of Radha is blowing the flute by bending his body on the beach of the river Jamuna. The tune of the flute burns Radha's body. She requests her girl friends Laita and Bishaka to bring Shyam. It does not matter whether the dignity of the family

fact that while arranged marriages take place between families who are mostly not related before, in these cases the boy and the girl are often from the same locality. Therefore the relationship between the two houses is more public and negotiations can hardly be concealed. [50]

If love-marriages occur between members of families of different economic and social status, the family of the groom may refuse to accept the dowry given by the bride's parents, if the latter are considered to be of lower status in general and not fit to give prestations as part of an exchange between equal partners in marriage negotiations. But given the close proximity in a small neighbourhood, large demands may become known as well and the prestige of the groom's family as a whole might be at stake. In many cases an appropriate dowry was paid and the love-marriage did not differ from any arranged marriage in that respect. On other occasions, the marriage took place between families of different economic status and the bride's side was not prepared to pay a dowry in addition to the traditional *tattya* gifts (which often constituted the only prestations made among members of lower castes in the past), even though the groom's side expected the daughter-in-law to bring a dowry. But whatever transactions take place, the traditional gifts (*tattya*) have to be given as in any arranged marriage, because these are part of the rituals conducted in public. As such they are given if the new daughter-in-law moves in with her husband's parents and her in-laws do not strongly oppose the marriage, in which case the tendency is towards neolocal residence in the neighbourhood of the wife's parents.

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is lost ...()... to get Shyam. Her mind has become restless like a flying bird and her heart filled with the waves of love"(Roy 1984:32).

50 Contrary to observations of Vatuk and Caplan, marriages in which the parents of the couple took the responsibility of organising a reception and providing gifts given on the occasion, are interpreted as love-marriages (see Vatuk 1972:89ff and Caplan 1984:228ff).

Such love-marriages have to be distinguished from marriages of eloped couples which are never socially approved of and are either registered marriages or marriages confirmed by a priest in a temple, mostly at Kalighat. The latter occur rarely and none of the love-marriages encountered was of the "*Kalighat biye*" (Kalighat marriage) type, although two couples married against the wish and without the approval of the groom's parents and were first registered and later complemented the union by a small scale function in the bride's house. However, the frequency of love-marriages in the neighbourhood, which became regular incidents from the 1960s onwards, led to an increasing degree of tolerance towards such unions, and love-marriages are not necessarily disapproved of by neighbours, the circle of kin and friends. [51]

3.4 Evaluation of love-marriages

Love-marriages challenge notions of proper conduct and parental authority and carry a connotation of inappropriate behaviour of both the boy and the girl involved. Children are educated with arranged marriages in mind and parents are constantly concerned with the reputation of daughters and even sons, which ultimately may influence the chances for a good match. Nevertheless, the disapproval of love-marriages is derived from the fact that the children act in an irresponsible manner and put the family name at risk in order to pursue selfish interests which are understandable but threatening. However, as long as caste and class distinctions are maintained, the parents' grudge may fade quickly and they often try to resolve the problem in the most respectable manner (Vatuk 1972:86ff; Debi 1988:61).

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51 In Debi's sample 36.5% of the married employed women had a love-marriage (Debi 1988:61).

While love-marriages occur frequently, arranged marriages have many advantages and are interpreted as more predictable and safe, at least if the parents are in a position to choose among a number of potential candidates. Women and men alike state that the way a marriage came about is of little importance provided the criteria for a "good" family are met and this is precisely the decisive point as far as love-marriages are concerned. It has often been stated that the concern is not with love-marriages as such, which do not necessarily cause anxiety as long as the chosen partner belonged to a "good" family, a somehow vague description of all features contributing to social status. Apart from rare cases where a love-marriage could not be accommodated and the couple eloped, problems with love-marriages do not take a different form from what might be seen as a general concern with status and relationships brought about by marriage alliance.

Thus love-marriages are interpreted within the general framework and the fact that the union might be beyond the control of the parents poses a potential problem, because the chosen partner might belong to a different caste, community or economic background. In the light of what has been outlined above, the responsibility of parents to arrange the best match for a son or daughter lies partly in an attempt to maintain the sensitive balance between all different factors. Young adults can generally not be entrusted with the serious matter of status assessment and they are expected to leave decisions to their parents, but as the mother of an eighteen year old girl pointed out "If they go to college and meet someone there, what can I do, after all nobody can challenge love and it might just happen". Although it is accepted that boys and girls fall in love, the concern is with the

choice they make and this is often reflected in conversations about the wider

neighbourhood and love-marriages in the *para*.[52]

3.5 Love-marriages in the neighbourhood

Most women openly discuss the fact that they had love-marriages themselves (see

Debi 1988:60). But contrary to the widely held assumption by which love-

marriages are attributed to "working women", only one of the women married a

colleague and the majority have never been in employment.[53] Furthermore, most of

the love-marriages took place between inhabitants of the neighbourhood itself and

this influences the status of the women concerned as well as patterns of interaction

between kin, household structure etc. (see chapter 5).

Young women meet young men in a number of contexts in this locality, in

particular during the years they spend in education and move between the school

and their home. Thus female education is one of the reasons to explain the rise in

love-marriages in the *para*. Different religious festivals like *pujas*, which are a

major event in the neighbourhood, provide further occasions during which girls

and boys roam about freely to visit the different seats of the deities (*pandal*). Very

often girls get acquainted with friends of their brothers who visit the house on a

regular basis and fall in love.

In order to establish the framework within which love-marriages take place,

different types of marriages in the neighbourhood have to be distinguished.

Although some of the women interviewed are not married, the sample comprises of

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52 Thus whatever brought about the marriage, love-marriages are marriages and they are evaluated along the same lines as other marriages.
53 In this fashion Feldman attributes the rise in love-marriages in urban Bangladesh solely to new patterns of socialising among working women (see Feldman 1993:230). Streefkerk-Hubbeling

35 married or widowed women between the age of 24 and 72. All women belong to middle-class families, and while the majority are Bengali Hindus, three Bengali Christians and three Marwaris, as well as two woman who originally came from U.P. were part of this group. Among the Bengali Hindus, eight women belonged to Brahmin families, seven to Kayastha families, while four belonged to different agricultural castes (like Sadgopes), four to Bene families and one to a Scheduled caste.

The majority of all married women had arranged marriages and love-marriages only occurred among those younger than 48 years. However, twelve married women had love-marriages among which six were intra-caste marriages. Three love-marriages were inter-caste unions and the remaining three consisted of inter-community marriages.[54] One third of all marriages were love-marriages and thus such unions represent a substantial portion of all marriages.[55]

Furthermore, love-marriages have been reported from all wider families for the age group below 40 and in many cases more than one love-marriage occurred among the siblings of a woman. A high percentage of such unions are inter-caste or inter-community marriages, often between Bengali Hindus and Bengali Christians in the neighbourhood, but also between Bengali Hindus and Bengali Muslims, Bengali Hindus and Punjabis and Bengali Hindus and Marwaris.[56] Although the number of intra-caste love-marriages is higher than the number of

mentions various love-marriages in Bulsar (Gujarat) which occurred between colleagues (Streefkerk-Hubbeling 1979:248ff).

54 "Community" is used to indicate ethnic origin, language group and religious affiliation in this context.

55 Debi points out that the majority of love-marriages in her sample were inter-caste marriages among Bengali Hindus (Debi 1988:60).

56 Two arranged marriages are inter-caste unions and in both cases a Brahmin girl was married to a Kayastha boy in the 1970s. Debi reports 11 cases of arranged inter-caste marriages which supports the validity of the findings from Taltala (Debi 1988:60).

inter-caste and inter-community marriages, only half of all love-marriages took place within the caste.

Amongst the latter, a significant number of inter-caste love-marriages in the neighbourhood occurred between girls belonging to agricultural castes and members of other castes or communities.

Further conclusions regarding caste-status and love-marriages might lead to misrepresentations because data on the overall caste-composition of the neighbourhood do not exist and the sample is not representative in that respect.

3.6 Inter-community love-marriages

The heterogeneity of the *para* accounts for a relatively high number of inter-caste and inter-community love-marriages, which are not a rare exception, although the majority of love-marriages occurred within the caste. Many of the features used to evaluate inter-caste marriages are also present if inter-community marriages are discussed, and the way in which differences between castes and communities are described are often comparable but not always similar. Thus notions of caste are often more detailed and are part of a framework within which Bengali castes belong to one group but are hierarchically organised, while communities are separate entities. It goes without saying that with respect to marriage only unions among middle-class families are relevant for the following discussion, which excludes e.g. communities like Biharis and most Muslims originally from U.P.[57] The fact that inter-caste and inter-community marriages are very common in the slum areas is well known but shall not be discussed here.

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57 The Muslims referred to here are Bengali-speaking and belong to middle-class families with comparable educational and economic backgrounds to Hindus.

Within the range of possible love-marriages, inhabitants of the neighbourhood are in favour of particular types of love-marriages, and broadly speaking prefer *jati* endogamy, whereby caste, community and religious divisions are maintained. Thus everyone agrees that the ultimate problem is not love-marriage, but particular configurations and especially inter-community marriages, amongst which Hindu-Muslim marriages are abhorred most. Within this framework marriages of Hindu girls with Muslim boys are seen as even more deviant by Hindus. Apart from marriages with Bengali Christians, inter-community marriages are always interpreted as very difficult and are strongly disapproved of by Bengali Hindus. Although certain distinctions are made as to what are preferred inter-community marriages it is emphasised continuously that members from different communities (described like caste as *jati*) should not marry. The most difficult and feared form of love-marriage is a match between a Bengali Hindu girl and a Muslim boy. This may surprise given the fact that many of the well-to-do Muslim families in the area are Bengalis and some of these families have been settled here for more than 150 years. But the divide between the two communities is partly the result of communalist repercussions in an area well known for riots even after Independence (e.g. Das (1991)1993:173). As a result, most better-off Muslim families left the area and the majority migrated to East Bengal but a considerable number of middle-class families live here. Nevertheless, even though historical experience shapes the perception of the "other", it is in many ways not the only point of reference. While discussing Hindu-Muslim marriages which occur frequently in the wider area, women in particular would state that while a Muslim girl could "adjust" to the ways of the Hindu in-laws a Hindu girl could never get used to the Muslim household of her husband.

Knowledge about different life-styles among women is very limited and even those who maintain regular contact with Muslim families would only point out that the food habits as well as the seclusion of women would pose a problem within a marriage.

This reflects a strong preoccupation with food and constructions of femininity as related to differences between *jatis*, and while such opinions and images of otherness are never as pronounced as in the case of Muslims, the same idioms are used with reference to different groups in general. The frequent incidents of rape during communal riots have produced an overtly sexualised notion of difference with regard to Muslims and thus unions between a Hindu girl and a Muslim boy are interpreted within this context by Bengali Hindus (see Kakar 1995; Basu 1998; Hansen n.d.).

Many women state that "Muslim boys just marry Hindu girls but they never allow their own women to move around and marry Hindu boys...", but given the comparatively low numbers of these particular inter-community marriages this expresses the general fear and dislike of the other community rather than experience (see Kakar 1995:30 and 37ff). Such notions are largely hypothetical, as none of the women or any of their siblings married a member of a Muslim family. Nevertheless, many women attended school with Muslim girls, or sons and daughters may have had Muslim classmates if not friends. In this respect women in this neighbourhood are exposed to interactions with Muslims much more frequently than their counterparts in less heterogeneous localities. In some cases, Muslim neighbours live in the same house or other family-members may have Muslim friends. This pattern of close contact within a heterogeneous context and deeply felt disapproval or even hatred is commonly expressed. Contact and

exchange are perceived as a necessity of everyday life but the involuntary nature of the relationship enhances the need for control.

Apart from the direct reference to communal incidents it is widely believed that Muslims are more organised and more in tune with their community and religious leaders than Bengali Hindus. The latter often depict themselves as less rigid than other Hindu groups, and interpret Muslim religious practices as "self-control" and "hardening", whilst Hindu society is depicted as "soft", tolerant and open-minded. Such perceptions are often expressed in the idiom of marriage and stories of "soft" Hindu girls, who fell prey to the seductive techniques of Muslim boys, or Muslim boys who lure Hindu girls into marriage are manifold (e.g. Kakar 1995:144ff). In this context, evaluations of marriage can serve as a pretext for self-affirmation and distinctions, which incorporate local and national political discourse as well as historical experience.[58]

While such notions are common in other contexts, a surprising feature is a preference for inter-community marriages with Bengali Christians rather than other Hindu communities. This is framed in terms of language and customs and very little cultural contradictions between the two groups, an assumption which can be sustained regarding the East Bengali Christians. Although Christians from East Bengal and South India have been settled in the neighbourhood for a long time, Bengali Christians entered the area in high numbers after partition and even today many families move to Taltala because prestigious English medium schools with quotas for Christian pupils are located in Central Calcutta.

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[58] Chatterjee placed the social construction of communities with clear cut boundaries at the heart of nationalist formations but asserts that "I do not believe that the imaginative possibilities afforded by the fuzziness of the community have disappeared from the domain of popular political discourse"(Chatterjee 1993:225).

Like other such communities on the subcontinent, East Bengali Christians have a long tradition of male migration abroad, in particular to the Emirates, and many households are *de facto* female headed units with access to considerable amounts of foreign currency (see Rozario 1992). Male members of the Bengali Christian community in the neighbourhood are mostly in white collar employment abroad or follow the traditional occupation and work as cooks and stewards on ships. Many men are comparatively highly educated and the families are often upwardly mobile. Within the community living in Calcutta, different status groups (*jati*) can be recognised which are distinguished by their "*title*", and marriage between members of different groups is common. However, the internal division into Christians with Brahmin surnames, Christians with Portuguese names and among the latter the low status groups often referred to as "*chasi Christians*" (farmer Christians) indicates a system guided by (former) ritual status and occupation.[59] Whereas the system is not really rigid and many mixed unions take place, the notion of Bengali Hindus is that all Christians except for those with Brahmin names are low-caste converts and thus of inferior ritual status. Nevertheless, inter-community marriages with Christians are common and this type of inter-community marriage is preferred among all Bengali Hindus. The main reason given by women themselves is that Christian girls marrying into Hindu households easily adjust and learn how to behave in an appropriate manner, that their patterns of rituals and worshipping are the same and that they are properly educated Bengalis, which Muslims are not normally considered to be. Hindu girls marrying into a Christian household are often (but by no means

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59 East Bengali Christians never refer to the differences among themselves in terms of caste but "title" (Rozario 1992).

always) required to convert and be baptised. This depends on the in-laws and in many families the emphasis is not on what religious affiliation the daughter-in-law has as long as her pattern of worshipping does not openly contradict the family custom (see chapter 6). The stress on individual devotion and worship and the mainstream of Hindu goddesses worshipped in Bengal along with a generally tolerant approach towards religious practices allows for a number of ways to accommodate either a Hindu bride in the house of East Bengali Christians or a woman from a Christian family who stays with her husband's Bengali Hindu family. Women commented on this by saying "Why should we have a problem with the Christian girls, they speak our language and their Mother Mary is just like our Durga, they know how to prepare Bengali meals and can easily adjust in a Hindu household, just like every other girl who marries into a house...". The same degree of tolerance is displayed with respect to inter-marriage with other groups, if the latter are Hindus and the daughter-in-law speaks Bengali, although these marriages are normally considered to be more difficult to maintain. It is largely agreed upon the problems involved in other inter-community marriages, but Bengali women are expected to learn most practices of everyday life in the in-laws' house, and because a wide range of customs exists, no two houses are the same. Hence the interviewed never considered it to be very hard or even impossible for a Bengali girl to get used to the new family, at least not in the case of a marriage with another Hindu group, whose members came to Calcutta a long time back and adopted many of the main features of Bengali lifestyle. This holds true for the Punjabi population of the area, which is thoroughly "bengalized", and two women interviewed had love-marriages with Punjabi men in the *para*.

The general features determining the evaluation of inter-community marriages are related to gender stereotypes and the role of women in the house, the preparation and type of food, dress code, worshipping, and rules concerning movement of women (often expressed in terms of educational standards) and these are precisely the distinctive markers setting Muslim communities apart.

This is the common way to express perceived differences in culture and that in particular Hindu and Muslim communities can be distinguished according to their food habits. Thus notions of purity and communal boundaries are emphasised. Muslims, whether they are from Bengal or another Indian state, are outsiders (or rather "the other"), and as far as Hindus and Christians are concerned they are as a community not part of the system and therefore of a different culture. No matter what the particularities of a Muslim spouse's background are, he or she is the worst imaginable marriage partner for a son or a daughter and no amount of adjustment, not even the common mother-tongue is sufficient to bridge the gap between the communities.

Another example of disapproved marriages are inter-community marriages with Marwaris, which though rare, occur. While Marwaris in general and especially women are thought to be less educated, those who have been in Bengal for as long as two centuries are often bilingual and respected, not least because they are normally of considerable wealth. If such inter-community marriages take place women disapprove of these unions, for Marwaris as a group are looked down upon as less educated and refined. Because Marwaris belong to a business-community they are generally disliked and are expected to be involved in dubious transactions. Furthermore, this comparatively well-to-do group allegedly did not actively participate in the reform and nationalist movements and it is stated that

levels of female literacy and education as well as the status of women in general remained low throughout the first half of the century. But even though these historical "facts" do not provide reliable information on the current situation, they fuel prejudices about the group.

Given all these assumptions, a girl is not considered to be able to "adjust" to a Marwari family out of the same reasons cited for Muslims, because the Marwari life-style does not match with "Bengali culture". In comparison, the commonly referred to features are the same (food, education and the status of women) with the most prominent amongst them the food habits. But straightforward conclusions about distinctions based on concepts of purity and pollution which are prominent in attempts to explain such stereotyping and would provide an analogy between caste and community in terms of group boundaries are hard to maintain. This is obvious if the fact that the Marwari community consists of a majority of strict vegetarians is acknowledged. Thus differences in food habits of a group often serve to express a much wider concern with the culture, including education, dress, kinship pattern and religious practice as well as freedom of movement of women. It is assumed that although the same markers of group identity are used, the cultural practice in the house makes it impossible for any Bengali Hindu and Bengali Christian girl to get used to it.

The most distant groups in the view of Bengali Hindus and Bengali Christians are Muslims and Marwaris, whereas other communities are referred to in more neutral terms and inter-community marriages with e.g. South Indian Christians and Punjabis are interpreted as closer and seen as less complicated.

In specific cases, an additional point of reference is whether a girl married into a different community or vice versa. While the reluctance to accept a girl from

a different background is strong, the marriage of a Bengali Hindu girl into another group is even more openly disapproved of. It is widely assumed that a girl taken from another *jati* can adjust but a girl given to a different group implies that she is exposed to a different culture and carries a notion of surrender to their norms. This holds true for inter-marriage with Bengali Christians as for all other groups. All women suggested that a Christian girl could far more easily marry into a Hindu household than a Bengali Hindu girl could adjust in a Bengali Christian household, because with none of the groups equal status can be asserted and although taking a girl from a Christian family is interpreted as an unequal exchange, to give a daughter to a Bengali Christian household would be more damaging to the reputation of her paternal family. It is tempting to interpret the explanations given for different degrees of tolerance in terms of hypergamous preference if only the Hindu-Christian unions are considered as the latter are assumedly of low-caste origin and any preference to take a bride would therefore be consistent with this notion. Such conclusions however do not hold true in the light of the wider material, e.g. the arranged inter-caste marriages cited, which were hypogamous unions between Kayastha boys and Brahmin girls. Furthermore the general idea that a girl taken can adjust would be applied to urban-rural, Delhi-Calcutta, and comparably wide differences in "culture" as well.

3.7 Inter-caste marriages

Whereas the number of inter-community marriages is limited, love- marriages often take place between members of different castes and here again certain patterns of assessment can be observed. Caste-membership of the person is of importance if inter-caste marriages are discussed, but this does not imply that

every member of a lower status group will assign positive values to a match with a member of a high status group. Inter-caste marriages should on the contrary be as close as possible.

Like signifiers used in the case of inter-community marriages, the "culture" of a caste, which may be evaluated in terms of economic and educational achievement, is all important and castes are expected to differ in everyday rules and practices observed in the house (*bichar-achar*) (see chapter 6). While this applies to inter-community marriages as well, communities are in an equal position towards each other, and differences do not necessarily translate into a fixed hierarchy. They obviously do, however, as far as castes are concerned and women are normally quick to point out that whereas some communities, like Bengali Christians and Bengali Hindus are of a different *jati*, they are not perceived of as having a particularly "difficult" culture, whereas this is assumed as far as some other communities and particular castes are concerned. Thus one should bear in mind that caste and community are mostly expressed in terms of *jati,* but not all features related to exogamous marriages apply to castes as well as communities.

Inter-caste marriages are not only problematic if a member of a high caste marries the member of a lower status-group but all inter-caste marriages may pose problems by violating the endogamous ideal. Thus members of low ritual status feel the same way and point out that the differences between all castes and often sub-castes do not so much refer to abstract rituals but customs in the house. However, many marriages in the *para* are inter-caste marriages and families can integrate a member of a different caste within the household. The fact that a marriage takes place between members of different castes rarely constitutes a

source of lasting tension in itself. This tolerance is often displayed regarding marriages within the three upper castes (Brahmin, Baidhya, Kayastha), members of which intermarry often in urban Bengal. In case such unions occur many women argue that "after all, as long as the family are good, what can be wrong and all human beings are equal...". The caste membership of the children born into mixed marriages, which would according to the shastric view be affected by inter-marriage with a member of a lower caste is not generally seen as the main obstacle to accommodate inter-caste marriages. It is widely assumed that a child belongs to the caste of the father because he or she is born and brought up in his line (*bangsha*) and thus the fact that the mother is from a different caste does not really affect the status of the child in everyday life. If such children marry, the parents of a potential spouse get to know about the caste of the groom's or bride's mother and can decide whether they find it difficult to accept such a match. However, in most cases membership of the patrilineage is decisive and neutralises the mixed descent of a couple's offspring among the three upper-castes.[60]

Some castes are nevertheless more equal than others and this can be aptly demonstrated by looking at attitudes towards inter-caste marriages between and with members of agricultural and merchant castes (clean or unclean) or untouchable castes (*acchut* or *antyaja jati*), which is met with resistance within different families. It is assumed that these groups follow an entirely different lifestyle and thus cannot possibly be of equal status. Consequently a marriage within the group of the first three castes is superior to a marriage between a member of any of these castes and a member of an agricultural group. One of the

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60 This is markedly different from more rigid notions of caste-endogamy present in other contexts (e.g. Nishimura 1998:54ff).

women, herself a Brahmin and neighbour of a family whose son had married a woman from an agricultural caste (an incident that was neither disclosed by the woman concerned nor her mother-in-law) put it in the appropriate manner by stating that although the wife was a good mother and a good friend the marriage was difficult because the culture of the two houses was not the same and the wife faced problems to adjust. In all incidents when a woman belonging to an agricultural caste married into a family of higher ritual status, it is argued that the woman does not fit in with the customs of the house and the general life-style of her in-laws, whether the latter belong to the same socio-economic background or not. This holds true even though all agricultural castes concerned are clean castes and experienced rapid upward social mobility from the end of the nineteenth century onwards (see chapter 2). Whereas the number of such inter-caste marriages is limited because of the generally lower economic and educational status of members of such castes like Sadgopes and Kaibarta, the main merchant caste of the area provides another example of a caste which does not belong to the high status caste group.

The (Subarnabanik) Bene, who dominate the political life in the neighbourhood, are often of considerable economic status and are thus more likely to intermarry with middle-class families in the *para*. But although hardly anyone is prepared to talk about their ambivalent caste status given their influential position, members of upper caste families strongly object to a Bene daughter-in-law or son-in-law. The Bene and of course even lower castes are not seen as part of the middle-castes and their economic status cannot always transcend their low caste status. Furthermore, the Bene themselves, though convinced of their separate identity as a caste below the Kayastha but above the agricultural and in particular

the untouchable category, are not fond of inter-marriage among members of their own families.

While caste, education, economic means and descent contribute to the status sought in an arranged marriage, some factors level out differences between two families. Thus caste might come second to economic status and descent might come second to education, while education might again balance a lack of good descent, but not all differences can be neutralised. The Bene are not only of lower status than the middle-castes but are in addition involved in trading and sometimes manufacturing activities and although often very well-off, are said to lack education. The sum of all these components leads to the antagonism in marriage between members of a Bene family and other groups. As one of the women pointed out "you can always marry into a house of inferior economic status, but the Bene do not have any education, they are not cultured and they are not *bhadralok*". In suggesting that as a group the Bene are not *bhadralok* it is implied, that members of other groups are potentially *bhadralok*, and while some Bene families actively shaped nineteenth century *bhadralok* culture, the Bene as a caste did not really emerge as an educated and high status group (see chapter 1).

Although they are not involved in business activities the same holds true for members of any agricultural caste who are never considered to be of equal status, although some families are economically better-off and educated. In most cases inter-marriage with a member of one of these groups met with strong disapproval but the problems could be resolved somehow. Again the most important point in order to assess differences is the status of the group irrespective of the educational background of the spouse. While Brahmins, Kayastha, and Christians are

perceived of as educated groups, others are not and lack culture even though some

families acquired education, access to government jobs and higher social standing.

Although castes are described in terms of economic and educational status,

this is a convenient way to express a wider concern with the status of a family

which does not consist of a simple reconciliation of economic and social mobility

on a local scale. Thus while not all love-marriages are a threat to the overall social

structure and the individual reputation, they are evaluated according to the context

in which they take place.

3.8 Newly emerged distinctions and status

From what has been outlined above, it can be inferred that the role of caste is

clearly limited as far as actual marriages are concerned, although caste endogamy

is adhered to in the majority of arranged marriages. Nevertheless, the changing

attitudes towards love-marriages and inter-caste or even inter-community

marriages are reflected in the way these are accommodated and described in a

lower middle-class setting. The fact that these marriages take place in a milieu

governed by considerable parental domination if not coercion regarding marital

choice, serves as an indicator for the changing meaning of caste within the given

context. Béteille pointed out that it can be assumed that caste still plays an

important role where marriages are evaluated, although sub-castes and

hypergamous status groups might not be the focus of attention for the urban

middle-class (Béteille 1996:162). Fruzzetti states that inter-caste marriages are not

tolerable in Bengali society and Caplan concludes that every tendency towards

inter-caste marriages is a result of less rigidly defined ideals of purity in the urban

context (Fruzzetti (1982)1990:11; Caplan 1984:227ff). The reason for the more

favourable approach towards these unions may be related to a variety of processes amongst which notions of blood and caste may have been substituted by notions of family and descent. Urban reconfigurations of the social system along class lines have contributed to the decline of the importance of caste among urban professionals. Thus Béteille refers to inter-caste and inter-community marriages as a phenomenon among the intelligentsia and the urban educated middle-class, where it is assumed the meaning of caste and sub-caste changed considerably from the turn of the century onwards (Béteille 1996:162ff). It has however to be established what kind of notions of "caste" are employed in the setting we are concerned with.

The social setting in the neighbourhood suggests that the practice is common among less elitist strata of society as well. While *jati* endogamy is still one of the main principles guiding arranged marriages, the notion of *jati* as caste has been partly broadened in favour of *jati* as community. Sub-caste and caste distinctions seem to play a less prominent role with reference to specific unions, which is not to say that the differences are not important at all, but what emerges is a new framework within which different castes are assigned different degrees of "culture" and thus acceptability. This perspective can be substantiated by the material on inter-community marriages, which as has been shown, exemplifies that the same notion of differences in social custom and history do not necessarily occupy the same position with reference to marriage. In the absence of caste-organisations, which were important among many groups in nineteenth century Calcutta, caste seems to constitute itself mainly in and through the domain of kinship and is thus relevant for marriage alliances.

More significant is a preoccupation with the status of a family and within this framework status depends on different factors drawing from the "traditional"

system of castes or *jatis* to the more recent development of class-based notions of social and economic status. Love-marriages across caste boundaries are socially acceptable among members of the three upper castes who are considered to be of more or less equal social status irrespective of the fact that this structure emerged during the nineteenth century only. But as far as other castes are concerned the potential for educational and cultural success is interpreted as limited and individual accomplishment measured against the background of group mobility and standing which can never overrule other indicators of status. This is exemplified by the case of inter-caste marriages with Bene which are always seen as problematic. The modified version of *jati* endogamy which emerged during the last century and is fully incorporated into the social fabric of Calcutta today dependent on a notion of "culture" to which only certain castes and communities have access while others are excluded. As we have seen the yardstick is not so much the *de facto* economic and social status of a group but rather the partly imagined distance to the core of *bhadralok* culture and notions of a "good" family with reference to caste and community as well as history and economic means.

Chapter 4: Marriage transactions

Marriage transactions and the transmission of property have been discussed in the

previous chapters as part of marriage negotiations, discourses about differences

between groups, and representations of change, in which contemporary practices

figure against the background of an (imaginary) less competitive past. A variety of

prestations form part of arranged marriages as well as love-marriages, and the

advantages of a match are partly determined by series of gifts exchanged, patterns

of male and female inheritance, number and sex of siblings, and the economic

background of a spouse. Such marriage transactions are often referred to in

English as "dowries", however, these form only some part of the exchange.[61]

Although different gifts will be described, my material on actual amounts is

limited and changes even during the colonial and postcolonial period encompassing

the last 150 years are difficult to trace. Thus what is depicted should not be

understood as "the Bengali dowry", but the contemporary variation of a very

important theme, event, and discourse. The purpose of this chapter shall be

threefold in that firstly the direction and content of marriage prestations and the

discourse on dowries shall be examined. Secondly the still changing patterns and

meaning of marriage prestations shall be analysed and thirdly the relation between

marriage transactions and women's rights in various types of property shall be

explored. In order to establish the content and meaning of dowries within this

context the legal and customary framework are described and women's rights in

parental as well as affinal property are discussed. Marriage transactions are

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61 Within this chapter dowry is used to refer to any unilateral transaction from the bride's to the
groom's house because a demand was made or a fee for the groom expected (like in dowry-

highlighted from different points of view and the shifting meanings of goods transferred are traced.

By the time a girl or a boy are to be married their parents have already saved a considerable amount of money to meet the necessary expenses, regardless of whether a daughter or a son are to be married. It has been argued by social scientists that the fact that the boy's family has to contribute to the expenses in the form of gifts for the bride and her family is often ignored by a public discourse which since the nineteenth century portrays dowries as the main transaction and a "social evil". This notion implies that a fundamentally unequal pattern of unilateral prestations dominate all transactions and that this "groom-price" is the dominant pattern found in urbanising and increasingly in rural areas. Although the shift from bride-price to dowries has been acknowledged by social scientists as a feature of socio-economic change and its implications especially for women were recorded, a careful investigation of all marriage transactions has often led to a more differentiated picture of the meaning and importance as well as the direction and value of different types of gifts within particular settings (e.g. Gardner 1995; Roulet 1996; Bénéï 1996). Thus apart from the widely accepted payments to secure a groom, detailed investigations of all transactions established that the elements of reciprocity may nevertheless be equally valued parts of such gift exchanges.

In urban Bengal, 'dowries' are condemned and thus the notion of dowries as a "social evil" and an indicator of deprecated social change dominate public opinion. Within such a concept dowries are defined as a groom-price (often

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murder). This is distinguished from 'dowry', the payment of cash or jewellery before the marriage in Bengali (Hindu) marriages.

referred to as *"bor-pon"* - the gift for a groom) and although such payments form part of the majority of all marriages they are rarely ever revealed. However, apart from dowries in the sense of groom-price, mutual prestations and unilateral prestations are openly discussed and consumerism has influenced the content and evaluation of what is expected from such exchanges. As we shall see, the changing material culture serves as a pretext for the negative perception of "modern" marriage transactions in general, which is not necessarily limited to concept of a 'dowry' or a groom-price. Furthermore, for Bengali Hindus, various gifts in marriage carry different meanings, all of which are closely related to the ideal gift (*dan*), although some transactions may violate the ideal. While some gifts constitute *dan* in the shastric sense in that they are given from the bride's house with the gift of a virgin without expectations to receive anything in return, others highlight the gift as an indicator of wealth, conspicuous consumption and competition.

Despite all differences in individual cases, like the rituals performed, transactions of goods, gifts and money on the occasion of marriages show a strong tendency to become fairly homogenous in a modernising urban setting. This is most obviously exemplified by the shift from bride-price to dowry, which has been reported for all three main Bengali speaking communities. Furthermore, the prestations considered part of every proper marriage and described by women in the neighbourhood are by and large the same, so that the following account can be understood as representative of a widespread pattern, even though differences between members of different *jatis* still exist.

4.1 *Tattya* : the mutual prestation

A discussion of marriage transactions and dowries will focus on marriage prestations called *tattya*, which are interpreted as traditionally exchanged goods at the time of marriage.[62] *Tattya* gifts are mutual prestations exchanged between the house of the groom and the house of the bride and are a source of joy and curiosity, but are also competitive as the gifts are displayed in public.

In general two sets of *tattya* gifts are transferred, the first one moves from the groom's house to the bride's house at the time the ritual of *gay holud* is conducted before the wedding and the second is brought to the groom's house with the bride on the occasion of *bou bhat* when she enters the in-laws' house as a daughter-in-law for the first time (see chapter 2). The *tattya* from the groom's side includes affinal prestations of clothes to relatives of the bride, and a set of clothes and jewellery for the bride which is considered to be *dan* given to the bride by her husband-to-be. The items given to the bride on this occasion are used for the ritual of smearing the body with turmeric (*gay holud*) and today a set of make-up for the wedding is added. Furthermore, a number of ritual items, food and some gifts like china are always included in the *tattya* given by the groom's house today. This *tattya* given by the groom's side triggers off the series of gift exchanges but it is not until after the wedding that the bride's side send the *tattya* to the groom's house.

In return a bride is accompanied by a *tattya* prestation to the groom's house which exceeds the one previously received from the groom's side in that it includes

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62 The term has a wide range of meanings, e.g. real or essential nature, reality, essence, fundamental truth, God, spiritual or philosophical knowledge, principle, inquiry, information, search, a present, a gift (*pujar tattya* and *biyer tattya*).

all *dan* gifts given to the bride by her parents (clothes and jewellery), special *dan* prestations for the groom and his parents (clothes and jewellery) and a number of household goods designated for the conjugal fund (mostly utensils and furniture but increasingly expensive goods like refrigerators, china, gadgets etc.) (see table 1).

Table 1

Content and direction of *tattya*

Groom's house	Bride's house
Clothes for the affines Ritual items, food, sweets Saris and jewellery for the bride (*dan*)	Clothes for the affines Ritual items, food, sweets
	Daughter (*dan*) Saris and jewellery for the daughter (*dan*) Presents for the father- and mother-in-law (*dan*) Furniture and household goods for conjugal fund (*dan*)

Although these transactions are presented as reciprocal gifts, the competitive overtones such prestations may acquire result from the inherent contradictions that the direction and the content of *tattya* imply. While *tattya* gifts are dominated by cross-prestations for the wider family or the people in the receiving house and are subject to negotiations before the wedding, some gifts included in the category are internal prestations, like the gifts given to the bride by her father, and turn into affinal prestations once the bride moves to the in-laws' house with the *tattya*. Furthermore the gifts which the bride receives as *tattya* from the groom's side (clothes and jewellery) ultimately move back to the groom's house, as the bride brings all these on the occasion of *bou bhat* back as part of her *tattya*. As shown in table 1, some of the gifts are defined as *dan*, and although not

all *dan* originates from the bride-giving house as it ideally should, none of the *dan* prestations remains in the bride-giving house as all *dan* prestations return with the bride to the in-laws' house.

Who is the recipient of a sari or a *dhuti* as part of the *tattya* sent from the groom's or bride's house is important and the wider the circle of family members the more contested these gifts become (see table 2). Within the urban setting all presentations are provided by the parents of a daughter or a son, and whether the maternal uncle or the paternal aunt contribute gifts depends on the relationship with the niece or nephew concerned. Thus neither the maternal uncle nor the paternal aunt receive any internal gifts apart from the clothes everyone in the house receives as an affinal prestation from the groom's side, and as such the maternal aunt and the paternal aunt figure as important participants in the women's rituals but not as recipients of special internal prestations. Customarily all men and women related to the house in which the marriage takes place are presented with clothes, as this is an auspicious occasion like a *puja* etc. Thus prestations are made to sisters and brothers of the bride's or groom's parents, cousins and affinal relatives with whom a close relationship exists. However, unlike in other contexts, these internal prestations do neither carry a special name nor are they done as part of one specific ritual. Except for the *jamai* (the son-in-law) of the family, that is a sister's husband or a cousin's husband, who represents all *kutum*-relationships, no such gifts are to be given to specified relatives and kin. In turn, all attending relatives are expected to give presents but these are not named in a specific manner and even the maternal uncle's contribution, which should exceed the other gifts, is presented as part of the exchange.

In comparison to practices described by different scholars, the distribution of the mutually exchanged *tattya* designated for the people of the "other" house (affines) in Bengal does not include a high number. Thus it rarely exceeds the groom, his parents, the relatives living in the house (bride's or groom's father; mother; sister; father's brother, father's brother' wife; father's brother's son; father's brother's daughter) and the grandparents (paternal and maternal) as well as some maternal relatives (maternal aunt and uncle). But unlike what has been described for other regions, all prestations to these consanguines of a bride or groom are made by affines, and apart from those made to the parents of a groom, the number and quality of these gifts are the same (e.g. Vatuk 1975; Bénéï 1996). In general *tattya* gifts are more important to women than to men and a number of women from the bride's and groom's side expect *tattya* saris, because they help with the women's rituals (*stri achars*), to be performed before and after the wedding. Although the groom's side provides no furniture and few goods, it has become more and more common in urban settings to give a number of presents to the bride's house and include clothes for those living in the house, the elders of the line (*bangsha*) and the maternal line as well as other members of the maternal line (e.g. maternal grandfather; maternal grandmother; maternal uncle and aunt).

4.2 The content of *tattya*

The number of trays brought as *tattya* is still significant and in middle-class households anything from twenty up to sixty trays may be sent to the bride's house and return including the presents for the groom's family with the bride. Today affinal gifts are still predominantly clothes and cosmetics, and every person previously named receives a sari plus blouse piece, a *dhuti*, a T-shirt, or trousers.

The bride herself is the recipient of a more precious silk sari to be worn during the first rite of *gay holud* and jewellery as well as shoes and cosmetics used for her make-up during the wedding ceremony. Some items (like the jewellery and clothes a bride receives from her husband and her in-laws) and all gifts she receives from her parents are included into the *tattya* but are strictly speaking *dan* or the gifts given to the bride directly, who receives them from her father and the groom, as well as her affinal relatives. This concept resembles classical *stridhan* and the items are presented as a woman's property (see Tambiah 1973). While a bride receives the most precious jewellery and sari for the wedding from her father's side, the sari and the jewellery given by her husband's side are designated for the occasion of *gay holud*. All these prestations form part of her possession which she eventually takes back to her in-laws' house. Items like clothes and jewellery given by the groom's side are customarily also seen as a woman's property and thus *stridhan*. Apart from her dress and make-up, kitchen utensils, a tray with china, or comparable items are normally contributed by the groom's parents, as well as a number of trays or clay pots with sweets, flowers, a whole fish (preferably *rui*) and the necessary items for the *gay holud* ritual (see table 1).

In the past many East Bengali families did not send an elaborate *tattya* to the bride's house and the prestation consisted of the items necessary to conduct the ritual, the sari and jewellery for the bride, and some food items like sweets and fish given to her family. However, today even East Bengali families give a more elaborate *tattya* to the bride's house which leads to an increase of prestations to be received in turn. West Bengali families have traditionally given more valuable and diverse items as *tattya* and included a generous number of affinal gifts.

The mutual obligation to give *tattya* is expressed by the widespread custom to use the trays or baskets (*tala* or *dhala*) provided by the groom's house for the *tattya* sent with the bride as well, although her family are expected to outdo the previous prestation in terms of quantity and quality of the gifts.[63]

Apart from the ritual items, food and the clothes for different relatives in the receiving house, the bride's parents traditionally add furniture and household goods, which increasingly comprise of expensive items like TV-sets, refrigerators and gadgets.

Contrary to what has been reported from other areas, the expectation that increased *tattya* is sent from the bride's to the groom's house does not seem to be a recent phenomenon. The tradition to provide more with the daughter than was received is in line with the ritual inferiority of the wife-givers in Bengali marriages and the emphasis on reciprocity does not prevent unequal patterns of gift-giving. However, even among the Brahmins, these never take the form known in cases of pronounced hypergamy as practised in other areas, where no gifts or hospitality ought to be accepted from wife-receiving affines without formal remuneration (e.g. Pocock 1972:108ff; Parry 1979: 304).

Tattya is often explained in terms of reciprocity, and described as a set of items and gifts, but these are influenced by changing patterns of consumption and the content is well defined only in a traditional setting. While those items sent by the groom's house remained the same, goods and household items given by the bride's house in contemporary urban Bengal have changed in number and quality. All household goods are interpreted as part of the conjugal fund and thus count as

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63 The significance of exchanging baskets has been mentioned with reference to weddings among different castes in Tamil Nadu, and has been widely interpreted as an emphasis on reciprocity (Dumont (1957)1983:81ff; Nishimura 1998:235).

inheritance of the daughter who receives them at the time of marriage. While the groom's house may provide some decorative gifts like china to be incorporated into the conjugal fund, the bride's father is expected to include furniture into the *tattya* sent with his daughter. Even in poor families, where the groom's party gives only the necessary sari and wedding accessories with the clothes for the people in the bride's house, a girl's parents have to add utensils and a bed often referred to as *jinispatro* (things).[64] Such modest wedding gifts are still the rule in rural areas, but in urban settings an increase in the availability and variety of consumer goods classified as household items led to impressive sums invested in this particular transaction. As the bride's father is expected to supply the customary basic furniture for the couple, the expenses on the part of the bride-givers rose immensely with the enhanced demands for such goods, which form part of middle-class lifestyle. The influx of status enhancing and expensive goods like refrigerators, TV-sets, steel cupboards, and gadgets transformed the conjugal fund into an avenue for demands (*dabi*) raised by the groom's parents. Thus *tattya* represents a set of gifts closely resembling the dowry (*dahej*) given for example by Gaur Brahmins in U.P., but this aspect is well concealed because in Bengal 'dowries' are defined as money or jewellery handed over to the in-laws, as opposed to the obligation of the bride's father to provide his daughter with household goods at the time of marriage (see Vatuk 1975:162ff). It therefore carries an entirely different connotation than that described by Vatuk amongst others, who even though excessive dowries are often criticised in different settings

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64 There exists rather strong evidence that giving *tattya* from the groom's house was not a custom among most high castes in East Bengal.

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states that the payments and exchanges are made public and are more or less accepted in principle.

Furthermore, *tattya* may resemble dowries given in other regions, but it is in the local understanding distinct from payments labelled groom-price or dowry (*pon, joutuk*), which like in some cases reported from South India, is understood as a separate and recently developed transaction (see Srinivas 1966:54; Caplan 1984; Kapadia 1993).[65]

In better off middle-class families the *tattya* given to the bride's family and the *tattya* sent back to the groom's side consist of the core items as described above, and additional sets of clothes, cosmetics, utensils and furniture, household goods and electrical goods provided by the bride's family. The quality of all prestations is subject to lengthy negotiations preceding the wedding and will be laid down in writing to the last detail. Subtle differences between materials and brands become major issues and not only the number but also the choice, range, and value attached to specific items are indicators of status, negotiating skills, and the respect the houses command or claim in public. Traditionally *tattya* items are meant for public display and as such are carefully decorated and wrapped as well as carried to the house of the bride or groom in a procession.

4.3 Representations of different transactions and status

While analytically different prestations made as part of marriage transactions are designated for different purposes (conjugal fund, female inheritance, or affinal prestation) the situation in urban Bengal is characterised by a blurring of the

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65 *Joutuk* is translated as dowry, a portion, a present or a gift given at the time of certain sacramental ceremonies.

differences between the three aspects. With the changing market for household and consumer goods, *tattya* prestations understood as part of the conjugal fund resemble more and more the gifts given as a groom-fee to affinal relatives, but as the donors adhere to the accepted form of goods and mutual *tattya* gifts, this aspect is not conspicuous in most cases. The tolerance exercised towards such intentional display of wealth results from the separation of *tattya* and 'dowries' in contemporary discourse and the fact that all items are everyday-goods, although the number and prices vary. Thus *tattya* forms part of setting up a house, the ultimate aim of the daughter's parents.

Although these aspects overlap, different actors perceive of such gifts in various ways. *Tattya* items are often seen as inheritance or investment by a father of a bride, as contributions to the conjugal fund by the bride and groom, and as items given to the in-laws' with whom they will stay by the affinal relations. This partly explains the way *tattya* is defined not as a dowry, but as gifts given voluntarily as a response to the obligation of the bride's father, who has to assist his daughter in setting up a household.

Table 2

Distribution of *tattya* given by the groom's side

Recipients in bride's house	Groom's house
bride	Sari, jewellery, decorative and ritual items for *gay holud*
women who perform *stri achars* members of the father's line and their spouses and family (people of the house) MM;MB;MZ;FZ plus all spouses and children	Food and clothes

The fact that *tattya* is exchanged between the two houses further conceals the fact that most gifts are destined finally to move to the house of the groom,

although some may have been given by his family to the bride's house with the *tattya* sent for the *gay holud* ritual.

Items given as *tattya* are not interpreted as a dowry because *tattya* gifts are obligations both sides ought to fulfil and such transactions do not include money. To give *tattya* at the time of marriage is described in opposition to the customs of other groups and is attributed to Bengalis, more often Bengali Hindus. Although the amounts invested in *tattya* may be quite high, 'dowries' are in the view of the women in the neighbourhood unilateral transactions which take the form of jewellery and money handed over before the actual wedding takes place, and are openly directed towards securing a groom. Thus they match the legal and sociological definition of modern dowries as groom-price and constitute more or less well concealed transactions with which only the parents or very close relatives of a boy and girl are concerned. Even though this rationalisation is employed today and despite the fact that *tattya* gifts are often not customary at all, the conceptual distinction serves as a means to facilitate a discourse on dowries in general within which the problems related to new patterns of status enhancing practices can be expressed.

This clear cut distinction between accepted gifts and unilateral payments is challenged if the content and ideology of gift exchanges at the time of marriage are investigated more closely.

Complaints about the rising costs of marriages which may implicitly focus on 'dowries', expected by parents of an educated middle-class groom today are often phrased in terms of the rising demands for consumer goods to be included in *tattya*. Thereby any discussion of dowry payments is avoided and change is discussed with reference to *tattya* and the content of such prestations. It is often

stated in a conversation that "I did not receive any dowry and at that time we only got *tattya*, which was then much less than today. These things have changed and where you had to give three sari*s* before you have to give five now, people have become greedy and are always expecting more and better quality. The reputation of the house is at stake if the *tattya* is not big and we have to follow the custom". Such evaluations of marriage transactions are related to the nostalgia of the elder generation represented by their own idealised youth.[66]

Such sentiments were politicised within nationalist discourse within which "dowries" (here unilateral) meaning marriage transactions in general figured as signifiers of decay and the decline of "true" Hindu custom after the Golden Age (e.g. Chatterjee 1989:95pp). These evaluations are extremely common until today and provide a welcome general critique of modernism, consumerism etc. but are rarely directed at particular persons or events.

The preoccupation with the reputation of the house expressed in the earlier quotation reflects notions of the social value of dowries and marriage transactions elsewhere, and should therefore be interpreted as one of the meanings of such transactions within this setting. One feature of marriages in Bengali Hindu middle-class families is the need to conceal 'dowry' payments and to reflect the status of a house through marriage transactions at the same time. It is this seemingly contradictory tendency that accounts for an increased importance of *tattya* gifts in middle-class weddings, because these prestations are at once public and accepted and provide occasions for decent conspicuous consumption. While in other

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66 This can apply to various marriage transactions as the example of Alanga, a peasant woman in Day's nineteenth century novel, demonstrates, who tells the matchmaker negotiating her daughter's brideprice "when I got married, ghatak, people were not so fond of ornaments as they are now. Those days were days of simplicity, of thick clothes and coarse rice; but the present days are days of luxury". (Day (1878) 1970: 62-63).

regional contexts gifts and money transferred are a source of pride and women are well aware of the amounts their kin spent at the time of marriage, the representation of *tattya* gifts in urban Bengal allows one to distance oneself from the disapproved 'dowry' and to draw a line between oneself, other castes, and other communities.[67]

Even in a rare case in which gift-giving to secure a good groom was discussed, the mother of a twenty-one year old girl was referring to the *tattya* rather than the *joutuk* (cash and gifts which go well beyond *tattya*) when she explained "Of course my sisters and I did not have a dowry at the time of marriage, we got *tattya* and even that was only a bed, utensils, saris and one or two pieces of jewellery. Today we are prepared to give much more for our daughter's marriage because we want a good groom with a white collar job and education, a good family...". Asked as to why the rise in marriage prestations occurred even among those who deny the existence of dowries or *joutuk*, younger women in particular referred to their father's obligation and their own aspirations for a high standard of living, while mothers highlighted the chances to secure a good match and the fact that the number of children and in particular girls had fallen. Thus the 45 year old mother of a son pointed out that "we are Brahmins and have always given something with the bride, but I was the eldest of five sisters so my parents could not give that much and were searching for a family who did not expect a big dowry. Today most parents are in a much better position, because most of them have only one daughter and want to provide her with everything. We

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67 In other urban contexts, e.g. Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, equally negative notions of dowry payments exist (see Kapadia 1993; Bénéï 1996).

will not take a dowry but the girls themselves are so much into goods today that they will never marry without the new things given to them by their fathers".

Changing marriage transactions and different representations of these are reflected upon in the way *tattya* prestations are the main focus of attention as far as marriage costs and gift exchange are concerned. They represent the right and approved of reciprocal gift which does not involve any transfer of money and is thus traditional and socially accepted. As such they are never interpreted as part of a dowry at the time of marriage but still provide the only pretext within which the perceived negative aspects of today's requirements for a good match can be expressed.

Because *tattya* is given as a cross-prestation and is directed partly towards the daughter or daughter-in-law at the same time, it emphasises a strong ideology of mutual agreement, an ideal of isogamous marriages, and voluntary gifts. However, as we have seen, it is precisely the characteristic content of the *tattya*, namely goods, which, although often opposed to dowry as money, serves as an indicator of rising costs of marriages. Nevertheless a decent marriage always requires a dowry as well, and this implies even more unequal patterns of gift-giving that weigh heavily on the shoulders of the bride's parents.

While *tattya* gifts are the visible and traditional basis of unequal patterns of prestations in which the bride-givers have to provide more than they receive, the fact that the bride's father traditionally equipped her with furniture provides the context for a rise in the value and number of prestations openly displayed. This tendency has led to ever increasing amounts of money spent on goods transferred with the bride, which are more often than not demanded by the other family. Thus the traditional obligation of the father of a daughter and the inequality present in

the relationship between the two houses provide a pretext for dowry payments in the legal sense, i.e. unilateral gift giving to the groom and his relatives which goes beyond the customary and may not be recognisable as such.

Tattya comprises of gifts which highlight more than any other part of the wedding ritual the Bengali concern with an ideology of equal status and mutual obligations within the newly established give and take relationship (*deoya-neoya*; *adan-pradan*). In the absence of prominent differences in status and a terminology which identifies the bride-givers and bride-takers (both are *kutum* to one another), the pattern of gift-exchange and the rituals accompanying the *kanyadan* type of marriage produce and reproduce the inequality between both houses.

4.4 The encompassing voluntary gift: *tattya* and *dan*

All *kanyadan* marriages are governed by the ideology of *dan*, the ideal non-reciprocal gift of a daughter in marriage and as mentioned above some of the *tattya* prestations are defined as *dan* given to affines. Because *dan* represents the ideal gift in classical texts and anthropological literature defines high status marriages in relation to *dan*, the meaning of these and other types of transactions shall be established in some detail.

The *dan* prestation given with and to a daughter by her father at the time of marriage is frequently defined as a voluntary non-reciprocal gift. However some *dan* prestations common in Bengali Hindu marriages are given by the groom's side and return only later with the bride to the groom's house (see table 3). In this context *dan* prestations comprise of gifts given to the bride by her father, the groom and his parents and prestations made by the bride's parents to the daughter and her in-law's. Although these gifts (e.g. the jewellery and the *saris* given to the

bride by her father and her affines) are *dan* proper according to more educated participants, the *dan* gifts are part of *tattya* transactions and the spirit of *dan* is extended to the exchange of gifts between affinal relatives in general. Thus the ideology of the voluntary prestation includes all *tattya* gifts exchanged between the two families and is not limited to those gifts given from the bride's to the groom's side.

Table 3

Dan **prestations given as part of marriage transactions**

Bride's parents give	Groom's parents and groom give
	Sari and jewellery and ritual items for *gay holud* *lajja* sari for wedding may send *alta* and *shankha* sari for the rituals
Wedding sari and jewellery to bride Furniture and household goods Special gifts for the groom and his parents All clothes and jewellery the bride received from the groom's side Ritual items and food	Sari for *bou bhat* and a piece of jewellery for bride

It is therefore often stated that *tattya* given from the groom's house to the bride's house is a "voluntary prestation" and the *tattya* which is transferred from the bride's house to the groom's house is an equally prestigious voluntary gift to affines and a contribution to the conjugal fund. But while *tattya* gifts emphasise reciprocity, the spirit of the upper-caste marriage conceptualised as the gift of a virgin (*kanyadan*) and the ideal of accompanying unilateral *dan* prestations is evoked within this pattern, which accounts for the vulnerability of the bride-givers to the demands raised by the bride-takers. Whereas *kulin* Brahmins and Kayasthas

with hypergamous marriage rules were emulated by some members of other castes at least in the nineteenth century, not all castes adhered to the ideal of *kanyadan* marriages. Nevertheless the wedding ritual and the expected prestations have become fairly homogenous among urban middle-class families.

A closer look at the exchanges taking place within this context reveals that the meaning of *dan* and generally all prestations made at the time of marriage lies not so much in the presentation of unilateral gifts and asymmetrical exchange, but the fact that whatever is given is provided in the spirit of selfless generosity and has not been previously demanded. Contrary to what has been stated by Rajeha, marriage gifts are given to others to conceptually make them one's own in this context (Raheja 1989:94). While affines are certainly different from consanguines they are also different from the rest of the community as one's own people (*atmiya-svajan*) and are, contrary to the majority of other individuals in the urban setting, recipients of gifts and food from the house.

Thus although both sides provide the bride with *dan* prestations, a number of other gifts, both *dan* and *tattya* are expected and may be demanded by the groom's family, who are enabled to do so because the bride's parents want to give their daughter in a manner appropriate for *kanyadan* and are therefore obliged to give more than they receive. This inherent attitude is extended to those gifts which may have been demanded by the other party.

With reference to the data presented here, some qualifying conclusions seem to be possible. While traditional gifts to affines are exchanged by both houses, the groom's house has the opportunity to stick to customary amounts and qualities. The bride's family on the other hand has to adjust not only to demands but provide the "customary" sets of gifts for the couple's household as well, the number and

range of which has increased as a result of consumerism, new household goods available and expected life-style. Thus the goods included may be of recent origin and still figure as "household" items which a daughter's in-laws expect. In addition a 'dowry' in cash is provided, which may or may not be customary in a group or community but is estimated according to the status of the groom. With reference to the latter it is extremely difficult to define whether this constitutes a customary payment or not, but the fact that education made 'dowries' compulsory made the payment fairly independent from the rest of the expenses. It therefore assumed the character of a "groom-price", which depending on outside factors is not compromised by the status of a bride's family to a certain extent (e.g. Gardner 1995:178ff).

The tension inherent in changing practices is partly imposed on the parents of a bride by the parents of a groom, but fuelled by their own desire to enhance their reputation by marrying a daughter to a "good" groom and the life-style their daughter wants to maintain, who may be quite outspoken about what she expects as a "voluntary" gift or *dan*. Elder women in Taltala remember that money used to be handed over by the bride's father to the groom's father before, but that goods as well as jewellery provided by the bride's parents constituted a substantial part of all marriage prestations in their families. They often deny that dowries were given in the past and attribute the rising costs of marriages to newly introduced consumer goods as part of either the *tattya* or the *dan* prestation.

Expectations are not confined to the parents of the groom or the groom himself, who may suggest a wide range of items to be brought with the bride, but may be nurtured by a daughter as well. While the negative image of "demands" by the groom's house is widespread among all young women, the less educated they

are the more openly they may give their opinion on expected material assets, even though these are never called dowry. Apart from the condemnation of dowries (here defined as whatever is demanded in cash by the groom's side and goods beyond the traditional *tattya*), they hope for certain items which go beyond the traditional household goods, the sari and jewellery a father gives as *dan* to his daughter. Thus all young women stated on the one hand that whatever was given was voluntary and a gift given to the daughter but felt free to express their aspirations for certain consumer items, an approach which was not guarded by the assumed status gain in the in-laws' house alone. "When I marry, my father will give me a TV-set and a refrigerator, that's the minimum. I will also get a foreign kettle, well, you know our Bengali fathers love their daughters and will give them all this. They want the daughters to be happy and I can ask my father for anything and he will give it to me. I want a reception in one of the fancy places, and I will make sure that I get a Banarasi silk sari, I already know from which shop" anticipated one young woman in a typical way.

Such high expectations may be exaggerated, although the modest bride might be an immodest daughter and in the case of the wedding presents try to emphasise her relationship with her paternal home, the love her parents feel for her and the support she expects from her natal family as she will soon leave for her in-laws' house. Inden and Nicholas pointed out that the idiom of love is widely used in Bengal as an expression of the appropriate code for conduct among kin, and the kind of love expressed within this context is the hierarchical paternal love (*sneha*) an elder relative ought to feel for a younger one. It is reflected in gift-giving that forms an enjoyable part of everyday life (Inden and Nicholas 1977:29; Osella and Osella 1993:52). Thus a daughter perceives the *dan* and *tattya* provided by her

parents as an extension of the numerous gifts her father has given to her over the years, whether these consisted of sweets, books, or clothes. Apart from the ritual and structural meaning of such gifts, parents want to equip their daughters with some household goods as well as adorn them with expensive jewellery and clothes on the occasion of their weddings, a desire often expressed in conversations. In most cases daughters feel that *dan* is a right to certain gifts and expect their parents to provide them with all sorts of items indicating status and their new role as housewives.[68]

4.5 The recipients of *dan*

What may be a difficult obligation for parents is for a newly married woman often an expression of her links with her father's house, even if she will not necessarily control the goods and their use once she moves in with her in-laws. Daughters are not only aware of the strategic value of such gifts and their impact on their position in the in-laws' house, but are actively trying to ascertain their relationship with their parents and brothers which may be expressed through the wedding gifts (see Rajeha and Gold 1994). Thus affinal obligations may be interpreted by the women themselves as ties they want and ought to maintain with their paternal house, symbolised and produced by gifts they receive when they leave the house. In urban Bengal such emotional links are mainly supported through gifts given by parents, and although women in other regions customarily receive a wide range of

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68 As observed by scholars in other contexts, the obligation of men (brothers, fathers, husbands and sons) to give gifts to female relatives is a crucial expression of the latter's dependent status objectified in gifts and expressed in the different idioms of love and affection (see Osella and Osella 1996:52ff)

gifts from other relatives, I do not have any evidence for such widely formalised exchanges among natal kin in this setting.[69]

The series of *dan* prestations starts with the *tattya* given to the bride's house on the occasion of *gay holud*, which amongst other items contains a set of ornaments and the sari the bride wears during the ritual of smearing the body with turmeric. The different clothes (*bostro*) given to the bride by her father, the groom, and her in-laws' signify her change of status and the related code of conduct in different contexts, and the related roles are indicated by the names given to these sari*s* (Fruzzetti (1982) 1990: 57ff).

During the wedding itself the bride wears the wedding sari (*rokhto (blood) sari)* provided by her father and is presented with the *lajja* sari (shame sari), signifying the code of conduct appropriate for a new daughter-in-law. The latter is provided by the groom's parents and is publicly worn over the wedding sari while the husband puts vermilion in the parting of the hair (*shindur deoya, shindur dan*). Different sari*s* are presented with some jewellery, amongst which the most precious pieces are contributed by her parents. Afterwards the bride receives the conchshell bangles (*shankha*) as well as the red bangle (*pola*), together with vermilion the most typical Bengali signs of marriage, which are given to a daughter by her father during the ritual of *shankha porana* (wearing the conchshells). These gifts are taken with the *tattya* including all other *dan* prestations to the bride (furniture and utensils) and the *dan* for the groom and his

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69 The gift-giving mentioned with reference to the occasion of *bhai phota* clearly expresses the strong relationship between sister and brother, but I was never told that a brother ought to give special presents to a sister at the time of marriage. The most important affinal prestation following the marriage are the gifts and food given to the son-in-law on the occasion of *jamai shosthi* (May-June) and to him and the people in a married daughter's house during the annual festival of Durga *puja*.

parents to the groom's house as part of the *tattya* from the bride's house in a procession.

Another *dan* prestation to the bride is made when she enters the house of the in-laws' for the first time and is welcomed with a new sari (*bhat kapor*) and often some small ornaments, which are given to her as the new daughter-in-law by the groom's parents.[70]

Amongst these different prestations the most precious *saris* and ornaments are given to a bride by her father, but the sari (and often jewellery) she receives during the *bou bhat* ritual when she serves food to the elders of her in-laws' house for the first time are often costly as well. These latter *dan* gifts are interpreted as a significant statement about the culture and status of her husband's family. A decent family provides every new bride with a precious sari and some gold on the occasion and it is widely believed that the treatment of a girl in her in-laws' house can be anticipated from what is given to her when she arrives in the in-laws' house for the first time. However, the former bride is now already the daughter-in-law in her husband's parents' house and thus these items are an internal rather than a cross-prestation. This question has been discussed extensively by Dumont and Madan, who based on Vatuk's detailed analysis of prestations presented to affines in U.P. (*dhyane*) including gifts for the bride, nevertheless ascertain that whatever the latter receives from her father are ultimately affinal prestations (Vatuk 1975; Dumont 1975:210; Madan 1975:234ff; Raheja 1989:94). The fact that this *dan* prestation is given to the incoming bride in the in-laws' house by the in-laws challenges the notion of affinal gifts as carriers or removers (vessels) of

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70 Sometimes the newly married woman receives another sari at the time lac dye (*alta*) is applied to her feet in her new home.

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inauspiciousness passed on to affines as has been suggested by Parry and Raheja, unless we consider the bride as separate from both houses during an early stage (Raheja 1988, 1989; Parry 1994). Thus she may be seen as someone in a liminal phase or a more neutral actor, who depending on the perspective, is not part of her paternal house anymore and has not been incorporated into the in-laws' house until all the rituals have been conducted.

The notion that inauspiciousness is passed on symbolically with the *dan* prestations is further challenged by the fact that everything the bride receives from her in-laws (the sari*s* and ornaments for the bride) which are supposedly directed towards the groom's parents' affinal house never remain there and ultimately return to form part of the prestigious gifts enhancing the reputation of the bride-takers. However, *tattya* and some *dan* prestations stand for reciprocity and mothers of sons frequently complain about the obligation to give generously to the bride's house, omitting the fact that most of the gifts return shortly afterwards.

A related *dan* prestation is equally directed towards the groom's house, because the bride's father has to provide his daughter with special presents for her new father- and mother-in-law, normally a *dhuti* and sari and a piece of jewellery for the mother-in-law.[71] Like other gifts these items are brought to the house of the new relatives in marriage (*kutum*) with the *tattya* accompanying the bride and are thus part of the wider presentations which are necessary to fulfil the obligation towards the in-laws' house, but these items are defined as *dan*. The discourse

71 Some small piece of jewellery (or a comparable item) may be given to the bride's mother on the occasion of the leftover-marriage (*bashi biye*) by the groom in the bride's parents' house before the groom takes her daughter to the new in-laws' house (Roy 1984:20). The term for this gift (*kanya anjali*) is also used for the groom's customary throwing of betel and a coin into a cloth held by his mother before the marriage in North Bengal (Roy 1984:5). It is therefore perhaps more likely that these gifts combined with *pronam* (respectful greeting) signify the relationship between different generations of *jnati* and kutum .

about marriage transactions and the relation between *dan* and *tattya* thus focuses on the content of *tattya* and the ideology of *dan*. In this context the mother of a boy who was of marriageable age commented "We do not take a dowry (*pon*) or demand special *dan*, we only accept what is given to us, what they wish to give (*iccha koren*). Normally all fathers want to give something, some jewellery and clothes to the in-laws' house, so that their girls are treated well and because the boys will inherit something. The main thing is that she is a good family girl. I myself and my younger sister-in-law did not bring a dowry, but my sister-in-law was given a flat by her parents, because she is their only daughter and she has four brothers, who are very fond of her".

Whatever the family of the bride has previously given or received, the influx of new goods and the heightened importance of material status symbols has led to *tattya* and *dan* prestations which resemble purely prestigious groom-prices and common sense dowries. It may have however become clear from what has been described that the data limits an interpretation of *dan* in terms of an overarching concept of auspiciousness gained by removing sin to affines and the asymmetry involved in this kind of exchange (see Raheja 1989; Parry 1994:130ff). Thus the concept of *dan* employed here may only faintly resemble the overdetermined exchange of *dan* described by Rajeha and thus ultimately rest on the ideal of selfless gifts (as opposed to non-reciprocal gifts). Furthermore, as Parry has argued, a concept may be used in various ways and the fact that it is employed here in the most general way supports his argument about the "fuzziness" of the definition (Parry 1994). The latter supports the efforts to disguise unilateral affinal prestations and diffuses the pattern in terms of material and time. Like other

prestations and exchanges, *dan* and *tattya* may change over time and the meaning of these gifts depends on the context to which any interpretation refers.

4.6 *Joutuk* and *pon*: morals and economy of the excessive marriage prestation

The terms *joutuk* or *pon* denote a marriage transaction which by definition can contain money and constitute what can be translated as dowry, often including a "groom-fee". The reformers of nineteenth century Bengal directed their attacks towards this particular type of marriage transactions, partly because it did not include most of the customarily accepted items. The inflationary rise in payments for grooms amongst *kulin* Brahmins as well as upwardly mobile members of lower castes emulating these practices has been documented from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. Thus Bandyopadhyay remarks that along with other upper-caste customs like the prohibition of widow remarriage and the seclusion of women, dowries were introduced by well-to-do members of agricultural castes like the Sadgopes around the 1850s (Bandyopadhyay 1990:120). These social practices soon drew the attention of those who regarded a reform as a predisposition for the "upliftment of society" and focused attempts to mobilise on issues like child-marriage, 'dowry', and widow-burning. The agitation against dowries in Bengal was fuelled by the practice of excessive dowry demands by *kulin* Brahmins, who were held responsible for the high number of child-widows. It included all castes adopting 'dowries', which in the view of the educated elite lead automatically to excessive payments and child-marriages. But the lower castes only emulated what was the accepted practice amongst all high status groups including the new *bhadralok* elite, and the campaigners rarely mobilised

members of the high castes against dowries.[72] Nevertheless, the concept is influenced by this negative nineteenth century discourse and women directly refer to *kulin* customs, but the "dowry system" is still called "*joutukprota*" and to give a dowry is expressed as "*joutuk deoya*".

Traditionally a 'dowry' of this type (*joutuk*) was the dower bestowed on the daughter of a wealthy high caste man or king, who gave luxury goods to the groom. Such transactions did not only consist of *stridhan* or her portion of the father's property, although it may have included movable goods which were understood as part of her inheritance. Such prestations exceed commonly reciprocal affinal gifts, and are unilaterally directed from the bride-givers to the bride-takers. Different castes were known to give 'dowries' with the gift of a daughter in marriage and it is doubtful if in every case the custom was only adopted by non-Brahmins as a mode of claiming higher status during the colonial period. I would suggest that the excessive 'dowries' Subarnabanik Bene gave by the end of the nineteenth century were not merely a means to emulate high status customs but an extension of traditional unilateral marriage gifts, in particular jewellery, among members of a merchant caste dealing in gold. Even in the case of agricultural castes who started to transfer dowries only during the colonial period it seems the custom did not necessarily lead to an immediate reversal of all related patterns and excessive payments for grooms. Thus Nicholas, describing the changing marriage payments in a Bengali village dominated by members of the Mahishya caste (formerly Chasi Kaibarta) by the end of the 1960s, observed that payments made by the bride's father to the groom which substituted the previously

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72 In this context I would argue that members of the *bhadralok* elite, notably the *Brahmos*, refused to give (and take) dowries but provided daughters with elaborate receptions, clothes, jewellery, furniture etc.

paid bride-price (*pon*) in fact rarely exceeded a nominal amount among villagers (Nicholas 1967:74). In a remarkable twist the payments were given the same name.[73]

In other castes, most notably among the Subarnabanik Bene, gold featured as a traditional dowry, huge amounts of which are still given with the bride and understood as an essential part of every marriage. The high amounts of gold given with the bride in this case have to be distinguished from the gold given to the bride amongst members of all castes, because the former consisted of more than one set of jewellery transferred on the occasion of different rituals.

Gold appears in the contemporary pattern as *dan* given to the bride, who is adorned with ornaments and is perceived as Lokkhi (Laxmi), but the amount of gold given in other than Bene families rarely exceeds what is worn by the bride on different occasions.

However, in the case of Bene women such modesty is not necessarily displayed and jewellery (referred to as *pon*) plays a major part in marriage transactions. Thus a middle-aged Bene woman explained that among members of her caste high amounts are always spent on precious jewellery which is given with the bride to the in-laws' house "My sister married with jewellery worth 20.000 Rs but today they will ask for cash. In our caste today the boys should be settled and

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73 This observation is particularly significant as the Chasi Kaibarta were among those castes claiming high status and adopted dowries during the nineteenth century. As such they were condemned for giving excessive dowries by social reformers (see Bandyopadhyay 1990:119ff). Either the amounts were high amongst the city dwelling caste members, or the educated among them and the *bhadralok* interpreted comparably moderate 'dowries' as improper payments (groom-fee). A comparable case can be made with reference to many East Bengali groups or the Maharashtrian example cited by Bénéï, where the shift from dowry to bride-price seemed less drastic in the rural areas for a certain period of time (see Rozario 1992:134; White 1992:102ff; Bénéï 1996:139ff). It may be suggested that the customs adopted by groups during the nineteenth century as part of an emulation of Brahmin practices is not necessarily the same as the 'dowry' adopted by castes and communities with a high percentage of male migrant labour, which is often

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have a flat and/or a car (*gari-bari*), they should be established and well-off, and the girls get the gold. Not all castes give so much gold, but we do it and it has always been like that Bene brides are known to be beautiful and bring heavy gold jewellery, it is our rule (*niyom*)". While such conspicuous consumption was criticised by other women and may be exaggerated in this case, the fact that a dowry (*joutuk*) was given was not denied, and although jewellery can be passed as *dan*, the value and amount involved distinguished this practice from the mere gift of some ornaments and more acceptable transactions. In the course of the conversations the problems related to the need for conspicuous consumption on the one hand and the negative discourse on dowries as well as the difficulties to pass these gifts as *dan* were indicated and clearly related to the amount of gold involved. Nevertheless, none of the women who belonged to Bene families ever indicated that the traditional 'dowry' given amongst members of their own caste could be related to the *kulin* practice of paying a groom-fee in cash, and generalisations about the adoption of such practices have to be carefully evaluated in the given context. However, the negative image of dowries in general and the increasing demand of money paid before the wedding takes place may have led to a general perception of even these payments as the "social evil" attacked by the enlightened reformers.

Although perceptions of dowries are determined by legal discourse and notions of cultural refinement, the negative connotation of such transactions are partly derived from qualities attributed to the gifts themselves. In general, money is not a preferred type of investment, and security and wealth are identified with

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described as a "groom-fee" and is linked to individual and family mobility rather than group mobility in terms of ritual status (see Caplan 1984; Rozario 1992; Gardner 1995).

gold and land rather than money. Gold and golden jewellery are widely portrayed as items which symbolise abundance, beauty, and the qualities of Lokkhi (Laxmi) in Bengali culture (see Fruzzetti (1982) 1990; Greenough 1982; Kotalova 1993). While this holds true in most contexts I would maintain that the notion and social value of gold is more ambivalent than the proverbial descriptions of Lokkhi (Laxmi) as the golden goddess or the fertile country as golden Bengal may suggest. Gold and agricultural land both represent wealth, but while land is the ultimate source of nourishment and reproduction, the latter in itself disguises the origin of what is at display and represents non-reproductive material (as compared to e.g. paddy).

This might seem surprising given the obvious love for golden ornaments, which is frequently expressed by Bengali women, but the positive value attached to gold as jewellery a woman receives from her father and her husband does not exclude a more ambiguous notion of the material and in itself and as marker of accumulation.

Although the relation between women and gold as source and indicators of wealth is obvious, both represent potentially destructive and thus counterproductive forces, a view which is more strongly pronounced in the case of the incoming bride who is often seen as a potential threat, because she might be quarrelsome, sick or barren (Parry 1989:72-73). Even more striking is the ambivalent perception of the quality of gold, which is often represented as being possibly impure. Not only are goldsmiths always accused of stealing gold from their customers, but the fact that gold has to be mixed and might therefore be

impure is a constant source of discomfort for those who buy jewellery.[74] This notion of gold as potentially impure is apparently not confined to Bengal, thus Pocock observes that among the Patidar of Gujarat, a region equally well known for the positive values attached to gold, the negative effect of low blood assumedly brought into a line by hypergamous marriages is compared to "mixing gold with copper", an idiom commonly used in Bengal to describe inferior "European gold" (Pocock 1972:126).

While gold and jewellery represent security and wealth especially of women, it is often pointed out that too much jewellery given with a daughter may make her incorporation into her husband's wider family difficult to achieve. Amongst the virtues of a bride and young wife are modesty and shame and both are jeopardised if a girl is either spoilt by her parents or differs from other daughters-in-law. It is sometimes pointed out that "she is from a wealthy family but never behaved differently". Mothers- or sisters-in-law would comment in the opposite case that "she was always spoilt and could not adjust" which does not only refer to the behaviour of the woman in question but the lifestyle she was presumably used to and the amount of jewellery she brought into the in-laws' house.

Women thereby acknowledge another aspect of gold, the accumulation facilitated and patterns of competitive consumption, at least within the urban context. It is therefore hardly surprising that the disapproved of *joutuk* or dowry may contain luxury goods and/or excessive amounts of gold.

The 'dowry' proper *(joutuk)* figures in legends and myths as that what goes well beyond the conjugal fund, or mutual prestations, as well as *dan*. But gold

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74 The obsession with the degree of purity of gold ornaments, which are always considered to be mixed and thus open to some extent of impurity, is not related to the *de facto* degree of purity which can easily be established.

ranges only as one item signifying dowries as opposed to other marriage transactions. Thus it exemplifies the strategic and prestigious gift in general, indicating high economic status which may be used to secure a groom for a daughter.

An example of this imagery related to dowries can be found in the "story of the owls" (*pecha-pechi*) accompanying the *Lokkhi brata* (vow, fasting and rituals performed for Lokkhi) in the month of Bhadra (August-September). After the miserable fate of a Brahmin widow and her son has been depicted, the story continues with the reward of prosperity to the boy earned through selfless sharing with the hungry baby-owls, the representatives of Lokkhi (Laxmi). The boy, who gains wealth after the goddess provided him with the accessories to perform the Lokkhi *puja*, is richly remunerated for his piety and charity. When he becomes wealthy and "lives like a king", the envious ruler of the country tries unsuccessfully to destroy him. After his attempt to save his kingdom from the competition of the Brahmin widow's son fail, the king gives his daughter in marriage

"The king sent diamonds, pearls, elephants, horses and other goods to the daughter and son-in-law as dowry (*joutuk*). The Brahmin woman happily received the son and daughter-in-law in her home. Afterwards she fed all the people from the neighborhood a sumptuous meal" (Majumdar 1995:6).

This example reflects some of the main qualities of dowries (*joutuk*), the gift which one might feel compelled to give, but which may at the same time be improper as it is never given without direct interest and thus is as far removed from the pure intentions of *dan* as a gift can possibly be. The dowry mentioned is not only directed towards the in-laws of the daughter but consists of luxury items

which do not normally form part of the household of a Brahmin boy and his wife, even if he married the king's daughter. The prestation sent consists of typical royal status symbols and is therefore given as part of a status enhancing marriage the king aspired to arrange in order to fulfil a political need. Thus in this as in many other such stories, *joutuk* appears as a gift given in hypergamous marriages and symbolised in terms of a royal gift. As such it is often described as a special category, closely linked to the political aspirations and ritual position of its donor.[75]

Many Bengali Hindu women refer to dowries in terms of *joutuk* and state that in the past wealthy families and in particular *kulin* Brahmins provided excessive 'dowries', which in their opinion consisted of money and jewellery. Within the contemporary setting, Christian families who send male family members to the Middle East while their wives and children stay in Calcutta, as well as Marwaris and Bene, are portrayed as groups allegedly giving excessive and disapproved of dowries to secure a good groom. In general such transactions are interpreted as immoral payments and groom-price, and highlighting the intentionality of such actions, the practice is described as "selling the daughter".[76] While the majority of women belonging to other castes and communities deny that in their own families any money or jewellery was ever given to the in-laws' house directly, one of the younger Bengali Hindu women remarked that what was given in money before was given in the form of consumer goods today. Following from such comments and the gifts cited as part of the story of the owls, a 'dowry' in this

75 The importance of the royal gift within the caste system has been discussed by a number of scholars (e.g. Dumont (1962)1970b; Dirks 1987).
76 This phrase is widely used in different regions to denote a marriage transaction whereby the parents of a daughter to openly enhance their own prestige or gain material advantages (e.g. Tambiah 1973:62).

limited sense consists of either money or gold and luxury goods are symbolically often cited as substitutes for the former. This is in line with my observation that in many instances dowries are given in cash beforehand which then surfaces again in the form of refurbishment and extensions of the groom's father's house, purchase of a car etc.

4.7 Content of *joutuk*

Comments on dowries further suggest that in the past a shift among members of all castes towards payments of groom-price in cash took place, while some castes gave parts of the dowry in jewellery and added a groom-price in cash to the jewellery given to the daughter. This seems to be particularly important in the case of the Subarnabaniks, who started to include large amounts of money into marriage transactions by the middle of the nineteenth century, while gold was still given with the girl at the time of the wedding. Furthermore, a strong tendency in contemporary Bengal to discard of this latter added groom-price and invest heavily into goods may have recently emerged. Such a shift would satisfy the moral requirements to avoid a groom-price and the need to provide some remuneration to the groom's parents.

Although all items mentioned in this context are precious and some are comparatively rare, any general assumptions regarding the evaluation of wealth and conspicuous consumption have to be carefully evaluated. It has been suggested that *dan* and gifts given to affines may carry ambiguous connotations in some regions of North India as carriers of inauspiciousness that reflect upon the recipient and in certain contexts the donor as well (Raheja 1989; Parry 1994:128ff). Whereas this notion is mostly related to *dan* prestations, in Bengal

dowries have comparable implications but are conceptually separated from *dan*. Thus, although as Parry states the fact that *dan* can be given in cash or in kind to affines and Brahmins alike does not allow for any simple notion of money (or specie) as morally evil in the Indian context, the gifts specified in the above mentioned example as well as huge amounts of money carry ambivalent if not negative meanings precisely because they are not *dan*. While the inauspiciousness suggested with reference to *dan* in the contexts of Banares and rural U.P. does not hold true for *dan* given to affines in Bengali Hindu marriages, some of the ambiguity or the negative moral qualities are transferred to the transaction of *joutuk*. The evaluation of marriage transactions in contemporary urban Bengal still emphasises the harmful effects of purpose-oriented gift, which is defined as the opposite of *dan*. Such transactions are mainly made in cash but may contain items which are interpreted as a problematic or affinal gift in other regional settings. Whereas material goods like jewellery may have an ambivalent status, money given to a groom's family is never interpreted as an auspicious gift to affines but the result of demands made by greedy in-laws or an even worse attempt of a bride's parents to marry her above one's own economic or social status. Thus the explanation for the moral peril involved is rather different from the equivocal notion of *dan* prestations made to affines in other contexts as noted by Rajeha and Parry (Rajeha 1989; Parry 1989; 1994).

Apart from the ambivalent status of such items, all gifts included in the dowry represent movable luxury goods. Historically the list of items classified as luxury goods or excessive marriage prestations is open-ended, and these are significantly different from other goods and clothes transferred at the time of marriage, which do not carry the connotation of a groom- price. Contrary to the

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tattya gifts, which represent extensions of household and everyday items, elephants, emeralds and pearls as well as cash and huge amounts of jewellery belong to a different sphere and are productive in a manner open to corruption (which does not imply that corruption is a quality of the gifts as things), namely in the market, while all other goods are culturally closely linked with human reproduction, the household etc.[77] The distinction between different types of property and goods was highlighted by some of the women who regularly referred to luxury items as cause of broken marriages, difficult intra-household relations and signifiers of low educational and caste status, although men might less often identify with such views.

4.8 *Joutuk* as social disruption

With reference to dowries notions of different types of wealth implied a relation of such transfers to bargaining and greed, attributed to both givers and receivers. In the case of other affinal gifts lengthy negotiations are occasions for haggling and fighting over the quality and price of the feasts and items, and while this is still possible for the *tattya*, given the 'dowry' paid in cash the bride's father has comparatively little chance to reject the demands made.[78] This is expressed in terms of fixed amounts attached to certain qualifications of the groom, which may diminish only marginally in relation to the descent or qualification of a bride or her male relatives. Perhaps even more important is the fact that *joutuk* is not

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77 It is worth thinking about "things" as related to the body in this context - gold as measurement, enhancement, and symbol of beauty - as different from gold without any direct relation to the physical and social person. In the latter context gold is perhaps closer to money which differs from specie (also used in *pujas*) in a comparable way.

78 There are numerous examples in the literature which establish that bargaining is part of marriage negotiations and indeed various life cycle rituals in a variety of contexts like cremation (e.g. Parry 1994:141).

reciprocal, not even with reference to a transcendent reward and is therefore morally different from other types of gifts discussed so far. Although men and women frequently stated that all marriage prestations and payments should have a voluntary character and that by receiving as well as by giving 'dowry' the respective houses engage in a highly disreputable practice, it is the absence of appropriate forms of reciprocity indicating the possibility of a difference in status which facilitates the contempt expressed for dowries.[79] The problems surrounding the moral qualities of these dowries are best exemplified by the effect they are supposed to have. As many women pointed out *joutuk* may lead to an unhappy married life and endangers the relationship among the daughters-in-law in the receiving house. Moreover, a *joutuk* may be given to direct attention away from shortcomings of the daughter-in-law marrying in and it is well known that it is used to make up for a lack of accomplishments searched in a bride, e.g. beauty, education or health.[80] In this context the disruptive potential of a bride who comes as Lokkhi (Laxmi) to the house but might be as ambivalent as the affinal gifts due to her influence on the balance within a household and the notion of fertility in the wider sense are closely linked, because a household which is not peaceful cannot possibly prosper.

In his analysis of the qualities and different implications various items given as *dan* to Brahmins in Banares imply, Parry observes that "Certain items - like gold, an elephant, horse, water-buffalo, emeralds and sesame seeds - are

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79 It has been argued that in other contexts the moral problems with *dan* are related to the fact that *dan* prestations are often asymmetrical as well (see Parry 1994:130ff). The notion of a non-reciprocal gift is limited here to *joutuk* and 'dowry', whereas to give in exchange may be described by the term *protidan*.

80 This reflects the notion of a gift which makes up for shortcomings in the main gift, mentioned by van der Veer (van der Veer 1988:208).

sometimes said to be especially dangerous to the recipient, but specie is never listed among them. With the exception of sesame seed all of them are distinguished by their high value; but others of equal value are not generally mentioned" (Parry 1989:89). All items including money were traditionally given as tribute to kings, none of which can be gained or produced within the agricultural society, none of which is directly linked to or symbolises fertility or reproduction in the sense of most other goods exchanged at the time of marriage (see Fruzzetti (1982)1984; Kotalova 1993). All items mentioned represent royal gifts and insignia and as such signify prestige with which the family of the donors is vested, while the giver of such tribute is in an inferior position.[81] The interest to procure something (or someone in marriage) and to remunerate for such a purchase makes these gifts different, and while all other gifts can be exchanged (collectively) these go beyond anything one can possibly imagine, anything that can be obtained by moral means and given as *dan* to Brahmins.[82]

Whether interpreted as socially disruptive movable property or potentially impure material, it is not surprising that such gifts given as dowry are attributed not only to the past but the "social evil" of *kulinism*, a practice condemned in contemporary Bengali society. The disapproval of *kulin* practices is often not based on the dowries paid, which are interpreted as mere signifiers, but the high number of very young girls accumulated who, as one of the women expressed it, "never saw their husbands again" which in the view of many women prevented them from fulfilling their destiny as mothers. Thus this discourse often links

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81 The significance of gold as royal gift to Brahmins is supported by archaeological research referring to royal rituals (Morrison 1969:9).
82 This concern with different types of accumulation and profit is reflected in the notion of "bad wealth", which may pose an obstacle to successful marriage negotiations (Fruzzetti and Östör (1982)1992:22).

dowries to ideas about the appropriate fulfilment of a reproductive role, whether the negative qualities of the prestations themselves or the role of the bride are focused upon.

This kind of marriage transaction cannot be accepted or displayed in public, and although other prestations are frequently made the *joutuk* has to be separated conceptually and ritually from all other gifts involved in the marriage. The complete encompassment of all other prestations by the ideology of *dan* is signified by the constant reference to the obligations implied in the affinal relationship. But the ambivalence inherent in such transactions and unequal patterns of exchange is transferred to the secretive and competitive gift, the *joutuk* comprising of money or goods given to the parents of a groom. The fact that a 'dowry' is given may reflect on the donor and often the recipient will face social disapproval as well, but in the case of Bengal, this is not only the result of the relatively recent prohibition of dowries. Within this framework, wealth acquired by dubious business transactions, cheating and bribing, can be transformed to carry positive connotations but wealth secured in marriage, through the bride who as Lokkhi (Laxmi) is given with and as *dan* from her father's house, is an expression of strategic selfishness and profit and is in this sense represented as neither productive nor social.

4.9 From dowry to property: The gift that marks the crisis

As noted by some scholars, affinal prestations are interpreted by different actors in a variety of ways. Thus Raheja and Gold argue that women's songs common in rural areas of U.P. and Rajasthan provide examples for the different notions attached to gifts given from the paternal house which express a wider relation

between the transaction and married women's status in their husbands' kin group (Rajeha and Gold 1994; Tarlo 1996:176ff). Roulet in an illuminating article represents different views on marriage transactions in relation to status as interpreted by members of a village in U.P. and expressed in the idiom of voluntary gifts (Roulet 1996).

More generally I would emphasise that contrary to any attempt to define marriage transactions essentially as either dowry, bride-price, groom-price or voluntary gift their interpretation outside legal discourse is always flexible. Not only may all actors attach different meanings to these transactions and the goods themselves but all notions attributed to the prestations are constantly reinterpreted and negotiated. Thus a gift may be classified as part of a voluntary prestation by one actor, may be seen as a reaction to a demand by someone else, or even by the same person later on. But even the first person concerned may change her mind afterwards and agree that this was actually not a freely chosen prestation.

Discussions about dowries and transactions at the time of marriage are therefore always liable to tension regardless of whether the persons involved are taking part in marriage negotiations. The "modern" or progressive view on the "dowry evil" is only one angle by which transactions can be judged at any point in time. It is however not opposed to a "traditional" and less complex discourse.

Shifts in interpretation do not only imply actors' subjective perspectives but are often situational and processual and the result of complex social relations at a given point in time. This malleability is most obviously demonstrated by looking at the contested marriage transaction in case of separation and divorce. In such instances and property disputes, the interpretation of "dowry" as *pre-mortem*

inheritance of a daughter gains importance and is often emphasised by the woman and her family.[83]

Unless a crisis occurs, *dan* or *tattya* gifts are never interpreted as dowries, and it is the overlapping of *tattya* and *dan*, as well as the patterns of control and authority in the in-laws' house, which lead to the fuzziness characteristic to the definition of dowries in Bengali discourse.

By and large everyone is convinced that apart from the jewellery and the different wedding *saris* all prestations at the time of marriage are gifts given voluntarily by the bride's father to his daughter. "A father wants to give these things, nobody asks for a dowry, you give what you are happy to give. We can afford to send all sorts of things with our daughter and they will also send all sorts of things on the occasion of *gay holud*" is a common response to questions about whether such gifts constitute dowries. Nevertheless, this picture of voluntary gifts to a daughter, reproduced by both sides, often fades away the moment separation, death of a husband or divorce occur. What has been presented voluntarily with and to the bride and is used by her and her husband's joint family is thereby reinterpreted and turns into contested property, claimed by the in-laws and the woman herself or her consanguines.

In Bengal like in other North Indian settings, the bulk of all marriage gifts are customarily incorporated into the joint household of the husband's agnatic kin and are expected to remain there unless the couple decide to separate from the husband's agnates (e.g. Vatuk 1975:163; Tarlo 1996:176ff). Thus like in the case of the Gaur Brahmins described by Vatuk, all household items designated for the

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83 This notion is rooted in *Dharmasastra* literature and is certainly not new, but gains a different emphasis within the context of a legal system where claims can be made in favour of the individual woman and not only her male offspring.

conjugal fund and given by the bride's parents at the time of marriage are seen as a contribution to the joint household of the parents-in-law and their son(s) and are therefore normally not considered the property of a married woman. This view is supported by the legal interpretation of dowries as a demanded gift or a transaction which goes beyond the "customary", because as shown above, *tattya* and *dan* are defined as traditional prestations per se. Thus the father of the bride signs that he gave all gifts to her, her husband and her in-laws voluntarily and culturally whatever is designated for the conjugal fund (all consumer goods) is regarded as part of the in-laws' household.[84]

However, in the case of separation or divorce, a woman may claim *dan* prestations, which are customarily regarded as her *stridhan*, and in addition may also use the legal provision to assert other parts of the *tattya*, like household and consumer goods, which go well beyond the approved customary transaction. In this context the distinction between *dan* and *tattya* is often reinterpreted and parts of the *tattya* emerge as "groom-price" allegedly given to the in-laws and the husband in order to satisfy demands. More often than not household items given on the occasion of marriage include expensive gifts which are in retrospect not only defined as gifts to the daughter, but as non-customary items. This point of view, which is implied in the Bengali concept of gifts to the bride rather than to her in-laws or the groom, is supported by the Dowry Prohibition Act and maintenance claims might be successful. In most cases however, a woman is left with nothing other than the jewellery she received from her parents and her in-laws at the time of marriage as her property, and does not file a case against the in-laws

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84 In contrast the *joutuk* ('dowry') paid in cash is an illegal payment but cannot be claimed by a woman because the transaction is a clandestine one.

or her husband. Thus while parts of the *tattya* and the *dan* prestations can be perceived as a woman's property, her security consists in practice only of jewellery, most of which was given to her by her own father.

Although goods transferred as *tattya* are defined as dowry only in court, many women realise in times of crisis, that a number of gifts and prestations handed over at the time of marriage or afterwards constitute a 'dowry'. Normally cases in which a woman claimed the *tattya* or *dan* from her in-laws are not discussed openly, because children, neighbours or servants might be around but sometimes a woman explains the precarious situation she, a relative, or a friend found herself in. Thus a woman, who was regularly beaten by her husband and her in-laws but stayed with them until her three daughters started high school, made an attempt to escape domestic violence but returned after a short stay in her parent's house. "You see I have nowhere to go. I left them and went to my parent's house who allowed me to stay, but I did not have anything to contribute to the household expenses and all my jewellery was still here. My in-laws were not prepared to hand over my possessions. The flat my father rented previously in this area was given to me at the time of marriage and he even provided me with some money to open a shop. Still they were not satisfied, all that was nothing and when I went to the police they told me that all I owned was my jewellery. So eventually I came back".

Contrary to Vatuk's findings in urban U.P. and Tarlo's observations regarding urban Gujarat, the Bengali notion of *stridhan* is not extended to other goods than jewellery and clothes, and a daughter-in-law can certainly not keep these or other items in a separate trunk (Vatuk 1975:165; Tarlo 1996:176). It is thus closer to the practices of Kashmiri Pandits reported by Madan (Madan

1975:234). Thus although a strong notion of wedding gifts and expenses as part of the obligation of the bride's father and a daughter's inheritance exists this does not influence the way these are managed, which ultimately goes to demonstrate, that the items represent the share of a daughter in her father's estate (although some jewellery was given by the in-laws) but at the same time are managed by her mother-in-law or her husband. As written proof exists only for the voluntary and "customary" gifts, the in-laws' incorporate whatever they received into the joint household, and are ideologically enabled to do so by the notion of *stridhan*, which excludes all other wedding gifts and affinal prestations from a woman's property.

Thus, while in the cases Madan, Dumont and others cited, the married woman may not be the main recipient of gifts, in Bengal the bride-givers and the bride consider all items apart from clothes and a piece of jewellery for the groom and his mother as gifts given to a bride. But whereas she is presented as the main recipient of ultimately affinal gifts in the ritual context, a notion which is reinforced by the interpretation of these transactions from her consanguines as forming part of her share in her father's estate, these gifts surface as affinal prestations just like the comparable parts of a dowry among the Kashmiri Pandits (*satarath*) described by Madan (Madan 1975: 231;Dumont 1975: 208ff).

The problems to define a dowry by its content are therefore not only related to classical definitions of *stridhan* or the structure of control and authority, but to the fact that diverse meanings and aims are realised within marriage transactions and the concept of property as part of a joint household (see Sharma 1984:344ff).

Ideally a daughter-in-law becomes a member of her husband's family and should not feel the need to keep separate possessions apart from her jewellery, just like any other woman in the household does not see whatever was given by her

father as her property. Women's property (*stridhan*) in the full sense, namely the property a woman inherits from her paternal side that she can dispose of in times of crisis, consists thus only of the jewellery she received, which unlike in South India, is never transferred to a daughter, but a daughter-in-law (see Tambiah 1973; Upadhya 1990).

The different interpretations and the notion of a process of incorporation are often reflected if an accusation of dowry murder leads to a case, in the course of which all cash amounts and the gifts given are listed and the fact that Bengali Hindus give large dowries in cash and feel the need to give much more than the customary items in order to arrange a daughter's marriage is made public. I would therefore suggest that it is not only the legal discourse on dowries or middle-class ideology but the contextual interpretation of marriage transactions which produce and determine the content of "dowries". While transactions are seen in a positive light at the time of marriage at least by one if not all parties concerned, at a later stage the affinal link or the position of a daughter-in-law vis-à-vis her husband and his family may develop into a difficult relationship. In these cases, which are of course precisely those with which women's groups and lawyers are concerned, those parts of the movable property transferred with a daughter to the in-laws' house (*tattya* in Bengal, *dahej* in many other regions) and neither directly given to a daughter nor her affinal relatives but designated for the conjugal fund, become the same as a groom-price or *joutuk*, thus redefined as dowries. At this point the negative attributes attached to dowries in legal discourse and unilateral payments made to acquire a groom (*joutuk*) are extended to include a number of other items which in other cases are defined as *tattya*, freely given mutual prestations.

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Apart from different notions of appropriate and accepted gifts outlined above in the course of disputes a number of different gifts and transactions are defined as dowry. This is not a misrepresentation by women's activists and political parties but rather a reflection of failed attempts to achieve what the different marriage transactions were meant to facilitate and in its extreme form such failure may lead to dowry murders. In less drastic cases dowries are still represented negatively and perceived as a "social evil", which can partly be attributed to the ambivalence surrounding the prestations subsumed under *joutuk* and partly to the conflicts arising from the perceived need for such transactions. The disruptive potential of marriage transactions is a result of multiple elements and contextual interpretations as related to property rights, parental and affinal obligations, and the structure of kinship relations carefully managed by all concerned. With age a woman may be incorporated into her husband's wider household and marriage transactions try to facilitate such an incorporation, but for various reasons the process may be disrupted or fail. If this happens she relies on her relationship with her paternal family and the content and definition of a dowry determines her rights in her husband's house but also her rights of inheritance in the paternal household, which are crucial but contested possibilities.

4.10 Women's property, inheritance and dowry

Among the women in the neighbourhood many expressed their concern about women's rights in their in-laws' estate and raised questions which are closely related to debates on women's property and marriage transactions in anthropological and sociological literature. It has been observed that goods and cash given at the time of marriage in South Asian societies are often interpreted as

pre-mortem inheritance and thus a prestation made at the time of marriage, dowry, and inheritance, are closely linked (see Goody and Tambiah 1973). However, as a number of scholars have pointed out, the share in the property which is invested in the marriage of the daughter is not necessarily at her or her husband's disposal but given to the parents-in-law. Moreover, in most cases what is given is not equally valuable as the portion inherited by sons, mainly due to the fact that land (or real estate) is excluded from marriage transactions in urban Bengal and in most North Indian contexts (Sharma (1993)1994). Such a pattern is widespread in case of Bengali Hindus and the ideology of *pre-mortem* inheritance is firmly rooted in public consciousness.

It has furthermore been suggested that scholars working on marriage transactions adopted the misrepresentation of dowries (or payments and gifts given from the bride's house to the house of her in-laws) as female portion and *pre-mortem* inheritance, while in fact none of the goods and money transferred are under the control of the woman herself. Thus Sharma argued that the *dahej* transferred in parts of Northern India is never perceived as female property, and Agarwal amongst others noted that the exclusion of land in North Indian marriage transactions signified the inferiority of such payments and the lack of control women exercise over property in their father's as well as their in-laws' houses (Sharma (1993) 1994:343ff; Agarwal 1994:249ff). The problem with such an approach lies in the conceptualisation of property (as subject to law) as opposed to rights described in shastric texts which are used to define the customary practice. As Madan pointed out according to shastric texts everything the parents of a daughter give (with and including a daughter and *stridhan*) is given to the husband and is therefore at his disposal (Madan 1975:235). Thus whatever is transferred in

marriage may represent a woman's right in the paternal property, but as the property a daughter or a son inherit are meant to sustain their families and not to be alienated for personal gain or fulfilment, these prestations are strictly speaking a daughter's son's share in his maternal property. Considering this, it is obvious that these prestations serve to maintain a woman in securing rights in the husband's property (rights of maintenance and residence) and facilitate her establishing herself through sons.

4.11 Inheritance and incorporation

Given the fact that marriage implies the incorporation of the bride into her husband's line in order to reproduce the *bangsha,* elder married women in Taltala generally reject separate rights and claims in the paternal estate after marriage. Nevertheless, none of the women ever indicated that unmarried daughters or even divorcees should be excluded. Married and unmarried women alike state that the continuation of a line is at stake here and while in many cases women inherit land or real estate they should not be entitled to more than necessary to set up a household with their husbands. In this context many elder women with adult children maintained that they themselves readily handed over their share in their father's property to their brothers, because as one of them points out "After all, I have everything here and I am in my husband's house, I don't need that share". Although the marriage prestations given from their father's house to the in-laws' are seen as adequate, the same women are aware that this did not represent their equal share in their father's property, and all agreed that in case of divorce women have every right to claim maintenance and residence in their father's or brother's house. They do however not have the right to alienate any part of the paternal

property and widows are expected to stay in their in-laws' house, were theoretically a widow with a son has a right to residence and maintenance. It is therefore important for most women to secure a strong position in the in-laws' house, as brothers are not always inclined to support a widowed sister. On the other hand the support granted to a widowed daughter or sister is often seen as an indicator of appropriate behaviour towards someone who gave up the rights in her parental inheritance in exchange for such support.

In this context one of the women, who had a love-marriage and was always rejected by her husband's family, pointed out that this was the reason for her father to insist on a registered marriage in addition to the (reception and *kanyadan* etc.) he organised for his daughter. She explained that in the 1970s women rarely thought of registered marriages, but looking back she feels that he suggested the right thing and agreed that in case of problems she would not have any rights in her husband's property, as the in-laws' never consented to the marriage. While in this case such a move is widely accepted, particularly elder women oppose registered marriages as these would enable a daughter-in-law to regard specific items as personal property, mark her out and encourage selfish behaviour. Younger women always emphasise parental wisdom and are convinced that there will be no need for legal protection in the future. Only women who experienced difficulties to claim a share in parental (natal) or the conjugal/in-laws' property (including the main right to residence) themselves, for example when a father or husband died or the husband left his wife, acknowledge the advantages of registered marriages.

Married women are clearly aware of the effects *stridhan* given to a girl at the time of marriage has on the rights in parental property and often describe what

they receive as something akin to property rather than *de facto* property received from the father's side.

Exceptions are ornaments and clothes, which are normally given as *dan* directly to a bride and are of special value to a married woman, who may even in the urban setting never handle any money. But by and large the distinctions between any goods transferred, *dan* received, and money invested, disappear and in the absence of marriage contracts the investment in her future made by her parents and the joint property of her husband's family merge.

4.12 Codes of law and customary practice

Inheritance in Bengal is governed by the rules outlined in the Dayabhaga code of law as opposed to most other regions in Northern India in which the Mithakshara schools are adhered to.[85] Among the particularities of the code are the definite rights of widows in their husband's property, regardless of the nature of the property concerned and the interest of sons, and the provisions made for daughters who are entitled to inherit a share in their fathers' property in case their mother died. Both rules are related to the fact that the Dayabhaga code of law recognises only undivided joint property belonging to a male member of a line, of which he can dispose at his will. Furthermore, the prominent differentiation between acquired and ancestral property made under Mithakshara law is not made under Dayabhaga law. Thus widows and daughters are entitled to inherit from a deceased husband or father even if the property was not divided during his life-time, and hold rights in all types of property (Agarwal 1994:88ff).

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85 The following discussion is based on the brief description of both codes provided by Agarwal (Agarwal 1994:85ff). The differences between the two codes should not be overemphasised.

Apart from such crucial differences Hindu women in Bengal and elsewhere are expected to give up their rights in their father's property (Agarwal 1994:260ff). Thus in practice, what is considered to constitute female property consists of movable goods handed over at the time of marriage. Although the scriptures acknowledge a woman's right to dispose of the *stridhan* she received as gifts from her parents, relations, and others during the wedding and all movable goods she received after her marriage from her husband, the practice in Bengal is very different from these ancient rules and much closer to Mithakshara law (Agarwal 1994:90ff).One important point to be mentioned in this context is related to the right to dispose of property constituting *stridhan*. Although theoretically women can dispose of property and give it to daughters, the custom is on the contrary directed towards the male line, in that a mother has to give jewellery she received from her father or her affines to her daughter-in-law. Thus a woman cannot give and sell such items independently, despite the fact that e.g. jewellery is interpreted as her property.[86]

These practices are in marked contrast to the customary management of such gifts in other contexts, for example the use of ornaments among Gaur Brahmins described by Vatuk and Nargarattar Chettiars, or the management of a woman's land given as dowry by her father among the cultivating elite of Andhra Pradesh (Vatuk 1975:162ff; Nishimura 1998: 164ff; Upadhya 1990:49ff). While Marwari women may keep control over their jewellery, even wider disparities exist between the practice of Bengali Hindus and East Bengali Christians and Muslims,

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86 While by and large only new jewellery is given to a daughter or daughter-in-law, women may give a piece to the goldsmith and order a new design. It is however not common to use ornaments brought in by a daughter-in-law to marry-off a daughter or to give "old" gold to one's own daughter for her wedding.

because in both communities women hold titles in land they receive at the time of

marriage (Rozario 1992:184 and Gardner 1995:182ff).[87]

Moreover, as the Dayabhaga code does not distinguish between ancestral

and acquired property, unmarried daughters and widows may be entitled to a share

in all types of property, and this rule has an entirely different effect in an urban

environment than the consequences outlined for women living in rural areas by

scholars like Agarwal suggests (Agarwal 1994). In middle-class families the main

part of a son's or a daughter's inheritance consists quite often of (rights in) real

estate and under the Dayabhaga code women have an interest in all paternal

property as nothing is exempted once a father dies.

4.13 Sisters and wives

In a Bengali Hindu middle-class family the death of the father is the time when

sons and daughters receive their share in the paternal property, although a certain

amount of money, goods and jewellery are regarded as a daughter's property and

are handed over at the time of marriage. The fact that daughters are by birth

coparceners in their fathers property is taken for granted but whatever has been

given at the time of marriage is part of a daughter's share and ideally a sister

hands over property inherited afterwards to her brothers. Agricultural land is

beyond doubt the most highly valued form of property and wealth in rural Bengal

and many families still hold land in the districts where their ancestral home is

located. However, land is not inherited by women in the case of Bengali Hindus

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87 Rozario reports that Christian and Muslim women are entitled to shares in parental property,
although they rarely take up the land titles and normally transfer these to their brothers. This is in
marked contrast to what East Bengali Christian women in Taltala state, who insist that mothers (or
fathers) in their community are handing over a share in land or real estate to a daughter at the time

but in an urban middle-class setting many women inherit shares in real estate formerly held by their fathers. Whether or not such a share is given to a brother depends entirely on the relation between brother and sister, and an increasing number of women are not prepared to give up a claim as custom demands and keep a share. As more women become aware of their rights and legal opportunities, cases in which a sister sues her brothers who did not hand over her legal and customary share in a house or business became common and although women may not admit this, brothers often pay a sister for signing her part of a shared property over to them.

Property in this sense is something one can only inherit later in life, and sometimes precisely those enjoying a firm standing in the in-laws' house do not act according to the cultural ideal. While brothers live in their father's house, a sister visits her parents and later her brothers frequently. For many women the time of the father's death marks a period in their lives in which they become increasingly independent, as the children are grown up and the position in the in-laws' house has become stable or the couple separated from the husband's relatives. These changes in status are often signified in the way a woman interprets her relationship with her brothers in the years to come. While ideally the loving relationship between siblings so vividly depicted in the annual ritual of *bhai phota*, during which a sister blesses and feeds her (younger) brother and receives a present from him, should prevail even after marriage, the married sister and increasingly a married brother are interested in their own children's needs and the higher their aspirations the less enduring the bond between them may become. A sister may

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of marriage, which is controlled by a daughter thereafter. This model closely resembles the situation in Andhra Pradesh described by Upadhya (Upadhya 1990).

now even contemplate to keep her due share in her father's property or to sue a brother who is unwilling to hand over what he customarily regards as his own.

Some women think that today they should maintain rights in their father's property which does not imply that they themselves would make a claim. In most cases disputes focus on real estate. Disputes and legal action involving conflicts over a sister's share in the paternal property are based on the local concept of real estate as non-agricultural plots or buildings, but often only the right to rent is different from for example land or a business, both of which are exclusively handed down from father to son. In some cases the father of a daughter may try to provide her with a flat at the time of marriage (or more often rights in rented property) as part of a conscious move to secure the rights in other assets for his sons. In order to guarantee a daughter's support of her brothers' interests at the time of partition of the property, parents are obliged to give a daughter a valuable share of what they own. However, in many instances the brother-sister relationship turns sour after the death of the parents and thus women enforce claims apart from the dowry and other marriage transactions by filing a case.

In one such instance a sister of three brothers explained that "My two younger brothers are not married, they cannot expect to get the whole house, and as they do not have a family they can as well live off the printing press and their share in the property they inherited. I went and talked to them and asked them to pay me the money to keep my part, but instead they tried to sell all of it, and thus I went to the police and filed a case. Whatever your parents say, once you are married you are not friendly with your brothers anymore and I feel that they do not need the whole house. After all I always looked after my parents, although my younger brothers and the wife of my elder brother were there, but does a sister-in-

law know what one's own mother really wants ?". In this extreme case the woman had already thought of securing her share a long time back, partly because she had been married very early and felt that her parents should have provided her with more goods at the time of marriage.

In other instances a woman may be reluctant to claim the rights to residence in the brother's house even if a widow has a miserable life in her in-laws' house. The situation of widows, who are under Dayabhaga law entitled to inherit a share in their husband's property depends on comparable factors. While a widow with adult and earning sons may face little difficulty in using her husband's property, she will never be allowed to alienate it and is expected to let her sons control, manage, and if necessary, sell it. With reference to the in-laws' and her husband's share in the joint property, the situation is very often precarious, as undivided joint property held by her deceased husband's brothers or even elders may never be at her or her sons' disposal. Widows without sons are generally not entitled to a share in a deceased husband's joint property and regularly lose residence and maintenance in the in-laws' house. In such cases a widowed sister returns to her father's or brother's house, in which she can expect to be given the right to residence. Thus even married women with children are at loss if the property of a deceased husband is part of a joint estate and are often forced to leave the in-laws' house, in which theoretically she and her children hold rights of maintenance and inheritance and her children are coparceners.

It should therefore be noted that at the time of marriage parents do not only fulfil their obligation to give a daughter in marriage but satisfy the needs of their own sons by marrying off a sister, who otherwise maintains full rights (of residence and maintenance) in the paternal property. Although this intention is not

commonly expressed directly, mothers emphasise that daughters should receive substantial gifts partly because sons inherit the paternal property and thus the relationship would be kept friendly and undisturbed. This is portrayed as equally important as the attempt to satisfy the interest of the in-laws' of a daughter, who receive part of what is presented as *pre-mortem* inheritance at the time of the wedding and given as part of the conjugal fund. While the latter approach depicts the dominant ideology and governs the representation of exchanges between affines it has been suggested by Raheja in the context of marriage transactions in village U.P. that in order to understand dowries the fact that women may interpret such gifts and prestations differently as sisters, wives, mothers and mothers-in-law has to be taken into account (Raheja and Gold 1994). In this sense the competing meanings reflect the position of women at different stages of the life cycle, a notion which cautions us against oversimplifications.

While the daughter's parents can pursue their own and their daughter's interest in fulfilling the demands as part of the same transaction, a daughter might not know how much is given and by whom it will be controlled. Often a woman content with her married life is satisfied with her nominal rights in her father's property, unless she is forced to return as a widowed dependent to her father's house. But whatever her situation, she has normally neither rights in land nor in her husband's share of joint property and even the right to residence is in practice disputed. Many women realise late that what has been transferred at the time of marriage represented a groom-price rather than a voluntary gift or share in paternal property, and that the notion of *stridhan* deprived them of rights in their father's property, but did not secure unchallenged rights in their husband's estate.

Thus only the jewellery a woman possesses represents the security her parents

tried to arrange by giving a daughter in marriage accompanied by other gifts.

4.14 Marriage and prestations, or what is a dowry

In ethnographic writing the shift from brideprice to bridegroom price or dowry is

frequently mentioned as part of wider processes of social change affecting even the

most remote villages and all three major communities that is Bengali Hindus of all

castes, Bengali Muslims, and Bengali Christians (e.g. Nicholas 1967:71ff;

Rozario 1992:131ff; Gardner 1995:178ff). However, what is referred to as dowry

is not well defined and the word is applied to a wide range of practices apart from

legal discourse and anti-dowry campaigns.

In general educated women and men are not prepared to discuss dowries,

and will more often than not state that they have abandoned the practice and that

dowries exist among other (culturally inferior) groups, notably Marwaris, who are

said to "sell their daughters".[88] Bengali Hindus, it is stated, are not giving dowries

and are neither obliged nor prepared to pay any money on the occasion of a

daughter's marriage.[89] A dowry in this sense is a payment made by the family of

the girl to the family of the groom or the groom himself and consists of a fixed

sum of money given irrespectively of other presents and gifts given with the girl.

The local representation is thus comparable to what has been described as a

groom-price by Caplan and Nicholas among others and understood as a recent

phenomenon and a completely unacceptable practice (Nicholas 1967:71;Caplan

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88 This perception of Marwari marriage practices is found in other regions as well, e.g. in
Maharashtra (Bénéï 1995:39).
89 In many cases dowries may be treated less secretively (e.g. Rozario 1992:132ff; Kapadia
1993:40ff; Bénéï 1995:27ff). However, even in rural Bengal and among Muslims such payments
may be concealed (see Kotalova 1993:180).

1995). However, the occurrence of dowry murders and suicides of daughters in West Bengal is well documented and in fact such payments became common practice among middle-class families. These are nevertheless only discussed if the relatives of a woman file a case against her in-laws after their daughter was thrown out of the house, physically harmed, or even murdered.[90]

In the light of the ambiguity surrounding transactions it is sometimes difficult for the actors themselves to establish what represents a dowry and opinions about the relationship between dowries, affinal transactions and women's inheritance vary according to sex, age and background of the person concerned. Thus, while everybody agrees that *joutuk* is a dowry in Bengal, under urban conditions part of *tattya* and *dan* prestations given from the bride's house to the groom and his consanguines and the bride constitute a dowry in the legal sense, if these items are demanded.[91] The Dowry Prohibition Act states that the presents made to either bride or groom should be of a customary nature and not of excessive value with reference to the status of the donor. Thus the law acknowledges the fact that both sides may agree upon marriage transactions, a provision which accounts for the grey zone as far as Bengali marriages are concerned, because here as elsewhere demands are hard to prove. Furthermore in the local idiom *tattya* gifts and *dan* prestations to the bride are separated conceptually from other affinal prestations because they represent a daughter's inheritance. Contrary to *joutuk* or *pon* and luxury items, many gifts, which form part of *tattya*, are instead defined as contributions to the conjugal fund. Thus even

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90 With the rise of marriage costs suicides became a regular phenomenon in early nineteenth century Bengal (Engels 1996:51ff).
91 While the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 prohibited the giving and receiving of dowries. Presents which are given to either bride or groom but have not been demanded and have been

if the bride's side perceive of certain goods and services they provide as "demands", legally these prestations are made voluntarily and are given in accordance with the law as well as the ideology of *dan*.

Dowries are often interpreted as signifiers of hypergamous marriage patterns, and it has been argued that marriage transactions wherein the bride's side has to provide more gifts or a large sum for the groom's side, is in fact in line with the typical unequal pattern of gift-giving prevalent in regions with such a preferred marriage pattern (e.g. Sharma (1993)1994). Although this holds true for parts of Northern India, the dowry paid in cash, characterised as a groom-price by Tambiah and Caplan among others, has been introduced in different contexts and seems to be adjustable to hypergamous as well as isogamous marriages (e.g. Nicholas 1967; Tambiah 1973:62; Caplan 1984; Upadhya 1990).[92] As the case of Bengal may demonstrate, different communities practice groom-price payments in an urban or migrant setting (e.g. Rozario 1992; Gardner 1995). Thus differences between those Bengali Hindu castes which have always given 'dowries' (like jewellery) and those castes and communities which adopted 'dowry' payments in cash as a groom-price, disappeared and are difficult to trace given the multiple dimensions of *dan*, *tattya* and *joutuk*.

Nevertheless, members of different castes and communities may perceive the pressure to include a wide range of consumer goods into the customary marriage transactions as a reaction to demands in particular as the value is determined by the earning potential of a groom, rather than his descent, ritual

included in a list maintained in accordance with the rules made under the act are excluded (see Dowry Prohibition Act 1961).
92 Upadhya notes that dowries in coastal Andhra Pradesh were introduced among land-owning castes in the nineteenth century. These dowries (*katnam*) consisted mostly of land, and only

status and the status of the bride's house. Although the secretiveness with which

demands and 'dowries' are treated can be interpreted as a middle-class

phenomenon, which has been reported from other regions as well, the ambiguity

surrounding dowries and other marriage transactions in contemporary Bengal is

related to changing the forms and content of marriages and accompanying gifts

(see Upadhaya 1990:47; Bénéï 1996:33ff). A concern with these changes taking

place and the need to conform to homogenous practices is apparent in the

perception of receptions and the setting of the wedding itself as well as the

reluctant interpretation of non-traditional *tattya* gifts as involuntary demands. It is

therefore possible to regard many prestations as part of a dowry in a legal

context, although the nature of the demand may be concealed and hard to prove.

4.15 The relative increase in transactions

The common sense notion of dowries as the main unilateral marriage transaction

(often attributed to women activists) has been challenged by thorough

investigations of marriage transactions within specific contexts, in particularly

rural areas (see Bénéï 1995; 1996; Roulet 1996; Gardner 1995). While in almost

all cases a shift from bride-price to 'dowry' was observed, the content and value

of these redirected patterns of gift exchange does not necessarily imply an increase

in the overall expenses of marriages. It has been demonstrated that a direct link

between the status of women and the obligations of the bride's house to invest in

the marriage of a daughter is difficult to establish. In some instances the relative

value of goods and cash given may not have risen for some time after the shift

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recently the pattern of rural urban marriages has led to cash amounts or real estate transferred with
a daughter in marriage (Upadhya 1990).

from bride-price to 'dowry' took place, a situation Nicholas observed in village Bengal and described by Bénéï for rural Maharashtra (Nicholas 1967:74 Bénéï 1996: 140ff).

Nevertheless an analysis based on this discourse has its limitations, as the example of East Bengali Christians may demonstrate. In a familiar way dowries and related problems not only figure prominently in the writings of social reformers but are still presented by elder women as a relatively recent phenomenon. Matching the findings of different scholars cited above a transitional stage seems to prevail among members of the Christian community. Here some families give groom-price apart from the generally exchanged gifts, while others expect a groom-price but also equip a son with assets like a flat, land etc. The majority of the Bengali Christians in this area, who often moved to Calcutta one generation ago, have access to considerable amounts of foreign currency as many men are migrant workers in the Emirates and the second generation who grew up in Calcutta is equipped with generous marriage payments, which often exceed anything Bengali Hindus of a comparable background can afford. Like in the case of Muslims in Bangladesh described by Gardner and the practices of Muslims and East Bengali Christians in Doria observed by Rozario, Christian women in Taltala recall that such demands were only introduced recently with migration of the first men to the Middle East in the 1970s (Rozario 1992: 134ff; Gardner 1995:178ff). This shift is often represented in terms of rising costs of marriages, and true to the spirit of any discussion of dowries in Bengal, attributed to the problems of a daughter's marriage by many observers like Rozario. However, a closer look at the transactions and patterns of affinal and internal prestations reveals that among the Christians in Taltala and presumably other members of the community, the

cost of marriages rose in general, and the increase is not limited to a daughter's marriage. Thus in most cases the feasts and receptions are held in the groom's house, and the groom's family have to provide the bride and her parents with generous gifts on the occasion of the blessing that serves as betrothal (*ashirbad*). The discourse on dowries is therefore based on the demand (*dabi*) made by the groom's side, who feel free to ask for consumer goods in addition to the traditional *tattya* items mutually exchanged between the two families. However, a daughter and a son will still be equipped with land or in the urban setting real estate as part of their inheritance. Any title remains with a married woman, who can dispose of her share in the parental estate at her will.

The same holds true for the changing pattern of dowry transactions in coastal Andhra Pradesh described by Upadhya, who observed that although urban businessmen included customary land titles into the dowry of their daughters, the value of these assets did not increase over the last 25 years. What led to rising costs of a daughter's marriage was the introduction of additional dowries paid in cash at the time of marriage. In particular families from an agricultural background pay these as a groom-price for an urban salaried son-in-law. That the categories of payments may often be overlapping in the urban setting is clear from her example, where a dowry (*katnam*) given with a daughter who marries an educated groom may include different types of goods, cash, and land but excludes, like in the case of Bengal the gold, sari and consumer goods given as a daughter's trousseau (Upadhya 1990:44). In this case however, a woman remains the sole legal owner of the property and a husband will manage it only many years after the marriage took place, which is a pattern observed among the East Bengali Christians as well, were a daughter may receive a piece of land as part of her

dowry but contrary to common practice among Bengali Hindu castes may keep the title in this as her *stridhan*. This practice is markedly different from customary marriage transactions among certain castes like the Bene, who often give real estate and impressive amounts of jewellery with a daughter in marriage but transfer these to the affines. While both Christians and Bene invest high amounts in wedding gifts and marriage transactions, the same prestations are directed towards affinal relatives in case of the Bene and a daughter in case of East Bengali Christians. This indicates that the differences between various transactions may not necessarily lie in the value and the direction of the gifts transferred but the recipients and the items included, which in turn draws attention to the pattern of inheritance related to such transfers and thereby emphasises the perspective of women at different stages of life.

It seems however plausible to argue that at least among members of the urban middle class in Calcutta the expenses related to weddings, dowries and gifts rose disproportionally. Thus, as mentioned above, the groom's family provides a reception like the bride's family but can limit the prices of gifts by sending "traditional" items, while the bride's party is bound to invest in the inevitably more costly modern consumer goods. Given the fact that most of the households we are concerned with and a large percentage of the middle-class population of Calcutta depend on salaries from government service, this would imply that inflation and rising prices of such articles are matched and levelled by the equivalent rises in salaries for holders of service posts. As implied by a simple comparison of some chosen consumer goods (index for non-manual employees) and their prices over a period of twenty years and the rate of inflation, this is not the case.

Table 4

Inflation as represented in Consumer Price index numbers (urban non-manual

employees) in Calcutta*

1960	100%
1975	287%
1985	463%
1985 (change of basis)	100%
1995	247%
overall inflation	710%

*Compiled using Government of India:
Monthly Abstract of Statistics 1975; 1985; 1995

While the rate of inflation between 1960 and 1995 was 710%, salaries of

clerks (approximately Rs 500 a month in 1960) did not rise accordingly (to reach

Rs 3750 a month in 1995). It can therefore be assumed that apart from the high

amount of cash to be transferred as a 'dowry' a much higher percentage of the

average salary has to be spent even if the same goods are to be purchased.

Table 5

Consumer goods basket 1975, 1985, 1995*

Month Goods	June 1975	August 1985	April 1995
Dhoti (mill) pair	23.25	41.72	149.98
Shirting cloth p/m	3.99	8.60	24.83
Sari (mill) pair	29.71	59.91	192.22
Alum. Vessel (100gr.)	2.21	4.00	10.64
Toilet soap	1.43	2.81	6.16
Shoes (leather)	16.37	46.81	169.66
Sum	76.96	163.85	553.49

*Compiled using Government of India: Monthly Abstract of
Statistics 1975; 1985; 1995

Furthermore, given the unequal rise in prices for different goods in the

consumer goods basket (see table 5), an unbalanced rise in prices of goods like

cloth and leather shoes (both indispensable as wedding presents) may have

affected the middle-class, who are bound to provide "quality" products well above the level necessary for survival.

Both tables go to demonstrate that families dependent on incomes from government service have experienced a decrease in the real value of the salary provided and thus complaints about the relative rise in marriage expenses are justified.

Given the fact that in many urbanising areas upward mobility and a rise in living standards occurred, the changes in marriages transactions may consist of more than a simple addition of modern consumer goods to a "groom-price". Even if inflation and rising or falling salaries are taken into account the number of additional gifts mutually exchanged and given unilaterally increased (see tables 4 and 5). In the urban setting the additional expenses to be born by the bride's parents result from the numerous services to be rented, like the catering, the marriage hall and the vehicles necessary. This is the arena of reputation and honour and it is very difficult to distinguish between different types of transactions due to differences in perspective and interpretation by different actors (see Roulet 1996).

Chapter 5: The domestic unit: household composition and family patterns

This chapter is concerned with the composition of households, the domestic cycle and women's intra-household relations.

The sphere of activity for most women belonging to middle-class families in this neighbourhood is the household as unit of reproduction and consumption, which in most cases is constituted by members of a family. Feminist research criticised the concept of households as closed units and the preoccupation of social scientists with the prototypical nuclear family, and scholars called for more cultural specific approaches to an analysis of the domestic sphere (e.g. Whitehead 1981; Moore 1988:43ff). Nevertheless, as Sharma points out the family-based household represents the main unit of reproduction in the Indian context, while what exactly defines the household and its content has to be investigated within any particular setting (Sharma 1986:197; White 1992:121ff).

In order to analyse different types of intra- and extra-household relationships, the composition of households and its effect on the life of women are to be investigated and domestic cycles are to be identified. Determinants of residential patterns, the role of migration, and women's relation with conjugal kin are to be explored, and the hypothesis of a neolocal tendency in the urban setting is evaluated.

The quantitative data presented refer to 42 women including married women, widows, young women not yet married, and women who remained unmarried. The household sample refers to 26 households in which these women lived at the time of interview and examples of related households are cited to

exemplify alternative patterns and inter-household relationships in the neighbourhood where necessary. The general argument however rests on a wider set of households in the neighbourhood, members of which discussed different aspects of relevant topics. Thus case studies and conclusions drawn with reference to the comparatively small sample could be verified in the light of less formalised information gained among a wider circle of respondents.

5.1 Definition of urban households

Women's lives are determined by their marital status and whether or not a woman marries is decisive for her relationships with kin, status in the locality, and the household patterns experienced over a lifetime. Ideally a woman spends her life with members of a family in a co-residential unit or house (*bari*), first in her father's house (*baper bari*) and later in her in-laws' house (*shashur bari*). Both houses contain unit(s) of consumption, which are defined by regular commensality, the sharing of cooked food. This Bengali definition of a unit of consumption correlates with the sociological definition of the urban household as predominantly consumption-oriented, and therefore such units can be identified (see Kolenda 1968).

The co-residential unit that corresponds to the ideal household (*poribar*) consists of members of a family composed of agnates and/or consanguines and others who are related through a male head of household, who among Bengali Hindus and Christians is referred to as *karta*. Although as Inden and Nicholas rightly state *poribar* signifies a relationship to the male head and refers thus to family rather than household, the term indicates a common unit of consumption as exemplified by the inclusion of non-related members of the unit (like servants) and

is colloquially employed in the sense of household (Inden and Nicholas 1977:4ff). Moreover the term is applied to co-residing individuals even if the former male head of household is deceased or absent.

While the term *poribar* is used in some contexts to denote a family (e.g. during discussions of household chores etc.), the expression *barir lok* (people of the house) is used to refer to members of the patriline living in the same residence who do not necessarily share all facilities or contribute to a common budget even in the rural context and among Muslims (Gardner 1995:104). Thus *poribar* refers to interaction and close co-operation on all levels, which is expressed through the idiom of commensality. Members of the same household share the same facilities, food, budget and collaborate in everyday life much closer than members of the same house and patriline (*bangsha*), even if they live in the same residence and co-operate on a different level, e.g. in childcare, rituals, joint ownership of property or business.

Households in this sense can take different forms and are composed of members, the majority of whom are relatives, but a household is not based on a notion of common unilinear descent, and even distant affines may be members of a household in an urban setting. In many instances families are defined as joint (*ekannobarti poribar*), which may be indicated by using the English term. But a *poribar* does not have to be joint and thus in Bengali attention is paid to the fact that while property may be held jointly (*ejomali*), the units of consumption of agnatically related coparceners and their families of such property may constitute separate entities.

5.2 Ideology of joint families

The joint or extended family and related household patterns have been investigated in different regions of South Asia. Although the persistence of extended families and different forms of joint property have been described, the problems involved in an analysis of such units have been addressed with reference to a variety of contexts (see Parry 1979:159ff). While extended families and jointly held property are widespread in many rural areas of Northern India, it has been stated that contrary to previous assumptions such extended family and households patterns have been adapted to urban life. It is widely accepted today that presumed nuclearisation does not automatically occur as a result of urbanisation (Mukherjee 1965:50; Vatuk 1972:57; Sengupta 1985:204; Sharma 1986:48ff). Extended and nuclear households and family patterns co-exist in Northern India and can be found side-by-side or over periods of time as a result of the development of the household cycle and independently determined by factors like region, caste and class (Shah 1973:43ff; Freed and Freed 1983).

With reference to Bengal, life-histories indicate that the collaterally joint unit of production and consumption became widespread among the upper castes by the middle of the eighteenth century and was well established among the Hindu rural and urban elite by the beginning of the nineteenth century (Raychaudhuri 1975:14).

From the nineteenth century onwards joint property and co-residential units of agnatically related kin are commonly found in village Bengal amongst the land-owning rural population and are still present in many areas (e.g. Kolenda 1967,1968; Day (1878) 1970:21; Gardner 1995: 100ff). Even in urban Bengal the joint family or *ekannobarti poribar* (extended family eating from the same pot of

rice) constituted the dominant household type amongst the Calcutta *bhadralok* and the emerging middle class *(madhaybitti sreni)* and presented a widely adhered to ideal among those who owned property, business and land in the countryside (Borthwick 1984:10ff). While these data may be interpreted as reflections of the lifestyle of the urban elite, more recent studies suggest that the extended family still presented the dominant pattern of Hindu families in rural and urban areas of West Bengal by the beginning of the 1980s (Mukherjee 1977; Sengupta 1985).

Images and ideology of a "joint family" ideal are very strong in Bengali middle-class families, and although household cycles indicate that in fact most brothers separate shortly after the death of their father, women express their preference to enter a "joint family" in most cases.[93] Although the term is often associated with jointly owned property, it may as well be applied to households which include more than a nuclear family in everyday discourse. Thus the English term is used for various types of households, as it may signify joint property inhabited by members of a patriline and dependent other kin, different units which originally formed the former with separate kitchens but which co-operate closely in a number of ways, or only a couple and their sons amongst whom one is married. All three types of jointness are to be distinguished theoretically as the co-parcenary joint family, the residential joint family and the commensual joint family (Kolenda 1968:349).

From the nineteenth century onwards Bengali commentators ascribed the negative aspects of the urban experience to deteriorating family values and the

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93 Changing family patterns represent one of the dominant themes in Bengali literature and public imagination from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. The role of the popular household novels *(grhasthya upanyas)* has been taken over by TV-soaps. Women often refer to TV programmes and the countless memoirs written around the turn of the century in order to explain

decay of the presumably age old normative joint family.[94] This was defined mostly

as joint living of three generations of agnates and in particular brothers and their

families occupying joint property, and a rigidly adhered to hierarchy according to

sex and seniority (Borthwick 1984:10ff). The erosion of related values is

interpreted as an ongoing process which to many participants in urban life

signifies decay indicated by presumably rising numbers of nuclear families.

Nevertheless, extended families can be found all over Calcutta but

particularly North and Central Calcutta are famous for the still existing houses of

families whose reputation rests partly on the fact that they occupy supposedly

undivided joint property. Apart from such exceptional cases surveys suggest a

large number of "joint families" in these neighbourhoods, not only amongst

Bengali Hindus but members of different communities. Frequently scholars and

inhabitants of other parts of the city alike contrast the North to the Southern areas

with reference to the prevalence of different household and family patterns (e.g.

Sengupta 1985:100). These assumptions about caste and thus tradition- related

patterns have however be proven wrong in the past as the study of three

neighbourhoods in Calcutta conducted by Sarma exemplifies (Sarma 1964).[95]

The various household patterns found among middle-class families in the

neighbourhood result from identifiable domestic cycles which account for the

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important points e.g. Chitra Debi's Thakur Barir Andor Mahal (Debi 1980; Karlekar (1991)1993; Ray 1995).

94 The redefinition of the family during the colonial period led as Chatterjee suggested, not only to a redefinition of the domestic sphere, but the discursive production of an inner world characterised by authenticity, enclosure and segregation which enabled nationalist aspirations to develop (Chatterjee 1993). The role of the position of women within this popularised cultural critique has been analysed by Forbes and Engels among others, who, contrary to Chatterjee, state that the extension of the domestic sphere was a prerequisite not the outcome of nationalist consciousness (Forbes 1982; Engels 1989).

95 While in the affluent South Calcutta neighbourhood populated by members of the three highest castes the number of joint households was high (58%), the same type of residential unit could be

coexistence of extended and nuclear units at different stages. Although it is generally assumed that in the past a "joint family" consisted of all collaterally related members of the lineage and dependants "eating from the same pot of rice" (*ekaanno*), in the given context the term may signify joint residence and the minimum of two married couples which share food. As indicated below the definition used in Indian census data which is based on sharing a stove does not indicate co-operation and shared budgeting in all instances, as women might share the same kitchen and use the same gas-stove but use different utensils, cook and eat separately and depend on individual budgets. Thus the defining feature of all types of households is the regular sharing of food which might correlate with various degrees of co-operation and interdependence between agnatically related occupants and their dependants in the same residential unit (*bari*).[96]

The degree of co-operation between occupants of the same residence is regularly exaggerated towards an outsider, because the ideal of a united house with undivided households of a patriline prompts members of the household to downplay the divisions within the wider kin group. In this context families (defined as people belonging to one patriline (*bangsha*)) are focused upon and everyday activities omitted while ritual co-operation is emphasised. Such interpretations reflect the ideology of the "joint family" and are enhanced by the fact that the domestic cycle here as elsewhere does normally lead to *de facto* but rarely to *de jure* divisions of property (e.g. Parry 1979: 156). Joint property is common and perceived as unchanging family pattern, although joint households including

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found in only 37% of all households in the mixed North Calcutta neighbourhood near Shyambazar with a lower percentage of high-caste families (Sarma 1964).
96 Under specific circumstances joint property may be described in an everyday conversation as a joint family.

brothers and their families are temporary arrangements experienced at different stages of life.

In instances when a division occurred within jointly held property, one or more of the husband's collateral kin with their families may stay, and a house is divided into different residential units as indicated below and are defined in terms of commensality. Such divisions normally lead to separate budgets, and frequently co-operation is limited to rituals conducted by all members of the lineage and their families.

However, the content of these units is not necessarily predefined and whereas one brother may leave the parental residence or force a division by changing the lay-out of the building, two others may stay jointly and separate only in the next generation. Thus the spatial division of residences and the composition of households they contain are changing and the relationships between the inhabitants are determined by age, marriage, death and birth of children as well as socio-economic factors like migration, occupation and rights in the property.

5.3 Intra-household relations at different stages of life

Intra-household relations are determined by the actual membership of the domestic unit and the history of the members in relation to this particular residence. Due to the preference for patrilocal residence men and women experience households and the co-operation between members of co-residential units differently. The majority of women enter a new household at the time of marriage, but irrespective of their marital status women are involved in more aspects of the everyday running of the household than men, whether they are in employment or not. Married women mostly enter the house of strangers and are therefore extremely partial about their

parent's house but nevertheless acknowledge the necessity of joint families regardless of whether their natal constituted a nuclear household when they left.

Patrilocality implies that men are often brought up in the house they occupy after marriage and spend much of their life surrounded by relatives, many of whom belong to the same lineage. Furthermore, although men are responsible for household expenses in many households and often contribute to the daily chores, male members of the house are rarely working side by side with women and do not perform the more time consuming tasks (see chapter 8).

While daughters generally experience their father's house (*baper bari*) as a place of considerable freedom with little responsibility for the running of the house as long as they attend school, a daughter-in-law enters a new stage of life in her in-laws' house (*shashur bari*) and is not only expected to adhere to the appropriate code of conduct but acquires all skills necessary to run a household (Roy (1972)1975). A daughter is socialised with marriage in mind and because the customs of all houses (*bichar-achar*) differ, a newly married daughter-in-law is initiated into the responsibilities of the house (*barir dayitva*) by her mother-in-law (*shashuri*) or an elder female relative of her husband. Many married women with daughters commented on this point and a mother directly referred to the relations within the household as reflecting relations between affines by stating that "a daughter does not have to be taught how to do housework because she will have to adjust in the in-laws' house, she just has to learn the basics, one or two dishes in case I am not home, and that's it. I did not know how to cook when I came here and was taught how to perform all the necessary tasks by my mother-in-law. If my mother would have taught me my mother-in-law would not have accepted any of

that, and I would have had to learn everything all over again. A daughter should not develop too many fixed habits".

These first years in the in-laws' house are a phase of learning and even an educated girl who married into a family with in-living servants acquires skills which enable her to perform the duties of a housewife at this stage. Young wives not only work very hard but are constantly supervised, criticised and educated, while the main responsibility lies with the senior woman of the house (*ginni* or *grihini* - mistress of the house), who ideally should be the mother-in-law supervising her sons' wives while the male members of the family are in outside employment.

Depending on the relationship between women in the house, memories of this period are mixed, and while the need to supervise a daughter-in-law is readily acknowledged, women do complain about the treatment they received as younger *bou* either by their mother-in-law (*shashuri*) and elder-sisters-in-law (*ja*), or by the husband's unmarried elder sisters (*nanod*) (see Ray 1995).

Married women who are not in employment spend most of their time working together and tasks are assigned according to age and length of membership of the household. Thus a mother-in-law is the ultimate authority and the sister of a husband is more important than an elder sister-in-law, but all three can allocate work to a younger daughter- or sister-in law. In some cases the elder sisters of a husband remained unmarried or came back to the house after a separation occurred and contrary to Fruzzetti's observations the relationships between the sisters-in-law are not amicable (Fruzzetti (1982) 1990:58). In many cases the control exercised by the elder sister over her brother's wife took extreme forms and is regularly cited as a reason for divisions. One Christian woman, who

had been chosen by her mother-in-law as a daughter-in-law at the age of 16, stated that "I married into a joint family and at first when the children were small and my husband worked abroad my in-laws helped me a lot, especially my father-in-law was very supportive. But then my *nanod* came back from her *shashur bari* and the situation changed completely. I could not stay any longer with them because she constantly quarrelled and my husband was away, I could not do anything right. After four years my father-in-law died and I told my husband each time he rang that it was unbearable. Only two years ago he agreed to buy a flat here and I moved out immediately, it does not matter that I am all alone, I can manage, everything is better than to stay with a *nanod* in the same house".

Conjugal relations underwent considerable change in the urban middle-class setting because the economic conditions enhanced the importance of the married couple and their children as a reproductive unit and defined the role of the educated middle-class wife in accordance with the need to support the activities of a male wage earner. While such changes among educated high status families have been analysed extensively, those who did not belong to this elite and were most probably less influenced by the reformist discourse which shaped the new ideal of femininity were rarely ever taken into account (e.g. Borthwick 1984; Chakrabarti 1995; Chatterjee (1992)1995). However, within this context the majority of women older than fifty years of age have not been exposed to such discourses in the same way as daughters of highly educated fathers cited in written sources (e.g. Forbes 1977). Most of the women over sixty (the present mothers' mother's) generation never attended schools. This influenced their ideas about the conjugal ideal, and while their daughters born in the 1950s are very outspoken about the

changes they themselves observed within their marriages, their mothers may have led a life in a separate sphere from that of a husband.

Young married women in the in-laws' house are often in a difficult position as the ideal of romantic love and close conjugal relations is not only difficult to realise during the first few years in a joint household, but is actively undermined by other female members, most often the mother-in-law. Most women evaluate this first period in the in-laws' house ambiguously and mention a lack of privacy and support by a husband, who is neither willing nor capable to spend much time with his young wife. From the point of view of the in-marrying wife the relationship with the mother-in-law dominates all other relations and gradually the married woman realises that due to the conflicting roles a husband is bound to fulfil, conjugal relations may improve only as a result of division. To married women the difference between various types of extended households is perhaps less important in hindsight and they often distinguish only between "living together" and "living separate". However, the experienced housewife acknowledges the advantages of an extended household with more than one daughter-in-law, because the presence of many women not only accounts for a more favourable division of labour but diverts the attention of the mother-in-law. Relationships between sisters-in-law may be difficult and only in two cases a close friendship between sisters-in-law developed.

Relations with men in the house are governed by the principle of seniority, and the strict rules of the past when daughters-in-law avoided the father-in-law and a husband's elder brothers are generally not observed (Day (1878)1970; Roy (1972)1975:100; Fruzzetti (1982) 1990: 57ff). Apart from a single case in which a woman over seventy spent her married life in the *antahpur* (women's quarters)

of a conservative North Calcutta family, all married women communicated with senior male affines. However, the elder generation (above fifty) often still covered the head with the end of the sari (*ghomta deoya*) in their presence and avoided addressing senior men in the household.

In most cases the father-in-law as the senior male member of the household commands the respect of all other residents. Although true householders (*grihasta*) are married men, an unmarried elder is respected by his younger male and female relatives but not necessarily in a position to take wide-reaching decisions about the running of the household (Standing 1991:95). Sometimes an older brother of a father-in-law or brother-in-law whether they are married or not may spend their days in the house with the women, and are consequently the male members of the family whom a young daughter-in-law encounters most often. While relations with a father-in-law vary according to his character and the composition of the household, many married women referred to their father-in-law in a fond way and emphasised his kind attitude towards the young women in the house. This image of a father-in-law as a figure of authority but not necessarily of conflict does not apply to women from other communities, e.g. Marwari families who adhere to rigidly formalised contacts between affines.

Whether or not a daughter-in-law had to cover her head in the presence of male elders or could talk to her husband in front of her in-laws depended entirely on the individual father-in-law and his approach, whereas such rules do not apply today. Nevertheless, even if avoidance in the strict sense does not occur in this setting, daughters-in-law are expected to show modest and shy behaviour (*lajja*) during the first few months and act more assertive only once the first child has been born.

A young daughter-in-law is subjected to restrictions of movement, speech, and time, and her behaviour is observed and evaluated by the women in the house. Thus a father-in-law rarely criticises a daughter-in-law, who is preoccupied with housework when he is around. A mother-in-law on the contrary is supervising the work of the young woman, and by teaching and allocating tasks effectively manages and controls the activities and behaviour of her daughter-in-law, unless the latter is in employment.

During this early period in the in-laws' house a married woman does work long hours and has no spare time to herself or with her husband. She is expected to become pregnant within two years time after marriage and often a mother-in-law guards the sexual activity of a young couple. After a propriety period of one year the young married woman is judged as much by her skills as a housewife as by her reproductive performance, which is always a cause of anxiety. Decisions on the timing and number of children are often taken by a husband and a mother-in-law, who effectively tries to control the sexual behaviour of the couple. Such predominance of a senior woman in these matters has been observed in joint families in more traditional settings like rural Punjab as reported by Papanek (see Papanek 1982:31). Today the influence includes advice and decisions on the use of contraceptives and the control of access to medical care. In-laws and husbands commonly decide on which type of medical care is offered to a pregnant wife and in many instances women would state that they went to see a gynaecologist only after their mother-in-law told her son to take his wife to the clinic for prescribed contraception or ante-natal care. Often the in-laws are directly concerned about the number of children a couple have and in two instances a mother stated openly that

her husband and mother-in-law tried to force her to have an abortion while she was pregnant with her second child after the birth of a boy.

After a young wife gave birth to a child, her standing within the household changes as she herself becomes an experienced mother and starts to develop strategies to diminish the influence of the mother-in-law on her son or daughter. Rivalry regarding grandchildren is a source of tension and develops often into considerable conflicts as the senior woman claims experience, while the mother of the child expects emotional satisfaction from this new relationship and often succeeds in extending her influence over her husband after giving birth. All men and women born into the patriline exercise control over children in the house which in many contexts overrules the influence of the mother. This is aptly demonstrated by the widespread custom to nickname a boy or girl according to the wish of the mother-in-law or the paternal aunt (*pishi*).

The arrival of a new member of the family is a great joy, regardless of the sex of a firstborn, and facilitates a shift in the relations the mother of this child maintains with other women in the house. As mother of an infant she is normally not involved in outside employment and spends much of her time with her child but appreciates the advantages of an extended family in sharing the burden of childcare with senior women in the house. Regardless of the sex of a child the grandmother and sometimes the grandfather contribute to the childrearing activities and thus a married woman in an extended family enjoys more flexibility than a woman in a nuclear household during the early phase of motherhood.

In case the first born is a girl a second child is expected after two more years but often a middle-class couple in the generation below 40 may only have a single boy. The experience of motherhood and childbirth has changed drastically

over the last thirty years, with the age of marriage rising while the number of children decreased. This new reproductive pattern brought about far reaching consequences in intra-household relations where two or more women take care of one or two children whose education becomes the main preoccupation of all household members (see chapter 7). In the next generation the effects on established patterns will be even more crucial, as daughters-in-law will hardly ever marry into a household with more than one son, and many sons will be single children who alone have to provide for their parents. In turn even couples with two daughters do not necessarily take a third chance and in effect many daughters are going to provide for their parents' old age. Some of these processes can already be observed in the generation of their mothers, who still predominantly came from families with more than two siblings but rarely have more than five brothers and sisters.

Even women born after 1950 experienced rapidly falling birth-rates and thus the composition of households and women's inter-action within the household changed. While for elder women the shift from a married woman's role to motherhood implied as many as nine to ten pregnancies over a period of fifteen years, younger mothers experience fewer pregnancies and have one or two children. Thus the period of childbirth is limited and more energy and activities are devoted to bringing up these children, which is normally the task of the mother and the grandmother who are both involved in related activities.

During the early years of motherhood a wife may develop a more positive relationship with elder sisters-in-law and the mother-in-law, but in most cases a younger daughter-in-law feels that she is still allocated the most laborious and time consuming tasks, while her elder sisters-in-law have more time for their own

children and leisure activities. A mother-in-law ought to level out these intra-household disparities but often favours one of the daughters-in-law and while her influence increases gradually, a woman's interest in a division of the domestic unit develops as her children grow up.

The mother of adolescent children is now, as *ginni* of the house, responsible for all intra-household and inter-household relations and ideally co-operates closely with her husband, receives and manages visitors and controls relations with relatives and neighbours, but she now has time for herself. During these years the conjugal relation is much closer than in the past and many women gain access to funds once they reach this stage.

While the number of members of the household decreases, the responsibilities of the housewife increase and she is eagerly looking forward to the marriage of her son who will bring a daughter-in-law into the house to assist with the numerous tasks she has to perform.[97] But first the daughter(s) have to be married and the difficulties to arrange a match for a daughter preoccupies both parents some time. The marriage of the son starts a new phase in the domestic cycle and if a woman has been living with her in-laws until this point, she may experience more autonomy.

The changing attitudes of daughters-in-law, especially those who are more educated than their husband's mothers, provides a focal point for women to reflect on change in general and intra-household relations in particular. Endless complaints about young women's disrespectful behaviour and the fear to end up with a disobedient daughter-in-law who neglects her duties, are common topics of

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97 Consequently the daughter-in-law is depicted as a co-worker or maid (*jhi*) during the ritual exchange between mother and son as part of the *stri achars* (Roy 1984:18).

conversation and given the structural tensions these two roles imply and confirm a mother-in-law's fears. Many women who stay with their son's family feel that the restrictive code of conduct to which a daughter-in-law was subjected in the past, prevented conflicts and gave a mother-in-law a more secure position vis-à-vis her daughter-in-law (see Ray 1995).

Compared to men, women are in a much more vulnerable position in old age, because they depend on the son's support in case the husband deceased, and many widows are not only socially but economically dependent on their sons. Due to the wider age difference between husbands and wives in the past, the majority of women over sixty experience widowhood. Most widows remain in the son's household after the husband's death but they do not necessarily still figure as *ginni*, as the daughter-in-law with adolescent children is now in charge of the everyday activities in her unit. Sometimes widows who stay with more than one son in undivided property remain decision-makers and are often much more influential than those who stay with a son in a separate unit. Sometimes a widowed mother moves between the houses of all her children, but all visit the houses of their sons and daughters frequently. The widowed mother-in-law in a middle-class setting may receive a small pension and is therefore economically secure. But sometimes a husband never took up such types of employment and in such cases a widow without earning sons is forced to look for a job herself.

In an increasing number of cases a widowed mother-in-law is also responsible for childcare in households with working women. While a mother(-in-law) with a living husband still has her own duties, a widowed mother(-in-law)'s labour power constitutes a welcome asset in many households, and it is common for a mother to support any of her children in moving in temporarily to take care

of the grandchildren. Such arrangements are more common between a mother-in-law and a son with whom she expects to live permanently, but because a daughter can count on her mother as well she is free to ask her mother to stay with a couple if she is in employment.

In the past daughters(-in-law) were not in employment and the problems which arise from this are experienced only recently by some mothers(-in-law). The reason for the very close co-operation among some affinal households are mainly related to childcare and the educational needs of children which account for household patterns that may even temporarily include a woman's uterine kin. This pattern which can be observed in an increasing number of families exceeds those bilateral tendencies reported by Vatuk among white collar migrants in Meerut, amongst whom such extensive contributions to a daughter's household were still rare in the 1970s (see Vatuk 1972:140ff).

While a male head of household remains the *karta* until bad health forces him to retreat from his duties, a widowed woman may only gradually withdraw from the day-to-day management of the household which is now effectively run by the (eldest) son's wife.

This period may lead to more amicable relations between the women in the house and some comment on the difference it made to their lives when their mothers-in-law retired from their duties.

But to have had a strict mother-in-law is also a case of pride and affection, often shown by emphasising the former's impressive characteristics which enable the young wife to perform the role of a dutiful daughter. One woman, who always shared a flat with her in-laws and her younger brother-in-law's family talks in very fond terms about her mother-in-law "She was a very proud and powerful woman

who ran the house very strictly, we were first afraid of her but then we learnt how to take her and gradually we developed a good but respectful relationship. You see, the main thing is that she did not have favourites and always does justice to all of us, she did not allow us to quarrel amongst us and therefore we developed a good relationship. When she became old I took over, because she needed someone to take care of her, and I do it as well as I can".

The widow is free to devote much time to worship and religious practice and is in fact expected to do so. Most widowed women perform elaborate rituals (*bratas*) at home and visit the temple frequently. But independent widows often fulfil their desire to travel even further and visit religious sites in West Bengal and beyond, in particular if relatives live in the region. Vatuk remarked that the urban household may have lost its meaning as the site of production held together by joint property but a joint family remained the site of taking care of the aged (Vatuk 1972:71). Contrary to Vatuk's findings none of the households consisted of an elderly married couple who formed a nuclear unit (Vatuk 1972:71).

Intra-household relations in the urban middle-class household are governed by the adherence to an ideal hierarchy structured by the principles of sex, seniority and length of residence in the household. Although relations between different members vary over time with respect to authority and control, the same principles are applied to nuclear and extended households. While the division of work between the sexes does not differ, the fact that a woman may not share responsibility and household chores with another woman and the absence of elder and superior women brings about change in the conjugal relationship. This process, which is expected as part of the domestic cycle, does prematurely arrive only in cases where a couple move into a separate residence right after the

marriage. In all other cases shifts in authority structures, autonomy and gender roles could only be observed when a married daughter-in-law with children was in outside employment (see below).

All activities in the household are directed towards the reproductive needs of children, and whether a man or woman lives in a nuclear or extended household this objective determines intra-household relations. In this respect later marriages and decreasing the number of children significantly challenge existing notions of the organisation of households and relations among its members. Whereas a woman in a nuclear household may bear the burden of bringing up her children by herself at least after they entered high school, a decrease in the birth-rate leads to a majority of lineal-extended households and women stay with a mother-in-law. This pattern may be even more pronounced in the generation below 20 today where single sons or families with one son and one daughter are the norm. This demographic change will affect intra-household relationships in ways which cannot yet be fully explored.

5.4 Typical household patterns experienced

Analytically the ideal of the joint family, the average household cycle, and the development of specific households ought to be distinguished. Thus some of the ambiguity of the data provided results from different stages within the cycle households experienced at the time of interview, and some from peculiar opportunities arising from family patterns which are perhaps not widespread but still may present an alternative to the average development.

Those women who had an arranged marriage inevitably moved into their *shashur bari* after marriage and experienced a period of joint family life which

normally implied a household with a minimum of two married couples. However, a number of women who chose their own partner, started married life in a nuclear family and many of them remained in this setting (see table 6 and table 7).

At the time of interview the majority of married women lived in nuclear households which comprised of their husbands and children or supplemented nuclear households with one married couple and their children and dependants, mostly a widowed mother-in-law (see table 7). Rarely an in-living servant lives in the house permanently but in some cases child-labourers were part of nuclear households. However, the majority of women did not start their married life in a nuclear household, but moved in with the husband's agnates and sometimes a wider circle of patrilineal members of the husband's family (see table 6). Life histories of women are therefore closely related to patterns of residence, the growth of their own and the husband's wider family, and the death of elder conjugal kin, in particular the father-in-law.

The common experience of nuclear households is nevertheless translated into a preference for joint households and ideally all women want a daughter-in-law who is a "family-girl" and wish to stay with sons and their families in the flat or house occupied by conjugal kin, a situation their mother-in-law experienced when they moved in. Although it is assumed that married life starts in the *shashur bari* (the in-laws' house) as shown in table 6, women who had love-marriages regularly stay separately and the majority of women spend part of their married life in a nuclear family (see table 7) (Beech 1971:195; Sengupta 1985:212).

Previously some women married into a household which consisted of more than two couples. Due to the early marriage age women of the generation above 50 years spent their first years in a *shashur bari* with more than one other married

couple, often the uncles of the husband and their families and in almost all cases the husband's brothers and their wives and children (see Ray 1995). The pattern changes regarding those women who were below fifty at the time of interview, who generally did not join a conjugal household including more than the in-laws and the married brothers of the husbands with their families. This is related to a variety of factors, like rising life expectancy and later age at marriage, high numbers of single sons in all households, and less emphasis on jointly held business as well as the influence of migration to Calcutta in case of East Bengali families. But contrary to Vatuk's findings, patrilocality within lineal and lineal-collateral extended units persists (Vatuk 1972:69).

Apart from the length of settlement in Calcutta, two factors determine this shift in an urban setting. Firstly, the marriage age of the generation below 40 was generally much higher than that of the previous generation because most men and women completed their education and married afterwards, while in previous generations female education was not as widespread and rarely exceeded class 5, while men often married before completing higher studies. Thus the younger generation often entered the *shashur bari* only after a separation between the different units of husband's uncles' families occurred due to the rising age of marriage. Secondly, in case a woman entered a household residing in jointly held property, she was more likely to experience a period of shared expenses, facilities and duties between the husband's uncles and their respective families, whilst this type of household rarely occurred in rented accommodation. The length of migration to Calcutta is the overriding factor influencing this distinction, because joint property is normally inherited and only in two cases property had been bought by the present occupiers.

Thus migration from rural to urban areas and the post-partition migration from East Bengal led to shorter periods of lineal-collateral extended households, because households are more likely to remain joint for two generations if brothers are coparceners in property they occupy. Nevertheless, the majority of women started their married life in a household which included their parents-in-law.[98]

Table 6

Marriage and Household type after marriage (36 individuals)

(classification of households developed by Kolenda modified by Vatuk (Kolenda 1967,1968; Vatuk 1972:72)

Type of marriage Type of household	arr. caste	arr. inter-caste	love intra-caste	love inter-caste	love inter-comm	arr. intra-comm.	Sum
Sub-nuclear							
nuclear			3	2		2	7
suppl. nuclear			one uxori-local				1
lineal extended	2				3 (one uxori-local)	1	6
suppl. lineal extended							
lineal-collat. extended	8	2	1	1		3	15
suppl. lineal-collat. extended	2		1			1	4
suppl. collat. extended	3						3

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98 The neolocal tendency is therefore clearly the result of recent migration and not necessarily a pattern found in urban households (Vatuk 1972:67ff).

If women moved into other forms of non-nuclear households, this was due to individual family circumstances at the time, e.g. the early death of the father-in-law or the addition of dependent relatives like returned widows or temporary visits of diverse unmarried relatives like students. A common variety of alternative arrangements occurred in East Bengali households in the two decades after partition when matrilineal extended households were formed in some instances. Regarding residence after marriage a remarkable contrast between arranged and love-marriages exists (see Sengupta 1985: 217ff). In some instances of neolocal residence in a nuclear household, the couple settled in the neighbourhood of the wife's parents. Such cases include inter-caste and intra-caste as well as inter-community marriages. But while a couple may live separately from the woman's affines, the in-laws are not necessarily hostile to a love-marriage and in some cases the couple moved in with the husband's parents (c.f. Beech 1971:195).[99]

Women who married by choice are bitter if the husband's family shows a negative attitude towards them and try to make a favourable impression during occasional visits of the *shashur bari*. But in four cases this never led to a complete reconciliation with the estranged son and the parents inevitably kept on blaming his wife for a union they disapproved of, mostly because the status of the affines seemed to be inappropriate. However, all these evaluations are reported with hindsight only and are therefore strongly influenced by the general development of the relationship between the couple and the conjugal relatives of a wife. That love-marriages may not be the reason for such a pattern is exemplified by instances were opportunities to reorganise a household came up. Thus a couple who had a love-marriage and started married life in a nuclear household may

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99 The two cases of uxorilocal residence do not signify any tensions caused by the love-marriage.

decide to move in with the husband's parents, which happened e.g. after the birth of a daughter to a couple when the wife wanted to return to work.

Women are not only socialised with the perspective to move in with conjugal kin after marriage as expressed in the idiom of adjustment constantly emphasised by elder kin, but are mostly exposed to some form of joint family life in their own childhood of which they keep fond memories, and young girls romanticise the sharing and support in these households to a certain extend. They rarely recollect tension, vividly depicted by senior women, who as in-married wives often portray the past in a less nostalgic way. As one young woman reflected "We are always told that the joint family is good, and although we know that it is difficult we dream about it and think it will be fun". But apart from the normative pressure to adhere to the ideal, pragmatic considerations influence the evaluation of different household patterns. Thus the objective of all women is to have children soon after the marriage and the ideology of motherhood and child-rearing practices require constant supervision of a young wife by a senior mother (see chapter 7). Such considerations are even more decisive in the case of working women, who feel that they depend on another member of the family once they have children and stay in employment. Thus married women live in a household with other women during the first few years and share the child-rearing activities, an experience which is in their view not only adequate but a right signified by attempts of women who were not accepted by their in-laws to establish a relationship with conjugal kin.

Younger women mostly experience a second period of married life during which they live in a nuclear household constituted only by the married couple, their children and an elderly mother-in-law. To women the distinction between

nuclear and nuclear extended households is crucial, because a woman living in a nuclear household automatically becomes the *ginni* of the house.

The pattern which emerges is thus that a woman enters a lineal or lineal-collateral household after marriage and remains there until the household becomes a nuclear or a nuclear extended household through separation or death which in a third phase develops into a lineal and a lineal-collateral household. But while both men and women regard the "joint" or lineal household as a preferred and natural phase of the household-cycle, women distinguish between types of nuclear households and do not always interpret an extended nuclear household and a nuclear household as comparable transitory states (see Vatuk 1972). It is also significant to remember that such units do not constitute a cultural ideal, and the occurrence of nuclear households as part of the household cycle in almost all cases is represented as an individual incident, conventionally blamed on the intra-household relationships between women.

5.5 Time, causes and evaluation of divisions

When, how and why the partition of joint households comes about has been analysed in different contexts and various communities (e.g. Mayer 1960:177ff; Kolenda 1967,1968; Parry 1979:150; Gardner 1995:107ff). But whereas the material suggested that divisions of joint households regularly occur, the paradigm of one simple domestic cycle has been challenged by those who could observe developments over long periods of time (e.g. Freed and Freed 1983).

In the rural areas of Bengal the proportion of joint households seems to be lower than in the Gangetic plains and slightly higher than in Central India, at least during the three decades following partition (Kolenda 1968:371). Beech amongst

others identified a domestic cycle in the urban areas which is characterised by

numerous fissions brought about by the longer life expectancy, very low rates of

lineal-collateral extended households and determined by the economic standing of

the family concerned (Beech 1971:201; Sengupta 1985:212ff).

Table 7

Marriage and Household type at time of interview (36 individuals)

Type of marriage Type of household	arranged caste	arranged inter-caste	love intra-caste	love inter-caste	love inter-comm.	arr. Intra-comm.	Sum
Sub-nuclear	w		w	w		w, 1	5
Nuclear	3	2	2	1	2 (one uxorilocal)	2	12
suppl. Nuclear	5		2 (one uxorilocal)	1		1	9
Lineal extended	1		1		1	1	4
suppl. Lineal extended	1						1
Lineal-collat. Extended							
suppl. lineal-collat. Extended						1	1
suppl. collat. Extended	5						4

Whatever the ideal of the joint family may suggest, most women below

forty, irrespective of whether the marriage was arranged or not, live for some part

of their married life in a nuclear household. At the time of interview the majority

of women aged forty and above lived in (supplemented) nuclear households which came about through partition of a lineal extended household with only one married couple including a dependent like a widowed mother-in-law. A comparison of table 6 and table 7 indicates that in the majority of cases women who joined a lineal extended or a lineal-collateral extended household are now the only married woman in a unit consisting of the married couple, unmarried children and in case of the nuclear extended households a widowed mother-in-law.

It should however be noted that almost all divisions reported took place over longer periods of time and often the respondent could not recall when exactly a kitchen was added, a wall built or a brother moved permanently. This processual aspect of fissions has hardly ever been commented upon by scholars investigating instances of fission. It is nevertheless important to bear in mind, that in the majority of cases multiple stages co-exist.

In the majority of cases brothers separated only some years after their father died. Only in two houses members of the collateral units still share all facilities even ten years after the brothers' father's death, although in many instances a mother tried to prevent a separation. Sometimes the separation occurred after a period was spent in a collateral household, but such arrangements are fragile and brothers do not normally stay together for more than a couple of years (see Sengupta 1985:226). Furthermore, although the unit previously comprised of more than one couple, collateral agnates separate often before the division of the household occurred. Thus although a pair of brothers may stay in a lineal

collateral extended unit, additional collateral units move out of the residence before the demise of the father.[100]

In the local representation a joint household implies that two or more couples live and share household expenses, and it is assumed that the respective husbands earn an income, preferably a salary. This is then pooled and administrated by the senior male, mostly the father in the patriline (see below).[101] Conflicts over control over funds and authority between male members of the household divided according to the principle of seniority are generally among the reasons for partition. Because sons are bound to obey their fathers and senior men in the house are not normally prepared to hand over responsibilities, they find themselves in a difficult situation. They may prefer to spend more on their own family, especially their children. In many cases the separation occurs after an elder brother took over the responsibility for the household budget for some time after the demise of the father in an attempt to keep the joint household together but could not exercise the same authority over a younger brother.

Budgets and the management of the common fund (*joutho bhandar*) have been analysed in a variety of contexts in Calcutta (see Debi 1988; Sengupta 1985; Standing 1991). Different scholars reported a high degree of women's control over the general budget and their own earnings (Debi 1988:54; Standing 1991:105ff). Nevertheless access to the general budget and control over one's own earnings are mediated by the household type and age as well as marital status of the women concerned, and generalisations are applicable only where nuclear households are

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100 This stands in marked contrast to the findings of Beech, who studied household cycles in three Calcutta neighbourhoods by the beginning of the 1970s (Beech 1971:196).
101 The management and contribution to the common fund emerged as signifier of jointness in the urban context, where the division of property became increasingly secondary to control over wages (Broomfield 1968:11).

concerned. Women in (sub-)nuclear households generally have a say in the budgeting and they keep more money for personal expenses than women living in lineal- and lineal-collateral extended households. Only in case a woman in such a unit is earning is she more likely to keep part of her income and may be more independent than her counterparts in nuclear households who are not in employment.

In a household comprising of more than one married couple budgeting is normally the task of the eldest married man. Decisions on expenses are taken by the male head of household who receives the advice of the senior women in the house in order to allocate amounts to individual members within the domestic unit. Earning sons who live with their parents are expected to hand over their salaries to the senior male members who distribute small amounts on a daily basis. This pattern is common among Bengali Hindus but differs considerably from the practice in the Marwari households, where a woman receives larger amounts of household money for several weeks and does all the budgeting and shopping herself. This is apparently not only the result of living in a nuclear household constituted by migration but prevails in the natal families as well, although servants may do all the marketing.

Women in such Bengali middle-class households may have a say in what is bought but rarely do the shopping themselves, which is regarded as the duty of a male householder. Nevertheless, all arrangements are supervised by senior women in the house who decide on meals and special needs like medication. Only gifts are often bought by women themselves, who are responsible for the purchase of items for specific occasions even if they do not handle everyday expenses. In such units personal purchases of clothes etc. are decided upon by the male head of household

and while all men have some pocket money which they spend on food, cigarettes etc., junior women rarely have access to even small amounts, unless these are given to them by their consanguines. Ideally a house should never be left without men but in case all men are in employment elder women keep a small amount for purchases which occur during the day and buy sweets for guests, schoolbooks for children and the odd treat for the women in the house. In most cases the women are alone for short periods of time during which it is assumed that no expenses occur.

Once a couple separate from the main unit, a woman starts to take over all responsibilities for running of the household and decisions regarding the purchase of day-to-day stocks and clothes. This pattern of shared responsibilities is not necessarily welcomed by men, apart from the fact that they cannot retain control over the budget. Often a nuclear household implies that a woman is left with some of the daily shopping and decisions about purchases during the day, while in many instances she will as well gradually start to visit a bank etc.

The tensions which arise from the change in membership of households are always linked to the structure of authority which ideally should be guided by the principle of seniority which organises men's and women's responsibilities (see Ray 1995). But unless a joint family occupies jointly held property, the probability of a break up to take place directly after the father's death is high. Such divisions rarely take place in an amicable way and even in cases were the property was divided and members of the different units are still on speaking terms, one or the other household remains isolated. Divisions are always traumatic and are often the outcome of endless arguments, which are more often than not supported, if not

initiated, by the women in the house, although separations between brothers and the division of a lineal-collateral unit are to be distinguished.

In her study the domestic cycle of 100 Calcutta households, Sengupta identified job-related reasons, disputes within the family, finances and accommodation as causes for partition in over 80% of the cases (Sengupta 1985:212). However, a quantitative analysis is difficult to support because members of the same household may have different interests in partition and in most instances more than one cause for a split could be given.

Partitions normally take place between collaterals and only in one case did all brothers in a formerly lineal-collateral extended units stay together and continue a joint household even after marriage. This supports Sengupta's findings who concluded that while lineal-extended units are still widespread, the number of collaterally extended units is declining (Sengupta 1985:226).

If the family own a flat it has to be decided whether the couple and their children move out of the area altogether, and in some cases a government employee buys a small flat in the suburbs for this purpose, in which case brothers may be on amicable terms. But unless one can move into own property this kind of separation is the least favourable solution and is avoided by those who are coparceners in joint property. In case of a jointly owned house a nuclear unit often occupies one room and expands after a couple have had children. In these cases a younger brother, whose family inevitably stays in the least comfortable rooms may decide to split up or add separate facilities like the bathroom or kitchen. However, such additions are not always possible or favoured by the head of household concerned, and in many instances a division consists of separate budgets, cooking and eating patterns. The most reliable indicator for fissions is the addition of a

new cooking stove, which in most cases is added to the one in the existing room used for cooking.

In line with the conventional treatment of divisions in surveys as "separate hearths" such a description does indicate individual budgets, but does not reveal the effect on women's work as members of the households involved. Husbands are generally not inclined to add a kitchen, the courtyard, or the roof with all women belonging to the former collateral unit.

While the main interest of men is to gain authority over decision making processes and often to separate from a less well-to-do brother's family, women may favour early divisions because co-operation in everyday life becomes increasingly difficult with older children (see chapter 7). Thus gradual divisions are determined often as much by the budget as by quarrels between women resulting from the character of reproductive activities performed. The proverbial cause for divisions are conflicts between women of the house, an explanation which has rightly been treated with caution by scholars investigating partition of households (e.g. Parry 1979:194). It seems however, that the shift away from the household as a unit of production towards a unit focusing on reproduction and dependent on a male wage or salary also implied changes in women's work, dependency and co-operation (see chapter 7). These changes were supported by the new ideal of domesticity and an increase of the influence and individualism of women in the house, which turns many of their concerns into a matter the couple is interested in for the sake of the children (see Ray 1995). Thus although a kitchen and a bathroom may still be shared, a tendency to separate all but ritual activities and co-ordinate tasks only on a broad scale with other women in the house emerges, which over the years turns into a full division of the lineal-collateral

household. The reproductive work of women is thus defined in a manner which allows for enhanced autonomy through desirable family patterns and the type of work women do.

5.6 Property ownership and divines

In an urban setting, joint ownership of a house determines the development and form of household divisions, because a son is unlikely to leave before the demise of his father for fear of loosing rights in the property. Due to the problems involved in regaining rights in joint property, women may express a tendency to stay. Here as with other cases the future interest of their children serves as the guiding factor for decisions to move out. Thus in the only two instances in which a family lived jointly after the death of the father, a complete house had been build two generations ago by the grandfathers of the male siblings presently occupying the property. It has never been divided, although in many other cases a property was divided even though a number of brothers inherited it in the same generation. If the house had been built more than three generations ago, the patriline would have split already many times, and a huge building may be occupied by as many as twenty individual units belonging to the same *bangsha*.[102] Whilst separations in case of rented flats, which are generally small, occurs only rarely due to lack of space, the owners of houses have the option to subdivide the existing residence into a number of units which in themselves constitute nuclear or supplemented nuclear extended households. After a partition took place, co-operation in certain respects might still exist between mostly collaterally related units, but in many

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102 This supports Sharma's point, who with reference to household patterns in Meerut, stated that complexity depended on the length of migration (Sharma 1986:50).

instances the house was divided into bitterly opposed units headed by brothers, uncles, or cousins who awaited the outcome of endless court cases to gain legal recognition of their share.

Table 8

Type of Residence and Household type at time of interview (36 married and 4 unmarried women)

(classification of households developed by Kolenda modified by Vatuk (Kolenda 1967,1968; Vatuk 1972:72)

Type of residence Type of household	Rented flat	owned flat	separate unit in joint property	non-divided joint property	house owned by nuclear family
sub-nuclear	3 widows	1		1 widow	
Nuclear	5	3 (one uxori-local)	3		1
Suppl. Nuclear	7 (one uxori-local)		3		
Lineal extended	2		2		
Suppl. Lineal extended	2 (one un-married)				
Lineal-collat. Extended			1		
Suppl. Lineal-collat. Extended					
Suppl. Collat. Extended	one un-married			6 (two unmarried sisters in the same household)	
Sum	20	4	9	7	1

Half of all households occupied own property and in all but one case the families which owned property in the neighbourhood were from West Bengal (see table 8). While in the majority of cases the property was inherited, one nuclear unit bought a house in the neighbourhood and in one case a Bengali Christian family bought the right to rent a flat. Although own property and rented accommodation are categories which ought to be distinguished, the situation of long-term tenants in such neighbourhoods is comparable to that of owners, as tenancies are inheritable. This type of property will therefore often cause the same tensions between brothers and their families commonly attributed to jointly owned property (Standing 1991:28). The main difference between the two types of residence is related to the ideology of the house which implies affluence in the neighbourhood and neighbours who are potentially members of the patriline. Given the history and social composition of the neighbourhood outlined above, patterns of property ownership are related to caste, as some castes like the Bene or West Bengal Brahmins and Kayasthas are more likely to inhabit houses which are still owned by members of common descent and may continue to co-operate on occasions like house-*pujas* and marriages or *shraddh* ceremonies, regardless of whether all units are nuclear or lineal households at present. In turn not only do such possibilities enhance the chances to live according to the ideal of a joint family or at least jointly owned property.

The overall standing and influence of a family (or "house") in the locality is still indicated by the fact that agnates own a set of neighbouring residences, regardless of the actual pattern of households inside.

5.7 Migration

Migration has been studied in various contexts and the links between urban and rural areas have been focused upon in different settings (e.g. Vatuk 1972; Parry 1979; Sharma 1984; Gardner 1995).

Vatuk among others pointed out that migration may affect household composition, inter-household relations and partition in case of joint property in many ways, the analysis of which may lead to specific forms of residential units based on the link to ancestral land (Vatuk 1972:63ff). This was the prevailing pattern in the cities of Bengal in the nineteenth century, when absentee landlords lived in Calcutta while some less well-off members of the family took care of the land. A more recent example of links between rural-urban migration and households in the industrial area around Calcutta is presented by Owens with reference to the small scale engineering industry in Howrah dominated by members of the Mahishya caste (Owens 1971b:106ff). Such influences are still traceable in case of West Bengalis, especially the Bene, whose links with their natal villages were sustained even after Independence and who sometimes have an ancestral home in the districts. Under these circumstances urban households maintain close links with the rural extended household and women are in many instances living with their parents-in-law for some time after the husband migrated. However, such arrangements are determined by the length of migration (see Sharma 1986:42). Nevertheless, this pattern was widespread in the case of East Bengali Hindu women before partition and in two cases West Bengali Hindu men migrated alone before the family followed after some years. Furthermore, a number of Christian women in Calcutta itself lived with their in-laws initially. By way of generalisation one can nevertheless state that rural-urban links disappeared

in the majority of cases were a family settled in Calcutta more than one generation ago.

The residential history of the majority of all men is urban and links to ancestral land occurred in two West Bengali Hindu families, and none of the East Bengali families on the side of the husband. The complexity of households is therefore determined not only by class and caste affiliations but the length of migration to the city (see Sengupta 1985:210; Sharma 1986:50).[103]

Partition is the one most important factor for different settlement patterns between West and East Bengali Hindus, while rural-urban migration does contribute to differences between Bengali Hindus and Bengali Christians. Few men migrated themselves and links in the villages are mostly formed through marriage in that a girl from the districts is married to a boy from Calcutta.

5.8 Marital migration and bilaterality

The most frequently encountered form of migration in the sample is the migration of women at the time of marriage, and the overwhelming majority of women were born outside Calcutta. Despite the recent interest in female migration, marital or "domestic" migration has not gained much importance and is rarely ever analysed in detail (e.g. Pocock 1972; Parry 1979; Singh 1984; Sharma 1986).

Although marital migration is frequently mentioned as one factor for inclusion of migrant members in a household, the effects of middle-class female migration of this type have rarely been addressed because of the assumedly less important economic impact of these patterns. Thus in a typical example, Sharma

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103 In a survey of 100 households conducted in the late 1970s, Sengupta found that while the co-residential units occupied by West Bengali Hindus experienced mostly only two fissions, frequent

argues that much of the migration of women to Shimla is wrongly termed marital or social migration because women come to the city with their husbands and often join them to search for employment (Sharma 1986:42). As in other cases the issue of domestic or marital migration as part of wider socio-economic strategies of households, is neglected. One can nevertheless infer, that far from being secondary, marital migration provides households outside a metropolitan area with new opportunities, and contributes to the city-based consanguine household of a woman's affines in a variety of ways.

With reference to women's lives in the neighbourhood, marital migration generally plays an important role in terms of kin relations in urban areas, like residential patterns in the locality and the network of natal kin a woman commands. Shifts in preferences regarding marriage patterns are indicators of changing socio-economic conditions within and outside the households concerned. Marital migration may serve a variety of purposes in case of long distances, which is exemplified in an extreme form by married Marwari women and women from U.P., who married into Calcutta families. This preference which is independent of demographic strength and length of migration of the husband's family to Calcutta indicates one way of maintaining useful links with the region, and is supporting the rigid hierarchy between affines.[104]

In case of Bengali Christians, all women over the age of fifty were born and married in villages in East Bengal and migrated with their husbands to Calcutta, either before or after partition, whereas their daughter's generation was born in

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divisions occurred in the households of East Bengali Hindus during and after partition(Sengupta 1985:209).

104 Members of the Marwari community maintain close links with some districts in Rajasthan and Gujarat which account for credit and business networks all over Northern India (see Timberg 1971).

Calcutta, and married Christian boys from Calcutta, although in some instances women belonging to this community are married back to East Bengal as well.

Among the East Bengali Hindus patterns vary depending on the time of migration. While the majority of families migrated permanently only after partition mostly during the 1950s, North Calcutta neighbourhoods have always contained a high percentage of East Bengali population, which consisted of male students and government employees with and without their families. In the majority of cases we are concerned with, the families migrated only after partition but had some link with the area, because a male member already stayed here while completing his studies.

As shown in table 9, half of all women originally came from outside Calcutta, but most had relatives living in Calcutta at the time of marriage. Most women have a number of relatives in the city with whom they established and maintained regular contact after they moved to Taltala.

Table 9

Marital migration

Calcutta	West Bengal Districts	Dakkha	East Bengal Districts	outside Bengal
15	6	4	5	1 Orissa 1 Ranchi 2 U.P. 2 Marwar

In case of women who married into East Bengali families, the post-partition period was often a time of lineal-collateral extended households with consanguines including kin belonging to the wife's side. In some instances a household in Calcutta consists temporarily of relations including affines of the male head,

because a student or a male relative from the wife's side may come to stay if his family live in the districts. Although these patterns were more widespread in the past, this bilateral tendency which reportedly characterises many urban contexts, is much stronger among Bengalis than other groups in the city, e.g. Marwaris (see Vatuk 1972:140).

For women who migrated to Calcutta the main factor determining the relation between their conjugal and their natal home is obviously distance. Due to historical circumstances, Bengali Hindu women born in East Bengal are most unlikely to have relatives outside Calcutta in districts of West Bengal. Among those who originally came from West Bengal, this varies according to class and caste, and many women in this group have kin in villages or small towns with whom they maintain close relationships. Christian women often have relatives in Bangladesh which may be linked through jointly held land in rural areas (see Rozario 1992). None of the Bengali women was entirely without consanguines in Calcutta and among migrants from Marwar, one or the other male relative lived in Calcutta at the time of marriage, albeit temporarily.

Thus Sharma's critique, who argues that female migration in the case of Shimla often has economic reasons, e.g. in the case of young women who enter educational institutions and the urban labour market or widows, who came to the city in search of employment does not apply in this middle-class setting (Sharma 1986:42ff). Only in those cases where a husband worked in Calcutta and the family came to join him and children were born, economic reasons for migration of women were give. Once a household is settled in Calcutta, the tendency to marry a daughter within the city is very pronounced and all mothers, some of whom

migrated to the city themselves, express their wish to find a husband in the city itself.

Proximity to consanguines and the natal home are crucial factors not only for support in times of crisis, but also for household management, funds and supervision of children. Among those who married within the neighbourhood proximity to the *baper bari* influences intra-and inter-household relationships even stronger. Apart from general support, a daughter-in-law's standing, workload and time-management are affected by this pattern. Thus the six women whose natal household was in the neighbourhood emphasised that they could always save time by asking their mothers or the natal household's maidservant to help out. In these cases, grandchildren spend much more time in the maternal grandparents' house and often the mother of a woman visits daily. In nuclear households she may even do some work in her daughter's house, especially if the latter is in employment. But even if the natal home is not in the neighbourhood, parents support a daughter in many ways, by taking care of her children and providing her with extra funds and clothes. Such affinal inter-household relationships have been observed by Vatuk among others and are generally interpreted as a result of urbanisation (Vatuk 1972:140ff). Whether or not this structure is more pronounced in urban areas and can be interpreted as an urban phenomenon, depends on caste and length of migration among other factors. Thus high-caste women tended to marry further away in the past, and patterns of inequality between affines were emphasised especially among *kulin* Brahmin families and wealthy houses of the three high castes. Such families often kept big houses and a number of servants and in terms of housework, the need for such bilateral arrangements was not eminent. Among the lower status-groups, close marriages

within the same village are common and thus women from mainly agricultural castes and Christians of rural origin often experience bilaterality as an extension of existing patterns. Co-operation is however largely limited to parents and brothers, and although sisters may visit socially and come to participate and help on the occasion of rituals, contacts are limited and everyday activities are rarely affected. Thus a woman whose natal home was in Ranchi and whose old mother was living with her brothers, immediately boarded a train and travelled to Ranchi when she heard that her mother had fallen ill, and in another case a woman whose *baper bari* was in Howrah District stayed there for a week because her younger brother's wife had fallen ill. If a sister-in-law has been married into a different neighbourhood and her brother maintains a lineal extended household with her parents, his wife is expected to support this sister-in-law and all women can expect support from this unit as a household.

This bilateral pattern is emphasised by most women in the neighbourhood and all insist that obligations towards a daughter or sister are binding. In most instances a woman's consanguines are regular guests in her in-laws' house and often the husband and wife stay in her paternal house on festive occasions and visit on a regular basis. All women who married inside the neighbourhood are free to visit their parents on an everyday basis and most of those born in Calcutta see them once a week, at least once the children are grown up and they moved into a nuclear household.

It has been indicated that women's natal kin support a household in various ways, thus specific contributions to childcare are mentioned. But consanguines are also involved in ritual activities like *pujas* and marriages, provide contact with schools, tuitions and employers and often aid a nuclear unit financially if the need

arises. Furthermore, women emphasise the importance of kinship ties beyond the circle of agnates and with whom emotionally satisfying relations can be maintained which are often less constrained by common interests in inheritance and household management. This is exemplified by the strong identification of most married women with the natal home and her consanguines to which a 45years old mother of two sons referred by saying "We always say "people of my house" (*amar barir lok*) when we talk in front of the husband or the in-laws. You gradually get used to it, but women still feel that the real house (*bari*) and the real "people of the house" (*barir lok*) are the people in the *baper bari* (father's house). I sometimes invite only my own family for dinner, and I am really enjoying that and tell everybody who is not related to my *shashur bari* that I am inviting only those belonging to my house" .

5.9 Male guardianship in the house

If men are married and have children, their involvement with the household is conceptualised as that of a male head of household, someone who is responsible for those depending on him, which are normally his ageing parents, his wife and children and unmarried brothers and sisters respectively (see Inden and Nicholas 1977; Greenough 1982). The ideology of domesticity which emerged with the rise of salaried middle-class employment from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, assigned various obligations to men and shaped class-based ideals of masculinity which are designed to match with reproductive needs served by a separation between domestic and public spheres in urban areas. The middle-class ideal which emerged and is widely accepted amongst members of the Bengali middle class today, emphasises the contributions of both men and women to

everyday activities in the house and centres around the reproductive needs of the nuclear family, the parents and their children. Within this framework, the latter's education is the ultimate priority of all efforts undertaken.

Educational needs of boys and girls are to be distinguished in these households, although the differences are pronounced only in case a boy and a girl coexist in one nuclear family. While both may be sent to English medium schools today, boys attend better and more renowned institutions and get extra-classes from an early age with better teachers. Boys are also more likely to attend schools far away from the neighbourhood and due to the fact that most girls are not qualifying for ambitious careers after school, they do not get extra-curriculum training in computers etc. Instead girls may be taught to sing and dance and may even attend a class in one of these subjects which should however be located in a reasonable distance to their homes.

Most of these activities are guided and organised by the mother of the children, who is responsible for bringing children to different places and fetching them after they finished their class. A clear cut distinction between the domestic and the public domain is supported by the designation of most of the household-based activities to women. However, men in these households are closely involved in the management of the household, household-related activities, and the education of children. In order to achieve these ultimate aims the physical presence of men in the house is necessary, who due to a perceived need for male guardianship are often effectively performing, allocating and controlling a wide range of household-related tasks.

Ideally a household includes one male member of the *bangsha* who stays at home as guardian of the women of the house and to mediate contacts between

female members of the house and outsiders. This is often ensured by accepting early retirement of a senior who then controls and advises the women in some of the day-to-day decisions, takes the children from and to school, and is responsible for allowances, shopping duties and bills etc. In some cases, which are by no means exceptional, an unmarried brother is exempted from outside employment and stays in the house all day. Such persons are either without earnings or contribute whatever they earn from a small side-business like radio repair, journalism, or comparable jobs, to the common fund. Such an unmarried person without his own family to take care of, may contribute little to the household's expenses but fulfils the role of protector and mediator on behalf of the household and at the same time administrates paperwork. In units without unmarried members like some lineal-extended households, the retired father-in-law or brother-in-law takes this role. The ultimate role-model for this type of involvement has for a long time been the clerk, as low profile employment in government service offers security and flexibility. This ideal husband has been popular for a long time and the advantages of other types of employment do not automatically outweigh the disadvantages of having to adjust to schedules and develop more ambition. Men are expected to put work second to the family and its requirements and many fathers or fathers in-law (especially those who have other sources of income like property) are much more involved in neighbourhood politics and the activities in the house than paid employment. In almost all cases, a father employed in middle-level government service took early retirement once a son living in the household married. Such a pattern prevails regardless of age or income.[105]

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105 This aspect of kinship shapes occupational preferences and the ideal of masculinity based on a

5.10 Female headed households : Male migration abroad

Although women do not generally head households in urban India, some female headed households exist. Two types of such units are to be distinguished, namely households which are female headed due to migration of men abroad and households headed by widows. Both types develop from other households like lineal-extended units. Although the composition of a household may be the same in both cases, the socio-economic conditions and social relations of the members differ.

Female headed households that came about by male migration abroad are mostly, though not exclusively, constituted by East Bengali Christians. The Bengali Christian community in Calcutta and elsewhere has a history of (temporary) male migration and men belonging to this and other rural communities in East Bengal have been working on ships from the last century onwards (see Mascarenhas-Keyes 1990; Rozario 1992; Gardner 1995). Numerous men are employed in this way but an educated Christian elite has arisen which monopolises the sought after contracts in the Emirates, the preferred choice of employment for men from this strata. Due to the social composition of the neighbourhood, Bengali Hindus and Muslims work in comparable jobs as well, although apparently on a much smaller scale, and one household included in the sample has been a female headed household in the past, because the Punjabi head of household worked as a cook in Bahrain. This type of male migration affects the composition of households, intra- and inter-household relationships with kin and neighbours, and

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modified version of the ideology of the householder as described by Sarkar and Chatterjee amongst others (see Sarkar 1992; Chatterjee (1992)1995).

in particular the role of women in such families, who are often much more independent than the majority of the Bengali Hindu women whose husbands rarely migrate. The same women are on the other hand coping with intra- and inter-household relations on their own and may depend heavily on the co-operation of affines and consanguines, an effect which has been observed in different contexts (see Gardner 1995:114ff). Furthermore, the wives of migrants are more restricted in their contacts outside and ought to be more cautious in establishing relations with neighbours. Often their only regular contact outside the nuclear units is with affines and natal kin respectively.

Although men belonging to such households often work as cooks or stewards on ships for comparatively low wages, the fact that a family has access to foreign currency shapes their life-style. Many but not all of these migrants are legally employed in the Gulf States and the money earned is invested in property and education to broaden marital choice. Women in these families have access to more cash than their Bengali Hindu counterparts, but often funds are invested in the priorities cited above. Thus a mother may manage a modest budget despite the fact that her husband earns foreign currency.

Four families had a male member of the family working abroad either in the past or at the time of interview, and while all three Christian households and one Punjabi-Bengali household had been female headed at times none of the Bengali Hindu, Marwari or U.P. families sent male members of the household abroad. If Bengali Hindus reported relatives abroad, employment was taken up in countries like the U.K. or Germany under the condition that the whole family was able to migrate.

Bengali Hindus attribute the fact that Christian men migrate more often to a perceived lack of family values. It is generally accepted that Bengali Hindu men feel more responsible for their families and avoid living separately even while in service unless the family resides with the husband's parents. Whether this is a rationalisation of historically different patterns of employment and migration from rural areas in both communities or not, such notions are extremely powerful. For the wives of migrants themselves, differences occur not only on an ideological level, but migration has brought about a new way of life for mothers, who often spend some time in a lineally extended household but move out once the migrant husband earns enough to provide for a separate residence. The household which is effectively run by a mother with school-going children depends entirely on the male earner but wives do the budgeting, shopping and dealing with officials, bills, schools etc. often supported by male kin. Marriage itself is experienced as substantially negative and these women complain about the responsibilities they shoulder in addition to the housework all women are expected to do. In most cases the husband returns after some ten to twenty years of working abroad and the couple retire to a property bought with the earnings. Marital problems frequently surface and it is well known that women who stay alone probably have an affair, while many wives learn that their husbands maintain a second family abroad.

Every type of male migration which gives access to foreign currency in this setting has serious effects on the domestic cycle, household management and budgeting, women's work and inter-household as well as kin relations. Although the customary responsibilities of women are extended, the "domestication" of these housewives is intensified. The need for support and guardianship of male kin, mostly agnates of the husband is enhanced and presents the overarching principle.

Even though these women are managing budgets by themselves, their chances to enter employment are low, and control over family assets is limited.

While all these points are made by Christian women, some positive aspects are highlighted as well, which are often related to the fact that a woman is master of her own household in such a setting although the responsibility for certain aspects may lie with the husband's brothers or his father who often supervise the transfer of money. Nevertheless a woman can take decisions on the budget, visit her natal kin whenever she finds the time and is often free to spend more money on herself than a Bengali Hindu woman who rarely handles a budget. However, the ideology of marital relations and appropriate role of women in the family are always in conflict with the structure and constraints of a female headed household and Christian women are caught between the practical needs and collective notions of an ideal family they share with other Bengalis.

5.11 Female headed households: widows

While the sub-nuclear household of married Bengali Christian women has a solid economic basis and constitutes a temporary arrangement with the perspective of upward mobility, widows with or without children find themselves in a very precarious position. In three cases a widow stayed in a nuclear household with school-going children after her husband's demise. In these as in other instances the widowed women did not return to their natal home and decided to continue living in a nuclear household. Two women who migrated to Calcutta from villages in West Bengal did not want to return to their natal villages when they became widows although they had close relationships with their parents or brothers, because they felt that the children's education would suffer and employment would

be more difficult to gain. Both were in low paid employment at the time of interview and sustained their household's basic needs with some support of natal and conjugal kin while the children were at school.

In one of these cases the daughter of a widowed mother finished her education after class ten and immediately started to work in an office. Her mother and two siblings are living on her income today, although her mother still works as a teacher in a slum school. A comparable pattern was presented in case of a Bengali Christian woman whose husband died when the eldest son was about to finish high school and now stays with one of her sons in a rented room in which the whole family has lived for a long time. She is not in employment because her eldest son is working as a steward in the Caribbean and earns enough to support his mother and finance the education of his younger brother. A third widow, one of the recent migrants to the city, lives with her two young children in a rented room and took up employment in an office, while she is supported by her consanguines and agnates. Two widowed Bengali Hindu women live alone in sub-nuclear one-person households. While one of them has two married daughters, the second is childless and is isolated within the residence owned by her late husband's agnates. This type of female headed households is not exceptional and widows often return to stay with natal kin, particularly if they have no sons who are coparceners in the conjugal relatives' property.

Whereas consanguine links can be activated after a husband's death, two widowed women living in nuclear households consciously decided to stay by themselves with their children and lead a less secure but more independent life in a nuclear household until one of the children would earn sufficiently.

The employment these women took up is in low status jobs and highly insecure, a pattern which tends to be perpetuated in the next generation. Thus one of the main differences between these and other households is that they cannot survive on the salary of one earning member alone, which is the case in many of the other households, because the salaries are designed as supplement income. Although women in these sub-nuclear households are extremely autonomous, the living standard of these families is low. The monthly budgets are well below those of any other middle-class household encountered. Additional problems arise for widows with small children as the workload increases, while sub-nuclear units can generally not afford servants in this context.

Widowhood changes the intra- and inter-household relations and strengthens dependency within the household, but at the same time affects the perspectives of all its members, like old age residence, education of children, their marital choice and occupational opportunities. Thus households headed by widows constitute one of the most marginalised groups and this can be generalised across community and partly class boundaries.

5.12 Household composition and sources of income

The economic situation, perspectives of the intra and inter-household relations and composition of households are determined by the general state of the economy and conditions prevailing in West Bengal. The local economy has been characterised by high rates of unemployment among educated male members of middle-class families and lack of chances for workers in the formal sector, while the unorganised sector is expanding. Almost all decisions regarding the family and the household are determined by a stagnant labour market (Banerjee 1985).

Complete data on the sources of income, residential histories and the changing compositions of 24 households were collected. In all but the households of widows with children, the income of one or more male earners constitutes the main source of income and female employment is interpreted as supplementary (see table 10).

Table 10

Household composition and different types of income of all permanently employed household members

(classification of households developed by Kolenda modified by Vatuk (Kolenda 1967,1968; Vatuk 1972:72)

Type of income / Type of household	pen-sion	ser-vice	office employ-ment	pro-fes-sion	employ-ment in busi-ness	business incl. self-employed	support through relatives (sons, brothers)
sub-nuclear	1		2		1	3	4
nuclear	2	4	1			6	1
suppl. nuclear	1	1	2				
lineal extended	2	2	1	3			
suppl. lineal extended	1	2				2	
lineal-collat. extended							
suppl. lineal-collat. extended	1	2			1		
suppl. collat. extended		3	1			1	
Sum	8	14	7	3	2	13	5

Male employment in these households is mainly in business (*byabsha*) and in "positions" like government service or banks (*chakri*). Men are rarely employed in the professions (see table 12). Apart from the sub-nuclear units constituted by widows and their children, only few households depend on one income earned by a male member of the family, which is in all cases the husband in a married couple. In the majority of cases more than one source of income (including pensions from government service) contributes to the household's budget (see table 11).

Often a father and a son provide the income for the lineal-extended or the supplemented-lineal extended household, but sometimes a lineal-collateral extended household contains only few adult working members. While a nuclear household implies that a senior male member of the family is in employment, fathers and siblings living in any form of lineal extended household are not necessarily all in full-time employment.[106]

According to the cultural ideal, married men are portrayed as main providers for their family and are therefore normally required to stay in employment until the son(s) are able to contribute their own earnings. In the Bengali Hindu community *chakri* (position) is not only preferred as secure option but is evaluated with reference to the contributions a man can still make to the everyday activities of the household. Rather than making a career in service or offices, married men with children are expected to stay at home as much as possible and only in two cases the main earner was employed in a department which was involved in projects outside Calcutta. Thus an engineer working with the Government of West Bengal spends a considerable amount of time each month

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106 Contrary to Debi's findings the number of working women in employment in nuclear households is not higher than in lineal- or collateral-extended households (Debi 1988:45).

in the field away from his family, and a medical representative employed by a multinational works in one of the Districts.

Incomes in all households are strongly influenced by ideal family patterns and the composition of individual households. Whereas a male member of a lineal(-collateral) extended unit can take up a variety of positions, a male head of a nuclear unit is normally the sole earner.[107]

Within this framework business and the professions are perceived as insecure and albeit socially acceptable less family-value oriented forms of employment, desirable only in the case of doctors. Employment in the professions is limited to middle-range office positions preferably in companies with comparable schemes for pensions, holidays, and security for relatives in case of sickness or death. Such positions are interpreted as equivalent of government service in that they offer relatively flexible hours, holidays and social security for the whole family. Professionals in the sample are employed as medical representatives (three heads of nuclear households), in banks (three male members of lineal-extended households) and in case of the Christian migrants to the Middle East, in hotel and hospital management. In two cases a male head of household had been employed as cook and the son of a widowed woman supports her and his younger brother by working as a steward. This lower end of the scale for professional employment is acceptable only amongst lower middle-class families with a tradition of this type of employment and is due to its character only taken up by less educated men (see Rozario 1992:56ff; Gardner 1995: 35ff).

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107 As remarked by Béteille, such an orientation towards family values serves class interests, which are realised within the pattern of class, caste and education (Béteille 1991). In the inner realm freedom of choice and independence are relegated to the spiritual domain and masculinities are constructed around the needs of the nuclear family (Chatterjee (1992) 1995).

Despite new opportunities in the service sector, business is seen as least favourable occupation for a male head of household, although income from business often constitutes one part of composite incomes in the households we are concerned with, partly because positions in service are hard to find.[108] In three Bengali Hindu families a business was owned by the men in the household, in the first case three brothers who live separately run a printing press, in a second case a father and his son own a workshop for tiles in a nearby slum and plan and decorate buildings, and in a third case a son and his unmarried maternal uncle work as electricians. In all three cases the main owner of the business is a senior male member, who takes decisions on business budgeting etc. with or without the advice of other family members employed. For the households we are concerned with, a difference between a business owned jointly by brothers and a workshop or business owned by a father and son or an uncle and nephew, represents a crucial distinction. In case members of a lineal-extended unit own and work in the same unit all profits made are used for the same household and are shared among members of the family.

Women are in favour of a business owned by father and son, and given the decreasing number of siblings in the generation below forty collaterally joint businesses are rare among the younger generation. This sometimes saves married women the trouble of convincing an elder brother in-law but may lead to more and longer involvement of the father-in-law, because a young married son cannot run a business himself. In turn a business owned jointly by a son and his father may lead to tensions in the residential unit and may be judged less favourably.

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108 A good example of an analysis which links business success and factors like inheritance etc. is provided by Owens (Owens 1971).

A different perspective on the relation between family-values and involvement in business is apparent in Marwari families who in all cases run their own business and identify strongly with the lifestyle of a business community. Types of enterprise run by the male head of household of such nuclear units vary and because of the involvement in a variety of transactions, rarely one single enterprise can be identified. Marwari women are increasingly involved in business as well and in one case the wife helped with the accounts and set up her own business some years ago.

Table 11

Household type and composite incomes

(classification of households developed by Kolenda modified by Vatuk (Kolenda 1967,1968; Vatuk 1972:72)

Number of earning members Type of household	one	two	three	four	five	none
sub-nuclear	4		1			1
nuclear	5	3				
suppl. nuclear	2	1				
lineal extended		2	1			
suppl. lineal extended		1	1			
lineal-collat. extended						
suppl. lineal-collat. extended		1			1	
suppl. collat. extended		1		1		
Sum	11	9	3	1	1	1

Employment in someone else's business is strongly disapproved of by Bengali Hindus and Christians and is taken up only by young unemployed men. This attitude is in marked contrast with the ideal preferred by Marwaris, who regularly start as apprentices in enterprise run by other family members. In another example, a young man whose family is originally from U.P. took up employment as a salesperson while his father received a pension from government service and retired when the first of his two sons got a job.

Such opportunities are not favoured by young men belonging to one of the Bengali speaking communities and are only acceptable if additional incomes are provided by another member of the family. To be employed in business not only implies low salaries, but brings none of the desired social security.

Because such jobs are never the main income in an extended household, it is expected that the complete salaries received are handed over to the senior male member of the household. The wives of men employed in this way are therefore either dependant on a male member of the family, whose contribution to the overall household expenses exceeds the income provided by her own husband or find themselves in a nuclear household with an extremely tight budget. In two cases a married woman in such a household went out to work in an office to supplement the husband's income before having children, due to the financial pressure resulting from such employment. In general such positions are not easily taken up and are left once a better opportunity like a position in government service arises.

Monthly incomes in this group vary widely and may range from 400 Rs. to 2500 Rs. for a clerk in government employment up to 10 000 Rs. and more for successful professionals or businessmen, but exact incomes were never disclosed.

Nevertheless, in case of government service and professionals, salaries are supplemented by allowances, credits, paid leave, and bribes. Thus employees of national or multinational companies are often so well-off that they open cornershops, run buses or invest in real estate, in short those extra enterprises attributed to businessmen and merchant communities which are condemned for the variety of high profit investments they undertake. In turn, the professions and government service range among the high status occupations which are expected to guarantee salaries and regular amounts at the side and such perceptions shape educational, occupational and marital choice.

Another common source of income is property. Although rents are generally very low in Central Calcutta, Standing's generalisation that they constitute no significant asset has to be treated with caution (Standing 1991:28). Firstly, a number of families own more than one property in the area and the resulting patron-client relationships are extremely important to both sides and in some instances the number of units rented out sums up to large amounts. Secondly, although rents are low the area attracts families who belong to minorities with quotas in the schools located here, who in turn are prepared to pay exorbitant rents or fees (selani). Furthermore, speculation with property in the area is increasing as the demand for office space and luxury apartments rises. Thus, property figures as a significant source of income in some households.

5.13 Female employment

West Bengal has extremely low employment rates of women in general and although the number of working women steadily rose since the 1920s, middle-class women are rarely in employment (Standing 1989:23ff). Rates of female

employment in Calcutta have been lower than in other Indian cities throughout its short history but a marked degree of female employment in the industrial labour force and the overall number of earning women in the formal sector decreased from the 1920s onwards (Debi 1988:14). This reveals the limited impact of increased opportunities for middle-class women in the professions and in service but is also the result of cultural and class-related patterns discussed in chapter 7 (Standing 1991:47ff). Although the informal sector has been expanding since then, such jobs are not regarded as suitable for the women we are concerned with and among the small number of middle-class women in employment the majority are in service (see Debi 1988; Banerjee 1985).

While the majority of the married women over forty has never been in outside work, some daughters-in-law who married during the past ten years were employed between high school and marriage. In the households we are concerned with, only a small minority of all married women continued work after marriage or even childbirth. Although education to degree level and increasingly employment are decisive factors for an arranged marriage, the authority of the in-laws' house over an in-marrying woman is such that she will have to leave her job if the mother- or father-in-law do not allow her to continue working. Once married only a tiny minority of middle-class women in these neighbourhoods continue to hold a position and the majority of all those constituting the sample never worked outside the house.

Reasons for women to enter employment are manifold, and although economic reasons may dominate, some express the wish to be more independent (Debi 1988:24). However, only few women were working on their own accounts, and even in case of college educated middle-class women whose husbands have a

regular and satisfactory income the wife provides extra funds needed to lead a comfortable life and guarantee the best education for the children.[109]

Contrary to Debi's findings, most affines do not accept female employment and married women are prevented from working outside, an attitude which can be exemplified by the frequent instances of daughters-in-law giving up their position and the low number of young unmarried women actively involved in employment before marriage (Debi 1988:41). Furthermore, Debi's findings that among 424 women in her sample high percentage (26%) started outside work only after they married, cannot be generalised. In case of this neighbourhood only one woman started working as a teacher after marriage and out of all women only 15 are in employment, with a high percentage of widows and mature unmarried women (see table 12). In two cases two women in one household were in outside employment and all but one of the widowed women earned to support themselves and their families. Young women who finished school are often not working during the period leading up to their marriage and parents try to let their daughters finish education only close to the expected date of marriage.

Standing points out that middle-class status in Calcutta allows only for specific types of female employment ideally in a (formerly) segregated setting like the educational sector (Standing 1991:50). In accordance with such ideals, two married women, one widow and two women beyond marriageable age, work as teachers, although only the two married women worked in senior positions in high schools, while all three others are employed in slum schools. The same principle applies to the single doctor in the sample, a Marwari woman married into a

109 Interestingly a high number of women in Debi's sample stated that reasons for taking up employment after marriage were not economic (Debi 1988:28). Only one of the 15 women in the

Bengali family, who practices together with her husband and father-in-law and is thus under their guardianship. Medicine and teaching have offered opportunities for women in Bengal from the nineteenth century onwards and are still the ideal female spheres of outside work, preferred by parents and daughters alike. Nevertheless, in-laws will in many instances prevent a daughter-in-law from continuing in even these professions. Thus a woman in her forties, who married into a conservative Kayastha family, complains that she had been a teacher before her marriage and was offered a position as headmistress of a well known girls' school but had to turn down the offer because her in-laws did not allow her to work even in this segregated environment. In general teachers are least likely to stop work after marriage.

Table 12

Working women: type of employment, age, marital status and number of children

type of employment	marital status	age	number of children
sales	not married	16	-
sales (travel)	not married	19	-
office	not married	23	-
executive in business	married	23	-
doctor	married	26	-
service (bank)	married	32	1
govern.service (teacher)	married	36	1
professional (laboratory)	married	36	1
govern.service (teacher)	married	42	3
office	widow	26	2
self employed (tuition)	widow	36	-
govern.service (teacher)	widow	38	3
self-employed (knitting)	unmarried	32	-
govern.service (teacher)	unmarried	47	-
govern.service (teacher)	unmarried	51	-

sample we are concerned with stated that financial considerations apart from control over part of her income are secondary.

Government service is often a chance for a woman to remain in employment after marriage and thus one of the married women in the sample held a post in a government owned bank which she kept even after the birth of her daughter some years ago. This woman was supported by her in-laws and her husband in all daily tasks to enable her permanent employment. Although her mother-in-law felt that a woman with a child should stay at home, given the advantages of the public sector they are increasingly encouraged to keep such a position.

Contrary to these favourable modes of outside work, to be employed by a private company or to work in any kind of business, are less favoured options and are avoided by most women who rather take up status enhancing but meagrely paid positions in teaching and government service. Consequently, all women employed in either private companies entered this kind of occupations because they were not educated enough to take up other types of employment or were forced by family circumstances like widowhood or a widowed mother to provide a large proportion of the family income. Both self-employed women in the sample lived in sub-nuclear households and received some funds from male relatives, while they themselves earned very little by giving tuition and producing knitwear. Such sub-nuclear units lack social security and are often a direct correlative of the absence of sons in this or the previous generation.

Employment in offices may take different forms but in the cases cited both women are not educated, as they migrated to Calcutta from villages later in life and work as office helpers. While one woman contributes to the budget mainly provided by her husband, the other one is a widow and she and her two children live on her earnings and small amounts given by her affines and consanguines. In

two instances young girls were sent out to work in situations of crisis and took up less favoured employment. Thus the young daughter of a widow earned the main part of the family budget and supported her mother, unemployed brother, and a younger sister by working as a receptionist and secretary in a travel agency - a type of work usually disliked because of the regular exposure to male customers, long working hours, and social insecurity. In a comparable case the daughter of a family whose main male earner fell ill after returning from abroad took up a job as a sales assistant in a shop.

This is however an unlikely scenario in most families, who would rely on a pension received from government employment of the male earner (see table 10). Sometimes a widow may take up government employment in such cases which is guaranteed to her by law and try to secure a future job for her son in the department in which her husband used to work. In one case a widowed woman started to give tuition after her husband, who had never been in employment, died at an early age. The second self-employed woman was unmarried and supported herself and her widowed mother by producing knitwear sold by a neighbour from her home.

This arrangement provides an example of another source of income namely a side-business set up by a married woman. The knitwear produced by the widow and all products resulting from workshops for women's employment conducted by the local party are marketed by one out of three women who set up a small business at home.[110] Some women whose husbands are the main earners in the household tried at one point to open shops and small scale businesses but failed

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110 Here as elsewhere, charities and political parties run employment programmes for lower middle-class widows and unmarried women, who often work under the co-operative act for very low wages.

due to the restraints on dealing with strangers. Thus such female entrepreneurs are not encouraged to expand their range of activities and services beyond the circle of family, friends and neighbours.

How women's earnings are spent and how the wage or salary she earns is conceptualised depends on a variety of factors like the type of household, age, marital status, and the percentage of a woman's wage or salary to the budget. All female earners claim that they keep a small part of their income for themselves and contribute the major part to the shared budget of the household. Only in case of sub-nuclear households do women decide by themselves how the money they earn is spent and in case a daughter and a mother contribute to the expenses the senior woman is the decision maker.[111] Young women contribute their income to the common fund administrated by a senior male or female member of the house and keep only some pocket money. Married earning women in nuclear families are often responsible for particular parts of the budgets which they pay directly, but the tendency to split the financial responsibility according to fixed expenses (rent, bills etc.) and more flexible costs (food, clothing etc.) whereby the latter are paid by the wife reported by Standing was not observed (Standing 1991:98ff). On the contrary it is often men who keep daily accounts and thereby control the budget while the wife's salary may be used to pay for school-fees etc.[112]

Most women in middle-middle-class nuclear households keep larger shares of their earnings for themselves and spend these amounts on clothing, presents

111 This is in line with Standing's findings whose sample incorporated households from different neighbourhoods (Standing 1991:85).
112 Given the social meaning of providing food and clothing in the Bengali context, Standing's conclusions regarding the difference between fixed payments, and inferior expenses on food and clothing cannot be generalised. Furthermore, her assumption that by assigning food expenses to women the cultural construction of women's incomes as secondary is reflected, has to be subjected to a more careful analysis (Standing 1991:104ff).

and special treats for the children or themselves. These women always provide useful resources and may finance more expensive education etc., as school-fees are often exempted from the rule of common funds in such families and may be paid separately. This arrangement helps to maintain conflict inspite of the normative redistributional ideology described by Standing (Standing 1991:95). Thus women's incomes in these households are often used to further distinctive consumption patterns of a parent-children unit within the household and this marking off of an amount to be used for one's own children is generally regarded as a problem. But if couples in such a unit are in employment, such extra expenses are normally paid for by using the wife's salary and this seems to be more acceptable to other members of the household. Contrary to Standing's observations, members of such lineal- or collateral extended units do not have access to funds used by all members of the household to cover their expenses. Such an arrangement can only be found in some of the nuclear households, and depends entirely on the type of employment of the male main earner, who might be absent during the day. Thus whenever women want to take out money e.g. to visit their parents they are responsible to the head of household and in his absence to a senior woman. The allowance system is based on a principle of ultimate financial control by seniors and governs the spending patterns of a married woman in employment. In nuclear households employed and non-employed women manage common funds and are thus less dependent on male members of the family, but if a mother-in-law resides with the son, expenditure is mostly strictly monitored. This applies to working women and housewives alike, but may be even more pronounced in case of working women, who spend much of their time outside. This exemplifies not only the points Standing emphasised with reference to the

The impact of female employment on women's lives and household budgeting depends on the wider kinship pattern and the actual composition of the household but is equally strongly influenced by the marital status of women and different stages of life. But while the generally high rate of unemployment shaped occupational preferences, compositions of households and incomes in the case of men, rates of female employment are informed by the preferred cultural ideal of married women and mothers and structures of control in the in-laws' house. If and when women are in employment is decided by the type of house she marries into and the outlook of the household in terms of pooling, partition and education of children, the latter of which is the "reproductive priority". Why such an ideology of the domestic sphere should exclude female employment and which intra-household arrangements determine the type of household married women experience and their work within the context of the middle-class family is investigated in the next chapter.

position to keep a larger amount of their earnings, which is often justified by special needs.[116]

Like all other resources, the employment of unmarried women and men in the household is determined by the raising and education of children in the household. In most instances the unmarried sibling stays with a married brother's family and contributes to the common fund. Thus a couple may want to send two children to attend expensive and competitive private schools today and are forced to provide more money and time than previous generations would have done. A crucial resource is provided by unmarried sisters and brothers of parents, who, due to the lack of reproductive obligations, are expected to provide an income and contribute their labour to the household of parents and later a married brother. In many families unmarried siblings support nephews or nieces and enhance their standing in the joint household by financing their education. As reproduction, and in a more narrow sense education, is the declared reason for domestic units to exist, it seems only natural that most of a household's resources apart from daily needs are invested in this field and that all members of a house contribute their share. As an unmarried aunt of an eight year old put it "We help with his education, because his parents could not possibly afford to send him to all these extra-classes. We love him and he will also take care of us in old age so we contribute to his fees and clothes etc.". The aunts and uncles concerned expect some support in old age in return and often provide non-material support in the form of contacts, gifts and tuition etc.

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116 Unmarried women are perceived as lacking male control and guardianship, but also sexual fulfilment, and are expected to become tense and unstable as a result.

relationship between women's outside employment and autonomy but also indicates that seniority and consanguinity are the main ideological determinants of patterns of control within the household (Standing 1991:121ff).

5.14 Extra resources : the role of unmarried siblings

The general principle is supported by cases in which unmarried daughters of the house are in employment. Unmarried siblings, mostly women who remained with their families, are common in Bengali lower middle-class households and are forced to search outside employment after a father's death.[113] Brothers may expect their sisters to contribute to the household budget but in the setting we are concerned with, no unmarried woman ever stayed in a separate household. Nevertheless pressure to provide for their own expenses was clearly the reason to take up a job. However, as these unmarried women are members of the patriline, they exercise considerably more control over their earnings than women who married into the house.[114] Although only one household depends solely on the earnings of an unmarried daughter it was mentioned that lower-middle class families may not be in a position to marry-off a daughter who in turn became a significant source of extra-earnings for a struggling household (Standing 1991:156ff).[115] Normally unmarried women are in low paid jobs but maybe in a

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113 The high number of unmarried women in employment is reflected in Debi's survey of 424 working middle-class women, amongst whom almost 40% were unmarried, with only 19.8% of them of marriageable age (under the age of 30) (Debi 1988:20-21).

114 Standing's observation, that changing economic conditions brought about new types of family dependencies which exclude the support of unmarried, widowed and separated women, is only partly supported by her own sample and the data provided here (Standing 1991:158).

115 A strong disparity between household composition and incomes of East Bengali "refugees" existed in the past, which brought about high incidents of unmarried male and female members in such households during the period following partition (see Standing 1991:156ff).

Chapter 6: Women's work: Housework, reproduction, and the body

Most studies investigating women's work focus on paid employment or poor women's contributions to subsistence production in South Asia, while "housework" or domestic work is rarely discussed in detail (e.g. Jain and Banerjee 1985; Chen 1990). Even the rare analysis of middle-class housewives and their duties explores the impact of education, reform ideologies and employment on women's work and the role of status production work rather than the actual everyday activities these women perform (e.g. Beech 1982; Debi 1988). Thus a number of studies are devoted to an analysis of female employment and migration on women's workload and family patterns but provide only glimpses of the work these women undertake as wives and mothers (e.g. Sharma 1986; Mascarenhas-Keyes 1990).

Within the chapter, different types of work performed in and around the house, the meaning of housework in relation to class and status as well as the contribution of women to constructions of distinctive communal identities are examined. On a different level the notion of housework as "invisible" work, and the changing content of the category in relation to wider household patterns and occupational structures shall be explored.

It is widely accepted that women's reproductive work and their contribution to household budgets are devalued in many contexts and have consequently been underestimated in social sciences (see Moore 1988:43ff).

6.1 Definition of housework as work

While in other contexts the definition of work is limited to activities which take place in the non-domestic sphere and are seen as productive because they are

enumerated in cash, the middle-class women we are concerned with see housework as "work" (*kaj*) and include ritual activities, childbearing and sexual activities into the category. It will be outlined that women's inferior status therefore does not depend on the denial of their contribution to the household and the "invisibility" of reproductive work. Instead the importance of the relation between the definition of work and the status various activities carry, as well as the effects of attributes which support women's link with the domestic sphere, bodily practices and child-rearing, are explored. The limits of the self-assertive discourse among mothers and housewives in the wider context of dependency and family-oriented behaviour are identified.

The majority of middle-class women we are concerned with have spent most of their lives as housewives, and even among those young unmarried women in employment, the perspective of marriage and children implies a period of activities in the domestic sphere alone. Thus housework encompasses work in the house and all activities related to reproduction and the family as well as the diminishing part of home-based productive work undertaken by all women in the past and women in rural areas today (e.g. making of pickles, spinning, husking of rice, raising of poultry, certain types of food processing). The latter type of work diminishes among middle-class women in cities, partly because services and ready-made products are used and partly because the necessary space and raw materials are not available in this environment. There is however a general shift in the amount of work undertaken by women at different stages of life because as daughters join full-time education, the married woman is taking most of the responsibility for chores. The tendency towards nuclearisation contributes to this and thus the workload of the mother with children increases proportionally. But while the latter

may hold true for the given example, any generalisation about the ideologies attached to housework and their impact on the status of women are challenged by the data presented. Thus different types of activities women undertake in the domestic domain are not only interpreted by the actors as hard and indispensable part of everyday life, but are evaluated as "work" and not rendered invisible.

With reference to a segregated context, the domestic sphere has been described as an indicator of the status of a lineage among those well-to-do families who can afford to withdraw their women from work outside the house. This conceptualisation has been widely adopted by upwardly mobile groups and closely resembles middle-class practice in that restrictions on female mobility and women's economic activities are explained in terms of a wider morality. But although it is often assumed that even middle-class women have been secluded for the same reasons as their rural counterparts and that the domestic sphere is structured along the same lines, such a generalisation has been challenged by scholars analysing the various concepts of *purdah* and the meaning of the "domestic" in different contexts (see Papanek and Minault 1982). Thus, as Papanek pointed out, middle-class women are rendered "unproductive" in many contexts for ideological as well as practical reasons, but provide specialised services (status production work) crucial to the reproduction of class-based life-styles which can be found in countries without a tradition of seclusion (Papanek (1979) 1989). These activities guarantee the perpetuation of family and group identities which are assumedly fixed and unchallenged in the midst of socio-economic change.

In order to broaden the analysis, Sangari argues in favour of an attempt to theorise hierarchies and ideologies constituting the domestic sphere in general, with

consumption and issues of class formation (Sangari 1993). Within the given context, the hierarchies implied by the evaluation of women's work include the reproduction of class-based as well as community based distinctions which are often bound to images of femininity and women's role in reproduction.

6.2 Division of labour among women

In order to describe the division of labour in the household, the daily duties of a married mother may be taken as a point of departure. These women do most of the work in the house and perform those tasks related to the education of children. While women may live in joint or nuclear households some activities are normally undertaken by a mother alone, while others are shared with adult (mostly married) women in the house, if it is a joint family. Only in rare cases an adolescent daughter contributes to housework directly, even though she may take up some minor duties like serving food on a regular basis.

In most of the households we are concerned with, some basic and low-status tasks are assigned to servants, whether these are part-timers, full-time maids or live-in child servants (see Sharma 1986:75ff). Only in two cases of households headed by widows the women did not have access to these services, but while in one instance the mother of two small children performs the tasks only supported by her eight year old daughter, the second family consisted of three adolescent children and their mother, who assigned some tasks to all of them.

In the next category are those women who have part-time help only, mostly someone to clean the floor two times a day, wash clothes in the house and dispose of waste. None of the families in the area use the services of a washerman (*dhobi*) for all their clothes, but most give school uniform, men's shirts and special saris to

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them for washing and ironing. In some cases part-time servants assist in minor tasks related to cooking, like cutting vegetables, and in many instances they are occasionally sent to fetch small items from a shop. Christian and Marwari households are less likely than those of Bengali Hindus to hire full-time help for housework and none employed live-in servants. Women belonging to Christian and Marwari households nevertheless routinely hire help to clean the flat and do the laundry. As indicated above, married women in both communities are more likely to stay in nuclear households when the children are young and are therefore often bound to perform the remaining tasks themselves. Thus in many instances a woman is dealing with all the needs of children and the general housework alone, a situation rarely found in Bengali Hindu families. However, decisions on hiring servants are, as Sharma points out, guided by economic circumstances, amount of work to be done and often the emotional needs of the housewife (Sharma 1986:77-78). A further important aspect of social life is access to potential providers of such services, including distant kin in rural areas or patron-client relationships in the city or the ancestral village. Whilst in most cases the servants hired are inhabitants of nearby slums, at least two households included a destitute female relative who assisted in housework. In those instances where child-servants are hired, the employer's family maintain patron-client relationships with the servant's parental family and assist in various ways by lending money etc. (see Sharma 1986:158ff).

While this leads to different intra- and inter-household relations and patterns of housework, Bengali Hindus avoid a situation where a young woman with children below the age of ten has to run a household by herself even with a servant. In general, all women belonging to this group spent the early years of

their marriage and parenthood in the company of other women and where a nuclear household exists the unit depends heavily on the support of relatives and servants. However, a pattern in which adult kin came to stay with the nuclear family and provided help in exchange for education and residence in the city is absent, as those who are sent to Calcutta to take advantage of better educational opportunities are male members of the extended family. Support is in these cases provided by mothers and mothers-in-law (see Vatuk 1972:128ff; Sharma 1986:162ff).

The strong ideology related to this pattern links housework and the intra-household hierarchy in two ways: firstly, the supremacy of the senior woman of the house (mostly the mother-in-law) is confirmed by denying a young woman knowledge and responsibility; and secondly, a young woman is bound to devote all her time and energy to supervised housework and is thus prevented from continuing with outside employment. Women themselves argue along the same lines by stating that "In today's world, housework is too much for one woman, and nobody can take care of small children all alone". While many women in the neighbourhood have to cope on their own due to poverty or because they live in a nuclear family, the ideal household is constituted of a minimum of two women belonging to different generations who share the workload and responsibility for the children's education (see Banerji (1991)1993).

The impact of this priority can be further seen in those instances where a husband was stationed outside Calcutta. Thus a woman whose son moved his young family to Delhi spends much of the year in their household looking after her grandchild, although her husband and younger son have to cope by themselves. In the past these situations could be avoided by leaving the family in the house of the

in-laws for some years before the husband was posted in Calcutta again, a pattern that still occurred in the case of Christian Bengali men who migrated to the Emirates in the 1970s.

In case two women share the work in a Bengali Hindu household, these are either a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law, or a housewife and a servant. In both cases one of the two is clearly superior and ideally servants and junior family members are supervised by an elder woman whose orders they have to fulfil. All women cooperate in the preparation of food, while the care of small children is very often taken over by a mother-in-law or a servant. The stated preference for teams of two women is nevertheless not so much due to a concern with the care of and work involved to raise young children, but the general availability of more than one adult and the hierarchy established through the supervision of the younger woman.

As soon as the children start going to school, most of the responsibility regarding their education like escorting them to schools or tuition, is taken up by their mothers, who become increasingly mobile and involved in school-related duties. They are exempted from some of the food-related housework which is now performed by servants who are ideally supervised by the mother-in-law. Once the household is split, mothers of schoolchildren are in a position to supervise servants themselves and take care of their families' needs. At this stage married women have more responsibility but may drop some of the rules enforced by their mothers-in-law. The older children become, the less a mother is involved in the manual part of domestic work and middle-aged housewives devote much time to their children's education and rituals, as well as social relations and socialising activities.

In old age women maintain the right to spend much more time by themselves and some may withdraw from housework. But in many instances elderly housewives do not retire from their domestic duties until they are forced to do so by bad health, in particular if a daughter-in-law is in employment. In this case the ageing mother-in-law still has responsibility in the house and assigns tasks to other women working together, which is very often a source of conflict between the mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law as well as husbands and wives. It is however not necessarily expected of a mother-in-law to "hand over the keys" to the daughter-in-law and the latter may only gain control of household matters through the mother-in-law's gradual detachment from domesticity and her involvement in *pujas*, prayers and rituals. In a few families this transition takes place at the pace preferred by the daughter-in-law and in most cases the senior woman still supervises most food-related tasks in the household and prepares some items herself. She cannot however, interfere with the children's education, partly because she is hardly ever equipped for this task and partly because she avoids taking up duties outside the house apart from social visits. This area becomes the domain of her daughter-in-law who ultimately gains control over other aspects of women's work which are increasingly adjusted to the educational needs of children.

6.3 Types of work undertaken

Housework and the ideology of the domestic sphere have been analysed extensively with reference to Western societies and the influence of capitalist modes of production on rural and poor households in different parts of the world (e.g. Rogers 1980). However with reference to India's middle class, ideologies

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related to the domestic realm rather than the activities constituting it are focused upon (see Engels 1989; Beech 1982; Chatterjee (1992) 1995). I would nevertheless maintain that any attempt to understand what constitutes the domestic sphere in the given context and the relation between status and women's lives, apart from idealised images of femininity, needs to focus on the actual content of women's work.

Married Bengali women belonging to middle-class families are primarily expected to be homemakers, whether they are in employment or confined to a role as housewife. In general these women spend most of the day in the house itself and take care of the nuclear family they belong to, and sometimes a wider circle of relatives. None of the women takes care of a person not related by blood like a neighbour or ageing friend and thus housework and caring are generally understood as family-related work.

6.3.1 Nourishing and caring: providing a meal

Within the urban setting, the most time-consuming daily tasks of a wife and mother are the provision of food and raising and education of children. While both fields are related, the preparation and serving of food is intrinsically linked with an overarching need to maintain Bengali identity and in particular "Bengali womanhood". Thus common statements about women and housework focus on food rather than education and typically both sexes assert that "our women have to stay at home because we eat food that is extremely time-consuming to prepare and cannot be pre-cooked but has to be served fresh". Indicating the importance of food (and not only commensality) as a marker of group boundaries, the same argument will be completed with a remark about the typical items served in

"every" Bengali home "every" day and how much more effort is involved in preparing this type of food as compared to Western, North Indian, Moghul (Muslim), Chinese or South Indian meals (e.g. Banerji (1991)1993:3ff).

The importance of food as part of social relations in Bengali Hindu society has been emphasised by scholars working on different subjects who often depict the provider-consumer and dependency relations linked to food and meals as the basis of status and hierarchy within and outside the family (e.g. Inden and Nicholas 1977:18; Greenough 1982 39-40). While a wide range of social relations are expressed in terms of food and its social implications, in Bengal, this analysis follows an implicit notion of food and meals as entities in themselves. Thus the domestic sphere seems to be devoid of differences in class and community and is represented as untouched by changing patterns of consumption and the division of labour (e.g. Greenough 1982:41; Banerji (1991)1993). Such an approach cannot be justified if reproductive activities and the domestic sphere are interpreted as loci of wider divisions. Thus housework including the processing, preparation and serving of food is to be understood within the wider framework of (status-) production. It may therefore be useful to look at food and its preparation as well as the consumption in terms of gender, class, age and community as these are the differences involved in what is simply conceived of as constituting "a meal".

Middle-class women are expected to serve two warm meals a day which are scheduled according to the time-table of school-children and a husband's office duty. While the day starts with a snack consisting of tea and biscuits served before the family have taken their bath, the rest of the mostly warm and specially prepared meals are consumed afterwards. Thus women are busy cooking from

early in the morning until everybody has left the house and start to work in the kitchen again in the afternoon when the children and the men return.

The most laborious items are prepared for the main meals, which are consumed by the male members of the family and the children more or less at the same time. These two meals are normally referred to as rice (*bhat*) and are ideally taken in the morning before the children and the men leave for school or work and late at night. They contain rice and are held responsible for health and physical well-being and reproduction in that semen and uterine blood are believed to be produced by rice (Greenough 1982:36-37). *Bhat* as generic "food" indicates furthermore the social meaning of different types of meals by what is given with the rice, whether boiled rice was given at all, and the physical and psychological status of relationships with other persons and the locality (*desh*) (Kotalova 1993:101ff).

During the day, two more smaller meals (*jolkhabar*) are consumed, one of which consists of specially prepared items taken to the workplace or school. This "*tiffin*" normally consists of cooked food and bread and serves as a miniature home-made meal and can as such not be substituted by a snack bought from outside. It will however never contain rice, as stale rice is abhorred and rice is generally eaten in houses of related people rather than in restaurants or public places due to its tendency to become polluted and to pollute. The least laborious meal is taken after those who spent most of the day outside return and are served tea, which is often accompanied by a snack, like omelette or some patty. Again home-made and warm food is preferred and many housewives provide these as a rule. Such "in-between" meals (*jolkhabar*) are often shared with guests and are never a substitute for a full rice meal.

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It has been noted by scholars investigating the meaning of the domestic sphere as well as those analysing the social implications of food, that the preparation of a meal involves more than the simple cooking of items for consumption. Recently the time spent on housework, the class-wise differentiation of tasks performed and the social construction of a "family meal" have been analysed with reference to Western society (see e.g. De Vault 1991; Fenstermaker et. al. 1991; Shelton 1992). In all studies the gendered and gendering character of housework and the provision of meals for the family have been emphasised.

Within the given context, certain features serve to reaffirm not only the nature of the female character exemplified by serving and preparing meals, but also the maintenance of community and class distinctions on an ideological and a practical level. In a comparable way the ideology employed in urban Bengal takes aspects of a good and appropriate meal as indicators of qualities searched for in a bride and a household (e.g. non-working girl; servants or more than one woman in the house), while others determine women's movements, time-management, physical well-being and hierarchies within the house.

Apart from the composition of the meal, middle-class women in the West are concerned with the sociability aspect of meals as much as with the cooking and serving itself and pay attention to supposedly scientific discourse into what makes a "good" or "balanced" meal (see De Vault 1991). The criteria governing the work surrounding a home-made meal in Bengal are slightly different though notions of healthy eating are involved as well.[117]

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117 Food and eating habits are among the activities deliberately separated from Western influences during the colonial period, although the British expressed a strong interest in studying and changing the food habits of their Bengali subjects (see Greenough 1982). The emergence of "Bengali cuisine" formed part of the redefinition of the "domestic sphere" under colonial rule as

One of the most important aspects of a meal in a middle-class family is the fact that the wife, mother or grandmother prepared certain items "with her own hands". This expression includes not only notions of the caring role of a mother towards her children, but implicitly acknowledges the presence of servants in most kitchens who do the bulk of the heavy work like cleaning, cutting of vegetables, fish or meat and grinding of spices. Often the housewife only gives orders regarding the amount of one ingredient needed or the length of processing while she supervises the servant in the kitchen and now and then stirs a dish. The food served will nevertheless be considered to be prepared by her own hands and her special recipe and is thus the ultimate signifier of maternal love and wifely devotion. While upper middle-class families with working women use pre-processed ingredients for everyday meals like spices, cleaned rice and lentils, mixes of certain types of dough, a more traditional and often less well-off housewife does not command the budget to purchase these time and labour saving products and sticks to Bengali preparations with seasonal vegetables. Her kitchen is not the modern longish room in a new apartment block with "marbled" boards, fitted sinks and waterfilters but the smallest and least airy room in the house. Running water is not necessarily available in the house and a servant is employed to fill different buckets with water for the day from a handpump in the courtyard. In most families we are concerned with, kitchens had not been refurbished since the family moved in and while moderate additions may have been made to the main rooms, the kitchens are not altered at all. Thus in almost all cases, most of the work is done on the floor and due to lack of space a number of activities (like

part of nationalist and anti-colonial discourses but it is not normally mentioned in the course of textual analysis (e.g. Chatterjee 1993:116ff).

washing of vegetables and dishes) may take place on an open veranda. The servant and the housewife working in this context are also required to use only two "modern" gadgets, namely the refrigerator and the gas stove, whereas her well-off counterpart uses mixers, grinders, sandwich toasters etc. all of which are seen as considerable investments in Bengali households (Sharma 1986:67-68).

Just as ingredients should be bought daily, meals should be freshly prepared on the day they are consumed and rarely a mother or wife serves leftovers to her children or husband.[118] Like others, a mother of three pointed out, "our Bengali food has to be prepared fresh because it is mostly vegetables and fish, not like other Indian food where they can use dry ingredients. The different meals have to contain rice, and nobody ever eats stale rice or warmed up rice and therefore we have so much work on the meals. In other communities they can serve old things but our children and husbands do not eat that and want fresh dishes each time".

The standards for certain varieties of food have nevertheless changed among citydwellers and some of the ingredients (like specific *mashla* or special types of bread like *rumali roti*) are bought ready-made even though they may not be represented as such. Some raw materials are processed when they reach the bazaar, thus the painstaking work of husking the rice or flattening and puffing of rice are in urban households are only performed for important rituals and many items can be bought cleaned and sorted. Further changes in consumer patterns were brought about by the widespread use of refrigerators which enables housewives to store frequently used items for longer periods of time.

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118 These are however given to servants and are traditionally consumed by the women of the family.

While most of the shopping is traditionally done by the male head of the household or another male member of the line, women organise storage and are therefore responsible for the type of food and amounts purchased. Decisions on what to cook are taken in accordance with gender and age hierarchies as they have to provide every member of the family who leaves the house during the day with favourite dishes. Thus a high degree of flexibility is necessary to provide a "meal" and a housewife ought to think of other family members and their preferences. In joint families the attention of a wife is openly directed towards her children rather than her husband as his mother may jealously guard his diet. But in many instances daughters are as used to special treats as their brothers and are equally fussy when it comes to food, even though some mothers admit to refusing a special dish more easily to a daughter.

6.3.1.1 Meaning and context of meals

Food habits express a variety of social concerns and the Calcuttan is exposed to a wide range of regional and international food. Some of the most prominent influences are "Moghul" and "Chinese" dishes which have been introduced into the diet of middle-class Bengali families but were previously served in restaurants and on special occasions in upper class homes. Women had to adapt to the requirements of new tastes and learned to prepare a variety of such dishes notably some red-meat and chicken preparations, even though many do not eat the former themselves.

The non-vegetarian diet draws on images of nineteenth century *zamindari* lifestyle, when rich absentee landlords spent much of their time in Calcutta indulging in conspicuous consumption, and is fuelled by the cultural impact of

Hindifilms and the popularity of North Indian restaurants (see Forbes 1977: 21ff). There exists a pervasive link between what has been labelled "North Indian Kshatriya" culture with its masculine heroes, excessive consumption, and the heating effect attributed to red meat that enhances sexual potency and general strength. Even though these qualities are often attributed to Muslims, it is not surprising that those most keen on such dishes are young men in all families. Thus the mother of a son and a daughter who are both students explained this new trend "I do not eat any meat, not even chicken because it is not good for my blood pressure, but I eat fish like all Bengalis and so does my husband. But the children today they have a different taste, if I cook some fish curry or fried fish they come home and complain, they always want some meat...() ...my son prefers red meat, mutton *curry* or something like that, and my daughter always likes some Chinese dish, but she is as fussy as he is although she rarely eats mutton. In the end they will eat what I give them - but I try to satisfy their tastes and cook something special for each of them". Another mother of an adolescent boy went further in stating that her son would not eat any vegetable *curry* or fish but only accept vegetables prepared as part of a chicken dish. She therefore prepares a minimum of one chicken dish a day for her son and sends her retired husband to a particular shop once a week where he purchases good quality mutton not available in the nearby market.

In Bengali Hindu families married women often do not eat any meat or exclude red meat from their diet, although in all houses men were allowed to eat any type of meat. While all family members are rarely vegetarian, the consumption of fish and the consumption of meat are distinguished and the former does not really count as a non-vegetarian item in everyday discourse. Fish is seen as part of

the Bengali Hindu diet, while chicken and lately even more strongly mutton are attributed to Muslims. These categorisations changed over time and chicken has become the more acceptable item, whereas mutton is identified with non-Bengali Muslims even though it was formerly served during the *pujas* in some houses and regions.

Almost all housewives have by now adapted to the new tastes and are specialists in preparing some items of non-Bengali origin, but the daily meals contain these along with some West or East Bengali variations of lentils, vegetables and fish. Every full meal is served with rice, while bread is consumed mostly with meat dishes although the latter is more often served among West Bengalis than East Bengali Hindus, but some of the latter adapted it for the lighter evening meal. While breakfast, *tiffin* and tea are interpreted as snacks (*jolkhabar*) rather than complete meals, the two main meals are not only sumptuous but also cooked and compiled according to fixed rules related to notions of health and digestion at different times of the day and the effects of variations in climate between heat, cold, humidity and dryness. Thus although city-dwellers are quite detached from the reality of seasonal changes regarding supplies of basic items prevalent in the rural areas, certain goods are consumed only during one period of the year and even though the ingredients are available all year round, some dishes are assigned a special place in the calendar of food. A comparably rigid regime applies to other aspects of the consumption of food, thus some dishes of the basic tastes salty, (sweet-and-)sour, sweet and bitter are served in accordance with the season and time of day.

All full meals consist of a minimum set of items which are consumed in a fixed order every day. A very sumptuous meal follows a strict order nut is served

rarely in full, however, some of the following items are served on an everyday basis. All items should be eaten separately and most are taken with rice. Different tastes are normally present, thus a bitter vegetable item like yam with mustard oil (*tito*, slightly bitter in taste), bitter gourd or fried neem-leaves etc. served as *shukto* (bitter) is eaten before the rice and *dal* combined with lemon followed by a fried vegetable item or fried fish. Next the *ghanto*, a vegetable dish made from finely chopped vegetables often prepared with oil and different spices, is served. This may be dry or juicy and the vegetables may be supplemented by fishheads in an East Bengali family. After this "heavy" item the *chachchari*, a "light" vegetable dish (sometimes prepared with fish skin or bones) with a flavoured light gravy (*jhol*) is served. This is followed by the main boiled "wet" fish course(s) and sometimes special fish dishes. Meat is served after vegetable items and fish, unless red meat substitutes fish dishes. Before the final course of sweets, chutneys and *ambal* (a sour preparation of vegetables or fish)are served which are followed by dishes like *mishti dhoi* (sweet curd), *payesh* (rice cooked in milk) or sweetmeats (Banerji (1991)1993:18-19). With slight variations this pattern applies to meals where bread is served instead of rice as well.

Personal preference guides what is eaten by individuals but the order of these different courses is always maintained and it is often stated that this minimum number of dishes makes up a daily meal in Bengali middle-class families. There are distinctive rules about the consistency of any fish, meat and vegetable dish, which may be of the dry or wet variety. The way an ingredient is boiled is mainly responsible for the definition of the dish as heavy, light, dry or wet and the assumed effect the dish has on the digestive system. Thus a "heavy" meal is taken in the morning or for lunch on a holiday rather than in the evening,

as fatty and heating foods are supposed to affect sleeping patterns negatively. But even a light meal will in itself comprise of items prepared in various mediums, and while today fish and vegetables will more often be fried in mustard oil than in ghee one fried preparation of aubergines or the like and a piece of fried fish are expected.

6.3.1.2 Time spent on the preparation of meals

To provide a meal therefore implies careful planning to organise the dishes in a balanced way and meet the tastes of those who matter. The variety expected in a traditional meal is in turn regularly used by men and women as an explanation for the low percentage of women in outside employment, the traditional outlook of Bengali housewives with reference to ready-made products and gadgets and the ideal of female devotion and duty. It is however apparent from the data that neither does a majority of the women in the neighbourhood provide such variety on a regular basis nor does any of them spend as much time cooking as one would expect following the strong emphasis on women's commitment to their domestic duties and the elaboration of the regional meals. While most of the women reiterate the familiar statements regarding Bengali women and their role as providers of complex meals and nourishment, a detailed enquiry into time-patterns related to domestic duties reveals that women rarely spend more than 2-3 hours cooking in the morning to prepare breakfast meals, *tiffins* and most of the items used for dinner (see table 13). There is furthermore no indication that meals provided in these households are less laborious. On the contrary, strict vegetarianism accounts for more elaborate procedures to provide a certain although smaller variety.

Meals have been modified according to the needs of employment and schooling as well as the availability of paid help in these households while a strict so-called traditional structure and minimum content are provided on a regular basis. The actual time and effort involved depends on the age and stage in the life-cycle of the woman concerned. It is apparent from table 13 that more time is indeed spent warming up and serving food, as well as organising and supervising related activities, than on cooking as such. In particular women living in nuclear households serve a simplified menu which consists of less items and fewer variations although little use is made of the semi-processed foods popular among upper-middle-class and Bengali Christian families.

Among the latter these foods are used in female headed households where the housewife cannot devote as much time to the preparation of elaborate meals and shopping. In general the diet of Bengali Christians is comparable to what East Bengali Hindus eat with a stronger emphasis on chicken dishes served on special occasions as well as on an everyday basis.

From what has been outlined so far, the importance of meals can be discerned. It is however obvious that the ideological importance of food and the social meaning of related processes are to be distinguished if one is to see the provision of food as part of women's domestic work.

While the requirements of a complete or "traditional" meal have been outlined, these are changing over time along with shifts in priorities of households as units and are therefore indicators of how society speaks of itself rather than reflections of unchallenged truths.

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Table 13

Average time-use for food preparation and consumption of meals

Household pattern	Borsa Ganguly (55): one live-in childservant, husband and mother-in-law; one part-time servant	Renu Gomes (39): Husband Gulf migrant; three children at high school; no servant to cook	Shibani Ghosh (40): teacher, one son (student) and husband; one part-timer to cook in the morning
Meals prepared	7.00 Tea and biscuits	4.00-7.00 Cooking of all meals for the day	4.00-7.00 Cooking of all meals for the next two days with the maidservant
	7.30-9.00 *Puja* Husband does shopping	7.00 Breakfast : Sweets, toast and tea	7.00 Tea and biscuits
	9.00-12.00 Cooking of all meals with help of two servants 9.00 Husband takes breakfast (*Roti* or *Paratha* and curry)	9.00 Tiffin for children: Bread and curry (before school)	8.00-9.00 Breakfast: rice or bread with curry and fish or even meat, *dal* and chutney
	12.00 Husband returns from office Lunch:(Rice, curry, *dal*,fish) Mother-in-law : vegetarian dishes	10.00-12.00 Shopping	
	14.00 Husband takes Tiffin (Bread and Curry)	13.00-14.00 Lunch after children returned (Rice, Fish, *dal*, curry, *bhaji*)	13.00 Son comes home and warms up his lunch (Curry, meat, bread) Tiffin: she and husband take curry and bread to work
	16.00 Husband returns Tiffin: Tea and biscuits	16.00 Tiffin: tea and biscuits	17.00 Tiffin: She and her husband eat curry with fresh bread or freshly prepared pasta
	21.00 Dinner (Fresh rice or bread and dishes prepared in the morning)	21.00 Dinner (*Chapati* or rice and dishes prepared in the morning)	21.00 Dinner (Fresh bread, dishes and curd prepared in the morning)

Whereas the actual cooking does not take more time in Bengali middle-class households than elsewhere, women are well aware that changes in technology like the introduction of the gas-stove and refrigerator as well as the wide availability of cleaned and pre-cooked ingredients changed the character of the work necessary to provide a plain meal. It has become a common sense view that the time and effort spent on food-related activities today is less important today than it was in the past. Even though this representation is never substantiated by hard facts which could take changing patterns of consumption and household responsibilities into account, the decrease in the number of children supports the stereotype that a mother and housewife does comparatively less caring work now.

However, as the activities surrounding a meal in a middle-class family prove that increased urbanisation led to more class-specific patterns of food consumption. Thus women's work was adjusted to the schedules of institutions and the workplace and the need for mothers to support full-time education. The time spent serving dishes and entertaining the eaters has more often than not increased because the schedules of most male and many minor members of the house have become increasingly diversified. With reference to activities directly related to food the fact that less time is spent on processing and cooking does not imply that to provide a complete meal as a housewife involves less time. Beyond the level of constant serving and storing, the class-specific expectations of exotic and various dishes all year round imply that a certain amount of time is spent on achieving the skills to present the family with a wide variety of such dishes. Furthermore the preferences of all members of the family are more pronounced

and women spend more time thinking about and organising meals throughout the day.

While the requirements of "caring" have changed in urban Bengal from the last century onwards, the ideology of traditional home-made or "real" meals and financial priorities elsewhere prevent lower middle-class women from improving their kitchens. Thus, contrary to Sharma's findings in Shimla the introduction of gadgets and a change of diet towards less laborious easy-to-cook (convenience) meals are limited (Sharma 1986:66ff). While the emphasis on the maternal carer still enforces and reaffirms gender roles, she is still constructed as the only person fit to feed and nourish. Through the provision of meals for people in the house, her role is made indispensable, a requirement that renders her relatively immobile and inflexible.[119] While upper middle-class women in less traditional settings make up for the new demands by employing full-time cooks and using semi-processed food their lower middle-class counterparts cannot afford this either financially or ideologically.

6.3.2 Progressive motherhood: educational needs

While daily meals form part of a mother's and housewife's duty all women with children at school devote much time to the educational needs of children. The preoccupation of parents with the schooling of children is expected and a feature of middle-class life in different settings (e.g. Sharma 1986; Mascarenhas-Keyes 1990). Moreover, a rise in the involvement of parents' in the schooling of their children is observed in the Indian context (see Béteille 1991). But to what has been

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119 Beech observes that Bengali Hindu women in employment state their primary interest in motherhood and work in the domestic domain (Beech 1982:12ff).

reported for upper middle-class families male involvement with the actual schooling of children is kept to a minimum in most families we are concerned with. Only in three cases fathers supervise homework (e.g. Roy (1972) 1975:20). Here fathers have a more abstract role in that they provide funds and decisions on educational developments but mothers are heavily involved in all day-to-day aspects of informal and formal education. Thus what has been labelled "progressive motherhood" in other contexts is found as a prevalent ideology in this rather traditional setting and represents the bulk of status-production work in contemporary households (see Papanek (1979) 1989; Mascarenhas-Keyes 1990).[120]

Until recently Bengali medium education was entirely acceptable among middle-class families in Calcutta and the same conditions sketched by Sharma with reference to Shimla prevailed (Sharma 1986:107ff). Unlike members of upper middle-class families, most parents in this setting attended less prestigious schools than their children mostly because English medium education is acquired today. In most families neither the father nor the mother are educated enough to assist their children with homework and exams and parents depend on "experts" from outside on a daily basis to prepare their children for exams.

Whereas mothers attended Bengali medium schools and in most instances finished before the final exam, all boys and most girls are expected to leave school with a university entrance exam and even girls do not normally drop out before class ten. All children below thirteen years of age attend English medium schools,

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120 The phrase used by Mascarenhas-Keyes describes the requirements of motherhood among middle-class Catholic Goanese families with a high percentage of male migration to the Gulf (Mascarenhas-Keyes 1990). Although it may be more directly applicable to the Christian context, I use it here more broadly with reference to the emphasis on education and the "primary objective" of child-centred household and family structures.

a trend that indicates that the immense pressure on middle-class families in order to secure employment developed only recently (see Béteille 1991).

Although mothers are detached from the content and medium of instruction, they are responsible for organising the busy schedules of sons and daughters in education and spend most of the day bringing children to school and tuition and picking them up. All women brought up in the neighbourhood attended local Bengali medium schools with a reasonably good reputation, nevertheless today pupils attend schools which may be further away and mothers have to travel one hour or more to reach the school. But even if a school-bus can be used, a mother will not take a chance and all children below 15 are walked home by relatives, mostly their mothers.

The time mothers spend in front of the school gates chatting has been described by Sharma as a valuable resource and constitutes an important source of information. It is on these occasions when a mother finds out about the quality of schools, tuition, material and exams from other mothers and her presence assures children that someone takes responsibility for their affairs (Sharma 1986:108). The government, schools and teachers in turn expect mothers to devote themselves to this task and enquire about exams etc. by themselves, contact teachers in case of need and organise appropriate tuition for their children. Thus much of the work that formed part of the institutional responsibility is now taken over by the family, and more precisely mothers who move between schools and homes on a regular basis.

Given the considerable distances and the additional preoccupation with daily tuition, those living in nuclear families with more than one child are barely at home during the day and spend most of their time on the bus or in front of the

school. None of the women suggested that a (female) child below 15 could possibly walk or travel alone and it is generally agreed that only neglected or working class children enter public spaces unaccompanied at any time. This protective behaviour is related to notions of city-life as much as to appropriate maternal duty and thus even children attending schools nearby are subjected to guardianship until a certain age.

Regarding child-rearing and education, the lack of co-operation between mothers is noticeable, just like children never visit their classmates' houses for dinner during the afternoon, mothers living in the same street would never entrust a child to someone not belonging to the house. While living in one house often implies that women share the same kitchen, servant and facilities, children are looked after by the mother, a servant and a relative without children of the same age, e.g. a mother-in-law or rarely an unmarried aunt. Sisters-in-law rarely share these responsibilities and in many instances two or more take their children to school or look after them in the afternoon individually.[121]

Thus even in a joint household, parents emphasise the nuclear family and do not share the responsibility for the education of their children with a husband's collaterals and their spouses in case these have children as well. This conspicuous absence of co-operation serves to enhance the self-esteem of mothers (and sometimes fathers or grandfathers) and while good parenting is demonstrated, gender roles and ideals of motherhood are confirmed and publicly played out.

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121 It is important to note that the prevalence of extended families coexists with an enhanced emphasis on the moral unit of the nuclear family. A comparable example is provided by Jeffery, Jeffery and Lyon, who state that low levels of co-operation between neighbours and relatives even after childbirth are common in rural U.P.(Jeffery, Jeffery and Lyon 1988:48ff).

6.3.2.1 Reforming motherhood

The nineteenth century discourse on new Indian womanhood focused on the need to educate women in order to run a household and bring up their children in a manner that enabled them to excel in studies and gain employment in service or the professions (see Banerjee 1989; Sangari 1993:19ff; Walsh 1995; Bose (1995) 1996). Yet it was rather the structure than the content of these reformist approaches which seems to have had an impact. Thus many educational needs are attended to by paid specialists while mothers and grandmothers are mostly responsible for providing the infrastructure for schooling. It is therefore apparent that literacy and education for women and changes in the observance of restrictions in movements were introduced as means to enable them to deal with their children's schooling and promote related contacts with the outside world. Women themselves are quite aware of the aims of female education and state again and again that girls today may need a university degree to marry into a "good" family and be capable of producing educated children. They are convinced that education is of use in the domestic sphere to a certain extent, that literacy is a prerequisite for running a household (e.g. for reading important articles in newspapers) and numeracy makes a good organiser. Literacy is furthermore frequently used to enhance the quality of leisure activities by reading religious books and women's magazines. Borthwick and Engels, amongst others, observe that attempts to reform female education resulted in a changed outlook and thus altered their lives more fundamentally than the ideal of the educated mother implied (see Borthwick 1984; Engels 1996). However conclusions drawn from written sources and accounts of *bhadramahilas'* experiences may lead to an exaggerated picture of changing attitudes towards female education. Even though

it appears that the role of the married woman as a carer was not consciously challenged, those women who recorded the impact of education were often those who could shift boundaries in the name of motherhood. This does however apply only to a minority of all women.

The lower middle-class version of new motherhood facilitated women's involvement in children's education but not their emancipation from a caring and serving role within this context. On the contrary, this type of family status production work turned women into providers of non-specialised services as part of a conscious investment in future earners (Papanek (1979)1989:101ff). But while their better-off counterpart gained the opportunity to take up employment and use servants and drivers to fulfil the more manual tasks involved in children's schooling, mothers in the families we are concerned with can only produce successful students if they perform the least attractive tasks themselves and supervise the organisation of rather than schooling itself. Thus they exempt their children (including girls) from housework and save money by performing most related tasks like delivering children at school, shopping, searching for tuition, cooking of special food for high performance etc. themselves. The ideal of the educated *bhadramahila* does not influence the lives of women belonging to these families as strongly as historical accounts may suggest. Only a very privileged minority among middle-class women entered higher education and freely chosen employment or made use of opportunities unknown to their mothers.

The assumedly old fashioned feminine ideal did however support the development of the private and domestic sphere as opposed to the public domain and helped to create conscious efforts to impose new motherhood in its most functional form. While status-production work is undertaken by all middle-class

women in this context, the effectiveness and depth of involvement in different categories of such work differ from group to group. Thus a lower-middle-class family where sons are expected to work as government employees uses the resource of female labour differently from an upper-middle-class family whose aspirations focus on women's employment in teaching or the professions. It furthermore appears that in relation to what can be achieved in the respective setting, women's work is a crucial factor in the overall strategy employed by a family or a household. Variations exist although the same ideologies of female devotion, maternal love and duty as well as group specific chores are used to guide and justify married women's preoccupation with the domestic domain. While all women perform some status-production work, some are restricted to "unskilled" labour which takes up most of their time, while others are in a position to use the services of the urban poor to do these jobs and devote themselves to the cultural skills of their children and the advancement of useful social contacts.[122]

6.3.3. *Bichar-achar* and the domestic sphere as locus of significant distinctions

While education was one priority, another interest of the reformers comprised of the socio-religious practice followed by women and members of the low-castes. Most beliefs and activities not embraced by the high-caste and highly educated members of the *bhadralok* elite were branded superstition and defined as unsuitable for the newly emerging middle class. As Banerjee has shown, a remarkably rich popular and female culture disappeared by the end of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless many of the so-called traditional systems of

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122 It is only this latter group who match Caplan's account of middle-class women's organisations and Roy's description of the psycho-social environment of Bengali women (Roy (1972) 1975); Caplan 1985).

knowledge and beliefs merged with moderate forms of reformed religious practice and continue to inform the life of average middle-class women living in this area (Banerjee (1989)1990).

Rituals, "technologies", and customs are however subject to change and even though some were abandoned altogether, the definition of these socio-religious activities as "traditional culture" has allowed many idiosyncratic elements to survive.

If women are asked about the rituals, customs and rules governing the domestic sphere and their work, they refer to *bichar-achar* or customs of the house. *Bichar-achars* form part of a wider context of concepts dealing with purity and pollution, but refer to the most performative and contextual aspect of these if used in this context. In rural areas *bichar* signifies the village council in many regions of East Bengal and may be used in the sense of caste rules as well as more broadly in *desher achar* meaning the customs of a locality, region or country (see Davis 1983; Rozario 1992:47; Kotalova 1993:77ff; Gardner 1995:33).[123] Thus *bichar-achars* link the rules of the community with the practices observed in the house ideally constituting *samaj*, the sphere of the social. Concepts of purity and pollution are used to express the order so generated and are modified according to local needs, situative context and historical circumstances.

In everyday use the phrase signifies the customs of the house including rituals performed, vows observed, rules concerned with hygiene, food, dress or even educational standards and women's mobility, in short the tradition of a house, family or line. It is assumed that all Bengalis (excluding Muslims) observe

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123 These related meanings are reflected in the definition of the terms in dictionaries which translate *bichar* as "established practice" and *achar* as "religious rule". Although Inden defines

bichar-achar but differences between castes, class and families are expected. Thus the *bichar-achar* category denominates markers of the domestic and defines it as the predominant arena of tradition, hierarchy and individualism.

The creation of this social framework is mostly women's work and the more conservative women in the *para* observe numerous rituals their counterparts in other settings dismissed two generations ago (e.g. Banerji (1991)1993:36ff). Many rules and rituals are still accepted among all families across castes and sometimes class so that the ideal of *bichar-achars* distinguishes and unites at the same time. Women related to the same house take part in the *bichar-achars* of the *bangsha* in different ways, as the mother-in-law is the guardian of traditions all in-married women ought to follow. Although the out-marrying daughter watched her elders and participated in some of the practices she will not necessarily be allowed to observe all of these customs in her *shashur bari*. While major religious acts will never be affected by the influence of a mother-in-law (such as a Christian woman worshipping Mother Mary in her in-laws' house), the role of *bichar-achars* as rules and practice related to the status of the line or family is at stake in case the in-married woman tries to introduce her own customary use of e.g. clothes and food preparations. These two fields will not be compromised and a daughter-in—law is forced to adhere to practices of the women in her husband's line.

Common to all Bengali households are some of the women's rituals (*stri achars*) described above which form part of auspicious occasions (like marriages or the consecration of a house) where these are performed alongside shastric rituals referred to as *shastrachars* (see Fruzzetti (1982) 1990:121). On certain

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bichar as "judgement" and "discrimination" these are aspects of a wider and more complex concept (Inden 1976:45).

occasions only women participate in rituals and only few highly educated families abandoned such customs in favour of more "cultured" proceedings mostly involving men and/or Brahmins or religious sites.

In the ritual domain, the different *bratas* performed by women in groups or alone are of special importance, as the female members of the house can conduct them independently, and according to their status in the household, are free to elaborate, dismiss and add such rituals. As discussed below, *bratas* are still extremely popular in this setting and a core is performed by all the Bengali Hindu women. While Marwari women do not perform this type of rituals, Bengali Christians observe fasts and vows like *bratas* which are devoted to different saints.

In everyday discourse, the language of auspiciousness used by scholars to analyse rules observed is not employed by Bengalis in the neighbourhood unless specific *bratas*, *pujas*, marriage dates or mysterious illnesses and the like are discussed. It therefore does not serve as a framework for socio-religious activities of all groups and individuals concerned (e.g. Raheja 1988). The terms *mangal*, *subha* and *kalyan* may be used in specific situations to identify the auspiciousness of a moment, action or symbol etc., and women express the need to observe certain domestic rules and rituals in terms of the *bichar-achar*.

6.3.3.1 *Bichar-achar* related to food

While all sorts of customs and individual traditions of a family or house can be described as *bichar-achar*, specific attention is paid to the observance of various rules linked to the preparation and consumption of food. Almost all everyday *bichar-achar* are related to the impurity affecting food and eaters. Most types of

food are easily polluted and some are *etho* (transmitting impurity or impure). The

term *etho* is often used in the lexical meaning of "leftover after eating of food and

drink, on the plate after eating, of things other than food that came into contact

with leavings of someone's meal or with cooked food, not washed after eating

(*etho mukh*), *etho khata* leavings after a meal, *etho para* to remove the plate when

dinner is over". All the phrases mentioned indicate the transmitted impurity and

thus hierarchy of states and persons implied by *etho* which as Davis points out

may be inherent or depend on exchange. Different varieties of food and its

preparation and various types of exchange are part of the concept as signified by

the cleaning of the plate undertaken by a person lower in rank (Davis 1983:

75ff).[124]

Food is not only categorised according to its raw or cooked status but the

more complex notion of the permeability and effect of processing with reference to

impurity (see Cantlie 1981). Distinctions depend on the way it was prepared and

the status it has at the time of speaking and whether or not the food was touched

by eaters and thus turned into a spoilt left-over. These notions reflect the

acknowledged concern with social relations and the consumption of different types

of food, but furthermore indicate that impurity and purity are often qualities

inherent in particular food and preparations (see Davis 1983:75ff). Thus in the

urban setting the implicit impurity is emphasised more strongly than the effect of

social hierarchy (like caste) indicated in rules about commensality. Such pre-

occupations with the "moral significance of food" are equally important among

124 Sometimes the adjective *shokri* or the term *jhuta* (partly eaten; dinner plates etc. not yet washed after being used in dining) are used for particular impurities subsumed under the general Bengali phrase *etho*. According to some respondents, meat and fish are strictly speaking *shokri* rather than *etho*, because the latter term is reserved for the impurity transmitted by rice. Das

rural Vaishnavite Gossains in Assam and thus a regional emphasis seems to exist (Cantlie 1981). Here as in Calcutta, food processing and consumption centre around the notion of boiled rice as *anna* (life-food), which represents a natural product in process of transformation through the body into human life itself" but is prone to impurity by virtue of being boiled in water and therefore softened (Cantlie 1981:51). While rice is affected by processing, fish and meat are always *etho* because they are associated with death.[125] Items accompanying rice like vegetables as well as the utensils, eaters and those serving boiled rice are capable of transmitting impurity, a state called *chuva* in the Assamese context and rendered *etho* in Bengal. Rice is *etho* at different stages depending on the permeability and softness of the grain. Thus *dhan* (unhusked rice) is not *etho* and used regularly during *pujas*, while husked rice (*chal*) even if raw is prone to contamination due to the removal of the outer layers. Husked rice in turn is less *etho* if airdried (*atap chal*) than the parboiled variety (*siddho chal*) and therefore used for guests, rituals and to feed the very young and sick. It should also be eaten by widows and most middle-class consumers prefer *atap chal* for everyday meals.

Certain types of food are on the other hand not *etho*, like milk-products, sugar and honey, *ghee* and particular types of dried rice, such as flattened rice (*chire*), all of which can be offered together with rice boiled in milk (*payesh*) and sweets made from cut milk (*channa*) cooked in *ghee* or syrup. The latter are offered as *prasad*, eaten to break a fast and shared in public. At the same time dishes prepared with *ghee* are seen as pure and can be shared with outsiders as long as vegetarian items are consumed. These items are not interpreted as proper

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remarks that the impurity affecting women's body through intercourse is referred to as *juthi* in Punjabi and notes that this type of pollution cannot be removed (Das 1988:200).

meals but represent a snack (*jolkhabar*) as opposed to a full rice-meal and may be given as a *tiffin* or purchased from a stall, but cannot substitute a meal because they lack the capacity to nourish.

Many *bichar-achars* are related to the state of food and cooking, and even though the modern housewife does not follow all the prohibitions imposed on those in contact with food many rules are to be observed if the purity and thus nurturing effect of foods and hygiene of the house are to be maintained. Thus women get up in the morning and change from their sleeping sari into a cooking sari and enter the kitchen only after a quick bath.

After cooking and consuming a meal, cooks and eaters take a bath and change again, and whereas men often eat *tiffins* or *jolkhabar* without bathing, women who stay at home observe these rules in most cases. The kitchen and all utensils used for cooking rice are *etho* after the process and have to be cleaned carefully. To touch them makes a purifying bath necessary.

One important aspect of women's work is directed towards auspiciousness brought about by observing different (female) rituals (like food-related rules, *bratas* and *pujas*). Traditionally all women in the house are involved in this task, as the unmarried woman is auspicious on certain occasions unless she is too old to marry. The married woman is the auspicious wife par excellence if she still can have children or has had a son, and even the widow so prone to sexual transgression and herself inauspicious in certain contexts, is given the task to perform rituals.

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125 Some respondents insisted that strictly speaking they are not *etho* but *amish* (impure) because these are not vegetarian dishes.

While all women can contribute to the auspicious states, the adequate time for them to do so depends on their performance of reproductive duties. Auspiciousness serves as an idiom to describe particular types of behaviour by persons who are, through the combination of sex, age and marital status, proponents of the successful fulfilment of active fertility. While most of the rules apply to men and women alike, women are impure on certain occasions and thus prohibitions to cook, enter the kitchen, wear new clothes and perform *pujas* are strictly observed during menstruation or after giving birth. An equally special set of ritual prohibitions is related to widows in the house, who, although they are treated more liberally than in the past, are subjected to food restrictions, do not wear bright coloured saris and jewellery and often observe a strict diet, even though younger widows may modify these rules. The *brata* called *ambubachi* during which elder widows are expected to fast and abstain from boiled rice (*bhat*) is often cited as an example of the contribution widows with children make to *bichar-achar*. Furthermore most widows in these families follow the ritual observations on the main day of *ambubachi* in the monsoon month of Ashar, when the goddess (or earth) is supposed to menstruate (see Samanta 1992:60-61; Kinsley (1986)1988:186-187).

The special link between female fertility, pollution and the *bichar-achar* complex can be exemplified by the rituals conducted during pregnancy (*shadh*) and the segregation after birth (previously in the *atur ghor* and today in hospital) which like *ambubachi* belong to the *bratas* discussed below. While these seem to refer to different effects (auspiciousness and health of mother and child and removal of pollution respectively), they are among those *bichar-achars* mentioned

by all women and observed in all houses even if seclusion is more symbolical than real and include prohibitions to touch certain foods.[126]

6.3.3.2 Status, customs of the house and women's work

In a more general sense, all rules relating to the separation between different spheres in the house like the outer or male area (*baithak khana*), *andor mohal* or *antahpur* (women's quarters of the past), the *puja* room (*thakur ghor*), bathroom, kitchen and bedrooms as well as rules related to *purdah* form part of *bichar-achar*. That these depend heavily on the status of a family, is apparent from the account of an elderly widow who described the difference in practices in her parents' house and the house of her wealthy in-laws "At first I found it difficult to adjust, they had so many strict rules and we (*the women*) stayed in the *andor mahal* completely secluded. We were not allowed to even look at the elder men in the house and when one of my favourite *dadas* died, I had to sneak into his room to see him for the last time. The women in that house never went out, and I was not used to that either because in my father's house we were all allowed to move within the *para*. They did not even have shoes because they did not need any. And then they had all these customs related to marriages like carrying the young bride on a silver tray around the groom during the rituals and so on. I did not know about these *bichar-achars* but I learnt about them". This indicates that in a wealthy house like this, *bichar-achar* also includes displays of status related to women's modesty and shame and conspicuous consumption and may therefore represent differentiating features rather than the unifying aspects related to

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126 It is interesting to note that here the medical or scientific discourse is attributed to traditional observations, which in turn makes the latter more acceptable. Thus women remark frequently that although unknown then, seclusion after birth was designed to protect from infections.

women's work in the domestic sphere. This aspect seems to be enhanced through the middle-class emphasis on the domestic sphere and the decrease of caste-related signs of identification. On a basic level such changes are reflected in the almost complete disappearance of prohibitions on commensality and prevalent restrictions of certain foods in the public sphere and in a different context new elaborate rituals and consumption patterns displayed on the occasion of weddings and *pujas*.

Even though the factors for determining status may be challenged and notions of class extended, the tradition or customs of the family which are used to legitimise these are closely linked to women's work. That boundaries are often expressed in terms of women's "adjustment" to these rules of the community or family (as in case of inter-*jati* marriages cited above) indicates the relevance of partly changing practices based on traditional categories. Contrary to other indicators of status which refer to the acquired and achieved attributes of wealth, education and partly marriage, *bichar-achar* belong to the sphere of inherited and internalised group status, whether this is related to the family, the line or the caste. Thus Mayer notes that the emphasis on differences in "ways of life" (*rahan-jahan*) or *khan-pin* (food and drink) between castes denotes the general domestic habits of a group in rural central India (Mayer 1996:60ff). A comparable non-bourgeois notion of the domestic sphere provides the basis for middle-class distinctions in the areas of hygiene, ritual purity, domesticity, parenthood etc. It can therefore be stated that women's work and the domestic sphere are crucial areas through which such divergent types of esteem and status are produced and reproduced.

It is apparent that the adherence to these rules requires specialised knowledge and elaborate practices as well as resources. Married women are expert

in preparing food according to time of the day, season, age and state of health of the consumers, relationship and membership in the household according to context. But *bichar-achars* also include the less obvious skills necessary to preserve and store ingredients and prepared food, produce home-remedies and cleaning agents for various purposes and rooms. Another important aspect is related to the preparation of the cooked food to be offered (*bhog*) and ingredients needed for *pujas*. This "work for the rituals" (*anusthaner kaj*) has to be done in accordance with specific rules and all offerings (*prasad* and *bhog*) are prepared in a separate space. In most houses a veranda or the space in front of the *puja*-room are used for this purpose for fear of pollution by a hearth and utensils used to cook everyday rice and fish. In some instances women will be preoccupied with the house-*pujas* for more than two weeks and a minimum of three women is necessary to cope with the workload. But in all houses some *bratas* and smaller *pujas* are performed which are planned and executed by women, who are participants and act as *bratinis* in these rituals.

Many of these practices are common across caste and class boundaries and create a setting within which women constitute a *jati* through assumedly common preoccupations and interests, skills and knowledge. It is however obvious that different groups of women deal with the obligation to maintain *bichar-achar* rules according to class, caste and generation and that some can hire servants to deal with the more practical side, while differences in age guide the adherence to the rules and the hierarchical structure involved.

One of the main duties of married women and mothers is to maintain and continue the rules which are linked to the *bichar-achars* and the concept of *etho*, and women talk in length about the different prohibitions to be observed. They are

however aware that "science" and "hygiene" often contradict these "traditional" patterns and argue that while some of the customs are not "healthy" others are congruent with modern views. In order to make this point, knowledge of these rules and the assumed scientific content of different discourses are linked within a pattern in which "tradition" precedes modern medicine but is legitimised by it. However, the basic assumptions about the impurity transmitted by certain foods, the necessity to keep away from impurities occurring in certain contexts and to observe the related rituals of cleaning the body, clothes, utensils and rooms on special occasions are never questioned.

6.3.4 *Bratas*: Rituals of the body: the cultured nature of reproduction

A main preoccupation of women in these contexts is the performance of rituals like *pujas* and specific female observations known as *bratas*.

While women's roles in rituals in general and the specific rites categorised as domestic rituals performed by women have been described in different regional settings and contexts, they are normally not included in an analysis of women's work. Thus Wadley provides a detailed description of different rituals performed by women in rural U.P., while McGee emphasises the scriptural basis and personal experience of votive rites (*vratas*) among mostly middle-class informants in western Maharashtra whereas Wadley outlines different rituals performed by village women in Tamil Nadu as related to the concept of *shakti* (Wadley 1975, 1980; McGee 1991). Apart from the different obligations of women to contribute to the main festivals like Durga *puja*, house-*pujas* or smaller community events, some *pujas* and *bratas* are performed by all women. While such rituals are popular among Bengali Hindus as *bratas,* Fruzzetti provides examples of

women's domestic rituals, widespread among Bengali Muslims (Fruzzetti 1981; Fruzzetti (1982) 1990). These rituals form an important part of the activities women consider as their work and are categorised as *kaj* in the given context.

Bratas as social practice divide women into groups according to the life-cycle and expected reproductive behaviour, and both categorisations are expressed in terms of the auspiciousness of a rite or a person. Because almost all *bratas* are related to fertility and the body, women of all ages perform some of these rituals with married women participating in most of them. In the urban setting, most *bratas* related to nature and the fertility of the soil have disappeared and none of the women performed any of these apart from the Itu-*brata* devoted to the goddess governing the fertility of crops and humans alike (see Maity 1988). Like in other settings many *bratas* deal with the fulfilment of married women or their daughters, an aspect emphasised by McGee in her account of the textual sources and aspirations for rituals performed by Maharashtrian women (McGee 1991).

6.3.4.1 *Bratas* performed

In urban Bengal the Itu-*brata* is equally seen as enhancing the chances of a happy marriage for young girls, but rites performed by unmarried girls are rare, thus this ritual may be interpreted as belonging to the decreasing number of *bratas* related to the quality of the future marital relation of an unmarried girl. Amongst these *kumari bratas* (*bratas* of virgins), the *Shibratrir brata* is the most prominent. To perform this very popular rite on the day of *Shibratri* in the month of Baishak, the unmarried girl forms a *lingam* from clay and performs a *puja* like her mother does daily. Afterwards she is taken to the temple where she offers to Lord Shiva who despite his habit of smoking *ganja* and upsetting his father-in-law is constructed

as the ideal husband. This imagery has been reported to be present in different regional traditions, thus while Roy and Maity present the Bengali version of the idealised image such rituals are common in the South as well (Roy 1972 (1975):38; Maity 1988:69-70; Fuller 1992:182). As one young woman described it "*Shib* is the ideal husband and all his smoking and drinking does not change that, because what we are looking for is someone who demands as little as *Shib*. He does not need an elaborate *puja* and is happy with some wild flowers as offerings, besides he is a faithful husband".

A different category of *bratas* are those concerned with a happy married life and focus on the health of the husband and fertility of the wife. A variety of these *bratas* are performed by woman already married with or without children. These *bratas* are much more focused, and widely observed, such as different *bratas* directed towards Goddesses like Shosthi who is worshipped on the sixth day of month. Like with other *pujas* and *brata*s a day in the week or a month is designated as auspicious to worship a particular deity but special *puja*-days exist on which specific deities are worshipped. Shosthi, often depicted as a cat but worshipped in form of a stone by West Bengalis, is widely seen as a Goddess watching the well-being of children and as bestower of fertility. Mothers and mothers-to-be observe the common *nil shosthi* in the month of Chaitra, when offerings are given to Shosthi in the Shiva-temple, and while *ashok shosthi* in the same month is observed at home, women visit the *pandal* (seat of the goddess) on the sixth day during the main Durga *puja*. The fourth ritual for this deity is *jamai shosthi* celebrated in the month of Jyaistha on which occasion the son-in-law is invited for a feast to the house of his wife's parents who present him with a complete set of new clothes. As common with most *bratas* married women fast,

perform *pujas* and give offerings for the Goddess themselves. The stories read on the occasion of Shosthi *pujas* are among the most popular in Bengal and many originate from medieval legends depicting female virtues familiar from the epics but dressed into folk-tales like the legend of Behula and Lokhindar. Thus even those who do not perform the *bratas* themselves are exposed to ideals like the selfless behaviour of Behula who like Sita brought back her husband from the dead.

Shosti worshipping is related to the belief that the goddess can bestow fertility on a married women and protect her children. In the latter concept fertility and the more general aspect of a happy married life are linked, and both aspects are hard to tell apart in many of the rites. But while the duties of married women constitute the subject of many *bratas* fertility is only one of the concerns. Sometimes more emotional aspects are equally dealt with, in which case *bratas* become more preventive measures. Thus some women perform the *bipod tarini brata* (the "avoiding danger *brata*"), which is said to appease a jealous husband, but more common are different *bratas* for a husband's health and long-life. All the *bratas* dealing with fertility and the well-being of children and husbands are extremely important to women, and while they serve to emphasise the fertile status of married women the dependency of the wife is ritually reaffirmed.

Apart from the general rituals, specific *bratas* may be performed to gain particular boons (*bor*). In these rituals the obligatory fasting, performing of *puja* and reading of stories is supplemented by vows (*manut*) linked to gifts and offerings for a deity which are given after the respective aim has been achieved. It is this practice that gained such observances the status of "votive rites" or vows (see McGee 1991). Thus a special offering, mostly special foods, a sari or a

regular *puja* may be promised to the Goddess in question and some of the *pujas* performed in a house originate from such deals. Because this practice is result-oriented and not directed towards general benevolence of the deity addressed, such vows are kept secret and are discredited by educated Hindus as superstitious. They are however very commonly undertaken in cases of childlessness, exams, employment and disease and may be delivered in temples, churches or the seat of a *pir* (*dorga*) respectively. Nevertheless not all such rituals include vows, and in the majority of cases, the performance of the ritual and the desired effect may not require a vow to be successful (Mc Gee 1991:71).

The way these *bratas* and *pujas* are observed is fairly similar in different houses and whether or not a *brata* is performed depends on the tradition of the house, the interest of individual women in the ritual and the resources available to buy the necessary accessories and perform the rites. The adherence to these traditions in the in-laws house is however often contested terrain, and although a daughter-in-law is expected to perform all the rituals common in the family, Bengali idiosyncretism allows for a certain degree of resistance to the mother-in-law's wishes as well as the exclusion of a daughter-in-law from certain rites. Thus a daughter-in-law explained that her mother-in-law introduced a *Kali-puja* after her husband recovered from an illness and prevented a second daughter-in-law from performing the ritual as long as she was alive. In turn some daughters-in-law drew on the tradition in their parents' house in order to refuse the performance of specific rituals in the in-laws' house. In cases where parents-in-law resisted a love-marriage and in particular inter-caste or inter-community marriages, mothers-in-law regularly express their dislike of the match by excluding the in-married woman from rituals and may even refuse to perform *bratas* like the *Subhachani*

brata on behalf of married children's happiness and fertility (see Maity 1988:70ff). This type of behaviour is seen as a grave insult and a woman treated in this way is bitter about the inauspiciousness inflicted upon her husband and son by her mother-in-law.[127] Thus *brata*s unite and divide women, show their adherence to ideals of devoted wives and mothers and more often than not serve as an expression of fissions between mother- and daughter-in-law.

In the urban context the majority of *brata*s are performed by women belonging to the same "house" at the prescribed place and during a specified period of time. While most of the practices are directed towards the family in a neighbourhood like this, some *brata*s and *pujas* are to be performed not for personal gains or members of the family but the community (*samaj*). Thus women's opinions are divided as to whether women in the community should collectively observe Shitala-*pujas* or not but many feel that to safeguard the well-being of all inhabitants of the neighbourhood, it should be observed. However, here like in other instances, community-*pujas* took the place of *brata*s performed on behalf of the safety and well-being of a village and a city like the *bhaduli brata* mentioned by Ray (Ray 1961:43). Most women participate in the rituals performed during different community-*pujas* and conduct some rituals at home. That the difference between *pujas* and *brata*s may fade into the background can be exemplified by the most important regular *pujas* and *brata*s which are devoted to Lokkhi. All women in the sample observed the weekly Lokkhi *puja* in the house, which is by style and content a *brata* performed on behalf of the well-being and prosperity of the family by married women with children. The main Lokkhi *puja* is

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127 That the reasoning behind such patterns depends entirely on the individual case is clear from examples in which a Christian girl entered the house of her Hindu in-laws. In such cases the latter

however celebrated after Kali *Puja* and the community erects a *pandal* and orders

a statue, while the main observances takes place in the house. Even though a priest

is today expected to perform the Lokkhi *puja* in the morning and install the deity

in the small idol (*murti*), the housewife functions as *bratini* and her food-offerings,

alpona s (rice-flour designs) and *bratas* provide the ritual context within which the

service of the priest is situated. Here like in other contexts, the difference between

brata and *puja* is blurred. Thus women are expected to take part in the rituals

during the *Pujas* in their neighbourhood culminating in the special offerings

presented by all married women in the *para* on the eighth day of Durga *puja*

(*asthma din*), without which the celebration of the *puja* would be inauspicious.

They are nevertheless marginal in that they are never members of the committee

organising the events and remain the ritual specialists during those performances

which take place in the household and are centred around the family.

6.3.4.2 Changing performance of *bratas*

Women's rituals are equally important as markers of time and link history and

continuity of a line to events in the lives of individuals who add and change *bratas*.

Bratas have been described as the "true religion of Bengal" because

women's rituals form part of all rites taking place in the household (see Ray

1961:10; Dutt 1990:95). In many instances *bratas* and *pujas* became

indistinguishable as the services of a priest are used on both occasions before the

women of the house perform their rituals. But even though the diminishing variety

of *bratas* is bemoaned, the importance of some of the customary rites cannot be

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may or may not consent to the marriage and can decide whether to allow the Christian girl to
participate in *bratas* and *pujas*.

denied. Thus *bratas* linked to fertility, a happy married life and well-being of husbands and children are still very popular, while the performance of *bratas* dealing with the agricultural cycle and diseases declines in the urban setting.

Traditionally *bratas* were inspired by the desire to achieve a certain aim, which was symbolised by an object (e.g. a *lingam* by a young girl as described by Sudha Mazumdar) or drawn in form of *brata alpona* (see Forbes 1977:36). The object or drawing was animated with a spell (*chhada*) followed by a story (*brata-kotha*). With increased literacy levels among urban women, the drawing of *alpona* s and the depiction of objects of desire like jewellery and symbols of fertility during everyday *bratas* have become less common even though such objectifications are still used in particular cases. Moreover, women emphasise the need to fast rather than the drawing of *alpona* s and thus the importance of sacrifice and self-control as the most important aspect of domestic rituals which are thought to be enhanced by the moral content of the stories.

Literacy brought a high degree of homogenisation to the world of women's rites and because all women use the same almanacs (*panjika*) and editions of stories related to *bratas*, those included into these books are the most widely practised. Among these *bratas* the most common ones are related to goddesses like Lokkhi, Shosthi and Manasa. There are different ways of worshipping these deities but most popular among middle-class women are those practices which refer to anthropomorphic forms of goddesses and can be conducted in the house. However, sometimes worshipping of a god or goddess in open space or a temple is necessary and thus *pujas* and *bratas* related to Manasa, Shitala, Shosthi and the god Sonni. But while *bratas* and *pujas* for Lakshmi are expected of women, the latter *bratas* are often treated as superstitious and may be denounced by educated

women, who would not perform rituals on the basis that the deities involved do not form part of shastric beliefs and reformed religion.

They nevertheless represent a fixed part of the ritual calendar for most women in the neighbourhood as they are related to health and the well-being of the body, and frequently Shosthi and Sitala are worshipped by those whose relatives fell prey to various illnesses, mostly contagious diseases. While in upper middle-class neighbourhoods community-*pujas* for deities like Manasa or Shitala are rarely performed, the latter are worshipped publicly in neighbourhoods such as this and often attended by women. With the exception of Kali, all deities worshipped by upper middle-class families are "clean" and benevolent anthropomorphic idols common all over Northern India.[128] But most women in the neighbourhood distinguish between the more sophisticated deities (like Durga) and less dignified forms often depicted through objects (pots or baskets in case of Lokkhi; stone in case of Sonni etc.) (see Ray 1961:22).

Although Borthwick and Banerjee among others emphasise the efforts of members of the *bhadralok* elite to change female cultural practices it seems as if these attempts were less successful than the literature on *bhadramahilas* wants us to believe (see Banerjee (1989)1990; Borthwick 1990). Only a small group of women did abandon *bratas* and different non-shastric *pujas* altogether, the majority of women observe specific rituals which have been chosen in accordance with social change related to processes of urbanisation. Thus in one of the earliest works on such rituals Abindranath Tagore distinguishes between three main types of *bratas*, namely *bratas* of unmarried girls (*kumari bratas*), married women (*nari*

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128 This division reflects caste and class but equally often hints at differences between high caste shastric rituals and Vaishnavite traditions.

bratas) and shastric *bratas* (cited in Baggchi 1922:63). Many of the shastric

bratas still form part of all major *pujas*, like *bratas* accompanying the placing of

the *ghat* (jar) filled with Gangeswater or purification of the five *gavya* (products

of the cow). Among all rituals the choice of *bratas* today inevitably emphasises the

married woman and hardly any *kumari bratas* are performed by young girls.[129]

6.3.4.3 Rituals of the body and fertility

In contemporary urban Bengal the most strictly adhered to *bratas* and *pujas* are

the ones directly related to health and fertility and thus performed by married

women with living husbands and children (*eyo*) within the wider ritual context.

Das mentions numerous ways in which women are held responsible for the

physical domain through practices of purification, observance of taboos,

motherhood etc. Women see themselves as the main source of physical well-being

and general nourishment of the family (here nuclear family) in their role as Lokkhi

(Laxmi) of the house (*ghriholokkhi*). Some techniques and notions relating to

childbirth and the treatment of certain diseases have been adopted and substituted

older practices like seclusion after birth and certain offerings to Shitala. They

nevertheless perform *bratas* and *pujas* on behalf of children and husbands often in

addition to medical treatment. Furthermore the practices are supported by beliefs

in the healthy effects on the *bratini* herself (the concentrated listening to a "good"

story, the fasting, the auspicious effects) are given as reasons to conduct the

rituals.

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129 While the more explicitly positive aspects of sexuality in unmarried girls dealing with their desires were erased those relating to implicit bodily control are emphasised (see Das 1988:196-198).

As described above women are married in order to have children and reproduction is the main concern of the entire family but of utmost importance to the status of women. While medical facilities are widely available to women living in Calcutta and different services like ante- and postnatal care or abortions are routinely used today, fertility in general is not seen as "natural" or automatic. In effect all women below fifty who gave birth in the city used the services of doctors and hospitals but participated in *shadh*-ceremonies (rituals of "desired food" on behalf of the baby and partly the mother) often during the third, fifth and seventh, but in all but one case the ninth month. *Shadh* rituals are women's rituals which serve a number of health and fertility related purposes but are a crucial expression of social relations as these are ideally celebrated in the house of a married woman's in-laws and subsequently her parents' house. On the occasion *pujas* and *bratas* may be performed and the pregnant woman is treated almost like a goddess in that she is served specific and favourite foods and may receive gifts. Physically these rituals are thought to bring about the "ripening" of the child and may be called *kacha* or *paka shadh* but are also thought to enhance the likelihood of a safe delivery. The overall purpose of the *bratas* is to facilitate the safe birth of a healthy, strong male child in both families.

Within this setting fertility is a quality of a woman and a couple which ought to be brought about and cannot be expected. Thus mothers-in-law nervously observe the first few years of marriage hoping that the chosen girl will provide the desired offspring. To use a variety of "professional" and customary means to secure fertility in women belonging to the line is not only socially accepted but expected behaviour and often openly discussed in the family. *Bratas* and some *pujas* (e.g. those for Laxmi and Shosthi) are to be interpreted within this context

and even the stories read on these occasions are intended to "ease the mind and bring about good thoughts so that a woman gets pregnant and has healthy children". This applies equally to the category of *bratas* described by Mc Gee as contributing to marital felicity, because in the words of one married women performing some of these "the main thing is to achieve peace (*shanti*), that is why we perform these, that is why we pray and do the *pujas* and sing devotional songs. Without peace of mind there will be no family and no children or grandchildren". It is obvious that one does therefore not adhere to *bratas* and *pujas* because these are traditional but in order to achieve a result, the well-being and prosperity of the family and the community epitomised in images and stories of Lokkhi (see Mazumdar 1995; Greenough 1982:23ff). Even though, as Banerjee rightly observes, the range of such rituals has diminished the issues addressed cannot be entrusted to medical professionals alone, as these belong to the outside sphere (Banerjee (1989)1990). Overall well-being has to be promoted by the ritual contributions of women and thus fuelled from inside the domestic domain.

The performance of *pujas* and *bratas* is interpreted as accompanied by fasting and other bodily practices like ritual baths and changing of clothes. Like eating, fasting is not only conceived of as extremely exhausting and weakening but is seen as a genuine means to control the female body and limit sexual desire. Abstinence from complete meals (*bhat*) requires and develops a healthy body and a strong mind in equal measure, even though complete fasts are never maintained. Fasting is interpreted as a sign of inner strength and control over human desires and strict practices are attributed to Muslims who are said to possess more will-power as exemplified in the daily fast kept during *Ramona*. Hindus, and in particular men are considered to lack the physical and psychological qualities to

maintain fasts. Women start this "work" from early onwards and young girls are encouraged to abstain from certain foods on special occasions in order to practice control over physical needs.

In what may be taken as a female counter-ideology women are praised for their mental and physical strength and the "work" they are doing, which is nevertheless constantly devalued because of the impure state women's bodies exemplify and the low social status attributed to the ritual observations of women. Furthermore, most men would emphasise the fact that indeed any woman married into the house could perform these rituals and thus minimise the individualising effect of *bratas* and *pujas* chosen. Therefore the source of women's strength and basis of their claims of superior control over the body is closely linked to the fact that such practices are necessary in the case of women exposed to different types of pollution, the work of cooking and cleaning as well as giving birth and the physical part of family life. Within this context it is the general exposure to these influences as well as the assumed lack of self-control among women which is emphasised by men more strongly which leads to practices drawing on the ascetic ideal. But while men may enter a satisfactory spiritual state and bodily purity even as householders women are bound to try and are still again and again tempted, polluted and shown to be weak because mere bodily strength is only one aspect of the achieved control. It is however clear, that these middle-class women insist that the overarching hierarchy is determined by complementarily which allows women and men to strive for the ideal with differing results but denies that cultured women are incapable of refinement and a degree of ascetic achievement.[130]

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130 The gender aspect of self-control in the ritual context has been discussed by Parry with reference to grief (see Parry 1994:152ff).

Women are convinced that through fasts and the processes of pregnancy and birth they become stronger than men. Thus many women emphasise that men may be stronger in the mind and active in the outside world but women are physically stronger and possess more self-control than men. This has however no effect on the ideal marital relation within which women are devoted to their families and come second to their husbands regardless of their influence in things domestic, because women rely on more self-control in order to keep their bodies and minds peaceful and pure. Much of the work women do is thus directed towards facilitating reproduction in a more general sense, which has to be brought about by actively influencing fate, preparing the mind and the body of the young woman as well as the married wife, positive marital relations, and the production of children.

6.4 Conceptualising women's work in/as the domestic domain

Married women's lives are centred around the household and the needs of children and they conventionally regard every activity undertaken in this context as work (*kaj*). Thus a woman would refer to the "work" of rituals including *bratas, pujas* and mourning rituals, the "work" of cooking and cleaning and the "work" of having sex, giving birth and raising children. All this constitutes work which contrary to what is assumed in other contexts is not rendered invisible as such but emphasised by the actors as important contribution to everyday life (e.g. Jeffery, Jeffery and Lyon 1988: 56). It seems that on the contrary the emphasis placed on women's work as mothers and housewives provides the vehicle by which their economic contribution is marginalised and the ideology of gender hierarchies sustained. The notion of complementary and hierarchical roles provides the

context within which one can distinguish between the male and the female sphere constructed as interdependent and linked but not equivalent. Therefore this approach to domestic and "housework" does not provide a different discourse on women's reproductive work, and female dependency as well as the superior nature of male wage-labour are emphasised by men and women alike. Most men of this strata are in white collar employment. Thus the difference between the activities men and women conduct is marked in terms of the skills acquired and the activities undertaken outside the house which are remunerated through a salary or the profits made. Even in those cases where women are conscious of their direct contribution to men's business by entertaining guests and helping with the accounts, the ideology of seclusion (see chapter 7) prevents a different view on their work and defines them as housewives and mothers (see Sharma 1986: 129).

Thus every woman would point out that different types of women's work are important and self-consciously assert that without women the family and household would not survive or maintain a high status but that still all women are dependent on a husband and a son to be able to conduct these duties. Only few women who are in prestigious (but not necessarily well paid) employment are very assertive about their contribution to the family income and the different types of work they are performing which can be compared to male positions. It is clearly the dependent nature of female work and not the invisibility which accounts for the inferior status of the activities (many of which are manual as well) and the persons closely related to it.

Thus raising children, cooking, washing dishes and clothes, entertaining guests and various ritual tasks are far from invisible and middle-class women self-consciously describe such activities as time-consuming and exhausting. But

contrary to male wage-earning activities the work of women is related to special skills acquired by practice under the supervision of a senior housewife, and although such "crafts" are learnt rather than inherited women are *qua* gender capable and destined to fulfil these duties as part of their *Sharma*.[131]

Such concepts are strongly influenced by the redefinition of the domestic sphere in relation to gender identities which formed part of nineteenth century nationalist discourse and led to a particular ideal of domesticity in urban Bengal (see Chatterjee 1993; (1992) 1995; Bose (1995)1996). While the emergence of these notions can be interpreted as result of discourses on Bengali womanhood as part of nationalist aspirations in a late nineteenth century setting, Radian emphasises that the same tendencies to depict the outside world as modern and the domestic sphere as traditional are inherent in contemporary consumer culture and media representations (Radian 1993). While the distinctions described above reflect existing group boundaries within the locality the role of women as signifiers of "Bengalis" draws on variations on the same theme prevalent in Bengali consciousness since colonial times. Within this context women's domestic role became formulated against the influence of "western" ideas and the feminine caring homemaker figured as part of a traditional value-oriented alternative. This domestic sphere symbolising "Bengalis" was later extended to depict the "Indian" as opposed to the foreign. Today the same images demarcate separate groups within the middle-class category and across class boundaries.

Middle-class women in Calcutta assert that the role of homemaker they ought to fulfil is adequately represented in the media and public discourse. Thus

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131 There exists a wide range of literature to supply expertise on certain aspects of motherhood in the form of popular women's magazines like Sananda and books.

Bengali soap operas watched daily by those with grown up children confirm their own role as mothers and housewives and address many of the contradictions which emerge within and between generations. Talking about the soap *"Shanti"* an elderly mother stated that she and most of her neighbours were addicted to soaps and all of them preferred the Bengali productions over Hindi serials because "they are about mothers and thus we identify with them, they are always about the problems in the joint family and how much a woman has to suffer for her children, she always keeps a cool head". Like in real life women's work in the house, their contributions to family and kinship ties and their spiritual guidance are not rendered insignificant but serve as a main focus of group identity.

Among Bengali women themselves the domestic sphere is the place where tasks or work (*kaj*) are undertaken. Contrary to other notions employment outside is expressed as "having a position" (*chakri*) or "having a business" etc. Women emphasise that the work they do is hard, and that they are linked with other women through the suffering and hardship borne. But women's work in the house cannot be undertaken by professionals, outsiders and institutions, because only married women have the correct and necessary knowledge about how certain activities have to be organised and undertaken. Within this context "housework" is not only taught by one generation to another, but constitutes a never ending set of chores most of which are a duty of all women regardless of class or caste distinctions. Thus women's duties and work are strongly associated with an overarching notion of Bengalis (Bengali "womanhood"), a construction based on the assumption that such activities remained unchanged over space and time.

Apart from the reproduction of class distinctions pointed out by Sangari amongst others, housework and women's duties in the house serve as powerful

markers of Bengali identity within the multicultural setting of a mixed Calcutta neighbourhood and define the correct and aspired way of life for a family as a unit (see Sangari 1993).[132] Within this rhetorical framework women constantly emphasise distinctions regarding food, marriage patterns and dress-codes between different groups. Most would depict the plight of Bengali women, their life and work, in relation to gender roles supposedly prevalent in other communities and assume (negatively evaluated) differences in domestic chores and duties. These distinctions focus on the amount of work women belonging to various backgrounds are thought to cope with and the effort involved in carrying out particular activities in the domestic sphere, especially cooking and the conduct of rituals. Certain tasks and obligations are nevertheless represented as "feminine duty" transcending caste, class and other group-identities, like cooking, birth and raising of children, marriage and building a home. These serve as points of mostly abstract identification with (often communal) "womanhood", as depicted in rituals and stories, films, novels, experienced through state policies (e.g. medical facilities etc.) and promoted by political parties in speeches and women's committees (see Hansen, n.d.; Haas 1994; Sarkar and Butalia 1995).

But while all these points emphasise the unity of women and support the co-operation of housewives and servants in the household, the very same features of women's lives differentiate between backgrounds and groups as well as families. Thus women's work in the domestic sphere as well as ideologies related to this type of work are crucial indicators of status as well as class and community-identity as far as middle-class women are concerned.

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132 Here like in other contexts Muslims are opposed to "Bengali" as far as Hindus and Christians are concerned.

Chapter 7: Locality, Seclusion and Change

Segregation, seclusion and the *purdah* system have been discussed intensively amongst scholars exploring gender issues in South Asian societies, and specific local as well as comparative approaches have been adapted to theorise a variety of practices and supporting ideologies. Segregation and related practices like veiling but even women's confinement to the house are common in all regions although complete seclusion (*purdah*) is more common in the North Western part of the subcontinent (e.g. Jeffery 1979; Papanek and Minault 1982; Gannet 1989; Gardner 1995; Raheja and Gold 1994). Though the degree of women's confinement to the domestic sphere varies, the ideology of separate spheres and related practices has been proven to fulfil three main objectives. These can be summed up as the control of female sexuality, the control of relationships between women and affines as related to property rights and wider kin-relations, and the control of women's access to the public sphere (see Sharma 1978,1979,1980; Jeffery 1979; Papanek 1982; Vatuk 1982). Apart from restrictions imposed on women in different contexts segregation and seclusion have been used on an ideological level within different political contexts as part of caste and community reformism as well as the nationalist and communal movements (see Engels 1989, 1996; Forbes 1982; Minault 1982; Bandyopadhyay 1990; Chatterjee 1993; Borthwick 1984; Sanyal 1981). Partly as an extension of processes within which gender roles and ideologies of seclusion were politicised and as a result of post-colonial interest-group politics, the language of segregation is a crucial factor in contemporary South Asian politics (e.g. Hansen n.d.; Sarkar 1995; Butalia 1995; Gardner 1998; Rouse 1998).

Within this chapter different contexts and ideologies related to former high status practices of seclusion are to be explored. Variations in the observance of behavioural and dress codes at different stages of life and changes within the last three generations are described. More recent modifications of existing notions as well as the incorporation of new avenues for status- related behavioural codes are to be identified and the relationship between space, mobility and class-based group identities as related to gender roles is outlined within the specific context of urban Bengal.

7.1 *Purdah,* segregation and the role of seclusion in Bengal

In nineteenth century Bengal strict seclusion (*purdah*) was only practised by affluent high status Hindu and Muslim families, who could afford to keep all women of the *bangsha* confined in the women's quarters (*andor mahal, antahpur* or *zenana*) (see Borthwick 1984; Karlekar (1991)1993). These women spent their married lives in the inner quarters of the house and were shielded from contacts with outsiders, whereas men belonging to the affinal family had to be avoided. While affluent families in Calcutta confined women to the inner courtyard and adjacent rooms which included the bedrooms, *puja* room and kitchen(s), the male or outer sphere consisted of the reception room or veranda (*baithak khana*) for visitors and the outer courtyards. In the majority of houses occupied by middle-class families the *baithak khana* represented the only outer room and led directly to one single inner courtyard which belonged to the inner realm (e.g. Karlekar (1991)1993:47). In wealthy families men belonging to the line did have access to the *antahpur* but married or elder male family members usually rather dealt with servants of both sexes than the women directly. All married women remained

confined to the female sphere only, whereas unmarried young girls would be allowed to move between the men's and the women's quarters (e.g. Forbes 1977; Debi 1980). This was however a very privileged setting and in most middle-class families the space available would not have allowed for such complete segregation. Judging from the layout of such houses which are very common in the area we are concerned with, it was common that men belonging to the family were indeed in direct contact with women in the house. Given the lack of sources regarding women belonging to such households one can only assume that the latter must have observed the appropriate rules of behaviour even more rigidly. In poorer families women could not be hidden from strangers and thus the veranda served as a reception area while female family members stayed inside the house during visits of unrelated men. In this case women could often be observed by neighbours etc. as they went about their daily chores and segregation was limited to the avoidance of eye contact and direct addressing of male elders and veiling (e.g. Day (1878)1970:25). Among all women complete seclusion was only observed during the confinement after giving birth. While upper-caste women belonging to wealthy families were enabled to travel in a closed palanquin (*palace*), a mode of transport still used by some mothers and mothers-in-law of the participants, women belonging to the middle strata rarely ventured out of the compound or house. Apart from industrial labourers, poor women, most of whom would work outside the house were bound to walk around but would still try to avoid strangers and to find work in the village or neighbourhood.[133]

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[133] From the nineteenth century onwards the percentage of Bengali women in agriculture or industry remained notoriously low (see Mukherjee 1989; Banerjee (1989) 1990).

The politics of segregation gained the attention of the colonial rulers who held seclusion and *purdah* responsible for many of the problems encountered among the "natives". Missionaries and "enlightened" colonial officers turned the discourse about practices of *purdah* and the women's quarters into an ideological weapon to prove the need for intervention (see Broomfield 1968; Borthwick 1984). This rhetoric was later adopted by Bengali reformers and brought about change in outlook for women belonging to the *bhadralok* elite, who gained access to higher education and were thus gradually less rigidly confined to the *andor mahal* (see Forbes 1977; Engels 1996). Changing attitudes were however limited to women's roles in their father's house and once married even educated women spent their lives confined to the domestic sphere. From the turn of the century onwards seclusion in the strict sense became more uncommon as the majority of middle-class women entered educational institutions and the majority moved around in public if necessary. Different forms of political activism brought high numbers of Bengali women out into the streets, but these periods of women's involvement in the public sphere were limited and most female participants returned to their homes shortly afterwards (e.g. Sarkar 1989). Women's involvement in nationalist struggles developed parallel with the introduction of the complete withdrawal of women from manual and outside labour among many upwardly mobile middle-castes and counted, as remarked by Sarkar as a further contribution to the processes of sanskritization among these groups (Sarkar 1989:235). A more common experience among the women's senior female relatives was the traditional pilgrimage (*tirtha*) women belonging to different strata undertook. Even secluded women in nineteenth century Bengal would sometimes gain permission to visit religious sites and among the urban elite such journeys became increasingly

popular (e.g. Karlekar(1991)1993:136ff). This and frequent visits to their parents'

house presented the regular experience of the outside world among the majority of

middle-class women until the 1940s (see Forbes 1977).

From the time of Independence onwards more and more Bengali women

would be forced to enter the public sphere to pursue education, live with their

husbands in service away from the in-laws' house and undertake some amount of

travelling in the neighbourhood and beyond. Women started to attend schools in

the *para* especially in villages and increasingly in the city, to use public transport

within Calcutta by themselves to visit relatives and religious sites and go to the

market if necessary. But even though *purdah* and seclusion are understood as past

practices only common among Muslims on contemporary Calcutta, ideologies of

segregation and related rules still determine women's lives (see Beech 1982).

These were however modified according to the needs of modern employment and

changing family patterns, conjugal relations and economic necessities. Thus

elderly women may remember their mothers' and mother-in-laws' reluctance to

leave the house in order to pay visits to family and friends while social contacts of

this kind became the norm in urban areas (see Engels 1996). It may be understood

from what has been said that not only did seclusion and segregation increase

amongst certain groups parallel to the introduction of female education and

women's increasing involvement in the public sphere, but also that *purdah* and

purdah-related behaviour were and are used in a variety of contexts in Bengal.

Thus past upper-caste practices of spatial seclusion in the women's quarters, the

middle-castes' withdrawal from outside work and women's confinement to a

domestic role are linked to notions of *purdah*. Although none of the women would

have used the term to refer to her own situation it was frequently used to describe

the lives of mothers and grandmothers, who nevertheless were not necessarily completely confined to inner quarters. Just like in Gardner's example, *purdah* and descriptions of seclusion in terms of inside and outside (*ghore-baire*) form a set of references and ideological prompts to describe a variety of practices, past and present, customs of the community and the status of women (see Gardner 1995:198ff).

7.2 Continuity and changes of female confinement and mobility at different marital stages

The modified ideology governing women's movements depends in all cases largely on the marital status of the person concerned. Although the newly introduced female education made it easier for young girls to leave the house and attend institutions, some families still insisted on seclusion of incoming brides in the post-independence period. Thus a woman who married into a wealthy North Calcutta Bene family joined the other female members of the household in the *andor mahal* even though such rigid segregation between the sexes and different spheres was not maintained in her natal family. Such complete seclusion and segregation between men and women in the household was however not widespread among the families we are concerned with after Independence. Even in the two cases were a Brahmin woman's mother-in-law stayed inside the house unless she had to visit the temple, this was possible if certain precautions were taken to provide appropriate transport for her. The now already middle-aged daughters-in-law nevertheless remember that all young brides were kept inside the house initially and were advised not to leave the residence unless they were to visit their natal family. Accounts of changing modes of segregation and seclusion thus show that the

modified requirements of female modesty and group identities in a historical perspective are always mediated by age and marital status. Even though seclusion is not adhered to by any of the women concerned, experiences with elder family members, ideas about change and modernity as well as differences between natal and affinal families (often correlating with rural-urban distinctions) determine the description and evaluation of practices prevalent in the past and norms governing the mothers' and their daughters' lives.

In comparing written accounts and three generations of married women (in their thirties, fifties and seventies) a number of changes in the practices related to seclusion and segregation occur. Whereas Sudha Mazumdar and the women interviewed by Engels state that around the turn of the century upper-middle class women may have stayed separate with their husbands and some took part in nationalist activities which in turn allowed them to enter the public sphere, this is clearly not the case in the families we are concerned with. However even women in their seventies acknowledge that they were allowed to leave the house accompanied by a male guardian once in a while to visit relatives and temples, doctors and gurus. Whereas in that generation girls were not normally sent to school, women in their fifties attended schools in the neighbourhood and were extremely mobile once they became mature mothers responsible for their own children's education. The conjugal relationship was influenced by an increased emphasis on the nuclear unit within or outside the joint family and women maintain that communication with husbands changed in that generation. Elder women with married children rarely withdraw from the public sphere altogether and relations with in-laws are determined by the fact that many experience early separation from the joint unit. But even in cases of those who reside together with

affines mature daughter-in-laws may disregard many of the older customs and communicate with male members of the house, don't use the *ghomta* unless on formal occasions and are in contact with strangers. It is clearly the situation of married women with children and in particular those around fifty years of age which changed most drastically. While they describe themselves as housewives they are responsible for numerous tasks performed outside the house, travel around the city unaccompanied and don't use a veil except for ritual occasions etc.

Although changes took place and women's accounts emphasise these the ideological constructions of a woman's place and the domestic domain are powerful tools to alter and redefine such practices over and over again. Thus notwithstanding the almost complete freedom of movement enjoyed by those married with older children according to the accounts of adult participants, the most recent changes with reference to practices of confinement took place in relation to the mobility of girls before menarche. This fact is rarely consciously noticed by women living in the neighbourhood, who nevertheless employ fairly standardised arguments related to former practices of confinement and *purdah* to justify gender specific restrictions of mobility and behavioural codes.

7.3 Mobility of female children

Young children below twelve years of age, who belong to middle-class families, are rarely allowed to leave the house and play in the streets. But while this applies to boys and girls alike, the latter are, more often than not, even prevented from buying sweets or stationery from the shop next door and are thus far more restricted than their brothers who may be sent for errands to neighbours and stalls. Thus girls learn from an early age not only that the division between inside and

outside limits their mobility as well as social contacts, but experience that restrictions are inevitably related to gender. "Going out" (*baire yaoya*) in the case of small girls implies chaperonage and full control of their movements by an elder person, even though this may be an only slightly elder brother. The restrictions imposed on girls and young female adolescents are always phrased in terms of the dangers of urban life which turns into a threatening setting for young women. This image is even more powerful as young girls are forced by their educational needs to leave the home and enter the outside world regularly which normally involves travelling and exposure to strangers and people belonging to different backgrounds. Being forced to do so is a generally unpleasant experience and should be avoided.

While all women who grew up in villages and married into the locality state that they were less confined in their own childhood, even those born here were frequently allowed to move freely in the lanes directly adjacent to their parent's home in the past. Like those brought up in rural areas many of the older women experienced a wide network of kin and neighbours living in the same street or nearby and were allowed to visit them, stay with cousins and their friends and came back to the house by themselves. Later they joined the local schools and walked there with friends and siblings but unaccompanied by parents. Even some, who, around eighteen years of age attend institutions further away, recall that they used to play on the pavement or in the "park" located in the neighbourhood in the afternoon and some made friends in the houses of neighbours. This holds true for all women above the age of twenty who grew up in the neighbourhood and even girls aged eighteen today remember taking part in outside activities such as the neighbourhood's children's club organised on a regular basis until some years ago.

This recent development cannot be analysed in the course of this thesis. Some facts indicate that an increasing emphasis on private English medium education outside the area and a more pronounced need to openly differentiate oneself from others led to restrictions imposed on young girls. Both factors occurred from the beginning of the 1980s onwards and may be interpreted as a result of wider socio-economic processes linked to economic liberalisation.

Shifting priorities regarding the relation between the locality and the control of mobility of small and adolescent girls is also reflected in accounts of women married into the *para* who are from other areas in Calcutta or the districts. Much more freedom of movement was generally experienced by women growing up in villages where girls move among people known to them and their families. But equally frequently the fact that villages and other neighbourhoods may be less heterogeneous is given as a reason. This holds true even for Marwari women who grew up in Rajasthan, but is more prominent with Bengali women who vividly depict free movement in the streets of their locality or village.

The emergence of new restrictions can be observed in other neighbourhoods as well but is particularly conspicuous in this *para* during the *pujas* in which young girls used to participate more openly. In many areas the pride of the locality are the processions (*shobayatra*) by which the goddess is taken to the river or pond for immersion (*bhashan*). On this occasion the majority of the people living in the *para* should be present and in many instances women and young girls form part of the parade although they may not be walking all the way but are carried with the idol on a lorry. A locality may be judged by the absence or presence of girls and women on the occasion. Even though this was tried by one of the *puja* committees in the *para*, once the practice was abandoned the following year.

Many children did however take part in processions within the neighbourhood in the past. As one of the high school students who belongs to a well established family remembers "We had this Youth Club before and all the young girls and boys from middle-class families participated in its activities especially in the band used for different processions during the *pujas* and on Republic Day and Netaji's Birthday. At that time all children took part, but today they cannot play outside or go with the procession, this has all changed and I sometimes feel sorry for my cousin who does not experience this".

The restrictions applied to even very young girls today are an extension of the need to control the sexuality of adolescent girls and social contacts, expressed in various regional and social contexts (see Das 1988). But while the need for children and girls to move in a sphere beyond the household has increased with the introduction of female education, the freedom of movement accompanying this development has been curtailed after a short phase of considerable tolerance.

As shown above, female children of kindergarten and school-going age are taught the difference between inside and outside as well as appropriate movements and social contacts from early onwards. Thus all girls moving unrestricted outside the house in this urban neighbourhood belong to working class families while middle-class children in general and girls in particular are absent from the outside sphere.

7.4 Adolescent girls in the neighbourhood

Although it has been emphasised by a number of scholars that Bengali girls experience their childhood as a period of relative carelessness and freedom, girls are supervised closely in the home and their conduct and contact with relatives and

guests are closely monitored (see Roy 1972(1975)). Whereas they are encouraged to display affection and girlish behaviour towards male and female relatives during their childhood, supervision, control and strict behavioural codes are imposed on young adolescents after menarche (see Das 1988; Roy (1972) 1975: 32ff; Kotalova 1993:72ff). Once a girl has reached this age the focus of attention is no longer on the clear distinction between the outside and the inside but the relationship between the public and the domestic domain phrased in terms of her vulnerable sexuality. A young girl is required to keep up a reputation in a neighbourhood like this while she is at the same time withdrawn from activities in the *para*. Therefore those who can afford this are expected to socialise with their same sex peer-group, although it is explicitly preferred if friends are from outside the neighbourhood and contact with other girls is controlled by her mother. As one student stated "I am not often meeting friends from the neighbourhood, because my mother taught me early not to trust anybody. I do not socialise a lot with the *para* people because they only start talking. If I have a friend at college I bring her home and my mother talks to her to find out whether she is a good girl. Then we may become friends, but often I don't feel I should be close".

During adolescence spatial constraints are more explicit and girls are rarely seen outside the house by themselves. Thus a brother or elder cousin or girls of the same age may accompany a daughter who ideally should be guarded by her mother and stay at home as much as possible. This stage is characterised by the conscious display of "*lajja*", the norm that encompasses deferential behaviour towards men and elders, shame of the maturing body, and the need to adhere to more restrictive behavioural codes (movements and language) as well as the inability to make unmediated contact with people. At this stage the fundamental

orientation towards marriage and motherhood is consciously instilled in the adolescent girl who now comes to understand the home as the domestic sphere and the outside as the public in a more general manner (Das 1988; Roy (1972) 1975; Kotalova 1993). In the urban context girls are forced to venture out of the home and, given the pre-occupation of middle-class parents with non-manual labour, their link with the "cooking hearth" so prominent in rural areas is a more ideological one. Thus rules of female confinement, restricted mobility and segregation refer to appropriate behaviour instead of a perspective on actual seclusion and the emotional and psychological processes to install self-restraint in these girls are manifold. They could perhaps be best summarised as immobilisation, a process by which the rules relating to parental authority, the hierarchy between men and women in and outside the house as well as the spatial differentiation of a locality and the city are internalised mentally and physically. While the world outside becomes ever more meaningful and tempting, restrictions are more rigid and parental authority more persuasive through a mixture of emotions and threat (via "tales of the city") as well as the monopoly over a daughter's education acquired by a mother at this stage.[134] In this neighbourhood as elsewhere such moralising efforts are often supported by real heterogeneity of the locality and young girls are generally taught that this fact makes the neighbourhood more dangerous and inappropriate for them. Internalising distinctions of class, caste, and community which serve a range of purposes is the most effective device to limit girls' spatial mobility and confine them to the house

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134 The referential framework for this internalisation is provided by older women and their favourite stories dealing with child abuse, abduction, rape and molestation and fuelled by print and visual media highlighting real and fictional crimes. The number of such incidents reported is much lower in Calcutta than in any other Indian metropolis.

or the guardianship of an elder brother. In the urban context complete self-control and the restriction of contacts with the world outside the home is the main concern of the education of adolescent girls which is counterbalanced and determined by the need to join schools and colleges, the attendance of which is turned into a daily practice of the public performance of appropriate behaviour.

The girls learn at this age to depend not only on the judgement of parents and relatives but on public opinion and to become aware of the social meaning of space. In most instances adolescent girls from middle-class families move within the neighbourhood only to reach a bus or to go to a nearby shop but are aware like the newly married woman that the neighbourhood is a place of social judgement. Furthermore all young unmarried women are exposed to more or less subtle forms of sexual harassment in public spaces.[135] While this is less common in a small neighbourhood of closely related families, this *para* invites such behaviour through the heterogeneity and its central location.

Adolescent girls have nevertheless to move outside the house although they practice behavioural codes which are designed to convey the image of internalised immobility. There is however only a very low degree of rebellion against the ideal and its norms and the obsession with the control of adolescent girls exists despite the fact that the majority of girls would be too scared to attempt transgression.

The ideal of the homely unmarried daughter is expressed inside and outside the house by dress-codes, which include very subtle forms of veiling using the *dupatta*, movements employed and different types of avoidance. But the ideal is also reflected inside the house where most young girls wear "nighties" all day long

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135 These range from singing, whistling and comments made by passers by to following and touching most common in public transport.

unless they are bound to go out. Working in a village in Bangladesh, Kotalova observed the importance of an adherence to fixed norms governing what to wear in terms of dress, hair and cosmetics (Kotalova 1993:72ff). This is even more pronounced in a city where consumer goods are more readily available and fashions contesting norms may blur the boundaries between groups expressed in clothes, hairstyles, and ornaments worn.

While the outside world turns into dangerous terrain, girls who finish their education are often in their late teens and prepare themselves for marriage. This phase may today still be spent at home and some young women experience what would be called seclusion in a different context. Thus in one of the families two girls who finished their formal education with class six and eight respectively were confined to the house for two years already as their parents experienced difficulties in arranging marriages for them. This type of confinement before marriage was common amongst women of the elder generation but is today frowned upon by many well-educated families who encourage their daughters to proceed to college or take up a "sheltered" job like social or academic work. In the setting we are concerned with, it is however still widespread. If daughters attend colleges these are inevitably segregated institutions, which are chosen with the perspective of marriage. In a typical way of reasoning the father of an eighteen year old who wanted to study journalism remarked "we are giving her a really good education but she has to go to a women's college because she cannot travel that far on her own and she should not be exposed to nasty behaviour. Thus we are encouraging her to take up a suitable subject like home science or sociology".

None of the parents interviewed aimed at sending a daughter to one of the prestigious mixed universities and colleges (some of which are only a short busride away) and daughters with less than university entry level education married early or spent some years at home "helping the mother".

7.5 The young daughter-in-law

Most young women eagerly await the status of the new bride (*notun bou*) although the code of female *lajja* prevents them from expressing such wishful thinking openly (see Roy (1972) 1975:62). In order to become well-groomed daughter she has practised the behaviour appropriate for a newly married woman during the last years in her parents' house. As wife and daughter-in-law she is expected to display signs of modesty and "adjust" to her in-laws' house and especially her mother-in-laws' wishes. The process of moving to the new house, locality and social circle may make her feel shy and insecure as she is suddenly living among strangers. Here her practice of avoidance and deferential behaviour should enable her to deal with the situation by referring to a set of rules and behavioural devices such as wearing her sari in the traditional way appropriate for the chaste wife, wearing a bun, lowering her voice and eyes in front of all elder affines etc. Although a middle-class daughter-in-law is no longer required to cover her entire face or head she expresses adherence to the ideal of *lajja* and avoidance behaviour by drawing the end of her sari over her bun when meeting those who do not live in the house or neighbours, friends of the family and strangers, at least during the first year in the in-laws' house (see Forbes 1977; Beech 1982:118ff; Borthwick 1984; Karlekar (1991)1993:47ff).

In many instances a daughter-in-law may not leave the in-laws' house for some time after the marriage except to visit her parental home. The young wife gradually gets to know the neighbourhood through visitors coming to the house, who sit and gossip with her affines while she is serving tea and sweets. These contacts nevertheless rarely develop into friendships because the efforts of the mother-in-law to control the new *bou* aim at keeping her isolated and marking her as an incoming wife. A new wife cannot be trusted and unless she has children herself she is not mature enough to act as an independent social being who is allowed to invite people and pay visits, purchase goods, or move in the neighbourhood.

Women who married in the neighbourhood itself are at an advantage in the role of new bride because they are neither isolated in the *para* nor separated completely from their paternal kin (see chapters 4 and 6). Thus they are normally much more self assertive in dealing with in-laws and pay regular visits to their *baper bari* and friends. While this enables the married woman to develop a generally more individual pattern of social contacts and activities, in-laws do not always appreciate this freedom. Thus a mother-in-law whose daughter-in-law came from the same street complains that she is in her paternal house half of the time and neglects her household duties to chat with her mother and aunt. The daughter-in-law may not only enjoy her daily visits of her *baper bari* but points out that the closeness enabled her to leave her four year old son with her mother without bothering her mother-in-law. Moreover she states that a short spell of employment was possible because her mother took care of the son. Interaction with the natal family of a new bride is normally close in Bengali Hindu and Christian families and the various *kutum* (those related by marriage) are expected

to cooperate on job-search, marriages and during economic crisis. Although this co-operation can take different forms a wife's parents are obliged to lend money to the son-in-law and support their daughter if she needs financial assistance with the education of her children etc.

These and other kin relationships are mostly maintained by women who visit relatives on a regular basis once their children are grown up. Young married women increasingly maintain these contacts themselves, a pattern that emerged only recently. This increased emphasis on a bilateral pattern is expressed in many women's comments on relations with their *baper bari* who often stated that after the initial childless period of marriage passed they were free to visit their parents and siblings and often were even encouraged to do so by their in-laws who saw such contacts as a valuable source of support.

7.6 Married women

Modest behaviour is emphasised in young girls and married women without children who are in need of constant control and guardianship. Married middle-class women with children are however by definition chaste. It is thus widely assumed that a mother can move around freely and that any problems arising from her presence in public space are due to the fact that within the urban context men lack respect. In fact the mother of children will experience less molestation and harassment than her unmarried counterpart if she reached the age where she is most likely to travel on her own. Thus whereas a woman without children ought not go to visit certain places and events, a mother may decide that it is in line with her mature and serious role to undertake such excursions.

Whether or not a mother lives in a joint household, she is required to leave the house and often even the neighbourhood on a regular basis once her children enter a nursery or kindergarten. Thus motherhood implies mobility and soon restrictions for social visits are determined by housework and schedules rather than moral concern.

With age these duties diminish and women above forty whose children are grown up are involved in extensive socialising and visiting patterns limited only by their own desire to move around on a regular basis. Free from control and supervision of a mother-in-law either because they live separately or because they themselves took over responsibility for the household, these women are normally part of wider networks of kin and friends. They are responsible for keeping in touch with their siblings in the city, they visit elder relatives whose health does not allow them to travel and may drop in at a neighbour's house on a regular basis. Moreover, these older women may take part in activities not directly related to their role as mother and housewife e.g. party meetings and religious practice. Thus the local *mahila samiti* (women's society) is organised by women of this age together with unmarried women who participate in welfare programmes, election assistance and entertainment. Others who are less inclined to be involved in local politics may still meet regularly to sing devotional songs, meet gurus and go on shopping trips. In some cases the freedom gained extends beyond the city boundaries and a wife may face no difficulties to undertake trips to visit relatives on special occasions like the 55 year old mother of a grown up son, who suddenly decided to travel to her native Ranchi during the *pujas* on her own as her husband was busy with the local *puja* committee. In another instance, a 45 year old mother of a school-going daughter who lived in a joint household, undertook a journey to

help out in her brother's household in Orissa after her sister-in-law was admitted to hospital.

While this kind of travelling is seen as an obligation some women undertake frequent trips to religious sites in the post-reproductive phase. Whereas mothers may visit temples and gurus in Calcutta with relatives and friends, elderly women may wish to undertake pilgrimages to Tarakeshvar and other places of interest in West Bengal and beyond (see Morinis 1984). Thus a group of three neighbours meets under the guidance of a male family member to sing devotional songs and attend religious meetings in the neighbourhood or travel by bus to the Dakineshvar temple.

7.7 Old age

The preoccupation with worshipping is the privilege of the post-reproductive phase and is common among widows who may be released from direct responsibility in the household. Once a daughter-in-law took over from a widowed husband's mother the latter is expected to enhance religious activity and extend her kin relations. Women in this position may however not withdraw from the responsibilities of the household if a husband is still alive or a daughter-in-law is in employment so that the mother-in-law is bound to stay in the house and look after her grandchildren. She is however not restricted from maintaining contacts in the *para* and even if social relations do not extend beyond the group of relatives she may spend more time in the local temple, chatting with other visitors or visit a park.

Gradually a woman may be forced by ill health to retreat to the house again and occasions to go out are less frequent. This is demonstrated in the rather

careless way she dresses and leaves her hair open. At this stage she hardly ever gets in touch with unrelated people and will not leave the house unless she has to visit the doctor or the temple. Her role in the community and the neighbourhood comes to an end and living the restricted life of a widow she socialises with relatives only. But in the older generation more often than not relationships with her siblings and their children and grandchildren gradually decline and the old woman is now fully dependent on her sons and affinal relations in what used to be *shashur bari*.

7.8 Ideal of restricted mobility and wider social relations

The relation with the domestic and the public sphere is determined for all women by kinship and marital status. This realm allocates the resources of unmarried women for community service and links mothers with the domestic sphere. However it may also provide one of the most valuable assets used by women to negotiate individual rights and duties, a fact that is often underestimated (e.g. Sangari 1993). Many women are aware of this and claim that while in the past men were involved in keeping up relations with relatives who live in other parts of the city, today women are responsible for visiting, gift-giving and exchange of news and are therefore socially responsible for this realm. Men are still very much involved in kinship networks but it is women who often go out of their way to visit particular relatives on a regular basis.

Regular visits are paid not only to affinal relatives but a married woman is expected to maintain close relationships with a number of families related to her paternal house whom she may meet there or visit independently. A number of women report that they went to their *mamar bari* (the paternal home) or just

returned from a *pishi*'s house (FZ) with whom they had a particularly close relationship. That these contacts are crucial is obvious in those cases where a woman is widowed and relies on the support of her affines who may nevertheless not be prepared to help. Women acknowledge the importance of kin-relations as a form of social security and in many instances these are the only pretext for young unmarried women to enter the public sphere apart from their daily educational duties. Thus one of the female students agreed that her mother would rather allow her to visit her *mashi* (maternal aunt) or send her to stay with her maternal grandmother overnight than give permission to visit the nearby cinema or bazaar with her friends. Girls in particular are groomed early into the role of supportive relative and may take over some of the responsibilities in this field from their mothers.

Although such kin relations are important, married women are not encouraged to keep up other contacts than those with relatives. Relationships with neighbours and women belonging to other families in the neighbourhood are normally maintained by women who passed marriageable age, especially those who aspire to a leading role in the political party and are therefore bound to mobilise other women. Unmarried women in particular serve as a valid example for the shifting emphasis from confinement towards the construction of a broad notion of the "domestic" and away from the emphasis on sexuality prevalent in the treatment of marriageable young women. While the latter are restricted in their movements, unmarried women are normally free to make contact with different groups of people and are forced to move in the public sphere to enter paid employment (see Rozario 1992:162ff). Because of the absence of domestic duties related to children (even though many contribute to expenses and housework) their

part is sometimes regarded as comparable with that of hired servants. There is furthermore no need to chaperone them and they can visit freely whoever they want. In many instances women who remained unmarried enter political and social organisations which rely on the unpaid labour of female workers who have unrestricted access to people of different backgrounds and no limitations to travel. Unmarried sisters not only contribute to household expenses but may be responsible for valuable outside contacts. In a typical case two unmarried sisters who live with a widowed mother, one unmarried and two married brothers took up employment with the CMC as slum school teachers. Apart from a lack of motivation and qualifications for this work they enjoy the company of other teachers in the school and pay regular visits to parents of children who fail to attend classes. As a result they are not only in position to assist in the area during elections but can also organise servants for relatives and neighbours. They are in effect valuable members of the family and the wider community, while their two sisters-in-law maintain strict standards of confinement as in-married wives. [136] This example demonstrates that among the middle class the relationship of women and reproduction constructed as the domestic sphere and not the distinction between the public and the private defines the feminine ideal of restricted mobility.[137]

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136 Unmarried women beyond marriageable age are nevertheless marginalised, even if their economic position and social autonomy may exceed that of their married sisters (see Rozario 1992:162ff).
137 Patterns of restricted mobility, deferential behaviour, and control today clearly apply more rigidly to contacts with outsiders than household members, so that much of the discussions focusing on affinal relations and appropriate codes of conduct cannot be applied in this context.

7.9 The role of confinement in a heterogeneous neighbourhood

A number of scholars demonstrated that the local definition of *purdah* supports particular social relations and women's access to resources in a locality by providing them with a code of conduct which allows them to enter the public sphere (e.g. Jeffery 1979; Sharma 1978, 1980; Feldman 1993). Whereas in other neighbourhoods all families are known to each other, belong to the same class and community and actively form a closely knit network, the setting here allows for unrestricted movement of people from diverse backgrounds into flats and houses. The high number of slums in the area increases this type of movement and middle-class inhabitants are not normally acquainted with all the slum-dwellers, while small workshops located here create a bazaar atmosphere. All these factors enforce a preoccupation with the confinement of young girls and young married women in the *para*, who feel generally insecure and exposed once they move outside the house. As one of the students put it "you cannot move outside in this neighbourhood, the people are no good. Not that it is dangerous but there are too many trouble-makers from outside moving here and then you have the boys from the slums".

It has furthermore been stated that kin-group and village exogamy lead to modified patterns of behaviour and seclusion among Hindus which can be differentiated from the more general notion of *purdah* prominent among many South Asian Muslim groups (see Vatuk 1982; Jacobson 1982). In different contexts the affinal relationship provides an idiom to position woman in the domestic as well as the public sphere. Thus wider kin relations are used as a model to deal with all related and unrelated persons in the village or neighbourhood. Within this framework caste and community may be mobilised to legitimise a code

of conduct and define the parameters of veiling, language and movements of women according to context. While such structures exist in some of the less heterogeneous neighbourhoods, in particular the more homogenous so-called refugee colonies established by East Bengalis after partition, social relations in this neighbourhood are more complex. A crucial point regarding the modern adaptation of an ideology of seclusion lies thus in class-based opportunities and attempts to prevent girls before menarche and young unmarried women from contact with other than household members. This is generally realised not by seclusion but restricted mobility and the modified subtle ways to impose such norms and boundaries at this early age.

It is evident that women do not consider the neighbourhood to constitute public space that allows for familiarity let alone kinship-like relations and a place where correct and modest behaviour may enable them to avoid sexual harassment. More in line with a simple division between public and private domains they consider the domestic sphere as secure and appropriate while the public realm is depicted as hostile and dominated by men belonging to lower status groups and other communities.

Only in the case of married women and those beyond marriageable age can the domestic be extended in the way familiar from political movements as demonstrated by Forbes among others (see Forbes 1982; Sarkar 1995). Thus the local women's committee, which is dominated by middle-class Hindu women, deals with the problems of deserted, separated and divorced Muslim women and in two instances recorded tried to solve domestic conflicts between a Hindu wife and a Muslim husband. Although Christian women ask the organisation for help, no married Christian woman attended the meetings of the group on a regular basis

presumably because of the precarious moral reputation of these female heads of household.

The public is thus also the sphere of politics and although these may enter the domestic sphere at times (e.g. if a woman complains to the party committee about maltreatment at the hands of in-laws) this is applicable only in the case of low status families. All cases discussed by members of the committee during the period of the study related to families living in the slums and in no instance was a problem of a respectable woman referred to the party. On the contrary in the case of a woman who was severely beaten by her husband and her mother-in-law and left the family to return to her father's place, the local party of which her husband is a prominent member exercised considerable pressure on her family to send her back.

The second major public activity in the locality are community *pujas* and functions organised by local committees comprised of men (see Östör 1978). Such organisations are entirely staffed by Hindus and the areas of the neighbourhood form separate committees according to class distinctions. Thus two *pujas* may exist some fifty metres from each other, but while one committee is composed of working- class men living in a small slum the other represents middle-class inhabitants of the adjoining street. Married women are generally expected to participate in the *pujas* themselves but are not members of committees, even though their involvement in the preparations for the *pujas* varies from neighbourhood to neighbourhood. In case of this *para* married women may attend the main rituals especially the eighth "day" (*osthomi din*) when all women are expected to visit the *pandal* and give offerings to the Goddess. On this occasion Bengali Hindu women from surrounding households meet and celebrate together in

what can be described as an act of collective worshipping. The second main occasion on which women perform particular types of worship during Durga *puja* is the worshipping of the Goddess who is about to leave performed by married women, who imagine her as a married woman/daughter leaving her parents' house after a long visit when small gifts are offered to the Goddess and her companions.[138] But while men are strongly involved in the organisation and entertainment aspect of the festival (and all other *pujas*) women enter the *pandal* in this neighbourhood to worship, offer gifts and receive blessings. In most cases women feel that Durga *puja*, an event organised with the help of women in other neighbourhoods who assist the Brahmins in different rituals, is a male and public affair. Thus only an ambitious female participant in party activities states that despite the fact that women from the neighbourhood never attend the main cultural event organised on the day of the arrival of the Goddess she herself participated in it on previous occasions.

7.10 Maintaining the distance between communities

During the festive season many married women attend the *pandals* for particular *pujas* but they are generally busy cooking and preparing elaborate meals served on different days to families and the guests. Furthermore numerous visits to relatives houses are to be paid and while old women can expect to be visited rather than to have to go themselves, the younger a woman is, the more tours she will undertake with her husband. Apart from relatives, friends of the family, neighbours and

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138 The imagery of Durga as a daughter or married woman visiting her parental home is highly emotional for women, and the theme is repeatedly enacted during the autumn festival of Durga *puja*. Thus specific songs to greet the daughter in the house are broadcast, and women offer gifts a daughter expects from her family at the time of departure (e.g. Östör 1978:139; Kinsley (1986)1988:113-114; Banerjee (1989)1990:171).

clients (in the case of business families) are expected, all of whom are entitled to a fresh snack. Thus married women participate in the festivities but their activities centre around the domestic display of hospitality and social relations and the provision of (personal) offerings. It is therefore often the case that mothers with older children do not even move around to visit the different *pandals* within walking distance. Most women would prefer to limit the festival to a family affair in order to prevent outsiders from joining the stream of visitors and in case of some families this preference is linked to notions of class distinctions which are to be maintained while hospitality has to be offered to everyone. Thus in the case of a woman whose son and husband own a small manufacturing unit in the slums, the housewife complained that even though she herself did not visit the *pandals* the workers came around during the *pujas* and expected tea and snacks to be served in the house.

However, the pattern of visits did extend to colleagues and friends who are not from the same neighbourhood while in some cases Christian neighbours would be included. In these instances such relationships occur among women belonging to the two communities who may start to visit each other occasionally. "You see we meet once in a while and I will go over to her house at Christmas. She will come during the *pujas* and have some food, or I send the children with some sweets. In this neighbourhood all the Christians and Muslims come to see the *pandals*, even though Durga is not their Goddess and they don't give any offerings" commented a mother of two on her relationship with a Christian friend. In rare instances Muslim families were depicted as friends of the family and would be expected to visit during the festival and be visited on occasions like Moharram. Whereas such inter-community friendships are more common among men some

women (especially those in a socially and economically less favourable position like unmarried women and widows) maintain relations with a variety of people. Often individuals recall that such inter-community friendships or close patron-client relations were far more common in the past and many women state that in their father's house an old Muslim friend of a male member of the family dropped by almost daily to sit with the men in the *baithakkhana*, the outer room for men and their visitors. This kind of informal contact decreased after partition due to migration and the tension between the two communities following a number of violent incidents.

Among women there is however a more widespread concern with different communities and the appropriate social distance the middle class are eager to maintain. Thus in a characteristic move *purdah* and seclusion are attributed to backward Muslims in the vicinity but Hindu and Christian women claim that the area is unsafe and it is improper for women in general to spend time on the street because they may encounter working-class men and members of the "other" community. It is therefore argued that even during the Hindu festival of Durga *puja*, women belonging to respectable families should not be seen unaccompanied in the *para*, not so much because of the harassment they are likely to experience but the class structure of the area which allows lower status inhabitants to freely mix with everybody else in front of the *pandals*.[139]

It is apparent from what has been outlined above that far from presenting a familiar and homely atmosphere an urban neighbourhood such as this may (mainly on account of its heterogeneity) take on a range of negative implications for

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139 Given the fact that the majority of Muslims in the area live in the many bastis communal resentments often reflect class rather than community markers.

women. The fact that the father's house is located here modifies these perceptions especially in case of those who remain here after marriage (or have passed marriageable age). Others experience restricted mobility and confinement-related codes of conduct as obligatory and a way to cope with the threats to the reputation, physical and mental purity and group-identity posed by the composition of the surroundings.

7.11 Linking the two spheres via status: the implications of spatial distinctions and labour

Whereas the *purdah* system provides women who are forced to participate in wage-labour in other contexts with appropriate codes to enter the public sphere without losing respectability, middle-class Bengali women did not enter the labour force in large numbers. Education (as prerequisite for marriage) is still the main pretext for daughters in these families to move beyond the confines of the home and local contacts are minimised by an emphasis on strong class divisions. The outward adjustments adopted in order to allow young women's participation in formal education can however be compared to, for example, the practices brought about by economic change among rural lower middle-class women who work in Bangladesh's export industry as described by Feldman, and *purdah*-related behavioural codes among mobile Sylhetis outlined by Gardner (Feldman 1993:230; Gardner 1995:198ff). In both cases cited, the need for women to enter the public sphere led to redefinition of the outside as an extension of the domestic using the idiom of *purdah*. Thus whereas the women in Gardner's example adopted rigid veiling as a means of mobility while maintaining respectability for young female migrants, in Feldman's example the veil is used by women travelling

from and to work and while meeting with male colleagues. In addition, recruitment and employment take place using fictive kinship to legitimise women's participation in the labour force (see Gardner 1995:220; Feldman 1993:232ff).

Here as in the case of urban Bengal the domestic sphere re-emerges as determinant of status-related constructions of femininity (Sangari 1993:18). These processes are also present in readjustments between the inside and the outside sphere among middle-class women in urban West Bengal who are destined to be housewives. While in case of employed women the "public" workplace takes on "private" characteristics, Bengali middle-class girls are taught that employment (but not work as such) belongs to the public sphere which is inaccessible to them and are provided with a definition of the domestic that prepares them for performing elaborate types of unpaid labour. In turning the daily trip to the local school into the work of a mother without equivalent among non-married women the domestic work ethic is extended to the public space within which domestic duties are performed and the ideology of confinement kept up. Thus an extension of the activities related to housework but undertaken without payment by the multifunctional housewife which is legitimised within the framework of motherhood and marked sexual control by the affinal family takes place. It is thus not only the case that seclusion and related ideologies produce housewives or may in a modified version provide access to waged labour while keeping women under control but these practices produce class status by defining the "home" (*ghore*) and the outside "world" (*baire*) in accordance with different types of work performed by women. The marked "ritualisation of the domestic realm" in urban Bengal observed by Beech is therefore dependent on a restricted modification of ideologies of seclusion, segregation and confinement, which are based on the same

assumptions about a woman's place applied in case of rigid seclusion (see Beech 1982:116ff).

7.12 The meaning of the domestic sphere and class

It has been argued that the economic shifts taking place in colonial Bengal and after partition facilitated a devaluation of women's economic contributions. These developments have been linked to group-mobility and the role of *purdah* which led to the marginalisation of rural women and working class women within the process of industrialisation (e.g. Mukherjee 1989; Banerjee (1989)1990).[140] What is obvious in the case of poor women, namely the reproduction of class and gender hierarchies through women's access to paid employment determined by the relation of gender and status, can be stated for middle-class women as well. Thus aspects of class distinction can be discerned by taking a closer look at the constituting factors of the domestic sphere and how different kinds of women relate to it. The importance of the domestic sphere is reinforced, because a middle-class woman performs consumption and domestic duties which are defined as service to the family and are thus settled in the highly stratified and hierarchical domain of kinship. Many of these tasks are nevertheless undertaken sometimes (or in parallel) by servants who provide them on a regular basis but within the framework of an employer-employee relationship.

Within the middle-class household the ideology of female confinement focuses on different aspects of such a state at different stages of life. Restrictions and class distinctions are most rigidly handled with reference to such girls and

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140 The use of *purdah*-related ideologies and practices does not necessarily result in the marginalization of women (Feldman 1993:219ff; Gardner 1995:22ff).

young married women, who have not yet reached the state of motherhood in which they are firmly grounded in a domestic ideology and contribute their labour in the form of elaborate consumption patterns, childcare and socialising as housewives. Mature married women are active in the inner and the outer sphere, but their activities are domestic in that they are directed towards the family and social relations which facilitate kinship and class-based status. In order to do so even those involved in a variety of activities outside the home emphasise their adherence to the ideology of restricted mobility and confinement by calling their perspective "oriented towards the house" (*ghorer dike*) (Beech 1982:111). Whereas *de facto* seclusion barely exists, as it would jeopardise the maintenance of the status quo by hampering their work, they actively demonstrate and practise distinctive behaviour. After the reproductive phase has come to an end, a further shift in women's work and restricted behaviour can be observed, due to which mothers-in-law and in particular widows can chose more freely between venturing into the outside sphere or not. But even the elderly widowed housewife is not spared from contributing to the household activities and on the contrary may be mobilised in times of crisis or changing patterns of domestic work. In some instances her contributions nevertheless only entitle her to the lowest rate of consumption and social security, but as her work is family work she performs her tasks voluntarily and as a relative. The link between the domestic and the public domain and female members of the house is in all cases mediated by the fact that women do not have access to the market and figure as soon-to-be married, married, or formerly married women in their relationship with both domains.

The emergence of this ideology from a blend of middle-class and wider family-centred notions of a woman's place has been outlined by Sangari who links

early attempts of reform to the "eternizing of marriage" as part of nineteenth century discourse (Sangari 1993:32). Contrary to the common sense notion of female confinement it is however not the control of sexuality itself, but the construction of the domestic domain as specialising in reproductive activities in the wider sense that leads to idioms of segregation, seclusion, and related practises. Whereas the control of female sexuality in unmarried women constitutes a reason for rules related to segregation and confinement, this is not the case with married women or those beyond marriageable age. Marriage and the place of these women in the domestic domain as dependants are seen as adequate devices to safeguard their sexuality and the distinction between the home and the outside world serves to maintain the division of labour and hierarchies older and younger women, and between men and women, on the level of the family. Within this context both concerns are related to class distinctions and status production, and conveniently the older prestigious tradition of seclusion can be used as a point of reference. A more detailed analysis of mobility and practises of socialising reveals that it is only on the level of the community, neighbourhood, or nation that the two aspects of the ideology merge again and women become "Woman" and thus subject to a homogenising ideology of confinement.

Conclusion: The modernity of tradition

Without repeating all the findings of this thesis, I would like to complete it by briefly highlighting some general conclusions which emerge from it. The central argument of the thesis is about the flexibility and modern content of assumedly traditional concepts and practices and the everyday discourse on distinct communal identities in relation to gender roles, women's work and class status. "Change" and "continuity" were traced throughout the ethnographic data, which show that in many instances the effect of urbanisation on "traditional" social and cultural organisation has been more diverse and ambiguous than might have been expected.

In the final chapter on "seclusion", women's mobility, and status I showed that the lives of women in the neighbourhood are governed by restrictions and stereotyped constructions of gender, that emphasise "traditional" aspects of the female world and imply practices, which serve to internalise the ideal of the chaste wife and devoted mother. Although the social and cultural framework within which these female roles are played out has been subjected to considerable change among members of the Calcutta middle classes, a number of scholars have demonstrated that urbanisation does not necessarily lead to the breakdown of ostensibly traditional institutions like the joint family or arranged marriages accompanied by dowry. Moreover, just as gender stereotypes are far from being limited to the kinship domain, discourses surrounding social practices like the payment of "dowry" may be used to express a wide range of concerns. In our case, for example, the payment of dowry in particular figures as a critique of modernity and a demarcation of community boundaries by attributing such transactions to supposedly old fashioned Marwaris and *kulin* Brahmins in the past.

It is therefore assumed that "traditional" categories and practices like caste, dowry and joint families, as well as women's rituals, clearly fulfil important roles within the modern urban context. All of these can be identified as part of the construction of gender and kinship identities, whose definition and boundaries significantly determine women's lives. Thus although the dowry system, women's work in the house and their position in the family have in fact changed, the related ideology still pretends that some kind of "traditional" pattern prevails; it assigns women a subordinated and backward position, and guides their socialisation into contemporary wives and mothers. This role of "traditional" ideology is particularly obvious in relation to women's rights in inheritance, the joint family, and attitudes towards female employment, education and motherhood.

Throughout the study I have also shown that women's work, and their social role in relation to marriage and kinship patterns, is important for status in the urban setting. Particularly in Bengal, the "position of women" served as an indicator of progress from the nineteenth century onwards, and even in today's urban society some groups are identified as "backward" as indicated by low levels of female education and employment, "traditional" marriage patterns and transactions, and restrictions on women's mobility, which are assumedly derived from former practices of seclusion. These markers of status are particularly obvious in the cases where differences between "communities", that is ethnic origin or language group or religious affiliation, are concerned. But the same indicators can also be traced in notions of caste in the urban setting. By identifying the impact of the elite *bhadralok* category on low status groups, the popular myth that caste distinctions and inequalities disappear in the urban context has been challenged in this thesis. I have shown that a wider notion of "*jati*" developed,

which depends increasingly on a combination of social status and economic standing indicated by life-styles, which are in turn largely identified with the private sphere and consumption patterns. This modern usage of "*jati*", which groups castes and communities on a continuum rather than strictly separating them in this everyday context come into play when people e.g. evaluate love-marriages. But notions of *jati* difference have been internalised as part of women's reproductive roles as well, and various features like food customs, educational success and ritual as well as social status of a family merge as part of *bichar-achar*, which express the link between women's work and both middle-class and communal identities.

The differentiation between social status and economic standing, and the readjustment of gender relations and of affiliation to caste and community, have been discussed in the context of marriage patterns among middle-class families in this neighbourhood. It emerges from my analysis of arranged and love-marriages that new ways to assert and maintain the status quo have developed, which incorporate indicators of status and standing also employed in the past. Thus, the important contributions of women to the education of children, as well as the related ideology of "new motherhood", coexist with a predominant concern with the distinctive rules and practices expressed in *bichar-achar*, which formerly represented caste custom and emphasised group boundaries. Together these various features of women's work produce and represent the "culture" or refinement of a family by providing an appropriate environment and educational achievements.

In many respects, the women in Calcutta described in this thesis illustrate the Bengali idiom of "women and gold" (*kaminikanchan*), whereby women are

symbolically equated with gold, and both signify the mundane world which is opposed to spiritual progress. Throughout the thesis the double role of women as signifiers and producers of status and class distinctions is apparent not only in marriage patterns, but also in the domestic sphere. The distinction between inside and outside (*ghore-baire*), which is similar to the public - private separation in other societies, becomes the "home and the world" shaping notions of proper marriages, patterns of women's work, their "traditional" outlook and the priority of reproduction. The significance of this distinction can be exemplified by the analysis of ideas derived from *purdah* or ritual beliefs and practices, all of which are modified, but I have also shown that the domestic sphere, though equally exposed to change, still lies at the heart of group identities and their symbolic manifestation. By looking at e.g. the rules of the house (*bichar-achar*), we have seen how status and difference are linked with gendered practices, using both old and new ways to make, adjust and express distinctions. These are explained by the actors within the context of the domestic sphere, but they are enacted in the public arena as well. Within this context the activities of women and notions of female sexuality, gender roles and marital status, are linked together and the modern use of assumedly rigid prescriptions is identified. Contrary to the local representation, a modified version of the "traditional" ideology actually provides the framework within which middle-class women reproduce distinctions of caste, class and community.

The data and analysis presented in this thesis also allows me to make some points relevant to recent discussions of women's lives and the construction of gender. By showing how gender identities are linked with marriage, women's work and shifting household patterns, the malleability of gender ideologies and related

practices has been demonstrated and the flexibility of supposedly rigid separations has been traced. Furthermore I have shown that whereas women often experience these ideologies and practices as oppressive, they can nevertheless act as subjects within a social context that does allow them a share in decision-making and power. Thus, for example, if they refuse to adjust to the requirements of family life in the in-laws' house or a crisis occurs there, they may be in a position to challenge gender ideologies and the institutionalised supremacy of the joint family, the affinal control of marriage gifts and male rights in property. Moreover, taking a familiar argument further, I have shown that actors not only interpret institutions and social action differently, but that these can take on variable meanings over longer periods of time.

It has been demonstrated in this study that these middle-class women's experiences are shaped by kinship and marital status as outlined in various contexts. But although these structural constraints are important, the content, meaning and implications of women's work are the consistently crucial factor for their own and their families' status. By drawing on the concept of status-production work, we have seen that housework and ritual practises are vital contributions to the middle-class life-style, which might be perceived of as "traditional" but is actually very modern.

Finally, this thesis has shown that women's reproductive activities have to be identified as links between the "home and the world", rather than strictly separating them as Bengali ideology suggests. Women's work and their structural position in the kinship system are crucial in establishing differences in the urban context through the perpetuation of a distinctive middle-class life-style. However, whereas their reproductive role as mothers determines the lives of these women,

the social conditions and cultural content of reproduction are often ambiguous and they can be altered in accordance with new requirements and considerations. The urban home and the world are interdependent and, as indicated in this study, the relation between both is continuously modified and "modernised" by those who live in Calcutta today.

Glossary

Terms used in the text as quoted somewhere else (e.g. anuloma) and some with a
common spelling (e.g. purdah; zamindar) are not transliterated.

Achar (*āchār*) religious rule, customs of a locality (see *desher achar*)

achar-bichar (*āchār-bichār*) rules governing the purity of the kitchen and the

      home or *jati (also used as bichar-achar)*

adan-pradan (*ādān-pradān*) give and take, exchange relationships among kin

ajol (*ājal*) polluting and unclean caste

alpona (*ālpanā*) rice flour designs

ambubachi (*ambubāci*) new moon of Hindu calendar, *brata* performed especially

      by widows on the day

andor mahal (*āndar mahal*) women's quarters of the house (see *antahpur,*

      zenana)

antahpur (*antaḥpur*) women's quarters *(*see *andor mahal, zenana)*

anuloma (*anuloma*) not in accordance with custom and rules, lit. against the hair

anusthan (*anuṣṭhan*) shastric rituals

atur ghor (*ātur ghar*) room in which women spend the period of seclusion during

      birth pollution

Badal biye (*badal bi(y)e*) exchange marriage

baire (*baire*) outside

baire yaoya (*baire yao(y)a*) to move outside

baithakkhana (*baithakkhana*) parlour, reception room for male visitors

bangsha (*baṃsa*) male line, lineage

baper bari (*bāper bāṛi*) father's house

bari (*bāri*) house

barir lok (*bāṛir lak*) people of the house

baron (*baraṇ*)ceremonial welcome

bashi biye (*bāsi bi(y)e*) ritual second marriage during the wedding, lit. leftover

marriage

basti (*bāsti*) slum

bhadralok (*bhadralak*) nineteenth century educated elite in urban Bengal, lit.

affluent or gentleman

bhadramahila (*bhadramahilā*) women belonging to the *bhadralok* elite, lit.

affluent or gentlewoman, lady

bhakti (*bhakti*) devotional love especially in Vaishnavism

bhalobasha (*bhālabāsā*) love, affection

bhashan (*bhāsān*) immersion of the image of a deity after a *puja*

bhat (*bhāt*) boiled rice, a complete meal

bhat kapor (*bhāt kāpaṛ*)sari given to the new daughter-in-law by her husband's

parents of her husband on the occasion of *bou bhat,* lit. rice clothes

bichar (*bichār*) village council, caste rule, established practise

bichar-achar (*bichār-āchār*) rules governing the purity of the kitchen and the

home or *jati*

biyer bari (*bi(y)er bāṛi*) house in which a marriage takes place

boli (*bali*) blood sacrifice

bor (*bar*) groom, husband, blessing

bor-pon (*bar-pan*) bridegroom price

bou (*bau*) wife, bride, daughter-in-law

bou bhat (*bau bhāt*) ritual of the first rice cooked by the new wife in the house of

her in-laws, lit. daughter-in-law's (or wife's) rice

brata (*brata*) women's rituals observed in the house consisting of fasting, *puja*

and sometimes offerings undertaken on behalf of the family, the husband's

health, fertility etc.

brata kotha (*brata kathā*) stories told or read within the course of a *brata*

compiled in almanac

byabsha (*byābsā*) business

Chakri (*chākri*) a position, a job

chal (*chāl*) husked but raw rice

chapati (*chāpāti*) bread

chire (*chire*) flattened rice

Dabi (*dābi*) demand

dada (*dādā*) elder brother

dal (*dāl*) lentil dish

dan (*dān*) prestation

deoya-neoya (*deo(y)ā-neo(y)ā*) give and take, coll. for *adan-pradan*

desh (*deś*) locality, land, country

desher achar (*deśer āchār*) custom of a locality

dharma (*dharma*) religious and moral duty

dharmiya (*dharmi(y)ā*) in accordance with religious and moral duty

dhuti (*dhuti*) traditional men's garment

dorga (*dargā*) seat or grave of a Muslim saint

dupatta (*dupāttā*) shawl used as veil

Ekanno (*ekanna*) to share the same rice

ekannoborti poribar (*ekannabarti paribār*) joint family, lit. the family who share

the same rice

etho (*ẽṭho*) things exposed to pollution through food, polluted by contact with

cooked food, the mouth or touch

eyo (*e(y)o*) auspicious woman with living husband

Gay holud (*gāe halud*) ritual of smearing the body with turmeric during the

wedding

ghee (*ghī*) clarified butter

ghomta (*ghamta*) end of sari used as a veil

ghomta deoya (*ghamtā deo(y)ā*) veiling

ghore (*ghare*) inside

ghore-baire (*ghare-baire*) inside, outside, title of novel by Tagore translated as

"The Home and the World"

ginni (*ginni*) mistress of the house (coll. of *grihini)*

gotra (*gatrā*) exogamous marriage cycle

grihasta (*gṛihasta*) householder

grihini (*gṛihinī*) female householder (coll.*ginni*)

Hom (*ham*) sacrificial fire

Ja (*jā*) elder sister-in-law (HeBW)

jamai (*jāmāi*) son-in-law

jamai shosthi (*jāmāi sasthi*) ritual honouring of the son-in-law in his father-in-

law's house

jati (*jāti*) genus, caste, ethnic or religious group

jhi (*jhi*)daughter(-in-law), maidservant

jhol (*jhol*) light gravy of a dish

jol (*jal*) water

jolkhabar (*jalkhabar*) light meal

joutuk (*jautuk*) dowry

joutuk deoya (*jautuk deo(y)ā*) to give a dowry

Kacha (*kāchā*) unripe, uncooked, raw, immature

kaj (*kāj*) work

kam (*kām*) lust

kaminikanchan (*kāminikānchan*) women and gold

kanyadan (*kanyādān*) gift of a virgin

karta (*kartā*) head of household

kotha (*kathā*) words and stories

kulin(ism) (*kulīn*) system adhered to by high status groups among Brahmins and

Kyasthas who follow prescribed hypergamy

kutum (*kutum*) relatives through marriage

Lajja (*lajjā*) shame

loha (*lahā*) iron bangle signifying eternal marriage

luchi (*luchi*) puffed bread fried in *ghee*

Madhyabitta sreni (*madhyabittā srenī*) middle class

madhyama samkara jati (*madhyamā samkarā jāti*) middle mixed castes

mahila samiti (*mahilā samiti*) women's association

mama (*māmā*) maternal uncle

mamar bari (*māmār bāṛi*) the house of the maternal uncle often formerly house

of the parents of a married woman

mashi (*māsi*) maternal aunt

mishti doi (*misti dai*) sweet curd

mofussil (*mofussil*) district

mukh dekha (*mukh dekhā*) ritual of seeing the bride or seeing her face on the day

of the wedding

murti (*mūrti*) image of deity

Nanod (*nānad*) husband's sister, sister-in-law

nijer biye (*nijer bi(y)e*) love-marriage, lit. own marriage

niyom (*niyam*) custom

notun bou (*natun bau*) new bride, new daughter in law

Osthomir din (*aṣthamir din*) eighth day of the *puja* festivals

Paka (*pākā*) ripe, mature, hardened; in relation with food pure and cooked with

ghee; in relation with marriage to formally draw the marriage contract *paka*

dekha

pandal (*pāndāl*) seat of a deity during community *puja* mostly a tentlike

construction

para (*pāṛā*) neighbourhood

parar lok (*pāṛār lǒk*) neighbourhood people

pishi (*pisi*) paternal aunt

pola (*palā*) red bangle worn by married women between the two conchshell

bangles (*shankha*)

pon (*pan*) money paid to secure a bride or groom, dowry

poribar (*paribār*) family, household

prasad (*prasād*) sacrificed food, mostly raw

pratiloma (*pratiloma*) in accordance with custom and rules, lit. following the hair

prem (*prem*) love

prem-bhakti (*prem-bhakti*) mode of worship of e.g. Vaishnavites, lit. worship

  through love

puja (*pujā*) worship

purdah (*purdah*) seclusion and the related rules of segregation, lit. curtain

purohit (*purahit*) priest

Samaj (*samāj*) society

shangshar (*saṃsar*) family

shamshkara (*samskara*) sacrament

shashur (*śaśur*) father-in-law

shasur bari (*śaśur bāṛi*) in-laws' house

shashuri (*śāśuri*) mother-in-law

sati (*sati*) widow's (self-)immolation

shadh (*sādh*) rituals of "desired foods" performed for the health of a pregnant

  woman and safe delivery

shakti (*śakti*) female power

shankha (*śankha*) conchshell, bangles made from conchshell

shanti (*sānti*) peace, peaceful

shastrachar (*sastrāchār*) shastric rituals, rituals performed by a priest

shomporko (*samparka*) relatives and related people

shosthi (*saṣthi*) sixth day of the month, dedicated to the Goddess of the same

  name

shraddh (*sraddh*) rites performed for the dead

shindur (*sīdur*) vermilion

sneha (*snehā*) (hierarchical, e.g. parental) love

stri achar (*strī āchār*) women's rituals performed on the occasion of weddings

etc.

stridhan (*strīdhan*) woman's property given on the occasion of her wedding

shubha (*śubhā*) auspicious

shubha dristhi (*subha dristhi*) auspicious glance

Tal (*tāl*) palmtree

tattya (*tattya*) traditional gifts given by the families of bride and groom (*biyer*

tattya)

thakur ghor (*thākur ghar*) room of the gods used for *pujas*

tiffin (*tiffin*) snack taken out

Varna (*vārnā*) classification of castes found in the scriptures : Brahmin,

Kayastha, Vaishya, Shudra

Zamindar (*zamindār*) landowner under British rule

zamindari (*zamindāri*) landholding, in the style of the *zamindars*

zenana (*zenānā*) women's quarter of the house, (see *andor mahal, antahpur*)

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