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Modern Asian Studies / Volume 46 / Issue 03 / May 2012, pp 601 - 638

DOI: 10.1017/S0026749X11000448, Published online: 30 August 2011

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### How to cite this article:

ANNE WALDROP (2012). Grandmother, Mother and Daughter: Changing agency of Indian, middle-class women, 1908–2008. *Modern Asian Studies*, 46, pp 601-638  
doi:10.1017/S0026749X11000448

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*Grandmother, Mother and Daughter:  
Changing agency of Indian, middle-class  
women, 1908–2008\**

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**Abstract**

Covering one hundred years, this paper recounts the life stories of three generations of middle-class women of the New Delhi-based Kapoor family. By taking the methodological view that individuals born approximately at the same time, within the same class segment, and at the same cultural place will be shaped by the same historical structures so that their lives to some extent are synchronized into a gendered, generational experience, these three life stories are viewed as voices that reflect their respective generational class segments. In view of this, the paper uses the three life stories to discuss changes in women's agency within the urban, educated, upper middle-class. Agency is here understood as control over resources, and it is argued that in order to understand changes in women's agency, one should take into account the impact of both social, economic structures and cultural ideologies. When analysing the three life stories, the overall finding is that the granddaughter has had more control over her own life than her mother and grandmother. However, by acknowledging that cultural ideologies and social economic structures are not always synchronized, a nuanced and many-dimensional picture of twists and turns in these middle-class women's degree and type of agency over time emerges.

**Introduction**

This paper recounts the life stories of three generations of women of the New Delhi based Kapoor family—Kamla Kapoor, her daughter-in-law, Sheila Kapoor (née Khanna), and Sheila Kapoor's daughter,

\* I would like to thank Louise Lamphere, Tord Larsen and Stein Sundstøl Eriksen for their inspiring comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

Lata Mehta (née Kapoor)<sup>1</sup>—and uses their stories to discuss changes in women's agency within the urban, educated, upper caste, middle-class.<sup>2</sup> Historical circumstances have clearly affected cultural norms and gender practices in urban India during the 100 years covered by these three women's lives and many changes have taken place. In view of this, a central question that will be probed is to what extent young women in contemporary India within this upper middle-class segment have more agency than did their mothers and grandmothers. The concept of agency will be discussed in more detail below, but in short, I use it to refer to the degree to which a person is in control over decisions relating to his or her own life.

In India, patriarchy has historically had one of its strongest footholds among the upper castes in the North, and it is here that upper caste married women, through practices like *Purdah*, are known to be most severely restricted in their movements outside the home.<sup>3</sup> With the implementation of neo-liberal policies from 1991 onwards, however, the cultural practices of the Indian middle-classes have undergone sweeping changes, which also appear to have affected women and gender relations.<sup>4</sup> For example, when looking at the portrayal of women in media it seems that restrictions on women's dress and

<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to the three women, here called Kapoor, for sharing their family stories with me. In order to protect their anonymity, I have changed their names and in some cases changed minor details, such as names of places or description of jobs.

<sup>2</sup> India has a large, growing, rather heterogenic middle class, and as has been noted by Fuller, C.J. and Narasimhan, H. (2007), Information Technology Professionals and the New-Rich Middle Class in Chennai (Madras), *Modern Asian Studies*, 41(1): 121–150, p. 121, sound sociological and ethnographic information about India's growing middle-class is still sparse. In this paper, when I discuss changes in agency with reference to the three Kapoor women, I refer to a loosely defined segment of this middle class, which can be identified by the key terms 'urban', 'educated', and 'upper', and below include an explanation of what these characteristics entail.

<sup>3</sup> *Purdah* is directly translated as 'curtain' and is, according to Papanek, 'the word most commonly used for the system of secluding women and enforcing high standards of female modesty in much of South Asia', Papanek, H. (1973), *Purdah: Separate Worlds and Symbolic Shelter*, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 15(3): 289–325, p. 289. For analyses of *purdah* practices among Hindus in Northern India, see also: Chowdry, P. (2004), *The Veiled Women: Shifting Gender Equations in Rural Haryana*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press; and Jacobsen, D. (1982), 'Purdah and the Hindu Family in Central India', in Papanek, H. and Minault, G. (eds) *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia*, Columbia, Missouri, South Asia Books, pp. 81–110.

<sup>4</sup> For a broad, general analysis of how the introduction of neo-liberal policies has affected the middle-classes in India, see: Fernandes, L. (2006), *India's New Middle Class. Democratic Politics in an Era of Reform*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press. For an ethnographical analysis of changes in middle-class women's experiences and practices in Calcutta, see: Donner, H. (2008), *Domestic Goddesses:*

movements have been lessened,<sup>5</sup> and with the new type of white-collar jobs that have emerged in the service-sector and the private-sector, new work opportunities for urban, educated women have been produced. It is, however, well documented that when it comes to women and work, the introduction of neo-liberal policies has had an overall negative impact on women from lower class backgrounds, and a mixed impact on women from the middle-classes.<sup>6</sup>

The three middle-class women, whose life stories form the empirical core of this paper, are Kamla Kapoor, Sheila Kapoor and Lata Mehta. Kamla Kapoor is now a very old lady living in a semi-separated joint family household in an up-market neighbourhood in New Delhi, India. Being 100 years old and frail, she spends most of her days in bed with a nurse looking after her. When I first got to know her in 1992, she was a widow and a *Mater Familias*: Mother of two successful sons of the Indian Administrative Service, and grandmother of five young adults living in England, America and New Delhi. Sheila Kapoor is married to Kamla's youngest son, and she and her husband have two adult children and four young grandchildren. After her husband retired from the Indian Administrative Service in 1994, the two women have been living in the same household in the family house in Jor Bagh, New Delhi. Lata Mehta, the daughter of Sheila and the granddaughter of Kamla, is now in her mid-thirties. She runs her own successful fashion business,

*Maternity, Globalization and Middle-Class Identity in Contemporary India*, Aldershot and Burlington, Ashgate.

<sup>5</sup> See: Dewey, S. (2008), *Making Miss India Miss World: Constructing Gender, Power, and the Nation in Postliberalization India*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press; Thapan, M. (2004), 'Embodiment and Identity in Contemporary Society: *Femina* and the 'New' Indian Woman', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 38(3): 411–444.

<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of how the introduction of neo-liberal policies has had an overall negative impact on poor women's education and employment in rural Tamil Nadu, see: Swaminathan, P. (2002), 'The Violence of Gender Biased Development: Going Beyond Social and Demographic Indicators', in Kapadia, K. (ed.) *The Violence of Development: The Politics of Identity, Gender & Social Inequalities in India*, New Delhi, Kali for Women, pp. 69–141. And for the case of working-class women in New Delhi see: Mazumdar, I. (2007), *Women Workers and Globalization: Emergent Contradictions in India*, published by Kolkata, Stree (also published by the Centre for Women's Development Studies, Delhi, which is the reference used in this paper). When it comes to the mixed impact of the neo-liberal policies on middle-class women and work, see Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class*, pp. 162–168. And for arguments about how neo-liberal policies strengthen already existing inequities of caste, class and gender, and how this generally implies that middle-class women benefit from these policies, see Banerjee, N. (2002), 'Between the Devil and the Deep Sea: Shrinking Options for Women in Contemporary India', in Kapadia, *The Violence of Development*, pp. 43–69, esp. 58; and Mazumdar, *Women Workers*, p. 35.

is married and lives in another New Delhi upscale neighbourhood together with her husband and two small children.

In the following analysis, the overall finding is that the granddaughter has had more control over her own life than her mother and grandmother, and from this I infer that there has been a change from the previous generations to the present towards increased power and agency for women from the particular urban, educated, high caste, upper middle-class segment that I am concerned with here. However, by acknowledging that cultural ideologies and social economic structures are not always synchronized, a nuanced and many-dimensional picture of twists and turns in these upper middle-class women's degree and type of agency over time emerges.

The paper is organized with the three life-stories in chronological order at its empirical core. Because I am interested in change, the life-story of the grandmother, Kamla Kapoor, lays the foundations with which the two other life-stories are compared, and comparatively more space is therefore given to her life-story. The interviews with the three women were conducted in English, and in the presentation of each life story I use full citations so that the voice of each woman comes through with their own particular words and expressions. Analysis of the life-stories, in terms of the historical, structural contexts that they take place within, how they express particular gender norms of time and place, and what the stories might say about agency, is recorded intermittently and in the conclusion.

### **Theoretical perspectives on changing agency**

Before turning to the life-stories, I will discuss the theoretical and methodological underpinnings that this analysis is based on. First is a presentation of the key-concept agency, second a discussion of how to explain changing practices, and third a discussion of methodological representativeness.

As mentioned above, in very general terms, agency is about being in control of one's own life and the decisions relating to oneself, and it is something individuals and groups may have more or less of. In more concrete terms, agency is to what extent a person is in control of their own body, their movements in geographical space, and/or property. Theoretically, agency is a concept that springs out of the theoretical debate between actor-oriented and structure-oriented perspectives that both have been criticized from the opposite angle.

In the context of theories that try to explain women's subordinate position in society, Lovell compares Judith Butler's post-modernist, individual-oriented approach with Bourdieu's structural perspective in his theory of masculine dominance, and brings out the shortcomings of both.<sup>7</sup> Lovell argues that whereas Butler stresses agency, fluidity and performance, Bourdieu operates with durable structures and dispositional subjects. Furthermore, it is argued that whereas 'Butler reads at times like a voluntarist whose individuals freely don and doff their masks... Bourdieu reads at times like a structuralist with an "over socialized" concept of the individual, ... one who comes to love and want his/her fate: *amor fati*'.<sup>8</sup>

To focus on agency is a way to bridge these two opposing perspectives. Agency implies that all human beings, regardless of their class, age or gender, are viewed as acting subjects that live within durable structures that shape their lives and actions. From such a perspective all human beings are capable, in theory at least, to take some control over their own lives, but their degree of power and control will depend upon how they are placed within larger structures of class and gender.<sup>9</sup>

In the analysis of the life stories below, I try both to describe the agency of each woman empirically, and to explain the causes behind changes in agency. In order to make 'agency' operational and comparable, it is broken down into two empirically observable factors. Firstly, because agency is closely related to control over material resources and decision-making power, focus is on to what extent the three women have been able to decide on important life-choices like education, work and marriage, and on the degree of individual control over economic resources they have had. Secondly, I look at how the women talk about their lives and the choices they have made, or that have been made for them, and consider this in terms of individuality

<sup>7</sup> Lovell (2000), Thinking Feminism With and Against Bourdieu, *Feminist Theory*, 1(1): 11–32. Lovell refers to several works by Bourdieu and Butler. In this argument, the following three books are specifically relevant: Bourdieu, P. (1998), *La Domination Masculine*, Paris, Seuil; Butler, J. (1990), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York and London, Routledge; Butler, J. (1993), *Bodies That Matter*, New York and London, Routledge.

<sup>8</sup> Lovell, Thinking Feminism, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> The cultural emphasis on individual action versus collectivism varies from society to society, and this again will affect how individual agency is valued. See: D. Arnold and S. Blackburn (2004), 'Introduction: Life Histories in India', in Arnold and Blackburn (eds) *Telling Lives in India. Biography, Autobiography, and Life History*, Delhi, Permanent Black, pp. 1–28.

versus family orientation. Here, I look at to what extent the women express an orientation towards the family versus the self. Included in this is the wording they use in terms of stressing the individual 'I' versus the collective 'we', and to what extent they express an orientation in their lived lives towards the family or the outside world.

In order to explain causes behind changes in agency, I draw theoretically upon Derné's<sup>10</sup> model of social change. Influenced by Swidler's<sup>11</sup> argument about the causal priority of social structure and institutions over cultural ideologies, Derné analyses the impact of globalization, in the form of neo-liberal policies and transformation of media, on gender practices in India. According to this perspective, because people live within social structures that over time will have produced 'stories, values, and other elements of culture that make these structures meaningful',<sup>12</sup> there will generally be a fit between social structures and hegemonic cultural meanings. At the same time, because social structures also always disadvantage some groups of individuals, there will exist alternative meanings within the same social structures.

Thus it follows that for globalization to affect individual lives and lead to changes in gender practices, changes at several levels have to take place. Firstly, local social structures that directly affect groups of individuals have to be transformed. Secondly, when local social structures are transformed, and the hegemonic cultural meanings no longer fit, a space is opened up so that new and/or alternative cultural meanings may develop. Finally, when both new social structures and new ideological norms coincide, gender practices will change.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Derné, S. (2008), *Globalization on the Ground: Media and the Transformation of Culture, Class, and Gender in India*, New Delhi and London, Sage, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> See: Derné, *Globalization*, pp. 58–59, where he refers to Swidler, A. (2001), *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press. See also: Swidler, A. (1986), Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies, *American Sociological Review*, 51(2): 273–286.

<sup>12</sup> Derné, *Globalization*, p. 78.

<sup>13</sup> From a different, psychological point of view, a similar argument about generational change of gender practices has been made. Bjerrum Nielsen and Rudberg argue that it is only when parents raise their children in accordance with current cultural and social possibilities that these will be inscribed into the gendered subjectivity and gender identity of their children and will over time affect their practices: Bjerrum Nielsen, H. and Rudberg, M. (1994), "Hallo Fatty!"—Continuity and Change in Psychological Gender', in *Psychological Gender and Modernity*, Oslo, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Scandinavian University Press, pp. 85–115.

### Methodological issues

The life-stories presented in this paper have been gathered in bits and pieces over a long time-period: from when I first got to know Kamla Kapoor in 1992, up to my last visit to India in 2007. The life-stories are mainly based on the two methodological tools of participant observation, and in-depth, individual interviews with each woman, where I asked them to tell me about their lives.<sup>14</sup> Focus is mainly on the period in each woman's life when they were young adults. In America, it has been argued that historical circumstances tend to have the strongest effect on individual life-courses when they happen during late youth and early adult life because these are periods when individuals are confronted with major choices that are often likely to have crucial impact on their later life-courses.<sup>15</sup> The same also tends to be true in the case of middle-class India, as choices regarding education, work, marriage, and children all have to be made when a person is between 17 and 30 years' old. Furthermore, focusing on the same period in the life-courses for all three women—the period when they were young adults—will also make easier the comparison between their life stories and what these might say about agency methodologically. According to the normative standard regarding North Indian upper caste women's life-path, women's agency changes over the life-course, from beloved girl in her parents' house, via subdued daughter-in-law, to powerful grandmother and mother-in-law.<sup>16</sup> Hence, the grandmother in this account, who was an old and

<sup>14</sup> I first got to know the Kapoor family when I came to New Delhi in 1992 to work for the United Nations Development Programme. When I came back to New Delhi for a nine-month period in 1997, to do fieldwork for my Dr Polit project on the established, English-speaking middle-class in New Delhi, India, they helped me to find a flat to rent and became my neighbours. It was during this period that I conducted the life-story interviews with Kamla and Sheila. I have kept in contact with the family since, and touch base with them whenever I am in New Delhi. The interview with Lata was conducted during one such later visit in 2006, after she had married and established herself professionally.

<sup>15</sup> Elder Jr, G. H. and Hareven, T. (1992), 'Rising Above Life's Disadvantages: From the Great Depression to Global War', in Elder Jr, G. H., Modell, J. and Parke, R. D. (eds) *Children in Time and Place*, New York, Cambridge University Press, pp. 47–73.

<sup>16</sup> For portrayals that shed light on the varied experiences of North Indian women within the standardized life-course, see for instance: Jacobsen, D. (1992), 'The Women of North and Central India: Goddesses and Wives' in Jacobsen, D. and Wadley, S. *Women in India. Two Perspectives*, Columbia, South Asia Publications; Jeffery, P. and Jeffery, R. (1996), *Don't Marry Me to a Plowman: Women's Everyday Lives in Rural North India*, Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press; Seymour, S. C. (1999), *Women, Family, and*



powerful mother of two successful sons when I met her, was in no way as powerful when she was newly married.

I now turn to the issue of relevance and methodological representativeness. To what extent is it possible to use the three specific stories recounted below to draw more general conclusions about changes in Indian middle-class women's agency? To focus on life stories—or just on stories—as a window to get insight into other cultures, has become quite popular among anthropologists. Two of the advantages that the adherents point out with this type of approach are that 'focusing on individuals encourages familiarity rather than distance and helps to break down "otherness"'<sup>17</sup>, and that life stories 'straddle the elusive divide between personal narrative and objective truth'<sup>18</sup>.

However, as warned by, amongst others, Hagestad, there is an ambiguous relationship between individual life pathways, and the social structural context that they take place within, so one should be careful not to project a one-to-one relationship between individuals and society at large.<sup>19</sup> I suggest that by drawing upon methodological perspectives developed by social historians, and by focusing on how larger historical events and social structures have been found to have had a similar effect on individuals born approximately at the same time and in the same place, it is methodologically possible to regard individual life stories as social stories.<sup>20</sup> Individual lives can be viewed to some extent as synchronized into a generational experience, so that

*Child Care in India: A World in Transition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; Sharma, U. (1980), *Women, Work, and Property in North-West India*, London and New York, Tavistock Publications; Donner, *Domestic Goddesses*.

<sup>17</sup> Abu-Lughod, L. (1993), *Writing Women's World: Bedouin Stories*, Berkeley, University of California Press, p. 29.

<sup>18</sup> Arnold and Blackburn, 'Introduction, Life Histories', p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Hagestad, G. 'Social Perspectives on the Life Course' in Binstock, R. H. and George, L. K., *Aging and the Social Sciences, third edition*, San Diego and London, Academic Press, pp. 151–168, esp. 152.

<sup>20</sup> In an analysis of how the two historical events of the Great Depression and World War Two affected the life courses of two different cohorts on the East Coast and on the West Coast of the USA, it was found that the two historical events affected individuals depending both on when and on where they were born. This implies that individuals born at the same cultural place, belonging to the same social class, were affected rather similarly by the same historical event. See: Elder and Hareven, 'Rising Above' pp. 47–73; and Elder Jr. (1998), *Children of the Great Depression*, Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press. For an analysis of how larger economic structural transformations in America at large have affected women in the same Navajo family differently, depending on their age, see Lamphere, L. (2007), *Weaving Women's Lives: Three Generations in a Navajo Family*, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press.

the historical events that one individual has experienced can also be viewed as having been relevant for other women of similar cultural class. Based on this perspective, the three life stories presented here are viewed as reflecting larger changes in agency over time among women from the same social segment.<sup>21</sup> Before turning to the life stories of the three Kapoor women I need to define more specifically 'the wider society' and 'social segment' that they are part of, as well as the historical periods that have formed their three respective generations.

What characterizes the Indian middle-class segment that the Kapoor family belongs to? Although sound sociological and ethnographic information about India's growing middle-class is still sparse,<sup>22</sup> it is not hard to find empirical references to this often vaguely defined set of people. For the purpose of descriptively defining the middle-class segment of the Kapoor family, it makes sense to divide the references and debates regarding the Indian middle-classes<sup>23</sup> into three types, thus establishing three main characteristics: (1) urban and educated; (2) upper caste; and (3) established, upper middle-class.

The first of these debates was prominent in academic writings from the 1960s until the early 1990s and defined the ruling class in India as opposed to the ruled class.<sup>24</sup> Here the middle-class is viewed as the same as, or as part of, the ruling, dominant class(es) and as such, is generally divided into two main types: the rural, landholding middle-class; and the urban, educated middle-class.<sup>25</sup> The Kapoor family falls into the latter of these two main middle-class categories.

<sup>21</sup> This is in line with Arnold and Blackburn, *Telling Lives*, p. 6, when they argue that 'life histories reveal insights not just into the experiences and attitudes of the individuals directly concerned, but also of the wider society, or social segment, of which they are a part'.

<sup>22</sup> Fuller and Narasimhan, 'Information Technology', p. 121.[17]

<sup>23</sup> Many authors prefer to use the plural form and write about 'the middle classes', rather than 'one middle class'. See for example, Misra, B. B. (1961), *The Indian Middle Classes: Their Growth in Modern Times*, London, Oxford University Press; Beteille, A. (2001), 'The Social Character of the Middle Class' in Ahmad, I. and Reifeld, H. (eds), *Middle Class Values in India & Western Europe*, New Delhi, Social Science Press, pp. 73–86; and Markovits, C. (2001), 'Merchants, Entrepreneurs and the Middle Classes in India in the Twentieth Century', in *Middle Class Values*, pp. 42–56.

<sup>24</sup> See Srinivas, M. N. (1977), *The Dual Cultures of India, Gandhi Memorial Lecture*, Bangalore, Raman Research Institute.

<sup>25</sup> See Misra, *The Indian Middle Classes*; and Bardhan, P. (1984), *The Political Economy of Development in India*, New York and Oxford, Blackwell. The latter divides the ruling classes in India—or 'the dominant propriety classes'—into three segments: (1) rural

The second debate involves writings on the Indian middle-classes which are historical analyses of the cultural values of the emerging colonial middle-class. This (in the Indian context) new class of people had two characteristics in common. Firstly, they were in the 'middle' in the colonial class hierarchy,<sup>26</sup> and secondly, the Hindus were almost without exception high caste. As high caste, middle-class they shared some key values such as an emphasis on education and, for women, an emphasis on respectability.<sup>27</sup>

The third debate that helps define the middle-class segment to which the Kapoor family belongs concerns the growth of the Indian middle-class along with neo-liberal reforms, and to what extent and in what ways it makes sense to view this post-liberalization middle-class as 'new'.<sup>28</sup> Here, where my objective is to define the specific middle-class segment to which the Kapoor family belongs, I find it fruitful to emphasize that they are part of an established, upper middle-class that can trace their class position back several generations. This implies that, because of this established position, they not only have high cultural capital, but also have capitalized on the neo-liberal reforms, increased their economic capital and become quite rich.

In the analysis below focus is on three historical periods that coincide with the periods when each of the three women was a young adult, and which I view as having defined their respective class cohorts. It will be seen that the historical period between the Second World War and Partition (1940 to 1947), which had lasting effects on the life courses of many individual Indians, directly affected Kamla Kapoor's life-course, and that her experiences during this period also affected her agency later on. Sheila Kapoor, on the other hand, was a baby

landholders/rich farmers, (2) urban industrial bourgeoisie, and (3) urban, class of white-collar government employees/professionals.

<sup>26</sup> For analyses of the colonial middle-class as middlemen in a double sense—in the middle between classes and in the middle between colonialists and Indians—see for example, Bhatia, B. M. (1994) *India's Middle Class. Role in Nation Building*, New Delhi, Konark Publishers; Chatterjee, P. (1994), *The Nation and Its Fragments. Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Delhi, Oxford University Press; Joshi, S. (2001), *Fractured Modernity. Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press; and Varma, P. (1998), *The Great Indian Middle Class*, New Delhi, Viking. For an argument about how middle-classness overrides regional culture when it comes to the position of women, see Poggendorf-Kakar, K. (2001), 'Middle-class Formation and the Cultural Construction of Gender in Urban India' in Ahmad and Reifeld (eds), *Middle Class Values*, pp. 125–141.

<sup>27</sup> High caste, middle-class ideals in the analysis of the life stories is discussed below.

<sup>28</sup> Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class*.

in 1947 and was only indirectly influenced by Partition in the sense that it made her parents move from Lahore to New Delhi. However, it is the historical period of the 1960s and early 1970s (during which time Indira Gandhi was Prime Minister, when the Nehruvian planning economy was in full bloom, and when pre-World War Two and pre-Independence gender roles were ideologically restored), that has affected Sheila Kapoor's life-course the most, albeit in quite subtle ways. Lastly, the period following the introduction of the neo-liberal economic policies from 1991 onwards, has clearly affected the life-course and agency of Kamla's granddaughter, Lata. This historical period came so late in Kamla's life-course that it is hard to see that it has had any affect on her agency at all.

### **Introducing Kamla Kapoor: modern and middle-class**

Kamla Kapoor began her life story by telling me about her youth in Amritsar, Punjab, where she was born in 1908<sup>29</sup>:

My parents came from Amritsar, and I was born and brought up there. I was the oldest girl with two elder brothers... I started school when I was 7–8 years old. I was sent to missionary school, with an English principal. It was the best school in Amritsar. But that school was only up to 10<sup>th</sup> class. Then I was admitted to college in Lahore. My parents were against college, but I wanted it. I had two friends from Amritsar who had gone.

I protested against early marriage and said that I will not marry anyone until I find somebody I can be happy with. My two elder brothers had been sent to England to go into the same business as our father, and they stayed for 4 years there... At that time there were 3 colleges for women. I stayed in a boarding house, so it was safe you know, and I went to Amritsar for holidays.

After college her parents wanted her to get married, but she was picky:

Everyone I met, I turned down. They were not educated. They were businessmen with money, but I did not want an uneducated man. Then, it turned out that a friend of my father had a son who he wanted to get married. He was educated in Edinburgh. He was a medical doctor and an

<sup>29</sup> Kamla Kapoor does not remember dates very specifically, so I'm not sure of her exact age. She told me that she remembered the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre and that it happened while she was a young girl in Amritsar. Since that was in 1919, and she later told me that she got married in 1930 at the age of 22, I assume that she was born around 1908.

eye-specialist. He had been married previously, but he was not happy in his marriage.<sup>30</sup> I met him and I was impressed. He was educated.

My husband-to-be was at that time stationed in Rangoon in Burma. He was an all-round-doctor, but specialist in eyes. Two days after I married him, we went to Burma. First we were in Rangoon for approximately 6 months. Then we went to a hill-station, a beautiful place with wooden houses. We lived there for 2 years. . . I remember we had a very nice cook in the house. He was South Indian and could cook English food very well. I had been taught to cook and sew at my parents' house. I made *chapattis*<sup>31</sup> . . .

My husband had been a doctor with the troops in the First World War, and he was good at riding. I had never been on a horse, but I was taught to ride by my husband. . . I had learned tennis in college and enjoyed that. . . There was a club for foreigners, and my husband had friends to whom I was introduced after marriage.

My family was enlightened, and both my husband and my father had studied abroad, so there was no *purdah*<sup>32</sup>. I liked the life in Burma. . .

After two and a half years in Burma, Kamla's husband's elder brother died and they had to go to Punjab for the funeral. Since this now made her husband the eldest son in the family he felt that he had to stay in India. He got a job with the Indian Medical Service and they moved from posting to posting in North India until the outbreak of the Second World War.

In this first part of Kamla's life-story, she focuses explicitly and implicitly on the importance of 'being educated'. To be educated is, however, not only about education *per se*, in the Indian colonial context it can also be translated to mean being modern, middle-class and enlightened. As has been noted by many, the Indian colonial middle-class grew out of the need of the British colonizers for locals who could function as middlemen—contacts, agents, interpreters, brokers, money-changers and financiers—between the English rulers and the

<sup>30</sup> The first wife could not bear children, and within the educated, high caste, middle-class at that time this was regarded as grounds for divorce, or grounds for the husband to take a second wife. From what I was told by other family members, Kamla Kapoor's husband-to-be never divorced his first wife, but married Kamla as a second wife and lived with her. I do not know whether he continued to support his first wife economically or had any other contact with her.

<sup>31</sup> *Chapattis* are a flat kind of bread made in the frying pan, and it requires training to make them thin and fluffy. Since they are a Punjabi speciality, eaten instead of rice, one could not expect the South Indian cook to be able to make them properly.

<sup>32</sup> See footnote 3 above.

ruled Indian people.<sup>33</sup> To be able to speak English and to some extent behave according to English values and customs was a necessity to succeed as a middleman, and thereby an English education with its inherent modernist values became the mark of the emerging colonial middle-class. So when Kamla Kapoor talks about the importance of 'being educated' she is referring to a specific colonial Indian middle-class lifestyle. This becomes evident when she talks about her early-married life at government postings in the colonies, for instance, when she emphasizes that she was taught how to ride, that she played tennis, and that in Burma she was a member of the club for foreigners. Class distinction is also expressed when she uses terms like 'backward', 'dirty', 'in *pardah*', and 'so-called enlightened' about people that she regards as below her in the class hierarchy.

Another interesting aspect of this first part of Kamla Kapoor's life-story is that she seems to express a strong determination with regard to decisions concerning education and marriage. How should this be interpreted in terms of agency? The first half of the twentieth century was a period in Indian history when middle-class gender hegemonies were undergoing changes that resulted in ambivalent outcomes with regard to women's agency. Together and separately, the various factors of English colonialism, the Hindu reform movements, the Indian Independence movement and the Indian Women's Movements<sup>34</sup> affected hegemonic views of middle-class femininity, resulting in contradictions, sudden changes, and great regional variation in policies concerning women.

This was a period when, on the one hand, women were idealized and viewed as a symbol of Hindu supremacy, and when, on the other hand, English, Victorian notions of hygiene and of women out of *pardah* had gained hold within the Indian women's movement and parts of the Independence movement.<sup>35</sup> As Chatterjee has argued, the Indian

<sup>33</sup> See for example, Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class*; Khilnani, S. (1997), *The Idea of India*, Hamish Hamilton; Joshi, *Fractured Modernity*; Liddle, J. and Joshi, R. (1986), *Daughters of Independence*, London, Zed Books; and Varma, *Great Indian*.

<sup>34</sup> The three women's organizations that came to be most influential in Indian politics were started within ten years of one another. They were: The Women's Indian Association (WIA), started in 1917; The National Council of Women in India, started in 1925; and the All India Women's Conference (AIWC), started in 1927. See for example, Forbes, G. (1981), *Women in Modern India*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; Liddle and Joshi, *Daughters*.

<sup>35</sup> For debates about and descriptions of how the high caste, emerging *bhadralok* responded to colonialism and dealt with 'the women's question', as Chatterjee has termed it, see Chatterjee, P. 2006 (first published 1989), 'The Nationalist Resolution

Independence movement looked upon the home (*ghar*) as the place of Hindu tradition and the sphere where women belonged, while the outside world (*bahir*) was viewed as the sphere of modernity and economic progress, where men were in charge.<sup>36</sup> From the perspective of the Independence Movement's ideology of nationalist modernity, men should act as protectors of women, who again were protectors of Indian tradition. That women belonged within the home did not, however, imply that they should not acquire an education. On the contrary, during the early twentieth century when Kamla was young, middle-class women were increasingly encouraged to become educated so that they could learn about hygiene, raising children and other issues that were considered important for the modern, yet chaste, homemaker.<sup>37</sup>

In view of this, Kamla Kapoor's seemingly strong determination to have her say in decisions concerning her own life is not so remarkable. When she says that she demanded a college education, she was only asking for what most middle-class households of the time would consider necessary in order to arrange good marriage matches for their daughters and make them into capable housewives. Her seemingly strong determination is also modified by the family-orientation in her story. Family obligations come first, as when her husband's elder brother dies they feel that they have to move back to India from Burma.

In fact, in this first part of Kamla Kapoor's life-story the position of women as belonging within the home and family comes through as an implicit backdrop that is taken for granted and that her agency is worked out from. She acknowledges and accepts the colonial middle-class, patriarchal ideology that women do not have the same options as men. She does go to college, but accepts that she is not sent to England to study as in the case of her brothers. She gets to marry an educated man of 'her own' choice, but she does not rebel against arranged marriage in the first place. She accepts the rather

of the Women's Question', in Sangari, K. and Vaid, S. *Recasting Women*, New Delhi, Zubaan, pp. 233–253; and Sarkar, T. (2001), *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism*, Delhi, Permanent Black. For an analysis of this in the case of Punjab, see Malhotra, A. (2002), *Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities: Restructuring Class in Colonial Punjab*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press. For a descriptive analysis of Hindu Bengali womanhood of upper-middle class families, see Roy, M. (1992), *Bengali Women*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press.

<sup>36</sup> Chatterjee, 'Nationalist Resolution', pp. 233–253.

<sup>37</sup> See: Hancock, M. (2001), Home Science and the Nationalization of Domesticity in Colonial India, *Modern Asian Studies*, 35:1, pp. 871–903; Malhotra, *Gender, Caste and Religious Identities*, pp. 116–164.

male-chauvinist view of women, that her husband has the right to leave his first wife because she is barren. And lastly, when Kamla Kapoor portrays the adventures and distinction of her early-married life to include travelling, club-life and sports, she acknowledges that this was possible only in her capacity as a companion to her husband.

In this early part of her life-story, what comes out as a strong will and adventurousness might also be viewed as a sign of Kamla Kapoor's colonial, high caste, middle-class position—with its inherently patriarchal and modern ideology—inculcated through English language education and strengthened through a colonial club-lifestyle. However, in the next section of this paper, which centres on the period of World War Two, it will be seen that this middle-class femininity provided her with the potential for being able to take charge of her life and manage on her own.

### **World War Two: managing on her own**

With the outbreak of the Second World War a dramatic part of Kamla Kapoor's life, which would come to affect her marriage and further life-course, begins:

My husband was given the assignment of mobilizing a general hospital to follow the English troops to Burma. . . The time came when he went to Penang. I left Lucknow to go and stay with my parents. At that time, all my three children were born. They went with me to Amritsar. Then Japan entered the war and the British had to retreat towards Singapore. The hospital kept retreating by stages until the British surrendered. My husband was taken prisoner of war. He could not send letters and they were treated badly.

Meanwhile I was in Amritsar, but the children had to go to school. There were no good schools in Amritsar, and I decided not to send them to a Convent School. I decided to go to Shimla<sup>38</sup> where there were some very good English schools. So I moved to Shimla because of the schooling. My parents were dead against it, so one of my brothers, junior to me and still a bachelor, was sent with me to Shimla. He went with me for almost one year until I found my footing. I managed economically because I got Rs. 800 from my husband's bank account pr. month, something he had arranged before he was sent to Penang. However, I used only Rs. 300 pr. month.

<sup>38</sup> Shimla was a so-called hill-station, which was the term used for the summer-retreats that British colonizers created in the Himalayas. As a hill-station, it had good English language schools.



During all the 4 years while my husband was [a] prisoner of war, I did not know whether he was alive or not. Then the war ended and one evening at 10 o'clock someone knocked on the door. I was worried who it could be. It was a friend who had heard on the radio the names of the prisoners of war who had come back to India and my husband's name was among them. . . My husband was brought back to Calcutta, but he was in a bad state. I was not allowed to see him at first. The British wanted to feed him up first.

What I find most interesting in this dramatic part of Kamla Kapoor's life-story is when she describes how she dealt with the situation of being left in charge of her children's education and upbringing, whilst her husband was a prisoner of war. She first moved to her parents' place in Amritsar, and then made the decision, against her parents' wishes, to move to Shimla with her children. How should this be interpreted? To what extent was this a rebellious action and a sign of an alternative, new form of middle-class femininity?

On the one hand, it can be argued that because she stayed within the limits of what was considered proper female middle-class behaviour of the time, it was not very rebellious. With her middle-class position and its strong emphasis on being educated, moving to a place where her children could get a good education would be the mainstream logical thing to do. Furthermore, although her parents initially were 'dead against it', she compromised and received their approval by agreeing to let her younger bachelor brother accompany her and to be her male-protector during the first year in Shimla.

On the other hand, in the Indian upper caste context where *Purdah* was still practiced by many, it can be argued that to insist on moving to a place on her own was a rather unusual thing for a woman to do. The fact that her younger brother only stayed with her as a male protector for one year out of four, makes it reasonable to argue that there are signs of independence and self-confidence in this action that depart from the general portrayal of high caste, middle-class women of that place and time.

Here, it is important to understand how the war itself was an event that on many levels threw the normal out of balance. Thereby, previously latent, alternative femininities opened up new avenues for middle-class women. As noted earlier, during the first half of the twentieth century Indian middle-class femininity was undergoing ambiguous changes with regard to women's agency. Middle-class women were getting education, not for their own sake, but for the sake of the home and the family. Women were not yet perceived as free individuals, but as individuals within the patriarchal family home.

With the onset of World War Two, however, men were going away to fight, leaving women not only in charge of family comfort, but often also in charge of family economy. It has been shown how the war forced many women in America and Britain to take up paid work and how this, at least temporarily, affected their femininity and had an empowering effect on the former homemakers.<sup>39</sup>

Kamla Kapoor did not have to take up paid work as she got a pension from her husband, but she had to make it without a male protector of her home. As noted earlier, her college education had already broadened her horizon, both in terms of being away from home and thereby getting other influences outside the family, and in terms of the modernity of the curricula. But it is also likely that the war affected her femininity as it forced her to manage and to take decisions on her own. One can argue that the war opened up alternative gender norms and thereby created a revised form of middle-class Indian femininity that allowed women, at least temporarily, more agency than they had experienced previously.<sup>40</sup>

In short, when the historical event of World War Two threw Kamla Kapoor's family-life out of balance and her capacity to take charge as a middle-class, upper caste woman was 'tested', she rose to the occasion and, from the way she related it to me many years later, seems to have enjoyed the opportunity of making decisions on her own. Thereby, she was on her way to becoming the tough *mater familias* that I got to know 50 years later.

<sup>39</sup> For the case of the United States, see for example Gluck, S. B. (1987), *Rosie the Riveter Revisited: Women, The War, and Social Change*, Boston, Twayne Publishers; Hartmann, S. (1982), *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s*, Boston, Twayne Publishers; and Milkman, R. (1987), *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex During World War II*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press.

<sup>40</sup> Not much has been written about the effects of the Second World War on gender roles in India. There are, however, several factors that together indicate that Kamla Kapoor is not a single case and that Indian middle-class women's general agency temporarily increased in India during the war: (1) Women's organizations emerged as fully political participants, Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p. 90; (2) during the war Indian middle-class women entered social and professional services that had been closed to them previously, Jackson, A. (2006), *The British Empire and the Second World War*, London, Hambledon, p. 357; and (3) the facts that during the war India became 'the second pillar of the British Empire after Britain itself', Jackson, *The British*, p. 353, and was a major supplier of food, material and manpower, Jackson, *The British*, pp. 353–363, show that the war had major implications for social and economic relations in India, which also most likely affected gender relations.

### **Partition and after: settling down in New Delhi**

Kamla Kapoor stated that, in the period immediately following the end of World War Two until partition and independence in 1947, 'it was turmoil in the country'. With her husband out of hospital, but seemingly not really recovered from his war imprisonment, and with the violence around and uncertain situation for their relatives in the Punjab region, this turned out to be a very difficult period for Kamla and her husband. As an employee of the Indian Medical Service, Kamla's husband was eligible for a civilian job and was posted first to Patna and then to Lucknow. Being protected by the guards of the government and outside the areas with the most violence, they were fairly safe.

This was not the case for several of their closest family members in Punjab. Kamla Kapoor's parents were in Amritsar and had to leave everything behind and flee to safety to one of their sons in Calcutta. Her father in-law, however, was killed:

My husband's father and his brother with his wife were still in Punjab. My father-in-law had lots of land and property on the Pakistani side of the new border in a rural area. He got killed with a knife in the stomach while he was hiding in a cowshed! Somebody saw it and sent the news. . . .

Kamla's husband, therefore, hired a plane and sent a Muslim family from India to Pakistan, thereby managing to get his own brother and his wife to safety in India on the return flight. In 1948 things were settling down and Kamla's husband decided to retire from the Indian Medical Service. Since doctors could get jobs virtually anywhere in the country, the couple could now decide where in independent India they wished to live. First they moved to Kanpur for a year, because Kamla's husband's brother had moved there, but Kamla found it dirty and did not like the place. She continues her story:

So my husband told me to choose where I wanted to live and we would settle down there. I chose Delhi because my younger sister, who previously had lived in Lahore, was living here with her husband. Then my husband said that I would have to find a house to live in. I approached my sister's husband who was in the catering business. He had a job feeding parliamentary members who stayed at the Eastern Court in Central New Delhi, and this job he offered to me. He also offered me a big room to stay in at the Eastern Court.

The Red Cross Society had advertised a job for a Doctor of Civil Hospitals all over India based in Delhi. My husband got it, and it was paid Rs.1.200 pr.

month. At the catering job, I was given Rs. 6 pr. feeding plus the room. I was happy earning money and for a nice room to live in.

After one year Kamla's contract at the Eastern Court ended, and they had to find alternative accommodation. The Red Cross had just finished building flats for its employees, and the family were able to rent a three-bedroom flat close to Delhi Golf Club. Then, Kamla's husband suffered a heart attack, and within six months he suffered another. The doctor suggested that he should leave his job, which would leave the family without a home:

I was very worried. My children were still young and I thought about the future. That is when I decided that it would be better to build our own house in a good location, and the moment they advertised Jor Bagh, I decided to go at the auction and make a bid. I started visiting an architect and told him that I wanted a two-storied house with two flats because I have two sons. During the building process, I came here at 8 am every morning with food and a flask and sat down in the car to supervise the work. We were really relieved when it was finally completed. That was in 1954. We decided, however, to rent out the whole house for the initial period to make some money.

We continued renting it out and never lived here until now when both my sons have moved back to Delhi for their retirements from the services. I needed the money for my children's education, so I had to rent out. Quite soon after we built another house in Defence Colony to live in.

When analysing this last part of Kamla Kapoor's life-story, one can clearly see that her self-presentation has changed. She now tells the story so that one gets the impression that although her husband is back, she is the main family decision maker. This comes out, both by frequent usage of the pronoun 'I' when she talks about decisions in connection with the house-building processes, and by 'reading between the lines' when she talks about her husband.

Thus, the war seems to have had opposite effects on Kamla and her husband. Whereas Kamla has tasted the fruits of decision-making, he has become weak after four years' imprisonment. Apparently, their marriage has become one where the husband lets the wife take charge. Maybe a little tired of her complaints about the filth and poverty of different places, he lets her decide where to move after Kanpur and she chooses Delhi because her sister lives there.

Later in time, when her husband has had his first heart attack and she starts to worry about the future, the phrases about her husband letting her decide are gone and she seems to have taken over decision-making completely. Now it is 'I', Kamla Kapoor, who decides to get a

house built in a nice location, and who spends every day at the building site in order to get the house built on time. In the context of Norway, Nielsen and Rudberg have noted that such a switch from 'we' to 'I' reflects a change from choices made on the basis of social norms and what is good for the family collective, towards choices made on the basis of individuality and what is good for *me*.<sup>41</sup> In the case of Kamla Kapoor, she still talks about what is good for the family, and not what is good for *her* as an individual. But in the context of middle-class, upper-caste India, interestingly it is she, and not her husband, who makes the decisions about what is good for the family.

With this, I will leave Kamla Kapoor's life-story, and turn to the story of her daughter-in-law, Sheila Kapoor.

### **Sheila Kapoor: 'I have given my children liberty and freedom'**

I first met Sheila in 1994 when she moved back to New Delhi in connection with her husband's retirement from the Indian Administrative Service. At that time her son was already living in America and her daughter, Lata, was in high school. For nine-months during 1997–1998 we were neighbours, and it was during this period that I asked Sheila about her life story. I thought that her individual story as a woman who married into the Kapoor family, and one generation younger than Kamla, would be of interest. My initial impression was that Sheila was more 'conventional' than Kamla, in terms of Indian femininity, and I was curious to discover if this was indeed the case. Once for instance, when I asked her how she spent her days as a housewife with adult children, she referred to herself as a 'homely person', and continued: 'Since my children became adults I just prefer to relax at home'.

My interpretation of Sheila's use of the word 'homely' has two meanings: 'average' (which is the thesaurus meaning of the word); and a person oriented towards the home. She thereby conveyed that she sees herself as an average middle-class woman who likes to be at home, spending time with her family.

<sup>41</sup> Bjerrum Nielsen, H. and Rudberg, M. (2006), *Moderne Jenter: Tre Generasjoner på Vei (Modern Girls: Three generations in the Making)*, Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, p. 16.

Sheila was born in Lahore in 1946:

My parents had a love marriage. I think they met through common relatives. They got married in Lahore around 1944 and I was born in 1946, just before Partition. I am the oldest child.

She came to Delhi as a baby because of Partition:

My maternal grandparents and my parents moved to Delhi together. The Government was giving land to refugees as compensation. Land in Defence Colony<sup>42</sup> was given to my father because it was earmarked for army officers like him. However, we did not build a house on the plot in Defence Colony until much later. We moved around in India with my father's job in the Army and were always given government housing.

Sheila spent her childhood in newly-independent India moving around with her parents from one army station to the next, spending only three years at each place. She expressed ambiguity with regard to her upbringing. On the one hand, the constant moving gave her broadmindedness, but on the other hand, her parents were strict and left her very little room for individual choice:

I was not very happy. However, with the Armed Forces we lived in Cantonments and everybody were in the same situation. Looking back at our Army life today, I think that it has made me adjust; one gets used to moving around and meeting new people. One becomes an all-around person. It was a wide upbringing.

I asked her what kind of people her parents were and she replied:

My mother was into social work. Very committed. She wore *khadi*<sup>43</sup> in college because of Mahatma Gandhi, you know. She only wore *khadi* and cottons throughout her life. My father taught her to give speeches. My mother was involved with social work and politics. We used to tell her: 'You have no time for us'. She was a very affectionate and loving mother, and a popular person. My father was into Club-life with cards and horseracing. They were a social partying couple taking part in the social circle of the Cantonments wherever they were posted.

I asked if she thought her parents were happy in their marriage, and she replied:

<sup>42</sup> Defence Colony is today an upper middle-class neighbourhood, centrally located in New Delhi.

<sup>43</sup> *Khadi* means 'Hand-woven cloth. The term was used by Gandhi to refer to cloth that had been hand-woven using hand-spun yarn', Tarlo, E. (1996), *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p. xii.

Not really happy. They were very different in nature. He was the gregarious outgoing person. He more or less educated my mother and brought her into politics. Then he had a heart attack and became introvert. I was around 15 years old at the time. He became a difficult person—he changed personality.

I had a Burmese *ayah*<sup>44</sup> who moved around with us wherever we lived. She was with us from I was 6 months old. She was very important in my life and I was very attached to her. My parents also trusted her and let her handle the keys to the house. In fact, I would say that during my childhood my parents and my *ayah* were the most important people in my life.

At the age of 12, in 1958, my father left the Army and we moved back to Delhi. My parents had by then had a house built on the plot in Defence Colony and I went to a convent school. Afterwards I went to college at Delhi University. When I was in college my parents wanted me to get married. I did not want to. I dreamt of becoming an airhostess. My parents did not think that was a good idea. Girls from good families are not supposed to do work like that. I was very sheltered and protected. Most girls were like that among middle class families then, and I was more innocent than most girls.

Soon after I finished college, marriage was arranged. It was arranged through common relatives. I did feel I was too young, but my father used emotional blackmail. He was sick and I was asked to do it to make him feel better. I was also brought up to think that arranged marriage was the right thing. Even though my parents had had a so-called love marriage, in the sense that they met through common friends or relatives and chose one another, it was no question of dating. My mother had also been protected, and they wanted me to have an arranged marriage.

After marriage in 1966, the year that Indira Gandhi became Prime Minister, Sheila moved with her husband to Bombay where he was posted. After a couple of years their son was born, and five years later Lata was born. She told me that in the early years of their marriage, before they had children, she had worked first in a travel agency and then a couple of years in interior design. However, with her husband in the Indian Administrative Service and the moving around that went with it, she said that it was difficult for her to have a job. Inspired by her mother, she was quite active with social work during this period. In particular she helped teach literacy to the servant children on the various Indian Administrative Service housing compounds where they lived. I asked where they had lived:

Basically it was Bombay-Delhi back and forth. We came to Delhi when Lata was around 14 years old and she went to school here after that. Rajiv was

<sup>44</sup> *Ayah* is the Hindi term for nanny.

posted back to Bombay, but I mainly stayed here in Delhi then, while Rajiv was commuting.

Since about 1988 Sheila has lived in New Delhi. At first they stayed in housing provided by Rajiv's government job, which at the end of his career was in colonial-style bungalows, and since Rajiv retired in 1994, they have stayed in the family house in Jor Bagh.

At the end of the interview I asked her what important values from her own life she had tried to instil in her children, and she replied:

To be a good human being. I have given my children liberty and freedom, as I have never been given liberty and freedom. I think they should choose what they want, both in terms of partners and career. Then, it is important to be able to judge right and wrong. I'm more like a friend with my children, and they can question me. I want them to have the ability to choose for themselves.

### Comparing Sheila's life-story with Kamla's

There are many obvious class-related similarities between the lives of Sheila and Kamla. Apart from jewellery and expensive clothing, neither personally owns any material or economic resources. Still, because of their respective father's class positions, both have grown up in relative affluence. Both have got a college education and have had servants to do the housework all their lives. Both opposed early marriage and were allowed to wait until they had finished college, and both married men in high-ranking government service positions and moved around in India along with their husbands. Both have been homemakers and neither of them has worked for money for more than a couple of years.

In short, both women have followed the standard path of family-orientation and modernity laid out for Indian middle-class women throughout the twentieth century.<sup>45</sup> As noted earlier, within this path, women were supposed to receive an education, but they were not supposed to work for money. If they did work, it should not interfere with taking care of family and home, and it had to be considered suitable for respectable girls. Being an airhostess was, according to Sheila's parents, not suitable for girls from 'good families'. This was probably because of the independent travel involved, making it

<sup>45</sup> See for example, Donner, *Domestic Goddesses*; Seymour, *Women, Family and Child Care*; and Liddle and Joshi, *Daughters*.



impossible for the unmarried woman's family to control her sexuality and assure her chastity.<sup>46</sup>

However, there are several differences in their life stories that point toward differences in agency for the two women. Firstly, there is a difference regarding at what point in life and why they took up paid work. Kamla stays at home with her husband until the historical event of World War Two/Partition throws them out of their middle-class orbit, and Kamla is induced to take up paid work in order to obtain a place to live. At this point in time Kamla is in her late thirties and her children are of school age. Kamla has not expressed a desire to get a job earlier in her life and although she says that she enjoyed making her own money, she ceases work when they get another flat. Sheila takes up paid work right after marriage whilst she is in her early twenties, before they have any children, and she stops work when their first child is born. To Kamla, taking a job provides the means towards getting her will and being able to move to New Delhi. To Sheila, having a job is about doing something interesting, and she expresses regret at having to quit.

Related to this difference regarding when and why Kamla and Sheila took up paid work and why they ceased working, is the difference of emphasis in their two stories. It is noticeable that several times Kamla expresses that she went against her parents' wishes or that, when it came to marriage, she demanded a choice. Kamla also uses the pronoun 'I' several times when talking about important choices she has made. Sheila, on the other hand, gives the impression of having been overruled or ignored when it comes to important life-choices like marriage or career. She says that she dreamt of becoming an airhostess, but that her parents did not allow this. Furthermore, she says that she did not want to marry as early as she did, and did not like the man picked out for her, but that she was not given any options. In view of the topic of agency, this is an important difference. It directly

<sup>46</sup> In Central and North India one finds historically a strong concern with female chastity, which continues to inform parents' socialization of daughters. See for example, Malhotra, *Gender, Caste and Religious Identities*; and Sarkar, *Hindu Wife*, for perspectives on the contradicting ideologies under colonialism of keeping high caste daughters chaste and making them into modern mothers. See also Jacobsen and Wadley, *Women in India*, for portrayals of women in rural areas; and Donner, *Domestic Goddesses*, for an analysis of how educated, high caste, middle-class parents deal with these dilemmas in contemporary Kolkata. See Dewey, *Making Miss India*, pp. 103–106, for an account of how the ideology of women's seclusion has been transformed into a discourse of protection by the Miss India organizers.

concerns the extent of being in control of one's own life that the two women have experienced. Interestingly, it is Kamla, the older of the two women, who gives the impression of having had more control.

Does it follow from this that Kamla has had more autonomy and agency in her life than Sheila has had in hers? If so, does this reflect a 'backlash' in women's agency and autonomy from Kamla's generation to Sheila's? Since it has been shown that Indian middle-class gender hegemonies remained more or less the same from the period when Kamla was a young woman in the 1930s and throughout the period when Sheila was a young woman in the 1960s—not changing until the late 1970s—this is at first glance quite surprising.<sup>47</sup>

In order to explain this, I draw upon Derné's model of social change, which emphasizes the primary role of social, economic structures, but which also incorporates culture and ideologies into the analysis. Above, I showed how the historical event of World War Two forced Kamla to take control and manage on her own while her husband was away. This was also the case for many other middle-class women of her generation.<sup>48</sup> World War Two can be viewed as an event that temporarily changed social and political structures and which opened up opportunities for a more outgoing and active femininity than the one prescribed by the gender hegemonic ideals of the time. But, for the women of the post-Second World War age-group like Sheila, the liberating possibilities that World War Two/Partition had to some extent opened up for their mothers were closed. Sheila and women of her generation who grew up in newly-independent India became mothers at a point in time when preservation of tradition, which was viewed as the women's domain, was still considered an important part of nation-building.<sup>49</sup> In contrast with the previous generation of urban, educated, high caste, middle-class women, Sheila's generation who grew up in post-Independence India were able to live out the prescribed gender hegemonic ideals of the independence movement of helping to build the nation by staying at home to look after children,

<sup>47</sup> The second wave of the Indian Women's Movement came with full force in the late 1970s and affected middle-class gender ideologies in many ways. See for example, Sen, I. (2004), 'Women's Politics in India', in Chaudhuri, M. (ed.) *Feminism in India*, New Delhi, Kali for Women, pp. 187–211; Sen, S. 'Towards a Feminist Politics? The Indian Women's Movement in Historical Perspective', in Kapadia, *The Violence of Development*, pp. 459–525.

<sup>48</sup> See footnote 40.

<sup>49</sup> See for example, Liddle and Joshi, *Daughters*; Chatterjee, *The Nationalist Resolution*, pp. 233–253.

husbands and tradition. In line with this, Sheila says that she felt compelled to do what her parents and middle-class society at large expected from young women.

Given the fact that Sheila got married in 1966, the same year that Indira Gandhi became prime minister, one could have expected that a female prime minister would have had an impact on gender ideals and that Sheila, as a married woman would have been able to take more control. This was not the case. Indira Gandhi's prime minister period, until the Emergency starting in 1975, was mainly marked by her foreign policies of continuing the non-alignment track started by her father, and by the war against Pakistan ending in 1971. A female prime minister did not have a great impact on the number of women working or going into politics.<sup>50</sup>

From the late 1970s and onwards, a second wave of the Indian women's movement, which questioned the patriarchal family order and encouraged women to take more control over their own lives, took hold. As a consequence there was a definite shift in middle-class gender norms in India, and it became more common for middle-class women to take up white-collar paid work.<sup>51</sup> By this time, however, Sheila was well settled into her marriage. With two school-going children and a husband demanding her services, she was busy living out the prescribed gender ideology of being 'homely' and had neither any interest nor any opportunity to take part in the women's movement.

Derné's model of social change, with its emphasis on cultural ideologies in addition to social structures, is helpful for understanding this.<sup>52</sup> Although the influence of the women's movement on middle-class norms and practices came at a time when Sheila was in her thirties with a well-established marriage, it came too late to affect her possibilities for having a say in her own young adult life regarding marriage and work, and may have affected her own gender norms. In other words, the fact that the women's movement took off in India during the late 1970s and that it became more common for middle-class women to take up paid, white-collar work in consequence, might have affected Sheila's views on her own life. When she says that she has given her children 'liberty and freedom' as she has never experienced

<sup>50</sup> Indira Gandhi is well known for not seeing herself as a feminist, which came out in her statement: 'I do not regard myself as a woman. I am a person with a job to do'. *The Asian Student*, 23 November 1974, quoted in Sen, 'Towards a Feminist Politics?', p. 514.

<sup>51</sup> See footnote 47.

<sup>52</sup> Derné, *Globalization*, pp. 58–80, 162–172.

that, indicates that some of the ideologies of the women's movement have impacted on her own practices. Hence, it is possible that the reason why Sheila is more vocal than Kamla in describing the limits that were put on her life and her own inadequacy in taking charge and demanding her will *vis-à-vis* her parents, is that she sees her own life through the gender norms of the contemporary urban, educated, high caste, middle-class society of which she is a part. When looking back over her life and relating it to me, Sheila might therefore have been more aware of her limited agency than Kamla.

Such an explanation is supported if one takes a closer look at the emphasis in each life-story. In her life-story Sheila expresses a main concern with interpersonal relationships within the home, whilst Kamla expresses a main concern with achievements that count in the outside middle-class world. Sheila expresses explicit thoughts on the personalities of her parents, and on what kind of relationship she has with her own adult children. She is also self-reflexive and expresses how today she views her own unmarried self as sheltered and naïve, and how she has wanted to learn from that in terms of raising her own children. Kamla, on the other hand, does not dwell on relationships or on how other people feel. She emphasizes her own and her family's achievements in terms of the colonial middle-class norms that she grew up with, like speaking English, taking part in a sports-oriented colonial club-life and building a house in a 'good location'.

It is possible to argue therefore that Kamla never questions the patriarchal hegemonic norms of her time, and that she stresses those aspects of her story that bring out the middle-class accomplishments from this patriarchal middle-class viewpoint. Sheila, on the other hand, questions the patriarchal middle-class values that she has grown up with, and therefore sees her own lack of accomplishments from the perspective of the gender norms of the women's movement. So, it is possible to argue that the differences between them are due both to the fact that the Second World War affected Kamla Kapoor's life in ways that gave her the opportunity to take real control over family decisions, and to the fact that Kamla and Sheila look back over their lives from different ideological standpoints.

### **Lata Mehta: 'I did not want to be only a housewife'**

For the sake of clarity and comparison I will present Lata Mehta's life-story differently to those of her grandmother, Kamla Kapoor, and her

mother, Sheila Kapoor. I will first present a brief summary of Lata's life-story, without the use of any quotations, and will then look at what her story says about the two select topics I have chosen to focus on in order to analyse changes in her agency. The first topic is about having been in control over key life-choices like education, marriage partner and career. Linked to this (because Lata is working and has an income of her own), I will look at what these life-choices mean to her and to what extent she expresses that she has control over material resources. The second topic is about individuality versus family orientation: what Lata's story might reveal compared with the conclusions drawn so far in the cases of Kamla and Sheila. As mentioned earlier, underlying the choice of these topics is that in different ways they might say something about being in control of one's own life and, thus, about women's agency.

Lata Mehta's life-story is one of success in terms of both marriage and work, and can be summarized as follows: she was born in New Delhi in 1974, but lived in Bombay until she was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade because her father was posted there with his government job. She attended her last two years of school in Delhi, then went on to a prestigious college in Delhi and graduated from there with a B.A. honours in sociology in the spring of 1996. Then she joined an advertising firm for one year, but soon found out that it was not for her. After taking some time off work and spending her time exercising and dieting, she started getting modelling offers. She worked as a fashion model for a couple of years and made quite a lot of money. During this period, in 1998, she met her husband, Prakash, through common friends and married him in 2000. They now live in a flat in an upper middle-class neighbourhood in New Delhi with their two small children and have three full time servants: one cook, and two *ayahs* (nannies) (one for each child). Because her husband is running his family business in another town and Lata wants to live in New Delhi, the couple live separately half the week. As soon as Lata married, she ceased modelling and with a female friend started her own fashion business in New Delhi. The business has been quite successful and they now have 25 employees.

Turning to the extent of control that Lata has had over key life-choices like education, work and marriage, of these three choices it was only on the issue of education that her mother and grandmother were able to exert some influence. Lata, however, has been fairly free to decide for herself also on the other two important life-choices of marriage partner and career. Looking at marriage partner first, this is how Lata described meeting her husband, Prakash:

I met my husband in a typical girlfriend-boyfriend scenario. Because we had a bunch of common friends, we used to meet at parties. The husband of a very good friend of mine, and Prakash went to the same boarding school. I was around 21 and Prakash was 4 years older when we met in 1998. Initially I did not really like him, because I thought he was a bit of an attention seeker. At the same time I admired his guts. I could not see myself settling down with him, since I said, I will not live in Agra because it is a small town and I am an all-city girl. So since marriage was never an option with him, because I could never see myself settling down there, I never looked at him from that angle. But I was not into marriage or anything at that time, so I thought, maybe for a fling or something. So we never really dated. It is quite shocking! But after, I think, 9 months we fell in love. We got married in 2000, after seeing each other for about 2 1/2 years.

From this story, one can see that Lata has had a love marriage in the 'real meaning' of the term. It was not a love-marriage arranged by family members like Sheila's parents, but one in which the couple met through friends, dated and fell in love. Here we see the contours of a real change from Sheila's generation to Lata's generation in terms of control over one's own body. Although an arranged marriage still is considered most proper within the urban, educated, upper middle-class segment, a love-marriage like the one of Lata and Prakash that does not cross any religious boundaries and stays within the boundaries of high caste and middle-class, is not unusual.

When looking at Lata's relative freedom in choosing a career, this impression of a change in women's control over their own life is strengthened. As mentioned above, after college she first joined an advertising firm for one year, but realizing it was not for her, she decided to take some time off work. She told me:

So then I decided to take some time off and do nothing for 4-5 months. I played a lot of squash and lost a lot of weight. Then I started getting modelling offers, and I dabbled in that for a couple of years. And it was really good money and lots of travelling and really very nice. And it helped me a lot in terms of confidence. They bring you around and they groom you well and all that.

When I got married, I had had my fair share of modelling. I did not want to be a model anymore, and I did not want to be only a housewife, you know. I knew that if I had a kid, I wanted to have time for my kid and not work to such a degree that it is all work and ambition and no time for family. So I liked the idea of something with a good balance, a little bit of everything. When we got married and Prakash was in Agra throughout the week, my friend came up with this proposal; you know 'why don't we start a fashion business'. And I knew a lot about clothes through my modelling experience and I had studied fashion, so I was quite qualified. This seemed to be the perfect option for where to start, so I completely buried myself in work. It was risky in a sense.

I got cold feet several times before it opened. Because I had not come from a business family background so I was not used to having such large amounts of money in a project, you know, so it was very scary. Initially I worked really hard. Now it is very popular and it is doing well. Until you have tasted that first experience of your business doing well, it is very scary. Now we have 25 people under us.

I asked how she got the funds to get started:

I got the money from my modelling. I used half of that and half of it Prakash gave me. So like a good husband, he was like 'take the money and start your own business' (laughter). That was sweet and generous of him! The half he gave to me I paid him back later. He said, no, no there is no need, but I did not want to get it just because he was my husband.

I find three things particularly interesting in these paragraphs about career choice. Firstly, it is interesting that Lata indeed had the possibility to choose a career, and that she is so explicit about not wanting to be 'only a housewife', which is what her mother and grandmother mainly were. Secondly, it is interesting that she first worked as a model, which is an occupation that makes it hard for her male relatives to control her sexuality. This is an occupation where the female body is very much on display and where Lata, because she was successful, got to travel a lot. Being a model is therefore an occupation that in many ways may be likened to being an airhostess at the time when Sheila was young. In both cases, there are strict requirements regarding the female body for entering the profession, and both occupations involve travelling without male relatives as protectors. Finally, it is interesting that it was her modelling career—an occupation not normally linked to the women's independence-movement—that enabled her to raise half of the funds needed to get her fashion business started and thereby become financially independent.

So, when it comes to work, Lata departs from the life-stories of her mother and grandmother. Her grandmother never mentions that she dreamt of achieving something she did not achieve, but is nevertheless resolutely emphasizing all her accomplishments. Probably because a career was neither considered proper nor valuable within the colonial, high caste middle-class of Kamla's youth, working is not among the things she emphasizes in her story. Lata's mother says that she wanted to work and that she dreamt of becoming an airhostess. However, she was told that being an airhostess was not a proper job for a girl from

a 'good family', and she decided to leave the job she had in a travel agency when she had her first child.

Lata, however, seems to have been fairly free to decide both on whether to work and on what type of work she would do. When she decides that she wants to become a model, she loses weight and achieves her goal and continues doing it as long as she wants to, with no one trying to stop her. And, after marriage, when she decides that this is not something she will or can do for the rest of her life, she starts her own business. All in all, compared with her mother and grandmother, Lata has had a much larger degree of decision-making power regarding marriage partner and career, and whilst Kamla and Sheila were mainly housewives all their lives, Lata is pursuing a career.

The fact that Lata has been free to pursue the career of her choice and has chosen careers that bring in money and thus control over material assets, is another important implication for women's agency. Arguably, control over money or other material assets will always give people more control over their own lives. This has been the case for Lata, as can be seen from the following quote when she talks about why she thinks there has been an increase in the number of divorces:

There are a lot of people getting divorced. Now it is increasing. I think it is because of westernization and the women becoming aware of what they are to expect, and that they are also earning [family] members now. Women are far more financially independent now than in my Dad's or my mother's generation. They are career women, they are successful women, they feel, if things are not going well at home and if the husband is completely unreasonable, they think 'Why should I take this shit from this man, when I am perfectly able to take care of myself, and to support myself and my child? I do not need to take this crap at home'. So that is why they walk out.

Here, Lata shows a clear awareness about how earning her own money implies financial independence, which again implies bargaining power *vis-à-vis* her husband in discussions about who should do what, when it comes to work, and domestic tasks such as changing diapers and looking after the children. Equality within the marriage is a topic she returns to several times during the interview:

Now it is all about equals. I say, if you are earning, so am I, and if you are doing this, you also have to look after certain household activities. And I demand it, and a lot of guys these days agree. Prakash is very hands-on. He helps feed the child, he helps change the diapers. My father would rather be caught dead doing any of that, 'cause they come from a time when they thought this is the woman's job. My parents were another generation. My mother was such



a softy, always giving in, always bending backwards, because for women at that time the family always came first.

In contrast with her grandmother who never questions the patriarchal order of things, and her mother who questions it but still does not get her will, Lata says that she demands that her husband should carry out his share of the work at home. Because they have several servants, this is not really that much, but it is interesting how she compares her own marriage with that of her parents in terms of gender roles and housework. Behind Lata's assertiveness lies the financial independence that gives her the option of walking out of the marriage if her husband does not live up to her ideals and demands.

### **'I'm an outgoing, totally-people person'**

I now turn to the topic of individuality versus family orientation in order to compare the case of Lata with the conclusions drawn in the cases of Kamla and Sheila. Derné has argued that with the neo-liberal policies and increased globalization in India since the early 1990s, there has been a slight change towards more individualization among lower middle-class men that he has worked with.<sup>53</sup> This change is part of a larger process of modernity and individualization, where the upper layers of the Indian middle-class are moving from a patriarchal and collectively-based view of marriage towards a more contractual and individualized view. In the interview with Lata, this came out in several ways.

Increased individualization came out in the fact that Lata and her husband live separately half of the week, and that they do this because Lata does not want to live in Agra where Prakash has his family business. This is how Lata explained the living arrangement:

Initially his parents were hesitant about me living here and he living there, because ideally they would like their son's wife living with him, but I was quite clear that I couldn't live in Agra, I have to live here. Now I have my business and my son, so. Now we have a commute relationship. We got this house and

<sup>53</sup> In his analysis, Derné looks mainly at local, lower middle-class men, and finds that within this group, 'a second language of individualism seems to be strengthening, although collectivism remains salient. Derné, *Globalization*, p. 170. The urban, educated, upper middle-class that Lata and her husband belong to, has moved much further towards an individualist outlook than this non-elite group.

I said, I live here and you live there and we meet over the weekend. Now he has an office here in Delhi, so from Thursday to Monday he is here and two days he is over there.

In view of the hegemonic patriarchal practice of keeping upper caste women's bodies under control, discussed in the cases of Kamla and Sheila, it is actually quite surprising that Lata's husband and in-laws agreed to such separate living arrangements in the first place. From the perspective of the patriarchal gender norms that Kamla and Sheila have been raised by, the separateness of Lata and Prakash in their daily lives requires a fundamental trust in Lata by her husband. It signals a radical change in gender norms. According to Lata:

I would say in our generation 60% are flexible like Prakash, but there is 40% who still want to be like their fathers, who do not want to get involved in the nitty-gritty and who still want to be the patriarchal type. In that way I am also lucky, because Prakash is open. Sometimes when he is out of town, I could be out every night of the week, coming home 2 o'clock at night and he wouldn't question me about where I went, whom I went with. Most women here in Delhi aren't allowed to go out without their husbands at night. Here I go to a bar, go with girlfriends, we go drinking, go to a movie, go to a dinner on our own; sometimes with female friends, sometimes with male friends. There are a lot of husbands who do not allow this, because they feel insecure.

Lata's point about how she goes out (a) at night, (b) to bars and (c) without male companions, while her husband is in Agra, would have been totally unthinkable to the generations of her mother and grandmother. When they were newly married women, going out at night without a male family member as protector or going to a bar where alcoholic beverages were served were not compatible with the ideals of female respectability.

The change in gender norms that makes it possible for Lata and her husband to live separately half of the week is also a change away from a collectivist outlook towards increased individualization. If one compares the case of Sheila, who stayed behind in Delhi together with her in-laws because of her daughter's education while her husband commuted to Bombay, with the case of Lata, one sees that these are two very different situations. Sheila stayed in a joint-family arrangement, which is in line with the well-known North-Indian patriarchal and collectivist model, while Lata does not even live in a fully nuclear household. Underneath the separate living arrangement of Lata and her husband lies the fact that they view one another as two equal individuals.

This individualism is illustrated poignantly when I asked Lata to describe herself and she said: 'I'm an outgoing, totally-people person'. This does not mean that she has a collectivist cultural understanding of herself in society, as this would have implied that she was oriented towards the family patriarchy.<sup>54</sup> Rather, that Lata chooses to describe herself as 'outgoing, totally-people-person', implies that she uses an Americanism that inherently is built upon individualism. It means that she sees herself as an individual with a lot of family and friends whom she likes to be with in a setting outside the home. As such, it is interesting to note that she chooses to use the term 'outgoing', since this, in fact, is the very opposite of the term 'homely' that her mother uses to describe herself.

The last example I will look at that illustrates the increased individualization that Lata expresses compared with her mother and grandmother is the fact that Lata has managed to start her own business and run it successfully. This shows individualization in two ways. Firstly, it would have been unthinkable in her mother's and grandmother's generation that a woman should start her own business, separately from her husband's business. It shows assertiveness and a turn from a focus on the collective 'we' towards a focus on the individual 'I'. I argue above that Kamla, through her educated middle-class position and her adventurous personality, became capable of taking charge when the event of World War Two dramatically influenced her life in the sense that her husband's war experiences lastingly weakened him. But there is a major difference between Kamla and Lata in this regard since Lata, by starting her own business, is not doing it on behalf of the family-collective, but for her own good.

Secondly, the way that Lata raised money to start her own business, by borrowing half of the sum from her husband, points to the contractual element of their relationship, which is an inherent part of increased individualization. This contractual element is based on an understanding of the marriage as consisting of two equal individuals, and therefore a lot of issues in their marriage are open to negotiation. They negotiate on big issues like where they shall live and on small issues like who shall change the diapers. The contractual element of their relationship also came out when Prakash gave Lata half the sum she needed to start her own business, and the way they later on

<sup>54</sup> Derné, *Globalization*, pp. 74–78.

negotiated whether she should pay him back or not. Prakash, from the perspective of a patriarchal collectivist family view, where one neither separates between family and family business nor between what belongs to the husband and what belongs to the wife, said that there was no need to pay him back. Lata, on the other hand, says that she wanted to manage without his money and chooses to pay him back, apparently because she wanted to be independent, and separates between marriage and business and between what is his and what is hers.

### **Concluding remarks: 'That's what it has come to'**

In this paper I have recounted in detail the life stories of three women of the same New Delhi based upper middle-class family and have analysed their life stories in terms of what they might say about changes in agency. By taking the methodological view that individuals of the same generation, from the same class segment, living at the same cultural place are shaped by the same historical, economic and social structures, I have used the three individual life stories of the Kapoor women as voices that might be viewed as expressing changes within the urban, educated, high caste, upper middle-class segment at large. I have found that the overall picture is one where young women from this middle-class segment in contemporary India do have more control over their own lives than did their mothers and grandmothers. I have also found that this change of increased agency goes hand in hand with a process of more individualization within this upper middle-class segment. However, these processes are not linear. When I compared the life stories of Kamla Kapoor and her daughter in law Sheila Kapoor, I found that Kamla Kapoor, although one generation older, presented herself as having been in more control over her own life than Sheila Kapoor did. Following Derné, to account for this seemingly 'backlash' I have argued that one has to look at the impact of both changing socio-economical structures and cultural gender ideologies.

The event of World War Two/Partition changed socio-economic structures temporarily and directly influenced the lives of Kamla Kapoor and her husband, forcing Kamla to manage on her own whilst her husband was a prisoner of war. This experience, I have argued, had lasting effects on her agency and her relationship with her husband after the war. In addition, one has to incorporate changes in gender

ideologies in the analysis. Although the normative change in gender ideologies in middle-class India only came during the late 1970s, at a time when Sheila was in her thirties and was well-established in her marriage and therefore came too late to affect her possibilities for having a say regarding her own marriage and work, it seems to have affected her own gender norms. Thereby changed gender norms might have affected Sheila's views on her own life and this helps to explain why she is more vocal than Kamla in describing the limitations that were put on her life. Sheila is definitely more concerned with her limited agency than is Kamla.

The really big change in agency of the three generations of Kapoor women comes with Lata, and again one must look at changes, both in socio-economic structures and in gender ideologies, in order to explain this. The change in socio-economic structures that has profoundly affected Lata's life course has been the introduction of neo-liberal economic policies in India since 1991. Although the introduction of neo-liberal policies has had a differential impact on women in India, and has led to increased stratification between the rich and the poor, for women of the established educated, urban middle-class segment to which Lata belongs, the economic restructuring has mainly been a blessing.<sup>55</sup> Although the opening up of the markets and the increase in export and import of consumer goods have led to an increase from below in the number of people that can be defined as middle-class, this has hardly meant any real competition for the established middle-class of whom the Kapoor family is part, since they were already in control of cultural, social and economic capitals.

For Lata there are two factors that, combined, have contributed to the success of her fashion business. These are the consumerism that has come with neo-liberalism and her resourcefulness in terms of capital that again is a result of her established upper middle-class position. One effect of the neo-liberal policies in India has been a globalization of feminine beauty ideals with an inherent new type of fashion consumption, making the late 1990s and early 2000s a perfect time for starting a fashion business.<sup>56</sup> In fact one could argue that,

<sup>55</sup> See for example Derné, *Globalization*, p. 65; Mazumdar, *Women Workers*, p. 35; and Banerjee, 'Between the Devil', p. 58.

<sup>56</sup> It is important to remember here, that Lata started out as a model a couple of years after the twin victories in 1994 of the two Miss Indias, Sushmita Sen and Aishwarya Rai as Miss Universe and Miss World. Furthermore, that when she started her own fashion business in 2000, Miss India Diana Hayden had won the Miss World contest three years before in 1997. See Dewey, *Making Miss India*, p. 20.

because Lata runs her own business which has profited profoundly from the neo-liberal policies, she has moved up and out of the urban, educated, high caste, middle-class of her parents and grandparents and that it is now more correct to view her as part of an upper, professional managerial class.<sup>57</sup>

Neo-liberalism alone cannot, however, explain why Lata was allowed by her parents to be a model in the first place. Neither can it explain why she was allowed to date men and choose her own husband. In order to explain this, one has to take ideological, normative changes into account. Here I have drawn upon Dorné<sup>58</sup> and Bjerrum Nielsen and Rudberg<sup>59</sup> who argue that it takes time—maybe one generation—before structural changes affect gender norms and actual gender practices. Such an interpretation of the material presented above was supported by Sheila's statement about having wanted her children to have more control over their lives than she was allowed to have. As she told me: 'I have given my children liberty and freedom, as I have never been given liberty and freedom. I think they should choose what they want, both in terms of partners and career.' Here we see that the normative change in Lata's mother's generation regarding control over women, which came too late to affect Sheila's agency as a young adult woman, directly affected the way Sheila raised her own daughter. Thereby Lata has been allowed to work as a model, to date men, and to have a love-marriage.

So does more control over one's own life lead to more happiness? That is of course a big question with no definite answer, but being rich comes with its own, new problems. I will end with a quote by Lata, where she points out, rather nostalgically, what could be termed the 'negative effects' of the neo-liberal reforms for the new rich professional class of which she is now a part. Here she points out what she sees as the coldness, the money-chasing, the impatience, the networking and the consumerism of her life in New Delhi, and

<sup>57</sup> For a good discussion of different models for categorizing people in the United States as middle class, upper class, professional managerial class etc., see Ortner, S. (2003), *New Jersey Dreaming: Capital, Culture, and the Class of '58*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, pp. 269–274. In the case of Lata and her husband, one could argue that the old Marxist term 'capitalist class' would be most suitable, since they both own their own businesses and extract a profit from the work of their employees. Whatever term one chooses, my point is that Lata and her husband have more money and more power in terms of being employers of other people, than did Lata's parents and grandparents had.

<sup>58</sup> Dorné, *Globalization*, pp. 58–80, 162–172.

<sup>59</sup> Bjerrum Nielsen and Rudberg, 'Hello Fatty', pp. 85–114.

compares it to what she sees as the positive aspects of the 1970s and 1980s; the cleanliness, the innocence, the relaxed lifestyle:

It is a very cold era—money and power—and everyone is chasing money and power, it is about drugs and about aggressive behaviour. That's what it has come to. While in my parent's generation, things were better then. There wasn't any pressure then, because people worked, but they were not driven by ambition. You had a great time in the 70s and 80s. It was so relaxed, you enjoyed life. There were a little grass and marihuana, but nothing serious. It was a very clean innocent time, because people were not so conniving, also. Maybe because it was post-independence or soon after Independence, but now, I do not know if it is our society or all over the world, but people are power hungry and driven by money. And it comes out in different ways. People have become very impatient. They want things very quickly now. It's all connection driven and networking. That's what it has come to. Now kids expect everything from their parents because they are surrounded by so much wealth. And in Delhi especially, because people are so rich and they have come into a lot of money recently—they are buying Louis Vuitton, they are buying this. I want to bring up my child in a different setting. Children should learn to be confident of who they are, rather than looking for their identity by being surrounded by all these expensive things.