

From “Collective Freedom” to “Individual Choice”: The Sociology of Everyday Life

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Abstract: *This paper disentangles how freedom and unfreedom play out in people’s everyday lives. The author argues that the idea of an unencumbered individual is a product of a specific history and freedom is a goal everyone desires and pursues. While conceding that those in power set the rules to control the life of the common people and that the latter are free to express and resist as a part of the dialectics of power relations the author questions whether this “resistance” in everyday life is an integral part of the system. The author expresses doubt about the inevitability of resistance by the weak, and asks if academics should now rest happy that the subjugated still breathe free. The paper seeks answers to these questions at a time when authoritarianism looms large.*

Keywords: Unfreedom, freedom, self, subjugation, liberal democracy, resistance, feminism, everyday life, relations of ruling.

Introduction

In this paper, I attempt to understand how we as sociologists understand everyday life and how freedom and unfreedom play out within this life. In the current context, there is a trend in vogue which understands everyday life in a manner that privileges the “everyday” as somehow more “real”, more “authentic”, closer to the “true” “self”. The tacit assumption is that there is an unfettered self, the site of “real” freedom. I argue, like many others, that this idea of an unencumbered individual is a product of a very specific history. Just as is the idea that freedom is a goal individuals naturally desire and pursue. I am also writing in a context where a popular view reigns that though rules are set by those in power, the subjugated are always free to resist and express. Indeed, they can and do. But my contention would be whether this “resistance” in everyday life is an integral part of the system. Should this be read as weapons of the weak? And should

academics now rest happy that the subjugated still breathe free? Or do they? The last question acquires a certain urgency in authoritarian times.

The theme of the seminar¹ for which I wrote this text was “Freedom and Unfreedom in Everyday Life”. As I started working on this paper, I was tempted to put “unfreedom” first. This stemmed perhaps from my training as a sociologist. For fundamental to sociological theories or any social science theories perhaps is the recognition that humans are socially constituted, embedded in specific social structures and in a very fundamental fashion “constrained” or “unfree”. And it is precisely in that context of constraint that the desire and imagination to be free emanate. While in a wider sense, the idea of “freedom” and its associated images of birds soaring into the sky and distant horizons resonate with us; the sociologists in us also know that even our visions and specific images of freedom are socially defined. Those old enough, growing up in the 1950s, and 1960s will recall a time when socialist ideas were not passe, and images of clenched fists of workers and peasants were heralded as inspiring for a free society. For the workers, as Marx said had nothing to lose but their chains. Those growing up in the 1970s will recall the early days of the women’s liberation movement and the sexual revolution. The slogan “My body, my choice” reverberated globally. For some, the sexual revolution is simply one manifestation of a broader culture of what we might call *expressive individualism*. That it was adopted by organizations² committed to reproductive health is one more instance of how ideas get appropriated by social institutions and how new meanings get spun. Freedom is just one of the many but perhaps most potent of such ideas. Contexts change and during Covid 19, anti-vaccine protestors appropriated the slogan “My body, my choice” from bodily autonomy and reproductive rights movements.

Those old enough to recall the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 and the end of the Cold War, would recall the celebration of the free world, i.e. the victory of the free market and liberal democracy. The world was declared flat. In an economically liberalized India, after the 1990s, we saw new images of Bollywood stars and models heralding the freedom to “choose”. There are two points I seek to emphasise here. *One*, that contexts in sociology cannot be overlooked to understand freedom/unfreedom; and *two*, as the examples above suggest larger histories and political economy are fundamentally constitutive of the everyday, the intimate and even the body. I hope to further this line of argument in the paper by drawing from some of my own experiences.

Constraints, like contexts, are important in sociology. I, therefore, refer to the classical theorists to buttress my points about *one*, there is no pre-theoretical space wherein we can "seize" the everyday; *two*, to show not just the repressive yet insidious ways that the big structures impinge on everyday life, and *three* to reflect on how the ordinary, everyday is socially constituted. Durkheim's observations on the absence of a concept-less human existence is a good beginning to start from:

Men (sic) did not wait on the coming of social science to have ideas about law, morality, the family, the state or society itself, for such ideas were indispensable to their lives. *It is above all in sociology that these preconceptions... are capable of holding sway over the mind, substituting themselves for things.* Indeed, social things are only realised by men: they are the product of human activity (Durkheim 1982: 53-54).

Access to understanding and everyday life sans theory is, therefore, an impossibility. Had pre-conceptions not been a pervasive presence in sociology, gender and Dalit studies would have not taken so long to emerge. We now shift to the insidious ways in which structures constitute everyday life.

It is sufficient to observe how children are brought up. If one views the facts as they are and indeed as they have always been, it is obvious that all education consists of a continual effort to impose upon the *child ways of seeing, thinking and acting* which he himself would not have arrived at spontaneously (Durkheim 1982: 53-54, emphasis mine).

Readers would notice that in each of the quotes that I use below Durkheim's refers to the construction of the ordinary, everyday life.

From his earliest years we oblige him to *eat, drink and sleep* at regular hours, and to observe *cleanliness, calm and obedience*; later we force him to learn how to be mindful of others, to respect *customs and conventions*, and to *work*, etc. If this constraint in time ceases to be felt it is because it gradually gives rise to *habits*, to inner tendencies which render it superfluous; but they supplant the constraint only because they are derived from it (Durkheim 1982: 53-54, emphasis mine).

And then:

When I fulfill my obligations as a brother, husband, or citizen, when I execute my contracts, I perform duties which are defined,

externally to myself and my acts, in law and in custom. Even if they conform to my own sentiments and I feel their reality subjectively, which reality is still objective, for I did not create them; I merely inherited them through my education (Durkheim 1982: 50).

Marx, often seen in opposition to Durkheim writes:

The way in which men produce their means of subsistence depends first of all on the nature of the actual means of subsistence they find in existence and have to reproduce. This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the production of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, *a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part*. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce. *The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production* (Marx 1968: 3, emphasis mine).

Every time I read the above paragraph, I recall scenes from various films that would show the awkward, unsure ways, of a first-time migrant, the unhurried pace of first entry to the city contrasted with the rushed, focused movements of the urban person. For the train has to be caught. The factory siren has hooted. Today we are governed by biometric or RFID devices to capture attendance data accurately including arrival time, duration of absence from section, and leaves- not just in factories but universities. Clock time is a modern phenomenon. Biometrics reflect both our authoritarian and neo-liberal moment.

But for a moment let's imagine an everyday where there is no "clock time" and reflect the "profound ruptures initiated by the emergence of industrial capitalism" that rearranged "our senses of time". Our everyday was once "tethered to seasonal, celebratory, or even cosmic temporalities" but time in capitalist society is not only characterized by the "regularity of clock-time but specifically as the waged "labor hour" or work-time³.

Returning to the matter of constraint, does Marx's emphasis on material conditions imply that humans have no volition of their own? Not quite for as he writes in the Eighteenth Brumaire:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.⁴

And then:

Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc. - real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life process (Marx 1968: 6 emphasis mine).

Human consciousness creates anew but not on an empty slate. For the "tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living". Perhaps a few quotes would be more appropriate today than the following:

...And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language⁵.

Theme, Structure and Argument

I read in the theme of the seminar two central elements: everyday life and the play of freedom and unfreedom. I have already outlined my broad approach. I seek to develop this further by drawing from my "biographical everyday" that necessarily includes the "everyday practice of sociology". I thus enter this discussion from some vantage points: *first*, my everyday world as I grew up and then the classroom experiences that propelled an interest in pedagogy; *second*, my research on women's movements and feminisms; and *third*, my study of the changing nature of media in India. These are the experiences that I draw from and reflect on "everyday life" as well as "freedom" and "unfreedom".

I begin this section of my paper with the everyday, immediate world that I grew up in, my classroom experiences as a student and then as a teacher. In the urban middle-class world, I grew up in, ideas of "individualism" reigned. They appeared natural, taken for granted and perhaps even "superior" in the evolutionary order of things. Though at that time, and for many decades after, I had not yet learnt to articulate this academically. I then proceed to my research on women's movements and feminism, where

ideas of freedom and unfreedom are central (next Section). For, significant to feminist movements and feminism has also been a critique of the everyday world of women- as ordinary, banal, familial, unproductive, and unimportant and therefore rendered invisible in the dominant and legitimate knowledge systems. In the final section, I draw from my research on the fast-changing Indian media from the 1990s when the Indian state shifted its economic policy to integrate more closely into the global capitalist market. Significantly this was also the time when women so long considered invisible became hyper-visible in public discourse. And the language of freedom was dramatically altered.

This was also when ideas of freedom were not just being discussed in philosophy or the political arena but were reinvented in the glossy pages of fast-expanding Indian media. The word that gripped Indian media was “choice” and “consumption”. Older meanings of freedom, associated with the anti-colonial national liberation movements and socialist movements changed. (Chaudhuri 2017) As I seek to map, albeit very sketchily this transformation, what would be obvious is how social contexts redefine ideas. And there is nothing “natural” about the shift. Tangible policy shifts that animate state and market decisions must be taken into cognizance. Both state and market are constitutive of class relations and the larger dynamics of capitalism. It is this ensemble of social relations that must be identified and analysed if we as sociologists must understand the everyday workings of freedom and unfreedom therein.

The Argument

As stated in the Introduction itself, I am wary of both a committed celebration of the everyday as I am of an idea of a purported unencumbered self. Certeau, in his influential work, *In The Practice of Everyday Life* distinguishes between the concepts of strategy and tactics. De Certeau defines “strategies” as the hidden means by which institutions and structures of power, or “producers”, circumscribe a place as *proper* and generate relations with targeted individuals, or “consumers”, who consequently enact “tactics” to unsettle or diverge from the prescribed conventions of such environments. For instance, he shows how in the influential *Walking in the City*, while “the city” is generated by the strategies of governments, corporations, and other institutional bodies who produce things like maps that describe the city as a unified whole, the walker at street level moves in ways that are tactical and never fully determined by the plans of organizing

bodies, taking shortcuts despite the strategic grid of the streets. This crux of the argument is that despite repressive aspects of modern society, there exists an element of creative resistance to these structures enacted by ordinary people. He thus makes an important critical distinction between strategies and tactics in this battle of repression and expression. Strategies are used by those within organizational power structures while tactics are employed by those who are subjugated. By their very nature tactics are defensive and opportunistic, used in more limited ways and seized momentarily within spaces, both physical and psychological, produced and governed by more powerful strategic relations.

While one agrees wholly to the point that the subjugated always find some avenues to negotiate, one would be wary of terming them as either resistance or subversion. As Certeau himself contends, they are defensive, limited, and opportunistic. In the times we live in defined by neo-liberalism and authoritarianism, responses to expressions of defiance are usually met in two ways. Acts of defiance are usually met with severe sanctions by an authoritarian state while a neoliberal regime (state and market in tandem) appropriates the rhetoric of freedom and defiance, refashioning it in the language of choice, entrepreneurship, and individual pleasure. The dominant script of the regime rules. Collective ideas of freedom are transfigured as “narcissistic” expressions of the consumer self. Or gets co-opted as the freedom to dominate “others” for triumphant nationalism replaces the constitutional vision of liberty, equality, and fraternity. The co-optive spirit of neo-liberal capitalism conjoined with a powerful majoritarian state is particularly adept at deploying the media apparatus.

My argument is simple, and at the risk of being denounced as a reductionist, I am spelling it out. The everyday (our micro, daily minutiae) is structured by the macrostructures. Capitalism I argue is the “big” structure today that impinges on all aspects of modern societies. The nature and form of capitalism have altered historically. We now live in a neoliberal capitalism and we need to take note of some of its most defining features. *First*, neoliberalism that structures the contemporary world is not just a set of economic policies; it is not only about facilitating free trade, maximizing corporate profits, and challenging welfarism. It involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action, including social movements and indeed feminism itself. (Brown 2017) *Second*, the neoliberal project has extraordinary adaptive and co-optive capacities. It recasts feminism and tears apart its inextricable ties to feminist movements. Feminism whose roots lay in women’s movements privileged collective action and fought for equal political, economic and social rights. Neoliberal

feminism celebrates individuation and entrepreneurial selfhood. This expresses itself differentially across unequal contexts. The right-wing appropriates agential women to target minorities, the marginalized and women whom they do not consider as others.

My focus is on the contemporary. The central attention is therefore to neoliberal capitalism in this paper. One agrees that the everyday in all social formations is impacted by big structures. But there is a difference. This stems from the very nature of capitalism which in Dorothy Smith's words has a "double character" and is not fully understandable within its scope. I quote in full below.

...It is organized by social relations not fully apparent in it nor contained in it. This is the social organization of the sociological problematic in the actual work and practices of real individuals. Earlier forms of society do not have this double character. In simpler social forms, the character and organization of the everyday world are fully visible. The ethnographic techniques of anthropologists have depended upon this visibility (Smith 1987: 92).

This throws up a specific challenge to a sociological study of everyday life. The structures and transformation of the everyday world in our form of society are not observable in the same way as a simple society was. The difference is more than a difference in size. It is only vaguely indicated in the notion of "complexity". There are important differences in the fundamental form of social organization. The problematic character of the everyday world is an essential property of this social form. The point that Dorothy Smith makes is that:

...capitalism creates a wholly new terrain of social relations external to the local terrain and the particularities of personally mediated economic and social relations. It creates an extra-local medium of action constituted by a market process in which a multiplicity of anonymous buyers and sellers interrelate and by an expanding arena of political activity. These extra local, impersonal, universalized forms of action became the exclusive terrain of men, while women became correspondingly confined to a reduced local sphere of action organized by particularistic relationships (Smith 1987: 92).

Sociology in other words has a task of going beyond the obvious façade. We need theoretical lenses to peer beyond the visible. As C Wright Mills puts it differently in his exposition in *The Sociological Imagination*:

...the lay person (and at many levels we are lay people) do not possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world. They cannot cope with their personal troubles in such ways as to control the structural transformations that usually lie behind them (Mills 1959: 3).

It is the sociological imagination that enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. It enables him to take account of how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions. The challenge therefore is not to yield to the easy temptation to take it for granted. For it is easy not to “see” the problematic of “observation” (Smith 1987: 92).

For that, we need to employ analytical lenses to grasp the extraterritorial workings of the big structure of capitalism, of the ensemble of relations that constitute the state and market to figure out our everyday locales. It is this task that I venture into as I draw upon my everyday experiences of growing up, everyday practice of sociology, the changing dynamics of feminism and finally the media. The last has entered our most intimate spaces, for we live in a mediated everyday social.

Everyday Life and Academics

As a young girl growing up middle class in an urban context, I learnt that having “a mind of my own” was a good thing. In part this I learnt from my “modern” educated mother. In hindsight when I did my PhD on the middle-class women’s movement and the ideas that animated both the 19th-century social reform movements and early 20th-century nationalist assertions, I realized how the larger world of social change and a colonially mediated modernity of Bengal had shaped my mother’s idea of self-hood. Herd mentality, I learnt early was not a good thing. The modern epoch that heralded Reason was not just a distant abstract idea. It had entered our everyday life, very far from where it may have emerged. The process was neither unilinear nor uncontested. Most women and men from my mother’s generation, even within the middle class were both wary and disapproving of such independence for it spelt danger. Freedom was suspect. Cautionary tales of the tragedy that befell female cousins who had strayed were in common circulation (Chaudhuri 2020a).

Such cautionary stories were also common in the convent school that I attended. The cultural nuances shifted but the pattern remained the same. Girls should be educated but not too much, be modern but not too much, free but not too much. This model of conduct like many of my generation, class and caste background was a script that “good girls” followed. It was many decades later as I researched the history of ideas about gender in modern India, one learnt later how the model was constructed and disseminated over decades. And how the sources of the complex ideas of a modern but traditional Indian woman were drawn from diverse sources to constitute our everyday lives (Chaudhuri 2015).

Later as I entered university and was drawn to the left student’s movement, I realized the deep resistance that many young privileged people had against organized, collectivist movements. It was associated with the “herd mentality” that my mother had disapproved of in quite another context. The dominant ideology that governed society was that of individualism. And freedom was essentially freedom of the privileged “individual”. This everyday consciousness I would argue was not disconnected from what was still a Cold War context. For the privileged young, it meant grey, regimented and unattractive images from China and the Soviet Union compared to the happy, free, colourful images from a very powerful United States of America. Later when I reflect on the trajectory of feminism I return to the hegemonic American idea of fierce individualism as freedom.

The years flew by. I started teaching and grew increasingly attentive to the everyday practice of sociology which also forms a vantage point for this paper. I grew interested in the messy ways that the concept of globalization, like modernization and other concepts before, travelled into our classrooms, our syllabi and the acknowledgement of our common-sense needs. The classroom, syllabi making, and textbooks were a central site of the everyday practice of sociology (Chaudhuri 2002, 2003, 2010, 2018, 2024). For in these everyday minutiae lies the larger story of Indian sociology.

I felt a deep sense of disconnect, first as a student and then as a teacher with established sociology which gives us a consciousness that looks at ‘society, social relations, and people’s lives as if we could stand outside them, ignoring the particular local places in the everyday in which we live our lives’ (Smith 1987: 2). For those in the margins - whether gender, race, or locations in the global south- the experiential feel of the ordinary everyday wherein theories arrived from distant shores and were variously adopted and sometimes mimicked, need to be told as legitimate recordings of

intellectual and institutional histories from our parts. I have reflected on this at different points and drawn from them.

Our everyday practice of Indian sociology is intellectually tied up with colonial rule, Orientalism and Indology. All shared a steadfast fast focus on India’s unique culture. Debates for Indian sociology in the pages of *Contribution to Indian Sociology* (CIS) that was launched in 1957 by Louis Dumont from Paris and David Pocock from Oxford left their intellectual mark. The point I am making is that the global was always present in our local/national/everyday, albeit in different ways. British social anthropology had greater influence in some institutions than American sociology in others. What was constant was the dominance of some variant of structural functionalism and a conscious distancing from Marxism. And the idea of a constant Indian culture of change and continuity (Chaudhuri 2024).

The global north was thus omnipresent in our local every day, much before globalization stormed into our lives. Its presence was larger than life in our curriculum. Teaching a course on women and society in the 1990s, I felt uncomfortable to begin with the mandatory reference to liberal, socialist and radical feminist theories in Western textbooks. If routine defines our everyday life in our personal spaces, so it does in the practice of sociology. Syllabi-making is often a cut-and-paste work, an everyday hand-me-down list. But even in this routine hand me down there are to use Dorothy Smith’s phrase “relations of ruling” that bind us.

To me, when I began teaching gender, it made more sense to begin with history than the mandatory reference to liberal, socialist, and radical (Chaudhuri 2002). This was the 1990s and therefore we had not still begun with Dalit feminism or Black feminism or queer theory. The buzz about multiple modernity had also still not reached our shores nor was “provincializing Europe” a heard of phrase. Nor had third-world feminism become an essential add-on to the internationalised curriculum in the Global North. We were still struggling to argue that our global histories have differently played out. Our modernity was therefore different, just as our feminist histories were (Chaudhuri 2004). My point is not that Western feminist theories have not arrived here. But the big and small ways that they travelled and settled here were different. The story of globalization was no different. The dominant discourse on globalization fed into a new everyday common sense and seamlessly merged with sociological knowledge.

To study the common sense of the common people and yet break from it has been a central challenge to sociology and anthropology. In India's unequal educational system, in its everyday practice, theory is often an add-on, a fixed product to be applied, rather than an analytical process to question the taken for granted. (Chaudhuri and Thakur 2018) This may not be our problem alone for as Bourdieu observes 'intellectuals, like everyone else, constantly peddle prejudices, stereotypes, received ideas, and hastily simplistic representations which are fuelled by the chance happenings of *everyday life*' (Bourdieu 1999: 220 emphasis mine).

This process however has accelerated in social media times and 2021, with the Pandemic accelerating online learning, we find writings on ResearchGate, Facebook and Twitter that may have not in earlier times breached the gatekeepers of academic sociology. I found on ResearchGate a paper that writes how "our deep-rooted traditions and customs have loosened up their hold with the emergence of globalization" and it has "not only inculcated the westernization in India", but conversely the "Indian culture has also spread its impact globally" (Mohapatra 2017 emphasis mine). In times where WhatsApp universities are a social fact- general, coercive and external- the role of social media in constituting our everyday life- personal, public or academic must be taken note of (Chaudhuri 2017).

Feminism, Freedom and Unfreedom

Feminism has an intrinsic but contested relationship with both freedom and unfreedom. With the former, it is overt, for equality and freedom have always been horizons that structure feminism. With the latter, it is contested and not readily apparent. Like all political and social ideas, notions of freedom are context-specific. And contexts, whether across societies or within societies are deeply unequal. I begin with my journey trying to make sense of the conceptual history of feminism in India. There were a couple of lessons that I learnt early. *One* was the unequal and different nature of the everyday lives of women; *two*, the varied ideas of selfhood, freedom and unfreedom that stem from the everyday experiences.

Let me begin with women's everyday life. Many of us who grow up middle class also grow up with some taken-for-granted ideas of gender roles – relegation of women to the domestic sphere and men as breadwinners. Everyday middle-class experience in such homes affirms the obvious and dominant ideology of natural domesticity and helps brush aside any departure as an aberration. Feminist theory rests on a twofold critique: *one* of the

separations of private and public at one hand; and *two*, the assumption of all women sharing similar everyday experiences. Not surprisingly, Marxist theory defined the normative given of "domesticity" as "bourgeois domesticity", not universal. Scholars have carefully etched the processes that led to the separation as well as the construction of a natural division of sexual labour. The very idea of a housewife has a specific history. For in an earlier epoch, men as well as women lived in the Home. The details about how industrial capitalism ushered in far-reaching changes that redefined ideas of home and work, private and public are too well known to rehearse here. Large-scale factory production meant that "work" happened outside the home. In most parts of the world, however, such as India, women continued to "work" in home-based production. This informal labour for long was glossed over, rendered invisible and more recently since the ascendancy of neo-liberalism this very "informal" nature of women's work, and women's resilience therein has been heralded as important for growth.

"Homes", to state the obvious but too often an unheeded fact are not the same. They differ across class, caste, and race. Sharmila Rege succinctly captures this difference concerning the everyday violence that women from different castes face. She writes:

An analysis of the practice of violence against women by caste would reveal that while the incidence of dowry deaths and violent controls and regulations on the mobility and sexuality by the family are frequent among the dominant upper castes - Dalit women are more likely to face the collective and public threat of rape, sexual assault and physical assault at the workplace and in public (Rege 1994, cited in Chaudhuri 2004: 217)

If everyday life was different, so were ideas of selfhood. Black feminists have engaged extensively with this and its associative ideas of freedom. Zillah Eisenstein discussing the liberal roots of North American feminism argues a good quarter century ago:

Today's feminists either do not discuss a theory of individuality or they unselfconsciously adopt the *competitive atomistic ideology of liberal individualism*. ...Until a conscious differentiation is made between a theory of individuality that recognizes the *importance of the individual within the social collectivity* and the idea of individualism that assumes a *competitive view of the individual*, there will not be a full accounting of what a feminist

theory liberalism must look like in our western society (Eisenstein 2000, cited Chaudhuri 2004: xxxii, emphasis mine).

Spelt out in terms of freedom, the competitive view would stand in contrast to the collective view. Bhasin and Khan's primer on feminism in South Asia introduces the *'personhood of a peasant woman'* and contends that it does not take a peasant woman very far even if she becomes equal to a peasant man' who himself experiences a brutalized, exploited and oppressed everyday life. "Feminists" Bhasin and Khan therefore argue are not only asking and fighting for the "equality" of women, but for a just and equitable society- for women and men both (Bhasin and Khan 2004: 3, cited in Chaudhuri 2004: xxxiii, emphasis mine).

This vision of collective freedom is a far cry from neo-liberal ideas of freedom as "fun" and "entrepreneurship" as evident in Indian media. This I have addressed in greater detail elsewhere. (Chaudhuri 2017; 2020b) But another dimension to the ideas of freedom and unfreedom in feminism needs mentioning. This is the way that collective visions were looked down upon by scholars, usually located in the global north, who failed to distinguish between competitive individualism and collective freedom. Reading commentaries on Indian feminism in the 1980s and 1990s, one often finds unflattering mention of the self-effacing "feminism" of Indian feminists. It was argued that "both progressive and conservative projects collaborate to erase "self-centred" narratives initiated by the elite Indian woman. Both urge her to efface herself considering other more urgent concerns... issues concerning the general populace and ensuring the survival of most women it was contended have always been at the forefront of women's movements in India. Thus, "*the self*" that is independent of or that overarches the many roles prescribed for the Indian woman is a luxury, an indulgence, an unnecessary (illusionary) pleasure...' (George 1999: 142-44, cited in Chaudhuri 2004, emphasis mine)

Historians and sociologists have discussed the very specific nature of the growth of an Indian middle class in colonial India. The middle class was caught in an intellectual world that resonated with the ideas of the French Revolution and the English bourgeoisie but was located physically in a context that offered no real bourgeois possibilities. The essence of democratic liberalism therefore expressed itself as a proclamation of independence for the 'nation' itself represented by Gandhi's "dumb millions", that President K. R. Narayan evoked in his independence speech of the nation in 2001. For Indian feminists like Vina Mazumdar whose entry into the public space and awareness of the women's question was inextricably linked to the

anti-imperialist struggle of the national movement, a language that separated the self from the collective was both alien and undesirable. her narrative suggests, that ‘the independence of the country and women had become so intertwined to be identical’ (Chaudhuri 2004: xxxi).

Little resemblance exists to what global feminists have decried as corporatization or even what has been called McFeminism when McDonald turned its arches upside down to form the letter W (Chaudhuri 2020b). The corporate rebranding of International Women’s Day (IWD), as a time for cupcakes and celebration, couldn’t be further from its revolutionary roots, or any meaningful discussion of women’s liberation. Now we’re even told, by one of the world’s most prominent IWD websites, ‘Equality is not a women’s issue, it’s a business issue.’ And there we have it — the improvement of women’s lot is only valuable insofar as it can advance capital accumulation. And it’s far too important to be left in the hands of women (Chaudhuri 2020b).

Media, Everyday Life, Constraint and Freedom

The media is a pervasive presence in contemporary everyday life. No aspect of our personal or public experiences is untouched. At the personal level, our dependence is acute. Whoever has lost a smartphone would know that sinking feeling of helplessness. For this is not the loss of a phone any longer. It is the loss of one’s anchor- the rudder to life: access to work and leisure; friends and family; banking and ticketing; monitoring health and wealth. Everything comes to a grinding halt. The world shuts off. The paradox is that while social media lures us with the possibility of “freedom”, experimenting, and “consuming”, we are at the same time tied to it and therefore “unfree”.

This is a slice of our urban middle-class everyday experience. The only way out of this deep pit of personal trouble is to make that desperate call to block the phone before the rush to fix it. Once too often, we find that is not possible. It cannot be repaired. Newer models in the market have ensured its redundancy. We are compelled to find a replacement to log back into our “world”. This little instrument’s loss incapacitates our everyday functioning. This is a story that would resonate with many who share this world. For others, access could be a struggle of an order that the more privileged would find difficult to comprehend. A tragic account of Aishwarya Reddy, 19 draws attention to the unequal everyday experiences of even the educated young. Aishwarya had asked for a laptop, even a second-

hand one, to continue her college classes during the coronavirus lockdown. But her family struggled with the request. The student of Delhi's Lady Shri Ram College (LSR) died by suicide at her home in Telangana, calling herself a "burden to her family" in a note - a wrenching example of the tragedy of thousands of families and students left financially desperate by the virus shutdown⁶.

The distant and complex workings of the market, the state and social inequalities impinge upon these personal stories. There are larger and often invisible structures that compel us to buy a new gadget rather than repair it⁷. Personal trouble is a public issue (Mills 1959). This constraint is however rarely felt as a compulsion. The advertisement industry ensures that we feel that our decisions are informed, rational and a matter of individual choice.

As users, we know how to download new apps and create a world that suits our tastes and consumption patterns. Friendly suggestions that crop up on our phone screens guide us to sites that we may find of interest and liking. The gentle prompting comes in personalized messages. The personal touch matters. For we as have seen above live in times of "competitive individualism". The industry knows this. There is the art and there is the business of messaging which makes up the communication industry.

It's time to get personal with your marketing strategy. Today's digital marketing tactics are focused on customizing the client experience to make each interaction meaningful and valuable. There are simple, cost-effective and non-spammy ways to make your customer feel like one in a million, one of the easiest being personalized text messages⁸.

The *market* is not a stand-alone actor in this story. The *state* spends a phenomenal amount of money on media, communication and publicity. This has only grown with the recent rise of populist and authoritarian regimes. We know very little about the many links that bind the state and market. We also do not know enough of how and why populism works so well, and what role media has in it.

The *relentless media messaging* and the 24x7 excitement of breaking news suffuses everyday life. In our world of over-communicative abundance, there is always the next big story that will grip our attention. There are organizations and professional experts to manage bad press and plant new stories that make old ones vanish (Chaudhuri 2017). Media technology helps in this constant *image-building* and *industrial-scale* representation.

This needs big money, market research and creative work. Brands must be made. Advertising and marketing agencies are part of this large complex and professional apparatus that are in the business of making brands and selling dreams.

We all use media but know little about its structure and functioning. We experience environmental degradation but do not quite comprehend what pressures are exercised by the state and market on the ways in which environmental issues are covered in the media. Nor do we know about attacks on environmental activists⁹.

We see, hear, and consume media's constantly changing and converging forms. Most print newspapers have their online versions as do television channels. Distinctions blur as do boundaries between entertainment and information. The quick pace and thrill of contemporary news is exciting. Not like the staid format that marked news channels not too many years ago. The older amongst us may recall the content and texture of news of another era. The new format, some scholars have argued has a visceral connection to the content conveyed.

It may not be an exaggeration to say that we increasingly see through the eyes of the media. Events that they focus on are the only events that exist and therefore matter. This matter of skewed information gets further complicated because, in a world of multiple choices and algorithms, we have "news" and "phone delivered" as per our preferences. We consume "news" that we can connect to and those that we are predisposed to believe in. The omnipresence of media-driven buzzwords is in stark contrast to our ignorance of how media works. A billion people now consume news and watch soaps and music videos. But we know next to nothing about the media industry- its ownership and organizational structure; its revenue model; or its relationship with other industries, with the state and the market. This is what Dorothy Smith identified as the problematic of everyday life in capitalism. This ignorance is one-sided. The now digitally equipped industry knows a great deal about us as consumers. They know that many urban English-knowing Indians consume news on smartphones.¹⁰

We have also argued earlier about the adept ways that neo-liberalism appropriates progressive ideas. Not surprisingly market researchers have realized that a bit of feminism may help target new-age women. (Chaudhuri 2017) That sunny side journalism, a term in currency in Indian media in the 1990s is the profitable and therefore viable way forward. (ibid) Media

coverage on caste atrocities, agrarian crises and urban squalor is not; unless it is sensationalized, is yet another product to be consumed¹¹.

Linked is the question of data mining, “our” data which we cheerfully share as we use the various apps on our gadgets. Its scope and scale we barely fathom. Reviewing Shoshana Zuboff’s seminal book *Surveillance Capitalism*, The Guardian writes that initially ‘intent on organising all human knowledge, Google ended up controlling all access to it; we do the searching and are searched in turn’¹² This unequal knowledge between consumers and the media “messengers” has made understanding media an imperative need. Some argue that every message is created with a reason and understanding that reason is the basis of media literacy¹³. That is possibly one entry point to understanding media; there may be others.

Capitalism is the “big” structure that impinges on all aspects of modern societies. One also underlined that the form of capitalism altered historically. We now live in a neoliberal capitalism and we need to reiterate some of its most defining features, mentioned earlier in the paper. Ideologically, it involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action, including social movements and indeed feminism itself. The point made repeatedly in this paper, the neoliberal project has extraordinary adaptive and co-optive capacities. It recast feminism and tore apart its inextricable ties to feminist movements. Feminism whose roots lay in women’s movements privileged collective action and fought for equal political, economic and social rights. Neoliberal feminism celebrates individuation and entrepreneurial selfhood. This expresses itself differentially across unequal contexts.

Western scholars have often commented on an individual identity understood as a self-conscious, choice-filled, reflexive project that defines the existential terrain of late modern life. This point needs elaboration. No culture eliminates choices, yet tradition or established habit orders life within relatively set channels. Modernity confronts the individual with a complex diversity of choices. Unlike the West, in India, colonially-mediated modernity followed by a Nehruvian model of development with public stress on thrift and austerity offered not too many choices to the middle class.

Liberalisation in the 1990s brought in its turn a public discourse redolent with ideas of “choice”. It has been argued that modernity confronts the individual with a complex diversity of choices but offers little help as to which options should be followed. A central consequence of this is the primacy of lifestyle and its inevitability for the individual agent. It is true

that the term "lifestyle" need not be solely associated with consumerism. In India, however, the association is obvious, for the entry of this entire package of ideas had a sudden and deliberate character. The corporate sector, advertising copy-writers, management gurus and media barons, worked towards the dissemination of a concept of selfhood defined by choice and consumption. I argue that explicating the language of sponsorship and the rhetoric of choice that it promoted is important for two reasons. *One* is to dissuade the dominant ideology, the common-sense belief that the idea of a consuming self is "natural". As I have argued elsewhere, the Indian middle class had to unlearn the virtues of "austerity" and learn to "splurge" (Chaudhuri 2017). *Two*, I draw attention to the intended action of corporations to emphasise that it is not just a particular product that is being sold but a worldview. Independent India's tryst with planned development was over. A new ideology however had to be put in place and disseminated. The focus was thus not just on "selling". An ideology of consumption, individualism, free choice, the good life, "feminism" and Hindutva were carefully created by both the state and market apparatuses. Thus, were ushered into a new everyday consciousness.

Tying up

I began with an attempt to argue that the sociologist can seek to understand everyday life and how freedom and unfreedom play out within this life only by bringing back the dynamics of the macro and micro, the "everyday" and the structures within which the everyday is constituted. I also started with a mention of my wariness of a current trend that privileges the "everyday" as somehow more "real", more "authentic", closer to the "true self". This I argue rests on an assumption that there is an unfettered self, the site of "real" freedom. The paper has sought to draw from three sites of my everyday life to argue that the idea of an unencumbered individual is a product of a very specific history that is defined by capitalism and its associated ideologies of competitive individualism. Here "freedom" is no longer a collective struggle for a more just society, but an individual pursuit. Within academic scholarship too there has been an approach that has valorised the idea that though rules are set by those in power, the subjugated are always free to resist and express. My study of a neo-liberal India suggests that while the rhetoric of choice is flagged off by corporates and their advertisers; the question we need to ask is how free we are to choose. Or are choices restricted to our preferences between toothpaste brands and models of cars? What happens to those who do not use toothpaste at

all? Are we free to choose between one hate-filled news television channel and another? Or one melodrama over another? We are free to play our cards but within the set of cards (or script) that has already been laid out.

Constraints, like contexts we have seen - whether in an analysis of the everyday practice of sociology, changing ideas of freedom in feminisms or of a mediatised everyday life - are analytically indispensable. The other contention that is present in this paper is that too often common-sense ideas and media rhetoric enter sociology without questions being asked. I thus thought it important to refer to the classical theorists to show: *first* that there is no pre-theoretical; and *second* how the repressive yet insidious ways that big structures impinge on everyday life. And how the ordinary, everyday is socially constituted.

The paper has also sought to make the point that there is no way we can access the everyday sans a theoretical framework. I have found Dorothy Smith's concept of "relations of ruling" particularly powerful. It grasps power, organization, direction, and regulation as more pervasively structured than can be expressed in traditional concepts provided by the discourses of power. Smith came to see a specific interrelation between the dynamic advance of the distinctive forms of organizing and ruling contemporary capitalist society and the patriarchal forms of our contemporary experience. I quote:

When I write of "ruling" in this context I am identifying *a complex of organized practices, including government, law, business and financial management, professional organization, and educational institutions as well as the discourses in texts that interpenetrate the multiple sites of power*. A mode of ruling has become dominant that involves a continual transcription of the local and particular actualities of our lives into abstracted and generalized forms. It is an extra local mode of ruling. Its characteristic modes of consciousness are objectified and impersonal; its relations are governed by organizational logic and exigencies (Smith 1987: 92-93, emphasis mine).

She writes that everyday lives in capitalism are ruled by 'forms of organization vested in and mediated by texts and documents, and constituted externally to particular individuals and their personal and familial relationships'. This practice of ruling involves the ongoing representation of the local actualities of our worlds in the standardized and general forms of knowledge that enter them into the relations of ruling. My focus on

media and academia as “knowledge” forms that enter into the “relations of ruling” must be read in this light. Forms of consciousness are created that are properties of organization or discourse rather than of individual subjects. Freedom and unfreedom in everyday life can only be understood through such theoretical lenses.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented as the valedictory address in the two-day national seminar on “Freedom and Unfreedom in Everyday Life”, which was organized jointly by the Department of Sociology, North Bengal University, and RC 28: Sociology of Everyday Life of the Indian Sociological Society, on 19-20 March 2024, at North Bengal University.
2. See Lygia Sabbag Fares, ‘Time and Capitalism: The Economics of the Clock’
<https://thebrooklyninstitute.com/items/courses/new-york/time-and-capitalism-the-economics-of-the-clock/>
3. See Lygia Sabbag Fares ‘Time and Capitalism: the Economics of the Clock’ <https://thebrooklyninstitute.com/items/courses/new-york/time-and-capitalism-the-economics-of-the-clock/>
4. See, Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. 1852 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>
5. See Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. 1852. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>
6. Arun Singh and Uma Sudhir. ‘Unable To Afford Laptop, LSR Student Dies by Suicide at Telangana Home’. India News, 9 November 2020, 7:10pm. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/lsr-student-suicide-in-telangana-unable-to-afford-laptop-lsr-student-dies-by-suicide-at-telangana-home-2322674> Accessed 9th November 2020.
7. Look at this as an example <http://www.electronicstakeback.com/designed-for-the-dump/quickly-obsolete/>
8. Look at the add titled “The Industry Leading Mass Texting Service: Our mass text service makes it easy to engage your audience at scale” (<https://www.slicktext.com/blog/2019/01/personalized-text-messages-complete-guide/>) Accessed 5th November 2020.

9. Article titled 'Ongoing Attacks Against Environmental Activists and Journalists in India while Critics Harassed', *Monitor* (online journal), posted on 10.09.2019. (<https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2019/09/10/environmental-activists-and-journalists-among-human-rights-defenders-risk-india/> Accessed 9th November 2020)
10. The Times of India (online edition 25 March 2019, updated at 19:08 IST) reports that 68 per cent Indian users consume news on smartphones. (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/68-of-indian-users-consume-news-on-smartphones-report/articleshow/68565146.cms> Accessed 7th November 2020).
11. For details see, <https://www.logicserve.com/blog/survey-social-media-apps-are-an-integral-part-of-the-indian-marketers-everyday-life/> Accessed 5th November 2020.
12. See the book review by James Bridle appeared in The Guardian titled "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism by Shoshana Zuboff review – we are the pawns" (2 February 2019, 07:30 GMT) (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/feb/02/age-of-surveillance-capitalism-shoshana-zuboff-review>)
13. Look at the advertisement with the caption "Lost your way? We are here to help" floated by Common Sense Media (<https://www.common sense media.org/news-and-media-literacy/what-is-media-literacy-and-why-is-it-important>)

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