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Growing up in Unfreedom: A Reflection on the Childhood Memories of Urban Middle-Class Women

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Abstract: *Unfreedom, cruelty, domination, and violence exist in disguise as 'normal' in our everyday life in social relations, in the process of growing up of children of all classes; their nature of manifestation and reasons, however, vary depending on economic, social and cultural conditions of the population. The middle class in India is located in a context which is fundamentally different from the context of the other classes, the poor and the rich. The Indian middle class now is educated, enjoys a degree of material affluence, lives in small and nuclear families, and is ambitious yet ridden with uncertainties and risks embedded in the neo-liberal social-economic order. The middle-class children in India thus grow up under the close care of their informed and conscious parents who operate in a narrow terrain of traditional normative patterns and the pressure of competition for career opportunities in the market economy. While bringing up their children, the parents consciously or unconsciously enforce their will in their children with authoritarian vigour in the name of care and support in making a successful career for them, without engaging their children in free dialogue. Growing up in such a conditioned terrain, the children, when they learn to live with agencies, realise that they lived a life of unfreedom.*

Keywords*:* Risk society, neoliberal order, fertility check, small families, care, careerism, structure-agency dialectics.

Introduction

The Indian middle-class population live in contradictions; they nurse the traditional morality and beliefs, yet they strive for modernity; they are economically secure yet suffer from economic uncertainties; they are educated, informed and conscious yet do non-logical things and make moral

compromises; they are caught in a contradiction of self-love and love for others (to use Rousseau's binary; see, Koffer, 2021 for details); they represent the most progressive and regressive-reactionary sections of the society as the progressive section sets the tone for social transformation while the regressive section patronises the cultivation of pre-science and the post-truth. The members of the middle class thus have a wide range of choices to decide about their subjective moral-ethical positions, and that is precisely what they do. In making decisions about their personal lives, they exercise their choices. For example, they decide what to study, where to study and for how long, how to plan their career, when to marry, whom to marry (within or outside the caste or religion), whether to demand dowry, how to treat the wife (along the line of patriarchy or equal partnership), when to have a child, how many children to have, whether to consult wife in deciding to have a child, how to select a school or college for the child, which stream to select, how to plan a career for the child, how much freedom to grant to the child in course of her/his growing up, what kind of values and what kind of personality the child should grow up with, and so on. They make decisions on all these crucial matters, not independently of the patterns or trends that are in vogue at the social-cultural levels, but mostly in line with the collective thought and behaviour patterns. In other words, the educated and informed middle-class parents make conscious decisions about all family matters and matters relating to the lives of their children. The parents, although they engage themselves with the social patterns, exercise their agency to make their own decisions. This explains the diversity in the personalities of the parents and their offspring.

In social sciences, it is now widely accepted that the individual subjects or the selves are constructs of history and cultural traditions and the contemporary social forces, a process which Michel Foucault terms 'subjectivation' the individuals in course of their growing up enjoy certain degree of freedom in shaping their agency that empowers them to reflect on the traditional, social, political and cultural orders that operate as the structural forces to shape them (Foucault, 1994, 1994a; Deacon, 2003). The growing children move from the semiotic phase to the linguistic symbolic phase (Kristeva in Oliver, 1993) through communicative interaction in the social field (Habermas, 1979, 1992), while continually shaping and reshaping their agencies and personalities in encountering the challenges of life and being unique subjects with distinctive identities. For the whole life, a person has to go through an endless and all-pervasive structure-agency dialectics

in shaping and reshaping the elements of cognition and consciousness and the action-interaction pattern.

Against the above conceptual backdrop, the present paper records the reflexive narratives of four educated women of middle-class background who are now at different phases of their lives. Although the information base is thin, the paper is out to make a point that through the method of autobiographical reflection, we can draw an understanding of how the structural elements are passed on to the growing up girls and how they negotiate them in drawing up their own agencies and how the unfreedom-freedom and structure-agency dialectics work in real life. The present exercise helps us understand the circumstances that force individuals to make compromises with their free will.

The social context

India in recent decades has undergone substantial economic, social and cultural transformation that impacts all classes of people. With aggressive structural adjustment or economic reforms since the 1990s Indian economy has steadily moved towards free-market capitalism integrated into the global economy, from the conservative state-controlled economy followed as a part of the Nehruvian economy since Independence. The result is that education, health, transport, insurance and all other essential sectors have gone private and become expensive. The living costs have increased manifold. On the other hand, the opportunities for tenured and secure jobs in the public sector have dramatically shrunk, and the educated middle-class youth now look to the private sector for contractual and insecure jobs. The Indian economy has gone through a process of informalisation, as about 93 per cent of the workforce depends on the informal sector for their livelihood. Alongside this, a section of the middle-class youth travel abroad searching for technical and job-oriented education, paying a hefty sum of money out of parents' savings or bank loans, and preparing for job opportunities in the global employment market. Globalisation has prompted the out-migration of the educated younger generation of Indians on a large scale. This has brought about a perceptual change in the Indian middle-class population. In the pre-reform period, the middle-class parents used to think that good education in the low-cost government-aided educational institutions would help their children secure good and stable jobs in the public sector within the state. But now, the middle-class parents, in their

efforts to adapt to the demands of the market economy, send their children to expensive English-medium private schools and colleges, to the private institutions that provide technical education (management, computer science, engineering and medical) to make their children employable. In the process, they stress their spending capacity beyond limits, taking an education loan from the banks at high interest rates. Yet, they are not sure of securing the careers of their children since the market is volatile.

Apart from the change of perception on matters relating to education and career, the new economic order has impacted the marriage decision and the reproductive behaviour of the new generation in the middle class. While the age at marriage has risen, the fertility rate has dropped significantly in recent decades. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS – 5, 2019-21) the median age of first marriage for women aged 20–49 increased from 17.2 years (2005–06) to 19.2 years (2019–21) and for men of 25-29 age, the median age of first marriage has increased from 22.6 years to 24.9 years during the same period (Government of India, 2022). The Survey does not give class-wise data, but from what we see around us, the average age at marriage for the urban middle-class men and women would be above 30, since they take time to complete education and earn economic stability of some kind. The rising age at marriage could be read alongside the high rate of unemployment among the youth. According to the Periodic Labour Survey Bulletin (released on 16 July 2025), 7.2 per cent of the urban youth are unemployed, and the rate is even higher among women, which is 8.7 per cent. Another piece of information suggests that 30 per cent of the Indian youth who graduated with a management degree from MIT, USA, are jobless. Even the highly expensive private education does not give any job guarantee for the Indian middle-class population.

One impact of the rise in living costs, particularly education and health costs, and the uncertain job market, is a drop in the fertility rate. In line with the global trend, India, in general, and urban India, in particular, are experiencing a progressive decline in the fertility rate (births per woman), which currently stands at 1.9 and is below the replacement level of 2.1 (United Nations Population Fund Report (UNFPA) on *The Real Fertility Crisis*, 2025). With one child or two children, urban middle-class parents, driven by hedonistic values, invest everything in the upbringing of their offspring, lavishing them with the best possible care and attention. Modern parents devote their time, resources, and energy to charting out a culturally

defined career path and push their children to follow the dotted lines to achieve success and establish themselves in life.

According to the *State of the World Population Report 2018* by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2018), although India's population has almost doubled, from 566 million in 1971 to 1.35 billion in 2016, the fertility rate is in decline. In urban India, the total fertility rate has dropped to 1.9, which is lower than the replacement level of 2.1. As a result, India's family size has steadily declined since 1971. According to the UNFPA (2018) report, the family size in India has decreased from 5.2 children per family in 1971 to 2.3 in 2016. The report observed that India, along with many other countries, has witnessed a substantial drop in infant and child mortality, partly due to a wider reach of health care systems, economic development, reduced poverty and increased enrolment of females in primary and secondary education (See Choudhary, 2018).

According to the 2011 Census, the median household size in urban India is now less than four for the first time in history. Data on houses and households released by the Census office show that 56 per cent of households in urban India now have four or fewer members. The mother's education level is marked as the biggest determinant of the number of children she wishes to have in her lifetime. However, women in India across regions and communities are having fewer children than ever before, irrespective of education or wealth.

Basu and Desai (2012) have identified a demographic trend in the Indian population indicating that a large section of younger couples is opting for single-child families. Based on data from the *Indian Human Development Survey 2004-2005,* the authors observe: '… a small segment of the Indian population has begun the transition to extremely low fertility. Among the urban middle classes, it is no longer unusual to find families stopping at one child, even when this child is a girl' (Basu and Desai, 2012: 2).

Comparing data from National Family Health Survey 1 (1992-93) and National Family Health Survey III (2005-06), Basu and Desai (2012) have found that the proportion of women in the 30-34 age-group with one child has increased from 6 per cent in 1992-93 to 9 per cent in 2005-06. A similar trend, named 'rising trend towards one-child families', has been found in the other younger age groups in India. According to the survey, about 73 per cent of mothers with a single child declared that they do not want more

children; 22 per cent of them were already sterilised. Only about 27 per cent said they may want another child at some point (p.11). According to scholars, one-child families are found overwhelmingly among the urban, educated middle class. While one-child families account for barely 5 per cent of all Indian families, they form 13 per cent of families living in metropolitan cities. About 40 per cent of the families which appear to have stopped at one child were having only a daughter (p. 12).

Fertility checks and the resulting decline in family size are indicators of the rationalisation process that the urban middle class is undergoing. The growing number of urban parents prefer one-child families because (1) they want to avoid the constraints of child bearing, and (2) that they want to prepare their child well so they can avail of the employment or work opportunities offered by the market (Basu and Desai: 2012: 14). The fertility check among the urban middle-class families could also be their perceptions about the career risks embedded in the neo-liberal order. Amartya Sen (2005) has argued that the spread of higher education and increased work participation among women, especially urban middle-class women, gives them the much-needed 'agency,' which, in effect, works to check fertility and achieve a higher quality of life. Going a step beyond Sen, we may argue that the agency in an individual woman gradually finds replication in the collective self, and thus a cultural or social trend or style crystallises. Once this happens, it is collectively sustained and reproduced at the cultural level. I would argue that the urban middle class, which is well-informed about the changes in the socio-economic order, is driven by a risk perception at a time when education and health are being rapidly privatised (commodified) and there is growing uncertainty in the job market. For one-child families, the focus has been on providing the child with a good quality of life and comfort. Guided by hedonism and concerned about developing their children's life chances in a competition-driven society, the parents try to send their children to the best possible schools and colleges, and apart from good education, they make them learn painting, music, or recitation and instil in them all the traditional family values to make them law-abiding citizens. In the process, they start consciously or unconsciously controlling their life. The children are brought up in a way where there is no scope for dialogue and no space for individual agency. They are expected to be obedient to their parents and accept everything unquestioningly.

In ensuring this 'one-dimensional' upbringing, the ever-anxious parents

shower all their affection and care, and in the process, constrain, consciously or unconsciously, the freedom that is essential for building the foundation of the children in their early years. What parents perceive as acts of love, care and protection for the children that turn out to be restrictions, interference and 'unfreedom'. By subjecting the children to a regime of strict 'discipline and punish', the confused parents do unmeasured and unidentifiable damage to the process of self-formation and thus contribute to the making of 'alienated selves'. The school system and the academic curricula play an extended hand of the family in disciplining the children. Driven by a false perception that they are acting in their children's best interest, the parents unknowingly impose their will, inadvertently stifling the natural inclinations and aspirations of their offspring. In the process of parenting, there is hardly any space for a dialogue between the two parties, and the voices of the children remain unarticulated and unexpressed, at least in the early years.

In this act, there are always more powerful 'villains', the larger structural forces, than the parents. In parenting, parents are driven by a 'perception of risk', which is rooted in the structure and operation of the neoliberal global order, unleashing a host of uncertainties for the middle and lower classes, making it obligatory for parents and children to prepare for difficult times. Besides, there are cultural pressures to confront; middle-class parents in particular are under pressure to uphold and upgrade the family status by pushing their children towards career success.

In the following section of the paper, I have tried to bring to light how girls and women in urban middle-class families negotiate unfreedom of different forms in their search for freedom in the process of their upbringing, consciously or unconsciously. I have tried to unravel the nuances of subjugation, control, and violence with the help of self-reflecting narratives of four working women.

Negotiation or Surrender: The childhood memories of urban women

Sumita, 34, is the only child of her parents. She was born in Navadwip but grew up in the Park Circus area, had a childhood shaped by her grandfather's decisive authority. Despite her parents' liberal outlook, her grandfather's orthodox views cast a shadow over her friendships, particularly with boys. Despite her parents' support, she had to conceal her friendship relations while living under her grandfather's strict surveillance.

While facing restrictions on her social interactions, Sumita cherished her outings with female friends, relishing the freedom to enjoy lunches and movies from seventh grade onward. Her parents shielded her from her grandfather's strict vigilance in their efforts to give her a liberal upbringing. However, her academic life was fraught with tension due to her grandfather's iron rule in the family. Despite excelling in academics, she faced occasional strictures for not meeting the standards set by her ever-vigilant grandfather. This fomented resentment in her toward her grandfather and passive parents, who did not do enough to give her some free space. Her grandfather's and, at times, parents' influence largely determined dietary and clothing choices; her grandfather wanted her to avoid red meat and junk food, and wear traditional clothes. Sumita was disappointed for not being able to exercise her freedom, and at the same time, thought that her grandfather and parents wanted to enforce some discipline out of their care and concern for her.

Upon reaching college, Sumita had to select the subjects of her choice. That was the first time she went against the wishes of her family members to choose sociology. The second time she went against her family was when she decided to marry Akash, defying her family's orthodox views against love marriage. However, the tension eased with her mother's intervention.

Post-marriage, Sumita's autonomy further diminished remarkably in trying to meet the expectations and standards of her in-laws. Gradually, she learnt to make adjustments to avoid possible confrontation with her in-laws. To her shock, her educated corporate official husband did not do anything to give her some free space; he also expected that Sumita would do everything according to the expectations of the elderly family members.

Throughout her life, Sumita's father exhibited immense concern for her well-being, especially during her college years. His anxiety intensified after her illness, underscoring his deep love for her. As her grandfather's influence waned with ageing, there was a subtle shift in family dynamics, allowing Sumita to live with some autonomy.

Despite harbouring grievances toward her grandfather, Sumita didn't hold her parents accountable for the unfreedom she encountered in her growing years, as she now recognises their love and care for her. Her grandfather's illness and eventual death a few years back marked a turning point, as she now lives her life with a greater degree of freedom and responsibility.

Although Sumita grew up in unfreedom with her grandfather and father inflicting unwanted control and interference, she does not blame them since she got used to a life in unfreedom. The degree of unfreedom grew after marriage as Sumita's in-laws wanted her to meet their expectations. She felt unfreedom in selecting friends, in choosing dress and food, and in her movements. Now she teaches in a college in the metropolis and reflects on how her life could have been better had she been granted more freedom. Sumita thanks her parents for supporting her education in a good English medium school, college and university and always encouraged her to do well. They helped her secure the job of an assistant professor in a government college. However, they expressed their conservative character when they arranged her marriage when she was 28 and not mentally prepared for it.

Debapoma (35) is the elder of the two daughters of her parents. She was raised in Liluah in a close-knit joint family. She attended a local Bengali medium school close to their house. Despite studying in a school of her family's choice, she excelled academically. Debapoma's parents were supportive and protective of her in her early years; they provided all support in her education and granted her wish to study in the Arts stream. She enjoyed a lively social life, playing with friends and visiting their homes. However, her family imposed some restrictions; she was asked to return home early whenever she attended social events, like birthday parties at her friends' houses. She had the freedom to keep in contact with friends, but was not allowed to go out for coffee or watch movies with them.

From a young age, Debapoma was soft and obedient but was often reprimanded for her struggles with math. Her parents, especially her mother, remained close to her, tutoring and providing the necessary support. Despite facing occasional disciplining and penal action, she holds no grudges against her parents. She rather appreciates her parents' efforts in her protected upbringing.

Debapoma enjoyed some freedom in trying a variety of fast foods, occasionally joining her friends in special treats in eateries and restaurants. Her parents kept advising her to be careful in selecting foods, but that was purely out of their concern for her health. Despite taking occasional scoldings for overindulgence, she remained indifferent to clothing and fashion, feeling content with whatever her parents provided.

Debapoma had an arranged marriage. Both she and her parents liked her husband from the start. Despite initial infatuation with someone else, she, with her parents' persuasion, realised that her husband was the right choice. She was 30 when she got married. She harbours no regret about the selection of her husband and marriage. She does not feel much interference from her in-laws; rather, she maintains a very cordial relationship with them, particularly with her mother-in-law. Her mother-in-law is suffering from Alzheimer's, and Debapoma herself takes care of her.

In her late school and college days, whenever Debapoma went out, her father and mother were taken over by a feeling of insecurity and anxiety. This concern led her parents to call her often whenever she went out, asking her to come home early. Debapoma would never return home late, as she loved to spend time with her parents at home. When she used to teach in a college on a part-time basis or even now, when she is a full-time teacher in a government college, she has to call her parents when she returns home in the evening, informing them about her safe arrival.

Despite her father's modest government job and income, Debapoma and her younger sister had opportunities for artistic and educational pursuits. Her father prioritised their education, but financial constraints put checks on some of their ambitions. Although Debapoma pursued her interest in recitation even after marriage, her desire for acting in theatre remained unfulfilled due to career pressure and lack of family support. Despite this, she holds no resentment towards her parents and appreciates their protective care and support, which continues even after her marriage.

Dipsikha (34) is the only child of her parents. She grew up in Kolkata's Vasudha Apartment in Baguihati, experiencing frequent shifts of residence due to her father's transferable job. From kindergarten to 10th grade, she attended different schools chosen by her father for English medium ICSE board education. Despite facing some initial challenges like bullying, she found joy in schooling, particularly at St. Stephen's and St. Joseph's. During her time in Cuttack, she and her friend Ashima cherished lunchtime chats with their mothers at school. Transportation varied, from a familiar rickshaw puller in Kolkata to walking with friends like Vaishali, and later using the school bus for Queen of the Mission School. Her mother was omnipresent in her studies and career planning.

In the family, her father made major decisions, but always after consulting

her mother. Her mother, initially employed, became a full-time homemaker after the birth of Dipsikha. 'Despite living as a non-earner dependent, her role and importance in the family can hardly be overstated,' said Dipsikha.

Dipsikha chose arts over science and commerce after ICSE and studied Sociology in college, with her uncle's persuasion, although she always wanted to study English. Despite doing reasonably well, not securing a first-class degree left her regretful. She abandoned her master's in sociology due to disillusionment and studied mass communication in Kolkata. Although she wanted to study at IIMC, Mumbai, she was not allowed to, because her parents didn't want her to go that far. Financial constraints prevented her from studying abroad (which she had always dreamt of); she had to do an MBA from a Kolkata-based private management institution, ignoring her study opportunity in a university in the UK. Despite initial disappointments, she excelled academically and now works in an IT company in Bangalore.

Dipsikha's parents encouraged her to make friends since they were worried about her introverted nature. Her early socialisation made her choosy in selecting friends. While her parents emphasised safety, Dipsikha enjoyed spending time with her friends and going on outings together. Even after moving to Bangalore, she maintained a strong friendship with a couple of her Kolkata-based friends as she kept in regular contact with them. All her life, her mother closely monitored her academic career and kept a close vigilance on her movements, but Dipsikha did not nurse any ill feelings for her mother; 'there is nothing unusual about my mother worrying for me', she said. However, Dipsikha regretted her uncle's interference in her academic choices and missed opportunities to study English abroad.

Dipsikha was allergic to certain types of food, and her mother took care in shaping her food habits. She often shared dining experiences with her parents by bringing home treats. She favoured modest clothing like loose salwar kameez and jeans, respecting her father's concerns about sleeveless dresses. Her parents' support for modest attire allowed her to shape her dress sense, and she never felt the need to confront her parents on this.

After some failed relationships, Dipsikha married Raktim in 2021, when she was 33. Her parents selected her husband. She came to know about Raktim after marriage, and she developed a strong relationship with him in the years after marriage.

Dipsikha enjoys more freedom after marriage, with no restrictions from her husband or parents-in-law. She lives in Bangalore with her husband, while her in-laws live in Kolkata. She can dine out freely, host occasional parties for friends, and indulge in leisurely activities without fear of any surveillance or reprimand. Even when visiting her in-laws, she feels at ease due to their liberal attitude. She now visits her parents in Kolkata 2/3 times a year or on social occasions; her parents always long for her and express their care and worries over the phone daily.

Chitralekha (34), the only child of her parents, grew up in Siliguri under the close and protective care of her working parents. She studied in a Bengali medium private primary school where her mother taught, and then in a good Bengali medium High School in the city. Her father, a university professor, was the decision-maker in the family, who taught Chitraleka in the pre-school, primary school, high school and later stages. Chitralekha's early aversion to Mathematics was the guiding principle in her selection of subjects at the Higher Secondary and College levels. At college, she decided to study Sociology under the indirect influence of her father, who was a sociologist. It was Chitralekha who chose the subject, although her father wanted her to study History. However, once she made her decision, her parents extended full support. Chitralekha's mother, too, was caring and supportive. The reason behind her study in a Bengali medium school was that of her father, who believed that the focus should always be on the subject matter of knowledge and not the medium of instruction and that a child can have a solid grounding in one's culture only by studying the rich literature written in the vernacular language.

Chitralekha's father's philosophy – 'do what you love but with a sense of responsibility' allowed her to grow up in an ambience of care and freedom; she was discouraged from overstudy and was encouraged to relax and make friends. Her father, in particular, was the dominant influence on her life, but he encouraged her to 'discuss and dialogue' about everything.

Although Chitralekha's parents were not interfering in nature she got used to a regimented pattern; and followed the same daily routine year after year with a focus on studies, particularly in her school and college days: get up early, study, come back home, have some play with friends in the evening, study until 10 p.m., go to bed, have food on time. 'I had a boring childhood,' lamented Chitralekha. By implication, she had limited outings with friends

and exposure to the outside world. Despite feeling restricted at the time, she now recognises her parents' concern for her safety and care for her. As an introverted child, she often clashed with her mother, resulting in occasional exchange of arguments. Despite initial struggles with studies, her parents' encouragement fostered her interest in learning, although math remained a challenge. Her father did everything possible to make sure Chitralekha excelled in education. Chitralekha too put in everything to do well, but despite all her efforts, she was never counted among the top students in her class at any level.

In her childhood, Chitralekha never liked vegetables; she loved eating chicken and eggs, and fast food, despite her parents' insistence on home-cooked meals. Indulging in street food occasionally, she kept these outings a secret from her parents. Her clothing preferences often clashed with her mother's traditional tastes, leading to occasional disagreements. However, she found a balance between her own choices and her mother's expectations. The decision to marry was entirely her own, and after connecting with her partner through social media, their friendship blossomed into love.

As the only child, her parents were constantly concerned about her well-being. Throughout her childhood, she faced various health issues, including a major operation when she was in 6th grade, which added to their anxiety. Her father accompanied her to music school, and the examination centres on examination days. However, she learnt to take care of herself when she was away from home in her college days in Kolkata and university in Delhi. 'I tasted freedom for the first time in life, living away from home,' said Chitralekha. However, remote control continued, and mobile phones became the means of control. Her parents would worry if she stayed out after dark, often calling her friends to check on her. She recalled an incident in Delhi when she went to Hard Rock Café with friends and was late in returning to the hostel. Her parents panicked and kept calling until she returned to her hostel safely.

Chitralekha's parents never treated her with violence, but her father in particular was domineering, and the truth of life always flew in one direction. Chitralekha never developed an agency to contest her father; she was always hesitant to voice her opinions (even when she had one), fearing her father's reaction. She never had doubts about the intentions of her parents, or their love and care for her, but she, too, had her moments of frustration

and boredom living a regimented life which was designed for her by her concerned and caring parents.

Chitralekha married the man of her choice when she was 33, after a courtship of about a year. It was an inter-caste marriage. Her parents granted her full freedom in selecting her life partner, and when she selected one, they approved the selection without asking a question, and before meeting the man. Chitralekha's husband, who lives in the USA, and her in-laws, who live in Kolkata, are incredibly loving and respectful, granting her ample freedom without ever imposing their will on her. As she teaches at a college in Kolkata, she lives with her aunt, close to her college. She makes it a point to visit her in-laws every weekend, who welcome her warmly and cherish their time together. Despite the distance, her husband remains connected and deeply concerned about her well-being. If she is out late, he becomes anxious and calms down only after her safe return home. Chitralekha enjoys the freedom to dress, eat and visit places. But she feels that her anxious yet caring husband, in-laws, aunties and parents are there to observe all her movements from a distance. She is bound by an invisible control of care and worries of her close ones, and the moral obligation of not hurting them. She acknowledged that 'there is a great deal of voluntarism and willingness in accepting the control that comes with love, care and trust'.

Summary of observations

1. All the women I studied were raised in middle-class families, with three being only children and one having a younger sister. They were nurtured amidst traditional middle-class values, surrounded by the love, care, and undivided attention of their parents. Small middle-class families are in line with the general population trend, which shows that the TFR has dropped to 1.9, which is even lower than the replacement level of 2.1. Although the stem families are the norm of the day, the traditional middle-class values are hard to wither, particularly in cases where the grandparents are a part of the family.
2. The factors that contribute to the dropping fertility rate are the rising cost of living because of the privatisation of education and health services, and the growing career uncertainties which come as a part of the neoliberal market economy. The collective

perception of risks is arguably deterring middle-class couples from having children and restricting the number of children to one or two, even when the child is a daughter. The career uncertainties and delay in getting jobs are contributing to the rising age at marriage for the urban educated women as well as men.

3. The common thread for all the women, notwithstanding some situational distinctiveness, is that although the parents were caring and protective they were bound by the traditional perception of upbringing and followed a regimented line with a focus on education and a successful career. The parents want their daughters to settle down in career terms and were, at the same time, driven by their security concerns; hence, they imposed a lot of restrictions and inflicted unfreedom. The parents in common were driven by a perception that the growing girls need special care and protection since society is not safe for them. The regimented upbringing of girls is, thus, rooted in the perception of the 'weaker gender'. The parents, in general, confuse care and love with control and domination. The daughters, on the other hand, lived in confusion over their search for autonomy and parental care.
4. This process of upbringing of daughters hinders the growth of 'woman-agency' since the parents who just follow the culturally sanctioned style of parenting are so sure about their methods and actions that they do not feel it necessary to engage their daughter in dialogues; they hardly allow their daughters to dialogical and dialectical engagements and exchange of arguments.
5. The result is the 'normalisation' of the techniques of domination and subjectification; this is evident in the fact that all the women regretted having grown up in 'unfreedom', but they justified it by saying: 'Our parents did all these out of care and love for us and our wellbeing.' They live in unfreedom, they feel about it, and regret it, but do nothing to change the rules because the conscious and unconscious patriarchal authority is invincible. The subjectification in unfreedom becomes a habit which lingers for the rest of the life of the women, even in their latter stages of life, when they are free of parental control, as the distinction between 'care' and 'control' stands obfuscated.
6. These are only some early indications of a social trend, and generalisation based on a few case studies is always risky.

Conclusion

It is not logical to draw some concrete conclusions about the process of 'subjectivation' or subject formation of the Indian urban educated middle-class women in India with a study of only four women. However, the present study brings to light some meaningful trends: (1) the rising age at marriage and the practice of restricting the number of children to one child, even when the child is a daughter, which comes as a response to a shared 'risk perception' of the middle class, shall have some serious demographic and relational implications at the levels of family and society for the decades to come; (2) the one-daughter families will see the emergence of a new child/daughter-centric families where the gender discriminations will wither and the parents and the daughters will remain tied in a relationship of life-long care, love and emotional interdependence; and (3) the generation of parents are perpetually caught in a duality of surveillance care and control on the one hand and a perpetual quest for autonomous space and agencies. Thus, one can see an endless dialogue and dialectics between the structural forces and the social traditions on the one hand and the ever-growing autonomous agencies of the younger generation of middle-class women.

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