

Self-formation and Life of the Daughters in Marwari Community in Siliguri

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Abstract: *The preference for sons over daughters, which is a part of Pan-Indian culture, is more pronounced in some regions and among some communities; the Marwaris of Siliguri, is one such community. The Marwaris, who have migrated to Siliguri from Rajasthan, over the years, are a burgeoning business community in Siliguri, which is a flourishing business hub. The present paper, which is a part of my research in Siliguri, gives an ethnographic account of the Marwari community's gender perception, especially son preference which they consider "natural" and acceptable because of the various socio-cultural and economic advantages associated with having a son. Such preferential treatment often results into the practice of daughter aversion and discrimination. The paper further demonstrates how the practice of son preference affects the self-formation of Marwari daughters who are made to grow up in an overpowering patriarchal culture and inculcate the values that help perpetuate gender discrimination.*

Keywords: Son preference, agency, self-formation, sexism, business community.

Introduction

Siliguri city is one of the fastest growing cities of West Bengal and, in recent decades, it has attracted migrants from different parts of India as well as adjacent countries owing to the economic potentialities that the city offers. Its proximity to Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan and the city being the gateway to the entire North-East India has made it a fast-growing class 1 city in terms of trade and commerce. Besides having a proportion of migrants from neighbouring states like Sikkim and Bihar, there has been a

significant influx of population from Rajasthan and Punjab as well. The Marwaris who are well known for their business acumen have migrated to Siliguri to expand their business from Rajasthan, especially in decades following Independence. Demographically, they are the second largest ethnic community, after Bengalis, in the city. The community is known for its strong son preference and neglect of daughters. Being a business community, the Marwaris require male heir for the continuation of family business. The Marwaris of Siliguri strongly believe in investing labour in their own business rather than working as salaried employees. The continuation of family business requires a male heir which makes the practice of son preference perpetual in this community. This materialist orientation which is so strongly ingrained in this culture constrains them from changing their approach toward life and approach towards daughters and women. This business aspiration often renders daughters as unwanted as they are unable to contribute anything of substance to business and their marriage prompts drainage of a substantial part of family saving. The daughters in general are oriented to be good wives and mothers and they have a fulfilling life when they are mothers of sons and manage their domestic roles well thus making their contribution to perpetuation of family business.

The Marwari trajectory

The Marwaris are well-known in India as a prominent business community that has mastered the art of doing business and evolved a culture that is rooted in business interests. They are termed as *Marwari* as they are from the Marwar region, an erstwhile princely state in colonial period, presently in Jodhpur district of Rajasthan. Over the years, the Marwaris have migrated to distant parts of India in order to establish their business. The Marwaris are referred to as Baniya (Vaishya or trader caste in Hindu caste order). They are the pioneers in textile business and have been contributing significantly to progress of the textile business across different states of India. The Marwaris are too deterministic when it comes to matters of money. The economic orientation of this community largely encapsulates and shapes its socio-cultural contour. Since Marwaris are the migrants from the desert region of Rajasthan they have mastered the ethics of hard work and ability to endure

pain which help strengthening their vigour and shape their lifestyle. The Marwaris are acclaimed to have an almost genetic destiny to make money out of nothing, even in the arid desert region (Suriya 1996). Marwaris have sharp business acumen and show much aggression when it comes to business and do not let go of any prospective business opportunity. They uphold traditional entrepreneurial values along with the philosophy of peaceful co-existence with the locals. Their ability to read business opportunities has taken the Marwaris even to the remotest corners of the country and, may be outside the country as well. They are regarded as very calculative and meticulous in making entrepreneurial decisions. They are frugal in their spending for consumption and thus accumulate capital to make sure their businesses run and flourish over generations; they prepare their younger generation while injecting all business arts and ethics.

The strong practice of son preference among Marwari community is strongly ingrained in their business interests and business culture. It is the sons, who are taken as the ones who would carry both the lineage and business forward; the daughters do not have a place in this scheme. Rather, the daughters, and the women in the family, are the ones who are supposed to facilitate this front-line with their serves and “reproductive” activities, remaining within the confines of home, primarily playing their roles as wives and mothers.

Business is not a tenured activity like jobs in the service sector. It demands the involvement of more than two generations of male members to have an established family business. Moreover, family business serves as an identity to the family. Hence, the need to continue family business is directly related to the maintenance of family identity in society. This results in strong preference for a son in the family who would continue the family business while upholding the identity of the family. Business is the means of accumulating social, cultural and symbolic capital, besides economic capital. For the Marwaris, business is a way of living. The desire to maintain legacy within business is important for the Marwaris. Most of the businesses among the community are family owned and have an element of continuity embedded within them. For continuation of family legacy reproduction of male children is a must. The tradition of transferring family firms from one generation another through male members makes son preference

more pronounced among Marwaris. Daughters have a negligible role to play in the continuation of family business as they need to get married and go to their husbands' house. Daughters in many Marwari families are treated as *Paraya Dhan* (someone else's property). Since childhood they are mentally prepared to accept their husband's house as their own and not their father's house. They are also oriented to do household chores from a very young age so that they can play the role of a dutiful wife and daughter-in-law diligently.

Socio-economic background of the informants

The Marwaris have migrated from a region prone to the practice of son preference and manifest apathy towards the daughters. Marwaris being traders and businessmen have migrated to several parts of India to pursue their business interests and they use their community and kinship networks in deciding about migration, choosing their destination and the field of business. Their migration to Siliguri is also due to the business opportunities that the city offers. A total of 100 respondents were selected for the present study, of whom 80 were female and 20 males. They were among the second and third generation migrants. A large majority of the respondents have their family business which are run jointly by the adult male member/members, who also control authority in the family. In some cases, the new generation respondents who are better educated in comparison to their previous generation members have initiated start-ups and manage them independently. The Marwari families of Siliguri mostly reside in Khalpara, Church Road, Punjabi Para and Sevoke Road, which fall within the central business district and the prime areas of the city. These areas are predominantly commercial centres. Residences and housing complexes have sprung up in these areas in order to accommodate the increasing population of the city. Some of the respondents have their shops and offices on the ground floor of their residences. This facilitates them to keep their shops open for a longer duration at night without being under pressure to return home early; this also gives them a sense of added security. This locational arrangement also allows the female members of the house to occasionally sit in their shops after they are over with their domestic responsibilities. However, some of the respondents

have expressed their desire to move to the new township areas that are burgeoning on the outskirts of the city especially in *Uttorayon*, as they find that their existing residential area is becoming overcrowded and polluted. Some families also claimed that owing a house in these new townships is a status symbol. On the outskirts they can build duplex houses for them which is not possible within the limited space in the central part of the city. Also, the townships located in the outskirts are less polluted and offer suitable parking space for family cars. The informants owning houses in these townships have well-established family business which are running for two-three generations. Some of them have sold their previous houses and bought a new house in these townships whereas others continue to live in their old houses.

So far as the socio-economic background is concerned one can notice a departure in terms of educational attainment of the present generation of informants. The present generation wish to complete their college before settling down in business and life. This is applicable to both boys and girls. Higher education of girls is not much encouraged as parents prefer to save money for their marriage rather than spending it on their education. Though some of the informants wish to break this stereotype, they are aware that it is a very challenging task. The boys too do not pursue higher education with determination as graduation is the average standard. They prefer practical education over bookish formal knowledge in line with the demands of their business culture. Higher education degree is not considered essential for earning money by the Marwaris as there is no direct relationship between income and educational attainment; yet the boys pursue some level of education which helps maintain their social status.

Urban Marwaris are also witnessing some signs of structural changes in their families. Traditionally, there has been a tendency among the Marwaris to live in intergenerational large joint families since they always wanted avoid split in their business. This also helped maintain community solidarity since they have been a migratory community. They were also guided by the thought that joint families would help preserve the spirit of collective living and would be beneficial for expansion of family business. The present generation members, however, wish to stay in nuclear families so that they can independently exercise their agency and run their business. The younger members of the community are

also making some efforts to come to terms with the changing society. Their unwelcoming approach to their daughters is also changing slowly. However, the community at large still strongly adhere to their traditional way of life where business interests constitutes the core. Community identity and solidarity continue to be the essence of Marwari culture in Siliguri as they strongly uphold their cultural traditions which gives them distinctiveness in society. Studying the Marwaris in Siliguri I have observed that the community combines business interests (or business rationality) and traditional values perfectly in their shared way of life and the place of the daughters in the community has to be located in this context.

Upbringing of daughters in Marwari families

The desire for a male child is found to be very strong among the Marwaris in Siliguri but the daughters are not totally unacceptable in family. Marwaris are highly adaptive and accommodative in nature which perhaps stands as a strong reason for their flourishing business. The Marwaris who have migrated to urban areas have, to a great extent, rationalised their family size and aim for a hedonistic life. There is certainly a strong preference for son even among the couples. In families with two daughters, there is always desire for the third child, with the hope of having a son. The Marwaris of the present generation, however, do not overshoot the standard of three children in order to keep up to the norm of small size family in urban areas. Two-child family is idealised like that of other communities residing in urban areas. The Marwaris, having been rooted in northern India, nurse a materialistic outlook. For them success in family business is the most important thing in life and for this they require a son who not only would carry forward the family business but also the lineage. Both are essential for the Marwaris since the family draws its name and reputation from the family business. All the male members, especially the adult ones, are engaged in family business. The girls (daughters) are not expected to provide labour of substance in business or trade and this explains why son-preference in an integral part of Marwari culture. Here are a few case studies to illustrate this point.

Mr. Jayprakash Bansal (53 years), owner of a hardware shop, has two daughters and a son. The family had a period of anxiety when the first two children were born daughters. Mr. Bansal, along with other family members, was desperately praying to be blessed with a son. Two years after his younger daughter was born, he was finally blessed with a boy. He mentions "Ladka hoga to khandan ka naam roshan karega. Ghar ka business sambhale ga. Ghar ka paisa ghar mein hi rahega. Ladki to paraya dhan hoti hai." (A boy will carry forward family's name. He will also take care of family business while remaining in the family. A girl will get married and go to some other family).

Mrs Sabita Jain (42 years) is a mother of one daughter and one son. Her daughter is studying in Class XII in Commerce stream and her son is in Class X. She told me that her husband strongly desired for a son as they required a male heir for the continuation of their family business that had been running for the past three generations. They both were disappointed on the birth of their daughter. With a gap of one and half year, she conceived for the second time hoping to have a son. Both she and her husband were elated on the arrival of their son. She told me that both children are sent to reputed English medium schools. They believe education in English medium school will help them to find a suitable groom for their daughter as modern boys desire for English-speaking girls. She adds that a girl will have to leave her house one day and settle in her in-law's house. She will get busy with her family life and will be unable to take care of her parents in their old age. They also do not expect such things from their daughter as their community do not support the practice of daughters taking care of aged parents. Daughters are supposed to be suitable daughters-in-law who will manage her own household which comprises of her husband and in-laws. She should be more dutiful and responsible towards her in-laws rather than parents. If daughters are seen to be more concerned about their parents, it might disturb her marital life. A son is therefore required who will not only take care of the family business but also be a support in old-age. Mrs Jain mentions when her son will get married and her daughter-

in-law will come to her house, she too will expect her to be more dutiful towards them and not her natal family. She adds that this practice has been continued for generations. The family roles are assigned to the members in such a manner that it maintains the balance and integrity of the household which eventually will contribute to proliferation of family business.

In a community which is obsessed with male heir, the position of daughter is stereotyped and subjected to cultural conservatism. Though the native Marwaris continue stereotyping and practicing unwantedness towards daughters in their native villages, the urban counterparts are gradually accepting daughters in the family. Daughters are welcomed in the family as Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. Naming daughters *lakshmi* sounds enigmatic as it serves as means of consoling parents for having daughters who otherwise regard them as financial burden and liability. The urban middle class Marwari families are gradually changing their attitude towards daughters by making them a part of their family and have started seeing some value in them. However, they consider it imperative to have a son in the family due to the materialistic aspirations and the need for running the family business. This has reference to cultural practices among their ancestors in Rajasthan. The changing attitude towards daughters among the Marwaris is due to the cohabitation with increasing number of educated people of different communities in the urban neighbourhoods. The adaptive nature of the Marwaris has helped them to adjust with the changing dynamisms of society.

Self-formation of daughters in Marwari family

Girl child in India has time and again been socialised to live a life in accordance to the expectations of the patriarchal social order. Patriarchal society has always shown a strong preferential treatment towards boys and has assigned a secondary and inferior position to girls. The upbringing of daughters continues to centre on the notion of raising a docile, well-mannered and well-behaved individual. Elaborate principles of socialisation are formulated for the girl child in order to make her fit into the constructed gender ideals of patriarchal social structure. Family acts as one of the key institutions of socialisation and disseminating the expected

normative behaviour patterns and gender roles into their daughters. The self-formation of daughters is deeply influenced by the different social institutions which reinforce patriarchy in all possible ways. Strong son preference persists among the Marwari couples as they are highly materialistic in their approach to life. This is rooted in their economic preferences as son is required for the continuation of family business and lineage. Family business is a source of identity for the Marwaris and therefore it becomes imperative on every couple to bear a son. The strong desire of a son often leads to increase in the size of family as the couples with only daughters keep trying for a son. Their apathetic attitude towards daughters is due to the practice of giving huge dowry at the time of marriage along with arranging for an extravagant wedding of them. This practice has reduced daughters to a subservient position where they are looked into as liability when the sons are considered as asset. Such kind of labelling and gender bias do affect Marwari daughters psychologically and impact their self-formation. Although in recent times, the educated urban Marwari couples are trying to overcome such attitudes towards their daughters by adopting single child or two-child norm, the community is yet to completely shrug of such practices. Simone de Beauvoir, in her phenomenal *Second Sex* (1953), had adequately explained how both masculinity and femininity are essentially social constructs. She argued that although biological differences might have some impact on the psychological and social orientation of the human beings, the factors like language, the existing body of signs and symbols and social institutions are more vital in shaping the individual psyche and selves, hence, femininity. The masculine and feminine selves are thus social constructs, which are reproduced in discourses, social relationships and the patterns of social action. The human behaviour is deeply ingrained in the psychological makeup of the individuals that leads to self-formation. As the girls constitute the 'second sex' they do not enjoy the social space and cannot exercise their freedom to tear apart the stranglehold of the social forms and create a free space to express themselves. In any social condition, the girls and women face greater and harsher adversaries compared to their counterparts of the of the privileged 'first sex'. In the following section we will examine how the patriarchal orientation of the Marwari community works in different social fields and how, as a result, the life of the daughters is impacted in the process.

1. Education

The urban middle class Marwaris are aware of the benefits of education and arrange proper education for both boys and girls. They prefer sending their children to reputed English medium schools of the city and avoid the vernacular schools considering the language and cultural factors. There are two more reasons behind selection of English medium schools. Firstly, the Marwaris being migrants have a tendency to move to any part of the country or world, which offers business opportunities. For this, it becomes mandatory to be acquainted with a global language which can facilitate in adapting to different cultures and situations. Secondly, the Marwaris, in general, consider that education in reputed English medium schools is a matter of pride and status for the family and the community. There has been a growing emphasis on the attainment of cultural capital besides their already existing economic capital. Though the Marwaris show a propensity of educating their children in reputed English medium schools, the continuation in higher education becomes a tricky issue for Marwari boys and girls. The present generation insists on completing their college education before settling down in their lives. The urge to continue further is not strong among them, since the girls are married out and the boys settle down in the family business. Since they pursue business and trade they do not require high educational degrees. The Marwaris think and talk about business all day. The family enterprise is a result of 'family culture' and their approach to life is set accordingly. The father and other elderly male members of the house believe in imparting practical lessons regarding business to the succeeding male/s members in the family. They do not rely much on bookish knowledge but prefer learning through hand-on experiences. The son/s therefore get less time to devote to higher studies and gradually lose interest in it. They also come to a realisation that higher educational degree is not essential to become rich. It is the family and community, and not formal education, that shape the entrepreneurial ambience.

The parents also do not show any enthusiasm about higher education of their daughter. They believe that highly educated daughters will not get suitable grooms as there is dearth of highly educated boys in their community. Moreover, the parents prefer saving money for their daughter's marriage rather than spending

on her higher education. In addition, the prevalence of customary belief that highly educated girls do not make a good house wife makes it all the more problematic for the girls to pursue higher educational degrees. Both the girls and boys of the younger generation are, however, encouraged to complete their graduation. This is necessary for the girls to have the right kind of marriage profile. A few Marwari boys and girls, however, are currently striving for higher education, which is a clear departure from the established tradition. The boys do it with an expectation of getting more dowry at the time of marriage, the girls are taking up to higher education to uplift their status in the society, trying to be at par with their male counterparts and with the hope of easing out their parents' dowry burden by being financially independent.

Disha (21 years) is a final year college student and the eldest of two siblings. She told me that her parents had already started discussing about her marriage when she was in her second year in college. They have been having discussions with their relatives to find a suitable groom. Disha mentions that although she is interested to pursue her Masters she is quite sure that her parents won't allow her to do that; she would be married out before that. Her mother has been involving her in household activities ever since she completed her schooling. Despite being sent to reputed English medium schools she and her sister were never encouraged to shine in their academics and were just asked to pass with good reasonable score. They have never encouraged her to pursue higher studies and be financially independent.

Ishita (21 years) is in the final year of college. She is the youngest of two siblings. Her elder brother completed graduation three years ago and is presently taking care of their family business along with his father. Ishita has been consistently good with her academics and she wish to pursue MBA. But her parents do not want to spend a huge amount on her further education. They want to keep a part of the money for her marriage and the remaining amount they want to invest in their business. Ishita mentions that she has made up her mind that if her parents do not allow her to pursue higher studies she will open a garments boutique. She is not willing to get married until

becoming financially independent. She has given this proposal to her father and he accepted it. She adds that Marwaris think of business all the time. They are willing to invest in new ventures rather than spending on education as they believe that higher educational degrees do not yield much profit. They would rather invest money in new business rather than on education.

However, Sonia and Riya expressed a different opinion in relation to higher education:

Sonia (24 years) is presently pursuing MBA. She completed her college from a Kolkata based college and is presently doing MBA from Pune. She is elder of the two siblings. Her younger brother is in first year of college. Sonia always wanted to have a career and be financially independent. She does not want to work in any company but want to have her own business. Sonia mentions that she convinced her father by saying that her MBA experience will help in understanding the contemporary dimensions of business not only nationally but globally. Her father, who is a hardware merchant, allowed her daughter her wish before getting her married. Her mother resented initially but since she had already taken the approval of her father, her mother couldn't oppose much. Sonia mentions that her brother is not interested in pursuing higher studies though her father wants him to pursue MBA like his sister. Her brother wants to get into business as early as possible and start learning the nitty gritty of business from his father. Sonia mentions that she is glad that her father supported her decision of pursuing higher studies, a practice that is very rare in her culture.

Riya (22 years) wishes to become a Chartered Accountant by profession. She is in the final year of her graduation and has been doing well academically. She is the younger of two sisters. Her elder sister got married after completing her college. She was not interested in having career and preferred to be a housewife. Riya was very keen in becoming a Chartered Accountant since her school days. She is very good in keeping accounts and has often helped her father in maintaining the accounts in his shop. Her

father supports her decision and is willing to send her to coaching centre in Kolkata to help her prepare for the examination. He also feels that if his daughter becomes a Chartered Accountant, she would be able to help him with his accounts. Riya agrees that higher education of girls is not a very common practice among the Marwaris. She feels lucky to be able to fulfil her dreams with the support of her parents.

In case of both Sonia and Riya, higher educational is a medium of being self-employed which have helped them to become confident and financially independent lady. They also accept that it has helped them articulating their views and interests and exercise their agency. The Marwaris, in general, do not prefer working for someone else as they regard it to be a disgrace. Moreover, their parents have supported them in their pursuance of higher studies as it would help them in their business in some way or the other. They also feel that their earning daughters would partially lighten the burden of dowry. The urban middle-class daughters, in general, nowadays are well-educated and earning to be self-reliant. They are no longer economic burden and are able to contribute financially to their families (Belliappa 2013; Kohli 2017; Radhakrishnan 2009). This is a modernist trend that is recently being witnessed among the Marwaris as well. This goes against the spirit of their culture which has always stereotyped daughters as trouble, or the “dependent other”. Daughters of such supportive parents grow up to be confident young ladies who are enabled to negotiate between community traditions and the will to change.

2. Marriage

The Marwaris show a propensity for early marriage for both boys and girls. Since business is the identifying marker of the community culture, the children are brought up to inherit their parents’ / family business. The Marwari children grow up in business environment and get acquainted with the family business at an early age. By the time they are in their early 20s, the boys become qualified to manage their business independently. Once they get acquainted with the business, they are regarded as eligible to start their family life. On the other hand, the girls are groomed by the elderly women of the house to manage or supervise household activities and are

prepared for conjugal life. The Marwari parents are not very enthusiastic about their children's higher education since they consider graduation as the sufficient qualification for settling down in life and business. When a girl or a boy achieves this, she/he is regarded as eligible for settling down in life. The parents start looking for grooms once the daughter is in the final year of graduation. The parents take a year or two to find a suitable match. Arranged marriages are encouraged for girls where parents and close kin select the groom; they prefer marriages within their own community. This is clearly in line with the classical patriarchal structure, which demands the practice of arranged marriages (Caldwell, Reddy & Caldwell 1982; Ghimire, Axinn, Yabiku & Thornton 2006). However, in contemporary times, both the boys and girls are allowed to meet.

Niharika (28 years) is a housewife and a mother of a two-year-old son. Her husband owns a hardware shop in Siliguri and Kishanganj. Niharika is the youngest of two sisters. Her elder sister got married before completion of her college. However, Niharika convinced her mother to allow her to complete her Bachelor's degree before getting married. She got married a year after completion of graduation to the boy of her choice. She mentions that the practice of early marriages of children is prevalent among the Marwaris since the parents want to see their children well-settled in life and want to see their grand-children. That is the idea of happy family. Parents who are blessed with grandchildren consider themselves lucky to have fulfilled their family responsibilities.

The Marwaris strongly advocate community identity and solidarity and therefore the practice of inter-caste and inter-community marriages are seldom encouraged. They maintain a strong solidarity and community-bonding among them and therefore prefer community endogamy. There is preference for community endogamy since it not only strengthens family ties but also contributes to sustaining and expanding business opportunities. It also helps maintain cordial relations among the kinsmen as they are very conscious of their status and money. The family performs a very important part in business interests and through marriages new business linkages are established and strengthened. The Marwaris do not encourage inter-community marriages which

could be detrimental to their business interests. A person who marries outside his *jati* (caste) not only alienates his or her natal family and extended kin but also makes it difficult for his or her parents to arrange a licit marriage for their other offspring within the group (Kolenda 1978: 92; Gupta 1974: 42). In addition to this, their migratory character makes them hold on to their roots and culture strongly. Their strong community solidarity does not give the Marwari daughters much scope to depart from their shared perceptions about marriage. Here is an illustration.

Jahnvi (27 years) is married for one year. Her husband owns two garment shops in Siliguri. Jahnvi wanted to marry a guy of her choice whom she met in her college life. But her parents were not at all in support of her choice as the guy was Bihari and not from their community. Jahnvi's father was very disappointed with her decision. She told me that her father once remarked: "Ladka apne biradri ka hona chahiye. Dono paribaar mein barabari hona chahiye nahi to aage jake bohot mushkil ho sakta hain. Barabari nahi hone se parivar sukhi nahi hota" (The boy should be from our community. There should be some balance in the social status and values between two families, else, there could be problems in future). After much resentment, Jahnvi finally married the boy of her father's choice. She now feels that her father had taken the right decision for her as she now believes the importance of balance between the families. Jahnvi now takes care of the shop along with her husband in her leisure time. This is helping them to spend more time with each other and strengthen the conjugal bond and understanding.

Another significant factor that contributes to caste endogamy among the Marwaris is that the social capital stands as a substitute to financial capital and this perhaps is the key to business expansion even in recent times. Social alliance in the form of marriage also takes place among two business families. In this case marriage helps in strengthening both business relations and kinship relation. Another significant reason is that since Marwari marriages calls for lavish spending, the parents of bride and the groom do not hesitate to spend as they regard it as an investment and not a waste. They believe that whatever is spent in marriage

will eventually come back as profit from the alliances that are established through marriage.

Nikita (26 years) recently got engaged to her childhood friend and will get married next year. Although she was not willing to get married to her fiancé, she was convinced by her parents as the alliance is regarded to be beneficial in matters of business for both the families. Further, since the marriage is presumed to be beneficial financially to both the families, she did not have much scope to ramble. Her father and father-in-law are planning to start a new company in the near future, which will be supervised by her brother and husband. This would require a lot of investment. The marriage alliance is a platform which will not only help strengthening family bond but will also contribute to business expansion. She told me that when her marriage was finalised, her father-in-law remarked: “shadi mein jitna bhi kharcha kar le, ghar ka paisa wapas ghar ajayega” (no matter how much money we spend in the wedding, the money spent will eventually come back home). Nikita accepts that the Marwari women do not have much scope to be opinionated and are oriented to think on similar terms with their husband. Further, she also talked about the modern girls who despite being well educated have to finally succumb to the authority of the male members of the family - a perpetual patriarchal practice.

A significant characteristic of Marwari marriages is that they practice *jati* (caste) endogamy and clan exogamy. Marwaris are divided into patrilineal gotras (clans) and observe strict clan exogamy in marriage alliances. Clan is used as a basis of ranking groups within a caste, giving rise to the practice of clan-hypergamy (Chauhan 1967: 35). Hypergamy is religiously observed among the Marwaris. The parents start saving money for their daughter's marriage ever since her birth so that she can get married in a family of greater wealth and reputation than that of their own. Hypergamy is directly related to the amount of dowry that can be paid by the bride's family to the groom's family. The amount of dowry increases with the rise of status of the groom. Thus, status becomes a commodity which is bought by the girl's parents. The parents are unwilling to marry their daughter into a family of

lower status within their *jati* as it consigns their daughter to an inferior position and lowers their family reputation and prestige before the fellow members of their *jati* (Mandelbaum 1970: 236). In recent times, however, dowry is not overtly practised. It is normative for the bride's family to shower the groom and his family with expensive gifts. The qualitative and quantitative standard of the gifts increases with the increase in status of the groom. For example, if the groom is a MBA or a CA the expectation of gifts is higher. Educated grooms are highly valued and regarded as good catch which leads to increase in demand of dowry (Dalmia et. al., 2007; Munshi 2012). The practice of demanding dowry directly, as a part of marriage negotiation, has reduced among the urban Marwari families as dowry is considered punitive and comes with a stigma. The practice is now referred to as 'exchange of gifts', which sounds more civil. Extravagant wedding is the standard in among the Marwaris in Siliguri. Along with it, institutionalisation of exchange of expensive gifts makes marriage an expensive affair. The Marwaris have always regarded lavish wedding a part of their culture as it enhances family pride and status. Some of the urban Marwari families are happy to have single daughter in the family and in such a case the daughter is treated well and is not considered a liability. However, when the number increases to more than one, the parents start treating their daughters as liability. The parents come under insurmountable pressure to bear the cost of marriage of daughters as the practice of dowry is still present among the Marwaris in Siliguri.

Ghar-grihasti (home-making) is regarded as the most important task for the girls in Marwari families. The prime duty of Marwari a woman is to maintain stability and peace in the household by serving her husband, children and in-laws. The idea of *grihasti* is diffused in the minds of young girls in their natal family by their mothers and elderly women of the house. Since most Marwari families are either joint or extended the young girls grow up seeing their mothers and aunts spending most of their times in kitchen and household chores. Once the daughters complete schooling they are gradually engaged in the household activities along with their mothers and other women of the family. For the young girls the focus is on being dutiful daughter-in-law who would take care of the household duties with utmost sincerity. The community is deeply rooted in the ideals of patriarchy which demands

subordination and suppression of women and denies them agency. The women of the house do not have much liberty to exercise their will. The concept of *ghoonghat* persists where the newly-wed women have to cover their heads with saree while appearing before the male members of the family. The modern educated women, despite their efforts to resist such orthodox and stereotypical practices, fall in line because of community expectations and demands and cultural pressure.

Nisha (27 years), told me that the Marwari daughters face more restrictions than the sons. You will not come across too many Marwari families asking their daughters to pursue higher studies or get jobs to build their career. On completion of class 12, Nisha's mother started engaging her in kitchen and other household activities. Not that she did not have a maid but her mother felt it necessary for her to have knowledge about household activities. When Nisha started going to college, the elders in the family had already started talking about her marriage. They insisted her father to start looking for groom. Nisha's relatively progressive father assured the relatives that he would look for a groom once Nisha completes her graduation. Nisha added saying: "it seems Marwari and marriage are synonymous. Looking after family and in-laws are primary for us, no matter how much educated we are."

Sita (52 years), the mother of two daughters and a son, told me that she had started training her two daughters in household chores right after completion of their school education. She strongly believes that there is a need to learn household chores for daughters as after marriage their in-laws will judge them on the basis of their etiquettes and their efficiency in managing household activities. Education is important but for girls maintaining household and taking care of in-laws is fundamental. She added that she too expects the same from her future daughter-in-law as this is how their culture has been functioning since time immemorial. Sita and her husband wish to get their daughters married right after completion of college education. They would not mind arranging marriage for their daughters even before completion of college education if they get suitable grooms.

3. Career choice

The scope of pursuing a professional career is very limited for the Marwari girls. Since the girls are married out early the Marwari girls do not get much scope to try out their luck in job market and have a professional career. After marriage they are not encouraged to take up any jobs since that is considered demeaning for the husband's family. The emphasis for the women has always been on living as home-makers. This is how the Marwari women tell their life stories.

Neha (28 years), a mother of a six-month-old daughter, wished to pursue MBA but her parents wanted her to get married. She was aware that MBA course fee would be very high and her parents preferred to save money for her wedding. She got married to her father's friend's son. After her marriage she expressed her desire to pursue a career. She wanted to teach accountancy in school but her in-laws were completely against it. Her father-in-law said: "we have our own family business. If you are interested to work, work in our firm". Neha adds that her mother-in-law also remarked that had she taken any salaried job she would not be able to take care of the family and would fail to fulfil the role of a wife, daughter-in-law and mother. She also said that her mother-in-law often mentioned to her that 'pati hain na business dekhne ke liye, tum ghar sambhalo' (your husband is there to look after business, you look after your household). Neha accepts that her in-laws continue to nurse patriarchal attitude of restricting woman to household chores. Her mother-in-law and other elderly female members of the family too were restricted to household domain and did not have much liberty in life. The vicious cycle continues as the present generation of daughters-in-law are made to live a similar life. Any deviance is regarded as offensive, and therefore unacceptable, to the family and the community at large.

Aarushi (34 years) is the mother of a one son and one daughter. She had completed her graduation and did computer courses on accounting. Prior to her marriage she used to help her father and brother in managing accounts of their shops. Though she wanted to pursue MBA and

have a career, she never expressed it to her parents. She was aware that pursuing an MBA degree would be expensive and her parents would rather prefer to save money for her marriage as higher education is not much encouraged among the Marwaris. She was also aware that her parents were looking for a suitable groom to get her married as early as possible. Aarushi got married at the age of 25 and had her first child three years later. Everyone was delighted to have a boy in the family. After three years of the birth of the son she was blessed with a daughter. She told me that her husband and in-laws were happy even on the arrival of their daughter. Both her children are now studying in an English medium school. Aarushi said that after completing all the household chores, she looks after her husband's shop. Her husband has one garment shop and one textile shop. Aarushi keeps accounts of all transactions in the shops. She managed to convince her husband to allow her to sit in the shop as staying at home and managing household activities all day long would make her depressed. Further, since she always wanted to have a career, managing her husband's shop gives her a bit of scope to fulfil her desire at least partially. However, she follows whatever his husband asks him to do. She does not give much suggestions about management of the shop as she is apprehensive that her husband might not take her suggestions in right spirit. She adds that since the society is male dominated, opinion of a woman regarding business matters is not welcome.

Puja expressed her views slightly differently.

Puja (28 years) is married for three years. Her husband has an import-export business. Puja mentions that she had a strong inclination towards interior designing and wanted to open her own office of interior designing. She completed her graduation and pursued a diploma course in interior designing. Her father had helped her to open a small office. She told me that she had very clearly mentioned at the time of her marriage that she would like to continue working in her office, which she did. Although her husband supports her, she can sense discontentment in her in-laws, especially her mother-in-law, as she is more

focused with her office rather than household activities. Her mother-in-law often remarks “jitni bhi padhai karlo, naukri karlo, ladki ko ghar mein aakar roti hi banani hain.” (No matter how much you study or do a job, a girl has to come home and cook for everyone). Puja admits that it is challenging for women of her community to pursue a career after marriage as their husbands and in-laws do not like working women. She adds that this stereotypical attitude of her culture has made her more determined and rebellious in having a career of her own and be financially independent.

For both Aarushi and Puja business is a means to freedom from the stereotypical roles of women in their culture. Women are subjected to the discretion of either their husbands or the eldest male members of the family to do anything new. Since the patriarch or the head of the family is always the eldest male member who takes all the major decisions of the household as well as business, the women of the house have no decision-making power on any matters. They are groomed to play the roles of wife and mother, the undying care-givers. The daughters are still made to marry and settle down in life in their early adulthood. The idea is that once the daughters get married, they will take charge of the reproductive activities allowing the male members to run their business. In Marwari culture, both the male and female members of the family are assigned specific roles. The idea is that a well-balanced household will cater to business prosperity. Marwari daughters continue to face cultural constraints, which deeply impair their self-formation and agency. Although they are not encouraged to take up jobs or pursue career after marriage, they are allowed to join their husbands’ business and serve according to their skill. Career options is very limited for Marwari girls. Although very few of them are showing signs of departure from their cultural standard a majority of the women are made to give up their dreams of having a career for the sake of maintaining their family and community norms and standards.

Conclusion

Bourdieu (1989) outlined the importance of *habitus* (or the perceived traditions) in shaping the personality and self of

individuals. According to him habitus are the mental or cognitive structures which help people to deal with the social world. Individuals perceive, understand and evaluate social world through a series of internalised schemes and produce their practices. Thus, habitus are “the product of the internalization of the structures” of the social world (Bourdieu 1989: 18) or as “internalised embodied social structures” (Bourdieu 1984: 468). The Marwari community being the beholder of patriarchal traditions nurse discriminatory attitudes towards their daughters, treat them as the second-grade citizens and make them work for a business project that is decided by the male members. The preferential treatment towards boys, treating them as assets, is rooted in business interests, i.e., continuation and proliferation of the family business. The daughters, on the other hand, are kept out of the family business, and are made to do “reproductive activities. They are also treated as a liability since the parents have to arrange their marriage and give huge amount of ‘gifts’ (read dowry) at the time of their marriage. This deeply impacts the self-formation of daughters as they too develop a sense of subservience towards the elderly members of the family due to their inability to contribute anything of substance to family economy. There is a clear-cut division of labour in the family where the men are oriented to take up the production functions (business or entrepreneurial activities) whereas the women are oriented to do the reproduction function (all kinds of services and domestic work while remaining within the confines of home). This gives Marwari men complete control over the family economy and, therefore, family authority. The women, on the other hand, are relegated to a subordinate position. Family, among the Marwaris, is thus a typical site of reproduction of patriarchy; the girls and boys are made to grow up with the patriarchal values. Femininity and masculinity are, thus, constructed at the levels of family and community. Made to live a life defined by patriarchy, the daughters and women, by and large, lack expressed agency. The position of daughters among the Marwaris in Siliguri completely endorses Simone de Beauvoir’s views on gender relations articulated in the two volumes of her masterpiece *Second Sex* (1953). The lack of a manifest agency among the Marwari daughters and women explains why there is strong son preference in the community and why the daughters continue to be treated as the ‘other’. I use

the term “manifest agency” since it is quite possible that some of the Marwari girls and women might be feeling bad about their subordinate place and some of them might be nursing a “will to change”, but often they make compromises while surrendering to the pressure of the shared culture. Only in a few cases the daughters show some signs of an expressed agency when they are determined to pursue higher education and be economically self-reliant or set up their own enterprises. I have also noticed that a few of the younger generation Marwaris in Siliguri are gradually becoming sensitive towards their daughters and are trying to give up daughter aversion (and not son preference) - a practice that has been so intrinsic in their culture and tradition so far. However, such attitudinal change is not yet strong enough to overpower the conventionally held patriarchal attitude towards the daughters.

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