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Ankalu's Errant Wife: Sex, Marriage and Industry in Contemporary Chhattisgarh

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The Man with the Brief-case

I once met a man with a brief case on a train . . . I forget between where and where. If you have travelled by train in India you may have met him too. He is conscious of cultural difference and wishes you to understand that Indians have family values—on account of which they don't go in for divorce or extra-marital sex. It was possibly he who first told me (though I have read it somewhere since) that actuarial calculations reveal that one in three marriages in Britain, and one in two in the United States, is destined to end in divorce. I find his contrast confirmed in a scholarly study of the subject. By comparison with its 'alarming rate' in the West, 'divorce was unknown to the Hindu institution of marriage. Husband and wife were bound to each other not only in this life, but even in the lives to follow' (Pothen 1986: ix).

But though contemporary Englishmen may well seem faithless by Smartha Brahman standards, it was not ever thus. Except by act of Parliament, legal divorce with the right to remarry was not an option before 1857; and up to that date the largest number of Parliament-

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ary petitions in any one year was twelve (Stone 1990: 325). Admittedly, this very low figure may have owed as much to cost as to widespread marital contentment. And admittedly, the less affluent took recourse to various forms of separation and customary procedures of divorce, while an incalculably larger number deserted their spouse (Thompson 1991; Gillis 1985). But even so, there is fairly wide consensus that England was 'basically a non-divorcing and non-separating society', prompting Stone to suggest that the ever-spiralling divorce rate since has been 'perhaps the most profound and far-reaching social change to have occurred in the last five hundred years' (Stone 1990: 28; 422).

The man with the brief case was, I sensed, apprehensive lest India put an unwary foot on the same escalator, and will not have been reassured by the LSE Director's recent assessment of global trends (Giddens 1999). Not just in Islington, but the wide world over, personal life is undergoing a revolutionary transformation in the direction of a new ideological stress on intimacy, on the quality and equality of the relationship between the couple, and hence on the possibility of de-coupling when that relationship is no longer fulfilling (cf. Giddens 1992).¹ Coming to us courtesy of BBC. Dot. Com this goes as 'globalization', though I fancy an ancestry in old-style 'modernization'.²

By comparison my canvas is extremely limited—one small part of India over one small chunk of time, in which context I want to

¹ The title of Giddens' 1992 volume—*The transformation of intimacy*—is (perhaps deliberately?) ambiguous. While it on the one hand evokes his argument that intimacy democratizes interpersonal relations and thereby transforms *society*, it also suggests that it is *itself* transformed. But if this second is intended, it is surprisingly difficult to discover from Giddens what intimacy was before its transformation, or even whether it existed in conjugal life in anything more than a latent form. What is however clear is that in its modern manifestation, intimacy is inseparable from the 'pure relationship', which is one based on 'social and emotional equality' (p. 2), 'entered into for its own sake' (p. 58) and 'terminated, more or less at will, by either partner at any particular point' (p. 137). Intimacy, equality and dissolubility thus seem to be inextricable aspects of the same phenomenon—the 'pure relationship'. In what follows, I use 'intimacy' to convey the idea of familiar and affectionate companionship and the sharing of inner thoughts and feelings; and suggest that a new ideological stress on its salience in conjugal relations is not invariably part of the composite package which Giddens postulates.

² The trajectory Giddens identifies seems, for example, to have been significantly anticipated by Goode (1963) who argued that with industrialization the family forms of non-western societies would tend to converge on the Western conjugal model. This is characterized by—amongst other things—spouses who look to each other for affection and who have a relatively egalitarian relationship; and by the possibility of divorce and remarriage (cf. Goldthorpe 1987: 62–4).

address my travelling companion's concern with the changing stability of marriage. What he may perhaps have overlooked is that it is possible to be legally married to somebody one has not seen for years. We therefore need to distinguish between jural and conjugal stability (Schneider 1953). And if we are interested in the latter, in whether the couple actually remain together, it is obvious that in contemporary India the legal divorce rate is an extremely poor guide. Though in much of the 'traditional' high-caste Hindu world the jural relations of marriage have indeed been very stable, it is unlikely that conjugal relations were ever equally so.

Lower down the social hierarchy, customary forms of divorce and remarriage were widely accepted. For south India in the mid-twentieth century, Gough (1956), Mandelbaum (1970: 1:78) and Dumont (1986 [1957]: 199–200) drew attention to very high rates of marital breakdown; while from the other end of the country, Berreman (1963: 161–2) reported that in the Garhwal hills divorce was 'taken as a matter of course', and that adultery was not a ground for it and was in fact 'expected'. Two surveys in neighbouring Jaunsar-Bawar showed that around one half of all ever-married women had had two or more spouses, and that a large proportion of those who had not were still at an age at which remarriage was likely (Jain 1948; cf. Majumdar 1955: 172). The recent literature has largely lost sight of the issue, though Unnithan-Kumar's study (1997) of the Girasias of Rajasthan is a valuable exception.³ Girasia women have a reputation for sexual freedom and can initiate divorce.⁴ Approximately 50% of current household heads have had at least one previous spouse (*ibid.* p. 139). Another important exception is Simeran Gell's

³ For a different part of Rajasthan, and for western U.P., see also Raheja and Gold (1994: xxviii) who speak of divorce and remarriage as 'not infrequent'. Sharma (1980: 155–66) offers a useful and more extended discussion for Himachal Pradesh; while Good (1991: 85) refers to the 'surprising number' of changes of marital partner in the Tamilnadu district of Tirunelveli. Long-standing pre-marital and extra-marital liaisons were also common.

⁴ Rajasthan is, of course, the land of heroic Rajputs and *sati*—than which surely nothing could be more powerful testimony to the indissolubility of the marriage bond and to a woman's envelopment in the person of her husband. Yet amongst the Girasias, who are sort of 'fringe' Rajputs, women are never incorporated into their husband's lineage and their outsider status is reiterated in the most symbolically powerful terms. A woman brings her own utensils to the marriage and can never use those belonging to her husband's lineage; can never cook for them if she comes from a lineage of slightly lower status; must weep outside her husband's compound for a deceased kinsman, and is said to have no further ties with his lineage once his mortuary rites have been completed and should ideally leave his village at that point (Unnithan-Kumar 1997: 112f).

remarkable re-study of the Murias. Her ethnography—which comes from the same general region—has many resonances with the data I will come to shortly. In the village studied, only 20% had the partners to whom they were originally betrothed, and more than half of all completed first marriages had ended in divorce (1992: 142, 129). Though in terms of India as a whole it is difficult to assess the demographic significance of these high-divorce populations, it is clear that certain pockets of the country sustain divorce rates quite comparable to contemporary California.

This has significant implications for my second theme—the reproduction of caste through endogamous marriage. Endogamy is conventionally seen as the last and most impregnable bastion of caste in contemporary India. True, several observers have reported some expansion of endogamous boundaries to unite formerly separate units of equivalent status (e.g. Kolenda 1978: 151; Mandelbaum 1970: 2:653; Vatuk 1982). But the wider picture is held to be one in which, while the hierarchical ordering and interdependence of castes has been greatly eroded, the stress on their separation remains. The most important manifestation of this, and its ultimate foundation, is the continued vitality of endogamy (e.g. Kolenda 1978: 151; Mayer 1996; Deliège 1997: 102, 167 and 1999: 173).⁵ In fact, Choudhury (1994, 1997) charts a marked *decline* in the toleration of intercaste marriage over the past century. For Patterson (1958) endogamy is ‘the hard core’ of caste and her Maharashtrian informants regarded ‘intercaste *marriage*’ as a contradiction in terms. For the Pallars and Paraiyars in an exclusively Untouchable Tamilnad village it is ‘unthinkable’ (Deliège 1997: 112); while Mayer (1996) reports in his recent re-study of Ramkheri that marriage outside the caste is not even regarded as a theoretical possibility and that caste membership remains as unambiguous as ever. Though Béteille (1996) has questioned the plausibility of this picture for the urban middle classes, he is forced—for want of hard data—to do so on largely *a priori* grounds.

For the working class, I posit a close correlation between the stability of marriage and the grip of endogamy. Though the situation

⁵ See also Holmström (1976: 80–2) who provides one of the earliest, but also one of the most nuanced, statements of this position. Amongst the Bangalore workers he studied, the hierarchical aspects of caste had lost much of their legitimacy. ‘Castes are “separate but equal”, and the only kind of separation that really matters is endogamy’. The actual incidence of ‘love marriages’ and cross-caste unions was nonetheless growing.

is subtly transformed in the modern industrial milieu, the basic logic is already present in Dumont's distinction between primary and secondary marriage. The primary marriage is 'the marriage *par excellence*', more strictly regulated, more expensive and prestigious (1964: 83). Where the conjugal bond is indissoluble, it is a woman's *only* marriage. But even when remarriage is possible, a woman (though not a man) may go through only one *primary* marriage which is a prerequisite for subsequent inferior, less elaborately ritualized, marriages. While the children may sometimes be hierarchized, they are equally legitimate. Legitimacy distinguishes marriage from concubinage, which—though socially condoned—is not a ritualized union. It is a matter of individual choice to which the consent of kin is irrelevant,⁶ and which may therefore involve partners of different caste. Thus Good (1991: 85) reports that though intercaste marriage remains rare in the Tirunelveli villages he studied, 'many men' have concubines of different caste and most important ones have *at least* one such liaison. In other parts of India the lines are differently drawn. Being freer, secondary marriages may also cross caste boundaries (e.g. Berreman 1963: 154).⁷ In general, 'the higher the type, the stricter the regulation'; the lower, the greater the scope for individual choice⁸—and hence for intercaste unions.

I argue that under modern conditions this correlation between marital instability and intercaste marriage is strengthened. Second-

⁶ As was also the case in pre-Revolutionary China. Jankowiak (1993: 195) suggests that this element of choice provided space for notions of romantic love.

⁷ Berreman (1963: 156) also reports the sale of Garhwali hill women to the plains; while the Jefferys record that most Bijnor villages (in western U.P.) have a handful of 'bought brides' from the sub-Himalayan region and from areas far to the east. These women appear to be almost invariably taken as secondary wives, and their unions are widely assumed to breach caste boundaries. Before they are brought back to the village, they are supposedly 'purified' by a bath in the Ganges—enough apparently to ensure that, though certainly looked down upon, they are regarded as 'proper' wives and that the children they bear are legitimate (Jeffery and Jeffery 1996: 76, 179–80, 231–44). In passing, Prem Choudhury (1997) again notes an association between secondary and intercaste marriages.

⁸ In the draft of an unpublished paper (referred to in 1960: 227), Mayer (n.d.) records that in two crucial respects secondary unions in Ramkheri radically depart from the rules which govern primary marriage. The couple are allowed to see each other before they are united, and the woman is always allowed a veto. (I am grateful to Adrian Mayer for making this draft available to me). Prem Choudhury (1994: 87) documents an interesting rearguard action against the relative autonomy of women in secondary marriage for the Jats of Haryana. A widow's in-laws sought to restrict her field of choice to their patrilineage—largely in order to prevent her share of her deceased husband's property from passing outside their control.

ary unions are increasingly likely to breach endogamous boundaries. But I also show that the marital practices of the local working class in what was pre-industrially a high divorce area are progressively polarized. For those with informal sector industrial jobs, divorce remains as frequent as formerly and remarriage more commonly crosses caste boundaries. For those with public sector employment, a new companionate ideology of marriage⁹ and stress on intimacy is accompanied by a *decline* in divorce (hence a lesser likelihood of intercaste marriage), and by a growth in gender inequality. While the first of these trends is in line with Giddens' predictions, the second and third run counter to them. In explaining all three the role of state institutions is crucial.

Ankalu's Errant Wife

On 23 March 1994, the *Hindustan Times* reported a familiarly ghastly story. Two teenage lovers—an Ahir boy and a Saini girl—had been axed to death in a Haryana village. Called into a closed room by her uncles, the girl had been judicially dispatched while the women looked on through the windows. Her corpse was dumped at the entrance gate. Witnessed—according to police sources—by over a hundred people, the boy was cut down in the fields. No isolated case, said the investigating officer; but what really struck the reporter was that the village appeared to be united behind the 'executioners' and conspired to keep the state at arm's length.¹⁰

On the day I read this story I was still near the start of new fieldwork; and that evening Somvaru¹¹ dropped by at my house, full of a scandal closer to hand. As it unfolded, I became aware that the distance that separates his world from this atrocity is more than geographical.

⁹ I use this expression in a sense rather different from Giddens (1992: 155), who sees 'companionate marriage' as a kind of attenuation of the 'pure relationship', and as characterized by a low level of sexual involvement but 'some degree of equality and mutual sympathy'. Following Macfarlane (1986: 154), what I seek to convey is rather the idea that spouses should be intimate and emotionally-bonded companions, who share at least some common activities rather than inhabiting entirely separate gendered spheres, who are 'two halves of one whole', and who can up to a point reveal to the other their 'true self'.

¹⁰ In an important article, Prem Choudhury (1997) discusses the reactions of extreme violence to a number of recent cases of this kind from the same general region—including this instance.

¹¹ I use pseudonyms throughout.

Somvaru is a Satnami, the largest untouchable caste of the area. He lives in the ex-village-cum-labour colony I call Girvi, which is located on the periphery of the modern purpose-built Company Township of Bhilai in the Chhattisgarh region of Madhya Pradesh. The company is the Bhilai Steel Plant (BSP for short), a public sector undertaking which was constructed with Soviet collaboration, began production in 1959, and—with an area of seventeen square kilometres and around 50,000 workers on its direct pay-roll—is now one of the largest steel plants in Asia. A little removed from it is the more recently built industrial estate with some 200 smaller-scale private sector factories. Immediately fringing the plant's perimeter walls is its spacious and orderly township. Elsewhere the perimeter fence abuts onto what still look like rural villages; while at other points the plant and the township are surrounded by a sea of unregulated urban sprawl which envelops old villages like Girvi and Patripar in which much of my fieldwork was done. In the mid-1950s, both were small rural settlements in which a bicycle was still a wonder. Since that time many migrant workers from other corners of the country have moved in, the erstwhile peasants and landless labourers are now better described as proletarians, and the lucky ones have jobs in the steel plant. Lucky because the BSP workforce is the local aristocracy of labour, enjoying pay, perks and benefits that make them the envy of every other working class family in the area (Parry 1999a, 2000).

The principal characters in the drama of which Somvaru told me the start that evening were Ankalu, Ankalu's wife and their neighbour, Kedarnath. Its narrator is really Somvaru, my source of almost daily briefings. Of Somvaru more later; though it helps to know that he is the *bhandari* of the Girvi Satnami Para—the functionary who presides at Satnami life-cycle rituals and has the role of first amongst equals in their quarter's panchayat. A few years his junior, and thus in his mid-fifties, Ankalu looked older, having lost most of his teeth, and one of his eyes in an accident in the BSP Coke Ovens. Before BSP the family were landless. But from his compensation money and the Provident Fund payout he received on retirement, Ankalu had purchased two and a half acres of paddy land and had a deposit account in the bank. With soaring real estate values in the area around Girvi, that made him a man of property who could indulge his appetite for chicken and country liquor. His much younger, and stunningly attractive wife, was his third. The first had borne him a daughter and three sons who were now young adults. Still childless,

the latest wife had had three or four husbands before him. Kedarnath is another BSP Coke Oven worker and another Satnami.

On the night in question Ankalu and Kedarnath were sleeping out in the street. Around 2.0am Kedarnath got up and climbed over Ankalu's compound wall to join the latter's wife. Coming back, his silhouette was spotted by Dakshin, who went to investigate. Kedarnath pleaded his discretion, to which Dakshin was disinclined by the circumstance that his own brother's wife had previously run off with Kedarnath. An enormous hullabaloo ensued. The whole *para* (quarter) was woken; Ankalu's sons manhandled the wife, confiscated her jewellery and turned her out of the house; and the *kotval* was summoned—the village watchman whose duties include reporting misdemeanours to the police.

A couple of evenings later, a panchayat meeting was called but broke up in inconclusive chaos. It would have to meet again. In the interim I encountered the errant wife on two occasions in Somvaru's house. On the first, he informed her that Ankalu refused to have her back. She seemed philosophical. The second was more emotionally charged. Her mother had died when she was young. She could not get on with her stepmother and was not welcome in her father's house. Perhaps she should move in with Kedarnath? Somvaru was discouraging. Was she really prepared to live as a co-wife? In that case, suicide. Somvaru told her not to be silly. She could always work as a contract labourer and 'make' a new man.

In the meantime, Ankalu was at one moment saying that he would take her back; at the next that he would never do so. The day after the first panchayat meeting, his wife's mother's brother and father's father arrived in the village, ostensibly in ignorance of their kinswoman's shame which they learnt about in a tea-shop up the road. They were about to turn home when Ankalu, who had heard of their arrival, sent word that there was no reason for *them* to fall out over a loose woman, and that they should join him in chicken and *daru* (liquor). For his part, Somvaru was advising Ankalu to condone his wife's conduct, put her up for a time in Bhata Para (a new hamlet on the periphery of the village inhabited mainly by outsider contract labourers) and then take her back when things had blown over. Meanwhile again, Ankalu's sons were stomping about the village threatening to bathe in Kedarnath's blood next time he crossed their path. Somvaru was scathing. 'They always say that. But we Chhattisgarhis don't have the courage for that kind of thing'. And a good job too, he would often imply—the capacity to keep a 'cold brain' (*thanda*

dimag), over women especially, being a positive value for old-timers like him. In any event, he was right. Within a couple of days of the scandal breaking I would see Kedarnath sitting shunned, but unmolested, at his door.

By the second panchayat, his sons had stiffened Ankalu's resolve. His wife was sent away. Mounted on powerful motorbikes, next morning Ankalu roared off with five friends around the peripheral villages in search of a new one. In each a fortifying drink and the party would call on the *bhandari* to ask if *koi rarhi-chharve baithi hai, kya* ('Is there any widow or abandoned woman sitting here?'). But as Somvaru had warned, it was not that easy and these sorties continued for several weeks. Sometimes the search was combined with one for a bride for his son and nephew, enquiries about which were hopefully concluded with: *Aur mere laik koi hai?* ('And is there anyone suitable for me?'). Several times the posse was directed to a temporarily husbandless woman 'sitting' in her *maike* (her natal home) only for her to declare she would consider the proposition if Ankalu would register some land in her name, for where would she be if he died or divorced her? Once he sought out his second wife to ask if she would return, but was angrily sent packing. Once, when Somvaru's alcoholic eldest son went along, the prospective bride said that she would have him but not the one-eyed old fellow (*dokra*). And indeed the errant wife had already put it about that she would never have come had she realized which of the group she was getting. Despondent, Ankalu told his sons that since it was at their insistence that he turned his wife out, it was now up to them to find him a replacement. If they wouldn't he would have the old one back.

By mid-May he had resolved to do so. He found her at her father's house, gave her money and sent her to stay with the brother of his first wife, the mother's brother of his sons. The plan was that if *he* brought her back and begged them to accept her, they would not be able to refuse. But as it transpired, they were. The one who was shortly to marry led the opposition. There was no way he would bring a new bride to live with *that* woman. If his father insisted on keeping her, he must do so away from home. Somvaru claimed to be puzzled. Why was Ankalu so abject? Who had the bank balance and who owned the land? Part of the answer, as we shall see, is that these upwardly mobile modern young men with new-fangled ideas about marriage increasingly occupy the moral high ground.

But to conclude the story, the errant wife was put to lodge with a family in Bhata Para. Within a couple of weeks she had rented a

place of her own in the hamlet and started work as a contract labourer. The outraged husband was now a wooer, going to the neighbouring house of a hunchback dwarf where the two of them would drink and cook chicken to send her. But soon the gossip got back to Ankalu. Kedarnath was paying her visits. She was complaining that Ankalu's sons were eating the fruits of her labour on his land 'like it was shit'. When sympathetic neighbours suggested she beat Ankalu for his drunken disorderliness, she said 'If you kill a fish, your hand stinks'. Fired up by all this, Ankalu was back on his motorbike. But by July, the wife had returned to live in an empty house in the main village which Ankalu would visit at night. Eighteen months later she ran off with her very first husband. Ankalu took Prithvi on one of his trips to persuade her to return. They had been drinking; their motorbike came off the road and Ankalu sustained injuries from which he later died.

The contrasting reactions in these two episodes, you might reasonably suppose, is explained by the fact that in the Haryana atrocity the caste status of those involved was more elevated and the affair was between an *unmarried* girl and a boy of *different*—and *lower*—caste.¹² But I think that is only a part of the picture. Certainly, Chhattisgarhis *are* less tolerant of *pre-marital* affairs, especially of those that cut across caste; and the higher castes *claim* to be more sexually straight-laced than Satnamis. Even so, the moral outrage and ready recourse to violent sanctions against sexual impropriety seem much more muted. A second contrast concerns the state—in the one case a sullen determination to prevent it from poking its nose into matters of village honour, in the other an immediate summons to the government-appointed village constable.¹³ More striking

¹² Sainis claim superiority to Ahirs, and the boy was branded an 'upstart' (Choudhury 1997). It is striking that in all the most extreme cases of violence directed at an intercaste couple which Choudhury refers to, the girl appears to have been previously unmarried and the union *hyogamous*. Choudhury's interpretation of this violence places particular emphasis on the threat to patriarchal interest of a daughter's right to inherit. But while this is no doubt an important element, it plainly does not explain the contrast with Chhattisgarh, where women (theoretically) enjoy the same legal entitlements.

¹³ I do not intend an absolute contrast, for in any one instance there are likely to be some whose interests are served by involving the state and others who wish to keep it at bay. In the two different regions, however, there does appear to be a significant difference in the balance achieved between these two opposing pulls. The Haryana violence which Choudhury discusses has a highly collective character, and the 'executions' were in some sense 'spectacles' for the 'edification' of the entire village.

still is the different role of the generations: in the one case the judges and executioners were the family gerontocrats; in the other the champions of morality were lads barely out of their teens.

Divorce and Remarriage in Chhattisgarh

Two major fissures run through the social order of the ex-villages-cum-labour colonies in which I worked. The first is between the local Chhattisgarhis and immigrants from outside the region. The second is within Chhattisgarhi society, between the so-called 'Hindu' castes and the Satnamis, who are descendants of Chamar untouchable converts to the sectarian following of a saint called Ghasi Das. Though most Satnami belief and ritual is shared with the other castes, and though people concede that Satnamis are Hindus 'by religion', they say that 'by caste' they are not. The 'Hindu' castes to whom they are opposed account for more or less every other in the village hierarchy, including some also regarded as untouchables in the past. The exclusion to which they were subject was, however, considerably less rigorous than that applied to Satnamis.¹⁴

The category 'Hindu' thus covers an extremely broad spectrum, and the separation between castes within it was in the days before the steel plant unusually stringent. In many instances the only people with whom one would inter-dine were those of one's own caste. Today, in places like Girvi and Patripar, members of all '*Hindu*' castes eat together in a single unbroken line (*pangat*) on occasions like marriage. But still no Satnami is ever invited. So while the barriers that once separated the 'Hindu' castes from each other appear increasingly permeable, the one which divides 'Hindus' from Satnamis remains substantially intact and is thrown into sharper relief (Parry 1999b). Something of the same shift, as I will later show, is repeated in marriage.

While it is true that Satnami marriages are less stable, the gap is exaggerated by high caste discourse. Almost all castes traditionally tolerate divorce and remarriage.¹⁵ There is, however, one now dis-

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the Hindu/Satnami divide, see Dube 1998 and Parry 1999b.

¹⁵ In Girvi and Patripar, the only exception were the Brahmans—in each case a solitary family which provided the village with its priestly *maharaj*. But today it would be hard to represent the scions of either as staunch upholders of shastric orthodoxy. The father's sister of Girvi's present *maharaj* is currently serving a jail sentence in

tinctively Satnami practice which signals a difference in ideological emphasis. Brahmanical theory constructs marriage as *kanya dan*—‘the gift of a virgin’. The ‘virgin’ (*kanya*) is given as *dan*, a unilateral prestation which the donor alienates absolutely and for which *no* return can be accepted. In flat contradiction, the Satnamis take bride-price (*sukh dam*—‘the price of happiness’). As a concession to Brahmanical norms, the sum is now fixed at a trifling level¹⁶ and propriety requires that most of it is handed back. But the crucial point is that, however trivial the amount, something is retained. Were it not, the girl would be *kanya dan*. Members of her household would not be able to accept food in her married home and she would not be able to return to her natal home if the marriage turned out badly—for *dan* must never come back to the donor. In short, the Satnamis explicitly repudiate the theory which objectifies women as alienable gifts.

But though the ‘Hindu’ castes pay lip-service to that theory, it is whispered that they too took bride-price in the past, while today they regularly subvert the ideology of *kanya dan* by divorce, and by exchange marriages (*guravat*) in which a sister is given for a wife and the need for dowry is obviated. For Chhattisgarhis, however, dowry has yet to become the drain on family resources that it is elsewhere—though amongst BSP workers, the emulation of outsiders has considerably inflated the outlay required. But it is still the case that a Chhattisgarhi with a regular job in the plant would spend on a daughter’s marriage no more than half, and could possibly get away with as little as a quarter, of what would be *de rigeur* for his Malayali, Punjabi or Bihari colleague.

In the urban areas today, at the time of marriage a boy is likely to be between twenty and thirty, a girl between fifteen and twenty-five. By contrast, many people over forty were first married as children—often so young that they do not remember the event. The child-bride would subsequently remain with her parents until she

connection with a bank robbery; while the divorced sister’s daughter of Patripur’s priest runs a loan shark-operation protected by her live-in lover, a prominent local politician of merchant caste from outside the area. Verma (1972: 100) records that apart from Brahmans, neither Rajputs nor Baniyas tolerate divorce. In the area around Bhilai I never encountered indigenous Rajputs, and the Baniyas are mainly confined to the towns.

¹⁶ In the past the amount was negotiable but would have invariably represented a significant sacrifice. Today each village sets its own fixed rate—in Girvi Rs 161. This is divided into Rs 101 at the wedding ritual (*shadi*) and Rs 60 for the subsequent *gauna*.

was ready for *gauna*¹⁷—at which she was ritually given into the custody of her husband and the marriage consummated. These days, *shadi* (the wedding proper) and *gauna* are usually run together.

Child marriage is plainly intended to ensure that a girl is married before she is sexually active.¹⁸ Marriage, as Somvaru put it, is 'for lifting the weight of virginity' (*kunvar bhar utarne ke liye*)¹⁹—which bears principally on the parents, who must make reparation to the caste panchayat if their daughter elopes. It is a 'liberation from (the) bondage' (*bandhan se mukti*) of parental responsibility. In parts of 'traditional' Chhattisgarh a pre-pubescent girl was married to an arrow or rice-pounder. Only after maturity was she given to a human husband. The token pre-puberty marriage was essential to 'ripen' and 'de-sacralise' her body. If she menstruated or had sex before it she was permanently defiled, and was unable to marry with full rites or participate fully in community ritual. But after the mock marriage, her sexual lapses were treated 'as those of a married woman'—that is, as peccadilloes (Dube 1953; cf. Hira Lal 1926).²⁰

While in the Bhilai area a girl was (generally²¹) married to a real groom, he might just as well have been a token in that they would

¹⁷ The dialect term is *pathauni*, but *gauna* is more generally used by my urbanized informants.

¹⁸ Echoing Brahmanical theory, I have occasionally been told that in the past a girl was not regarded as a true *kunvari* ('virgin' or 'unmarried female') once she had begun to menstruate. She had 'gone astray from the path of religion' (*dharam-bhrasht*).

¹⁹ I have often pressed Somvaru and others to elaborate further on this tantalizingly suggestive but somewhat opaque pronouncement, but failed to elicit the exegetical treasures it seems to promise.

²⁰ Though Dube's short note is regularly cited in the secondary literature, Hira Lal's earlier account has gone largely unnoticed. One significant difference in emphasis between them is that Dube reports that the girl is subsequently married to a human husband with full rites, while Hira Lal's examples suggest that this marriage generally takes the form of a minimally ritualized secondary union.

²¹ In the villages around Bhilai, I have heard of young girls being occasionally married to a mango tree or plantain—though I know of no actual instances. This was said to happen when the girl was subject to some inauspicious influence which would harm her husband—the token acting as a kind of lightning-conductor for the subsequent human partner. I do, however, have two quite detailed case histories of *men* who are married to objects—in one case to a knife (*katari*), and in the other to a kind of pot (*karsa*). The latter contains the paraphernalia of a married woman (bangles, vermilion, *bindi*, blouse etc.), and is kept carefully swaddled in white cloth, bound round with wire and suspended out of harm's way in his rafters. These precautions are necessary lest this 'real' wife should get broken. Were that to happen, he would have to perform the full set of funeral obsequies for it. It was because of this danger that he had unsuccessfully petitioned the Washerman caste elders to be married instead to a knife—as is the other man (an Oilpresser) whose story I

not consummate their union for years. In the meantime one or both might embark on a secret liaison. Such affairs were almost expected, and it was common to abscond before *gauna*. Though some people say that the parents of a girl who eloped at this stage were still responsible, others deny this on the grounds that while ‘the *kunvari* (“virgin” or “unmarried girl”) is the property (*sanpatti*) of her father, the married woman is that of her in-laws’. Provided that he is also of their caste, the latter can claim divorce-compensation from her lover.²² But either way, there is unanimity that after her *shadi* has been celebrated, a girl is no longer a *kunvari*, and her affairs did not occasion the scandal they would if she were.²³ The ‘weight of virgin-

heard. Assuming these objects survive without loss or breakage, they will be disposed of along with their ‘husband’s’ corpse, and their funeral rites performed in conjunction with his. The crucial point is that in all such cases the man is an unwedded *kunvara* who has not previously passed through a primary marriage, but who has taken a widow or divorced woman as his wife. If only to a token, he must at some point undergo a ‘proper’ marriage, for ‘a man too must have *tel-haldi* once in his life’ (a key sequence in the primary marriage at which the bodies of the bride and groom are rubbed with oil and turmeric). ‘If he does not, he will wander as a ghost after death.’ Dube (1996) reports that it is for this reason that a male corpse may be married to an object before its cremation or burial. Apart from Dube’s brief footnote, the marriage of *men* to objects has not—as far as I am aware—been previously reported, and it seems to shed a rather different light on the pre-puberty token marriages of girls from that which is conventional in the literature. I plan to elaborate on this theme in a subsequent publication.

²² That even before *gauna*, it is a married woman’s in-laws who are primarily responsible for her sexual conduct is illustrated by the case of Somvaru’s daughter, Janaki, whose story I come to in the final section of this paper (and discuss in more detail in Parry, forthcoming). On Janaki’s mother’s tragic death, her father-in-law tried to insist that her *gauna* be celebrated immediately. His reported grounds were that there was now no adult woman in the household to supervise her behaviour, and that it was *his* reputation that was at stake ‘if anything happened’.

The residual responsibility of the parents is, however, illustrated by a case of which I learned from an elder of the Oilpressers’ district-level caste panchayat. In the normal case, he explained, a married daughter’s parents would not be liable for punishment if she ran away before *gauna*; but in this instance the panchayat had suspected their complicity. The father had appointed a date for his daughter’s farewell, but when the groom’s party arrived to claim her, the girl was missing and the father affected ignorance of her whereabouts. A village-level panchayat was summoned, at which the son-in-law’s side demanded to be given ‘their goods’ (*hamara mal do*). No resolution was arrived at, either there or at the intermediate-level ‘area (*kshetra*) panchayat’, and so the case was forwarded to them. Their ruling was that since the bride’s side had been uncooperative in locating her, they should be held responsible for paying divorce-compensation (*bihat*) to her husband.

²³ There is, however, an important ideological distinction between a married woman who has already passed through *gauna* and one who has not. One who is widowed after *gauna* rates as an inauspicious *rari*, has her bangles broken, and can never remarry with full rites or play a key role in auspicious rituals. By contrast, a woman whose husband dies before *gauna* is classified as a *barendi*. A *barendi* does not

ity', in other words, seems to have borne on her parents principally up to the point of *shadi* rather than *gauna*, and to have had little to do with delivering a physically intact bride to a husband for life. Rather than manifesting an obsession with controlling the sexual purity of women in a world in which it is primarily through women that caste status is preserved—as Yalman (1963) and more recently Good (1991: 231–2) and Dube (1996) have argued—pre-puberty marriage in Chhattisgarh (whether real or token) appears to have permitted a *liberation* of female sexuality.²⁴ In any event it seems a little perverse to argue that a chronic anxiety about caste purity forces fathers to marry off their five year-olds if they then allow their fifteen year-olds so much scope for fun. In fact, as we shall see, caste is not principally transmitted through women; and the apparently self-evident hypothesis, which associates pre-puberty marriage with an overwhelming preoccupation with the perpetuation of caste status, seems somewhat unconvincing.

As all this suggests, the collapsing of *shadi* and *gauna* into one has considerably added to 'the weight of virginity'. The bride is now a young woman by the time of her *shadi* and will join her husband immediately. Husbands therefore expect to get virgins; and fathers find responsibility for a daughter's virtue more burdensome. It is one thing to guarantee that of a toddler; another that of a girl of twenty. This was brought home to me when Bhushan Satnami's daughter was about to get married, a magnificent match and a triumph of Somvaru's diplomacy. But it all came close to grief when the prospective groom's father's sister's husband approached Somvaru to suggest a medical test of virginity. 'When', as he put it, 'the *rahar* (dal) grows big, the cow will sometimes mount the embankment. The girl has been big for some time'.²⁵

Though by comparison with marital desertion, pre-marital elopement is both rare and disgraceful, it is certainly not unknown. Madan Lal is another Girvi Satnami and another BSP worker. When he learned that his daughter was five months pregnant by a Mahar who

break her bangles, retains her status as a *suhargan* (an auspiciously married woman) and is remarried with full rites. All things being equal, a man would sooner take a *barendi* or *chharve* (an abandoned woman) in secondary marriage than a *rari*, on account of her inauspiciousness and ritual incapacity. Now *shadi* and *gauna* are generally combined, *barendi* status is rare.

²⁴ As plainly also did the celebrated *tali*-tying rite of the Nayars (on interpretations of which see Fuller 1976).

²⁵ *Mer men jab rahar baya hojata hai, kabhi kabhi gaya charh jata hai. Lar ki bari hogaie kafi din se.*

pushes a hand-cart around the neighbourhood streets selling cosmetics and female trinkets (*maniyari saman*), his reaction was one of blind rage. Somebody should take the girl out, cut her throat and dump her body in the jungle. Nobody did. Next day the girl eloped with her lover, and her father announced that for him she was dead. Kanhaiya, the lover and the sister's son of Girvi's *kotval* (who himself made an intercaste marriage), has a mother's sister who lives in the company township and is married to a Muslim. She gave the girl refuge. Kanhaiya remained in the village, and three days after the elopement I passed him pushing his handcart—rather provocatively I thought—through the Satnami Para, wearing his dark glasses and trilby hat, the loudspeakers mounted on his barrow blaring out a Bollywood song. Four months later, both Madan's sons were unproblematically married within the caste, and his daughter gave birth to a daughter outside it. When I went back the next year, it was clear that Kanhaiya was tiring of the relationship. He had found mother and baby somewhere to live in an outlying village to which he was now an increasingly infrequent visitor. By the following year, both he and the girl had been conventionally married within their own caste. Kanhaiya had enlisted the aid of a Satnami roadside bicycle repairman who had found Madan's daughter an impoverished husband from his distant village to whom Kanhaiya had paid a substantial inducement. She now has child by this man; and the young family have come to live in Girvi's Bhata Para from where she can walk within minutes to her father's house—which she regularly does. As the saying is, 'If a child shits on your feet, you do not cut them off'.

The Patripar Barber introduced me to another useful adage which brings out the sexually liberating nature of *shadi*, and the contrast between primary and secondary marriage: *kunvari beti panch ke, chharve beti man ke* ('the virgin daughter belongs to the caste panchayat, the abandoned daughter follows *her own* disposition').²⁶ 'After making the seven circumambulations (of the marriage fire)', he elaborated, 'a girl is free'.²⁷ The difference is marked in everyday speech. Primary marriage is something which is 'done' to one and in which a girl is 'given'. But in talking about secondary unions the voice changes. The

²⁶ There is a possible ambiguity here because *man* in the Chhattisgarhi dialect also means 'people'. It might therefore seem possible to construe the Barber's wisdom as meaning that the abandoned daughter belongs, not to herself, but to 'other people' (*okar man*). But that is not the gloss that either he or numerous other informants offered me.

²⁷ *Sat phera lagane ke bad, lar̥ki azad hojati hai.*

woman 'makes' a new man, and he makes her his wife by 'putting on bangles' (*churi pehnana*).²⁸

As with the Muria (Gell 1992: 126f), a young bride is expected to run—and keep running—away from her husband; and he is expected to show his commitment by fetching her back. But if she does it too often, or if he does not like her, he may just let her moulder in her *maike*. And if she does not like him, she will refuse to return. In either event, it is time to find someone new. As this suggests, a woman retains rights of refuge in her natal home, her relationship with which is much more durable than the marriage bond.²⁹ But although her right of return is unquestioned, it is not expected to be permanent, and her parents will encourage her to make a new husband lest she shame them by conceiving without one. Her first husband (her *bihata*³⁰) should then go to demand of her new one a payment (*bihat*) which is handed over 'to break the marriage bond' (*bihati torna*).³¹ But today many men are ashamed

²⁸ Wrists without bangles are the key symbol of widowhood, and a widow is euphemistically referred to as having 'empty hands' (*khali hath*). When new bangles are put on, care must be taken that the last of the old ones is not broken before at least one of the new is in place.

²⁹ In line with the theory that blood ties are immutable, an adopted child can marry into the *gotra* of its adopted father but never into its *gotra* of birth (assuming of course that these are different). The same goes for a step-child. Again, there is nothing to prevent a woman from taking a subsequent husband from the *gotra* of a previous partner. It is the pull of consanguineal ties which explains why adoption is not a solution to the problem of childlessness. A boy is always drawn back to his natural father.

The situation I describe is consistent with the correlation which Kolenda (1987a [1967]) finds between the strength of a woman's continuing bonds with her natal family and her bargaining power, and between these and a high rate of divorce and a low incidence of joint families. (The only surprise is to find Durg identified in a later paper [1987b] as a district particularly low on divorce and high on joint families). See also the comments of Raheja and Gold (1994: 76) on the way in which the ties of a wife to her *maike* provide her with scope for resisting her in-laws; Dyson and Moore (1983) on the correlation between the strength of such ties, female autonomy and the demographic regime; and Choudhury (1994: 316–17) on the heightened importance given to the brother–sister tie by a woman's reliance on her natal family to arrange her remarriage in the event of widowhood or divorce.

³⁰ The *bihata* is alternatively referred to as a woman's *shadi-vala*. Reciprocally, a wife taken in a primary marriage is a man's *bihai* or *shadi-vali*.

³¹ The explanation I was generally offered is that the husband is entitled to *bihat* as part reimbursement for his marriage expenses, even if it was he who ended the union. The amount to which he is entitled is supposedly one half of his costs, and a woman's third husband should pay the second half of what he had paid the first. The third husband will know how much this was since the exact sum will have been specified in an affidavit drawn up on stamped legal paper in which the *bihata* acknowledges the end of his rights in the woman. But with him the buck stops, and he can obtain no payment from a fourth husband.

to claim such compensation, the proper use of which is to fund a feast known as *marti-jiti bhat* ('the rice meal of the living-dead') which signifies that for him that wife is now dead. No relationship between them remains, and a woman is widowed only after the death of the husband with whom she currently lives.

There is no distinction of status between the children of a primary and secondary marriage. Both are equally the product of their father's seed, which is why it is to him that they theoretically belong in the event of divorce. In practice, however, small children frequently go with their mother to her *maike*, and when she remarries are subsequently brought up in the house of a stepfather or are left with maternal grandparents. While girls are commonly written-off by their fathers, boys are likely to return eventually to claim their share of the paternal property. But much depends on individual circumstance.³²

Though this theory that *bihat* is compensation for marriage expenses was clearly already present in the colonial period (Russell 1916: 2:411), I suspect that for the area around Bhilai it might be a relatively recent rationalization designed to paper over the now disreputable fact that in the not too-distant past the Hindu castes also paid bride-price, which in case of marital break-down had to be in part returned (this being the way in which some elderly Satnamis still represent it). In any event, the current theory seems incoherent in that it does not explain why the man, and not the woman, is entitled to reimbursement. The costs incurred by her family at marriage exceed those of the groom's. I also suspect that other salient details are new. Several rural informants have told me that the rate is not fixed, and that it is only payable to a *bihata* and not to subsequent husbands, and then only if it is the *wife* who has run off (and not the husband who has turned her out). At least amongst the Satnamis of this area, *marti-jiti bhat* also appears to be an innovation. Somvaru was not expected to hold such a feast after he had been 'to break the marriage bond' with the first of his wives.

³² Both Somvaru's fourth and fifth wives, for example, brought with them a young daughter whom he raised and got married, who continue to be regular visitors to his house and to whose own households he extends significant material support. At the time of her marriage, an invitation was sent to the real father of the younger of these girls, though there had been no contact with him for years. He is said to have been too ashamed to come himself, but sent his son by a subsequent union as his representative. The mother of Somvaru's second son's wife had left her first husband on account of their desperate poverty and their daughter was also brought up by a step-father. One day her real father unwittingly arrived at Somvaru's. He rapidly established the connection and summoned his daughter-in-law to touch her father's feet. At first she refused. For years he had not even asked after her. And then there is Somvaru's half-brother's daughter, whose truck-driver husband deserted her, and who has brought her son back to live with her parents. The husband has had other women and children and has not seen his son since he left. But not all fathers are so feckless. Bhushan reclaimed his daughter by his first wife and arranged her marriage.

Some 'Quantitative Gossip'³³

Among the Satnamis of Girvi and Patripar, almost half of all *primary* marriages have been terminated by divorce.³⁴ The vast majority remarry, often more than once (and in one case eight times). My aggregate estimate for the 'Hindu' castes is that between one-quarter and one-third of all primary marriages end in divorce.³⁵ What these gross estimates conceal, however, is a generational variation. Sixty-one per cent of Satnamis aged 45 or over had been divorced. For those under 45, the figure is 39%.³⁶ Since marriage is

³³ I borrow this phrase from E. P. Thompson (1991: 416). Many hours spent poring over census forms and genealogies have served to remind me how soft 'hard' data can be. Some of the difficulties with the statistical analysis of divorce rates in 'traditional' societies are usefully reviewed in an early paper by Barnes (1967). By including the whole universe of ever-married people in the sample, one obviously biases it in the direction of a greater stability than really exists, since many of those counted have not yet had time to divorce. But by restricting the sample to completed marriages, one obscures the changes which might be occurring in the younger generation (which is of particular interest in the present instance). With regard to India, there are also considerable difficulties over the reliability of the data. Though by sub-continental standards, Chhattisgarhis strike me as remarkably open on such matters, they know very well that most of the outsiders they encounter look down on their laxity and not unnaturally avoid revealing its true extent. Moreover, many marriages are so short-lived, and of such limited significance to anybody but the couple themselves (and sometimes, one suspects, even to them) that their existence may be forgotten rather than suppressed. Of Mangal Satnami's five wives, for example, only two remained with him for as much as a year. His *shadi-vali* stayed only one night after *gauna* before running home next morning. In the face of these difficulties I have concentrated on the genealogies and census returns of the caste groups I know best, and focused on the proportion of *primary* marriages which end in divorce.

³⁴ Of the 123 Girvi Satnamis for whom I have marital histories, for example, 60 are no longer with their original partner. This is a sub-set of the 220 ever-married individuals belonging to the 79 Satnami households of the *para*. This proportion is higher than that suggested by Prakasam's survey (1993: 173) of Satnami households in a rural village in the neighbouring district of Raipur where around one-fifth of all extant unions were secondary marriages (43 out of 223 couples).

³⁵ This estimate is based on a sample of 254 marriages recorded on genealogies and household survey forms for five of the 'Hindu' castes represented in Girvi and Patripar: Kurmis (Farmers), Tamrakars (Coppersmiths), Telis (Oilpressers), Kostas (Weavers) and Mahars (Village watchmen and agriculturalists). These are roughly representative of the different levels of the old 'Hindu' hierarchy (cf. Parry 1999b). My limited numerical data does not point to any significant correlation between caste status within the 'Hindu' category and the rate of divorce.

³⁶ Of the 123 Girvi Satnamis referred to in footnote 34, I calculate that 56 would fall into the senior age cohort and 67 into the junior cohort. From the first category, 34 (60.7%) were no longer with their original spouse; and from the second category 26 (38.8%). But these figures can be taken only as approximations since older people are often vague about their age.

most fragile in its earliest years, I think it unlikely that this difference is simply an artefact of age. Marriage *is* becoming more stable—in a certain segment of the working class. Amongst those with casual informal sector employment, divorce is as common in the younger as in the older cohort; and is associated with a high proportion of female-headed households³⁷ and a small amount of casual prostitution. But amongst the aristocracy of labour there is a significant shift. Of 98 Satnami BSP workers and retired workers from Girvi and Patripar, almost exactly two-thirds (67%) of those aged over 45 had divorced and remarried (slightly more than this group as a whole). But of those under 45, only one-quarter (26%) have done so (which is appreciably fewer than their informal sector peers). Though these figures are only suggestive, they square with the general perception that ‘educated’ youngsters have learned more ‘civilized’ ways.

By high caste north Indian standards, Chhattisgarhi women display a shocking want of submissiveness, and often take the initiative in the break-up of marriage. A Muslim woman in late middle age, now married to a Maharashtrian neo-Buddhist, explained that a new husband keeps a woman feeling young, and it is only when she gets old and tired that she settles for what she has got. An excessively independent and assertive wife, however, risks being labelled a witch (*tonhi*) and on that account turned out. Sometimes the poverty of her husband’s household prompts a woman to leave. As a reason for divorce, however, childlessness is undoubtedly the most important. Patience is limited if a bride does not conceive in the first couple of years, or if she bears only girls. It is, above all, sons who stabilize marriages. Though male informants concede the theoretical possibility that the absence of children may result from the infertility of the man, in practice the woman is blamed. But women know otherwise, and it is this—I strongly suspect—which precipitates a number of extra-marital affairs, undertaken in a search for more potent seed.³⁸

³⁷ In Patripar around 20% of the total.

³⁸ I originally inferred this from gossip about the increasingly brazen and desperate affairs of a couple of long-married childless women from families I knew. When I later put the hypothesis to one of the few women with whom I felt I could discuss it without risk of misunderstanding, I was assured of its plausibility. In corroboration, Das’s (1988) report of a Punjabi woman advising her childless sister-in-law ‘to change her quilt’ (i.e. her sleeping partner) might be cited. Gold similarly discusses Rajasthani folk-songs and traditions which associate fertility with infidelity, which represent ‘a lover as a boon to a barren woman’, and which even suppose that the husband’s desire for children may encourage his complicity (in Raheja and Gold

In Chhattisgarh, wrote Russell at the beginning of this century,

... marriage ties are of the loosest description, and adultery is scarcely recognised as an offence. A woman may go and live openly with another man and her husband will take her back afterwards. Sometimes, when two men are in the relation of Mahaprasad or nearest friend to each other . . . they will each place his wife at the other's disposal. The Chamars (now Satnamis) justify this carelessness of the fidelity of their wives by the saying, 'If my cow wanders and comes home again, shall I not let her into the stall?' (Russell 1916: 2:412).

Though today adultery is certainly not treated so lightly, I believe that there is more to Russell's report than the hyperbole of an outraged Victorian sensibility. Amongst the new aristocracy of labour at least, there has been a genuine shift in values.

Polygynous marriages are increasingly at odds with these values, and even if a man may intend to supplement, rather than substitute, a wife, wives are increasingly reluctant to tolerate the addition and increasingly likely to leave—which is possible because they can generally support themselves by contract labour. What would in the past have become a polygynous union is now more probably serial monogamy.³⁹

A significant proportion of secondary marriages cross caste boundaries. For Girvi and Patripur I know of 116 intercaste marriages (and more were doubtless concealed from me). Of these, nearly 90% are secondary unions. Of all such marriages I estimate that 1:5 or 1:6 contravene the rule of endogamy. As a proportion of all current couples, the number of intercaste unions is not dramatic—about 7%. But if I include wives, sisters and daughters who have run away with a man of different caste and now reside elsewhere, we find that 10–15% of all households in these neighbourhoods have present or previous members who have married outside their caste.⁴⁰

1994: 58–9, 68). A likely instance of the latter is given in the final section of this paper.

³⁹ Out of a total of 508 households in Girvi, 29 (5.7%) are currently polygynous.

⁴⁰ The distribution is of course uneven, and is significantly higher in some kinship groups than others. For example, one genealogical fragment for the Girvi Tamrakars—who are amongst the highest status castes in the 'village'—shows 28 extant couples. Of these, eight have intercaste unions. Two men of the lineage and six women took partners of different caste. Of the latter, two husbands were 'Biharis', three were men of another 'Hindu' caste, and one was a Satnami (whose previously unmarried Tamrakar wife had moved in with him). It is significant that four of the eight marriages (including the one with the Satnami) were between partners who were both born in Girvi.

By comparison, Prakasam's survey (1993: 167) of Satnami marriages in a rural

But more significant than the figures is the form that these unions take. My estimates *exclude* instances of marriage between two formerly endogamous units which now recognize the possibility of a primary marriage between them—as is the case, for example, between the Coppersmiths (Tamers/Tamrakars) and Bronzesmiths (Kasers), and between various subcastes of Kurmi. Nor are we dealing with a pattern of women marrying ‘up’—‘with the grain’—in the approved hypergamous manner sanctioned by the shastras. Where both partners are Chhattisgarhis, they are often from widely separated rungs of the hierarchy. The number of instances in which the woman married ‘against the grain’ to a man of inferior status almost exactly matches the number in which she married ‘up’. The confusion of castes is further compounded by the fact that a significant proportion of these unions involve partners who were born and raised in the same ex-village neighbourhood. A woman who has broken up with her first husband comes back to ‘sit’ in her *maike*, where she forms a liaison with a man who lives nearby. Though they may not recognize each other as such, it is consequently difficult for the in-laws to avoid all contact with each other or to pretend that the union does not exist.

Of these intercaste marriages, 38% (N = 43) are between partners who are both Chhattisgarhis; 52% (N = 60) between a Chhattisgarhi and an outsider, and 10% (N = 13) between two outsiders.

While, with regard to the first of these categories, the scale may be new the occurrence is not. In the past the couple were boycotted, but—provided that the difference in status between the two castes was not great—they and their children would be eventually accepted into the caste of the husband after appropriate penance. This characteristically took the form of a feast known as *bharri bhat*, at which any member of the caste from the surrounding villages had a right to be present and to demand the food of their choice. It was therefore financially crippling and in effect amounted to a caste admission fee that enabled the wealthy to legitimate their irregular unions (cf. Leach 1961: 72). But as the rate of intercaste marriage rapidly grew

village in neighbouring Raipur district found that less than three per cent (six out of 223 current unions) crossed caste boundaries (1993: 173, 167). Nearer Bhilai, Helen Carey’s census of a multicasite village of 238 households revealed only one intercaste union, though there were at least eight other instances in which villagers had married outside their caste and were now living in town. And that, of course, is one reason for the relatively high rate of intercaste marriage in places like Patripar which serve as a sanctuary for villagers who have flouted the norms. I am extremely grateful to Helen Carey for making her census material available to me.

in the area around BSP, the caste councils tried to stem the tide by taking a tougher line. One strategy was to admit the man and his children, but not his wife. Sometimes he was allowed to keep her as his concubine (*rakhel*, *lauthi rakhi*). Sometimes he was required to renounce her; and sometimes the children as well. Faced with more and more cases, however, some councils vainly tried for a time to impose a permanent ban on a man who married outside.

With the exception of the Satnamis, such a ban always applied to a woman who took a husband of different caste. While a woman might acquire the caste of her husband, a man—however superior⁴¹—could never join that of his wife (unless she were a Satnami). The transmission of caste status is, in effect, patrilineal. Even if he has married improperly, a son—people say—‘is a bit of our liver, isn’t he? How can we cut him off and throw him away? But a girl is a *parai* (an “alien”). If she does not do what we say . . . she will have to suffer the consequences’.⁴² While the prodigal son ‘has given his blood and semen and that is why his children are ours’, such a girl is likened to a cracked earthenware pot—the only thing to do is chuck it away. The consequence is that an increasing number of people have maternal half-siblings and cousins of different caste to their own.

This reluctance to ‘throw away’ sons is one reason why the *de facto* tolerance of intercaste unions is rather wide. Another is that the sanctions against them are now rather weak. Goods and services are easily available in the town and there is now no question of the once all-powerful *malguzar* of the village (its erstwhile landlord and revenue collector) being able to order the Barber or Blacksmith to refuse one work. Today, all a boycott really amounts to is exclusion from the life-cycle rituals of one’s caste fellows. Even so, I know cases where a daughter’s primary marriage was arranged with a BSP groom whose family were boycotted. The caste panchayat may huff and puff, but can no longer blow down houses.⁴³

⁴¹ This plainly makes little sense in terms of conventional theories about caste purity, according to which there should be no problem with incorporating a man of *superior* status.

⁴² *Lar̄ka hamara kaleja ka tukra hai na? Us se to hamen kainse katkar phenkenge? Lar̄ki parai hoti hai. Agar voh hamare bat nehin mante aur ham jahan bhejna chahte hein, vehan na jakar khud apni murzi se kuchchh karti hai, to voh hi bhugat len. Is men ham kya kar sakte hein?*

⁴³ One of Girvi’s teashops is run by a Weaver caste couple (Kostas, now generally known as Devangans) who are boycotted because they maintain contact with a daughter who has made an intercaste marriage. But a measure of the severity of this boycott is that I was first told about it in an undertone by one of their young kinsmen as we sat drinking tea in their shop. True, another Weaver felt obliged to

The net result is that with regard to marriage the pattern of change has partially replicated the re-ordering of commensal relations. As the Hindu castes now publicly interdine, so they increasingly intermarry. And in both spheres the Satnamis are excluded. But the fact that marriages across this divide are never condoned does not mean they do not occur. Of the 43 intercaste unions from Girvi and Patripar in which both partners are Chhattisgarhis, seven were between Satnami women and men of 'Hindu' caste and five between a Satnami man and a 'Hindu' woman.

The largest category of irregular unions, however, cross not only caste boundaries but also those of regional ethnicity between Chhattisgarhis and outsiders (60 out of the 116 cases).⁴⁴ All but five involve a Chhattisgarhi *woman* and a man from outside. Of these latter an absolute majority are 'Biharis'.⁴⁵ Chhattisgarhis put this down to defects in the Bihari character, the violence of which explains the asymmetry. No sensible Chhattisgarhi exposes his throat by taking one of *their* women. A less prejudicial assessment would include demography and migration patterns. Before BSP, this area had an excess population of women, and it was only in the vicinity of the steel plant that this trend was reversed with the influx of migrant workers in the 1960s (Verma 1972: 101). By contrast with the south Indian pattern of *family* migration to the industrial areas, that of the 'Biharis' is predominantly one of single men who only much later, if at all, bring their wives and children to join them (Holmström 1984: 68–9).

Not uncommonly these Bihari husbands have a family back home, which is why colloquially their Chhattisgarhi wives are 'stepneys'—'spare wheels'. And as this suggests, there is sometimes something exploitative about these relationships—as in the case of two Patripar shopkeepers ('Biharis' both) who are alleged to have acquired Chhattisgarhi girls in settlement of debts. Moreover, Chhattisgarhi men have a reputation for indolence; the women for industry.⁴⁶ 'Here',

resort to subterfuge to find girls for his boys. Their mother is a Thethvar-Buffaloherder by caste, and when he applied for his and their acceptance as Weavers he included an affidavit from his wife affirming that their illicit union had ended. It hadn't and she openly played her role in the subsequent wedding rituals.

⁴⁴ In ten of the 13 cases of intercaste marriage between two outsiders, the partners are also from different regions.

⁴⁵ 29 out of 55 cases. 'Bihari' is also used for migrants from eastern UP.

⁴⁶ As Flueckiger (1989) notes, Chhattisgarh has one of the highest female labour participation rates in India. In an interesting analysis of the variations within a single oral epic tradition between two regions, she convincingly shows how (by con-

said the Patripar Barber, 'women are the slaves of men. We sit at home and they go out to work. But in UP-Bihar the men are the slaves of women and have to work for them. That is why they catch hold of our daughters.' But however this may be, many of these unions seem quite as stable as the general run of marriages.

Sex, Marriage and Industry

And in a sense the Barber is right—women's work outside the home *is* crucial. Chhattisgarhi women provide by far the greater part of the casual unskilled female labour force employed on construction sites and in the steel plant, where they sort scrap, shift slag, clear up coal spillages and the like. They work in mixed gangs under a male supervisor who is often an outsider, as is the mason for whom they carry bricks. As I have described elsewhere (Parry 1999a), one reason why contract labour is preferred to work in the fields is that it holds out the promise of sexual adventure—a significant proportion of illicit affairs and secondary unions being initiated in such apparently unpromising settings as the BSP slag-dump. At the time of a strike there, a Malayali union leader told me, he had despaired to discover how many of his pickets by day were massaging the backs of blackleg Biharis by night.

Within the gang, the foreplay—so to speak—is legitimized by the system of fictive kinship into which all its members are incorporated. Kashi, for example, classifies Kamla as his *nani* (maternal grandmother) because Kamla is the name of his real grandmother. Phirantin is his *bhabhi* (eBW) because she comes from the same village as the wife of one of his classificatory brothers. Other links might easily have been traced and his choice of terms is motivated. Both of these relationships permit joking, and with one's *bhabhi* in particular the joking is expected to take an explicitly sexual form and may even extend to horseplay. Kashi is fancy free, Phirantin is pretty, the outcome predictable. And if Phirantin is married, her husband's sense of humour is put to the test—which is why most couples avoid work on the same site. It is also why contractors are reluctant to employ them. Joking leads to jealousy, jealousy leads to rows and rows ruin schedules.

trast with its U.P. recension) the Chhattisgarhi variant foregrounds the themes of elopement, secondary marriage and female sexual initiative, which in turn reflects the higher status and greater autonomy of women in this region.

Here, then, is one clue to the greater instability of marriage amongst this segment of the working class. Legitimized flirtatious joking lets both sexes explore the possibilities of a more serious liaison. And if contract labour makes marriages, it also breaks them by putting temptation in the way, provoking jealousy and providing an unhappy young wife with a realistic means of doing without her husband and a promising means of finding a new one. Not surprisingly, BSP workers—who can well afford the luxury of keeping their wives and daughters at home—regard contract labour for their women as not only shameful but threatening. For their part, the women are probably happy enough to be relieved of what (despite its romantic possibilities) is such arduous, unpleasant and low-status toil. For both sexes, then, female domesticity has certain advantages; while for relations between them it plainly has consequences. One, I suggest, is the greater longevity of marriage; and another is a significant increment in women's dependence on men.

A further clue to the contrast is BSP itself. In the politics of kinship and marriage, the power of the state is regularly enlisted. Disputes between in-laws unrelated to dowry often escalate into police cases of dowry harassment. Consensual love affairs result in charges of rape at the instigation of rivals. Not that rape and dowry harassment do not occur (though the latter is principally a non-Chhattisgarhi problem). It is rather that many of the cases that get reported are not the ones that do. So routine is this recourse to the police and the courts that it is perhaps surprising that legal divorce remains a rarity. There is not a single instance in Girvi or Patripar. It is rather through the steel plant that the state most significantly impinges on the regulation of marriage.

It does so in both direct and indirect ways. Indirectly, the most important impact is through BSP recruitment procedures (described in more detail in Parry 1999b and 2000). A BSP berth is the acme of almost all working class ambitions. With a view to obtaining one, most young men who have managed to achieve the minimum educational qualifications lodge their cards with the district employment exchange as soon as they are eligible. But the queue of qualified candidates would stretch all the way from Raipur to Durg, and in 1994 BSP was processing applications for the lowliest post of Plant Attendant from candidates who had registered in 1983. The result of the log-jam is that most aspirants will not know their fate much before they are thirty, and some (who are eligible for posts reserved for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes) need not give up hope until

they have reached thirty-five. Because the quality of the match that he can make—in terms of the complexion and educational attainments of the bride and the standing of her family—critically depends on their son's employment prospects, many fathers try to delay his marriage until he is settled in a job. Moreover, a boy who can realistically aspire to a BSP job wants an educated girl, while one who is actually taken on by the plant very soon learns from his non-Chhattisgarhi work-mates that he ought to command a significant dowry. In short, while the divorce rate falls in response to BSP employment, the age of marriage and the expectations of dowry rise.

The fall in the divorce rate notwithstanding, a young BSP worker will not find it difficult to marry another virgin-bride if his first marriage ends, and—unlike a low-status *chharve*—a higher rated *kunvari* will come with a dowry. This at least partly explains what is, I am assured, a new phenomenon in Girvi and Patripar—a group of youthful 'abandoned women' from BSP families who have been 'sitting' interminably in their *maike*, because 'nobody (at least nobody of the right status) now comes to ask for them'.⁴⁷ Their plight is plainly a warning to any daughter from the better-off segments of village society who is contemplating the disappointments of her own marriage. It also gives pause for thought to her father and brothers, who must now face the prospect of having to provide for her and her children on a semi-permanent basis if she leaves her husband. And they also of course run an enhanced risk of her bringing shame upon them by conceiving children in their house and out of wedlock. At least for a woman and her family, these new barriers to remarriage in the upper echelons of the working class are an obvious disincentive to divorce.

Directly, BSP intervenes in the regulation of marriage by invoking the majesty of the law and the weight of the company rule book. By law, bigamy is a criminal offence punishable by a fine and up to seven years' rigorous imprisonment.⁴⁸ By BSP rules, a worker who wishes to remarry must get permission from the company.⁴⁹ Both

⁴⁷ In Girvi's Satnami Para (with a total of 79 households), I know of six such cases.

⁴⁸ The offence is compounded if the first marriage was concealed, and the term of imprisonment may extend to ten years (Diwan and Diwan 1997: 87).

⁴⁹ Until recently, such an application had to be accompanied by a certificate from the local panchayat that that worker's previous marriage had been duly dissolved. Since these were frequently fraudulent, BSP now requires the courts ratify them—which has dramatically cut applications if not remarriages.

provide management with a good deal of leverage over a good many workers—particularly because very few know the legal definition of bigamy and are easily persuaded that ‘putting bangles’ on a new wife without a court divorce could land them in jail.⁵⁰ The vast majority, moreover, will have defrauded the company by claiming medical benefits, free travel and other perks on her and her children’s behalf.

BSP is not the DHSS, with snoopers on orange boxes at rear windows. But it does have a Vigilance Department which the routine skirmishing of neighbourhood politics keeps supplied with anonymous tip-offs, and which receives a regular flow of petitions from deserted wives. These are forwarded for further investigation to the Personnel Department in the worker’s shop. Though only a small fraction of disciplinary cases are related to marriage,⁵¹ their demonstration effect is significant. The standard strategy is to admit guilt and throw oneself on ‘the kind mercy’ of the enquiry in a letter drafted by one of the clerks. At the hearing one humbly submits that one is a poor illiterate fellow who has merely conformed to custom without knowing the company rules, and if possible claims that one’s motive in remarrying was to beget a son to perform one’s funeral rites. This plays well to a management audience and the chances are that you get off quite lightly.⁵²

But some cases are less tractable. As the result of a complaint from his first wife who wanted maintenance, Bharat was charged with having remarried without company permission. His version was that it was his wife who had run out on him and their daughter, Budhvantin. At the time he was making a precarious living as an

⁵⁰ In fact, customary modes of divorce are recognized as valid by the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 (Diwan and Diwan 1997: 601), and the courts have been reluctant to interfere with the jurisdiction of the panchayats (Derrett 1968: 363). Moreover, a conviction for bigamy would seem to be extremely difficult to obtain. The courts have been liable to construe secondary marriage as concubinage (*ibid.* p. 358); bigamy is only committed if it can be positively proved that both marriages were conducted with all the requisite ceremonies, and prosecution is impossible if the marriage is declared void before it is started (Diwan and Diwan 1997: 86–7). Further, section 198 of the Criminal Procedure Code provides that a prosecution can only take place where a complaint is lodged by an aggrieved party—usually the first spouse, though complaints by certain other relatives may also be countenanced.

⁵¹ Against workers in Battery Operations in the Coke Oven Department, there were 102 disciplinary cases between January 1992 and October 1998. These included one case for bigamous marriage. Of the 65 current and pending cases in March 1999, again only one involved marriage.

⁵² Typically, the disciplined worker would be required to repay any monetary benefits he had illegitimately claimed and would suffer a temporary reduction in the pay-scale.

itinerant hawker, could not look after the girl and had persuaded her now remarried mother—whom he had met at a fair—to take her. His luck then turned, he got a BSP job, remarried and now has three other children. But in the meantime his previous wife had left her second husband, had got pregnant (by whom he could not say), and had given birth to a second girl. While he was willing to give Budhvantin a home, he was damned if he would support the mother and second child.

The wife of Ranjit, a Punjabi Sikh, complained that he had exchanged garlands with another bride in a local temple (photo enclosed), maintained two other women as his mistresses, and physically abused her in order to extort additional dowry payments from her parents. By dint of strategically-timed absenteeism, Ranjit span out the enquiry interminably, and was eventually sent a registered letter instructing him to report to the BSP Family Counselling Centre, Police Control Room, Sector 6.

The next instalment I heard on a subsequent visit when I spent some days with Counselling. Not in the Police Control room, but in the old administrative complex, down a dark corridor past an exhibition centre with posters illustrating the comparative effects of alcohol and yoga on the brain. From the Section's senior manager I learned about stresso-graphs, the contribution of Sai Baba to counselling, and—'you won't mind it'—about the similarity of Chhattisgarhis to Europeans in the matter of marriage. The solution is education and counselling; the objective is reconciliation through love and understanding.

In practice, however, these are sometimes supplemented by a certain amount of well-motivated arm-twisting. Marital problems are their largest single category of cases⁵³—of which they have handled more than 2,500 since the service was started in 1986.⁵⁴ In the vast majority, marital breakdown is accepted as a *fait accompli* and the issue is maintenance. In fact, BSP management has no *legal* standing in such matters—only leverage. Though it is in nobody's interest that the BSP 'bigamist' should be sent to jail—least of all the jilted wife's since her husband would then be unable to support her⁵⁵—

⁵³ The runners-up are alcoholism and problems with delinquent children.

⁵⁴ The precise figure up to mid-August 1999 is 2520. Of these, 116 involved dowry harassment and 'strained conjugal relations' and 667 were applications for maintenance brought by wives and sometimes parents. Of the 332 cases dealt with during the last financial year (1998–99), 103 related to such issues.

⁵⁵ A criminal conviction automatically results in the termination of company employment.

heavy hints about criminal cases and disciplinary proceedings generally ensure that love and understanding prevail. The worker signs an instruction to the Salaries Section to pay a proportion of his wage into an account set up for his wife.

Sometimes the *complainant* is transparently trying their luck—like the Girvi wife who had run off twenty years earlier and was now petitioning for a slice of her about-to-retire ex-husband's Provident Fund.⁵⁶ Sometimes the husband regrets his generosity. Until Counselling was given control of their credit to close the loophole, some took loans so large from the company that the monthly repayments left nothing for maintenance. Others—like Ranjit—find other ways of subverting the agreement. Counselling effected a 'reconciliation'. His wife agreed to go back to him, and he to make her a monthly allowance. But into the standard document Ranjit inserted an extra clause, which specified that he would only pay while she remained in his house. He made that impossible, and she soon was back to say that she would now go to court. In the majority of cases, however, the agreements stick.

It is a remarkable phenomenon: a large-scale public sector enterprise takes upon itself the task of defending the interests of the deserted wives of its own employees, and thereby incurs the ire of their union. What motivates management?

Part of the answer lies in the Nehruvian modernizing vision to which BSP owes its foundation, and according to which its purpose was as much to forge a new kind of man in a new kind of society as to forge steel. And if these *social* engineers are middle-class high caste managers from more 'civilized' regions, it is hardly surprising if the authentic expression of the family values of the modern Indian nation are their own more 'orthodox' norms. For them, I suspect, it is as much a matter of reforming the morals of *men*, who must be encouraged to become new model citizens, as it is of providing succour to women and children. Their power to encourage stems of course from the fact that most BSP employees are very well aware of how privileged they are by comparison with other workers in the area, and are consequently reluctant to jeopardize their jobs.⁵⁷ The

⁵⁶ Cf. Ramu 1997: 68 who reports past instances in the Kolgar Gold Field in which two wives showed up to claim a deceased's miner's Provident Fund, gratuity and benefits.

⁵⁷ In some ways the situation is reminiscent of Henry Ford's five dollar day, which provided him with the basis for a quite tyrannical exercise of paternalistic authority over the lives and 'morals' of his workers (Beynon 1984: 34f; Miller 1992: 66f). I

reformist instincts of management are further reinforced by the fact that regular BSP jobs have always been regarded as jobs for life. Even with the greatest missionary zeal, no employer has either the incentive or the capacity to exercise much influence over the private lives of labour which is here today and gone tomorrow. What is more, a large proportion of the BSP workforce lives in the Company Township, and in the same Sectors as the managers. They should live there respectably. Economic liberalization provides a further—and equally significant—ingredient in the form of a globalized market discipline, which increasingly constrains the Company to cut labour costs by stamping on welfare scams. Thus paternalistic Nehruvian modernism, Brahmanical values and 'bottom-line' accountancy combine to uphold the sanctity of marriage.

But just as important, I believe, is the way in which the work group mediates these new marital values. BSP work groups are socially very heterogeneous, being made up of both Chhattisgarhis and outsiders, and of high and low castes. In the 'hard' shops, where the work is often dangerous and involves close co-operation, but where there is plenty of time to socialize, they are also highly solidary—which makes them an important channel for the dissemination of the 'modern' and 'civilized' values of their most 'educated' members.⁵⁸ What that means in terms of marriage should already be clear, though the paradox it entails requires a little elaboration. I have argued elsewhere (Parry 1999a) that the cohesiveness of the work group makes the BSP shopfloor a kind of melting pot which dissolves the 'primordial' loyalties of caste, regional ethnicity and religious identity. But the implication of what I am saying here is that there is a kind of undertow that pulls against this tide. The instability of marriage is closely associated with the prevalence of intercaste unions. To the extent that BSP culture curbs that instability, it also reinforces the rule of endogamy and the separation of castes.

Back in Patripar, however, caste as an institution is becoming increasingly incoherent for increasing numbers of informal sector

do not wish to imply, however, that the BSP Counselling service has anything like such a sinister character as Ford's Sociology Department.

⁵⁸ I recognize that in principle one might postulate the opposite—that the outsiders acquire a more liberal outlook from their Chhattisgarhi work-mates. In practice, I believe the influence goes predominantly in the direction I have specified. This is because these values are increasingly regarded as superior by upwardly mobile Chhattisgarhis, and are associated with more powerful and prestigious groups.

families. It is true that, if castes perpetuate themselves patrilineally, the problem of intercaste marriage is in principle limited since the progeny are unambiguously assigned to the caste of their father. But limited is not erased. Kinship remains bilateral, and more and more individuals have close kin who belong to different castes. While in the past there were powerful sanctions which would have precluded the meaningful recognition of such kinship ties, that is no longer true. The separation of castes is subverted. Consider moreover the case of the young Patripar man whose father is a Sindhi refugee, whose mother is a local Satnami, and who has married a girl from the neighbourhood with a Maharashtrian father and a Chhattisgarhi Mahar mother. With grandparents of four different castes from three different regions, it is not easy to imagine what sense caste will make to their children. And though the numbers of such children is still limited, it is certainly growing.

On Intimacy and the Meaning of Marriage

At least for the labour aristocracy, marriage by contrast is changing—rather than losing—its meaning. Take Somvaru's family.⁵⁹ Somvaru himself is illiterate, started life as a carter and bullock trader, became a forklift truck-driver in the steel plant and has been married five times. His first wife put him off, he claims, by chewing tobacco. The second ran away with a lover after a couple of childless years, and the third was a witch. By the fourth he had four children; and when she died he took his present partner by whom he has three. Both of the latter brought with them an infant daughter by a previous husband, whom Somvaru raised and got married.

Janaki is his eldest child. Bright, ambitious and determined, she got herself educated and is now a teacher in a BSP school, is married to the Vice-Principal of another and lives in a comfortable modern house in a middle-class housing colony on the edge of Girvi. Janaki was fourteen when she married, and obviously put education to the same use as Penelope put tapestry. No *gauna* until it was done. Her first husband was uneducated, unlovable and impatient. And meanwhile Janaki had fallen for a senior student, her present husband.

⁵⁹ What follows is a much abbreviated version of a case history I develop in detail in a separate paper which is conceived as a companion piece to the present essay (Parry, forthcoming).

Tongues wagged and Somvaru was forced to fix her *gauna*. Janaki absconded, and only came home after her father had promised that he would not send her until she had all the degrees she desired. Her father-in-law then took Somvaru to court for depriving his son of a wife. And later, when Janaki had started to earn but was still an absentee spouse, he again went to court to make her pay maintenance to her unemployed husband.

Pramod—now a god-like engineer—is Janaki's husband's brother's son, but she brought him up. An eminently suitable boy. So suitable that it proved extraordinarily difficult to find a Satnami girl who was good enough. But when he was eventually married, his bride turned out to have a lover. Pramod filed divorce proceedings; the girl's family retaliated by registering a case of 'dowry torture'. Divorce still pending, the family decided that Pramod should remarry. The first wife's father got to hear of it and the police were tipped off that a bigamous marriage was about to be performed. But Janaki and her husband were also tipped-off about the police tip-off, and the new wife's parents filed a case against the first wife's father for criminal defamation.

Enough said to signal the way in which the state and the law have come to dominate the politics of marriage, and in which marriage has increasingly become an arena for status competition within the caste. More interesting is the shift in its meaning. For Somvaru, I judge it has little to do with intimate companionship, emotional empathy or shared tastes. It is above all an institutional arrangement for the bearing and raising of children, and for the management of the household economy. It is perhaps to be expected that Somvaru should after so many years look back on his own previous marriages with philosophical detachment. But the calm neutrality—almost indifference—with which many younger people from the bottom of the working class heap also talk about marital break-up is striking.

Somvaru has a favourite story—of a relative who one day returned from his shift to find that his wife had left him and gone to live with his closest friend. A couple of days later he came home to find that his friend's wife had moved in with him. Nothing was ever said about it between the two men and they continued their friendship as though nothing had happened. That, says Somvaru, is how one should be in such matters—'cold-brained'. One reason perhaps why this exemplary tale is so close to his heart is that it has some resonance with another, about which Somvaru himself is more reticent—though village gossip is not. He is reported to have had a long-

standing liaison with a divorced—but for him unmarriageable—affinal relative. With equally ‘cold-brained’ phlegmatism, he after some time arranged her marriage to a close friend and neighbour, a childless man whose fourth wife she became. Their relationship continued, to the apparent satisfaction of both men—until, that is, the affair became a scandal. The lovers remained lovers, and the husband acquired a longed-for son.

‘Cold-brained’ is not, however, remotely the way in which either Janaki or Pramod talk of their marital tribulations. For them the conjugal relationship clearly carries a much heavier emotional freight, and the psychological costs of marital breakdown have increased accordingly. No longer merely a matter of the satisfactory discharge of marital duties, that relationship is now a bond between two intimate selves.

It is, I concede, likely that the desire for intimacy in marriage was always to some extent present—on the part of *women* especially. That at least is what is suggested by Kakar’s discussion of the hankering which Delhi slum women express with their dream being ‘a couple’ (*jori*) (1990: chapter 5); and by Raheja and Gold’s analysis of the oral traditions of rural women, which emphasize the ideal closeness of husband–wife at the expense of inter-generational hierarchy within the household (1994: chapter 4). What seems to me new, however, is that what had formerly existed in a semi-submerged form, as an ‘alternative discourse’, has—in the upper echelons of the industrial working class—now moved more centre stage, and been progressively appropriated by *men*.

Prof. Giddens is right. There *is* a new ideological stress on the couple and their relationship. In upwardly mobile BSP families in Girvi and Patripar, suicides triggered by frustrated romantic attachments are now almost an epidemic.⁶⁰ In Somvaru’s old-style village house there is no separate space for the couple. Janaki and her husband have a private bedroom, dominated by what in village eyes is almost a pornographic object—a large double bed. When they are finally assigned a Company quarter, a significant number of young

⁶⁰ A particularly tragic instance from a neighbourhood adjoining Patripar was recently reported in the international press (*The New York Times International*, 24th April, 2000). Four sisters, aged between 16 and 24, the daughters of a Hindu–Muslim couple, had hanged themselves from the rafters of their hut—in apparent despair at their marriage prospects. It seems, however, that the problem was not an absolute want of offers, but the quality of those that had come. The eldest sister had recently rejected two proposals of marriage.

BSP couples move out of these peri-urban neighbourhoods, and away from the husband's parents, to live in the Township. There they are forced on each other's society with a new intensity, and even if their decision to move was not directly born of a desire for greater intimacy, their changed circumstances are likely to encourage its development.

I recently saw Subhash Ghai's Coca-Cola-sponsored blockbuster *Taal* at the Venkateshvar Talkies. 'Marriage', says the heroine's first love, 'is not a contract or a festivity (*utsav*) . . . It is the mingling of two souls'. And as he magnanimously renounces her, his rival reflects that: 'an Indian girl does not become English by putting on English clothes. Her heart remains Indian and *she* can never leave her first love'. With the moist-eyed young steelworkers who filed out of the cinema with me this plainly struck a chord.

I invoke it here because this pre-eminently globalized product seems to capture something which Giddens' trajectory does not. The new ideological stress on the couple is accompanied, not by a new acknowledgement of the possibility of de-coupling, but by a new stress on the indissolubility of their relationship. Far from inspiring sexual emancipation, Coca-Cola and competition with Korean steel on the global market, which makes BSP increasingly conscious of its welfare costs, collude in promoting that message. And nor, of course, does the modern concern with the quality of the conjugal relationship imply its greater equality. Withdrawn from the labour force, BSP wives pay a price in individual autonomy for the greater stability of their marriages. That stability, moreover, arguably represents for both sexes (but particularly for women), a reduction in freedom of choice—not only about whether to stay married, but also about who to be married to. Despite the conventional sociological wisdom,⁶¹ a significant rise in the age of marriage has not been accompanied by any significant enhancement of the younger generation's 'right to choose' their (primary) marriage partners. Though it is true that 'modern' fathers now seek their child's *acquiescence* (it can generally be put no higher than that) to the spouse he has selected for them, it is in secondary marriages that individuals have 'traditionally' been permitted a more meaningful autonomy. But these are now increasingly discountenanced.

Given all this, and given that with regard to divorce the most globalized segment of Chhattisgarh's industrial working class has

⁶¹ Associated above all with Goode (1963), and seemingly supported by the Chinese evidence (Whyte and Parish 1984; Jankowiak 1993; Yan 1997).

caught the *downward* escalator, next time I meet him I must remember to reassure the man with the brief-case that he does not need to be rattled by all that he reads on the World Wide Web.

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