

Exploring the narrative of Indian women and their choices in Deepa Narayan's "Chup: Breaking the Silence About Indian Women."

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ABSTRACT

The Global perspective of India often categorizes it as a developing nation that is committed to preserving its rich tapestry of cultural and ethnic diversity. Yet, beneath this façade of progress lies a troubling reality: many individuals still cling to remnants of colonial-era ideologies that perpetuate gender inequality and inhibit women's full participation in the workforce. Discussions surrounding gender inequality in India frequently delve into existential questions, revealing deep-seated beliefs and societal norms that continue to influence personal and professional lives. In numerous Indian households, the idea of educating daughters is undervalued. Many families adhere to the belief that a woman's primary role is to serve her husband and nurture her family, leaving little room for aspirations beyond domestic responsibilities. When women dare to challenge these age-old notions, they are often met with skepticism and dismissiveness from their own families, reinforcing the cycle of gender bias. A pivotal contribution to this discourse comes from author Deepa Narayan, who conducted an enlightening interview with Meera, a dedicated scholar. In their conversation, Meera candidly reflects on the complexities of her career decision-making process and the resistance she faced from her family and society at large. Her experiences illuminate the broader struggles many women encounter as they navigate their ambitions in a landscape still marred by traditional beliefs. In addition to Meera's story, this paper incorporates insights from interviews with postgraduate students across various academic disciplines. These individuals share their own journeys of decision-making, recounting the emotional turbulence they experienced as they pursued their goals or found themselves recalibrating their life paths. Through these personal narratives, a more intricate picture of the challenges and triumphs of women in contemporary India emerges, highlighting both the progress made and the obstacles yet to overcome.

Keywords: Emotions, Domination, Gender Inequality, Interview. Opposition

1. INTRODUCTION

In ancient societies, the discrimination against females often commenced at birth, taking a grave form known as female infanticide. This tragic practice involved families opting to terminate pregnancies upon discovering the fetus's female sex, utilizing various methods available at the time. The preference for male offspring was deeply rooted in cultural, social, and economic factors, where sons were often viewed as bearers of family lineage and responsible for ancestral rites. This destructive practice saw a significant decline following the enactment of the **Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act in 1994**, which aimed to eliminate the misuse of prenatal diagnostic technologies to selectively abort female fetuses.

Throughout the last three decades, another troubling aspect of gender discrimination emerged with the prevalence of child marriages. Many young girls were wedded off before reaching their teenage years, often as a means to alleviate perceived financial burdens on their families or to ensure familial alliances. This early marriage system perpetuated a cycle of discrimination and oppression, as these young brides faced societal pressures to bear male children, further entrenching patriarchal values.

However, there has been a notable shift in this cycle of discrimination in recent years, reflecting a gradual transformation in societal attitudes towards gender. Nobel Laureate Prof. Amartya Sen. (Amartya Sen 2001) identified seven distinct types of gender inequality that persist in India, drawing attention to the multifaceted nature of these disparities. These inequalities are:

Mortality Inequality: This reflects the differential treatment of males and females in terms of healthcare and nutrition, leading to higher mortality rates among women.

Natality Inequality: This inequality highlights the preference for male children at birth, evident in practices such as female infanticide and sex-selective abortions.

Employment Inequality: Women often face barriers in the workforce, including discrimination in hiring, unequal pay for similar work, and limited opportunities for advancement.

Ownership Inequality: Women frequently lack ownership rights over property and assets, diminishing their economic independence and security.

Special Opportunity Inequality: This refers to disparities in access to education, vocational training, and skills development, leaving women underprepared for equal participation in the economy.

Basic Facility Inequality: Women often have limited access to essential services, including healthcare, sanitation, and education, affecting their quality of life and health outcomes.

Household Inequality: This encompasses inequality within domestic settings, where women may have diminished decision-making power and face unequal burden in domestic responsibilities

Together, these facets of gender inequality paint a comprehensive picture of the systemic challenges faced by women in India, underscoring the urgent need for continued advocacy and reform to foster an environment where gender equality is truly realized.

PURPOSE OF THE INTERVIEW

An extensive interview was conducted across a variety of locations, designed to capture a diverse range of perspectives on educational experiences among women. The participants included a mix of current students who are pursuing higher education and those who have successfully completed their studies.

Throughout the interviews, many women articulated a recurring theme regarding their decision-making experiences, particularly in significant life choices. They expressed a feeling that their opinions and preferences were often overlooked or dismissed in critical situations, which left them feeling marginalized.

One of the most prevalent concerns raised during the discussions was centered around the question of "What should I study?" Many women revealed that they felt pressure from their parents to choose specific educational paths. This pressure often stemmed from a fear of societal judgment and expectations regarding career success and stability. Participants shared anecdotes about being guided toward fields that were perceived as more prestigious or financially rewarding, despite their own interests and aspirations lying elsewhere.

As the interviews progressed, several participants opened up about the rejections they encountered throughout their educational journeys—whether from family, peers, or societal norms. These experiences prompted deep reflections on their personal narratives and the constraints they faced. The conversations highlighted not only the challenges of navigating educational choices but also the broader implications on their sense of identity and empowerment in a society that often places restrictions on women's educational and professional ambitions. Overall, the interviews shed light on the complex intersection of personal desires, familial expectations, and societal pressures that shape women's educational decisions and experiences.

2. REVIEW OF THE INTERVIEW BETWEEN DEEPA NARAYAN AND SCHOLAR MEERA

Women in developing societies frequently face significant challenges in articulating their desires and aspirations, primarily due to the weight of familial expectations and societal judgment. This is particularly pronounced when it comes to concerns for family reputation and the fear of older generations' reactions. Author Deepa Narayan highlights this struggle through the poignant story of Meera, a 25-year-old scholar actively pursuing her studies at Harvard.

At the tender age of 17, Meera held a deep fascination for Psychology and envisioned a future where she could explore the complexities of the human mind. However, her ambitions were met with staunch resistance from her father, who insisted that she follow in his footsteps and pursue a career in medicine. Through his eyes, this was not merely a direction for her to take; it was a legacy he wished to pass on. As a result of this pressure, Meera found herself enduring three weeks of relentless mental anguish and emotional turmoil, ultimately leading her to make a drastic decision—she left her hostel in search of freedom and clarity.

Her journey took her to Chennai, where she persevered against the odds and successfully secured admission to a program in Psychology. Yet, her victory came at a cost; she faced the harsh reality of being homeless in a bustling city. Unexpectedly, she found a support system among women working as sex workers, who were caring for their children during the night, displaying resilience and a sense of community. These women offered her shelter, nurturing her in a way that she hadn't anticipated.

When her family tracked her down with the assistance of law enforcement, Meera expressed a sense of safety and security within this unconventional living arrangement. While this might appear as a testament to her independence, it raises poignant questions regarding her understanding of familial love and concern. In my view, if Meera truly harbored a passion for Psychology, she might have considered various alternatives to her runaway. For instance, she could have sought to open a dialogue with her father about her aspirations and the implications of his expectations, rather than choosing a path of escape.

Moreover, when Meera articulated her feelings of safety in the company of sex workers, it is essential to consider the emotional toll this decision had on her family. Completely unaware of her situation, they might have feared for her wellbeing, imagining all the potential dangers lurking in the unknown. The essence of her father's protection was fundamentally about wanting the best for his daughter—a deep-seated instinct born from his own experiences. Rather than viewing his guidance as dominance, Meera's perception might stem from her own fears and the inability to voice her desires effectively.

In retrospect, Meera misjudged her father's actions, interpreting his sternness and insistence as domineering behavior rather than recognizing the underlying care and desire to provide her with opportunities he may have never had. This dynamic could have been improved had she found the courage to stand up to him during their discussions about her educational and career goals.

Sandiya, a 25-year-old preparing for her civil service exams, recently reflected on this narrative after reading the interview. She firmly believes that Meera's initial actions were misguided. Sandiya emphasized that Psychology encompasses much more than merely addressing mental health concerns like depression and stress; it is fundamentally about understanding one's environment and developing interpersonal skills. This leads to a critical question: if Meera was too apprehensive to communicate openly with her father, how could she realistically expect to handle the inevitable stresses and potential conflicts that might arise in her future career working with diverse patients?

Both Meera's journey and Sandiya's considerations illustrate the complex interplay between personal ambitions, familial pressures, and societal expectations that women often navigate in developing societies.

3. RESPONSES FROM THE INTERVIEW REGARDING THEIR EMOTIONS WHEN THEIR DECISIONS ARE DENIED.

Many girls aged 17 to 19 express that "equality is being questioned for women" when they see others in society freely pursuing their desires, while they feel controlled by their parents. Deepa Narayan discusses this perception of inequality in her book "Chup"

"... It was a small news item in the Times Of India. Justices P. Sathasivam and J.S. Khehar, in a ruling that justified the death penalty for a man in the killing of a seven-year-old boy wrote, 'The parents of the deceased had four children – three daughters and one son. Kidnapping the only male child was to induce maximum fear in the mind of his parents... Higher valuation of boys or one could say devaluation of girls, has been decreed by the Supreme Court of India. This deeper cultural story touches all of us without our conscious knowledge...'"

The paragraph above discusses the reasons behind certain societal issues. A deep-seated cultural belief persists in many places, including India, that women are inferior and lack understanding of the world. India is one of several Asian countries where this mindset has dominated, and in some areas, it continues to do so. **Thilagavathy, 24**, who is currently preparing for her Ph.D., responded to this discussion by stating that although the mindset of many Indian people remains similar to that of the 1990s, we cannot ignore the ways in which women are affected by the law. She noted that crimes have become a sphere where equality often appears—as the emotional impact of a murder is felt equally by the parents, regardless of whether the victim is a boy or a girl. This highlights the distinction between the act of murder and the quest for justice.

When I asked her if her parents had ever rejected her decisions, she shared a personal experience that related to both the previous and current topics. After completing her secondary studies, she tried to convince her father that she was interested in literature and computer studies and wanted to pursue Commerce. However, her father insisted that she study Medicine, so she was forced to take Science in her higher secondary education.

In 2017, a girl's suicide related to the NEET exams gained widespread attention. Following this incident, Thilagavathy's father vowed not to allow her to pursue a medical career if it made her feel suppressed. She pointed out that parents often express their concerns in such ways. Nowadays, no parent wants to view their daughters as burdens. In light of this mentality, when a young boy is kidnapped and killed, the emotional response from the parents would be the same if a girl were to suffer the same fate. Thilagavathy expressed regret over having studied aimlessly during her higher secondary school years, but she is now working to make up for that time by achieving each milestone in her academic journey.

Lakshita, 23, is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Computer Science. She mentioned that many people still hold traditional views, particularly regarding gender roles. In the past, it was commonly believed that women were inferior both physically and in terms of opportunities. As a result, men often took women's efforts for granted.

However, Lakshita believes that the situation has changed significantly. When I asked her about a decision that had been rejected and affected her emotionally, she shared her experience after completing secondary school. She initially wanted to

pursue Mechanical Engineering, but her parents insisted that such fields were meant for men and encouraged her to study for NEET instead. Although she successfully passed NEET, she realized that she had little interest in the medical field, which stressed her out. Instead, she completed a Bachelor's degree in Commerce with a focus on Finance, followed by a Master's in Arts and an MBA, and is now pursuing a Ph.D.

When I inquired if she regretted not becoming a Mechanical Engineer, Lakshita acknowledged that while she does have some regrets, she is proud of her accomplishments in the fields she chose. She emphasized that education should be viewed equally, regardless of gender, and believes that societal attitudes need to evolve. She noted that the mindset around gender roles still reflects outdated views, reminiscent of the colonial period.

Some women in society who get granted for everything destroy anything she get granted for other women. **Aafina, 26**, currently pursuing PhD accept the saying '*A woman's worst enemy is no one but another woman.*' Aafina explains that after she completed her secondary studies she wanted to take the Science field to pursue Medical, but his father stood against her decision. Unlike others, to make her accept he doesn't speak with her for three months. Being the sole breadwinner of his family, he didn't give money to his family for three whole months because of her determination and adamant. Finally, she gave up and chose Commerce. After completing her higher secondary studies her father forced her to take Literature. This was a big shock since she completed her schooling in her native language. She decided to pursue CA, but her father doesn't give heed to her requests. Doesn't want to go to the same situation. She managed to learn the language and finished her UG. When she wanted to pursue PG her father didn't want her to do. Here she stood adamant and determined. Her mother and her aunt supported her till the end and completed her PG and pursued a Ph.D.

During a recent conversation with Aanifa, I delved into her feelings about her father's dominating presence in her life. Initially, she expressed that his dominance didn't significantly affect her emotions until an incident sparked a profound realization within her. The turning point came when her aunt's sister-in-law voiced her hesitation to pursue higher education in a different town after graduation. The sister-in-law harboured concerns that opting for studies away from home could tarnish her reputation in the marriage market, a sentiment that resonated all too deeply with Aanifa.

This revelation acted as a catalyst, unearthing a torrent of suppressed emotions that Aanifa had been grappling with for years. The weight of her father's overbearing influence bore down on her, and in a moment of despair, she felt compelled to articulate her anguish through a heartfelt suicide letter. In it, she laid bare her struggles under her father's dominance, reaching out for understanding and relief.

Throughout this tumultuous period, her mother and aunt remained steadfast pillars of support, providing Aanifa with the encouragement she desperately needed. When I asked her if she harboured any regrets about the experiences that had shaped her, she resolutely answered in the negative. Rather than succumbing to the pressures she once feared, Aanifa turned her challenges into stepping stones, ultimately achieving remarkable successes that even her aunt's sister-in-law could never have envisioned for her. Through determination and resilience, she not only reclaimed her identity but also proved that she could rise above the constraints placed upon her.

4. CONCLUSION

The interviews conducted with a diverse group of individuals shed light on a noteworthy trend: women today are increasingly embracing optimism. This shift in perspective is especially significant considering the numerous challenges they face in various aspects of life. Despite these obstacles, many women demonstrate remarkable resilience, showcasing their ability to navigate and overcome struggles that come their way.

However, it's important to acknowledge that historically, women have often been constrained in their ability to make independent choices. This lack of freedom has roots that stretch back to their early education and persists throughout the various stages of their lives. The narrative shared by Deepa Narayan in her interview with Meera encapsulates this ongoing struggle, while also emphasizing Meera's resolute determination to forge her own path.

In Meera's story, we see a clear illustration of this commitment. Rather than succumbing to the pressure and challenges of her environment, which might have led others to seek an escape, Meera chose to stay and confront her circumstances head-on. She dedicated herself to her studies and her personal growth, illustrating the strength of her character and her desire to achieve her goals. This determination serves as an inspiring example for many, showing that with perseverance and a strong will, it is possible to pursue one's dreams, even in the face of difficulties.

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