

From Ghoonghat to De Beauvoir: Finding a Feminist Voice through Ethnography

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Abstract

Questions of identity are central to anthropological studies. Likewise, the use of self-narrative as a resource has widened the scope for ethnographic research, becoming a form of participant-observer study. The author produces a narrative of the experiences of women in Marwadi communities in western India. The narrative examines the relationship between culture and identity for the purpose of achieving greater self-awareness. It explores the concept of veiling as a discriminatory practice and uses it as a metaphor for understanding wider gender issues. The study draws upon primary sources, such as oral history. Since memory is an important resource but is also selective in its veracity, the author supplements it with secondary sources that reflect on the dichotomy between communities, individuals, and gender. The central purpose of this personal ethnography is to understand the implications of ancestry and develop voice in the larger process of identification of oneself as a feminist.

Keywords

Self-narrative, culture, identity, gender, Marwadi, western India, ancestry, personal ethnography, feminist.

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An understanding of the notion of *self* is a task that calls for story-telling. The organizing of experiences into narrative helps us to develop identity, but it also demands reflection that leads to self-awareness. One's self is not just an entity but is actually a process that orchestrates personal experience into a storyline, an ongoing dialectic of experiences.

A woman's *self* is a gendered phenomenon premised on experiential identity. The secondary status of women in society can be observed in particular cultural settings, from cultural practices and gendered conceptions to symbols of female subordination.¹ Even though the role of women in a society and their relative power vary in different traditions and times,

understanding their position as 'the Other' is essential to develop the notion of the *self*.

A key aspect of the subordination of women is the assumption of patriarchal society being the 'natural order of things'. While ideas of self and identity stem from cultural beliefs, attributed reasoning for gender roles claim the inferiority of women to be a product of *nature*. This attribution is especially true in the context of gender and sexuality, where, for example, ideas about homosexuality have been characterized by traditionalists as 'un-natural'. In this way, such claims give a seemingly scientific veneer to cultural bias.

Big historians Nobuo Tsujimura and Hirofumi Katayama propose that scholars adopt a more holistic approach.² This implies that we need to break out

of categorical and fragmented thinking to achieve a larger reality. It includes the understanding of our world beyond anthropocentric ways. By understanding gender as a phenomenon in human societies and the animal kingdom, I seek to transcend categorical thinking as characterised by religions, politics and cultures, so as to bring to the forefront an awareness of connectivity.

This is more than just an academic concern. I belong to the Marwadi ethnic group in India, so my objective is also to explore the formation of my own identity as a feminist by investigating the gendered practices of our community. Through an analysis of the practice of veiling as a metaphor for seclusion and subjugation among the Marwadi, I aim to understand the social complexity of larger gendered phenomenon and contest the basis of its universal and seemingly natural logic.

Darwinian Evolution:

From Biological Differences to the Gender Binary

Beyond traditionalist forms of gender inequality, Darwin's theory of evolution contributed to relegating women to an inferior position in society. It provided a seemingly scientific and rational account of women's roles, such that 'natural' differences between males and females were seen to be the result of evolution, in a process that rendered males biologically and intellectually superior.³

The concept of female inferiority was a direct outcome of Darwin's model of sexual selection, which lies at the centre of his evolutionary theory. Darwin stated that, in the process of mating, males actively compete to prove their intellectual and physical superiority, while females are just passive recipients. Therefore, sexual selection worked on two levels – the competition between males to pass on the fittest genes and the female choice of a mate. In Darwin's conceptualization, sexual selection is the struggle of active males for the possession of passive females.

The biological differences between males and females in a binary scheme of inferior and superior

categories also appeared in Darwin's discussion of anthropomorphic models in *The Descent of Man*. He asserted that 'savages', who were said to possess smaller brains and whose lives were dominated by instinct rather than reason, were at a similar level as women. This extension was premised on the argument that women's power of intuition and rapid perception were characteristics of lower races.⁴ The later-evolved gap between male and female in 'civilized' societies led some scientists to classify the sexes as two distinctive 'psychological species', males as *homo frontalis* and females as *homo parietalis*.⁵

Darwin's extrapolation of biological differences into differences of social power-dynamics led to a binary understanding of gender that compartmentalised males as the epitome of intellectual and physical strength and females as sexually coy, submissive, and docile. The concepts concluded that males and females obey universal templates and that deviations from these templates are abnormal. Moving from his discussion of peacocks to people, Darwin concluded that equality was a scientific impossibility, due to the naturally disadvantaged position occupied by females.

Over the years, researchers have come to see that this sexual selection model is inadequate for addressing real-world animal diversity. They point out that Darwin erroneously extrapolated his observations of particular species to formulate universal gendered norms and that it is necessary to place his understanding of sexual selection and its social impact on gender within the contextual framework of the Victorian era. For example, his view of the power dynamics between males and females stemmed from biological determinism, which Victorians tended to see as an inescapable outcome of nature. Darwin's model of sexual selection became so influential that scientists of his day considered the opposing literature to be of minor importance. However, many academics today challenge his model by asserting that it stemmed from his existing binary understanding of gender. The absence of counter examples in his theory not only neglected real world animal diversity, but also

indicated a tendency to focus solely on the instances that substantiated his thesis. As a result, his research is not only charged with confirmation bias, but is also criticized for compounding the gender problem.⁶

A lot of more detailed and wider-ranging research has been done since the time of Darwin, including on the varieties of gender expression. A primary assumption that has been challenged is the belief that an organism is solely male or female for life. Modern researchers have shown that the most common body form among plants and half of the animal kingdom is for an individual to be both male and female, at least at different points in their life cycle. In alligators and crocodiles, as well as for some turtles and lizards, sex is determined by the temperature at which eggs are raised. Another antiquated assumption was that only females give birth. In some species, however, females deposit eggs in the pouch of the male, who incubate them until birth. It was also a commonly held view that males have XY chromosomes, while females have XX. In birds, the reverse is true, and, in others, males and females have no difference in chromosomes.

Other mistaken notions included the existence of only two genders, corresponding to two sexes, such that males have penises, females lactate, and males control females. Research has since shown the existence of three or more genders, with organs of each sex that have the ability to occur in two or more forms. In the spotted hyena, females have a penis-like structure, while, for the fruit bat of Malaysia and Borneo, males have lactating mammary glands. In other species, females control males and the mating interaction – the notion of female passivity and male superiority is reversed. Moreover, there are species in which females do not prefer a dominant male and, often, lifelong monogamy for both sexes is rare.⁷

These assumptions have led to a gender binary that assumes the qualities that define male and female are compartmentalized, innate, and based entirely on their sex. Not only are these beliefs inconsistent with real-world diversity, but exceptions or outliers that ought to have been excluded have been presented as a norm.

While Darwin may not have foreseen the influence of his scientific work on society, his theory of sexual selection and beliefs about gender has had a significant impact on society.⁸

Gender dynamics also impacted the way in which women conceived of their own identity. Some women identified themselves as a lower order, compared to men, and believed these qualities to be innate. This implied that women themselves conformed to the idea that education and greater political representation could do little to modify their *innate* nature. Some stated they were better *fitted* to subjects such as chemistry or botany that required ‘a capacity for noting details with patience and delicacy.’⁹ The common belief upholding the gender binary was that biology, rather than social conditioning, was the primary source of social power-structures. Attributing it to nature validated these beliefs by neglecting the critical influence of culture, family, environment, societal norms, and the fact that, in Darwin’s time, few occupational and intellectual opportunities existed for women.

This situation was not looked on as an unfavourable outcome of the gender binary, but instead as a reason for it. One of the major factors that women were defined as the ‘other’ is because their social role in Darwin’s time was largely restricted to childrearing and housekeeping. Constraints on education and employment by law and custom led to erroneous comparisons between male and female abilities.¹⁰ Given the amount of contrasting literature that has emerged since then, it is important to reassess the still existing beliefs concerning gender roles. Even if sexual selection were to operate differently on males and females, males would pass on their apparently superior genes to both sons and daughters. Moreover, the offspring, specifically the male offspring, receive genes from both the parents.¹¹

Beyond a modern reassessment of the gender binary in the animal kingdom, human societies and their cultures also need reassessment in respect to the lower values placed on women. The process of *mutualization*, as articulated by Big Historians, is one

that leads to greater awareness of the relationships between human and non-human worlds. This helps us to assess the entirety of our existence and shows the liberating potential of establishing harmonious societies.¹² In that light, I now turn to examine my own community, the *Marwadi* of India, which expresses its own patriarchal power-structure through the practice of *ghoonghat* or veiling.

History of Veiling

The custom of *veiling* encompasses a variety of clothing styles, from headscarves and face veils to all-encompassing face and body garments. Veiling was a political statement denoting the status of an individual in ancient Persian, Mesopotamian, Greco-Roman, and Byzantine civilizations. For Assyrians, veiling had class as well as gender implications: Ancient Assyrian law required veiling for upper-class women but punished commoners for it.¹³

While popular references to veiling are today most often made to Islamic traditions, it also was a custom actively practiced by Christians and Jews – a common tradition of Abrahamic societies. Veils were worn during prayers as a symbol of submission and humility in the presence of God. Various representations of the Virgin Mary show her veiled, and this tradition is cherished by some Catholic nuns today. Moreover, since Roman times, brides have donned veils as a symbol of purity and chastity.

In Islam, veiling as a concept was introduced by the wives of the Prophet Muhammad, who covered their faces to distinguish themselves from other Islamic followers. There are two types of veils recognized in Islam, the *khimar* (headscarf) and the *jilbab* (robe). Although both predated Islam, the *jilbab* connotes respect and status, while also serving as an apparel of modesty and privacy. The practice of veiling gathered momentum after the death of Prophet Mohammed, when Islamic Arab communities wore black or white veils to distinguish themselves from the Christian blues and Jewish yellows.¹⁴ Under the Ottoman Empire in the 17th century, the veil became a symbol of rank and

wealth, but women in rural areas were slower to adopt it because it interfered with their work in the fields.

Veiling has deep historical ties across cultural communities. Its historical significance was premised on securing the modesty and sanctity of women, based on religious or cultural notions of gender roles. Veiling is but one of the many cultural practices that are rooted in the patriarchal compartmentalization of gender roles. Another practice, for example, is female genital mutilation, or removal of external female genitalia, most common in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.¹⁵

While female genital mutilation is said to have originated with the *pharaohs* in Ancient Egypt, it was also practiced in different parts of Africa, the Philippines, certain tribes in the Upper Amazon, in the Arunta tribe in Australia, as well as by early Romans and Arabs. In various cultures, FGM is known as an initiation and considered to mark a girl's passage to womanhood.¹⁶ In an attempt to curb female sexuality, the practice succeeds by preventing women from indulging in 'illicit sexual activities'. The logic of the practice is thus embedded in notions of purity and chastity inherently associated with womanhood in most cultures.

The maintenance of these patriarchal structures depends greatly on the secondary status of women. Some cultures preserved these practices by embedding them within the logic of mythology, which rationalizes the subjugation of women and manifests itself in even modern-day traditions. Anthropologist Sada Mire writes:

Some key Somali rituals revolve around fertility and kinship. Hence, in the context of Somali fertility rites, myths are pervasive. The landscape and objects give existence to ancient deities and unite with the suffering of women.¹⁷

The veil and other such gendered practices are traditions connotative of the underlying status of

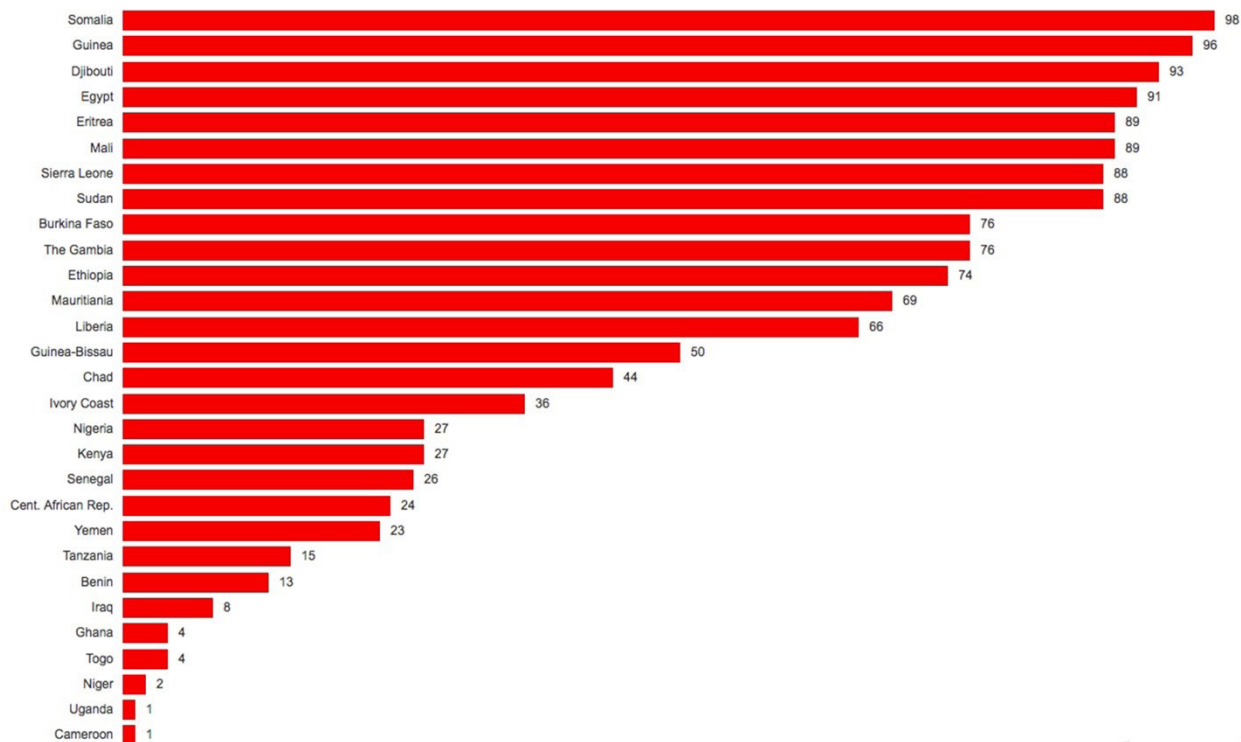


Figure 1: Prevalence of female genital mutilation in different countries.

Source: UNICEF, 2014, reported in Sarah Boseley, 'What is Female Genital Mutilation and Where Does it Happen?', *The Guardian*, 6 February 2014.

females as 'the Other'. In many ways, these practices are cultural artefacts that act as metaphors of seclusion for the female identity.

Movement Away from the Veil

The class and rank connotations of veiling persisted up until the last century, when more privileged women began rejecting the practice, while women belonging to lower classes began adopting it as a symbol of upward mobility. In that light, the movement away from veiling was a socio-economic phenomenon.

Being the drivers of the world order in colonial periods, European and other Western nations prospered significantly, leading to higher standards of living and educational levels. Among the first to reflect on *modernity* and *rationality* vis-à-vis existing traditions, these communities began to question the premise of veiling and identified it as a form of patriarchal seclusion of women from the public sphere. The

recognition of the veil as a construct and not a mandate from God further contributed to its decline.

The anti-veiling movement also gained momentum outside of the West. In nineteenth-century Egypt, Qasim Amin, a leader of feminist thought in the Arab world, argued that the veil only served to restrict the productive capacity of women.¹⁸ Late-nineteenth to early-twentieth-century colonial discourse also depicted the repression of women by traditional societies as an example of Western superiority. Shaarawi cast off her veil by calling it the biggest obstacle to women's engagement in public life.¹⁹ These actions were followed by feminists in Lebanon, Syria and Tunisia.

A major decline of veiling came when individuals began to recognize it as a form of gender discrimination. Many also argue that the decline was a side-effect of independence movements. Educator Leila Ahmed contends that, even though gendered practices and

customs such as veiling are an indication of inequality, colonizers used it to further their self-interest and establish Western superiority.²⁰ She writes:

When it comes to items of clothing, be it bloomers or bras, clothes have briefly figured as focusses of contention and symbols of feminist struggle in Western societies. It was at least Western feminist women who were responsible for identifying the item in question as significant and defining it as a site of struggle and not, as has sadly been the case with Muslim women, colonial and patriarchal men... who declared it important to the feminist struggle.²¹

In the context of democratization, veiling is seen to be an issue in deciding which values and cultural practices are deemed acceptable to a democratic nation. The simple act of unveiling cannot be considered a movement towards gender equality if it violates a woman's right to choose. What feminists from all over the world are trying to establish is that the decline of the veil comes dangerously close to a colonial and patriarchal agenda. Labelling the practice as unequal on behalf of instead of with the women who practice it can be problematic. Therefore, I try to understand the thoughts and feelings of Marwadi women who wear the veil even today.

Women and the Marwadi Community

The Marwadis are one of the ethno-linguistic communities of India. Originally from Jodhpur, Rajasthan, the Marwadis have come to be associated with other sub-cultures because of their specific job specializations pertaining to commercial and trade.

Marwadi women do not tend to be well educated, compared to women of other ethnic groups, even among wealthier families. If they are exposed to advanced education at all, they are often urged to study subjects like Home Science or Hindi Literature, subjects that would not pave the way for a career outside of the

home. Some Marwadi women have creatively taken part in the public sphere, such as volunteer work or running a small business. However, this calculated freedom is based on the idea that it would not shrink the focus on their domestic responsibility. The main duty of a Marwadi woman is to provide a stable household for her husband, sons, fathers, brothers and in-laws – men who dominate the world of business, trade, and the public sector.²²

Nonetheless, Marwadi women have increasingly obtained higher levels of education and a small percentage of them have achieved a more active part in public life by taking entrepreneurial positions in their family businesses. However, this is done only by not compromising a family's reputation by working for others, which would imply that a family is suffering from financial hardship. Even among these Marwadi female entrepreneurs, it would be hard to find women who identify themselves as feminists. They continue to hold traditional beliefs about gender roles that are at odds with the global feminist movement. One such belief that has managed to sustain itself is the idea of veiling in the Indian context.

Veiling as a Metaphor in the Marwadi Community

The Marwadi custom of *ghoonghat* is an essentially premised on the commodification of women. The *ghoonghat* is a veil worn by a married Hindu woman of the Marwadi. The loose end of the sari or a duppatta (long scarf) is pulled over the head and face of a woman. This acts as a headscarf (*ghoonghat*). Etymologically, the term stems from the Sanskrit term *avagunthana*, meaning to 'cover' or 'hide'. The significance of the *ghoonghat* is based on the logic of protecting the *laaj* (modesty, honor and shame) of a woman.

During marriage rituals, a bride wears the *ghoonghat*, which is provided by both her parents and her in-laws as a symbol of trading one family's protection to another. A post-wedding ceremony then introduces the bride to her new family and uses the custom of *ghoonghat* to perpetuate restrictive ideas of gender. As each family member lifts the *ghoonghat* of the bride,

she is rewarded for her beauty. Additionally, the bride continues to wear the *ghoonghat* as a form of showing respect to her in-laws.



Image 1:
Rashmi Mathur
(the author's
mother)
wearing a
ghoonghat at her
wedding,
Jodhpur, Rajasthan,
6 October 1996.

Source: Rashmi
Mathur wedding
album.



Image 2: Marwadi women (author's aunts) at the
wedding, Jodhpur, Rajasthan, 6 October 1996.
Source: Rashmi and Ajay Mathur wedding album.

In Marwadi communities, physical space and gender are linked in everyday life. The practice of veiling has contributed to the designation of urban and ritual spaces as not only being public or private but also as social zones for gendered interaction. It is important to understand the intricacies of these compartmentalized

domains, as they provide a framework for constructing and facilitating gender roles.

For instance, Marwadi women observe the *ghoonghat* predominantly in the house of their in-laws. These include the mother-in-law, father-in-law, and other older male and female relatives of her husband. In extreme cases, 'observing' the *ghoonghat* translates into not being seen at all, resulting in the daughter-in-law hiding behind doors or curtains. The practice of *ghoonghat* does not translate into a mere physical covering of the woman but also dictates her interactions and self-expression.

In complying with the tradition of a *ghoonghat*, the daughter-in-law is also expected to veil her voice. This implies restrictions on the expression of her thoughts and opinions in the presence of her in-laws. In this way, veiling enforces familial hierarchy and female subjugation in the name of 'modesty'. This shows that 'public' and 'private' are not distinctions tied to the nature of the space itself but more to the gendered interaction of kinship. Thus, veiling in Marwadi communities produces a complex sense of space based on a woman's kin relationship to that space.²³

My mother, Rashmi Mathur, commented upon how changes in kinship after marriage affected her experience of being a woman.²⁴

Shaadi ke baad sabse zyada farak rok-tok ki wajah se padhta hai. Mein kahin bhi apni saas ko puche bina nahi jaa sakti. Sab in-laws ke saamne ghoonghat mein rehna padhta hai. Zyada bolne aur karne ki bhi aazadi nahi hoti.

Translation: The one thing that changes the most after marriage is freedom. I can't go anywhere without consulting my mother-in-law. I have to wear a *ghoonghat* in front of all my in-laws. I do not have the freedom to do anything or say anything on my own.

The point she makes is that post-marital kinship destroys her individual freedom. Her actions, desires and mannerisms are dependent on the relationship she

Percentage of Hindu women practicing ghunghat, by age

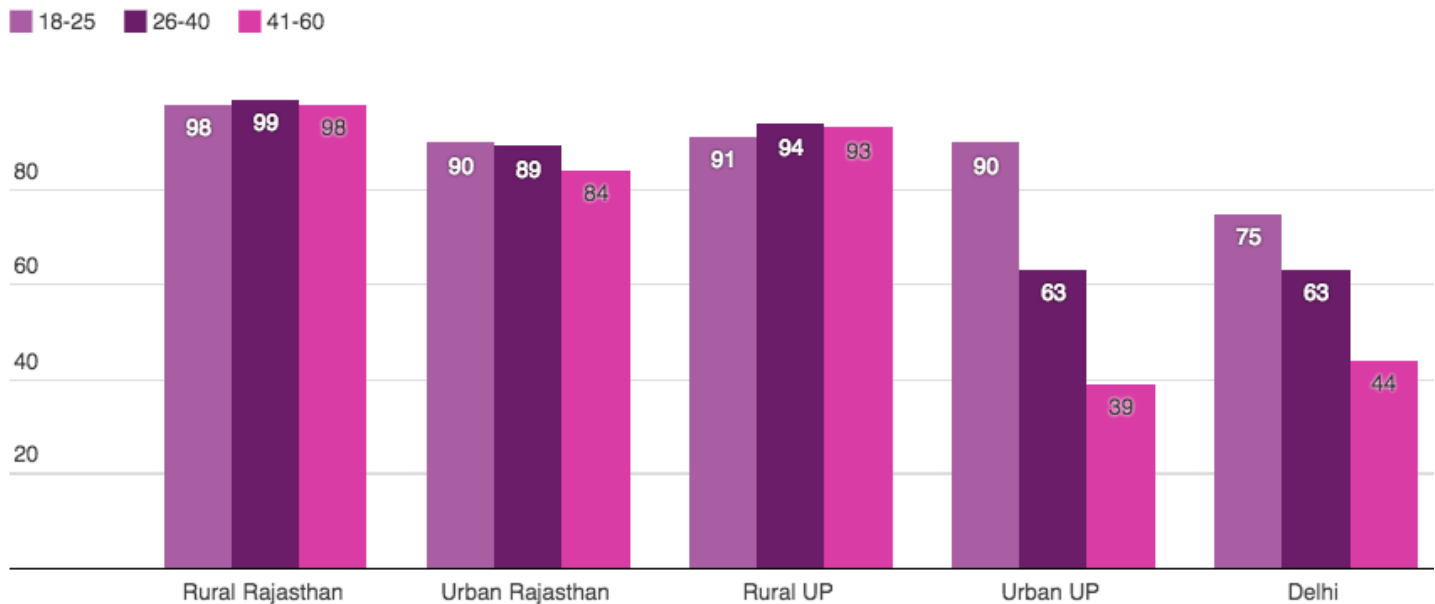


Figure 2: Prevalence of the practice of *ghoonghat*.

Source: Janhavi Sen, 'Understanding Prejudice: The Skewed Way Indians Still Think About Gender and Caste', *The Wire*, 11 January 2018, <<https://thewire.in/caste/caste-gender-prejudice-india-inter-caste-marriage>>.

has to her in-laws and male counterparts, such as her husband and father-in-law.

She also remarked on the extension of this deference to include males outside the family, a result of the expansion of the patriarchal Rajput community throughout India, including among the Marwadi. A community associated with ideas of warriorhood, the Rajputs ruled several kingdoms in Rajasthan and were army commanders of various rulers in pre-colonial India. This led to the proliferation and amalgamation of their ideas with those of the Marwadi. For instance, instead of the *ghoonghat*, the Rajputs use the notion of *purdah* to seclude women from public and political life. While the *ghoonghat* is an individual veil, *purdah* implies physical demarcation of areas specific for women by using screens, curtains, and even walls.

Rajputon ki wajah se bhi bahot farak padha hai. Jaise hi koi male in-law hamare saamne se nikalta tha, humein wahin neeche beth jaana tha respect dikhane ke liye.

Translation: The Marwadi culture has been impacted by the *Rajputs* insofar as whenever an older male member of the family or male in-law walks by a married Marwadi woman, she is expected to sit down to show respect.

As mentioned, the metaphor of veiling also secludes women from voicing their opinion after marriage. She states:

In-laws ke saamne zyada kuch bol nahi sakte. Har baat ko 'Ji hukum' kehke chup ho jaana hota hai. Zyada ghar-karche or kaam ke mamle mein baat karna allowed nahi hota.

Translation: You have to silence your voice in front of your in-laws and only restrict to responding with the words '*Ji Hukum*' which literally translates to 'Yes Sir.' In terms of property, work and expenditure, women have no say and are compelled to silence their opinions.

The idea of veiling also applies to seclusion of women from everyday family activities. Differential treatment of women during mealtimes is one of them. A Marwadi daughter-in-law is expected to wait until her husband and father-in-law finish their meals before serving herself – the public sphere is therefore defined by the presence of males. As with the practice of *ghoonghat*, this further serves to seclude women. Rashmi Mathur says:

Shaadi ke pehle jab marzi ho tak khaana kha sakte the. Lekin shaadi ke baad, sirf saas, sasur, husband aur baaki in-laws ke khaane ke baad hi kha sakte ho.

Translation: The freedom to eat as you please is taken away after marriage. One can only consume food after all the in-laws and the husband have eaten their share.

The primary understanding is that kinship and marriage are critical to understand how spaces are gendered through veiling.

Patriarchy of the Marwadi Community and Me

My father, Ajay Mathur, and my mother, Rashmi Mathur, both grew up in Jodhpur, Rajasthan. A distinct feature of Marwadi communities is the primacy given to kinship and community, and so they grew up into lives rooted in tradition. However, my father moved to Mumbai for work, and, after they married, they settled in the Goregaon suburb, a modern, middle-class neighborhood. As a result, they lived in a more heterogeneous society and were exposed to ideas not in accordance with tradition. I think the broadening of perspective played a significant role in my own non-traditional upbringing, but this change was not linear. It was gradual ... and is still is developing.

Like all children, I was susceptible to the internalizing of gender roles. My mother was never really a full person after she conceived me, as her efforts were reduced to glorifying motherliness as the highest goal of womanhood. I was told that academic

achievement was essential for professional success, but I came to understand that this expressed importance of education in a woman's life is only superficial. It was as though me and (by extension) other girls were being polished in school only to have a high cash value in the marriage market. As a result, instead of internalizing gender roles, my family life came to be a source of better understanding the artificial nature of social roles and their potential flexibility.

My relatives would talk about my father in high regard if he ever 'helped' my mother with domestic work. While helpfulness is praiseworthy, the descriptive language of help should be rebuffed if it is solely premised on gender roles. Nevertheless, I was exposed to ideas that assumed domestic work and caregiving to be domains occupied by women alone impacted the way in which I viewed every other woman, especially working women with children.

While growing up, I was always loved a little more, cared for a little more, protected a little more, and appreciated a little more. This tendency of being given 'a little more' was in contrast to my cousins, who were all boys. I do not think I quite understood why this was the case as a child, but I do recall my grandmother mentioning that a girl child must always be treated with special care. Naturally then, when I was 'protected' from playing sports and told to cultivate a more *feminine* hobby like dancing, I thought it was in my best interest, or worse, I thought this is what girls were supposed to do.

The problem with such inherently oppressive ideas of womanhood was that I was perpetually confused about my standing in the system. On one hand, I saw my educated mother willingly compromise her professional growth to be a caregiver, while on the other, I was being praised for my professional aspirations. I was privy to conversations about my future marriage as an ultimate achievement and, while my male cousins were always asked about their career plans, my worth was measured against the number of dishes I could cook. Conditioning girls to aspire to marriage and young boys to professional excellence creates an imbalance from the start. As a result, a

marital relationship is far from ideal because the institution is valued more by one gender than by the other.

By virtue of residing in a cosmopolitan urban space like Mumbai, veiling was a phenomenon that I understood only when visiting our hometown in Jodhpur. My mother observed the *ghoonghat* only in the presence of her in-laws in Marwadi spaces. It was an implicit understanding that veiling was a custom restored in the presence of orthodoxy. Although veiling in the form of *ghoonghat* was never demanded of me, I was expected to 'cover' myself, depending on the nature of the space. This implied that, while I was never veiled in the name of tradition, the idea of 'modesty' was imbibed through restrictions on clothing in the presence of orthodox family members. The notion of physically covering a woman's body has resurfaced as a more modern-day clothing restriction in the lives of urban women.

Even though I am not expected to alter my clothes or my voice or forgo agency within the safe space of my immediate family, that is not the case when I travel to places like Jodhpur or Jaipur. The closer I am to the Marwadi community and my extended family, the more I am expected to adhere to traditional ideas of womanhood. This substantiates the idea that the closer the Marwadi communities live, the more complex the gender dynamics are, with little room for independence of women.

Reflection and Analysis

My childhood, pleasant as it was, was filled with contradictory experience, ones sometimes overtly and sometimes subtly sexist. These experiences are characteristic of patriarchal societies all around the world, so I have found anthropologist Sherry Ortner's analysis of gender, nature and culture to be helpful in understanding them. The core argument of her famous article, 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?' (1972), is that the subjugation of women results from cultural distortions of social institutions.²⁵

As Ortner addresses it, *nature* is seen by modern, cosmopolitan society as inferior to *culture*, since

nature just passively exists, while culture is humanity's way of transformation. This notion goes back to nineteenth-century biological determinism, discussed earlier in my paper, a notion that resulted in the gender-binary social system. Female physiology has been interpreted by male society to be closer to nature, because of women's greater bodily involvement with reproduction. But, as Ortner notes, differences of 'superior' and 'inferior' only exist within culturally defined value systems; it is human society that has culturally restricted women's social roles and placed limits on their social mobility.

In other words, culture has the capacity to *socialize* views of nature, which it has done to the disadvantage of women. Men have become proprietors of the public sphere – ritual, politics, and regulation. It is not just the bodily processes of women that men have identified as inferior but also the locations in which those processes take place. Female space is negatively compartmentalized, while the male's public sphere is interpreted as a higher, more important form of existence, because of its inter-familial, integrative and universalistic concerns.

The practise of *ghoonghat* is part of this sexist discrimination, since it is based on the gender binary and confines women to a domestic sphere. Marwadi communities restrict women's participation in society through veiling, which controls a woman's ability to participate equally in political life, claim rights to resources, exercise volition, and fulfill their complete agency.

Change and Society

It is important to understand how societies can develop a better understanding of gender roles and gendered cultural practices. When societies began recognizing gender histories, the modalities of power became more evident. Varied degrees of female subjugation exist in every type of structure; gender issues are extremely profound. To be able to tackle this pervasive problem is one of the sentiments shared by visionaries in the field of big history.

In their attempt to pave a more activist path for the

future, Nobuo Tsujimura, Hirofumi Katayama and Barry Rodrigue of the Asian Big History Association encourage individuals to find, reimagine, build and sustain a new reality. This idea has been a driving force for me to reimagine cultural reality and develop my voice, as reflected in their following observation:

If you don't fit in with the old world, old custom and old roads, you can walk in a new direction where nobody walks. You can find, live and cherish a new reality by yourself.²⁶

While the objective of this paper is to assess the underlying logic of subjugation and see the potential for change, it is important to note that change is complex. The subjugation of women is a construct of culture and not a fact of nature, which makes the implications for social change circular. This implies that a different cultural view can only arise out of a different social actuality and vice-versa. Just transforming institutions (voting, quotas, equal pay) will not by themselves change cultural norms. Likewise, just raising consciousness, revising educational material or altering mass-media imagery will not be successful unless there is corresponding institutional change to safeguard and reinforce a changed view.²⁷

The two-fold interaction needed to address change for women is well enunciated in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949).²⁸ In it, she argued for changes to social and institutional structures, such as access to equal education, contraception, abortion, and economic freedom. These systemic changes then become a basis for philosophical liberation, when one advocates for freedom and defines its essence. The way in which de Beauvoir established the relationship between structural changes and changes in socialization is a remarkable feminist insight. Structural change devoid of socialization makes women complicit in their own subjugation, due of lack of knowledge and understanding, but socialization without structural change limits self expression.

One of de Beauvoir's important insights lies in understanding the relationship between dependency

and inequality. Her focus on providing women with productive labour opportunities and autonomy of work seeks to decrease a woman's dependence and demands that she embrace her freedom of choice. Independence is not just construed as a result of liberation but also as a process that leads to equality.

In this way, I find de Beauvoir's strategies and my proposals for the independence of women are very much in keeping with the commercial heritage and ideals embodied by the Marwadi community, although expanded to include all its members, not just its males. Thus, I am happy to find myself part of an ancestral legacy, but in a modern, transformative way and on a global scale.

Conclusion

Astronaut and physician Roberta Bondar describes a time without any boundaries in her discussion of big history.²⁹ She describes how the natural environment was understood as interconnected in earlier times. However, in an attempt to sustain and foster more sophisticated societies, human beings developed political boundaries to segregate societies and disciplines. In this process, we lost our connectedness to the natural world. Extrapolating this understanding to the concept of gender, it can be said that the development of boundaries in the form of gender binaries have led us astray from our inherent interconnectedness. Human beings need to revisit our fundamental connection to the natural world so as to eliminate the gender binary. This will not only bring about change in an oppressive cultural system, but also rebuild and deepen our connection with our natural environment.

I have used what big historian Barry Rodrigue calls a 'telescoping perspective'.³⁰ His vision for big history is one that approaches issues on a micro as well as macro level. Understanding the particular gendered practices in various cultures and doing a microanalysis of gender in the Marwadi community has equipped me with the tools of extrapolating it to a more universal gender problem, indeed a human problem. This connection not only addresses the challenge globally

but also provides an insight into our larger existence.

My aim is not purely academic. I wish to see genuine change. To that end, taking a big history approach has not only rendered my study more holistic and interdisciplinary, but it has created a liberating process. By assessing the deeply engrained roots of female subordination and then re-envisioning its framework led me to emancipatory ideas about ourselves and our identity as a continuum. Therefore, adopting a big history approach leads to an empowering message that deepens the understanding of our relationship with ourselves and our nature.

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Endnotes

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