

## **The Modern Indian City Women**

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## Introduction

“One of the most enduring clichés about India is that it is a country of contradictions. Like all clichés, this one too has a grain of truth in it. At the heart of the contradiction stand Indian women: for it is true to say that they are among the most oppressed in the world, and it is equally true to say that they are among the most liberated, the most articulate and perhaps even the most free. Can these two realities be simultaneously true?”<sup>1</sup>

10 I want to prove whether these prejudices, which I share, are true or just a misunderstanding of the Indian culture.

The contemporary situation of women in the cities, especially on the background of their traditional status in ancient India, is very paradoxical and therefore causes problems.

15 But, before writing about “the modern India city woman” I define the word “modern” to explain its meaning in this context.

“Modern means to be on the newest level/condition of social, scientific and technical developments.”<sup>2</sup>

20 On the basis of this definition it is necessary, when describing a modern city women’s life, to describe the current social development in India’s cities, especially for women.

I came to the conclusion that a “prototype” of a “modern city women” in India doesn’t exist. Therefore I decided to describe the life-styles of women which are, in India, considered a “modern”:

25 The city woman, the career woman and the single woman.

A question I’m interested in and which I hope to answer during my work is:

“Is the self-image of women in the Western countries and in India comparable or is it different? “

## 30 1. Forms of modern live-style

### 1.1. The city woman

Their status makes it very difficult for women to live in the City, because they are often exposed to sexual harassment and eve teasing (violence towards

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<sup>1</sup> Butalia, Urvashi: “Women’s movement in India”, www, p. 1

<sup>2</sup> Bertelsmann, vol.10, p. 147

women).<sup>3</sup> Behind the aggressive behaviour of men towards women stands the wide spread attitude that “women are less worth and depend on men.”<sup>4</sup> This attitude causes many acts of violence against women and makes life sometimes torturous.

5 Considering their status in the past, women’s status in contemporary India is conflicting.

In ancient India the attitude towards women was very different. Women in fact had a superior position to man and they were honoured and adored, because they played an important role in history and legends. This contrast characterizes  
10 the paradoxical status women have in India’s cities.

Now, in contemporary India women are not anymore seen as equal or even superior to men and they have first-hand experiences with it everywhere.

A very good example for this development is Hyderabad the capital of Andhra Pradesh a 400-year-old metropolis with an urban population of 2.9 million  
15 people. It is the fifth largest city in India and a mixture of old world charm and in economical progress, because the IT branch is mainly settled in Hyderabad. These factors create an atmosphere in which “modern working women can be seen along with colourfully dressed banjary gypsies and Muslim women in black veils.”<sup>5</sup> The crime rate concerning women in Hyderabad is high, because “the  
20 overpopulation has made it hard to govern the cities.”<sup>6</sup> That’s because more than 26% of India’s population is urban, since “India has just gone through its biggest wave of urbanisation”<sup>7</sup>, which leads to a massive proliferation of slums and pavement settlements.

This conditions are especially hard for women, because many of them need  
25 work urgently, but only men are traditionally supposed to work and bring income to their families. Thus the old patriarchal structures prevent women from working.

The living-situation for women in the City in general is problematic. This results in their status in society, where they are considered as worthless, and the bad  
30 living-conditions are a result of of poverty and crime. However, “the urbanization is powerfully affecting the transformation of Indian society”<sup>8</sup> into a progressive, economic state. And the situation of modern women is changing, caused by the

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<sup>3</sup> see: appendix, figure 3

<sup>4</sup> Hieber, Wolfgang: “Alltag in Indien”, p. 339

<sup>5</sup> Hydonline: Hyderabad, The heart of AP, p. 1

<sup>6</sup> India by kids: “Overpopulation”, www, p.1

<sup>7</sup> India by kids: “Overpopulation”, www, p. 1

<sup>8</sup> Growth of cities, www, p. 1

growing women's movement, "largely led by educated urban women."<sup>9</sup> Now women begin to question the old patriarchal structures and try to build up an equal society.

## 5 1.2. The working woman

Since independence India's economy has changed. Now agriculture accounts for only one-third of the gross domestic product (GDP), down from 59 % in 1950, and a wide range of modern industries and support services exists now.<sup>10</sup>

10 With the changing economic situation, more and more Indian women, who were hampered by household duties, are commencing upon their own business and are engaged in other industrial activities like services.<sup>11</sup> 2001 in India 32,1 %<sup>12</sup> of women were employed. Most of them as agricultural workers.<sup>13</sup>

15 But is it not easy for women to find work or to establish an own business, because of their status and the structure of Indian society which is extremely hierarchical with everyone ranked to others. This situation influences career and working decisions and affects the way they participate in the economy.

Another factor which impedes women's participation in economy is the sex role stereotyping. Women are expected to be chaste and especially modest in all actions, which affects their ability to work on an equal basis with men. Besides,  
20 women are seen as "physically weaker by some employers and thus not deserving equal wages as men."<sup>14</sup>

Other factors which complicate their participation in business are:

25 Marriage, because it is still the principal "determinant of women's social position"<sup>15</sup>, and parenthood, because women are traditionally expected to care for their children and the household.

These cultural rules place women in a paradoxical situation: When a family suffers economically, because of the poverty in the cities [refer to: The City Woman] people often think that a woman should go out and work, yet at the same time the women's participation in employment is viewed as wrong.

30 This is why working women "of all segments of Indian society face various forms of discrimination and sexual harassment."

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<sup>9</sup> Cities as centres, www, p. 1

<sup>10</sup> Dunlop & Velkoff, "Women and Economy", www, p. 1

<sup>11</sup> appendix, figure 2

<sup>12</sup> Encarta Weltatlas 2001

<sup>13</sup> appendix, figure 2

<sup>14</sup> Growth of cities, www, p. 2

<sup>15</sup> Womeninfoline:Career Choice, www, p. 1

Women often hold lower positions than men, even when they are able to work in higher-level jobs. In spite of similar education levels, women earn just 80 % of what men do.<sup>16</sup> This shows that the role of education is not that important as it is supposed to be. “Surprisingly, women with university degrees do not have high employment rates<sup>17</sup>” The reason may be that rich families are able to afford to keep their daughters at home after school.

Yet, Women who achieved a high school level are often employed as main workers. And surprisingly some “statistics quote more women engineers and scientists in India than in the US”<sup>18</sup> and there are a few popular examples of career women, like Indira Gandhi, who once was India’s prime minister and other powerful women, like Suljja Firodia Motwani, who rules one of the biggest concerns in India. But even professional career women find discrimination to be prevalent: “Two-thirds of the women in one study felt that they have to work harder to receive the same benefits as comparably employed men.”<sup>19</sup>

In spite of the disadvantages, women begin to make some “headway as leaders in industrial activities.”<sup>20</sup>

### **1.3. The single woman**

Another form of modern life is the single living woman which is a contemporary trend in India. The reasons for this development are seen very different. Some analysts think it is caused by the Western influence, brought on by satellite TV and the social change, entailed by liberalization, is often held responsible for this development.

But, surprisingly, most singles refer to role models at home, like single teachers or single living relatives. The reasons why women choose to be single are, in general, financial independence and mental freedom, because in an Indian marriage the woman is expected to submit to her husband and their mother-in-law. The idea of living single is also caused by the changing situation for women caused by the equalization of women in the Indian society. Now it is possible for a woman to work and therefore she is not depending on a marriage. Improved means of generating income have also made living alone for women easier.

The deterrent role-models in unhappy marriages, and the growing sense for discrimination towards women encourage more and more women to get

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<sup>16</sup> Dunlop & Velkoff: “ Women and Employment,” p.4

<sup>17</sup> Dunlop & Velkoff: “Women and Employment,” p. 5

<sup>18</sup> CD I, file://D:\women\womeninindia.htm

<sup>19</sup> Dunlop & Velkoff: ”Women and Employment,” p. 2

<sup>20</sup> Webindia: “Financial assistance,” www, p. 1

divorced, live as a single or prefer “live-in-relationships” to keep their own freedom.

The two ways of being single in India are seen very different by the Indian society. The first way is to be single by circumstance, which means to be widowed, which in the time of the abolition of sati [burning of the widow] is accepted. The second way is to be single by choice, which is hardly accepted and causes a lot of problems for the person who decides to break with the traditional form of relationship, the (arranged) marriage. Single living mothers face the most problems, because in a society where the woman is expected to care for the family and the children, she will not find a female support system.

That’s just why singles are separated of the social system and are considered as unhappy or not “good enough” for a marriage, which exacerbates their feeling of alienation. Therefore it can be said that singles make a courageous choice against the system, when they decide to live as a single.

## **2. The differences between modern Western women and modern Indian women**

### **2.1. The Differences- its reasons and problems**

To discuss the status of modern Indian women in Indian society I decided to compare it with the status or self-image of Western women. During my work I found a lot of differences between these two cultures, which complicate the situation of a Western influenced respective modern woman in India. Westernised is often, by Indians, considered as “modern” and it is true that women in India try to adapt to the Western role models, because they think that Western women are more independent, which may be true from their point of view. Because of the differences between the self-image of Western (influenced) women and the self-image of traditional Indian women, the modern women in India face a lot of problems, because the Indian society cannot cope with their modern self-image. But their self-image, is based on a culture which is not comparable with the Western culture although the roots of Western culture lie in the Indian culture.

One of the main differences between Western and Indian women lies in the religious backgrounds. While Western women believe in the love of God towards every single individual and therefore have a stronger sense of self-worth. Whereas Indian women live constantly in the fear to be reincarnated as a lower caste and therefore to suffer longer time in “the circle of life”. This is the

cause why Indian women first have to build up their self-worth resp. self-confidence. This may explain why the Indian women are still discriminated by society.

5 Woman's status in the family is also very different from the Western. Indian women are especially important to bear sons and for nothing else (apart from the housework). While in the Western culture the woman is seen as the origin of all life ("Mother Earth") and is honoured for it. Besides, Indian women are put extremely under pressure by the family, because of the expensive dowry, which turns them into a burden. They also cannot perpetuate the family name and  
10 are not, in most cases, allowed to bring any income to the family [refer to: the working woman]. Therefore their presence in the family seems to be worthless and unnecessary. So it is not surprising that Indian women feel "degraded and oppressed by their society."<sup>21</sup> Another fact which causes differences between Western and Indian women, is the lower education level, which hampers Indian  
15 women to fight the gender-based discrimination of women, because the mass of women is not able to articulate themselves.

This explains why for a long time the presence of women in religious, political, social, cultural, and economic affairs was non-existent. However, in the last decades, the situation changed and women's movements "began to demand for  
20 their rights and question women's relationship to men and gender-based structures."<sup>22</sup> This movement was rooted in "the colonial reform and in the nationalist struggles of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which resulted in the first mass mobilization of women."<sup>23</sup> The changed conditions for women cause a larger number of women to begin to take action against the unequal treatment of the  
25 female gender in Indian society, because they notice their unbearable situation in India.

Another reason for this development is the improved education of all classes of women (which still cannot be compared with Western standards) and therefore the better articulation. Although the illiteracy rate is 57,9 %<sup>24</sup> of the women's  
30 population, it is said by Indian feminists that "India has a rich vibrant women's movement, which has spread to various parts of the country."<sup>25</sup> One of the most significant developments for women in the last two decades has been the

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<sup>21</sup> Kaur, Valerie: "Equality of women", CD I file://D:\Sikhism-gen\equalityofwomen.htm, p. 3

<sup>22</sup> Kalpagam, U.: "The women's movement", www, p.1

<sup>23</sup> ibid p. 1

<sup>24</sup> Encarta Weltatlas 2001

<sup>25</sup> Butalia, Urvashy: "The women's movement in India", www, p. 3

“introduction of 33% reservation in local village-level elections”<sup>26</sup>, caused by the increased protests of women for their right of codetermination. Now women have the power to raise their voice in politics for the benefit of women in society. But from this new possibility develops the problem that e.g. the right-wing parties offer help to women in domestic problems and therefore are much sought after, but operating with a patriarchal ideology. This points out that democracy for women is not useful when it is just another, new form of patriarchy, which ignores the basic right and need of women: The “equality of men and women in the economic and the social sphere.”<sup>27</sup> It is another problem for women that the patriarchal structures in Indian society “lie deeper than marches of protests and laws can reach,”<sup>28</sup> This is explained by the fact that the protests are mostly led by Western, urban and middle class women, who try to unravel the deep seated unequal structures even though they are very distant from the reality for women in the rural, poor areas.

The root of the problem lies in the unequal structured Indian society. The religious doctrine of the unequal caste system and the definition of worthy as well as unworthy individuals defines the society and seems to condone the unequal treatment of women.

India’s women try to break up this structure with another culture, which is as well rooted in Indian culture. It is obvious that this will not work and causes further conflicts, which will split up the society in “Western” and “Indian”. With the progressive change to Western standards in the cities the differences between the Western influenced City women and the traditional thinking Country resp. poorer women will increase and prevent the equalization of Indian society.

The westernised people in India have better access to the Western capital and information, because they are seen as more cooperative, which will further increase the differences. Caused by these conditions, the Indian society will change and parts of their life and therefore culture will be westernised.

One of the most important conditions to prevent this development is the tolerance of the Western countries towards the Indian culture and not the effort to westernise the Indian society, because it is the “easier” way. I’m not able to predict what will happen to the Indian society in the next decades, but during my work I experienced that the Indian society, will change in a different way,

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<sup>26</sup> Butalia, Urvashy: “The women’s movement in India“, www, p. 2

<sup>27</sup> Venkatesan, J.: “Equal rights for women”, www, p. 1

<sup>28</sup> Kaur, Valerie: ”Equality of women“, CD I , file://D:\Sikhism-gen\equalityofwomen.htm, p. 3

because of the cultural differences between India and the Western countries and the powerful women's movement.

### 5 **3.2. The day of a modern Indian City woman**

**6:30 a.m.-** Asha Jadeja is ready to go to work. She is a single and a mother of a 8-year-old son and works at Dot Bagu Venture, a company which she founded and manages. She, as one of the few manager women in India, lives in a beautiful residential area, far away from the slums on the other side of the city.

10 She decides to take a rickshaw to go to work although she can afford a taxi. But the small vehicles will make its way faster trough the traffic jammed city than a car or bus, besides, she won't be exposed to the stares and molestations of the taxi driver or the men who wait at the bus station. Just yesterday she read a story about a woman who was brutally raped by a taxi driver and this is not a  
15 exception today in the cities. She is happy that her son is already a pupil, because babysitting in a community which expects the mother to care for their children is not very common.

**8:00 a.m. –** Asha Jadjea arrives at her bureau. On the top of her agenda is the daily employee meeting, where the daily schedule is discussed. Afterwards her  
20 day is full of conferences, discussions, and stress. Today an Indian women magazine is announced for an interview, to show their readers what women can achieve. Actually, Asha has no time but it is important for her to show the other women that a woman as manager is possible and to encourage them to try the same. The interviewer is impressed that Asha is a single and has such a “happy  
25 and successful” life. Asha laughs, about the old-fashioned attitude, that women can only be happy in a marriage and explains the reasons for her divorce to the amazed interviewer.

**7:00 p.m. –**Asha returns home through the city, which is full of dust and smoke. Her housemaid Nandana has already looked after her son and finished off the  
30 housework. Nandana's husband is an alcoholic and doesn't work so she is the only one who brings an income to the family. Asha gives her the daily wages, and Nandana thanks her “setani” (boss) and goes home where she will have to give a part of the money to her husband. Asha is aware of this fact but Nandana is not willed to get divorced because of her husband's family which will punish  
35 her for this cheek.

**10:00 a.m.** – Asha kissed her son good-night and watches now the daily soap, but switches it off, because she doesn't enjoy the suffering, traditional Indian-style dressed women and is angry about the fact that a Western dressed, single career woman plays the bad role. She turns the lights off and goes to bed.

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### **3. Conclusion**

#### **3.1. The modern Indian city woman- a paradox**

The contemporary situation in the cities is that women, who try to change the attitude of discrimination, violence and injustice towards women face deep seated patriarchal structures, which they can hardly change. This causes a conflict between the chauvinistic society and the modern resp. Western influenced women. The reporting showed two different positions. On the one hand, it described the situation of women in the cities as nearly similar to the Western, which may apply to a small part of women in the cities, but not to the majority. Which is, on the other hand, described as oppressed and discriminated by the patriarchal structured society. The contrasts, which do really exist, complicate the situation of Indian women, who try to change their situation. The traditional patriarchy on the one side and the progressive women's movement on the other side cause the paradoxical status in Indian society. To solve this problem, the attitude of the society towards women has to change. This learning-process can be accelerated by laws, which do already exist, but are not effectively realized by the (men governed) state. But the most important measure is to improve the education. Other countries can support the learning-process by financial assistance (for education) and tolerance for the Indian culture and values. Also surprising is the fact that the Western woman is seen as equal to the man by the Indian women, although in Germany discrimination of women does still exist, because the Western religion is also used by some men as doctrine of the unjust treatment of women with the argument that Eve committed the world's first sin and not Adam. But from an Indian point of view the situation of women in the Western culture seems to be progressive. This shows that reflections on modern resp. progressive women are always influenced by the personal point of view.

I think, Indian women can be modern or at least independent without emulating the Western "ideal". Just the decision to live as single and thus make a decision against the society is not Western but modern, as well as self-confident, which is not necessarily Western. However, the real situation cannot be described by

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a student who has never travelled to India and is nationalized by a Western society and therefore writes from a western point of view. What the development in India showed to me is, how difficult it is to break up old structures and now I see my privileged situation, to live in a society which is ,at least on the face of it, equal.

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Ein erheblicher Teil des Materials stammt aus einer privaten Linkliste und ist nach dieser Liste zitiert.

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