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# Women, Wellbeing, and the Ethics of Domesticity in an Odia Hindu Temple Town



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## Note on Translation and Transliteration

Unless specifically mentioned, most statements and the long excerpts of conversations presented in this book were part of taped conversations and discussions that I had with the women and men of the temple town. Some statements have been taken from notes that I maintained while doing fieldwork. I am also responsible for the translation of all this material.

Odia terms have been italicized. I have also tried to remain faithful to pronunciation in Odia. Therefore, because in Odia the medial “a” is usually pronounced as an “o” rather than an “a,” I have tended to transliterate these vowel sounds as “o” rather than “a.” Therefore, the word *karma* is *karmo* in spoken Odia with the last vowel sound being pronounced as an “o” rather than either remaining silent or being pronounced as an “a,” and so that is how it appears in the text. Proper nouns like Lingaraj and Siva are presented using the usual English spellings. In addition, the glossary contains all of the Odia terms that are frequently used in the temple town.

# Preface

This is a book about a group of Odia Hindu women living in the temple town of Bhubaneswar in eastern India and their understanding and experience of wellbeing. It is also a book that addresses a much broader subject: The idea that women living in societies that do not necessarily embrace the values of liberalism can still lead lives that have meaning, power, and a sense of purpose; that liberal formulations, despite what many secular liberals may think, do not exhaust the possibility of living life fully and satisfyingly. This is, therefore, a multicultural feminist text that focuses on the concrete contexts of these women's lives, and by doing so it expands the parameters of feminist discourse.

The present book's research site—the temple town of Bhubaneswar—is unique in many respects. As a pilgrimage center of some repute, it has never been isolated from the outside world. It is not, therefore, some kind of secluded backwater where time has stood still. On the contrary, people here are, and, perhaps, have always been, well aware of the wider world as well as their position in it. At the same time, precisely because it is a pilgrimage center, it is a bastion of fairly traditional Hindu values. The upper castes here, particularly the Brahmans, not only derive great pride from their high ritual status but also recognize that this high status stems from their disciplined lifestyle, from the restrictive life practices they follow. Not surprisingly, therefore, upper-caste residents of the temple town are invested in maintaining these restrictive life practices. Thus, despite the increasing numbers of intrusions from the outside world, customary Hindu thinking and practice still tend to guide and shape the orientation of temple town residents toward life and the world.

Perhaps because this neighborhood is unique, it has also been the research site for successive generations of scholars from a variety of disciplines. If one focuses simply on the anthropological investigations that have been done here, there exists a substantial body of knowledge against which the claims and findings of the present book can be juxtaposed.

When I went into the temple town of Bhubaneswar to do fieldwork in the summer of 1992, I was a typical product of a Westernized education and an upper middle-class, urban Indian upbringing. While I hesitate to describe myself as a “flaming liberal,”

I certainly saw myself as modern woman not overburdened by cultural or religious baggage. And I have to admit that my initial attitude toward the upper caste, fairly orthodox, seemingly subservient Odia Hindu women of the temple town was edged with some slight superiority. However, through doing fieldwork and through getting to know some of these women and their families rather well, my attitude changed, imperceptibly perhaps but quite profoundly: I began to realize that these women and I shared certain fundamental values despite all the differences that separated us in terms of class, caste, and cultural and linguistic identity. Nevertheless, I only realized the full degree to which my attitude had changed when I returned to the USA and began analyzing the data I had collected. There is little doubt that many of these women, especially when they are young and just married, live under enormous constraints: from a liberal perspective, temple town society is an illiberal one. But I found it hard to represent these women as victims of a misogynistic ideology. I found it equally hard to suggest that these women—even the younger ones—were proto-feminists, simply waiting for an opportune moment when they would rise up and rebel and demand a radical change in social and kinship arrangements. In the end, after careful and detailed readings, and rereadings, of the transcripts of conversations I had with the women of the temple town, after hours of mulling over my interactions with and my observations of them, I finally began thinking that it made much more sense to portray these women as inhabiting a distinctively different moral universe in which the virtues they aspire to are not those that animate a liberal moral universe: instead of seeking to be free to live life as one chooses or to be the equal of everyone else as liberals tend to do, many of these women work to cultivate self-discipline and to achieve self-refinement through such self-discipline.

It is particularly instructive to explore the temple town paradigm of domesticity presented in this book against the backdrop of the “opt-out phenomenon” and recent debates occurring in the USA about whether and how professional women can combine highly demanding careers and family life. While no one is suggesting that the America of the 1950s when middle-class women tended to choose domesticity over paid labor is going to stage a comeback, it does appear that many highly educated women are reevaluating domesticity, an indication, perhaps, that there may be more enduring associations between domesticity and women than many of us are willing to acknowledge.

To conclude, I am well aware that fieldwork is an enterprise that is fraught with pitfalls and problems. Furthermore, like many other anthropologists, I acknowledge that “contradictions and instability” characterize most cultural situations, and I recognize that anthropological interpretations are, at best, partial and incomplete. Therefore, what I present in this book to my readers are plausible explanations, “best guesses,” for the “apparent consistencies” (Wolf 1992: 129) that emerge from the data.

\* \* \* \* \*

Over the past many years, I have accumulated several debts of gratitude. I would like to acknowledge them by mentioning the people and institutions that have supported me during these years of intellectual endeavor.

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I am enormously grateful to Richard Shweder. Over the last 20 years and more, Rick has been both mentor and guide. Understanding and generous with his time and knowledge, he has patiently read through this entire book and has made significant and constructive suggestions that have vastly improved it.

I also owe a most profound intellectual debt to McKim Marriott. Even today, more than a decade and a half after I left the University of Chicago, my thinking is still shaped and influenced by his acute insights and his deep understanding of Hindu cultural realities. My work has never received the kind of enthusiastic reading that he has given it. An invaluable mentor, his critical evaluation and meticulous attention to detail has been truly inspiring. I should also mention Gilbert Herdt, Raymond Fogelson, and Sylvia Vatuk, all of whom in their own distinctive ways challenged me to think critically and cultivate self-awareness.

Since 1997, I have been privileged to know Douglas Porpora at Drexel University. Doug has been a stimulating colleague and friend. He has taken time out of a very busy schedule to read this book from cover to cover; and his feedback has been invaluable in improving it. In addition, Christina Honde, Stanley Kurtz, Girishwar Misra, and Susan Seymour have been wonderful friends and colleagues, helping and supporting me in all kinds of ways during both good and not so good times. I am also grateful to Shinjini Chatterjee, Senior Editor at Springer (India), for her early support of this work and the wisdom and clarity of her many suggestions. Two anonymous reviewers did yeoman service, providing solid and constructive suggestions that ultimately strengthened this work.

It goes without saying that this work would never have come to fruition without the generosity and cooperation of the people living in the temple town of Bhubaneswar. Maheswar Mishra has my gratitude for enabling that process. From the very beginning, so many families in the temple town—those of Sarat Mahapatra, Guna Mahapatra, Hrushikesh Mishra, Shankuntala Gorabadu, and Usha Mahapatra—responded to my intrusions and inquiries with a truly astonishing degree of open-mindedness. And if this book has any merit, it is entirely due to their honesty and candor.

Finally, the people who have sustained me during this intellectual enterprise have been my mother, my husband, and my children. It is sad that my father who was present when I started down this intellectual path and who took such pride in my achievements is not here to see this book published. Without my family's unflagging faith and confidence in my abilities, I doubt very much that I would have completed this book.



## About the Author

**Usha Menon** received her Ph.D. (with Honors) in Human Development from the University of Chicago in 1995. She has done fieldwork in the temple town of Bhubaneswar in Odisha, as well as in the northern Indian city of Meerut. She has written extensively on different aspects of Hindu society and civilization, in particular on goddess worship, family dynamics, gender relations, Hindu morality, Hindu women and liberal feminism, and Hindu–Muslim religious violence.

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Chapter 1

Women, Wellbeing, and the Ethics  
of Domesticity: An Introduction

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Multicultural Feminism

This book explores the subjective wellbeing of traditional, upper-caste Hindu women leading sequestered lives in the temple town of Bhubaneswar in Odisha (earlier, Orissa), eastern India. It focuses on Odia Hindu wives and mothers, and the opportunities they have over their life course for achieving control over their own lives, as well as empowering themselves in their relationships with others. While the book is an anthropological account of the lives of women in an orthodox Hindu devotional community, it is also a “third wave” or multicultural feminist text written with an eye to contemporary debates about the deep and persistent connections between femininity, family, and domestic life.

Perhaps as an acknowledgement of the complexity and ambiguity that characterizes women’s lives today, feminists who came of age in the 1990s have, in a striking departure from the intellectual position held by earlier feminists, rehabilitated the notion of domesticity (Walker 1995; Henry 2004). Betty Friedan’s famous and enormously influential text *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), a canonical liberal feminist volume written before the emergence of multicultural feminisms of various sorts, caricatured the housewife and domesticity so successfully that, for an entire



generation of feminists, being a housewife was anathema<sup>1</sup>: emancipation, it was believed, could only be achieved if one left domesticity behind. Yet, today, Rebecca Walker, one of the more eloquent spokespersons for late twentieth-century feminism, argues that there is more than one way to be a feminist. In her writings, she exhorts women “to be real,” to be true to all aspects of themselves—even those of wife and mother.

This book, therefore, might be viewed as a multicultural “third wave” anthropologist’s response to Betty Friedan. It is certainly not a *liberal* feminist text because it tries to remain true to the moral perspective of the women it is portraying, to the values they adhere to—and these women are not liberals. They live in a moral world that does not privilege liberty and equality—the central values of liberalism—over all others; instead, in their world, it is the values of self-discipline and self-control, loyalty, patronage, protection, and sacrifice (including the ability to defer or even subordinate personal gratification) which are the most prized moral goods.

As part of a growing literature in “multicultural feminism” or “third wave feminism,” a way of thought and a practice that emerged in the late twentieth century (see Minow 1990; Gunning 1991, 1995; Lâm 1994; Walker 1995; Volpp 2001), this book aims to broaden the parameters of feminist discourse by taking into account the perspectives of women outside the dominant groups of American and Western European societies. As Maivan Lâm has written, multicultural feminism distinguishes itself from liberal feminism because it “advocates” women’s “empowerment within the specific contexts of their cultures and societies” (Lâm 2001: 10164), not necessarily individual liberty or gender equality. Context, in fact, is crucial to the multicultural feminist perspective. As Lâm says, “multicultural feminism eschews, in the main, the universal versus relativist debate ... it insists, instead, on *context*, not as a device for evading discussion of the human rights of women, but as the necessary framework within which to conduct them” (ibid., emphasis added).

Consistent with this multicultural feminist emphasis on context, the present book is a detailed ethnography that explicates a particular model of human flourishing and that, simultaneously, elaborates on a distinctive paradigm of domesticity and family life. Its aims are twofold: firstly, to interpret these women’s beliefs and practices as exhaustively as possible so that their underlying logic becomes readily accessible to the reader and, secondly, to represent them in ways that they themselves would recognize—neither to ignore the illiberal family practices that sometimes constrain their actions nor to underplay the power they possess to construct for themselves meaningful and purposeful lives.

As a way of previewing the themes discussed in this book and suggesting their relevance to contemporary debates about work, family, and female identity, consider a recent demographic shift that has often been termed the “opt-out revolution” or the “opt-out phenomenon” (Belkin 2003; Moe and Shandy 2009). Around the

<sup>1</sup> But Friedan’s stigmatization of the label “housewife” has not lost its highly negative connotations. Moe and Shandy’s (2009) research shows that, even today, women who stay home to take care of their children prefer to call themselves “stay-at-home moms” or “homemakers”—never “housewives.”