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Vocations for
the Poor Married Women:
An Oral History

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Stiftung

Foundation
German Humanities
Institutes Abroad

¹Vocations for the Poor Married Women: An Oral history

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The field situation is a dialogue, in which we are talking to people, not studying "sources"; and that it is largely a *learning* situation, in which the narrator has information which we lack.... there's a lot more to be learned by leaving ourselves open to the unexpected than by a repetition of our own conceptualizations.²

Alessandro Portelli

The 'learning situation' and the question of being 'open to the unexpected' in this quote from Alessandro Portelli's landmark book *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and other Stories: Form and meaning in Oral History* can be unexpectedly productive. When I approached women at an ITI in Noida to record their life stories with the purpose of drawing out the links between poverty and education, I was not prepared for their preoccupation with their family life.³ This is not to suggest that they remained silent on their educational history: instead, the story of education was plotted around marriage in their narrative. It was not that the 'unexpected' worked only at my end;

¹ I am extremely grateful to Prof. Janaki Nair (Jawaharlal Nehru University) for her consistent guidance and encouragement which made possible the final version of this paper. I thank the reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

² Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* SUNY Series in Oral and Public History, (New York: SUNY Press, 1990). He argues that Memory is not a storage of data: it is, rather, a permanent search for meaning in which forgetting filters out the traces of experiences that no longer have meaning-or that mean too much. See Portelli, 'On the Uses of Memory, As Monument, As Reflex, As Disturbance', *Economic & Political Weekly* 49, no. 30 (2014): 44. Oral History is perhaps the only field where the sources talk back to the historian, confronting, disputing, disrupting and sometimes resisting the historian's understanding of the past. See Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral History and Public History*, (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1990) & Linda Shopes, "Making Sense of Oral History" in D Boyd, S Cohen, B Raekerd and D Rehberger, ed., *Oral History in the Digital Age*, (Institute of Library and museum Services, 2012 quoted in Indira Chowdhury, 'Speaking of the Past, Perspectives in Oral History, *Economic & Political Weekly* 49, no. 30 (2014): 40.

³ James Clifford alerts us saying that there is of course, a myth of fieldwork and the actual experiences hedged around with contingencies rarely lives up to the ideal. See James Clifford, 'On ethnographic Authority', *Representations*, no. 2 (1983): 119

the interviewees too were surprised when they were called suddenly in the midst of their lecture to meet someone who had come to record an interview with them. Given certain institutional rules and regulations, I could interact with these women through a proper procedure of getting permission at various levels and then approaching them through a teacher who would then 'choose' girls to be interviewed. In the middle of a lecture, the teacher asked these four women to meet me and explain their problems (*dikkat*). I got to know their marital status during the course of the interview sessions.

What struck me after the field work were parallels in the narrative of these married women. I take these parallels in their stories of joining ITI, their everyday experience at the ITI and their memory of home, as entry points to explore the inter-linkages between marriage, poverty and education in the lives of these women. How does one read their preoccupations with their family in tandem with their everyday lives as married students? What did education mean to them after marriage? Did education offer new forms of self assertion to these married women? If so, in what specific ways?

All the four interviews which I use in this article were taken during the months of December 2013 and January 2014 at the campus of the National Vocational Training Institute for Women (NVTI) in Noida.⁴ The Institute was set up under the Directorate General of Employment and Training, Ministry of Labour and Employment under the Women's Vocational Training Programme⁵ launched in 1977. It offers courses for women with basic education of 10th or 12th class and there is no upper age limit for joining any course in the ITI. The fee structure in the ITI varies from Rs. 150-500 depending upon the category (SC/ST/OBC/General) of the student. The interviews were conducted during the last months of their ITI course in

⁴ The interviews were taken under the Transnational Research Group's broad project "Poverty and Education in Modern India"

⁵ The programme attempts to promote the women employment in industry (mainly organized sector) as semiskilled/skilled & highly skilled workers by increasing their participation in skill training facilities under Craftsmen Training Scheme and Craft Instructors Training Scheme. See <http://womentraining.gov.in/general/moreaboutus.htm>

which most women were very anxious to get jobs. It was with this expectation that they had migrated to the city (Noida) from small towns of Uttar Pradesh and Haryana to get vocational training. From the off-record conversations I had with them before the interview, I could see the way my presence during these crucial months of their course was being looked at. All of them perceived this interview as something which would provide them with links for a job or would 'solve' their problems. In spite of all explanations about the purpose of the project, such expectations continued even in the post-interview calls I received from some of them. Given the 'non-event' context in which the interviews were taken, such expectations are very much part of the 'unexpected' from the perspective of the interviewees. Such perspectives could be seen in different contextual settings as well. Historians such as Shahid Amin and Janaki Nair talk about being seen as a representative of the State during their field experience in Chauri Chaura and Kolar Gold Field respectively.⁶

The four interviewees I discuss here are Preeti, Rina, Soumya and Riddhi (name changed). Preeti is 33 years old and comes from Bhiwani district of Haryana. She did a one year course in Stenography and two years of basic training course in Electronics from an ITI in Bhiwani. She joined the ITI in Noida for an advanced version of the course in Electronics-Mechanics and a Principles of Teaching Course which she was about to complete. She was pursuing her graduation from AAA (name changed) University through correspondence.

She is the eldest among siblings and has three younger brothers. Her father was involved in agriculture but is no longer. She did not speak much about him in the interview. She was in 10th class when she got married and it is 16 years since her marriage. She secretly applied to re-do 10th class from an open school at her in-laws' place after failing two papers in her exam. Her husband studied till 6th class and runs

⁶ During his fieldwork in and around Chauri Chaura, a small town in Uttar Pradesh, Shahid Amin mentions that he felt like a colonial policeman and was interestingly seen as *Sarkar* by an old low-caste woman. See Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-1992*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 5. Janaki Nair mentions that in her fieldwork at Kolar Gold Field in Southern Karnataka, she appeared as an "emissary of the State" for those on the threshold of losing their livelihoods. See Janaki Nair, 'The Historian as Film Maker: Slow Pan to the Present', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 53 (2002): 220

a grocery shop. She now lives in a separate household with her husband and children. She has three children who are studying in government schools. The eldest daughter is around 14-15 years old and studies in 11th class. She has two sons, one studying in 9th class and the other in 4th class.

Rina, Preeti's friend and roommate, is 32 years old and comes from Bhiwani. After one of my interview sessions with Preeti, I got a call from her at night. She said that her roommate taunted her saying that she is being interviewed since she is poor and is from an uneducated family. She told me that her roommate assumed that the interview had something to do with finding a good job, which she (Preeti) was hiding from her. This troubled Preeti and she asked me to let her roommate sit in on her interview. The last session of the interview therefore, which eventually turned into an accidental group interview, has a comparative insight of life stories from two women. Rina was in the final year of her B.A. (Correspondence). She completed two years of basic training in Electronic-Mechanics from an ITI in Bhiwani and was about to complete a one year advance course in the same subjects from NVTI along with a Principles of Teaching Course. She got married when she was in the second year of her B.A. eight years ago. She has a small family of five members at her in-laws' place and she often talked about the benefits of that with regard to her studies. She has a 5 year old son who is studying in LKG in a private school. Her husband had done a B.A. and used to work as a Security Guard in Delhi metro but after her father-in-law fell seriously ill, he moved back to his home town and took up farming. Her child used to stay at her maternal home with her parents while she was studying in Noida.

Soumya is 28 years old and comes from Jaunpur district of Uttar Pradesh and married at Faizabad, U.P. She is the eldest of her siblings. Her father has a Mobil agency and works as a motor mechanic and her mother is a housewife. She said that she had a good financial background at her maternal home and was 'chosen' for marriage by her in-laws because her father could give a good amount of dowry. She got married when she was studying in 9th class, fourteen years ago. She started her B.A. after marriage and is yet to complete her final year. She has two children. Her

elder son is 9 years old and the younger one is 5 years old. Her husband runs a small Xerox shop from which there is hardly any income. She lives in a joint family set-up with her mother-in-law and four brothers-in-law. She wanted her husband to stay in the joint family till she completes the ITI course. She previously did an ITI course in embroidery from Siddiqpur and was about to complete an advanced version of the same from NVTI along with a Principles of Teaching Course.

Soumya persuaded Riddhi, her hostel mate to give the interview after explaining her thoughts on the experience of the interview. Riddhi is 26 years old and comes from Kachwa region of Uttar Pradesh and married at Bhadohi, U.P. She has three sisters and two brothers and she is next to the eldest sister. Her family married her and her elder sister at an early age because they could not financially support the education and other expenses of all the children. She completed her B.A. in History from BBB College (name changed) from Mirzapur, U.P. She did an ITI course in Dress Making from an ITI Institute from Allahabad. She was about to complete an advanced version of the course and a Principles of Teaching Course from NVTI. She got married in 2002. She completed graduation after her marriage. Her husband had done an M.A. and had been in teaching for a while. He used to work in Reliance Services but was unemployed then. She said that her mother had studied till 5th class but could teach her well at home. Her mother, she said, could not complete her studies because her brothers (Riddhi's maternal uncles) would not let her be away from home because they loved her too much. This restriction was perceived by her not as a hindrance to her mother's education but as an expression of love. Also, she looked happy talking about this during the interview.

Her father used to work in Kachwa but had lost his job. He also had a grocery shop which was shut and has been running a Xerox shop since then. She talked about economic difficulties in the maternal home and also at her in-laws' place which had been a constant hurdle for her to study further in spite of having parents and in-laws who, as she mentioned in the last session of the interview, never differentiated between education for girls and boys.

Why ITI?

All the four women did their schooling from their respective hometowns. While early marriage provided a break to Preeti and Soumya's school education, Rina and Riddhi could not complete their graduation. As they said, their parents did not see marriage as a break but as a rite of passage after which they could do 'whatever they want' at their in-laws' place. All of them confessed that they had no role in deciding about early marriage on account of parental pressure and financial problems at home. While all of them were pursuing their B.A. through correspondence after marriage, they were permitted to migrate to a city for vocational education (which could also be done through distance learning) because it was tied to possible job prospects. Riddhi mentioned that her elder sister was allowed to do a B.A. through correspondence after her marriage but not study Medical Science. She therefore chose not to study after 12th class.

In all the four cases, it is after 8-10 years of marriage and after having children and moreover after doing a two year ITI course in their home-town, that they migrated to the city for vocational training. The joint family set-up (as in Soumya's case) or support from the maternal home (in the case of Riddhi and Rina) in caring for the child, or a teenage daughter to handle household work (in Preeti's case) made the migration easier. While her husband's insufficient income to support the children's medical treatment was what drove Preeti to migrate to study in an ITI, for Rina and Riddhi, it was the loss of the husband's job. In Soumya's case, migrating to study in an ITI provided an escape from everyday domestic violence at her in-laws' place followed by the loss of her husband's job. The narratives of all these four women have an "if" element in talking about their dreams and aspirations: if they had not been married at an early age.

Soumya: I was very much interested in stitching, embroidery and painting. I have done all the courses but my in-laws did not let me move ahead otherwise... I have done everything. It is just that I did not get a chance. If I would have got a chance, I would have moved ahead. It is just that I did not any chance anywhere.

Riddhi: If I would have got married after completing my education I would have felt nice, hmm...

- Rina: No, I was very much interested in studies but I got married and then I got busy with children. I mean I am average in studies... I mean if somebody would teach me now also then I am always ready to learn...
- Preeti: You know about that time. Then I was not so intelligent. At that time my mind did not work and my parents got me married.

All these women told their stories of everyday 'struggle' to avoid early marriage during different interview sessions. It is clear from their narratives that choosing to study in an ITI was not something they had planned for themselves. Preeti wanted to stay with teaching in primary school along with some private tuition, Rina wanted to become a lawyer, Riddhi wanted to study history and Soumya wanted to do a master's. Their narratives about economic difficulties at their in-laws' place, the loss of their husband's job and the need to take care of their children foreground a linkage between their need to 'survive' and their choice to go for vocational training. In the long run, all of them except Preeti showed an interest in doing a master's but are sceptical about being able to do so if they have to fulfil the role of a housewife and a mother along with anything they plan to do. I would read the motivations of these women to undertake vocational training as coming more from poverty rather than their own educational interests. Their eagerness to get employment and joining an ITI course is thus a part of the process of credentialing and improving their job prospects. The education of these women away from home had contradictory outcomes.

Everyday at the ITI

The expectation of 80% attendance to be eligible to sit for the exams, the schedule of compulsory presence in the class from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. from Monday to Friday, timely submission of assignments, and strict observance of rules in the hostel were issues about which all interviewees spoke at length. They said that their schedule in the hostel provided them time to watch TV, play games and do their work without any pressure to cook food. Soumya said that she was so depressed with the routine domestic violence at her in-laws' place that after hearing the news of her selection in the ITI at Noida, she ran to give thanks to God that he had shown her the way. Amongst exchanges on these topics, what struck me was the complaint by these

women about an inability to concentrate on their studies because of continuing guilt about not being able to fulfil their role as a housewife and mother and their longing for a glimpse of their children. Apart from Rina, who was quite happy about having a small family and only one child who was being taken care of by her parents, all of them talked at length about this anxiety. It was something which made them nostalgic and brought tears to their eyes. Preeti asked me to stop the recorder. Riddhi turned her face away from me and paused for a long time. Soumya asked me to stop the recorder and said that she wanted to speak about her pain, her story, which she had not been able to talk to anybody about. She requested me not to leak the interview to her in-laws and asked me to just 'listen' to her and just let her cry.

The difficulty in getting leave because of the Module system at NVTI was their major complaint. Preeti had to travel back home on every weekend to do household work and take care of her children. She said that she had to wash clothes piled up throughout the week on the weekend and make other preparations and arrangements in the house. In the midst of all this she said that she did not get time to follow up with the week's study in the classroom or do her assignments. She said that weekend was the time unmarried girls in the hostel utilized for their studies and hence got better marks, which made them better equipped for jobs. Rina too shared a similar experience. Marriage, Preeti often said during the interview, was a handicap to her academic performance. In her opinion, married women should be given extra leave to look after their families. As A. R. Vasavi says, "for every outer promise made by the larger system there is an inner denial"⁷. One of the persons in authority at the ITI said, "It is a pain to get women placed in jobs. We don't know which state they would migrate after marriage and how much they would commit to the job. Each of them needs placements in their home town which is not possible. Very few women prefer staying in Delhi/NCR. We don't know what to do with these married students." In discussing women workers' day-to-day experience of work, Sujatha Ghotoskar argues that women recognize and accept the non-negotiability of domestic work and its responsibilities (the primary defining feature of their feminine

⁷ A. R. Vasavi, 'Government Brahmin': Caste, the educated unemployed, and the reproduction of inequalities', *TRG Poverty & Education Working Paper Series*

identity) and are, therefore, more ambiguous about their role as workers and commitment to the workplace.⁸

Towards the end of the interview, Preeti said that it is pointless for married women to study and that she regretted joining the ITI.

Preeti: They (unmarried women) come but married women face problems. Sometimes, mother-in-law is ill, sometimes father-in-law is ill, sometimes my child is ill. If I don't handle these things then in people's (in-laws') eyes it would be like I am more interested in my studies, so let us make her leave her studies. I get to hear such taunts also, what else.

Rina: Now when I will go home after 15 days, I face the clothes piled up over those 15 days. What will I study after going back home after 15 days? Nothing happens. I take my books thinking that I would get some time at night or during day and I would study but I don't get time.

After secretly completing her 10th class through Open school, and difficulties in following English in her ITI course on Stenography which made her switch to another ITI course, she took the course at NVTI as the last option she could try to get a job. Neither Preeti nor Rina was not staying in a joint family set-up at their in-laws' place. While Rina thought that having a small family and only one child had made things quite convenient for her, Preeti felt the need for a joint-family so that there would be some support for her husband and children and she would not constantly have to face the anxiety of being at home on every weekend.

Riddhi too repeatedly talked about her inability to concentrate.

Interviewer: Ok, so your mother and father take care of your baby?

Riddhi: Yes, they only care. I don't like being here leaving my baby behind. I cry a lot.

Interviewer: hmm... Yes, Yes

Riddhi: She is very small. I still cry for her.

Interviewer: Don't worry, You are doing all this for her only.

⁸ Sujatha Ghotoskar, 'Women, Work and Health: An Interconnected Web- Case of Drug and Cosmetic Industries', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 32, No. 4, pp. WS45-WS52 quoted in Samita Sen, 'Gender and Class: Women in Indian Industry, 1890-1990', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 1, p.112

Riddhi: Hmm...

Interviewer: all these studies and everything

Riddhi: I still don't like being here

Interviewer: Here

Riddhi: I mean I don't like being here leaving my baby behind

In another session of the interview

Interviewer: Hmm... Hmm... So are you looking for work in Noida and Delhi as well?

Riddhi: Now, I want... I just want to see my baby

Interviewer: Hmm... Hmm... Hmm...

Riddhi: Now.... Now I am just thinking of staying with her first for one-two months and then I would think because I don't like being here since I have come leaving her behind. My mind stays with her.

For Soumya, her constant worry was that her child's education was stuck because of her own education

Soumya: My child is not able to study because of (expenses on) my education.. My younger son has to be admitted. My parents are supporting my elder son's education. My husband also takes care of some expenses. They both are supporting my elder son's education together but my younger son is 7 years old and we have not got him admitted (to a school). Even though my elder brother-in-law works in government rice-mill, he earns from there, he is also an inspector at *Nagar Palika*, still he does not give any money to us. He asks us to handle our own expense.

Apart from their constant worries about home and family, it was their cold response to questions about their relationships with friends and classmates which is striking. I have already noted that Preeti's interview turned into a group interview with Rina. In the joint interview, both of them talked about their classmates and hostel-mates' unwillingness to interact with each other or discuss issues like studies or placements. Riddhi started crying when I asked her about her friends: she said that one of her very close friends stopped talking to her because she scored better than her in the exam. The situation was similar for Soumya

Soumya: I don't generally talk to people, I keep silent, I mostly stay silent, I speak very little.

Interviewer: hmm... why, don't you like being here?

Soumya: No, it is not about liking. I feel scared of the women here, who may feel bad if I joke with them

In the last session of the interview, she said:

Interviewer: Have you shared your personal stories ever with any of your teachers?

Soumya: I have not done that with anyone yet. I never share anything with any student because if I say something today, they could make fun of it tomorrow. That is why I don't share anything with anyone. It is just in the midst of some conversation that I talked to my teacher about my studies that I am studying with so many difficulties. But I have never shared my full story with anyone. Neither did any teacher of mine ask nor did I tell them.

In the first session of the interview, she cried a lot ventilating her experience of routine violence at her in-laws' place. Her narrative gave the impression that she joined ITI not only to get a job to improve her economic circumstances but also to deal with marital tensions and irritations. Her classmates and teachers who could vaguely hear her voice from the adjacent room said to me after I came out of the room that this woman hardly spoke to anyone in class or in the hostel. They said (laughingly) that it was the first time in the past one year that her voice was clearly audible.

In the post-interview calls or meetings after a week's gap they were much more open to talking and sharing than during the time of interview. Soumya wanted to meet just to talk and share, and asked me to come without the recorder. When I met Riddhi at the ITI campus she asked me, "what happened with the interview I gave, did it help you?" Preeti asked for my phone number in case she faces any problem in getting a job. Soumya called me few months after the interview to tell me that she was in trouble at her in-laws' place as her husband was still unable to find work. She asked me to help her look for a job.

All these post-interview calls and meetings made me ask myself if my 'work' of doing an oral history interview was finished with the interview. How do we read these post-interview calls and meetings? Luisa Passerini⁹ cautions us against

⁹ Luisa Passerini, 'Memory', *History Workshop*, no. 15 (1983): 196

ignoring the problems of post-enquiry. She argues for the need to ask what happens to this memory which we have evoked.¹⁰

How did ITI restructure the memory of home?

Except for Rina who said that her in-laws and husband were supportive of her decision to study, all others talked about the taunts and challenges they have to face in their everyday lives because of studying after marriage. Being the eldest daughter, Soumya said that she had to compromise with her education as one of her younger sisters was doing a PhD, the other was preparing for a law course and her brother was pursuing a B.Tech. After marriage, when her in-laws stopped giving her any money and her husband could hardly earn, she was suggested by her sister's tuition teacher to do basic course in ITI from Siddiquipur so that she could get a job and support her expense. Her mother supported her in this as her in-laws did not give any financial support. However, as she mentioned, after realising the importance of an ITI course from others and its immediate relevance in obtaining a job, they did not create any problem for her when she came to Noida to do an advanced version of the course. She started her training in Noida using the money her husband used to get as unemployment allowance. When she went back to her in-laws' place to attend a function in the middle of the academic year, they suddenly made an issue of her studying after marriage. She said,

Then I adamantly left. I said that I won't leave my studies. I can leave you people but I won't leave my studies. You people have tortured me so much that I won't leave my studies now. Then I came here and continued with my ITI course. After I am done with ITI course I go to my village, my maternal home and then I go to my in-laws' place.

In another session,

¹⁰ The question resonates in Miroslav Vanek's work on Czech oral history in which he places a distinction between journalism and oral history. He argues that unlike oral historians, journalists hardly think about what is happening on the other side of the table, what the narrator's feelings are after such aggressive questioning which is so fashionable today. And after exploiting them, they quickly take their leave, with promises that the narrator's testimony will "somehow" be used. I also do not know whether the people involved are aware of the fact that harder methods significantly influence the outcome of the interview. If this is not reflected in the analysis and the interview evaluation, I consider it a mistake. See Miroslav Vanek, 'Parallels, Divergences and Crossroads, Czech oral History and Global Perspective', *Economic & Political Weekly* 49, no. 30 (2014): 51-2

Interviewer: Now you have again started your studies so what do you think now that you...?

Soumya: I feel that now I will be able to become something in my life. I will be able to live my life again. I have not been able to see the comforts of life but I want my children to experience that. I will never keep my children unhappy. Now I just think about the pains which my in-laws have given to me. At my maternal home, I was so dear to my mother that if I ask her for anything, my mother would bring that for me. When I remember those days, I get tears in my eyes.

An opportunity to “start fresh and build a new image”¹¹ through vocational education was also observed by Jeff Claus during his ethnographic analysis of students’ experience in a vocational programme in a regional vocational centre in the United States. Soumya told me that after migrating to a city (Noida), studying in a different setting and staying in a hostel, she became more conscious of the ways her marriage had held her freedom back. Even after all the routine tortures, her mother-in-law expected her to send her money orders as soon as she got settled into any job in Noida. She was willing to share money with her in-laws considering the fact that she is mother of her husband with whose support and assistance she had been able to do a course in ITI and study after marriage.

She often mentioned in different interview sessions that she cannot stay away from her husband and children anymore and so just wants a job when her training is completed. In response to my question about her plan after completing the ITI course, she said,

First, I will do job and accumulate money to put my children on track, then I would get my husband set (in some work) and after that I would think something about myself. I have thought this much about myself.

The case of Soumya in terms of expectations and responsibilities tied to her education after marriage was similar to the other three women, the only difference being in the nature of priorities. For Preeti, the main concern was to get a government job and earn for her child’s medical treatment. In almost all the

¹¹ Jeff Claus, ‘Opportunity or Inequality in Vocational Education? A Qualitative Investigation’, *Curriculum Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (1990): 17 His ethnographic study suggests that while most of the students found their programs enjoyable and rewarding, this response was, generally, the product of a complex assemblage of personal, social, economic, family, and educational factors which worked against the goal of increasing the students' opportunity.

interview sessions with her, she expressed dissatisfaction with her idea of choosing to study in an ITI. She often repeated in her interview that married women should never go for studies.

- Interviewer: So see if there is some short-term course for repairing mobiles or watches or whatever machines, I don't know, what kind of repairing do they teach you here, what you read in theory
- Preeti See, I am clearly saying I don't want to learn anything, I just want a job
- Interviewer: Job
- Preeti: I want a job. I have problem. I am not interested in learning.
- Interviewer: Yes, lots of such things are there
- Preeti: But now I have done this. Now even if somebody asks me to study further, I would not study.
- Interviewer: Hmm...
- Preeti: I am more depressed with studies

In different interview sessions, she repeatedly used to mention that she was not intelligent. Rina consoled her by talking about the way she was dealing with the problem in a similar situation. On the one hand, Preeti had been sent to study so that she could get a job and contribute to the family income but on the other hand she said that sitting at the shop counter (if she plans to open her own repairing centre) won't be allowed at her in-laws' place. At the other end she had to listen to taunts about studying after marriage. She said,

At my in laws place, no one would let me study. "Other daughters-in-law are sitting at home then why do you want to study? Are you not getting enough to eat? So you sit at home and manage your household."

As Samita Sen argues, the kind of women who work and the kind of work they do are very often contingent on male decision-making in the family, euphemized as 'family decision-making' or 'household strategy'.¹² Preeti spoke about the importance of having educated family members. She said that if her in-laws and her family members had been educated she would not have faced such taunts. She did not want the same to happen with her daughter and this was something which motivated her to study. But her doubts about getting a job in the immediate future

¹² Sen, 'Gender and Class', p. 111

made her consider her ITI training as a 'waste'. Rina interrupted and consoled her in the interview by saying

Waste, (I) mean how is it a waste? It is just one's thinking. It is not a waste. (I) mean we could handle our families better and train our children... We can also try working in some private ITI.

The anxiety of both Preeti and Rina about building networks to get a job formed a major part of their conversations with me. For Riddhi, the main concern was to be "secure for the future as anything could happen in life at any time". Her narrative gave the impression that she was still shocked by her husband's sudden job loss. She talked about expectations from her in-laws after she had started the ITI course. Her mother-in-law often doubted what she was doing in Noida and thought that she had changed after moving to the city and might become indifferent to household duties. Riddhi felt that she could not say anything to her mother-in-law as she was a cancer patient. She was using her husband's unemployment allowance to do her ITI course. She also gave the impression that it was very difficult to manage everything with the small sum of money she got, tuition and hostel fees, as well as sundry expenses. She therefore wanted to study hard to become economically independent. In one of the interview sessions she said,

It is very important to get educated. It is not necessary that one has to study for getting a job. Education is very important. If one cannot do anything [else] then one could at least teach one's children.

Sen shows in her discussion of women workers in the Indian context that most working women are already wife and mother and familial dependency continues to mediate their access to and experience of wage work.¹³ None of the women discussed here showed an interest in working away from their hometowns in case it interfered with their role as a housewife and mother. They said that despite their desire for work they could not exercise this option, as their working life was secondary to their role as a housewife and a mother. Their education after marriage was tied to expectations, responsibilities and obligations at various levels, fulfilling

¹³ Ibid., p. 115

which they would consider their vocational training as 'successful'. All the four women preferred getting a government job. Married women in the Indian context, Sen argues, constrained by their family roles as wives and mothers often enter and exit the labour market in response to the male breadwinner's employment situation. They enter the market when it is shrinking and terms for labour are unfavourable – male earnings become more inconstant, inadequate or suspended.¹⁴ They withdraw when the employment situation begins to improve and the men are able to 'win the bread'.¹⁵ Women, she says are flexible workers more for the family than for the employer. The family's particular requirements place limits on their flexibility in the labour market.¹⁶

Since they were only partially fulfilling their duties as wives and mothers in their in-laws' eyes, they were expected to prove the worth of the ITI course by getting a job. They shared their anxiety about facing their in-laws in case they failed to get a job after the ITI course because they were only permitted to migrate to study against a backdrop of financial losses in the family. As all of them said, they never dreamt of migrating only for the purpose of education. It needs to be underlined that this so-called 'support' of the marital family came about after the loss of jobs of their husbands in all the four cases. Hence, the independence of these women was an unintended consequence of this 'support' for education. While talking of their doubts about getting a job in the immediate future, they expressed their fear about the taunts they may have to face for not being 'successful' in the eyes of the in-laws given the so-called 'support' they had provided for their education. It seems that education after marriage for them was pressed between financial obligation towards their families on one hand and their sense of responsibilities as a woman in the family on the other.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 107

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 107

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 107

*Reading 'gaps' in the narratives*¹⁷

The whole process of taking the interviews, transcribing and then translating them exposed certain discrepancies, highlighting 'gaps' in our knowledge of the people and their narratives. One of the very interesting cases is that of Riddhi. She claimed to belong to both OBC (off-recorder in pre-interview session) and General category (on-recorder). There are inconsistencies in her response to questions on her parents' and in-laws' stand on supporting her education financially and otherwise. She had corrected/modified her complaints against her in-laws and her parents after the first session of the interview. Such inconsistencies, corrections and modifications give multiple voices to the interviewee's narrative.¹⁸

The element of corrections/modifications could also be seen in the case of Soumya and Rina. Soumya started her conversation with complaints against her in-laws and her experience of routine violence without any question being put to her on this topic. By the last session of the interview, she modified some of her complaints against her mother-in-law. Though Rina started by speaking about the way marriage and then miscarriage were breaks in her education, she hardly elaborated upon this during the interview and responded to most of my questions in favour of her parents and in-laws. Suroopa Mukherjee observes that "one of the constant refrains one gets to hear in oral history practice is the "experience" of

¹⁷ This section is inspired from my reading of the text *We were making History* in which the authors caution us to pay attention to certain factors in the process of capturing oral testimonies. These include, understanding of pauses, the waverings, the incoherence, the questions that are avoided just as much as we need to 'hear' the real import of obsessive repetitions, the need to take "little incidents" in the lives of the interviewees as not 'mere details' but as important pointers to dimensions of experience that had no public sanction. See Stree Shakti Sanghatana, *We were making History: Women and the Telangana Uprising*, (London: Zed Books, 1989), 27

¹⁸ Joanna Bornat, Parvati Raghuram & Leori Henry study the ways in which Polyphony becomes a way of analysing different voices and giving space to a multiplicity of viewpoints. They use an interesting methodology of juxtaposing two sets of interviews, one from the archives and the other, which is more recent, to demonstrate the workings of polyphony in dialogue. They argue for the possibility of multiple meanings that hearing different voices over time can open up. See Joanna Bornat, Parvati Raghuram & Leori Henry, 'Oral History Voicing Differences, South Asian Doctors and Migration Narratives, *Economic & Political Weekly* 49, no. 30 (2014): 60-66

“living” through pain. How do we listen to pain? Are we equipped to listen to pain?”¹⁹

The age of some of the interviewees differs by 2-4 years from what they had told me in Off-recorder/pre-interview sessions and what they spoke on the recorder. In my off-recorder conversation and in the first session of the interview, Preeti was very worried about the discrepancy in declared age in her certificates which disqualified her from certain government jobs. In another session, when I asked her to elaborate about the problem on the recorder, she said that she would call her husband and ask and only then would she give me details about this.

Oral history is always “incomplete” and can never be “false,” as the oral historian is not looking for confirmation of “facts”.²⁰ Reading the ‘gaps’ is not to look for an account which is more reliable than another (the one on tape or the off-recorder conversation) but to ask what could have accounted for such modifications/corrections in their personal stories after the first session of the interview. Paul Thompson answers his question of “believe it or not?” for oral history narratives by saying that, “we need both to believe and to doubt, to make sense of what we can believe and also of what we must doubt and to bring the two together in a new interpretation which fuses both history and memory”²¹. Just as the interviewer needs to be aware of the emotional energy which may accompany telling, he says, she must also be respectful of the emotion invested in *not telling*. I would read the ‘gaps’ in the narratives of these women as coming out of the ‘fear’ that the interview recordings may get leaked to their in-laws. It needs to be noted

¹⁹ Suroopa Mukherjee, ‘Listening to Silence, reading between the Lines and Creating Archives, why is Oral History not an Independent Discipline?’, *Economic & Political Weekly* 49, no. 30 (2014): 73-4

²⁰ Indira Chowdhury, ‘A Historian among Scientists: Reflections on Archiving the History of Science in Postcolonial India’, *Isis* 104, no. 2 (2013): 377

²¹ Paul Thompson, ‘Believe it or Not: Rethinking the Historical Interpretation of Memory’, in Jaclyn Jeffrey & Glenace Ecklund Edwall ed., *Memory and History: Essays on Recalling and Interpreting Experience*, (University Press of America, 1994), p. 12. Alistair Thomson underlines that one of the most significant shifts in the last 25 years of oral history has been this recognition that the so-called unreliability of memory might be a resource rather than a problem for historical interpretation and reconstruction. See Alistair Thomson, ‘Fifty Years On: An International Perspective on Oral History’, *The Journal of American History* 85, no. 2 (1998): 581-95

that they modified/corrected only what they said about their in-laws and nothing concerning themselves or their educational history. In addition, their questions and confirmations about the purpose of the interview and to what extent these would be kept secret were often part of my off-recorder conversations with them.

By way of Conclusion

Though these interviews were taken in a 'non-event' context in a broad sense, the context (last month of their course) in which these women were asked to talk about their educational history did make a difference. It could be argued that my conversation with them on their ITI Course in the context in which they were about to finish the course but were yet to find a job before leaving for their home-town made them talk about their education at various levels in terms of relevance and irrelevance, expectations and obligations and the ways marriage continues to 'disturb' (*pareshan*) their education and vice versa. I understand from the above discussed narrative that, as married students, they felt alienated both from their families and **from** unmarried students.

The narrative about their education was plotted along the path of their journeys from maternal home to in-laws' place, from wife to becoming a mother, from migrating from small towns to a city for an education with job prospects. The women seem to evince a deep ambivalence towards both education and their families because of the ways in which the two were presented to them as an either-or-choice. Given this, they seem to understand education as a means towards success in fulfilling their responsibilities towards their family, particularly for filling in the gap in their husband's salary and then for securing their children's future financially and otherwise. They were both enabled and hampered by family concerns in coping in the ITI.

The context of the interview posed a number of dilemmas and tensions in their narrative. If on one hand they expressed their satisfaction about the decision to study after marriage, they also expressed guilt about not fulfilling their roles as housewife and mother. On one hand they showed their confidence about working in

Noida and becoming independent after studying in the city, on the other hand they did not want their work-life to disrupt their everyday life as a housewife and mother. All of them talked of the importance of education for a woman but saw the 'utility' of education in terms of it being a passage to a job, or making them equipped to teach their children better.

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In: Working Papers of the Max Weber Foundation's Transnational Research Group India

"Poverty Reduction and Policy for the Poor between the State and Private Actors: Education Policy in India since the Nineteenth Century"

Year of Publication: 2017