

Single Women in India: Rarer, Riskier, and Happier Than in the U.S.

By E. Kay Trimberger

We can better understand the obstacles and advantages we face as singles in the U.S. by comparing our situation with that of singles - here limited to single women - in other countries. Because there is both an academic and journalistic literature in English on single women in India, and because I had an opportunity to learn more in person at a Women's Studies conference in New Delhi in January 2008, I decided to pursue a comparison of middle-class single women in two such different societies.

The number of mature, single women is much smaller in India. Between the ages of 25 and 59, 89.5% of Indian women are married, as compared with 65% of American women in the same age group. As for the unmarried women in that age range, the "never married" account for 2.5% in India versus 16% in the U.S., while the percentage of divorced women in that population is 17% in the U.S. as opposed to a mere 1% in India. The percentage of Indian widows is 7%, higher than the 2% U.S. rate. (2000 U.S. Census, 2001 Indian Census) Thus, there are more of us here in the U.S. which might lead to a prediction that we would be more accepted. But I found that cultural factors play a big role in how society views us and how we view ourselves.

FIRST, HINDI HAS NO WORD COMPARABLE TO THE ENGLISH SPINSTER, with its negative, asexual connotations. Moreover, Hindu culture has a positive image of celibacy. Madhu Kishwar, a writer and activist on women's issues, in an essay in "Off the Beaten Path: Rethinking Gender Justice for Indian Women" says: "We are still heavily steeped in the old Indian tradition which holds that voluntary sexual abstinence bestows extraordinary power on human beings. . . . Our culture has the remarkable ability to provide special space and respect for women who voluntarily opt out of the sexual, marital role." Voluntary is rarely used with spinster in our culture, and certainly respect and extraordinary power are never part of the image. Moreover, the arranged marriage system in India serves to liberate unmarried women there from the self esteem trap. Recent polls show that most Indians, even the educated, urban elite, still favor arranged marriage, although perhaps in modified form with some personal choice involved.

The author Sunny Singh, in a private communication, recently remarked: "A never-married woman in India is never assumed to be unattractive because arranging the marriage is generally a family enterprise. So people assume that there wasn't enough dowry, not the right match, irresponsible parents (my favorite), a wrong astrological chart and so forth."

THE SECOND DIFFERENCE THAT STANDS OUT is the cultural imperative in the U.S. that being coupled is essential to human happiness. Single women in India are not subject to this cultural standard.

Marriage in India is more highly valued, but its purpose is family ties, not coupled happiness. Compatibility between spouses is not linked to finding a soul mate, but is seen as the result of patient work, along with family support. Madhu Kishwar, in an essay on "Love and Marriage" concludes: "...[I]t takes much more than two people to make a good marriage." In India, personal happiness has less cultural significance, and is not linked to being coupled.

To illustrate the implications, let me quote from an essay by one of India's feminist intellectuals, Urvashi Butalia, a publisher who founded the feminist press Kali for Women. Butalia contributed an essay to a 2006 book, "Chasing the Good Life: On Being Single." She says, "Oddly enough, the first time I really became conscious of my singleness was in, of all places, England. . . . [I found myself] in a culture that so privileges relationships, especially heterosexual ones, that if you are not in one (and even if you have been in one that may have broken up you are expected to jump into another almost immediately), there has to be something wrong with you. So I was always the odd one out, the one without the man, the one to be felt sorry for. And it always bewildered me, because I did not feel sorry for myself, so why did they? It wasn't a nice feeling." Butalia made me see how engrained is our cultural ideal of coupled living.

TO COUNTER THE RECENT INFLUENCE OF IMPORTED WESTERN IMAGES of the romantic couple and spinsters, Indian intellectuals now are reinforcing their own positive cultural heritage about single life. In "Chasing the Good Life: On Being Single" some of a country's best known female (and a few male) writers, journalists and artists contributed essays on their mainly positive experiences as singles. The book was widely reviewed affirmatively. "Whatever singleness may be and for whatever reason people may find themselves in that state of existence," one reviewer remarked, "there are no sob stories in this collection of 28 articles. Single people may be alone, but they are not lonely; they have their problems, but they are not desperate; their lives are fulfilling and meaningful. "Even Indian chic lit novels retain some distinctions from their Western counterparts. In "Almost Single," the 2007 Indian best seller about urban single women in their late 20s, the narrator, Aisha is skeptical of romantic love. She says, "it strikes me then that romantic love is at the best of times a luxury." In addition, Aisha seems more positive about single life than is the case in most U.S. novels of this genre. "I bemoan my single status with my friends," she remarks, "but that's just 'habitual banter,' a Greek chorus, more for entertainment than an honest expression of misery. I am not discontented or lonely - in fact, far from it."

While single life is thus psychologically easier for women in India, their daily lives seem to be more difficult than in the U.S. Indeed, I found evidence that all single women in India are seen as objects of sexual prey, and are especially vulnerable to sexual exploitation and violence. A 2005 Indian self help book, "Single in the City," spends much more time on safety issues than any similar book in the U.S. The author, Sunny Singh, reported too that Indian single women who refuse to marry are experiencing violence within their families, linking their plight to that of widows who are often exploited in their husband's family and by their family of origin.

THOSE ACTIVISTS IN INDIA WHO WANT TO IMPROVE AND LEGITIMATE SINGLE LIFE are allying themselves with a strong woman's movement to fight violence against women in all marital statuses, while Indian feminist intellectuals struggle to maintain cultural traditions that affirm single life. In the U.S. we need a cultural transformation as a first step to legitimate single life. The word spinster is rarely used today, but the negative stereotypes of single life over age forty - especially for women - are still strong. We need to bombard the cultural wall separating couples and singles with evidence that the good life includes singleness and single living, usually with many close ties to family and friends, along with strong community participation. ATMP and other organizations and individuals have begun this work, but we need much more participation to begin an alteration of our culture.

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