The central aim of this essay is to characterize the life course images and domestic life of Oriya Hindu women living in extended households in the temple town of Bhubaneswar in Orissa, India. The essay is divided into three parts.

In the first part of this essay we examine Oriya women's conceptions of the ideal phases in a woman's life. Oriya women do not conceive of a middle phase of life defined by chronological age (e.g., 40–65) or by markers of biological aging (e.g., poorer eye sight, menopause, loss of muscle strength) that would correspond to the English phrase "middle age." Yet, Oriya women do have a well-differentiated conception of the normal and desirable phases in a woman's life. Their ideal life course scheme includes a phase called prauda or "mature adulthood," which begins when a married woman takes over the management of the extended household and ends when she relinquishes control and social responsibilities to others. Although prauda is a condition that a married Oriya woman is likely to achieve by her early thirties and likely to hand over to others by her late fifties, age and biology per se are not the defining characteristics of Oriya life-phase transitions. The underlying logic of the five-phase scheme elaborated below is a logic of social responsibility, family management, and moral duty. In the first part of the essay we describe this scheme.

In the second part of the essay, we review some recent anthropological representations and moral evaluations of the lives of rural Hindu women more generally. Since the 1970s, a growing number of anthropological studies have examined the lives of Hindu women (to name but a few, Fruzetti 1982; Dhruvarajan 1988; Papanek and Minault 1982; Sharma 1980; Roy 1975; Jacobson 1982; Jain and Bannerjee 1985; Liddele and Joshi 1986; Wadley 1980; Wadley and Jacobson 1986; Bennett 1983; Kondos 1989; Minturn 1990; Jeffrey et al. 1988; Raheja and Gold

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1994). Many of these studies are implicitly, if not self-consciously, “feminist” in orientation and rely on moral concepts such as social inequality, patriarchal oppression, subjugation, exploitation, and resistance to depict Hindu women, their lives, and their situations. In explicating and critiquing the feminist view, we identify two kinds of ethnographic portraits—the passive victim and the clandestine rebel—that have emerged from such studies.

In the third part of the essay, we raise some doubts about these recent representations and moral evaluations of the situation of rural Hindu women. We aim to recover a set of local moral meanings that have tended to be lost in the writing or invention (the “making up”) of a feminist ethnography of Hindu family life. We do this by relying on Oriya women’s own descriptions of their workaday lives and their own ratings of psychological well-being and physical health. Apart from women’s descriptions of their daily routines, we also make use of observations of daily life in the family, of cooking and worship, of events like births and marriages, and the everyday conversations that one of the authors (Usha Menon) had with these women outside the interview situation. We relate women’s daily routines to the different phases in an Oriya woman’s life, and we contextualize the lives of Oriya “housewives” and trace some connections that exist between family statuses over the life course and the achievement of a sense of personal well-being (hito).

Our strategy in this final part of the essay is to rely on indigenous and locally salient Oriya moral concepts to reveal a hidden and unexamined presupposition implicit in many portrayals of Hindu women. That unexamined presupposition is the tenet of “the moral superiority of the West,” the presumption of a white man’s (or white woman’s) burden to liberate others from the darkness of their own cultural traditions. We describe the ways in which Oriya Hindu women derive meaning, purpose, and a sense of power from their family life practices, and we point out some of the important differences between the moral sensibilities of “Westernized” feminist writers and the moral sensibilities of the “non-Westernized” Hindu women whose lives they have sought to depict.

As we shall see, the overriding moral significances of the domestic life of Hindu women perceived by many Westernized ethnographers (and projected into their writings about exploitation, victimization, and resistance) are not the moral significances constructed by local Oriya women, whose voices and subaltern notions of the moral good (including their ideas about service, duty, civility, and self-improvement) articulate a vision of life in society that Westernized feminists appear ideologically unprepared to represent sympathetically.

The Oriya Sample

Our investigation was done in the neighborhood surrounding the Lingaraj temple in Bhubaneswar, Orissa, the “Old Town” as it is known locally. This medieval temple (it dates to the tenth or eleventh century) is one of the contemporary residences of the Hindu god Siva and his divine family. The temple is an active pilgrimage site and a necessary stop in the itinerary of pilgrims on their way to the famous Jagannatha (“juggernaut”) temple forty miles away in the coastal town of Puri.

Data for this paper come from two spells of fieldwork conducted by Usha Menon: the first done in 1991 and the second in 1992–93. In 1991, ninety-two Oriya Hindu men and women were interviewed about their conceptions of the life course and about the kinds of events and experiences that they considered typical and/or significant in a person’s life. They were also asked to assess their past and present life satisfaction and their expectations for the future.

The results of this initial spell of research highlighted three important issues. First, Oriya Hindus tend to describe life in terms of changes in roles, duties, and responsibilities. They rarely speak of life in terms of the growth and development of a child’s capacity to speak or walk and they never mention first menstruation or menopause, although the former is marked by explicit rituals and marks the beginning of restrictions on girls’ movements, apparel, and companions. Second, Oriya Hindus have well-articulated conceptions of the two- and five-phase models of the life course, which are described below.

Third, Oriya Hindu women of all ages tend to see mature adulthood as, relatively speaking, the most satisfying period in a woman’s life. This finding appears to be distinctive of the Oriya Hindu cultural world; for instance, it differs quite remarkably from research done with American women. According to Paul Cleary’s unpublished results (see fig. 1), American women exhibit a steady, linear decline in anticipated future life satisfaction as they move from young adulthood to advanced middle age. According to our results (see fig. 1), however, Oriya Hindu women have different expectations. In fact, unlike American women, who view young adulthood—the period of life when individual capacities for autonomous, independent action are at their peak—as the
more satisfying period in life, mature adulthood is the period that elicits from Oriya Hindu women the greatest anticipation of positive life satisfaction. As we shall see, there are indigenous meanings and understandings that can help us understand their evaluations.

Those findings from the fieldwork in 1991 provided the background for a second spell of fieldwork conducted by Menon a year later. Since Oriyas tend to describe their lives in terms of changing roles and responsibilities, the later research focused on women at different phases in the life course who were occupying different family roles, performing different duties, and bearing different responsibilities. And since mature adulthood is perceived by many women to be the most satisfying period in a woman's life, the second set of interviews and observations tried to explicate the values and meanings that these women attach to this particular time of life and the ways they define "satisfying life experiences." Because we believe that shifts in these women's roles, responsibilities, and personal well-being can be most clearly witnessed within the context of joint living arrangements, informants for the second spell of fieldwork were selected from extended households.

Joint living arrangements (a three-generation family consisting of adult brothers, their parents, wives, children, and unmarried sisters) are a phase of the developmental cycle of all families in the temple town of Bhubaneswar. One significant difference between joint and nuclear living arrangements in India lies in the fact that joint families are most certainly the cultural ideal. Indians prefer such living arrangements whenever they are possible. In Old Town, joint families usually break up when either the old father or grandfather (the head of the household) dies or when the old widowed mother or grandmother dies. At this time, the adult sons set up their own nuclear families with their wives and their children. Yet with the marriage of their sons and the birth of their grandchildren, their families extend and become complex, and the cycle of joint living arrangements begins again.

Our sample of Oriya informants for this phase of the research consisted of thirty-seven Hindu women belonging to ten extended households, ranging from nineteen to seventy-eight years old. These women follow traditional age-related family roles, those of "new" daughter-in-law, wife, mother, "old" (or senior) daughter-in-law, mother-in-law, grandmother, widow. A couple of unmarried adult daughters also form part of the sample; they were interviewed to provide a same-age control group and counterpoint to the experiences of new daughters-in-law.

Figure 1. The American data were collected and analyzed by Paul Cleary and his associates at Harvard University. We are grateful for the opportunity to use this unpublished material as a point of comparison with the data from India.
Of the ten families selected, seven are Brahman; one is a Chassa (a cultivating caste), another a Teli (a merchant caste) and the last a Maharana (a caste of carpenters). Except for one Brahman family, the families are fairly well off: they own agricultural land and other property—houses and shops—that earn rent. Signs of this relative wealth can be seen in the fact that all families have at least one motor scooter, perhaps two, as well as televisions, refrigerators, and other household appliances.

The number of members in these families vary from six to twenty, with the average being thirteen. Of the thirty-seven women, there are twenty-two daughters-in-law, thirteen mothers-in-law, and two daughters; two of these daughters-in-law belong to four-generation households and so are mothers-in-law to the newest generation of daughters-in-law. In terms of education, a generational effect is clearly noticeable: mothers-in-law rarely have more than three or four years of education while almost all the daughters-in-law have completed ten years of formal schooling. There are, moreover, five mothers-in-law who state that they are unable to read or write; of these, three are non-Brahmans while two belong to a caste (Badus) whose status as Brahmans is contested by other Brahmans in the community.

Using open-ended, loosely structured interview schedules, women were asked to describe their daily routines, the degree of control they exercised over their own actions and bodies as well as the actions and bodies of others, their sense of belonging to their families and being part of a meaningful communal life, and the extent to which they felt they had achieved well-being. In order to measure the extent to which these women experience well-being, responses are keyed to the following mode of estimation. Ordinary folk in Old Town often speak of having “not even one anna of control over what happens in life” or of having “fully sixteen annas of happiness in childhood,” and so when it came to asking women how healthy they were or how much well-being they thought they had, we framed the question in these commonplace terms. Therefore, the answers we typically heard were, “Six annas of good health [svasthyā]” or “Four annas of well-being [hitā].”

Almost without exception, the women were candid, articulate, and eager to participate; consequently, the interviews are long and detailed. None lasted for less than an hour. Some went on for more than two hours. The reasons for this candor and eagerness are not hard to understand. We believe most women saw the interview situation as an opportunity to engage in a kind of therapy or a criticism of family members.

They permitted themselves to speak their minds with relative freedom to an interested stranger who spoke their language but who did not share the constraints of their lives. While most interviews were one-on-one conversations in secluded rooms, the feeling that the rest of the family was close at hand, within earshot, was not easy to shake off. Often, when the women felt that they were saying something particularly critical of other family members, their voices would drop, but at other times they would deliberately raise their voices so that their complaints could be heard by other members of the family. Thus, most new daughters-in-law spoke in low undertones while mothers-in-law and sometimes old daughters-in-law spoke loudly and self-confidently, often even aggressively. All interviews were in Oriya, audiotaped, and later transcribed and translated.

**Between Birth and Death in Orissa, India:**

Some Local Women’s Views

Diagram 1 is a schematic representation of the phases of life (avastha) as described by sixty-six Oriya Hindu women (predominantly Brahman) living in extended households in the temple town of Bhubaneswar. All the women were interviewed by Usha Menon in the summer of 1991. During the interview, they were presented with a sheet of paper on which there were two dots, designated “birth” and “death.” The women were asked to fill in the space between the two dots by narrating the most significant events and experiences in a typical person’s life and in their own lives as well.

Some women initially resisted the request, indicating that it is really boring to talk in broad generalities about things that are obvious about life. As one elderly woman put it (a woman who was in the fifth and last phase of life, the bṛiddha avastha, or stage of completion), “What can I tell you about those kinds of things? You know about them. Everyone does. You are born, you grow up, you grow old, you die. Do you want to hear that?” Other women were initially skeptical about the task on the grounds that “each person’s life is different from everyone else’s” and that “it depends on what kind of family you are born into, what your caste is, whether you’re a boy or girl, whether you are the oldest child or the second or whatever, what your capabilities are, what karma you have brought with you.” Nevertheless, Oriya women are quite adept at storytelling, and with just a bit of coaxing, they in fact had much to say about how a woman’s life proceeds between life and death in rural India.
## Diagram 1. Oriya Women’s Conception of the Life Course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lifeline</th>
<th>Knows right from wrong</th>
<th>Takes over family management</th>
<th>Relinquishes family management</th>
<th>Death</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birth</td>
<td>(7-9)</td>
<td>(18-20)</td>
<td>(30-39)</td>
<td>(55-60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Two-stage model
- **bapa gharo** (Life in father’s house)
- **sasu gharo** (life in mother-in-law’s house)

### Five-stage model
- **pila** (undisciplined child)
- **kishoro** (morally formative youth)
- **jouvana** (sexually active)
- **prauda** (mature)
- **briddha** (completed)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality of role</th>
<th>Pet</th>
<th>Servant</th>
<th>Manager</th>
<th>Dependent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rank in family</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High (peak)</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control over others</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High (peak)</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assimilation in the family</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High (peak)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Served by others?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Restrictive life? | No | Yes | Yes (peak) | Yes | No |
| Burden of responsibilities | Low | Low | High | High | Low |
| Worry about welfare of others? | No | No | Yes | Yes (peak) | Disappears |
| Perceived stress | Low | Low | High (peak) | High | High |
| Karmic consequences of one’s actions | Low | High | High | High (peak) | High |
| Capacity to reason | Absent | Present | Present | Present (peak) | Declines |
| Time of suffering? | No | No | Yes | No | Yes |
| Perception of life-satisfaction trajectory | I will be worse off in next phase | I was better off in last phase and will be much better off in next phase | I was worse off in last phase and will be worse off in next phase | I was much better off in last phase and will be much worse off in next phase |
The tales told by these sixty-six Oriya women reveal an alternative cultural conceptualization of the phases of the life course, one based on the logic of social responsibility, family management, and moral duty. In their narrations, Oriya women tend to divide the life course into either two, four, or five phases. These three types of conceptualizations (the two-, four-, and five-phase models) form a nested hierarchy of differentiated cultural models of the life course. The two- and five-stage models are schematically represented in diagram 1.

In the context of our general concern with documenting the breadth versus the narrowness of the cross-cultural and historical distribution of the idea of "middle age," it is the four- or five-phase model that interest us the most, because within these models there is a life phase known as prauda or "mature adulthood." We shall have more to say about the Oriya conception of mature adulthood below. First, however, we briefly comment on the most basic or rudimentary Oriya model of a woman's life, in which the life course is partitioned into only two phases: life spent in "my father's house" (bapa gharo) and that spent in "my husband's mother's house" (sasu gharo), the most common bipartite characterization among Oriya women who divide their lives into only two phases.

In extended households in Orissa, India, married sons continue to stay at home with their parents, but daughters, after an arranged marriage, move out. From the point of view of the daughter who is marrying out, the marriage ceremony is the most significant phase boundary in her life. It is at this point that an Oriya woman's socially recognized status shifts from being "a child who is some man's daughter" (jhio pila) to being "a sexually active female who is some other woman's daughter-in-law" (bou). As a jhio pila, an Oriya female is assumed to be sexually dormant (even after she is biologically mature) and lives under her father's protection. As a young bou, she is expected to be reproductively and sexually active and live under her mother-in-law's command.

Ideally, this fundamental phase shift from father's house to mother-in-law's house takes place between eighteen and twenty years of age. However, age per se does not mark the boundary between these two basic phases in life. Rather, it is marked by the numerous changes in social responsibilities attendant upon marriage, including, among other things, the responsibility to serve and be sensitive to the in-laws' needs and to become sexually active for the sake of reproducing the family line. Unlike young American females, who want to be referred to as "women" (rather than "girls") as soon as they move out of their parents' homes and into a college dormitory, a sexually inactive Oriya thirty-year-old who is still unmarried and lives under the protection of her father is socially categorized as a "child." She becomes a "woman" by getting married and by willingly and dutifully placing herself under an older woman's authority.

For the women in our study, the story of the life course, then, is the story of domestic life in someone else's house (first father's, then mother-in-law's). The fact that Oriya women are housebound, however, is not viewed by them as a mark of their oppression. Quite the contrary. The domestic realm is highly valued in Oriya culture, and domestic space (ghare) is understood as a kind of sacred, uncontaminating space and is contrasted with public, or outside, contaminating space (bahare). Men spend time outside the home and, therefore, are always at risk of becoming coarse (asabhya) and uncivilized (abhadra). It is by virtue of being able to remain indoors that Oriyas, both men and women, believe that women are more refined than men, more capable of experiencing civilizing dispositions such as "humility," "restraint," and "shame" (lajya), and less likely to display crude emotions such as "anger" (raga) or "mocking laughter" (hasa).

The four- and five-phase models elaborate on life in the two houses, presenting us with a more differentiated view of a woman's life course. In the five-phase model, life in one's father's house is divided into two phases: first, the undisciplined early childhood phase (pilaliya), when the daughter is indulged as a kind of resident guest in training and is given anticipatory instruction in the social responsibilities and duties of married life. The first phase ends at approximately seven to nine years of age, when the daughter-child becomes a kind of resident guest in training and is given anticipatory instruction in the social responsibilities and duties of married life; the second phase ends at marriage. (The four-phase model joins the first two phases and labels them "pila."

Life in one's mother-in-law's house is divided into three phases: the first is jouvana, or young adulthood, when the sexually active young daughter-in-law is expected to have children and to serve the needs of her husband's family members; the second is prauda, or mature adulthood, when a woman takes over all the responsibilities for family
management, including planning and control; and the third is briddha, or the age of completion, when a woman gives up the management of the family, becomes dependent on her kin, and begins to anticipate life in yet another house, the house of Yama, the house of the god of death.

In diagram 1 we have listed some of the characteristics of each life phase as revealed in these women's narratives. We have focused on those that are potentially relevant to perceived life satisfaction or well-being, for example, assimilation into the family, dominance within the family, being served by others, having control over the actions of others, and so forth. The sixty-six Oriya women in our sample represent four of the five life phases. As a measure of perceived life satisfaction, they were asked to estimate the ratio of good and bad events in their current lives, in the past five to ten years, and five to ten years into the future. The perceived life satisfaction of the fourteen oldest women (e.g., those over sixty who are in the last phase, that of briddha) can be summarized as follows: "My life was much better off in the past and it will be much worse off in the future." The perceived life satisfaction of the nineteen young daughters-in-law, those women under thirty who are in phase 3 (jouvana) can be summarized this way: "My life was better off in the past and it will be much better off in the future." Neither jouvana (the early married phase) nor briddha (the last phase of life) are valued times for women in this community. By way of contrast, it is the prauda (mature adulthood) phase that is highly prized. Married women in their twenties look forward to it with anticipation. The elder women look back on it as that phase of life that preceded their decline.

Praud a may seem vaguely reminiscent of "midlife" or "middle age." Yet that impression is surely misleading, for mature adulthood is not defined by biological age and does not normally extend beyond the ages of fifty-five or sixty. Prauda begins when a married woman takes over the management of the extended household and ends when she relinquishes control and social responsibilities to others. According to these Oriya women, prauda is the phase in life when dominance, control, planfulness, and responsibility for others are at their peak. The perceived life satisfaction of the twenty-eight women who are in the prauda phase can be summarized this way: "Compared to where I am now I was worse off in the past and I will be worse off in the future." In absolute terms it is when Oriya women are "mature adults" that they report the greatest life satisfaction.

When pressed, Oriya women can estimate descriptively normative age boundaries for each of these phases of life. Prauda, for example, is likely to begin when a woman is in her early thirties and end when she is in her late fifties. Nevertheless, as we have mentioned before, age per se is not the defining characteristic of Oriya life phases, and other biological markers such as menarche or menopause are rarely mentioned when these women talk about the phases of life. The underlying logic of Oriya life phases is a logic of social responsibility, family management, and moral duty and it is in such terms that a woman's "mature adulthood" in rural India is culturally defined.

We now turn to a discussion of the way Hindu family life and the domestic careers of Hindu women have been represented in recent scholarly literature, where, for the most part, the "native point of view" has either been subordinated to, or appropriated by, the moral framework of the currently popular "feminist" point of view. First we discuss the two types of constructions of the lives of Hindu women that are most prevalent in feminist ethnography. Then we offer an alternative construction derived from an alternative point of view.

Writing about Domesticity: The Moral Foundations of Ethnographic Representation

Feminist Discourse about "Hindu Women": A Brief Overview

Feminist scholarship is, of course, neither uniform nor homogeneous in its goals or beliefs. Nevertheless, in the context of South Asian studies, there are certain assumptions that seem to be widely held among anthropologists who approach their subject matter from a feminist point of view: that is, that patriarchy is bad and is responsible for the subordination of women; that women can be grouped into a unitary, coherent, already-constituted category made up of gendered persons who have the same objective interests and similar subjective desires; that male dominance and female subordination are not only morally outrageous but also seem to exist in almost every context; that Hindu cultural meanings systematically and regularly devalue women.

Armed with these tenets, scholars who study India from a feminist point of view seem to divide into two kinds: those who view Hindu women as passive victims of patriarchy, and those who view Hindu women as active rebels against it.

The scholars who portray Hindu women as passive victims (e.g., Kondos 1989; Dhruvarajan 1988; Jeffrey et al. 1988) focus on the differ-
ences that they, as Westernized observers, see in the life circumstances of the female Hindu “other,” and they are sensitive to (and feel great empathy for) the situations of the most unfortunate of Hindu women.

There is much that these scholars dislike or even disdain in Hindu society. For example, they blame Hindu religion (which they interpret as mere ideology rather than as a sacred and factual explanation of social and physical phenomena) for the “subordination and subjection” of women (Kondos 1989, 162), for clouding the consciousness of its victims, and for withholding from Hindu women a political discourse of protest, insurgency, and victimhood. Such feminist writers tend to project an image of “the Hindu woman” as tame, domesticated, bound by tradition, intellectually unsophisticated, and sexually constrained. In this view, she is a woman who has little control over her actions or her body, a woman whose life is completely contingent on others.

Thus, Dhruvarajan, while describing her book’s objective, writes,

By elaborating on the philosophical underpinnings and the beliefs regarding the nature of men and women it is based on, it shows how women’s dependent position on men is legitimized, how the ideology manipulates the motivational structure of women to accept their position as underlings of men, and how it strips them of the willpower necessary for self-reliance and personal growth. (1988, 108)

Kondos, in her study of upper-caste Nepali Hindu women, concludes that “feminine success is predefined and not open to variation, for a woman cannot be successful in any other way or in any other terms except those specified by the structures (the domicile, the laws, the cultural imperatives to produce sons and to die before her husband)” (1989, 190). Jeffrey et al. reveal their intellectual predispositions when they write that “Swaleha (one of our research assistants) responded to Patricia’s exasperation over women’s self-abnegation with the comment: ‘But you see, the men here have subdued their women so completely that the idea has perched in women’s minds that they are indeed inferior’” (1988, 157).

The foregoing image of the Hindu woman as passive victim is set in sharp contrast to another representation that is implicit in the writings of these feminist scholars: the image of the Western or Westernized academic woman as educated and cosmopolitan, as having control over her body and her sexuality, as autonomous, and as having the freedom to make informed decisions on her own. The message conveyed by these authors is that the discrepancy between the two images (the tradition-bound housewife vs. the cosmopolitan, liberated scholar) is a measure of the failure of Hindu society to recognize and live up to a set of obvious and universally binding moral ideals (autonomy, equality, privacy, individual rights, and social and economic justice), which have been recognized and are being institutionalized in the West. In ethnographic constructions of this sort the native point of view remains unvoiced or tends to be subordinated to a feminist point of view.

Yet not all scholars who study India portray Hindu women as passive victims. Recently, there has become available in the literature an alternative construction or invention—the Hindu woman as active rebel. Those who represent Hindu women this way, as proto-Jacobins or cryptorevolutionaries, perceive in Hindu women a set of “liberated” attitudes and reactions against patriarchy that are very much like their own. These ethnographers detect “subversion” and “resistance” in Hindu women’s songs, poetry, and ordinary conversations. They portray Hindu women as having a bawdy sense of humor, taking pleasure in their sexuality, and relishing their female nature. They represent these symbolic actions as ways for women to express their disenchantment with patriarchy and as indications of an incipient or clandestine movement within Hindu India aimed at undermining received gender roles (see Raheja and Gold 1994). According to this representation of South Asian moral attitudes and beliefs, Hindu women speak in multiple voices and elaborate both dominant male and subversive female perspectives. At some fundamental level, however, Hindu women, it is claimed, share with Western feminists insights that enable them to identify the ultimate cause as well as the proximate instruments of their oppression—patriarchy and men. In ethnographic constructions of this sort, the native point of view is equated with, and thereby appropriated by, the feminist point of view.

Is There a Distinctive (Nonfeminist) “Native Point of View”?

Local Oriya Discourse about Hindu Women

There can be little doubt that the cultural practices of rural India in general and the family life practices of rural Hindu women in particular are a challenge to the cognitive, moral, and aesthetic sensibilities of Euro-American observers. For example, most married Oriya Hindu
women living in the temple town of Bhubaneswar are sequestered in family compounds, where they assume a major responsibility for the humdrum routines, tasks, and duties of domestic life. Chandrama, a twenty-three-year-old Oriya woman who has been married for the last nine years and is the eldest daughter-in-law in an extended household of twelve, tells us about a typical day in her life. What she has to narrate about her daily routine is typical of a day in the life of an Oriya woman in the nuna phase of life:

As soon as I get up, I sweep out the house and then I go to the bathroom. I clean my teeth, have a bath, and then I start the breakfast. Once the breakfast is done, people come in one by one to eat. I serve each of them breakfast. Once that is done, we have our breakfast together. Bau [husband's mother] and I eat together. And then, I start preparing lunch—what we'll be eating at two in the afternoon. Once that is done, again people come in one by one to eat. By three, we would also have eaten our breakfast together.

Q. Would you like to add anything more to what you've just said?
A. No, nothing else.

Q. What about puja [worship]? In the morning do you do puja after your bath? Give water to the tulasi [basil leaf, representing the goddess] or offer water to surija [sun god]?
A. No, I do nothing. Bau does all that. All I do is wash the feet of our burhi ma [husband's father's mother] and drink the water after my bath and before I go to make breakfast. I used to do it for bou and nona [husband's mother and father] in the beginning but they stopped me from doing it. They said that it was enough to do it for burhi ma and get her blessings. But apart from that I don't do any puja. I offer sandhya but that is only in the kitchen—bou offers it in the puja room and over the rest of the house.

As every interpretive anthropologist knows, a storyteller's intent is not always equivalent to a listener's response. One theme of our essay is that, from the point of view of "authorial intent," Chandrama's chronicle of her daily routine is really a narrative saturated with locally salient yet universally recognizable moral meanings about her self-conscious engagement in a project of doing sewa, or service, for her husband's family. Her narrative is about the positive moral implications of voluntarily enduring the specific life phase (and hence temporary) responsibilities of a family sevaka (a devoted servant of the divine).

One of the things this storyteller, Chandrama, does not know, however, is that some of her listeners will be cosmopolitan, "liberated" Westernized scholars who will reflexively perceive her sewa as humiliating subservience, oppressive subjugation, or abusive exploitation. Minimally we can expect that the daily routine of an Oriya "housewife" as described in this narrative will appear at first blush to give new meaning (both literal and figurative) to the idea of the "daily grind." At least that is the first impression it is likely to create in the minds of many cosmopolitan and liberated academic observers.

A second theme of our essay is that first impressions can be misleading. This is especially true when those impressions have been formed or take shape under the influence of a relatively thin theory of moral goods, such as the honorable yet incomplete (and hence "partial" or "biased") "morality of autonomy" privileged by Western liberal thought. In this case the (objectively) partial yet (subjectively) totalizing moral significance projected (and then perceived) by Western and Westernized feminist ethnographers as they gaze upon the lives of "un-liberated" Hindu women are almost neocolonial in character, for those significances carry with them the implications of a moral imperialism or a "white (wo)man's burden" to emancipate and uplift Hindu family life and to disenthral "uneducated" and "superstitious" Hindus of their "unjust" and "oppressive" gender roles.

In this essay we wish to suggest, however tentatively, that the Oriya
Hindu women of the temple town of Bhubaneswar are neither passive victims nor subversive rebels, but rather active upholders of a moral order that Western feminists have largely failed to comprehend. High on the list of virtues and values in the moral order upheld by Oriya women are chastity, modesty, duty, self-discipline, the deferment of gratification, self-improvement, and the ideal of domestic "service" (sewa). Low on the list are liberty and social equality.

This essay is about the cultural agency displayed by the Oriya Hindu women of the temple town as they go about their daily lives, agency that supports and affirms rather than denies or undermines the cultural order. These women are not cultural robots who go through life mechanically and unthinkingly. Rather, they are self-reflecting people who acknowledge the constraints they live with, recognize the choices available to them, and are well aware of the costs and rewards of conforming to cultural norms.

_Hito_, the Oriya term for well-being, is an analytic category familiar to the women who participated in this study. Defined very broadly, it refers to the state of being satisfied with the way one's world has turned out. A more nuanced definition, one that includes the indigenous meanings that this term conveys to Oriya women, will emerge during the course of this essay. It is that nuanced definition that enables us to critique the rather dismal feminist representations of the lives of Hindu women and to relocate Oriya domestic life within an alternative moral order. (On the idea of plural moral goods such as autonomy, community, or divinity and alternative moral orders see Shweder [1991, 1994], Shweder et al. [1990], Shweder et al. [1997], Haidt et al. [1993], and Jensen [1995]. On the idea of plural moral goods such as fairness, sympathy, duty, and self-improvement and alternative moral orders see Wilson [1993].)

Our representation of women's lives in Oriya households highlights the way a woman's access to and achievement of well-being (_hito_) systematically varies across the life cycle. There are periods when an Oriya housewife is so valued within the family, when her activities are so significant for the material and spiritual prosperity of the entire household, that her own sense of well-being peaks; and there are periods when she is less essential to the household's well-being, and her own sense of well-being declines. No Oriya Hindu woman's life is uniformly a success or uniformly a failure, just as there is no woman in this community who always makes her own decisions or one who never does. These are facts well recognized by the women themselves. Oriya women will tell you that success or failure, control or lack of control, well-being or distress characterize different phases in a person's life and ultimately mesh together to form the fabric of a self-disciplined life. This essay is thus an attempt to describe the moral texture of that self-disciplined way of being in the world as understood by Oriya woman.

Understanding the Cultural Construction of Gender in a Hindu Temple Town

For the sake of our analysis we shall define a "culture" as a reality lit up by a morally enforceable conceptual scheme or subset of meanings instantiated in practice (Shweder 1996). In this section of the essay we introduce the reader to the alternative cultural reality of gender relations in the temple town of Bhubaneswar and to some of the concepts, beliefs, and practices to which the reader must gain access if Oriya gender relations are to be understood as a justifiable or defensible moral reality.

To an outside observer unfamiliar with the concepts, meanings, and practices of the temple town, the women who live there may at first glance seem docile, submissive, withdrawn, and relegated to the background—women without voices. But appearances can deceive, revealing more about the observer than the observed. A closer acquaintance suggests a radically different picture, for these Oriya women do not see themselves as powerless, and they confidently believe that it is they who hold families and society together. Oriya men share this view. In this section, we attempt to show the ways in which such self-understandings grow and develop among these women.

Sudhir Kakar's comment that, in Hindu India, "the preferred medium of instruction and transmission of psychological, metaphysical and social thought continues to be the story" (1982, 1) accurately describes much of indigenous cultural discourse in the temple town of Bhubaneswar. Oriya men and women frequently use stories from the various Puranas (texts about the old times, the often times), as well as regional Oriya folk tales to give logic and meaning to everyday or mundane experience. For most of the Oriya women who spoke at length and in intimate detail about their lives in our data, the stories from the Puranas are far more "real" and relevant to everyday life (and thus more worthy of repetition) than events reported in the daily newspapers.

The female protagonists (divine and human) of these stories—
Durga, Kali, Kunti, Draupadi, Sita, Radha, Savitri, Anusuya—exemplify womanly virtues. Their experiences elucidate a woman's dharma and define a woman's prakriti (svabhava, her nature). Their qualities (guna) tell them what it means to be a Hindu woman. Women see these figures as paradigmatic, partly because they represent ideals worthy of emulation, and partly because it is believed that, by virtue of being female, these heroines and ordinary Oriya Hindu women share the same configurations of female substance.

In addition to the Puranic orientation in the temple town, the Saka tradition is also strong. Oriya Hindus of the temple town, both men and women, are liable to say that women embody, as the goddess does, sakti (vital energy or power or strength), that they have more of the guna in terms of absolute quantities than do men, which is why women can turn the asadhyya (undoable) into the sadhya (doable), the asambhav (impossible) into the sambhav (possible). Women are commonly described as saktidayini (givers of vital energy or strength) and as being samporna sakti (full of vital energy or strength). Women are depicted as samsarore chalak (controllers or directors of the family and the flow of life in this world), as those whose duties include satisfying everyone (samasthonku santhusta koriba), maintaining the family (samsarako sambhaliba), ensuring peace and order (shanti shrunkhala rakhiba).

Most Oriya Hindus in the temple town believe that social reproduction is the primary task of any group. And they believe that the family represents the most appropriate site for social reproduction. For most Oriyas, the idea of a voluntarily childless marriage is a contradiction in terms. (Why would anyone marry, Oriyas ask, if they had no intention of having children and contributing to the reproduction of the group?) Both men and women will say, “We are born into this world to play our roles in samsara, to participate in the ebb and flow of life, to build families, to raise children.” They emphasize the impermanence of all things in this world, the fact that continual change is the only stable feature of life. They believe that only through procreating and raising children to responsible adulthood does a group achieve immortality.

It is thus not surprising that Oriya Hindu women, and their menfolk too, regard the home and the family—the domestic domain—as a more important sphere of human action than action in the public domain. Since women control and manage all household activities, whether what men earn is utilized effectively and productively depends on the sagacity and capability of the women of the household, particu-

larly the senior-most woman. Men readily acknowledge that women shoulder many more responsibilities than they do (stiro daitya purusa opekhya jyateshtha adhika) and that the work women do is six times as much as men have to do (stri jatinkoro karma chho guna adhika).

As a sixty-year-old husband, a father and one of the most articulate of informants says,

"Look at a twenty-year-old man, a twenty-year-old child, he knows nothing, he just roams here and there, but a twenty-year-old girl, she has become the mother of two children, she runs her household and family, she cares for the cows and calves under her care, the children and the house, she cooks and serves her husband, she cleans the children, dresses them, and sends them to school, makes sure that they are well. She manages the parents of her husband, she cleans the house. Compared to a man’s, a woman's responsibilities are far more. When you compare men and women of the same age, that is what you find."

In contrast to the premises of modern liberal thought, the view of the world espoused by Oriya women and men is built on a logic of difference and solidarity rather than on equality and competition. To understand the Oriya moral universe as it applies to gender, one must understand that the popular Oriya recognition of the worth of women's work and widespread acknowledgement of greater female effectiveness is not a local idiomatic Oriya expression of a feminist viewpoint, for, quite emphatically, neither women nor men in Orissa believe that women and men are equal.

Indeed, most Oriya women and men find the notion that one should be indifferent to gender or treat the genders as though they were the same as either incomprehensible, amusing, or immature. For these Oriyas, the most common metaphor for society is the human body: no organ is exactly substitutable for any other and yet all work together so that the body functions efficiently while life endures. Most Oriya women and men believe that of all the jatis (castes) in the world, male and female are the only authentic jatis because male and female are the only two jatis whose fundamental differences cannot be transcended.

For Oriya Hindus then, “difference” and “interdependency” are given. Yet, this “difference” and the character of the interdependence are not fixed or global. The prerogatives and privileges enjoyed and the
power exercised by women and men are fluid, varying, as A. K. Ramanaujan (1990) has said, with particular contexts. Men, in terms of the constitution of their bodily substances, have disproportionately more of the sattva guna (qualities of transparency, lucidity, coherence) and so are regarded as "purer" and because of this relative purity enjoy certain privileges in some situations (e.g., they can approach divinity with fewer restrictions); while women, because they possess more of all the gunas in absolute terms, exercise considerable power and control in other situations (e.g., they manage household finances and activities with little interference). We document and elaborate these points below.

Some Oriya Women's Discourse about Well-being

In this section, we rely on the voices of thirty-seven Oriya women from our broader sample to construct a representation of the way personal well-being is understood and defined by women who belong to this orthodox Hindu community, whose practices and institutions are premised on moral goods and ethical virtues other than those privileged in feminist writings and Western liberal thought.

Family role (rank and status) appears to be the significant variable in determining an Oriya woman's well-being. As noted earlier, considering the fabric of adult life across the life course, access to personal well-being is at its maximum when an Oriya woman enters the managerial stage of prauda (typically as either an old daughter-in-law or as a married mother-in-law). And while most Oriya women achieve this rank or status some time between thirty and forty years of age, biological age per se is not a crucial variable.

Similarly, the sense of well-being reported by daughters and new daughters-in-law varies according to their particular family roles. In Hindu extended households, unmarried adult daughters and new daughters-in-law live in the same family compound and are often of approximately the same age (both may be in their early twenties). Yet their well-being assessments vary widely, with unmarried daughters reporting strikingly higher levels of hito.

Because an Oriya woman's duties, responsibilities, social status, and ways of being enmeshed in interpersonal relationships seem to be the major factors giving her meaning, purpose, and fulfillment in life, it is one of our aims as ethnographers of Hindu family life to characterize their moral meanings, to describe changes in those duties and responsibilities over the life course, and to understand how access to those moral meanings is related to personal well-being.

The "Daily Grind": The Moral Meanings of Service to the Family (Sewa)

It has been reported that in most societies as a woman ages there is a relaxation in the restrictions under which she lives (cf. Brown and Kerns 1985). While this may be true on a worldwide scale, it would be a mistake to infer that increased "autonomy" is the central moral "good" that explains the association between personal well-being and prauda in our sample. We believe that in the temple town a woman's sense of well-being hinges on the particular kinds of family relationships she has succeeded at developing or has failed to develop as she ages.

An important part of the story about hito concerns the values and meanings that Oriya Hindus attach to the roles of old daughter-in-law and married mother-in-law. By incorporating such indigenous values and meanings, we will try to construct an ideal-typical model of the development of well-being among Oriya women. We believe this model is culturally salient, although because this model is an idealization, summarizing and typifying thirty-seven Oriya voices, it will not necessarily coincide with the lived experiences of each and every woman.

The most striking feature of the daily routines of these Oriya women lies, we think, in the ways such routines highlight social relational patterns within families. These daily routines bring to the fore the ways in which duties, responsibilities, and opportunities get distributed among women according to the needs of the family. In this section, we discuss and contrast five particular family roles: daughter, new daughter-in-law, old daughter-in-law, mother-in-law, and widow. We discuss the social relational patterns that are revealed by their daily routines.

We begin with the daughter of the family. As an unmarried adult an Oriya Hindu girl enjoys a carefree and relatively irresponsible life. She is far more carefree, in fact, than even her brothers, for whom, given the unemployment statistics in India, the pressure to obtain an adequate source of livelihood makes these years of early adulthood very difficult. An unmarried adult girl is indulged. She has no prescribed duties. Whatever she does, she does voluntarily. The daily routines of the two daughters in the sample makes this abundantly clear. (Al-
though there were only two unmarried adult women in our sample, over the years, the authors have observed this pattern of behavior in scores of families). As Sudhangani, one of the unmarried adult daughters, says, "After eating rice, I may stitch something or I may knit or if I wanted to, I may watch some TV or I may go to sleep. I do things like that."

And as the other daughter, Ameeta, says explicitly, daughters have no responsibility towards anyone in their fathers' households. "My responsibility? What responsibility? I have no responsibility. As long as my father and mother are alive, I have no responsibility toward anyone."

At the same time, however, they are aware of their positions as temporary residents in the kishoro stage of life; their permanent homes are elsewhere. Although these unmarried girls have few illusions that life in the homes of their mothers-in-law is initially going to be anything less than strenuous, the interviews communicate quite plainly the sense of positive anticipation they feel as they look ahead to becoming daughters-in-law.

Now let us consider the situation of a new daughter-in-law. The differences in well-being between daughters and daughters-in-law are quite striking. Daughters report almost double the level of personal well-being reported by daughters-in-law. This reflects, perhaps, the comfort, the sense of belonging, that daughters feel in their fathers' homes, a feeling of comfort that new daughters-in-law lack during their initial years in their husbands' homes. Since these two groups are of roughly the same age, the relationship is clearly not between age and well-being but between the family role occupied and well-being.

Unlike an unmarried daughter of the house, who is in the kishoro phase of life, a new daughter-in-law is in the jouvana phase and has explicitly understood duties. She is put through something like the domestic Oriya version of military boot camp. The most important of these duties lies in doing sewa—service to members of her husband's family. Such sewa has, in the Oriya Hindu context, very concrete dimensions. She has to do all the cooking and much of the cleaning and washing, and she must perform explicit rituals of deference to her husband's mother and father. These rituals include massaging their feet daily, drinking the water used to ceremonially wash their feet before eating, and eating out of the thali (metal plate) previously used by either her mother-in-law or her father-in-law.

It is crucial to recognize that the meaning of these rituals are easily misunderstood if they are comprehended only within the moral framework of Western individualist liberationist ideals. From the native point of view, these rituals of family life are culturally defined ways available to a daughter-in-law for reconstructing (see Lamb 1993) her physical substance and for expressing her solidarity with the patrilineage into which she has merged through marriage. This is not to say that every Oriya newlywed is temperamentally inclined to life in a boot camp or tolerates harsh treatment without suffering and physical distress. It is to say, however, that within the framework of indigenous South Asian understandings such rituals of deference continue the process of reconstruction of the bride's bodily substance begun explicitly during the marriage ceremonies and symbolized by the new name given the bride at marriage (see Inden and Nicholas 1977). In keeping with Hindu notions of the body, which emphasize the relative openness to external influences (Marriott 1976), the new given name, the marriage ceremonies, and the rituals of deference mark the continual reconstructions that a woman's body undergoes as her bodily substance slowly becomes that of the patrilineage into which she has married.

Such rituals contribute directly to an increase or decrease in a daughter-in-law's sense of well-being. Thus when an angry mother-in-law withholds permission to perform such rituals, all daughters-in-law interpret such refusal as a rejection by the family to her assimilation and experience that rejection with considerable sorrow and distress. The cognitive and emotional reactions of Westernized feminist scholars to such practices do not further, indeed they obscure, our understanding of the local moral world supporting extended family life in India.

Most new daughters-in-law echo Chandrama (see her narrative about her daily routine, above) with only minor variations. In the early years of marriage, daughters-in-law do not worship any gods. For them, it is enough to worship their mothers-in-law and fathers-in-law, earthly gods having the power to withhold or bestow blessings. As Sabitiri, a new daughter-in-law, married for just four months, reports, "At my time in life, it is appropriate that I worship bou. What need is there for me to worship any other god? She is my god."

These new daughters-in-law are working up a spiritual ladder to the gods. At this point in their moral careers, they regard the opportunity to worship their husbands' mothers and fathers rather than the gods as opportunities for promotion, not a deprivation. At this stage...
in the life course, given their position in the family hierarchy, new daughters-in-law appear to have few other responsibilities. As Chandrama says further along in her interview, “For the moment, I have no responsibility. There are so many people older than I am—they take all the responsibility of this household.”

Nevertheless, as she herself is aware, daitva, or responsibility, is never completely absent. A competent daughter-in-law has to learn to be adept in maintaining harmony among the younger members of the family. She must take on the role of friend and advisor to them. She may even intervene as an intermediary between them and her mother-in-law, when the latter’s consent and approval is required but unlikely.

And it is this capacity to, as she says, “understand what lies in the minds of the nattad and diyora” (husband’s younger sisters and brothers) that is the distinctive mark of a successful daughter-in-law, trusted by her affinal family.

Further in the interview, Chandrama describes the restrictions under which she lives. They are fairly severe. She rarely goes out; she hardly meets anyone but family members. Her trips to her father’s house are infrequent and depend on the wishes of her husband’s mother and father. Even within the house, she is unable to move freely because, given the pattern of avoidance relationships within the family, she has to hide from (avoid) those male affines senior to her husband. As Sandhyarani, another new daughter-in-law says, “All that one does in the house of one’s sasu [husband’s mother] is hide.”

Given the stressful circumstances in which new daughters-in-law in the jouvana phase live their lives, it is hardly surprising that only a couple of them claim to have achieved substantial well-being, fifteen to sixteen annas of it. The ones who do experience high levels of hito live in relatively small families having only seven or eight members and their mothers-in-law are both noninterfering and undemanding. At the other extreme, there are two daughters-in-law who appear to suffer considerable distress, one claiming to have no well-being at all and the other to have only two annas of well-being. For the most part, daughters-in-law have rather low feelings of well-being; if sixteen annas indicates that one has achieved complete well-being, a new daughter-in-law, on the average, has less than eight annas of well-being.

A notable and distinctive feature of these interviews with junior new daughters-in-law in the jouvana phase is fairly clear evidence for the somatization of emotional distress. New daughters-in-law who give themselves low scores on well-being complain of night fevers, chest pains, and swooning. Such somatization is explicitly recognized in local discourse. There are new daughters-in-law who say that they are so sad that they cannot digest their food and this leads to chest pains that cannot be explained by the doctors they consult. Their husbands’ mothers and sisters say that these women make no effort to integrate with the rest of the family, that they are angry and resentful of everyone else, and that this anger and resentment hinders digestion of food leading to chest pains.

There are also daughters-in-law who feel so unappreciated in their husbands’ homes, so diminished in respect, so anxious to receive regard, that they experience (by their own accounts) a fall in their blood pressure that leads to fainting. Of course, all this has to be seen against the background of a strong cultural aversion to excessive self-concern and reflection about oneself. Generally speaking, people in Old Town believe that too much thinking (i.e., worrying about oneself) is dangerous. They believe that attention to oneself leads in and of itself to illness and physical distress—one makes oneself vulnerable to disease by thinking about oneself too much.

Thus there are multiple explanations for the somatic symptoms of emotional distress, and they vary depending on who is speaking—whether it is the new daughter-in-law or the mother-in-law or the husband’s sister. Nevertheless these multiple explanations have one thing in common. They all ascribe the lack of well-being not to the severity of the restrictions under which new daughters-in-law live nor to their having to perform deference, but to their incomplete assimilation into their husbands’ families. Oriya women say quite categorically that the greater the assimilation, the greater the well-being that is experienced.

Before a new daughter-in-law gives birth to children, she receives more from the family than she gives to it, and she does not control any of this exchanging. Oriya women state quite explicitly that a new daughter-in-law has to learn to open herself, during this phase, to influences from the family, learn to become as permeable as she can so that her reconstructing and assimilation can occur rapidly and effectively. Those women who are unable to open themselves—and Oriya women recognize such a possibility, saying that often lajya (modesty, a heightened awareness of oneself) makes such opening painful and difficult—cannot make use of the opportunities available, even during jouvana, for achieving well-being and so feel less well-off.

Let us now consider the situation of an old daughter-in-law. With age, the birth of children, and the entry of younger daughters-in-law,
a woman progressively attains a status that is referred to locally as old daughter-in-law—puma bou. Purna is an interesting word because it also connotes completeness, and, in a sense, it is when a woman matures, becomes a mother, and becomes senior to others like herself that she finally becomes the complete daughter-in-law. While maturing and seniority happen on their own, women actively complete themselves as daughters-in-law by giving birth to children. By providing new members to the families they have married into, they are enlisting themselves within the household, embedding themselves in the families, and laying claim to being heard in family debates and discussions.

In reading the daily routines of these women, it is possible to detect a gradual relaxation in some of the restrictions women experience as new daughters-in-law. The insistence by their seniors that they do a substantial part of the cooking declines. The restrictions on movement, on meeting people who do not belong to the family, grow fewer. Even the emphasis on the performance of explicit rituals of deference grows steadily weaker.

Thus, Dukhi, a forty-year-old purna bou, makes very clear her promotion out of the kitchen. When asked if she helps her husband's younger brother's wife (sana ja) in the cooking, she says, referring to herself as a sasu (husband's mother),

No, no. I don't have anything to do with the cooking. The sana ja, she does all that. We sasus don't even enter the kitchen. She will do all the work, won't she? She does the cooking, doesn't she? Why should I do all that? I don't cut the vegetables, I don't grind the masala. I don't touch the cooking utensils.

And Pranati, a thirty-three-year-old purna bou, says, "If people drop in, then it is my responsibility to serve tea to them, snacks, talk pleasantly to them, till whoever they have come to see is ready to meet them."

Most old daughters-in-law do not strictly observe the rituals of deference toward the mother-in-law. Most purna boues explain it as merely a result of increased familiarity with one's mother-in-law, a consequence of the passage of time, and a function of the number of years they have lived within their husbands' families. An alternative, perhaps more plausible, interpretation would appear to be that such rituals are no longer needed: purna boues have completed their reconstructions into fully acknowledged members of their husbands' patrilineages. In-
gone out, who is in the house, and then again, I have the job of arranging the flowers and other things for god. And then, I may sit down, go from this room to that, look out of the front of the house, whatever needs to be done in the house—that has to be settled, this has to be cleaned and washed. And then comes the business of serving food and seeing people eat. All the business of running a house.

And then the children return home from tuition and it's time to see to their eating, their studies—this would be about three in the afternoon. Sometimes it may be a little later but my work of arranging things for the temple goes on. I make the wicks for the temple lamps, I make garlands with flowers for the deity. I gather together whatever will be necessary for tomorrow, and then I move around the house, from here to there and then we have tea. I join in the cutting of vegetables for the evening meal. After tea, I offer sandhya [evening worship]. Once I've given sandhya, I go and lie down. I cover myself and lie down right here. I only get up at about 9:30 or 10 at night. I eat food then and go to bed soon after. Nowadays, because it's cold, I cover myself and lie down, but even in summer, I lie down and close my eyes. After all, the food won't be ready till 10 o'clock—so what is there to do but lie down and close one's eyes?

Q. As you were saying, before you go to the temple in the morning, you bow your head to god?
A. As soon as we get up, early in the morning, as soon as we have washed our faces with water, we turn to the one or two photos we have of god and we bow our heads three times. Then we clean our teeth, after that we defecate. After defecating, before going for our baths we may clean out the house, throw out the garbage, do all that kind of polluting work and then we go for our baths. On the way back from Bindusagar, we pick a few flowers and, after returning home, there are again prayers in the puja room upstairs. After doing puja, I water the plants that we grow and then I come down for tea.

Clearly, this daily routine's emphasis is quite different from that of the earlier ones. Priyambada is freed from the strenuous work of cooking and feeding a large family; in fact, she does more than most mothers-in-law. When she says, "I turn my attention to cutting vegetables or grinding masala. I have to do that," she is subtly directing our attention to what she sees as her daughter-in-law's incompetence, her inability to manage the kitchen independently. Furthermore, her work now is more of a supervisory nature, of ensuring that her little community runs efficiently. She has considerable geographical mobility: she goes alone for her daily bath to the temple pond, she worships everyday at the Lingaraj temple, she admits that, during the day, she looks out of the front of the house, watching the world going by—all activities that are strictly forbidden a new daughter-in-law and often limited even for an old daughter-in-law.

Most important, however, is her regular communication with god and her uninterrupted association with offerings meant for divinity. This privilege of approaching divinity without reservation is a direct consequence of her ability to maintain her physical body's purity, an ability that is relatively recent for her and the direct result of two factors.

First, among Oriya Hindus of Old Town, when a son marries and brings his wife into the family, his parents usually cease being sexually active. The job of reproduction has been passed on to the son and his wife. Many Oriya adults are disgusted or feel desanctified by the idea of two generations copulating under the same roof. Priyambada is no exception to this custom and she believes that this cessation of sexual activity makes it easier for her to maintain bodily purity.

Second, she is past menopause, and so there is no time of the month when she is mara, polluted or impure. Both of these reasons make it appropriate that as the mother-in-law she is the intermediary between the family and god, a position that she enjoys considerably and is the source of a substantial sense of well-being; the average score for mothers-in-law among our survey is twelve annas of well-being. In fact, there are three married mothers-in-law who say quite categorically that they have fully sixteen annas of well-being.

Let us now consider the situation of a widow. It is as a married mother-in-law that an Oriya Hindu woman's position is least assailable. Yet time is an accuser and a degrader, and with old age and widowhood there is usually a sharp reversal in a woman's situation. As an old widow, a woman is often relegated to the background, expected to contribute nothing to the family and expecting to get little in return.

Sociologically speaking, a widow in Old Town is a nonperson. During the funeral rites for her husband, there are several rituals that emphasize this erasure of her social existence and that mark her entrance into the status of a perpetual mourner whose preoccupations ought to
be both transcendent and otherworldly. This erasure of social standing is symbolized by her lack of a family name: as a widow, a woman can no longer use her husband’s family name and is known only by her given name (the one given at marriage, not birth) and the title bewa, a local contraction of vidhwa or widow.

Harsamani, age 78, has been a widow for thirty-six years, and her poignant story of an ordinary day’s activities typifies this particular experience of widowhood among Oriya Hindu women of Old Town.

I get up at three in the morning. I put some water for heating and then I go and defecate. After that I bathe. People would be still sleeping—it would be dark, some people may be awake but others would be sleeping. After bathing, I get back into bed. I cover myself up and go to sleep. I get up only when the tea comes. With tea, there would be something to eat—whatever they had made, maybe some upma [dish of farina] or whatever—they will call me and I get up. But I eat lying in bed—do you understand? Sometimes I sit and eat but sometimes I lie and eat. These days the weather is cold and so I wrap myself and go and sit in the doorway. By about ten or eleven, they would have finished cooking and they come and call me. My daughter would have come, she goes to the kitchen and serves for me and herself and the two of us eat together. We eat here in this room. After eating, we go and wash our hands and then we come back to this room. If daughter is not there, they serve me and bring the food here. On days when I’m not feeling well, I get back into bed after eating. I eat paan [betel leaf] and I lie down once more. But on days when my mind is active, I sit in the doorway and chew paan. I see you going by sometimes, sometimes I see an aunt going by, sometimes a mother, sometimes a grandmother, and they will say, “You’re sitting here?” After sitting for some time, when I again feel cold, I get back into bed, I cover myself and lie down.

Then again tea and snacks will come and I will eat, again my middle daughter will be here and we have tea and snacks together. And then dusk falls, once dusk falls, there is no work whatsoever. You understand? Daughter will put the mosquito net over my bed and once again I lie down all covered up. In the middle of all this the evening meal arrives. At night, whatever comes, if I feel like it, I eat it. I eat a little of it and then I lie down. Parathas [fried breads], milk, curry, fried vegetables, whatever they have made, that is what is served. After eating, then again I make myself some paan, I eat one and keep one under the pillow. I lie down. I have no work to do, neither night nor day. At no time during the day do I have any work. I have nothing to do. When I get up in the morning, again I put water for heating. I shit, clean my teeth, I bathe. This is the month of Magha (January/February), all the women get up early, bathe, go to the temple, they do what they want to after bathing, I go back to bed. The nathani-bou [grandson’s wife], she comes and calls me, “Ma, you’ve fallen asleep, get up, get up, here’s your tea and breakfast.” Again the tea and something to eat—some days it’s suji [cream of wheat], some days it’s parathas.

Q. When do you pray?
A. There’s no more praying for me. Why? Do you want to know why? Our gods are kept upstairs. By the time I walk up those stairs, my strength disappears. God is taken care of nowadays by the bous (sons’ wives). Now that they do all that, what is left for me to do? On days when I have the strength I pour a little water on the tulasi [basil leaf] at the back but otherwise all I do is put a few drops of nirmaliya in my mouth. Everyday, everyday, I put a few drops of nirmaliya in my mouth and then I lie down. Then the same things happen every day—over and over again, the same things.

Q. How often do you go to the temple?
A. I can’t go to the temple. It is now two years since I went to the temple. My strength is declining, my body trembles, I may fall down somewhere, and then people will say, Hou, hou, people will criticize me for that.

Harsamani appears to have been effectively marginalized by age and widowhood. She is forbidden to provide sustenance to the family, for she is not allowed to cook and feed others. She is forbidden to provide spiritual sustenance, for she is not allowed to intercede with divinity to ensure the health and prosperity of family members.

The “Auspicious Heart of the Family”

In one of the interviews about roles and responsibilities across the life cycle, an articulate Oriya woman described a mature, married woman as the “auspicious heart of the family” (parivararo mangaliko
That particular description seems apt as one reads and rereads these accounts by Oriya women of their daily round of activities and their feelings of well-being. As the interviews demonstrate, a new daughter-in-law gradually becomes an old daughter-in-law, and her access to and enjoyment of greater well-being occurs almost imperceptibly as she attains the domestic managerial responsibilities associated with prauda [mature adulthood]. A period in which she has many juniors and still commands all sustenance in a household, prauda is a peak period in the lives of each of these women.

For a daughter-in-law to grow old (and well), she has to move out of the kitchen. This move out of the kitchen need not be complete or even substantial, but the possibility that she could move out if she wanted to has to exist. However, her ties to the kitchen continue to be strong enough to make her the primary server of food—a responsibility steeped in prestige that emphasizes the central nature of her role within the family. Through ensuring that each member of the family gets his or her fair share of food, she sustains, very concretely, the life and health of the family. If someone should come to the house for social or business reasons and if the men of the family are otherwise busy, she entertains them. She represents the family, underscoring once more her importance. She performs less and less frequently the rituals of deference, indicating her full assimilation into the family. Finally, she begins to represent the family in its relations with divinity: one of the first tasks of any ritual significance that an old daughter-in-law does is to offer sandhya, a ceremony performed at sunset that seeks to keep malevolent spirits at bay while inviting Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and auspiciousness, into the home.

Of course, other factors, physiological and cultural, limit this involvement in household worship: usually, an old daughter-in-law is young enough to menstruate. She is sexually active and she is still involved in the care of her children, feeding and cleaning them. All these factors make it difficult for her to maintain bodily purity and compromise her ability to approach the divine. It is as a married mother-in-law that these factors begin to lose their salience.

With daughters-in-law entering the household, the business of reproduction is passed on to the younger generation. The older couple withdraw from sexual activity, enabling the mother-in-law to maintain bodily purity more easily. This is also the time when one is no longer involved in taking care of the very old or the very young. One's own children are past needing such care. One's own mother-in-law and father-in-law are either dead or their care has been handed over to the newest daughter-in-law. At this time of life, most Oriya women go through menopause, which eliminates impurity caused by menstruation. Finally, for a postmenopausal Oriya Hindu woman, it is both culturally and physiologically appropriate to go to the temple whenever she wishes, to pray whenever she wishes, to perform the daily puja for her family without hindrance, and to function as the intermediary who seeks divine blessings for every member of the family.

Apart from this, an older married woman is also relieved of the physical labor of cooking and cleaning for a large family. While she still retains the responsibilities and privileges associated with prauda, she continues to administer the affairs of the household and remains aware of everything that happens to family members. The possibility of geographical mobility, of traveling, of going on pilgrimages, and of visiting relatives also contributes in some measure to her heightened sense of well-being. As a mother-in-law, explicit deference is paid to her by the junior women of the household. While this explicit display of social power must surely increase her sense of well-being, it also provides her with a forum in which to express her opinions. By refusing to accept a daughter-in-law's deference she conveys unmistakably her feelings of displeasure and disapproval without saying a word. A mother-in-law, therefore, has greater opportunity to express negative feelings about other family members, and this perhaps does make her feel better. Unlike the other women in the family, she does not, for the sake of family harmony, have to control what she says or does.

There are of course anxieties that may work to reduce the married Oriya Hindu mother-in-law's feelings of well-being. First, there is the prospect of widowhood and all the connotations that Oriya Hindus attach to that condition. Second, there is the process of growing old and losing the ability to care for oneself physically. While the junior wife has to shake off the constraints that are attached to being new to gain in well-being, the mother-in-law loses some of her wellness because she is looking to an uncertain future.

A Culturally Salient Model of Well-being

In general, women expect the middle phase of their lives, that of mature adulthood, prauda, to afford them the most satisfying experiences. According to their accounts, during this phase, they will be either the senior-most woman in the household or the next-to-most senior. As such, a woman is dominant—she has control over her own body
and her actions, but more important, she has considerable control over the activities of others within the family. She is also very productive during this phase—she is likely to feel and to be felt central to the order and material prosperity of the family. Finally, she feels coherent—her connections and communication with divinity are now regular and uninterrupted. Dominance coming from seniority, productivity emerging from centrality within the family, and coherence resulting from the capacity to approach divinity without restriction are thus three salient measures of well-being for an Oriya Hindu woman. All imply controlling and managing the transactions and exchanges she has with those above, around, and below her, within the household, between the household, and beyond.

There is another, subsidiary aspect of women’s well-being that needs to be mentioned here—the skill and competence with which a woman manages and controls these processes and transactions. In Bhubaneswar, as Lamb (1993) reports for Bengali women, the processes of reconstruction and deconstruction that women undergo as they marry, give birth, undergo affinal assimilation, mature, age, and become widows, require them to skillfully manage change if they are to achieve well-being. Those women who are less competent at managing these processes experience low well-being even during the middle phase of their lives, while those who know when and how to expand and encompass others and when to curtail their transactions, withdraw into themselves, or minimize their exchanges are more likely to achieve higher levels of well-being during all phases of their lives.

Furthermore, we suggest that these three measures (dominance, productivity, and coherence) of well-being are not competing but complementary. Having control over one’s own activities and the activities of others makes one central to and productive of the family’s well-being. Both of these conditions enable one to control one’s interactions with divinity and to approach the gods in a coherent, ordered way. When a woman achieves all three, usually during the middle phase of mature adulthood, her well-being is complete.

Variations around the Ideal Model

What we have described is, of course, an ideal model extracted from our interviews. However, even thirty-seven interviews are enough to make the point that this ideal rarely has a perfect fit to anyone’s lived experience. There are women in other family roles who claim to have achieved substantial well-being as well as some married mothers-in-law and old daughters-in-law in the prauda phase of life who claim to be miserable. For instance, Priyambada, the married mother-in-law whose description of an average day was quoted earlier, says that she does not even have two annas of well-being. She ascribes her lack of well-being to the conflicts within the family, which she believes result from the lack of respect that younger members display toward their elders:

Everyone thinks he is the superior of the other, everyone thinks he is the family elder, everyone thinks he has to speak out, that he has to say what his opinion is. . . . I’m not preventing others from talking, I’m only saying, “Think of everything, the person who is talking and the consequences of your talking back before you answer.”

In a community in which asymmetry of privilege and responsibility has such salience, it is hardly surprising that lack of respect should lead to such a diminishment of well-being. It is also possible that Priyambada was using the occasion of the interview to inform others in the family of her displeasure with what she perceived as discord within the family. Her daughter-in-law definitely interpreted her statements to indicate just that. This daughter-in-law believed that her own conduct was the focus of the mother-in-law’s criticism. The daughter-in-law’s attribution seems plausible. At the time of the interview it appeared possible that Priyambada was using her low assessment of her own well-being as a means to arouse the younger woman’s guilt at being an “unsatisfactory” daughter-in-law.

And the reverse, too, occurs. There are widowed mothers-in-law who continue to be valued and respected members of the family. There are “sonless” (Kondos 1989, 185) mothers who become the mainstay of their husbands’ families. There are new daughters-in-law who dominate household affairs almost as soon as they step across the threshold. Even in this small sample of thirty-seven women such examples can be found, demonstrating, we think, quite conclusively that one must be suspicious of simplistic feminist representations (see, e.g., Kondos 1988, 108). Kondos claims that Hindu women lead such contingent lives that only those who produce sons and who predecease their husbands are deemed successful. The following excerpt, from an interview with a seventy-two-year-old widow, Labanya, whose husband died almost forty years earlier, holds particular relevance here. She describes her day:
I get up in the morning. I clean my teeth, I have tea. After having had tea, it’s necessary to make sure that the children have gone to school and I go and do that. And then, maybe someone comes over, like you have come over, and I sit and talk. I have become the elder (murabbi) in the family, when people come over, I have to sit and talk to them, we discuss things. They may have tea, I may have some more tea. And then, I go for my bath. After my bath, the cooking would be almost finished, and so I eat. After eating, I take some rest, I lie down. I rest till afternoon. At about four, I get up again, if people come over, I sit and talk to them. I talk to them till the sun sets. After the sun sets, once more tea is made, I drink some tea and then . . .

[Long pause] I have no work. So right here, I take some rest.

While I’m resting, the children will come, the bous will come and they will say, “Ma, come, eat your rice,” and so, I go and eat. And then, I go to bed—what else is there to my day? . . .

Q. Do you do pujas to God?
A. [Long pause, then finally, hesitantly] Ye . . . s, ye . . . s . . . This elder bou, she does all that. I have become an old woman. I can’t have a bath that early in the morning. They all have their baths early and then they pray to God. Eldest son, he bathes, he is the kalasi [medium through whom the goddess speaks] at the Thakurani mandir. He goes there . . .

Q. Do you offer sandhya in the evening?
A. No. I don’t offer any sandhya. I don’t have that responsibility any more. That is a responsibility that the bous have and that they fulfill. I no longer touch the cooking vessels, they do and so they offer sandhya. This bou offers sandhya or if this one can’t, then the other or the other or one of the granddaughters, they offer sandhya. That is a burden that has slipped from my head.

Q. Do you tell them what to cook?
A. No, no. I don’t bother my head with all that. When they first came to this house then I had to teach them everything. “Arre, ma, do this like this, do that like that,” I used to tell them. “This food won’t be enough” or “That is too much,” but now I have grown old and they have all raised their families. What is there for me to teach them now? Now that I am old, I eat a fistful of rice that they give me and I sit. What else is left for me in life? Why should I continue to keep all that in my head?

Q. When did you give up giving directions?
A. It is now thirty years since I left all that. Once this eldest bou came into the house, a few years after that, I stopped running the house. A few years after eldest bou came, another bou came into the house, and a few years later, another bou came. In this way, three bous came. They gave birth to children, and they managed running the house. Why should I try to keep the nuisance and trouble of running the household on my head? All that I do nowadays is soothe my grandchildren when they cry, carry them on my hip when they’re small, clean them when they’re dirty, see that they go to school regularly. Or when someone wants advice or when someone wants to give or take money, I do that—that’s my business now . . .

He [eldest son] keeps nothing. He comes and gives me everything. I keep all the money, when he needs money, he asks me. He needs 5,000 rupees or 6,000 rupees to pay the laborers who are repairing this house, he comes to me. I give him the money. Vegetables have to be bought, I give the grandsons the money to buy the vegetables. I keep all the money. When I go away to Unit VI to be with my middle son, then I leave some money with eldest bou for household expenses but the rest of the money is still with me and he [eldest son] will come to Unit VI when he needs money.

One can see that Labanya is hardly involved in the day-to-day activities of the household and has little contact with divinity. But even a casual reading of her daily activities makes clear how she continues to be the center of her family. She holds the family purse strings. Her sons choose to give her all their earnings. No expense is incurred without her knowledge. More important, according to her account, her sons and her daughters-in-law make it explicit that they care for her; they are concerned that she relish what she eats, that her clothes are decent. They desire her comfort.

And then there is Pranati, an old daughter-in-law, mother of three daughters, who recognizes that she has disappointed her mother-in-law and father-in-law by not providing sons for the kutumba (lineage). This affects her sense of well-being, her score of eight annas being the lowest among all the old daughters-in-law. While this score may reflect her sorrow at not having had sons, that inadequacy clearly does not cramp her style when it comes to running the household. She is not relegated to some corner of the house, ignored and despised because
she is sonless; instead, as one reads her interview as well as those of her mother-in-law and her younger sister-in-law it becomes quite clear that the entire household depends on her for its efficient functioning. She decides what will be cooked. She shops for the entire family, selecting the clothes that others will wear. She entertains guests and relatives when they visit. She plays the lead role when it comes to arranging her husband’s younger brother’s marriage. Sonlessness, though a matter for personal sorrow, does not determine her position within the family; in fact, it does not even define her as inauspicious. For these women, success and failure are not predefined. Being a widow or sonless are constraining circumstances but they do not absolutely define success or failure.

Labanya and Pranati are examples of ways in which “psyche and culture make each other up” (Shweder 1991, 73). Cultural meanings and possibilities are picked up by these women, each according to her particular talents; they then create their own life situations. Thus Labanya is not just a widow, she is also the loving mother who singlehandedly raised her three sons to adulthood. As such she is entitled to their respect and devotion, an entitlement that she appropriates in full measure. Again, Pranati is not merely a sonless mother. She is also the dutiful daughter-in-law who has never stinted in her performance of sewa. As such, she has extended her influence through the family, making her its single most important member. According to Kondo’s formulation, these women would be “failures,” and yet, by all accounts, they participate fully in running their households and raising their children. More important, they feel good about themselves.

The Question of Subversion/Resistance

On the basis of our experience in Old Town, we have come to harbor the suspicion that the representation of the Hindu housewife as a rebel or subversive is largely a projection of critical ethnography grasping at straws. Quite baldly stated, almost nothing we have encountered in our interviews and observations implies a deep political critique of family or social life or the desirability of subverting the social system. There is an absence of subversive voices in Old Town. While complaint could, perhaps, be regarded as a language of “subversion” and the dragging of feet while performing household chores as acts of “resistance,” it is curious that only old daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law do so. New daughters-in-law who have the most to gain from subverting the system do not complain and rarely drag their feet. Some of the reasons, of course, could be that they are trained to suppress their words, to anticipate negative consequences from expressing themselves. It is true that their positions within the family are fragile, and that they have yet to accumulate power or exercise substantial influence. Only an old daughter-in-law or a mother-in-law, secure of her position within the family, could engage in such verbal and nonverbal displays of discontent with impunity.

We believe, however, that a more accurate representation of the situation is that neither complaint nor dragging one’s feet can be credibly viewed as subversion or resistance. In Old Town they are just the ways in which confident women express their dissatisfaction or displeasure with what is happening within the family—we do not believe they indicate any desire for radical change.

Ultimately extended families do break up. Each brother lives separately with just his own wife and children. This is the nuclear beginning for a fresh cycle of joint family living. A catalyst is usually needed to set this breakup into motion. Often this is the death of the father or of both father and mother. Yet joint family living remains the ideal. Daughters-in-law, both new and old, continue to live jointly because they are realistic and pragmatic about the options open to them. They make the best of whatever resources they have, realizing that they often gain thereby. Apart from the advantages that these women themselves mention when explaining why they continue to live within the joint family—those of greater economic, social, and personal security and the sharing of household chores and child rearing—an important reason lies in the fact that there is room for maneuvering, for achievement, and for working toward personal goals such as increased power within the family, a greater say in the process of family decision making, a sense of getting newly recruited women and their children to do what one wants them to do, and the possibility of ensuring the future success of one’s children.

What is remarkable and worth noting is not the insurgency of these women but rather their attitude of active acceptance. Sudhangini, a daughter who was to be married just six weeks after the interview, in talking of her future life in her mother-in-law’s home, says,

In truth, however affectionate the new family, I will feel sad for some time remembering this home but then as one
day passes and then another and then another, the sense that this is mine will begin even with respect to the other home and the people there. . . . One has to accept everything as one's own. Nona-bou [father-mother] haven't given us our karma, they have given us only janma [birth]. They have given me birth, and they have also given me sikhya [learning], they have given me jogyata [competence], that is my good fortune. Now with that, if I decide to do good work in their house, then it will arouse their appreciation, but if I don't do good work, they will criticize me and that I will have to endure. But it is all in my own hands—my karma is in my hands. If I want to do good and gain appreciation, it is in my hands.

Most people in the Old Town hold to this future-oriented notion as a major aspect of the karmic process. This sense of having control over what happens in one's life, of being responsible for one's own destiny, this belief that "human intentions really do matter" (Babb 1983, 180) runs through several of the other interviews, though perhaps no other woman articulated the idea so fluently. All these women—daughters, daughters-in-law, and mothers-in-law—recognize the givens in each of their situations. They recognize the factors that they cannot change. But they also realize that it is possible to work within an emerging situation for success. In fact, these women see such compromise and accommodation as admirable signs of maturity.

Furthermore, these women share with other Oriya Hindus a particular way of looking at life. They look on family life as a process, one that is continuously shifting and changing, never complete or static. And so, when they marry and enter a household, they do not see themselves as new daughters-in-law for the rest of their lives. They can see in front of them women at different stages in the life course. They see themselves as occupying those positions in the not too distant future. If one has to understand their motivations and actions, one has to assume their future-oriented, developmental perspective. They do not see themselves as victims. They are looking ahead into the future, perhaps ten or fifteen years, seeing themselves contributing to and controlling family decisions. Even the very old do not lack this future orientation. Indeed, most people in Old Town see death as merely a punctuation mark in the process of living numerous lives, and they are clearly busy at work preparing the way for the life they expect to come next.

Oppressors and Victims? More on Gender Relations in the Old Town

Among Oriya Hindus in the temple town of Bhubaneswar, men and women recognize one other as social actors, equal in importance and effectiveness, whose activities complement their own. To cast men as oppressors and women as victims is to try to establish a false dichotomy, one that does not exist within the Oriya point of view. If one wants to organize Oriya social life in terms of those in control and those controlled, then it makes much more sense to discuss the matters generationally, with the older generation controlling the activities of the younger generation. But even here one needs to temper this statement because age is not valued in and of itself. Only those older people who care for and are responsible for the welfare of others are respected and their opinions valued.

Furthermore, as anyone familiar with life and society in Hindu India knows, men (especially younger men) as well as women live with major constraints. Neither a young man nor a young woman has the right to choose, although they do have some rights to veto. Most Oriya men and women, just like most Hindu men and women in other parts of the subcontinent, do not decide for themselves what Westerners would regard as the two most crucial decisions of a person's life: their professions and their marriages. This is not to say that there is no difference between men's and women's lives, for, most significantly, men can move and interact with others quite freely.

Whether women regard this freedom as an unmitigated advantage is doubtful. Many women pitied the interviewer's predicament, one that necessitated "wandering from door to door looking for people to talk to." One widow, in responding to whether she planned to send her seventeen-year-old daughter to college, said good-humoredly, "Why? So that she will become like you, going from door to door talking to people?"

Sakti: What it Means to be a Woman in the Old Town

Even today, most Oriya Hindus believe that female power (sakti) energizes the natural and social world. In ordinary, everyday conversations, women in Old Town describe a woman as the embodiment of
adya sakti (primordial power), matru sakti (mother power), and stri sakti (woman power). According to these women such sakti is harnessed for the good of society and the family. It is power reined in, power that is controlled from within, power that is exercised responsibly. A woman is said to hold the destiny of her husband’s family in the palm of her hands. If she is irresponsible in her management of the family’s resources, the household does not prosper. If she commits adultery, the family disintegrates.” These women say that a woman maintains her chastity not because she lives in a joint family and others exercise a watchful eye over what she does, but because she disciplines herself. This is a remarkable assertion, quite unlike what Derne (1993) found among Hindu men in Varanasi, who relied on family structure and external forces to control their behavior. For Oriya Hindu women, to be truly effective, control has to come from within; only this ensures the spiritual and material prosperity of the family.

It is relevant to mention here some of the understandings that Old Town residents have about a popular icon of the goddess Kali in which she is shown with her foot placed squarely on the chest of a supine Siva (for a detailed description of this study, see Menon and Shweder [1994]). When men and women interpret this icon, they describe the protruding tongue of the goddess as the mark of her shame (lajya) at having stepped on her husband, her personal god. Acknowledging her husband’s social and ritual superiority enables her to become calm, to rein in her power to destroy. Many of those knowledgeable about this icon say that Siva does not do anything to stop her, because, in fact, he can do nothing to stop her (Kali is far too powerful). Rather, she chooses to recognize what she owes her husband in terms of respect and deference and so stops her destruction. According to the Oriya Hindus of Old Town, her choice is an entirely “autonomous” act.

From the perspective of many Oriya Hindus, Ortner’s formulation (1974) nature: culture: woman: man (nature is to culture as woman is to man) seems unnatural. For Oriya Hindus, a woman derives her strength and power from her closeness to nature. She, like nature, creates and reproduces, but such power gathers its full significance only because it is subject to cultural, ultimately moral, control that originates from within her. As Ramanujan points out, the Lévi-Straussian opposition between nature and culture is itself culture bound. In the Hindu alternative, “culture is enclosed in nature, nature is reworked in culture, so that we cannot tell the difference” (Ramanujan 1990, 50). This is yet another of the “container-contained relations” (ibid. 50) that extend to other Hindu concepts and ideas.

So, Oriya Hindu women think of themselves as intrinsically powerful. Simply by being female, by sharing the gendered physiology of the great goddess of Hinduism, they believe they share her power to create and destroy. But, they also recognize that unrestrained exercise of such power inevitably leads to destruction. Such power has to be curbed not by an external force but from within, through a voluntary, autonomous act of self-discipline. We believe that it is this self-discipline that those who perceive the world through Westernized lenses misinterpret as subordination.

Culturally Available Means to Power

Personal growth, then, for these women is not conceived by them to be some kind of process of self-realization that involves detaching themselves from others. Instead, it is a power that involves an increasing denseness in one’s relations with others. It depends on one becoming a strong weaver of the fabric of the family.

An Oriya Hindu woman achieves this kind of personal growth in a variety of ways. Behavior that from a Western perspective may be misconstrued as an index of subordination and passivity often lends itself to being seen as something quite different when seen from a Hindu perspective or understood in terms of local meanings. The Hindu notion of the body emphasizes (Kakar 1982; Zimmerman 1979) its relative openness to both improvement and contamination. Thus when a new daughter-in-law takes orders from her mother-in-law or eats her leftovers or massages her feet or drinks the water that has been used to wash the older woman’s feet, these practices are not a measure of her subordination or passivity. Rather they are ways she takes into her body potent substances from a superior. Ultimately these internalized substances empower her. Progressively, with time, such behavior increases her influence and control within the family.

Again, sewa, or service to others, is a culturally significant way of achieving power. When a woman cooks, serves, and takes care of members of the joint family, she is building relationships in very concrete ways. Many women compared cooking and serving to acts of bhakti or devotion, requiring the same degree of concentration and attention to detail as that involved in worshiping God and leading to similar feelings of serenity and contentment.
Self-abnegation or self-denial is yet another culturally salient way of gaining moral authority. While from a Western perspective self-abnegation could be interpreted as a kind of deprivation, that is not what it means to an Oriya Hindu woman. Fasting, eating last, and eating leftovers are seen as ways to garner moral authority. And when, after years of self-denial, a woman requests or decides or commands that something should be so, her husband and her adult sons cannot but accede to her, for no man in the family equals her in moral stature.

Conclusion: The Moral Discourse of Anthropology

Think of the Oriya Hindu woman’s life as a movement in three dimensions: outward and upward with time being the third dimension. Her life moves outward because with time she is no longer restricted to the kitchen, and she can ultimately move freely within the house and sometimes go outside the house accompanied by only a child. Her life moves upward because with time it becomes socially and physiologically possible for her to approach divinity.

A new daughter-in-law is essentially locked into the kitchen, which is often referred to as the heart of the household, because it is the place where the ancestral spirits (pitruloku) reside and are fed. But with time and age, when she begins to play a greater and greater role in making decisions within the family, she moves to other spaces within the house. She has access to the puja room and “higher” gods, the household deities (ishta devata). With old age and widowhood, this outward movement is completed, and old widows, who are now peripheral to household affairs, often live in an outer room that overlooks the street. On the other hand, the upward movement is temporarily halted, for although old widows continue to pray, they are relatively insauspicious members of the family who are no longer involved in family rituals. They are free to absolve themselves of their own accumulated spiritual debts for the sake of their own personal salvation but little more.

To represent women’s lives is a difficult and complex task. If anthropology as a discipline views itself as a means to understanding one’s self and one’s own culture by journeying through other selves in other cultures, then it is important that feminist anthropologists understand the dialectic they are engaged in. At the moment, the intellectual insights of feminist anthropology cannot be easily disentangled from their political agenda, for there is a transparent attempt in feminist literature to universalize women’s oppression and to indulge in myth-making for political ends. If anthropology is a discipline that studies differences, then it is necessary that feminists devise the means to analyze and interpret differences that they find personally disturbing without disrespecting the objects of their study (see Boon 1994). To ignore the alternative moral goods emphasized and made manifest in family life practice in India, to presume that inner control, service, and deferred gratification amount to subordination and acceptance of oppression, to represent Hindu women in South Asia as either victims or subversives is not only to dishonor these women—it is to engage in little more than a late-twentieth-century version of cognitive and moral imperialism.

Notes

1. For more on this temple and the community that serves it, see Mahapatra (1981), Seymour (1983), Shweder et al. (1990), Shweder (1991), Shweder et al. (1997).
2. For a complete description of this sample see Menon and Shweder (1994).
3. Paul Cleary and his associates at the Harvard Medical School have collected comparable data on American women. In a large telephone survey women were asked to assess their satisfaction on a ten-point scale.
4. An anna is a coin that is no longer in circulation. In pre-Independence India, there were six paisa (or pice) to an anna and sixteen annas to a rupee.
5. We should, perhaps, clarify that our particular understanding is neither unusual nor peculiar to us. Today in India there is a burgeoning women’s movement (see India Today, 30 September 1995) that disdains the label “feminism,” distances itself from Western-inspired feminist movements, and does not identify gender equality at home or in the workplace as a significant goal. Instead, it seeks to identify potential sources of female power defined in Hindu terms and works to achieve female empowerment within that framework.
6. This is the tradition that worships the Sakti or Devi, the great goddess of Hinduism. Followers believe that the world is energized by her and that in her lies the ultimate meaning of life in this world.
7. For the Oriya Hindus of Old Town, samsaro stands for the family, household life, the entire world of living beings as well as for the never-ending cycle of rebirths and redeaths that characterizes all existence this side of release and liberation.
8. Not all Oriya Hindu women have sons, but traditionally, people in Old Town overcome this by adopting a relative’s son, preferably one’s own daughter’s second or third son. The child is adopted formally into his maternal grandfather’s lineage and all ritual ties to his biological father are severed. Dukhi, the old daughter-in-law quoted earlier, and her husband have done just that.
9. The Lingaraj temple bathing tank—literally, “ocean of droplets.”
10. Nirmaliya is a solution made of water and desiccated prasad, which are leftovers of divine offerings from the Lingaraj temple.
11. According to Oriya Hindus of Old Town, the effects on the family of a man...
committing adultery are far less profound than if a woman does so, because men are considered to be marginal to the well-being of the family.

References


At the present time, with birthrates in Europe, North America, and Japan at the lowest level for human populations in history and with fertility declining rapidly in much of Asia and Latin America, it may be difficult to understand the perspective of an African people whose dominant ideals of adulthood are organized around the bearing of many children. When world fertility was dropping between 1965 and 1985, many birthrates in sub-Saharan Africa were increasing to new peaks for national populations. Kenya led the way, with a crude birthrate of 54 per thousand population in 1979, more than five times that of European countries at that time, and the Gusii people of Kisii District had the highest birthrate in Kenya (table 1). For Gusii parents, the desirability of high fertility, averaging about ten children per woman, was unchallenged, and men and women at forty years of age were deeply concerned with continued childbearing. Their experience of middle adulthood, the years from 40 to 60, can only be understood in terms of the meanings of reproductive performance in the culturally organized Gusii life course during the latter part of this century.

The twentieth century has profoundly altered the lives of men and women throughout sub-Saharan Africa. At the century’s end, precolonial (i.e., nineteenth century) ideals for the life course are still cherished in many communities, but the social conditions for their realization have changed, creating dilemmas for contemporary adults. Some changes have been caused by dislocation and new scarcities of resources, but others with equal impact have been produced by newfound abundance, opportunities, and the satisfaction of personal goals. The fulfillment of their reproductive goals, for example, has created an ironic predicament for East African parents: having long sought to maximize the number of their offspring for potent economic, social, and spiritual reasons but in an environment full of lethal risks to children, they were able to see child mortality rates finally drop after 1950. But child survival has been accompanied by rapid population growth and resultant scarcities of land, food, and other resources and a more