

The Ideal Indian Woman: Defined by Hindu Nationalism and Culture



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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses how the notion of “ideal femininity” is understood in the Indian context. I propose the term *Sati Savitri aurat* (woman) to describe this ideal image of an Indian woman. The paper argues that the modern *Sati Savitri* woman must embody three values that make her truly an ideal Indian woman in the eyes of society. Those values are modesty, marriageability and silence. The combination of these values makes an Indian woman socially respected and desirable. These themes reverberated when I asked my interview participants, 10 female journalists from diverse age groups, about the concept of an ideal Indian woman. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with these women journalists and their ideas about formulation of the concept of “ideal Indian woman” were recorded and analysed. In this paper, I categorise their responses into the three values (modesty, marriageability and silence) and thereby propose that the embodiment of all these values constitute the modern *Sati Savitri*, a prototype for middle-class Hindu women. By proposing this concept of *Sati Savitri*, a Hindu mythological idea, I argue that respectable norms for women’s sexuality are located within the discourse of Hindu nationalism and culture.

INTRODUCTION

The phrase *Sati Savitri* is a combination of two ideas: *Sati* and *Savitri*. Each of these words have Hindu mythological tales attached to them. *Sati* refers to the practice of self-immolation by Hindu wives of a certain community when their husbands die in war; the idea of *sati*, therefore, refers to godly devotion to the husband to the extent that the wife should be prepared to sacrifice her life for him (Sharma 2000, 63). *Savitri* was a princess who married an exiled prince named Satyavan, who was prophesied to die at an early age. When the day of death came for Satyavan, *Savitri* saved her husband from the Death God Yama by nature of her devotion and virtue (Vivekananda 2000). Both these tales signify how an ideal Indian Hindu woman should be: chaste, virtuous and a self-sacrificing wife. In modern Indian society, these mythological tales are evoked to assign the place of women in society: that is, as passive and chaste wives. This formulation is also in accordance with the role of women in Hindu nationalism and the modern nation-building project. In this paper, I argue that urban upper-caste middle-class Indian women are expected to embody the virtue of *Sati Savitri* as markers of Indian cultural identity. These ideas are disseminated in Indian society through everyday stories, myths, the family and popular culture.

I interviewed 10 middle-class, upper-caste, urban Hindu women journalists to understand their conceptualization of an ideal woman in India. Their responses, even though varied, constituted the same broad themes - modesty, marriageability and silence. The interviewees considered these three values as the most desired qualities in an Indian woman. Interestingly, as I demonstrate further in the paper, none of the interviewees thought that they “fit” well in this prototype of such Indian woman. However, they felt pressured to some extent to adhere to such norms of respectability to be considered a “good” woman in India. This paper will, thus, reveal how the gendered norms and expectations experienced by middle-class women in India relate to the dominant ideas of nationalism (Hindu nationalism in particular).

Modesty

*Badan dikha rhi hai, sharam nhi aati?*¹

(You are showing your body, aren’t you ashamed of yourself?)

Modesty is seen as a virtue for an Indian woman: not just for the woman herself, but for the honour of her entire family. A central aspect of modesty is that an Indian woman must be “covered up”. This means that she should not expose her body too much because she would risk getting unwanted male attention, which could be dangerous to her modesty and could potentially bring “shame” to her entire family. Women embody the family’s and nation’s honour; therefore, their “shame” is seen as the men’s shame, the family’s shame and the nation’s shame (Nagel 1998, 254). The Urdu term *izzat* is used in the South Asian context to capture the complicated

¹ This comment was made by Akansha while talking about her experiences of being a woman journalist.

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meanings of *izzat* as honour, shame, respect and prestige attached to an individual or a community. *Izzat* gives a community the most important cultural capital (Lindholm 1982, 189). Women are repositories of *izzat*, and hence their sexuality has to be actively controlled in order to avoid any deviance that may bring harm to the entire family's *izzat*. Wearing traditional clothes or "covering up" is an important measure of a woman's *izzat* as it distinguishes an Indian woman from the promiscuous western one (Chatterjee 1993; Fernandes 2000).

These ideas about were conveyed to me by Akansha, a 22-year-old journalist at *Sunday Guardian*, a weekly newspaper, and India TV, one of the oldest Hindi TV news channels in India. When I asked her about her understanding of the notion of an "ideal Indian woman", she responded:

*Ki bhai, sir ka jo baal hai use le k toe tk vo dhaki rhe, ankhe na dikhe, ungli na dikhe
bhar nikal rhi, dekh rhi galat hai.*

(Like you know, she should be covered from the hair of her head to her toes, her eyes shouldn't be visible, her fingers shouldn't be visible. If she is going out, looking inappropriately, it is wrong.)

If a woman did not conform to these expectations of "covering up", she will be subject to unwanted attention. When talking about the work environment at India TV, for example, Akansha said: "*kuch bhi pehen k jao* (whatever you wear), they [her male colleagues] will check you out and it is really weird". She explained that she has to take precautions in terms of what she wears to the office, how she presents herself on social media, lest people will "talk". She continued with an example: "So if I am uploading a picture you know if a bit of my cleavage is showing so people will comment like *kaam dekho kaisa krti ho, dikha rhi hai apna badan* (Look, she is a journalist doing such kind of work, showing her naked body)". In the workplace, modest women who embody symbolic cultural capital and perform "ideal femininity" are seen as reliable and respectable workers (Radhakrishnan 2009, 208). Therefore, women have to take precautions to monitor their appearance at their workplaces, so as to remain within the national framework of "sexual respectability" (Mosse 1995, 21).

Women must self-surveil their bodies and their sexualities because any deviance will put the *izzat* of their entire family and community in danger, while men are not pressured to do the same. Akansha explained these differential expectations from men and women:

Obviously, the things that happened to us didn't happen to the men... like my senior wears heels, they used to say *tak tak kr k aati hai* (she walks with the heels making this sound) ... I don't think these things happened with male colleagues.

There was this colleague... he used to wear shades in the office. But if a woman does that people will say... see she is wearing sunglasses indoors...

In her reference to heels, Akansha switches to Hindi, as she tries to imitate the sound that they make while walking. This particular expression in Hindi is also a derogatory way of saying that the woman is "being too glamorous/flashy" or just "too western". Being western makes her not Indian enough and most importantly, not *respectable* enough for the job (Chatterjee 1993).

This connection between modesty and sexual respectability is discussed in detail by Jyoti Puri. Puri explains that there are two dimensions to the Indian notion of sexual respectability: the threat of male sexual harm upon pious female bodies, and the threat of a woman transgressing the code of conduct (Puri 1999, 77). These norms of sexual respectability produce women as "sexed bodies" that need to be self-regulated and disciplined,² and males as actively needing "physical sex" to prove their manliness and virility. Within this framework, an attack on the sexed body of a woman is explained – and indeed justified – by her sheer failure in self-regulation and self-surveillance. Therefore, whenever a woman's sexual body is violated by a man, the onus lies on the woman as not having effectively regulated her own sexuality.

A sense of anxiety about different standards of respectability imposed on men and women was also expressed by Niharika, a 22-year-old journalist. As Niharika told me:

A man can still go in like shorts and nobody will like say anything... they might think *ki kya pehen k aa gya hai* (what is he wearing?) but then continuously *mundi uski taraf nhi jaayegi na 10 baari* (their heads will not turn to him and would not be stared at 10 times).

Like Akansha, Niharika makes a comparison between how men and women are treated differently at the same workplace. It is seen as a women's job to not attract attention and if she fails in this task, any kind of harassment becomes solely her own responsibility. Niharika, who worked for student newspapers and alternative media forums like *News Laundry*, is also very close friend and a former colleague of mine. In our interview, however, she deflected from questions about her personal experiences and appeared increasingly conscious of the relevance of her answers to my research questions. For example, when I asked about her personal experiences of harassment during her days as a student journalist, she started talking about the vulnerability of women's bodies, thereby deflecting from her personal experiences. "Our bodies are made in a way that... you know... it becomes easy for anyone to attack," she said, commenting on how female bodies are made docile, fragile and sexual by national and cultural institutions. Niharika's point resonated with the argument made by Ayşe Gül Altınay in her book, *The Myth of the Military-Nation* (2004). When discussing Turkish national identity, Altınay argues that cultural, familial and social institutions use modern disciplinary techniques

² The Indian education system, for example, stresses marriage as a way to regulate female sexuality.

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to produce docile and disciplined bodies. In the case of women, these sexed bodies are disciplined to conform to the normative gendered norms of the given nation. (Bartky 1990, 80).

A key site for the disciplining of women's bodies in India is the family. The family is the first unit of socialization for a child; therefore, it is the first unit that makes the child "a woman". The organic nature of the family naturalizes the national "sexual respectability" for a woman. Her subordination to the man, the head of the family, and thus the nation, is not just desired but also deemed as natural (McClintock 1993, 64). One interviewee, Diksha, a senior journalist at BBC News and one of the oldest interviewees within my research project, explained the role of male family members in terms of inculcating notions of ideal femininity amongst young girls:

My father used to say an ideal Indian woman is someone who wears traditional clothes, who talks keeping her eyes down, looks down while walking, who is just concerned about her own business, who doesn't wander around, comes straight home after work.

For Diksha, the image that was constructed by her father corresponds to the fact that notions of "ideal femininity" – modesty, honour and shame – are constructed and appropriated by men (Bannerji 1995). "Keeping [her] eyes down" is associated with modesty. If a woman makes eye contact, she might be seen as "sexually available". Diksha's father's emphasis on "traditional clothing" explains the importance of clothing in measuring the "respectability", "chastity" and "desirability" of women (Banerjee 2012, 9). Men define these ideas of womanhood, while women internalize them to be seen as "respectable" members of the community.

My interviewees did not have a monolithic, singular idea of what an ideal Indian woman should look like. Instead, socialization from different sources often led to development of contradictory ideas. For example, Diksha, who was the only interviewee who did not fall into the upper-caste and middle-class group,³ explained the development of her contradictory ideas about an ideal Indian woman. "I thought I would drop it [Diploma in Journalism] but my mother insisted and somehow she managed the fees... and then I thought ... no... if my mother is doing so much effort then I have... I should do the same". Notably, while her father was the one who told her how to be a woman, it was her mother who made that extra effort to ensure that Diksha received the training and education that she needed to become a journalist. Her mother emphasized that independence was the most important thing for a woman. Perhaps her parents had contradictory ideas about what this ideal woman should be, which may have affected the notion of ideal femininity for Diksha, as well as her career choices.

One of the important components of being a modest woman in India is being "beautiful": this means adhering to dominant standards of beauty. Explaining the pressure to adhere to unrealized beauty standards, Avantika, 23, a journalist and reporter at ABP News, a Hindi News channel, explained: "people used to say you won't look good on screen, you need to take care of your skin, your hair is becoming bad, you had such silky hair when you came."

Avantika explained how being light skinned makes a woman more important on the screen and in real life. Women with a lighter skin tone are seen as more rational, civil and competent as compared to those with darker skin shades who are naturally associated with barbary and danger. (Hunter 2005; Mishra 2015). This idea was also taken up by Niharika while talking about "pretty privilege" in India:

... conventionally attractive women... I mean thin and fair-skinned [...] excel in their careers... they get noticed more than someone who doesn't adhere to these beauty ideals but has the same talent...

As Niharika pointed out, fair and "pretty" women are more given more credit for their work and intellect than women who are not considered "pretty," but have the same or even higher capabilities. The obsession with fair skin comes from the long history of European colonialism and the caste system of India, in which light skin is associated with upper castes and dark skin with lower castes (Mohanram 2007; Majidi 2020; Shevde 2008). With the urban middle-class upper-caste Hindu woman being seen as the embodiment of national sexual respectability, her fair skin becomes a natural marker of her identity and therefore, her *izzat*. Being fair automatically gives a woman a "social capital" i.e., it means that she is seen as naturally more respectable and modest. Women adhering to these beauty standards portray "collective and national belonging" by how they look (Dhillon 2015, 209). Therefore, simply telling a woman that she does not conform to these racist, classist and colonialist ideas of Indian beauty implies that she is not Indian enough and perhaps has no right to speak or be heard. This idea was taken up by another senior journalist Shilpa (pseudonym), when she stated that "one of the ways to silence outspoken women is [to] say they are not pretty enough."

In this section, I have argued that modesty is a complicated concept in the Indian context. It incorporates not just discourses of honour and shame, but a myriad of ideas to define a woman's virtue, ranging from clothing to walking and even the color of their skin. These factors are also important in determining a woman's marriageability, as I discuss in the following section.

Marriageability

*Humari puri zindagi shaadi k hisab se chlti hai.*⁴

³ Diksha never explicitly mentioned her caste, which was quite understandable considering how taboo being "lower caste" is in India. Instead, she mentioned that she comes from a humble background and her family could hardly afford the fees for her journalistic training.

⁴ This is a quote from my interview with Diksha, a senior journalist at BBC News.

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(Our lives revolve around our marriage)

Marriage and children are central to the idea of a good Indian woman. Marriage is considered the ultimate destiny for Indian women; whether she belongs to any profession, she should make the choice to prioritize her family and children over her work (Radhakrishnan 2009, 202). As Akansha explained to me:

Ghar pr rhe bacha paida kre. Usse jyda tum kuch nhi kr skte Journalist ho ya na ho.

(She should stay at home and reproduce kids /Whether she is a journalist or not, she should not do anything beyond this.)

In the above quotation, Akansha describes the restrictive and marginal roles women are assigned in the family, as well as the nation: as domesticated mothers and wives (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989; Nagel 1998; McClintock 1993). Women are implicated in the nation-building project only through symbolic, domestic and passive roles: that is as signifiers of the nation, mothers or wives. They are restricted into domesticated private spheres while the “important” public sphere is reserved for men (Smith 1998, 4). To understand this trope of the “domestication” of Indian women, it is important to look at the postcolonial critique of nation and nationalism advanced by Partha Chatterjee. In Chatterjee’s understanding of nationalism, women occupied the “inner” domain, in which the nation protected postcolonial “modernity” and national identity (Chatterjee 1993). Domesticity was a characteristic of this “inner” domain. Women became the sites of chastity, purity and support, while the “domestic” sphere became the only “natural sanctuary” for these virtues (Sarkar 1995, 98-115; Sarkar 1987, 2011-15). Therefore, a domesticated woman became a “good woman”, who was seen to represent the “honour” of her entire community (Anthias and Yuval Davis 1989).

The modern Indian woman, who is expected to participate in the capitalist economy, is also domesticated but in a different way. This idea was explained by one of my other interviewees, Avantika (pseudonym), 23:

Ideal Indian woman (smiles)... they would expect us to return home by let’s say not more than 6 pm prepare food, get things ready, get things done for the family ... that’s sort is the Indian notion for the ideal woman (laughs) because right now I am on shifts and I am in the evening shift and if I were married, that would be a problem to my family...

Avantika’s mother is a Professor of Journalism, and her father is Head of the Hindi Language Department at the University of Delhi. Thus, even though she was raised in a relatively modern family, her understandings of an “ideal woman” are derived from the traditional roles of women in a Hindu nation. Like Akansha, Avantika focused on the “domesticity” of Indian women, yet the domesticity she hinted at was slightly different. It combined traditionalism/conservatism with modernity/progress, which comes to being in the form of a “modern Indian woman”. Rama Mehta in her book, *The Western Educated Hindu Woman*, argues that the modern Indian woman is trapped between the shackles of western modernization and Hindu cultural values (1970). As such, women must always remain domesticated when they are not earning a wage (Lahiri-Dutt & Sil 2014; Hervey & Shaw 1998). GN Ramu in his book, *Work, Women and Marriage in Urban India* (1989), shows that the ideal roles of husband and wife are still manifested in traditional terms: this means that women’s employment is seen as an egalitarian decision and therefore, she is expected to engage in domestic work while the man is supposed to be the primary provider of the family.

In contemporary India, where many women are engaged in paid employment, these traditional roles of wives and mothers are idealized through television advertisements and soap operas, which show that “women can have it all” (Munshi 1998; Rajan 1993). The Hindutva movement aligns with these demands of consumerist individualism. It incorporates women into the public sphere through a new kind of activism where it reconstructs the domestic realm as moral, while at the same time, maintains the façade of gender equality in the public sphere (Sarkar 1998, 104). This idea of domesticity and doing family chores was also taken up by one of my older interviewees, Apeksha, 40, who works at NDTV, one of the only progressive left TV channels in India. Talking about societal expectations and burden on women, she said:

Listen Sneha, it has been a long time since I thought of what society expects... I don’t give two... (pauses) hoots about what society expects because if I had thought that I would be sitting in some small town in Bihar making *paranthas* [a form of bread] for my husband and in-laws.

Apeksha was the most senior journalist I interviewed for this research project. Her answer to my question on the ideal Indian woman was very different from the rest of my interviewees. Right in the first sentence, she established authority through her tone and expression, and addressed me directly saying that she never cared about this ideal image or society’s expectation. Perhaps this forwardness and radicalism came from her age, experience and seniority. In the above quotation, she contrasted herself with the societal image of the ideal woman, who stays at home and makes bread for her family in a rural part of India, which made her seem like an emancipated modern woman who does not feel the need to conform to this ideal image of an Indian women. Domestication of women is also important to control the potentially dangerous female sexuality. (Puri 1999). Diksha demonstrated the importance of “appropriate” manners in conditioning young girls for marriage to make her a “respectable” domesticated woman:

Your life is dependent on marriage. Your style of sitting, walking is monitored... people say ... this will not work in another house when you get married... like you are talking too much... this will not work in your husband’s house (laughs). You feel like you are born so that you can marry, make kids and then... we are taught like this.

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The monitoring of women's movement and their speech is a way to control her sexuality and protect her virginity solely for marriage. If she is not a virgin at the time of marriage, she will be considered immodest.⁵ Married women should also have a natural desire to procreate and carry the patrilineal lineage of the household (Uberoi 1994; Dhruvarajan 1989). This familial expectation from a married Hindu woman to procreate also corresponds to her duty to the nation: to produce Hindu sons, who will fight for the honour of the nation and help build a unified Hindu nation (Banerjee 2005). If she fails in this duty, she will be considered *ashubh* (unlucky) for the house.

Diksha emphasized the "husband's house" or "another house" where her current ways of life would not work, and she would have to change them in order to conform to "ideal Indian femininity". This links to Uberoi's work on Hindu conjugal marriages, where middle-class Hindu women have to "adjust" to the situation of their conjugal families and their partners asymmetrically and unilaterally to maintain the quality of their marital relationship (Uberoi 1995, 392). For upper-caste Hindus, if the newly wed girl cannot adjust to the conjugal family, it is seen as a reflection of the lack of "necessary" training she received from her parents (Srinivas 1977, 231).

For several of my interviewees, this need to demonstrate to their conjugal families that they had been well brought up often conflicted with their work as a journalist. Like Diksha, Avantika also expressed her parents' concerns about the nature of her journalistic work, which might not be acceptable in her conjugal family:

Sometimes I am having early morning shifts... sometimes I have evening shifts... sometimes even I am going out with men... So, my parents are worried that how will your husband accept that you are roaming around with another guy at night (laughs)... I get their point... they are not wrong, that's just how parents are.

For her parents, Avantika's "roaming around with another guy" late in the night would make her seem unchaste. While men's infidelity in a marriage is considered "natural" or a "biological deficiency",⁶ the body of a married Hindu woman is seen as a critical site of struggle for the preservation of Hindu cultural values and purity (Sarkar 1995, 102). Since the chastity of women centres around the discourses of *izzat*, the family and community assume a "social responsibility" to surveil women's bodies to avoid any risk of sexual deviation (Chakravarti 1993).

In contrast to journalism, the teaching profession is largely feminized in India because it is considered that women will be able to fulfill child-caring and child-rearing duties along with this stable job and regular working hours. Diksha explained this to me:

The thing is for women is ... only [the] teaching job is considered safe for them... so people think if you are a teacher, you are doing a good job, besides that if you do anything else, people think that this girl could not get married.

It is not expected of a married Indian woman to pursue career advancement. Female teachers are also seen as "role models" for other young girls and the embodiment of morality and respectability (Kellehar et al. 2011). The profession is considered "safe" for women as it does not make them too ambitious and allows them to prioritize their families. One of the other basic requirements for a woman to be married is that she has to have "lower" status than her potential husband: this means that she has to be less educated and less ambitious⁷ (Srinivas 1977, 232). On this intricate connection between education and the marriageability of women, Diksha explained:

When I started studying [an] LLB, my relatives started talking like that... they ask[ed] my parents why are they making me do this... she wouldn't get married... we are never taught that we should have an identity of our own. Similarly, we are taught like that only... like if you study this you will get a nice boy.... (laughs).

Diksha made a strong statement claiming that women in India are taught in a manner to become good potential wives so that they can marry into a "good" household. Since the law profession is associated with ambition, it is not considered suitable for a potential wife. Geraldine Forbes in her book, *Women in Modern India*, argues that a women's education in colonial India begun as an attempt to make women "presentable" wives and mothers rather than seeking employment (Forbes 1999, 54). Starting as a colonial practice, things have not changed much, and women are still educated to get married into a "respectable" modern household not to make passionate career choices. During the colonial era, these educated and modern women were seen as better allies to their western educated husbands and a better representative of the modern Indian civilization, free from colonial rule (Jayawardena 1986, 13). After marriage they are supposed to keep their ambition in check and move on to the next stage of their lives i.e., motherhood. They are taught that they will only be "worthy" if they become mothers, since motherhood implicates them in the nation's respectable public sphere (Mookherjee 2008).

Women, no matter what, have to be "less" than their husbands in all fields be it education, employment, or even height. This idea was captured by Jaya as she explained her family's concerns about her marriage owing to her "unusual" height:

⁵ Since her modesty is tied to her family, the entire family bears the "shame" if a woman deviates from heteronormative sexuality which is expressed only through marital relationships (Puri 1999).

⁶ MN Srinivas calls marriage a strikingly asymmetrical relationship as it requires godly devotion of the wife for the husband: this means that she is supposed to be a virgin before marriage, remain chaste throughout, and cannot divorce the husband under any circumstances (Srinivas 1977, p. 231).

⁷ Even inter-caste marriage becomes acceptable if the woman is from a lower social stratum than the potential husband, but the opposite is seen as socially unacceptable (Liddle and Joshi 1989).

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So, like I am really tall... I am like 5'8 – 5'9 ... (laughs)... so there are some extended family members who have spoken about my height that... it will be difficult for me to find a guy to be with ... because I am so tall and men don't like to be with tall women.

As discussed above, a woman in a heteronormative marital relationship is only acceptable when she is “lower/less” than her potential husband (Srinivas 1977). Jaya's family expressed similar anxieties over her height. Since she is taller than the height of an average Indian male, it was considered difficult to find a “suitable” husband for her. In Indian society, it is considered that a tall woman would have an overpowering presence in a man's life which cannot be accepted either by husbands or their families (Sharma 2010). In this section, I have argued that marriageability of an Indian woman encompasses her ability to “domesticate” herself in one way or the other, reproduce children, have a “respectable” profession and most importantly, they should be “lesser” than their husbands in all domains. All my interviewees expressed concerns about how this concept of marriage and motherhood practically governs their entire life, right from their education to their training and manners.

Silence

I think the ideal Indian woman is somebody who shuts up... who doesn't [speak]... in every sense of her being she is submissive to her parents, her husband, her kids, her in-laws or whatever... and you know even with... women who are sexualized like this trope of “Savita Bhabhi” [an Indian porn character]... but like she is a woman who is not out there... she is seductive but... ohh I have my curves in all the right places... she is perfect and she doesn't have to say a lot of words... so I don't think anybody expects a traditional Indian woman to talk so the moment you put out your opinions you sort of cross the line...

Aradhana is a former student journalist who currently works at *The Indian Express*, which is one of the oldest English dailies in India. In our interview, Aradhana established the importance of “silence” in an Indian woman's life: “talking”, she suggested, throws a woman out of the domain of national respectability. Aradhana made a clear demarcation between the private/domestic domain, which is occupied by women, and the public domain, where they are not supposed to speak (Chatterjee 1993). Opinionated women are considered to be detrimental to the Indian household as do not conform to the domestic and submissive roles expected of them. Taking the example of *Savita Bhabhi*, Aradhana pointed out that “visible” women are sexualized but not expected to speak. Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon similarly argue that pornography “is an expression of encouragement to men to objectify and assault women”, which aims for complete and ultimate silence of women (McKinnon 1993, p. 22).

Silence and speech are much debated themes in feminist circles both in India and beyond. During the socialization of young women, qualities like talking, laughing or even confidence are often discouraged as they are considered less feminine (Rich 1979, 243). bell hooks in her book, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist Thinking Black*, explains that women are not taught absolute silence, they are supposed to “talk a talk that was itself silence”. Silence is regarded a “sign of woman's submission to patriarchal authority” (hooks 1989, 7). Not conforming to this silence makes the woman deviant. In the Indian context, silence is regarded as a virtue. A woman who talks too much is not considered suitable for marriage. Talking also means that the woman is sexually available and therefore, immoral and immodest. Deepa Narayan in her work, *Chup: Breaking the Silence About India's Women*, argues that Indian culture teaches young girls to be invisible. They should not acknowledge their bodies, cover up, never look straight into anyone's eye, not laugh too loud, not answer back to elders and most importantly, embody a culture of silence. A silent woman is considered respectable, desirable and marriageable. Women are trained to be silent as it makes them invisible in the public domain (Narayan 2018, 75-83).

Diksha explained the meaning of an ideal Indian woman through the example of a “domesticated silent woman”. This woman is lauded for her virtue of silence while, at the same time, makes herself productive by doing “domestic work”. Therefore, she becomes a desirable and marriageable woman. If she is talking too much, she is seen as “not nice”.

Basically, everyone thinks... a woman should talk less... you know. Someone told me, like when people go to marriages... umm... they tell me that there was this girl in the marriage function, she was a very nice girl, she wasn't speaking anything, just doing domestic work. Later women were talking about her...that this girl was so nice... we didn't even hear a word from her...(laughs)... so for them... The ideal Indian [woman] shouldn't talk.

Diksha was smiling (in fact laughing) while answering this question on the notion of an ideal Indian woman. Her reaction suggested that these ideas were socialized to her as a young girl but as she grew up, she started finding these ideas hilarious and unacceptable. Her laughing can also be seen as an act of resistance to such traditional ideas. She further explained the construction of this ideal Indian woman with reference to her capacity for agency:

So, this is it, a woman who doesn't speak, doesn't talk about her rights, who doesn't question others... like if my brother is going out why can't I go out... if my brother has permission why don't I... or something like why I cannot make my career first and then marry... why am I not free to choose my life partner... so if I ask these questions then I won't be an ideal women in the eyes of society.

Diksha emphasized who is “not” an ideal woman. A woman asking question, demanding equal rights or making a “choice” by herself is not considered an ideal woman. Diksha makes it clear in her response that this definition of an ideal woman is imposed

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upon young girls by society. She makes a comparison between her brother and herself, implying that social discrimination starts with the family.

Several feminist scholars have written about the philosophical underpinnings and cultural implications of silence. Simone de Beauvoir, for example, wrote about the socialization of silence and invisibility in women right from childhood. "Othering" of women makes them objects who remain subjected to men, she argued. These objects are forced into a culture of silence. For the subject to maintain its subject position, the silencing of the object becomes necessary. De Beauvoir emphasized that a woman's breasts speak louder than her mouth in a male dominated culture (Beauvoir 1949). Patti Duncan in her book, *Tell This Silence*, argues that silence is socially and culturally constructed. Writing particularly about Asian American women, Duncan argues that silences are defined more by social and cultural contexts, rather than the innate cultural values of an individual (Duncan 2009, p. 216). Silence is a form of discourse that communicates various thoughts or emotions. In the above case, the silence of an Indian woman communicates her submissiveness and acceptance to her position in the household and society. "Silencing" is, therefore, an important process of becoming a woman. Speech makes a woman come to power and attain visibility. The very act of speaking is a form of resistance to male domination, and therefore, deviance (hooks 1999, p. 129).

In addition to this silence, an ideal Indian woman does not make her own decisions. All her decisions are made by male figures of her life; she is not supposed to question them. This idea was explained to me by Jaya:

Ideal Indian woman is like a prototype ... you know... which is common to a lot of South Asian countries ... Good daughter, good wife, good mother, good sister, modest, quiet ... umm... willingly allows just things to happen according to other people's wishes, not like really saying anything, being okay with how things are going around her... because she feels like okay... Like this simulation in which they are living in... is... none of this is decided by their own terms... it's decided by the male figures around them.

In the above quotation, Jaya described the desirable qualities in an ideal South Asian woman. Her identity is associated with the males around her, and she must perform all the roles associated with these identities in a "respectable" manner. Her silence is a reflection of submission to male authority. Jaya uses the term "simulation", which reflects her acknowledgment that women do not actively chose to remain silent, but rather, they are silenced and forced to pretend to live a "simulation" rather than reality.

In this section, I have argued that silence is one of the main characteristics of an ideal Indian woman which not just encompasses being quiet and submissive but also not making any decisions for herself. Since mere "talking" is an act of deviance, the profession of journalism poses particular challenges for female journalists.

CONCLUSION

The above discussion of the modern *Sati Savitri* shows the roles of women in the postcolonial Indian nation and how these restrictive roles are naturalized as an essential part of "becoming" a woman. For most of my interviewees, these explanations of the ideal Indian woman were marked with smiles, laughs, sarcasm and sometimes even frustration. For example, while talking about instances of sexual harassment and silences associated with them, Akansha frustratingly remarked: "sometimes I feel like *paap kr dia ladki paida ho k*" (I have committed a sin by being born a girl). The switch to Hindi here showed her heightened emotion. This is also a commonly used phrase in India to capture the misery of being born a girl that is extensively used in films and popular culture.⁸ Despite these spirited responses, all of my interviewees identified similar features of an "ideal woman" – modesty, marriageability and silence – and explained that they came to understand these features through processes of socialization. At the same time, they used both verbal and non-verbal means of expression to communicate that they did not agree to such a definition. None of the interviewees identified themselves within this definition of the ideal Indian woman, however, they felt the need to conform to these images at some point in their lives. Two of the senior female journalists whom I interviewed felt the need to change these dominant gendered discourses and provided alternative definitions of an ideal Indian woman. It seemed that their age and seniority provided them greater agency to negotiate the dominant definitions.

In this paper, I have used the mythological concept of *Sati Savitri* to explain how women's subordination and subjugation is ensured through the evocation of these concepts in the postcolonial Indian context. The Hindu mythological concept of *Sati Savitri aurat* remains important even after centuries as it keeps postcolonial anxieties about westernization in check. The modern Indian woman, who has entered the labor force and public sphere, is represented as a safe repository of the archaic but rich Hindu tradition. Since women have been relegated to the "inner" realm of nationalism, they must embody tradition which is truly representative of the nation. The concept of *Sati Savitri* combines complex values of chastity, devotion to one's husband, virginity and beauty, at the same time, it is symbolic of the ideal Indian woman.

⁸ For example, there was a television serial called "Na Aana Iss Desh Lado" (Do not come to this country, my sweet daughter). It reverberated around the theme of feticide. It was a tragic story of a village where each female child was killed upon her birth. It made the theme of "paap kr dia h ladki paida ho k" quite prominent and brought it into a public discourse. After this show, similar television series and films were made around the same theme depicting the tragedy of being born a girl in India.

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My interviewees discussed the notion of an ideal Indian woman with reference to three main themes: modesty, marriageability and silence. In this paper, I discussed how these concepts have been borrowed and evolved from colonial and postcolonial understandings of women's role in the nation-building project. All three themes entail complex meanings in the Indian context. Modesty entails virginity, chastity, sexual respectability and beauty; while marriageability refers to the eligibility of a woman to marry. Silence is an essential virtue for an Indian woman, as it is associated with respect and submission to the patriarchal structures. For the profession of journalism, these qualities especially unsettling as they conflict with the nature of the work as journalists are expected to be vocal, brave and loud. Thus, these ideal qualities put an inevitable pressure on the middle-class Indian women that hinders with their work, ambitions and day-to-day activities, as demonstrated in this paper.

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