

# FORUM

## DECONSTRUCTING DUMONT'S INDIA

### WOMEN AND MARITAL BREAKDOWN IN SOUTH INDIA: RECONSTRUCTING HOMES, BONDS AND PERSONS

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It happened in the middle of my fieldwork—at the end of July, 2000: Bangalore went berserk. This, one of the most progressive and liberal cities in India, the Silicon Valley of India, became a battle field of furious crowds, and there was a serious threat of communal riots in the air between Kannadigas and Tamils; normally peace-loving neighbours in the two South Indian states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The most famous Kannadiga film star, Raj Kumar, had been kidnapped by the most famous Tamil bandit, Veerappan. Raj Kumar fans and other “anti-social elements”—as my informants called them—took over the streets of Bangalore. They were burning tyres, stopping busses, throwing stones at the windows of Tamil enterprises and smashing everyone’s vehicles. People were rushing home to be inside and to be safe.

No, not everyone. Gita, one of the divorced and separated women of this study, was rushing from her home to an event in the self-improvement program that she was in charge of tonight. She had decided not to cancel the event. However, she had left her scooter at home so that the fans would not break it, and she had taken an extra blanket with her so that she could stay overnight if the situation became extreme. She had also advised other participants to “be responsible”—for example, to be sure that their children were safe—and to come only if they considered it possible for them. The event, with 50 participants, was a great success. The man who had dropped Gita off at the event, and who had been astonished because Gita was rushing *from* home instead of *to* her home, had heard the same explanation from Gita that I had: if the good people are brave enough to lead a decent, everyday life according to their principles, then the bad people cannot control or ruin it. Later Gita had thought further: if all good people, the majority, had done like she—and they—had, the fanatical crowd would not have been able to “capture” Bangalore.

This Ph.D. dissertation explores the processes that Gita and 50 other divorced, separated and deserted women from different socio-religious backgrounds went through in the city of Bangalore in South India at the turn of the twentieth century: how did they become so brave? How did they become agents on behalf of the others—and what were the consequences of all this?

I suggest that the taboo of divorce in India has prevented divorced or separated women

from knowing about one another; and others from knowing about divorcees. However, the divorced and separated women of this study have begun to break the silence. This study shows that knowing about other women's problems and, particularly, organising or networking with them, gives women relief, support and courage. This could gradually lead to a greater acceptance of divorce as an unfortunate but not unavoidable state of affairs and the abolishment of the stigma attached to divorced or separated women.

Initially, the divorced and separated women seldom chose to become reformers. Most of them would have preferred to have been obedient wives and reproducers of prevalent kinship and gender hierarchies and ideologies. Due to marital breakdown, they are nevertheless 'forced' to become actors in order to survive. The South Indian 'relational' female actors struggle because of other people and on behalf of other people, particularly other women. This dissertation explores what they said and did and, particularly, how they challenged the order of kinship and gender hierarchies creatively in their homes, in their working places, in the women's organisations, and in the Family Court of Bangalore. With regards the latter, for example, they were able to use the legal system towards achieving multiple goals that also led to unintended practical consequences.

I also chose to look for the similarities between women of different social and cultural backgrounds because of the common denominator of their marital breakdowns. This kind of approach challenges the communal politics that consider religion as the main determinant of a person's social position. Consequently, despite the women's different socio-economic, religious and regional backgrounds, this study emphasises—also through negation—the significance for each of these South Indian women of marriage and of being a wife and of having a husband. Therefore the women, from the richest to the most impoverished; from the most highly-educated and sophisticated to the most illiterate; from their various religious backgrounds: all tolerated severe harassment throughout their marriages, and their threshold of tolerance before leaving the marriage was very high. The importance of being a wife is further strengthened by the importance of being a mother and of having a home and thus being 'related' with other people through intimate sharing and interaction.

I want to highlight that all the divorced and separated women of this study are the survivors of marriages and marital breakdowns or they are at least in the process of surviving. We can only guess what may have happened to the 'failures': have they been murdered in their marriages, have they committed suicide, have they died neglected; or have they simply hidden their background, unable to face the social stigma?

What, then, makes these women—with whom I was able to make a contact—survivors? The very least that all women need for initial survival after a marital breakdown is a place to stay, money to live on, social relations and support. The divorced and separated women of this study were reachable by me through a friend or a relative or a colleague, through a women's organisation or network or through a lawyer. They were 'related'—reconnected—with other people, and that is crucial to their surviving, as well as for their self-construction. The bonds of intimate interaction and sharing make up what a person is and have a fundamental importance for her/his construction of gender as well. In fact, the 'relational person' is a central concept for most researchers who have studied Indians, although its meaning is understood differently. For example, Dumont (1980) refers to the holistic and anti-individualistic nature of hierarchical personhood and Marriott (1976) refers to the transactional character of the person. Trawick (1996: 252) speaks about the "interpersonality"

among human beings in India: considered alone, a man has no meaning. Particularly, both the interpretation of fluid persons and the idea of constructing persons through interaction and sharing substances place emphasis on the transformability and flexibility of a person's self-construction. As such, a stimulating viewpoint is opened regarding marital breakdown which mixes up the woman's bonds of interaction and sharing and her make-up as a person within hierarchical gender and kinship relations. Marital breakdown fundamentally transforms a woman's relational field and forces her to recreate substitutive relations in a flexible way. This dissertation suggests that even if a husband is not a necessity for a woman, relationships and belonging to a larger wholeness and a web of significant relations *is* a necessity.

Particularly, this is a study about homes, bonds and persons before and after marital breakdown. Instead of trying to catch the solidity indicated by these concepts—homes, bonds and persons—I focus on the processes and flexibility embedded in them and the interdependence between them. The study follows the divorced and separated women from their natal homes to their affinal homes, through homelessness and legal battles, to their reconstructed natal, affinal or single homes in order to find out what it means to be a gendered person within hierarchical gender and kinship relations in South India. Firstly, a person, especially a woman, needs a house in order to live a decent life, to be related to other family members, initially in her natal home and then later in her affinal home. Among the first sentences that I learnt in my Kannada language course in Bangalore was an important and frequently asked question: *Nimma maneeli yaaru yaaru idaree?* Who all (*yaaru yaaru*) are living in your house/home? The presupposition was that there are many people living in your house. I was supposed to regret that 'only' we two—my husband and I—lived in our house. Further, one single, middle-aged, female classmate was advised to lie about her penitent living condition by our empathic Kannada teacher.

Secondly, the significance of houses lies in their importance to the main figures of this study, that is, the women whose marriages have broken down. Each and every one of them talked constantly about houses: they were lacking shelter, they longed for or saved for "a house of their own", they constructed or rented it or, finally, some fulfilled their dream of it. I suggest that kinship is both made and questioned in the urban homes of the divorced and separated women in South India. In fact, the title of the dissertation—Women and Marital Breakdown in South India—refers not only to the divorced and separated women but also to their mothers, sisters and daughters. The ethnographic evidence of this study highlights the importance of women in regard to South Indian kinship relations. A female-kin nucleus of mother, sister, wife and daughter has a significant influence within the family as a destroyer or as a guarantor of kin relations.

The negative consequences of marital breakdown particularly threaten the marriage chances of the divorced and separated women's sisters and daughters. On the other hand, marital breakdown reveals the co-existing matrifocal tendencies in kin relations, which means that a mother and a mother's natal kin are given practical preference when the patrilineal kinship ideology and the ideal of complementary kinship relations fail to materialise in everyday life. In these matrifocal kin relations, the social connections and substantial transactions of nursing, feeding, caring for and supporting that go on between a mother and a child are given preference over descent, as the consequences of marital breakdown show. For example, mothers' support for daughters becomes highlighted

throughout this study as well as the continual importance of the natal family and home, that is, the 'mother home'. The mothers—both the mothers of the divorced and separated women as well as the divorced and separated women as mothers—take their daughter's side against the overall kin even more strongly than the fathers if there is a conflict of interest. Secondly, mothers, sisters and daughters of the same natal family can substitute for each other in important rituals and social roles when the conventional order of kinship is confused by a family tragedy. Thirdly, a newborn child—of the husband's patriline—does not ensure the woman's position in her husband's family but may ruin it instead; the child is often left to the woman, with the husband or his family not taking later responsibility for arranging the marriage of the offspring to ensure the continuity of the patriline. Finally, marriage does not break the woman's bonds to her natal family whereas marital breakdown often does cut the woman's bonds to her husband as well as his family and kin—*always* if the couple do not have children and sometimes even when they do. All this shows, that although according to the prevalent patrilineal kinship ideology in most communities the children belong to their fathers and to their fathers' line, in practice the children of divorced couples more often belong to their mothers and they are more attached to the natal families of their mothers through everyday interaction and sharing. This supports the idea that bonds based on social connections and transactions with mothers are more significant markers of relatedness than inheritance as indicated by a patrilineal kinship ideology: matrifocal tendencies in kin relations often become manifested when things do not proceed according to plan.

Marital breakdown makes the interconnection between person, gender and kinship visible; it impacts on kin relations and discloses the existing gender relations and power structure through its consequences. I suggest that a moment of crisis, like a marital breakdown, makes the transformability of relational personhood—as well as the transformability of relational society and culture—visible.

Importantly, I suggest that the divorced and separated women are able to manoeuvre their position as well as their set up as a relational person through interaction with the right kind of people: sisters, mothers, other selected and trusted relatives, good friends, empathic colleagues or neighbours, women activists and other 'decent' divorced women. Through interaction and sharing with those with whom they are intimate, the lessons of marital breakdown are taken into account. The divorced and separated women renew the marriage system by opposing dowry, by emphasising a woman's right to decide and by supporting other women facing marital problems. Many of them feel it is their duty to question principles that are otherwise taken for granted, to suggest alternatives, and to introduce more or less subversive changes to gender and kinship roles, particularly with regard to a woman's position. Seniority of life experience improves the divorced and separated women's status. Simultaneously, they renegotiate gender and kinship hierarchies not only by divorcing but also by their positive evaluations of women and, particularly, by their own example and through offering their own experiences for the use of other women. The social order of kinship and gender hierarchies can be challenged from the bottom. Although the study reveals the painful history of women's ill-treatment in marriage, family and kinship systems, it demonstrates the women's rejection of the domination and shows their ability to re-negotiate and promote changes not only in their own positions but in the whole hierarchical system as well. The focus on the margins of kinship relations emphasises the

importance of looking between the structures and highlights the worth of looking beyond the kinship rules and into the 'exceptions' to the rules, which are, as I suggest, as frequent as the rules themselves. As I have shown, although the exceptions are hard to pin down, they are of great consequence: ignoring them may in fact distort kinship theory. Moreover, this study demonstrates that examining something truly significant in Indian society such as personhood, gender or law, or the interplay between an agent and the structure, leads us to study kinship. This keeps the study of kinship at the heart of anthropology in India and makes the renewal of it an anthropological mission.

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## TRACES OF DUMONT FROM INDIA

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Siru Aura's fascinating doctoral dissertation (2008) on divorce, gender and kinship in Indian society exemplifies Dumont's living heritage for the scholarship of South Asia. Dumont's ideas are topical—not because they are accepted as such but because of the new ideas generated by the critical debate on Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* (HH). Inspired by Siru's theses, I will discuss the main points of this debate, which has the potential to help assess and develop Dumont's ideas outside the Indian context.

For Dumont, India presented a lesson on hierarchy which does not originate from political and economic power. Dumont saw Indian hierarchy as built on caste and purity concerns. Castes maintain distance because those lower in caste hierarchy are impure and can transmit impurity to those higher in hierarchy. The essence of Hindu ideology is, according to Dumont, hierarchy in contrast to the individualism of western societies.

However, even early critics of Dumont such as Das and Uberoi (1971) pointed out that hierarchy does not exclude equality concerns. Janta, a village in West Bengal where I have been carrying out fieldwork since 1999, is in many ways an exemplar of caste hierarchy as described by Dumont: divided into caste neighbourhoods with the higher castes maintaining distance from the lower castes which are considered impure. Yet one of the most common