Chapter 1

Introduction

Why has the concept of ‘patriarchal honour’ prompted the enquiry of this thesis? And more fundamentally, why this thesis, during my mid-50s? Since this thesis is about challenging binaries between objective knowledge and lived realities of people’s lives, my own introduction should not seem out of place right at the start. In fact without my background and standpoint put out up front, it would not be possible or ethically permissible for me to go ahead and delve into ‘serious’ academics. My personal journey from the 1970s (the anti-Emergency1 and the ‘Long March’2 activism) has been chequered with feminist intervention and organisation building at the grass root level, mainly in rural Maharashtra. It is from women’s lives (and the lives of subordinated groups) that I have imbibed the theories to which I have politically subscribed since the 1970s and 80s.

Since 1987 I have worked with rural women. After staying in a drought-prone village for five years, Ramesh and I formed Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal (MASUM)3 that works with subordinated women and men in two districts of Maharashtra state. During the formative years of the organisation there was not enough time for any self-indulgence; nor was there access to telephone, computers and on many occasions, to electricity. As the internal leadership grew, and the transition process of handing over the rural work to our local colleagues began to gain momentum, my desire to engage with studies in a serious way began to grow once again.

Before I embarked on the journey of this thesis, my formal public education had been in Microbiology. I have never engaged formally with university level studies in feminist theory during these past decades; thus, my obsessive reading about social and political issues has not been structured within an academic discipline. My

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1 The ‘Internal Emergency,’ declared by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, during which civil liberties had been suspended for 19 months (June 1975 to March 1977).
2 The ‘Long March’ was part of the long-drawn struggle to rename Marathwada University in Aurangabad, Maharashtra, as “Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University.”
3 Website: www.masum-india.org
activism has been in grassroots intervention, including participatory action research on health, sexuality, violence, minority and Dalit rights; and, collectivisation of rural women for dignity, equality, secularism and democratic rights. However, during the decade of the 2000s I felt the urge to tie up what I have seen and learnt from the lives of subordinated women, and to formally engage with public education, notably in a discipline within the humanities. This work which attempts to understand women’s lives through an intersectional approach, trespasses into sociology, women’s studies and anthropology because the lives of women are too complex to be ‘fitted’ into a single theory (John 2004:66). Neither can the resistance of subordinated women be fully understood without having ‘insider wisdom’ about how multiple patriarchies intersect with women’s lives (ibid).

What I saw during the past three decades was the impact of stifling structures of caste, class and patriarchy upon women’s lives, both within the private and public domains (Walby 1990). What I learnt was that women, especially from subordinated groups were not mere victims; they were survivors, resisters and sometimes even agents of change within their communities. Often they might not be able to rebel outright (Scott 1990), but they did so when they collectivised, often at great personal cost. Much of what women suffered, irrespective of whether they rebelled or not, was linked to concepts of patriarchal and caste honour and power. Could the study of honour help to understand insidious power or structural violence (Galtung 1975-80) in women’s lives? Could the employ of feminist theories and methodologies, using case studies and focus group discussions help understand the phenomenon of honour from “below,” through the participation of people from diverse social locations?

Burawoy (2000,2009) talks of a public sociology that meets “the challenges of new and old patterns of inequality and domination,” by bringing the academic discipline “into dialogue with audiences beyond the academy, an open dialogue in which both sides deepen their understanding of public issues.” He also exhorts academic disciplines to make “the invisible visible” by forging connections between sociologist and the community, in the same way that “feminists transformed sociology by recognizing and validating what women do in their personal lives” (Burawoy 2002). Could reflexivity, public accountability (Burawoy 2003) and an
epistemology that challenges masculinist knowledge by building upon the lived realities of subordinated women (Collins 1991) become the entry-point into formal academic enquiry? The ethics of caring and personal accountability, as enunciated by Collins (ibid) would also be imminent, especially if one had to study intimate and sensitive issues such as sexuality, gender identity and transgression. These theorisations validated my politics and methodology, both as a feminist interventionist and qualitative researcher on women’s issues. Besides, the rich feminist epistemologies that challenged knowledge bereft of the understanding of people’s lives created an exciting moment to do research.

During the past few decades, we have seen the impact of the world passing into the ‘information age’ (Castells 2000a, 2000b, 2001). New information technologies can at once ‘annihilate’ space by converting a local event into a global one and can also change one’s relationship with time (Castells 2000a:5). In this era, an idea or terminology can get globally ‘viral’ within weeks if not days and minutes, through social networking such as blogs, twitter, facebook or youtube. During this phase of rapid neo-liberal globalisation, and especially post “9-11,” the focus on the concept of honour has undergone tumultuous change, locally and globally. The fact that ‘honour killing’ has now become a Hinglish word, well-known even to non-English readers in India is an example of what Castells calls the ‘network society’. Certain images, usually hegemonic ones, stay in our minds forever because they have been repeatedly thrown at us through the power of the printed, audio-visual or virtual world. Stereotypes about crimes in the name of honour, such as their Islamic connotation, their relegation to khap panchayats in Haryana in India and their understanding as merely cultural phenomena are a result of this information explosion. Castells warns that “the logic of the network is more powerful than the powers of the network” (Castells ibid).

This era has the power to strengthen hegemonic discourses; yet it also serves as a site for resistance. For this reason, this historical moment provides for an excellent opportunity to study the concept and practices related to honour (Chowdhry 1997, 2007, 2010). The unresolved dilemmas around its terminology, usage, hyphenation, and its anti-immigration, racist, Islamophobic or ‘backward’ connotations (Chakravarti 2005; Gill 2006; Wikan 2008; Terman 2010) make it worthy of study.
from an intersectional perspective (see Crenshaw 1991a, 1991b in Chapter 2, for details of the concept of Intersectionality).

One has also seen a change in ethnography because it is no longer limited to studies of colonised subjects; it also studies global phenomena (Burawoy et al., 2000; Zsuzsa et al., 2002). Participant observation from insider vantage points, showing how individuals and groups negotiate, challenge and even re-create “the complex global web” that entangles them, has been used to study histories of local struggles, linking those to global forces (Burawoy et al., ibid). Conventional methods of doing sociology have been challenged by these methodological approaches (Burawoy et al., 1991) through insider wisdom (Collins 1991, 2000) and through standpoint feminism, globally (Hartsock 1996) as well as in India (Rege 1998, 2006). Studying patriarchal honour promised these exciting possibilities.

In the area of honour, numerous publications ranging from the biographical to multi-country reports that combine personal interviews and macro-level analysis of communities in the Middle East have become global best-sellers (Goodwin 2003; Sasson 1993, 1994, 2000, 2004). Simultaneously, recent research by feminists within Muslim communities (Gul Khattak 1994; Zia 1994; Khan 2006) highlights the fact that the major focus of the entire world has been on the overt manifestations of honour, especially crimes and murders. Feminist scholars from Pakistan challenged the notion that honour was merely a cultural or religious phenomenon; they argued that it was a product of geo-politics, militarisation (Gul Khattak 1994; Zia 1994) and financial feuds within and between families (Khan 2006). To date, not much work addresses the concept of honour beyond culture, or beyond the moment of exercising the right to choose a sexual or romantic partner. Covert aspects of honour as they operate on a day to day basis in the lives of differently placed women remain relatively unexplored. Chowdhry (2006) and Chakravarti (2003:175) are among the few feminists in India who have consistently engaged with codes of honour that impinge upon women’s lives within casteist patriarchy. They have shown how the concept of izzat operates to enforce patriarchal codes; simultaneously they have argued that the caste system is not immutable but is fraught with internal, gendered tensions. Both have expressed the need for the
women’s movement to conduct more research, to engage with issues of caste and learn from women’s voices and lived realities.

Reflecting on discussions around honour, this thesis goes beyond capturing moments of violence. It outlines other ways of perceiving honour: as a daily cultural code and as cultural capital within family and kinship. It attempts to understand its political economy; its usage for material gain; and, for control and exclusion of group members. It explores the ways in which personal honour is conceived, and the relationship of personal honour with that of the family, caste, religion and nation. It studies patriarchal honour as power that is culturally defined and therefore not always visible as violence (Kannabiran 2003). I believe that by examining the operationalisation of honour codes in everyday life, we can assess the processes and agencies through which power is structured and reproduced over generations. This thesis emphasises the “dialectical relationship between subjects who are endowed with the capacity to act and the discursive and non-discursive forces to which they are subjected” (Allen 1999). It identifies multiple structures as well as multiple agencies as they operate within caste, gender and sexuality. It questions the given dualistic binaries of man-woman; public-private; centre-margin; passive-agent; or, acceptable-acceptable. It elaborates the dialectical relationship between structure and agency, highlighting the ways in which structures and agency continually impact and affect each other, leading to the reformulation of new structures and newer agencies.

It was quite clear that difference among women would first have to be acknowledged if one had to understand how honour affected women within patriarchy. It was imperative that the intersections of patriarchy with other systems of oppression would have to be studied. The idea of interviewing women from diverse backgrounds and social locations began to take shape in my mind. Not only would such an enquiry highlight the diverse and discriminate ways in which brahminical patriarchy (Chakravarti 2003) affected differently placed women, but also the unimaginable ways in which subordinated women resisted patriarchal honour. The growing feminist scholarship had added challenges to conventional understanding of sexuality and of ‘sex’ as simplistic categories (Geetha 2007). This epistemology created the opportunity to understand backlash to women’s continued
agency ‘in the name of honour’. My personal angst with identity politics based on violence (Baxi U. 2005) or exclusion, and the quest for struggles that are not merely based on recognition but which also fulfil an emancipatory promise (Fraser 1996, 2000, 2009) led me to undertake this work.

The upsurge of right-wing politics in India and the growing acceptance for the same has terrifying repercussions for women’s rights, especially for women from minority groups, and from subordinated or marginalised communities (Chaudhuri 2004). On the other hand, the State’s grudging, yet gradual acceptance of the rights of counter-heteronormative groups offers some tentative hope. As a feminist interventionist, I felt the need to be challenged and also be enriched and reassured that subordinated women never give up, even in the face of stifling structures and systems of oppression. Thus began my personal and political journey into a formal and stringent study of honour as a ‘case-study’, in order to gain knowledge about patriarchal power. I was sure that the struggles of subordinated women and socially excluded masculinities would impart wisdom about resisting and/or confronting the power of brahminical and heteronormative patriarchy.

This thesis documents the ways in which patriarchal power (both visible and invisible) operates and reproduces itself through daily cultural codes of honourable behaviour. The fact that honour is embedded and embodied from early childhood, both through discursive practice as well as through operational codes of conduct makes it intrinsic and invisible even to those who practice it, or to those who impose it upon others. It normalises violence and discrimination (Kannabiran 2005). Therefore I interrogate honour as a manifestation of power through the feminist lens, and also employ its research methods. This approach enables the understanding of deep-seated unconscious mores and norms which we don’t always recognise as power. Through focus group discussions and in-depth conversations with people located on diverse social locations, the thesis explores the ways in which honour is embedded in power based relationships of gender (Niranjana 2004) and patriarchy (Geetha V. 2002), and how women challenge these powers.
Chapter 2, namely the "Review of Literature," indicates that feminist interrogation of knowledge and the questioning of patriarchy has led feminist scholars not only to analyse gender and patriarchy, but also produce knowledge about the same (Geetha 2007:9). The concepts of multiple patriarchies, public and private patriarchies (Walby 1990), brahminical patriarchy (Chakravarti ibid) and Black feminist epistemologies (Collins 1991) have interrogated traditional bastions of knowledge. The emergence of women's studies during the past three decades has helped to put family, kinship, caste, religion and culture under the feminist lens, and to challenge anthropological and sociological traditions of understanding these institutions (Dube 2001). Unequal gender relations, power dynamics, as well as material, ideological and symbolic controls over women have been explored; and, normalcy, whether related to gender roles, gender identity or sexuality has been disputed. The fact that 'insider wisdom' was essential to theorise about the intersections of patriarchal power with other systems of domination was reiterated (John 2004:66) through feminist scholarship and intervention. That 'honour killings' were a continuum of violence against women (Welchman et al., 2005) and that the ideology of honour was a "gendered notion producing inequality and hierarchy" was established (Chowdhry 2007:16), thereby challenging stereotypes about honour related crimes being practised by 'backward' cultures and religions.

The intersection of patriarchy and caste, and the control over women through brahminical practices such as enforced ascetic widowhood (Gatwood 1985; Chakravarti 2003:83; Chowdhry 2006) has been explored by feminists within India. This led to kinship ties emerging as being central in constructing how families view each other; in constructing male and female identities; and in dealing with sexual or non-sexual transgressions (Geetha 2007:76). Even fictive kinships emulated those that were based on blood, descent or marriage when rules about sexual relationships had to be put into practice (Chowdhry 2007:13). Simultaneously however, the conflict generated within castes and between castes due to modernisation led to rebellion within the ranks, especially in the realm of sexuality and marriage (ibid). The role of the State has also been interrogated by feminists in terms of complicity
of the police, courts or the medico-legal systems in protecting the honour of the family and caste, even at the cost of violation of individual rights (ibid).

Chapter 2 traces debates around the anthropological discourses on honour (Stewart 1994; Wikan 2008; Welsh 2008) to understand its long and complex history (Stewart ibid:30-31). Most literature argues that honour (as it still exists in many parts of the world) is based on creating the ‘Other’; it is not based on intrinsic values of a person but on reputation; and is often revengeful and masculinist. Stewart argues in favour of honour being understood as a ‘right’, an entitlement among equals; the loss of which can cause banishment or humiliation within one’s ‘honour group’.

Anthropological literature did not adequately critique the gender-blind or anti-woman biases within the concept of honour. Feminists, having applied the lens of ‘power’ to honour, pointed out problems related to terminology, meaning, usage and its patriarchal, racist and anti-immigration connotations. They showed how codes of behaviour symbolise and project the honour and integrity of a group (Jafri 2008:23).

Some of these issues have led feminists either to discard the term altogether or use it within quotes (Chakravarti in Welchman et al., 2005). Recent research has also challenged the stereotypical binaries of honour and shame (Ewing 2008:30), arguing instead that they are gendered counterparts of the concept of honour. Backlash has also been documented, whether in families being forced to ‘cleanse’ the dishonour that women’s agency brings along, or the restriction of women’s mobility and rights through moral policing, when male control over women’s behaviour is challenged (Sen 2005:46; Onal 2008; Wikan 2008).

Chapter 2 elaborates upon the theories of intersectionality (Crenshaw ibid); namely how social locations create an interlocking system of oppression, and how they generate a complex matrix of domination in which each distinct system of oppression is part of one over-arching structure of domination (Collins 1990). Thereafter, Chapter 2 reviews the literature on women’s agency that is individual as well as collective (Abrams 1999) and which is conscious of structures; learning from them in order to strategise for the future (Emirbayer et al., 1998). Agency is not always be positive (Butalia 2001); neither upfront in the face of hegemonic power relations (Scott 1990:xii). In order to conceptualise a progressive agency we first have to re-conceptualise the meaning of power (Allen 2008a, 2008b).
Lastly, Chapter 2 identifies the gap in extant literature and elaborates on the need for the present study that combines empiricism and epistemology based on the lived realities of the subordinated.

Chapter 3, namely “Methodology,” outlines the personal, political and academic journey of the thesis. It acknowledges feminist epistemology because it does not accept a split between knowledge and politics (Tedlock 2001:174). It derives its wisdom from lived experiences, and is grounded in the understanding of gender, reflexivity, praxis and emotion (Denzin et al., 2001:34). Intersectional analysis proved useful because it helped to identify the matrices of domination as well as women’s agency in negotiating structures. To centre-stage women’s experiences and, yet interrogate the same from a feminist standpoint (Krishnaraj 2006) was the challenge before me. Merely giving voice to women’s world views was not enough; revisioning our own voices in the process of reflexive and transformative research was essential (Rege 2006).

Standpoint theory, which addresses difference among women (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004:4), and challenges the hegemony of white, western feminist experience (Haraway 1988; Mohanty 1988; Hartsock 1996) emerged as the theory and methodology of choice for my thesis work. Collins (1991) enunciates four necessary tenets of alternative epistemologies which resonate with my own politics and interventions during the past few decades. First, these epistemologies have to be built upon lived experiences, beginning with “connected knowers” rather than from objectified notions. Second, they use dialogue rather than adversarial debate, in which the author is central to and is present in the text. Third, they are built around the ethics of caring, encompassing empathy and compassion, whereby the binary of intellect and emotion is challenged. Fourth, they require personal accountability because the assessment of knowledge cannot be separated from the assessment of an individual’s character, values and ethics. These tenets entail personal responsibility of the researcher towards the subjects and the issues taken up for research.

Chapter 3 also outlines the research methods: qualitative and participatory, mainly interviews and focus group discussions with people, as far as possible in their own
settings⁴ to understand as many different viewpoints as possible (Hymes 1964). The logic of selecting the study area; identification of respondents for the focus group discussions and in-depth life histories; as well as details about field-work are presented in Chapter 3. Lastly, Chapter 3 details the ethical considerations and dilemmas faced by me before, during and after information gathering. Feminist consciousness cannot be separated from the challenges one faces during field-work; during analysis of information; or during the writing of the thesis. One has to deal with the power dynamics between the researcher and respondents, and between respondents and their ‘guardians’. Power, as it affects research methodology and the frailty of the notion of ‘reality’ have been presented here, as well.

Chapter 4, titled “The Structures of Patriarchal Power,” the first of the three field-work based chapters, draws upon twenty focus group discussions (FGDs) with 28 participants from a rural block of Pune district. It outlines the area in which FGDs were held, in terms of economic, demographic and other salient features. The chapter elaborates caste and patriarchal power and honour within the village setting. It identifies the ‘upper’ and ‘lower’⁵ divide within the village, and maps out gendered and caste-based spaces (or lack of, thereof). It highlights the ‘appropriate’ daily norms of behaviour that women from all categories, as well as men from subordinated groups are expected to follow. Caste honour, as is evident in almost every act ranging from wedding processions to funerals sets the boundaries of human behaviour; any transgression is disapproved and penalised. The geo-politics of the village and the patriarchal public-private divide have been discussed here. Norms related to honour are explored through proverbs, idiom and swear-words.

Chapter 4 lists local nomenclature for honour and power, focusing on which words are used for which group of people, and whether that depends on the individual’s placement on the gender-caste matrix. It identifies dozens of words for each concept, drawing upon Stewart’s classification. Further, it identifies daily codes of honour imbibed since childhood and tries to understand how hierarchy is reinforced in terms of gender and caste. It argues that patriarchal controls over women are normalised through the concept of honour and therefore honour can be considered as structural.

⁴ This was not possible for respondents living in remand homes or prison
⁵ varche aani khalche
violence. Thereafter Chapter 4 studies the intersections of caste, gender, sexuality and patriarchal honour; elaborating upon how they intersect as dyads as well as in the form of interlocking systems of oppression. The repercussions of honour with respect to transgressions from endogamous arranged marriage, ascetic widowhood, and the intersection of caste, sexuality and ‘love marriages’ are presented in this chapter. The gender-caste matrix of power and the control over women from blood-kinship to preserve caste and honour-group boundaries are elaborated upon. Chapter 4 also identifies loopholes in the concept of honour, the reasons why women stay within the matrix, and what happens when they collectivise for their rights and challenge customary notions of honour in the process.

Chapter 5, namely “Practices of Patriarchal Honour,” is based on in-depth conversations with respondents. It complicates the gender-power matrix by identifying leaky boundaries between ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ categories and by highlighting the shifting constellations of power among the dominators. It draws attention to the internal differences among women (Mohanty 1988; Rege 1998). Intersections of class, caste, gender, race, sexuality, heteronormativity, disability, age, position within family, occupation, wealth, rank, state authority, incarceration and occupation are studied to show how multiple identities operate alongside each other to create a confounding web of domination and subordination.

Chapter 5 draws from life-stories to highlight the intersection between family honour, gender and sexuality. It shows how young men are conditioned to feel ‘burdened’ to avenge family honour. Thereafter Chapter 5 deals with public patriarchies and moral panics around sexuality. It shows how the police as well as self-appointed moral police impose ‘appropriate’ behaviour upon people, mindless of the lived experiences of those they control and humiliate. The lives of women within walled institutions and the honour of those prisons tell us about the limited options in women’s lives, but also that women negotiate those spaces for their dignity and rights.

The intersection of patriarchy with gender, sexuality and livelihoods is explored in Chapter 5 as well. It exposes the tyranny of gender binaries and what it means to be a ‘man’ or ‘woman’ within patriarchy. It highlights how caste-based livelihoods
intersect with family economics and women’s sexuality; their interface with the laws of the modern State is also discussed. Further, the intersection of patriarchy with religion, culture and nationalism are explored through conversations with two men from religious right-wing groups. It shows that the ahistorical representation of religion and cultural nationalism by these men is not the prerogative of avowed members of conservative groups, but that it has mass appeal, especially for people (including women) from the top of the power matrix, as evident through another case-study.

Chapter 5 then shows how patriarchal honour and power infiltrate into unlikely spaces such as among sex-workers, devadasis, kotis, hijras and mainstream women. It reveals the interlocking systems of oppression and the matrix of domination by drawing attention to the effect of diverse combinations of intersections. Finally it points out the loopholes in the practices of patriarchal honour, especially where financial transactions are concerned.

Chapter 6, namely “Resistance to Patriarchal Honour,” is the last of the three field-work based chapters. It tries to understand how those who encounter domination find ways to resist, in spite of the suffocating presence of structures of patriarchal honour. It grapples with how subordinated women resist through transgressions, negotiations, coping, cheating or outright rebellion (Scott 1990). It asks whether resistance in one area automatically results in rebellion in another, and whether it creates the possibility of change in other areas of life. It contextualises people’s acts within their life-setting, and seeks to understand how the same act acquires a different meaning in the lives and circumstances of differently placed people.

Chapter 6 draws from the experiences of people from the bottom of the power pyramid. It not only reiterates what has already emerged out of feminist enquiries and interventions, namely that women are not silent victims (Geetha 2007:2), but also shows how they use the very systems that had worked against them in moments of distress. This chapter examines agency ranging from the individual to collective.

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6 The devadasi system is a form of temple prostitution linked to the Hindu religion.
7 Koti is a self-identifying label for males who may feminise their behaviours.
8 Hijras may be castrated or non-castrated men who live in communities consisting of an intricate genealogy of gurus and chelas (mentors and novices).
It understands the informal and formal alliances that women make to challenge domination. It documents the increasing resistance by women against their subjugation when they access or participate in a women’s collective. It reiterates that the presence of a progressive women’s organisation has positive bearing on the ways in which patriarchal power is challenged.

This chapter warns against judging acts of people from the ‘outside’, because the forms of people’s resistance are sometimes unimaginable to those who don’t share the lived realities of marginalised or subordinated groups. In spite of internal contradictions and tensions, people find ways to demand honour for themselves and their loved ones. It illustrates how women from the bottom of the pyramid are better able to subvert hegemonic masculinities, and critique sexual duplicities within patriarchal marriage and the heteronormative family. Chapter 6 documents the ongoing struggle of women and children within violent and abusive families, thus interrogating the myth of the safe home. It also interrogates gender binaries and hegemonic masculinity, and shows that androgynous and non-violent masculinities are possible if we learn from groups that have been excluded on the basis of gender identity. Finally it reiterates that subordinated women, through their lived realities can show us the way towards constructing an honour that is intrinsic, and a power that is collective and answerable.

This thesis uses people’s lived realities to add to extant knowledge on honour not from the point of view of the dominator but also from those who face domination. It shows why we need to recognise difference among unequally placed women in order to understand the specific way in which power, domination and gender politics operate. Life-experiences of respondents highlight that while temporary ‘safe spaces’ which exclusively provide the opportunity to subordinated women to organise may be essential during the first step of empowerment (Collins 2000:101); yet, this identity politics needs to move from mere recognition to a struggle for redistribution of power and towards egalitarianism (Fraser 2000). It emphasises that our struggles should necessarily include issues of diverse people who are different from us, so that we can challenge the intersecting powers of patriarchy. It also shows how a feminist power and honour is possible through collectivisation.