Chapter 3
METHODOLOGY

The journey of this thesis spans from the personal to the political. It ranges from acknowledging feminist epistemology to raising new questions, from subjective and objective engagement with the issue and respondents (prior to, through and after the thesis), to being challenged by the ways in which women engage with the notion of patriarchal honour. A feminist analysis of multiple patriarchies as they operate in the lives of differently placed women is the main focus of this enquiry; equally important is the attempt to enrich feminist activism by listening to the ways in which women abide by or challenge patriarchies and caste\(^1\) structures. This is not a comparative study by any means, nor is it representative of any section of women. What it hopes to reveal is the intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) of women's experience, and that structures and agents affect each other, even as they reconstitute themselves all the while.

For an enquiry of this kind, and also because of my personal politics, it was imperative that the most appropriate methodology would be feminist, and that the research methods would be of a qualitative nature. Feminist methodologies, located within the 'postpositivist' and interpretive paradigms of qualitative enquiries, use critical or standpoint theories (see Chapter 2); they derive knowledge from lived experiences, essays, stories and experimental writing, and are grounded in the understanding of race, class, gender, reflexivity, praxis and emotion (see Denzin et al., 2001: Table 2.1: 34). Feminist critical theory has been the methodology of choice for this thesis because it denies the split between epistemology and politics (Tedlock 2001:174).

Feminist, ethnic, Marxist, and cultural studies and queer theory models privilege a materialist-realist ontology; that is, the real world makes a material difference in terms of race, class, and gender. Subjective epistemologies and naturalistic methodologies (usually ethnographies) are also employed. Empirical materials

\(^1\) Andre Beteille, describes caste as a small and named group of persons characterised by endogamy, hereditary membership and a specific style of life which sometimes includes a pursuit by tradition of a particular occupation and is usually associated with more or less distinct status in a hierarchical system, based on concepts of purity and pollution. (1965:57)
and theoretical arguments are evaluated in terms of their emancipatory implications (Denzin et al., ibid:35).

At the outset it is essential to put out my own standpoint which is sure to have influenced field-work and reflections upon it. My belief that individual experiences can offer insight into theorising about broader political meanings has shaped the way in which information has been collected, analysed and presented. The dilemma of centre-staging women’s lived realities, especially those of subordinated women (Collins 1991), yet critically interrogating the same (Krishnaraj 2006) as part of transformative feminist methodology has not been a easy one. Also, as a socialist feminist who is concerned not only with relations of production but with relations of reproduction, such as gendered roles and expectations, biological reproduction, housework, sexuality or culture, it is inevitable that women’s experiences, as shared with me would be interpreted from this standpoint by me.

Feminist methodology includes the readiness to be challenged about one’s own world-views, including those about prevalent gender relations. This includes being aware of power relations that impact the lives of the respondents as well as the researcher, and of the power that permeates various levels of the research study. It is also about the commitment to create progressive social change. Not only is feminist analysis subject to self-reflection, revision and to being challenged (even by other feminist positions), but one is also aware that there is no ‘one’ uniform feminist methodology, just as there is no ‘one’ uniform patriarchal practice. Krishnaraj advises us to give up universal assumptions, to give up the notion that there is only one form of patriarchy; she also argues against assuming that “patriarchy is impermeable – negotiation, bargaining, communication dampens its severity; in other words, we must concede women’s agency” (Krishnaraj 2006:3). Feminist research, guided by feminist theory, is not just simply about giving voice to women's world-views but also about questioning dominant ways of thinking, analysing and challenging notions that portray women as passive, emotional and by implication, incapable of reasoning and agency. In fact, a reflexive research process allows the researcher an exhilarating transformative possibility, not by merely ‘adding’ a

\[\text{(See Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion on power by feminist scholars)}\]
subordinated voice to her work but by "sometimes losing and sometimes revisioning" her own voice (Rege 2006).

Learning from Feminist Epistemology

Collins (1991) argues that domination operates by seducing, pressurising or forcing African-American women and members of subordinate groups to replace individual and cultural ways of knowing with the dominant group’s specialized thought” [whereas empowerment] “involves rejecting the dimensions of knowledge, whether personal, cultural or institutional, that perpetuate objectification and dehumanization” (ibid:227-228).

She elucidates “An Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology” through which (in the case of Black women) the hegemony of white masculinist knowledge as well as basic epistemological assumptions and validation methods can be challenged. Collins argues in favour of a methodology that necessarily includes four tenets of alternative epistemologies which

(1) are built upon lived experience and not merely upon an objectified position; thus they begin with “connected knowers” where subjects are not turned into objects of study;

(2) use dialogue rather than adversarial debate where the author is central to and present in the text, where the story is told and preserved in narrative form and not “torn apart in analysis,”

(3) are built around the ethics of caring whereby the binary break between intellect and emotion is challenged and rather than believing that researchers can be value-free, all knowledge is considered to be intrinsically value-laden and needs to be tested by the presence of empathy and compassion; and

(4) require personal accountability because knowledge is built upon lived experience; thus the assessment of that knowledge is simultaneously an assessment of an individual’s character, values and ethics. This belief in turn entails personal responsibility (Collins 1991:258).

This thesis endorses the belief that the personal and public accountability of the researcher (Burawoy 2003) points towards bridging the gap between knowledge, methodology, intervention and empowerment. Not only are ethical considerations of
primacy whereby participants should be provided with every opportunity to refuse or terminate the interview, but the researcher's relationship with respondents should be intrinsic, not instrumentalist, and not necessarily terminated upon completion of field work if respondents feel the need to continue the acquaintance.

Feminist scholarship is built on the premise of challenging hierarchical modes of creating and distributing knowledge (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004) and because it recognises and validates women's personal lives (Burawoy 2002). Feminists therefore employ

a variety of strategies for creating knowledge about women and their social worlds which often lies hidden from mainstream society. A feminist approach to knowledge building recognises the essential importance of examining women's experience. It often takes a critical stance toward traditional knowledge-building claims that argue for "universal truths." Research conducted within a feminist framework is attentive to issues of difference, the questioning of social power, resistance to scientific oppression, and a commitment to political activism and social justice (Hesse-Biber et al., ibid:3).

Feminist epistemology has severely critiqued positivism which encompasses one objective logic of science to which all intellectual activity within this stream must conform. Adding women's experiences and voices has allowed for the questioning of the prevalent belief that "what was true for men was more or less true for women," and to point out how the androcentric biases within sciences and social sciences had caused women and their experiences to be left out. Within feminist research, new research questions to access 'subjugated knowledges' (Foucault 1980) began to be asked.³ Dualism was interrogated to unravel dominant relations of power, and question the subject-object split whereby the hierarchy between the 'knowing' researcher and the 'othered' research subject reproduced the patriarchal model and resulted in the "scientific suppression" of all who didn't resemble the researcher (Hesse-Biber et al., ibid:12). Objectivity and subjectivity were understood as dialectic, and the nature of knowledge and truth was understood as being "partial, situated, subjective, power imbued, and relational" (ibid). It was also recognised that

³ See Guru 2002 for a similar critique of non-egalitarian, external knowledge about subordinated castes in India
Feminist objectivity combines the goal of conventional objectivity - to conduct research completely free of social influence or personal beliefs - with the reality that no one can achieve this goal. All research occurs within a society. The society's beliefs, ideologies, traditions, structure etc., all impact the research in multiple ways. (Hesse-Biber ibid:12-13)

Within feminist epistemology, reflexive research projects that are attentive to the complexities of power relations within society and within the research process help to create larger amounts of contextualised knowledge. "Feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges" (Haraway 1998). Standpoint theory is often used in feminist research because studies that focus on the top of the power pyramid or on the groups at the 'centre' run the risk of reproducing the hierarchical schemes of knowledge. Focusing on the 'margins' in fact adds to knowledge, not only about hitherto hidden aspects of the experiences of the marginalised, but also provides for a dual perspective⁴ and critical view of the lives of those at the 'centre'. Yet, feminists have questioned standpoint theory where it subsumes difference among women to question the hegemony of white feminist experience and standpoint (Mohanty 1988), asking instead for an "intersectional" approach (Crenshaw 1991) that takes into account the ways in which race, class and gender shape women's experiences, viewpoints and perceptions. Further they have demonstrated that these "interlocking systems of oppression" create a complex web of power relations and a "matrix of domination" (Collins 1991).

Being differently located, the experience of women in different social locations cannot be validated by a single feminist methodology (Krishnaraj 2010). Essentialising women is problematic for academic research when multiple identities impact on each other; one then has to think of feminisms in the plural (ibid). A "multi-dimensional standpoint" understands the ways in which women's political activism operates within communities that are structured politically, and where their members promote or inhibit political activism (Naples 1999). This understanding uncovers the weaknesses of systems of oppression so that the "possibility of resistance - a central goal of feminist praxis" (Naples ibid:48) can be realised. An

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⁴ For example, women, who have been dominated by men, have a 'dual perspective,' whereby "they know the workings of not only the female world, but also much of the male world. Problems that women face on a daily basis are often invisible to, or ignored by, the male eye" (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004:16)
intersectional attempt such as this, which emphasises the standpoint as well as the political activism of the marginalised, would necessarily have to draw not from one, but from many closely related feminisms. Besides, the earlier feminist research that significantly contributed towards exposing sexism within their disciplines now needs to grow further by recognising differences among women in terms of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality and nationality (Hesse-Biber et al., ibid: 4).

Over the past three decades feminist research has “contributed to the development of many key methodological ideas, for example standpoint, positionality and reflexivity, while also foregrounding critical enquiries into gender, gender relations and society” (Burns and Walker, 2005). Feminist research is thus always more than a matter of method, and raises philosophical issues of ontology and epistemology” (ibid). Feminist research is concerned with developing equitable professional and personal practices and thus is critical, political and praxis-oriented (Weiner 1994). Feminist methodologies commit themselves to drawing attention to the “deep and irreducible connections between knowledge and power (privilege), and to making problematic gender in society and social institutions in order to develop theories that advance practices of gender justice” (Burns et al., ibid:66). Feminist scholars have argued that gender enters into and constitutes all other relations (Rege 2003); this would necessarily include an understanding of other axes of oppression and marginalisation, as differently placed women would have diverse experiences and standpoints.

Feminist Ethnography

Visweswaran argues that the “historical production of ethnography” has been affected due to changing conceptions of gender (Visweswaran 1997). She defines feminist ethnography as one “that foregrounds the questions of social inequality vis-à-vis the lives of men, women, and children.” In contrast to the life histories / autobiographies of women written in the early 20th century “that sought to make the narrator transparent or absent from the text” (ibid:614), recent feminist ethnography has affirmed that “the people who are being studied should be allowed to speak for themselves wherever possible” (Karen McCarthy Brown 1991, quoted in Visweswaran ibid:614). In spite of the fact that the term “giving voice” to subjects
has been critiqued, “there is still a role for the ethnographer-writer in giving voice, as best as she can, to those who have been silenced…” (Nancy Scheper-Hughes 1992, quoted in Visweswaran ibid:614).

Methodological Issues

a) Acknowledging and Addressing Issues of Power

Since gender based inequality and the dynamics of patriarchal power have been the concerns of feminist theory, subtle inequalities such as gender division of labour and gender norms⁵ and expectations have also been focused upon along with studying the direct formal power by which men control women (Personal Narratives⁶ Group, 1989). Women’s personal narratives help analyse how androcentric hegemony operates by maintaining inequality and domination through ideological as well as material means. They also record a variety of women’s responses; in fact some can be read as “counter-narratives because women don’t always behave or think in accordance to patriarchal expectations.

Personal narratives of nondominant social groups (women in general, racially or ethnically oppressed people, lesbians) are often partially effective sources of counterhegemonic insight because they expose the viewpoint embedded in dominant ideology as particularist rather than universal, and because they reveal the reality of a life that defies or contradicts the rules. Women’s personal narratives can thus often reveal the rules of male domination even as they record rebellion against them (Personal Narratives Group, 1989 ibid: 7)

b) Questioning Dualistic Binaries

Plumwood argues that “dualism is more than a relation of dichotomy, difference, or non-identity, and more than a simple hierarchal relationship.” Hierarchies, according to her set into motion an inferiorised view is projected upon the dominated group, so

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⁵ Norms are perceptions of what actions will lead others to validate an identity (rather than personal beliefs), the people are thought to conform to norms in order to demonstrate to themselves and others that they are a particular kind of person (Cancian 1975). In sociology a norm is a shared expectation of behaviour that connotes what is considered culturally desirable and appropriate. Norms are similar to rules and regulations in being prescriptive, although they lack the formal status of rules. Actual behaviour may differ from what is considered normative and, if judged by existing norms, may be deemed deviant (Marshall 2004)

⁶ Narratives can be conceived as the telling (in whatever medium, though especially language) of a series of temporal events so that a meaningful sequence is portrayed- the story or plot of the narrative. (Kerby 1991:39). Since the focus of this thesis is not on language and representation but on patriarchal and related structures of domination, I have chosen not to use the term ‘narrative’, instead using life-history or in-depth interview
that the latter collude in this low self-evaluation, "honouring the values of the centre, which forms the dominant social values." This makes "equality and mutuality literally unthinkable (Plumwood 1993:47, quoted in Hughes 2002:16-17). Her identification of five features as characteristic of dualism have been useful to understand the marginalisation of subordinated individuals and groups that this thesis focuses on. Plumwood (ibid 17-18) elaborates these characteristic as follows:

**Backgrounding** (denial), wherein "the relations of domination give rise to certain conflicts as those who dominate seek to deny their dependence and reliance on those they dominate." This also includes 'the making of the depended upon inessential and denying the other's contribution.' **Radical exclusion** (hyerseparation) is an essential feature of dualism because the superior need to ensure "that their distinctiveness is perceived to be more than mere difference," wherein any identification or sympathy between members of the dominating class and the dominated is eliminated, and widely differing privileges and fates are explained on the basis of separate 'natures'.

**Incorporation** (relational definition), the third feature, "sets a hierarchy among the meanings of a dualistically conceive pair, treating one of them as 'upperside' or primary and where the 'underside' is defined as a negativity in relation to the upperside." The fourth feature, **Instrumentalism** (objectification) "is the process whereby those on the lower or inferior side of the duality have to put their interests aside in favour of the dominant" and are seen as the instruments of the master, objectified in a way that its ends are defined in terms of the master's ends.

**Homogenization** (stereotyping) is Plumwood's fifth feature, whereby "hierarchies are maintained because they disregard any differences amongst the inferiorised class. Such a view would suggest, for example, that all women are the same." This theorisation helps address methodological issues in studying how honour and power work together within heteronormative and casteist patriarchy.

This thesis also attempts to question given dualistic binaries; whether of male-female, man-woman, public-private, centre-margin, passive-agent, victim-perpetrator, acceptable-unacceptable and so on, based upon the understanding that the dialectic relationship between the components of the binary points towards it own instability and infallibility. The first term of the binary opposition can never be completely stable or secure, since it is dependent on that which is excluded
(Finlayson, 1999:64 quoted in Hughes, 2002:15); for example, as understandings of male change, so do those of female and vice versa (Hughes 2002).

  c) Acknowledging Difference

There is still no clear agreement within feminist theory about ‘difference’ (Hughes, 2002:57). Concerns related to over-simplified, linear views about ‘difference’ and that the “variety of perspectives that were existent at varied points in history” were denied, have been perceived and raised by feminist scholars (Bacchi 1990, quoted in Hughes 2002: 57). Evans (quoted in Hughes ibid:58), suggests three schools of difference, namely: valuing woman’s difference from man (the ‘weak’ and the ‘strong’ versions of cultural feminism); differences between groups of women (identity politics); and, difference or the difference within (postmodernism and poststructuralism).

  Acknowledging that difference - race, class, gender and sexuality - is socially constructed and connected is only the first step in successfully working with difference in a meaningful way in feminist research. What is perhaps most important in the process of asking “which women?” and successfully studying across difference is the recognition that there are multiple truths and that there is more than one social reality. Reality is complex and not simply one dimensional as Positivism with its emphasis on objectivity would have us believe. A researcher must acknowledge that she is not the essential woman and that other realities and truths she may discover are just as valid and valuable as her personal ones (Hesse-Biber and Yaiser 2004:115).

  The move away from essentialist and universalist ideals whereby the notion of a unified subjectivity of womanhood is called into question (Felski quoted in Hughes ibid:58) has generated a fear about the ‘demise of feminism’, because it is feared that the deconstruction of womanhood could leave feminism without a unifying identity: if ‘woman’ ceases to exist, who are we fighting for? (Hughes 2002:58). I would argue against this fragmentation, and would instead argue in favour of relating with other movements such as Dalit consciousness, sexuality, minority and disability rights and contextualising women’s experiences within caste and class politics in India in order to confront patriarchal power, along with a resistance to other systems of subordination.
Qualitative Research Methods

The term qualitative implies an emphasis on examination of the processes and meanings, but not measured in terms of quantity, amount, or frequency (Labuschagne, 2003). Typically, qualitative methods produce a lot of detailed data about a small number of cases and provide a depth of detail through direct quotation, precise description of situations and close observation. Qualitative research seeks to understand (as completely as possible) the ‘phenomena’ under study (Winget 2005). One of the most ‘common flavours’ of qualitative research is ethnography that uses anthropological methods to seek and understand human behavior or verbal interactions within its own social setting (Hymes 1964). It tries to understand from as many different viewpoints as possible, the ways people interact with each other within their environment (Hymes ibid). Ethnographic research has qualitative goals but interacts with research subjects in their own setting to come to that understanding (Winget ibid:16).

The strength of qualitative research lies in its attempts to depict the fullness of experience in a meaningful and comprehensive way. Morse (1994) summarises the cognitive processes involved in qualitative research; he believes that regardless of the specific approach, qualitative research involves: comprehending the phenomenon under study; synthesising a representation of the phenomenon, which accounts for linkages and relationships within its pieces; theorising the how and why these relationships appear the way they do; and recontextualising the new knowledge (Morse 1994). Qualitative research then, is most appropriate for those projects where phenomena remain unexplained, where the nature of the research is uncommon or broad and where previous theories do not exist or are incomplete (Patton 2002). Qualitative methods for data collection typically include participant observation, open-ended or semi-structured interviews and qualitative content analysis of documents.

The process of information collection and analysis was explained to every respondent and focus group participant in the field work. Similarly, I tried to remain
as open to reflexivity\(^7\)\(^8\) and to 'fair dealing'\(^9\) as possible to prevent my biases and relative power from influencing the information gathering, and to ensure that claims of representing the whole truth were not made. This approach does not argue in favour of a relativist position, nor does it say that locationality is sacrosanct; but that it is essential for one to be able to comprehend conflicting experiences without allowing pre-conceived notions interfere in the research.

**Study area and identification of respondents**

The geographical area of the field work was limited to Maharashtra State and within that to three district areas, namely Pune, Sangli and Mumbai city. All the focus group participants (see Chapter 4) were staff members of MASUM. The in-depth interview respondents (see Chapters 5 and 6) were based in the above locales at the time of the interview even though they weren't necessarily permanent residents of the same (for example, current remand / rescue home inmates; sex-workers who had migrated or been trafficked from elsewhere). The reason for selecting these three geographical areas was related to my easy access to people who would not mind speaking to me about difficult issues in their lives. Access to people in brothels, remand homes and prisons, or to sex-workers and transgender people was not an easy task. I had to have strong contacts within NGOS, mass-based organisations and within bureaucratic circles to get permissions to enter state run institutions. The fact that I had some credibility in Pune, Sangli and Mumbai facilitated the rapport. It was entirely due to friends from NGOs, people's organisations and government offices that I was able to reach my respondents - including men from religious right-wing groups; in spite of my well-known anti-fundamentalism profile. As it turned out,

\(^7\) Reflexivity is 'the ways in which our portrayals of social realities simultaneously describe and constitute those realities' (Miller 1997; Moi 1998 in Hughes 2002:167)

\(^8\) "Reflexivity refers to being sensitive to the ways in which the researcher and the research process have shaped the research project, the data, and the generated conclusions. Prior assumptions and researcher experience can significantly affect research outcomes; this is particularly relevant for qualitative research, which attempts to leverage researcher involvement for more comprehensive understanding. For the purpose of credibility, in all research studies, both qualitative and quantitative, should account for the researcher's personal and intellectual biases at the outset of the research project. Topics for inclusion in this account include: the effects of the researcher's personal characteristics (like age, sex, social class and professional status) on the data collected, and the "distance" between researcher and participant" (Winget 2005:16)

\(^9\) 'Fair dealing is a technique that ensures that the research design incorporates a wide range of different perspectives so the viewpoint of any one group isn't ever presented as representative of "the truth" of any situation' (Winget 2005:16).
once the flow of interviews started, more and more respondents were accessible as well as ready to talk to me. Sometimes I would go for one interview and find that one more 'unscheduled' person was also eager to talk. Thus while I began with the idea of 20-25 narratives, the number went up to 32. I decided to stop there in spite of the fact that another four to five people still wanted to meet up and talk about their lives.

The search for in-depth interview respondents began after most of the focus group discussions\(^{10}\) (FGDs) with MASUM's rural staff were complete. The focus groups mapped the normative and the extensive, giving some idea of how to explore honour as a cultural code in greater detail through in-depth interviews. The facts that caste and gender relations were not immutable, or that the notion of honour was not sacrosanct had began to surface through the FGDs, pointing towards the need to understand people's agency, negotiation, manipulation, collaboration, transgression and rebellion in different social locations. They vindicated my belief that sexuality, caste, multiple experiences of women and women-like people in terms of gender (its construction, learning, unlearning, fluidity, roles, identities and expectations) and violence (structural, covert and overt) had to be addressed through an intersectional approach.

The individual selection of most in-depth respondents was based on their diverse (and often painful) life-experiences related to gender roles, expectations, identity, transgression, sexuality as well as the ensuing stigma, violence, acceptance and agency. It helped to understand the ways in which women coped with expectations related to gender, and what ensued when they weren't able to fulfill those, such as for example, giving birth to mentally challenged daughters or killing a husband in self-defense after years of experiencing domestic violence. It identified how multiple patriarchies and hegemonic masculinities operated in differently placed people's lives, such as *hijras* or transgender people. Did the concept of normative exist only among the *norm'al* or also among those who had transgressed, such as sex-workers,

\(^{10}\) Focus group discussions are a tool of qualitative research in the social sciences, typically consisting of a homogenous group of between 6-12 people. The same group may meet numerous times (as in the field work of this thesis) to discuss a particular theme or issue of interest. While this method combines a guided discussion format facilitated by the researcher, it also includes participant observation. Personal or individual oriented questions are avoided; normative and general enquiries are made and replies recorded without negating any one person's point of view and without passing value judgement.
or someone who had committed a murder? How did the experiences and coping mechanisms of someone who actively wanted to become a sex-worker or brothel-keeper differ from another who was sold into a brothel as a baby? How did the notion of honour operate among men and women from different caste groups? Thus, the reasons for focusing on 'marginalised' or subordinated individuals were multifold: they inform us about the normative not in simplistic but in complex ways. Simultaneously, it was equally important to not forget to listen to the 'normative' voices such as those of powerful men, married women, or someone who had committed a murder to 'protect' family honour. These voices were useful to understand how ideologies were propagated, how discursive practices operated on a day to day basis and how norms and rules were set, applied and enforced.

The idea was to listen to more experiences from the 'margins' (however fluid and transient the margins may be) in order to understand the fallibility of structures due to transgression or rebellion. Gathering some insight about the 'centres' (shifting and adapting as they are) was important to understand the pull of centripetal forces of structures upon those that wished to escape the orbit of conventional behaviour. Multiple centres, multiple margins and the messy interfaces in-between had to be visited, not so much to seek answers but to destabilise conventional and easily resorted to answers.

**Field Work**

*Field studies and armchair* studies related to honour have mainly been descriptive and generalised, tending “to present their conclusions without giving any very clear idea of the evidence from which they were derived. Verbatim quotations from the subjects, in the subjects' own language, are few” (Stewart 2008:3). The *lexical approach* has studied “the use of one or more words in the language of the people whose notions of honor are being investigated” whereas the *conceptual approach* has started from some general idea of what honour is, and then examined “its particular features in a certain society” (ibid:5). This thesis attempts to close the binaries between the ‘lexical’ and ‘conceptual’ approach by combining them in order to understand the concept and practices of honour.
The field work was carried over a period of seven months. The sources of primary information were:

(i) Twenty FGDs with MASUM’s rural staff. Twenty three women and five men from the paralegal, health, economic empowerment and political participation programmes participated in the FGDs.
(ii) 32 life-histories\textsuperscript{11} through in-depth interviews of women and some men, differently located in gender and power hierarchies
(iv) Conversations with key informants (such as the prisons officials or staff of remand homes)
(v) Observation at the above places
(vi) Proverbs, anecdotes and slang words related to caste/gender/sexuality from MASUM’s area of work

\textit{a) Conducting Focus Group Discussions:}

In order to 'map the terrain' of patriarchal honour and power in women's lives, focus group discussions were held with MASUM’s rural staff over a period of three months (November 2008-January 2009). A rural area was selected for the following reasons:

1) it was easy to find the 'normative' in a rural community\textsuperscript{12} where I could segregate focus groups easily on the basis of dominant and subordinated castes which might have been difficult in urban areas.

2) my personal knowledge about the area in terms of caste and gender relationships for more than two decades

\textsuperscript{11} This is "an ideographic approach which provides an intensive account of a life, usually gathered through unstructured interviewing" (Oxford Dictionary of Sociology 2004). It may help explore the subjective dimensions of life, trace the historical connections between life and social structure and provide access to ambiguity, flux and social change. For this reason the method is frequently used to explore new fields of enquiry (ibid: 369-370). I have used the traditional approach to life-history which aims to provide an account of someone's life in order to throw light on the social processes.

\textsuperscript{12} "The concept of community concerns a particularly constituted set of social relationships based on something which the participants have in common-usually a common sense of identity. It is frequently used to denote a wide ranging relationship of solidarity over a rather undefined area of life and interests." (Oxford Dictionary of Sociology 2004:97). Robert Refield (1960:4) identified four key qualities in community: smallness of social scale; a homogeneity of activities and states of minds of members; a self-sufficiency across a broad range of needs and through time and a consciousness of distinctiveness (ibid).
3) access and mutual trust with the FGD participants.

4) the MASUM women were the ‘outsiders within’ caste/family/ MASUM. It was easier to gain dual perspectives\(^\text{13}\) from them, and from dual standpoints.

5) the FGD participants are my colleagues in a life-long journey; thus they had the capacity to understand my topic. They also had the sophistication to bring out the best discussions and debates.

Prevalent notions related to honour and power within the family and the village were discussed in these meetings. Five focus groups, each consisting of 4-8 participants were created: four groups exclusively consisting of women were decided on the basis of their experience with health or violence related interventions and their caste status, with those from the dominant (i.e. Maratha) caste in one group and subordinated castes in the others. The fifth group comprised of rural men, also from MASUM's staff. A total of 28 people participated in the five focus groups. Twenty seven participants came from villages of Pune district, whereas one male participant came from a village in Ahmednagar district. Over a period of three months, each group met in Pune city, three to five times, for between 3-4 hours each time, and held discussions based on the guided questionnaires on honour and power (see Annexures 2 and 3 respectively) prepared by me earlier. Some minor modifications or additions were made, based on the flow of conversation or when suggested by the discussants.

An extremely rich texture of norms, codes of conduct, sexual mores,\(^\text{14}\) discursive practices, local terms for honour and power, proverbs, anecdotes, gossip,\(^\text{15}\) humour,

\(^{13}\) Collins (1991) argues that researchers from within can identify oppression as well as agency better, since they have knowledge of both.

\(^{14}\) Mores were considered important because they "refer to moral rules of ways of behaving that most members of a society believe are essential for maintaining standards of decency. Mores are vigorously enforced and transgressions punished by either group disapproval and sanction or, when mores become law, by legal action."

(\text{Oxford Dictionary of Sociology 2004:431})

\(^{15}\) Gossip is extremely important in terms of precipitating crimes in the name of honour. I believe that it also helps define boundaries between honour groups, because "gossip is a culturally determined and sanctioned process, a social fact, with customary rules and important functions. Notably gossip helps maintain group unity, morality and history. For, the essence of gossip is constant (if informal and indirect) communal evaluation and reaffirmation of behaviour by assessment against common, traditional expectations. Furthermore gossip enables groups to control the competing cliques and aspiring individuals of which they are composed; through gossip differences of opinion are fought out behind the scenes (through customary innuendo, ambiguity and conceit) so that outwardly a show of harmony and friendship can be maintained" (Gluckman 1963b:153).
plucky stories and grim realities emerged through these meetings. The ways in which honour and power operate within and outside the framework of caste and gender relations, the rupture between norms and reality, the tensions between tradition and modernity, the diffusion between honour and dishonour, the public and private transcripts, and the coping mechanisms of subordinated individuals and groups were discussed at length. These discussions provided the socio-political backdrop for the exploration of patriarchal honour and power.

Since all the members of the FGDs were MASUM staff, I had to be doubly careful about the power that I hold as the founder and head of the organisation. A detailed ethical procedure was followed (see later in this chapter) and the individual decision to (or not to) participate was taken in the researcher’s (my) absence. To my delight, each one not only wanted to engage in these (what they termed as “exciting”) discussions with me, but they also wanted to be part of my PhD project. Many said that they were motivated to ‘study’ once again - not the formal education that most had to leave mid-way because of poverty, early marriage or lack of physical access to schools, but to read and write about issues that they found important at this stage in their lives. I shall forever remain grateful for the gushing warmth and friendship from my long-term colleagues (many have worked with MASUM for over 15 years) as well as from the younger, more recent ones. In fact, many of the staff members also wanted to be interviewed in-depth for the life-history part in my field-work – I decided upon two of them later on. The discussions were documented manually as well as on the tape recorder (the latter didn’t work out as well, with voices merging when people spoke simultaneously). The data were transcribed and translated from Marathi into English by me personally, with clarifications from the group as and when required.

b) Process of information gathering with respect to life-histories and in-depth interviews:

Collection of life-histories and in-depth interviews from 32 people typically comprised of contacting respondents through interlocutors; getting permission from potential respondents to meet up again; explaining the methodology of field work,
describing informed consent\textsuperscript{16} and respondent rights; interview taking; two-way communication; mutual expression of feelings; mutual learning; asking each respondent what s/he would like me to do for her/him; following up on needs, requests and rights of respondents; and, in some cases, maintaining social contact with respondents after the field work. Life-experiences through interviews were collected over a period of four months (March 2009 to June 2009) from Pune, the twin cities of Sangli / Miraj and Mumbai.

Unlike the guided question list for the focus group discussions, there wasn’t a fixed list of questions for the life-history, except for basic biographical information. This allowed for “emotions to surface, doubts to be expressed, and relationships with subjects to grow,” with information gathering becoming less formal and the concerns of the subjects being as equally important as the research questions (see Charmaz 2003).

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I would start off by telling a potential respondent about what I was exploring. I would put forward my broad scheme of research, as well as my confusions and ignorance. Thereafter I would ask the person whether s/he had also ever grappled with some of the questions that were forming in my mind. I would explain why I had thought that her/his particular voice would add to the knowledge around the issue of patriarchal power and honour: Did s/he have anything to tell me based on her/his life that could shed more light on issues related to honour, gender, sexuality, violence and so on? Most times, I could see the person nod assent even before I had completed my introduction to the topic and before I had reached the informed consent. Only a couple of respondents said that they hadn't fully understood how their experiences could help me, but that they were willing to talk if I thought it was worthwhile to do so. Some said that they felt honoured that they had been selected from the interview; only two asked me what they would gain from the process, to which I replied "Not much, as far as I can see."

I started each interview only after taking detailed informed consent. For all those who were under the control of authorities (remand or rescue homes, for example) or who had been contacted through NGO friends, I had to be doubly sure that they were

\textsuperscript{16} See Annexure 1 for letter used to take informed consent
not agreeing under duress. In the case of incarcerated respondents, I would give them time to refuse, out of the ear-shot of the institutional 'gate-keepers'. I would explain that if they were not comfortable about talking to me I could tell the authorities that, on realising that their interview wasn't of much use to my research, I had terminated the conversation from my end.\footnote{\textit{respondents as well as focus group discussants also held the right to terminate the conversation mid-way}}

Once the respondents were aware of the 'main' reason for which I was interviewing them, I would start with a general question such as "Would you please tell me about your background," leaving it to the respondent to decide where to start from. I noted down some basic personal information at the beginning of each interview. Most names have been changed, except for those that belonged to organisations and who were clear that would like to be quoted (see below for ethical dilemma related to this issue). On an average, each interview took around two hours. Some went on for three or even five hours (for example, with Ritu, the survivor of the 'honour' related assaults), but only at the volition of the respondent. The cue was taken from the body language of the respondent; neither was the respondent cajoled into continuing the conversation, nor was s/he asked to terminate the conversation.

I would ask questions in between only when I found that the respondent had finished talking about a particular topic; if I wanted a clarification; or, if I felt that the information that I had wanted had not come in adequately. Some questions were asked to elicit nuances or opinions. Care was taken that the spontaneous flow of the respondent was not disturbed. In some cases, they began with an event, but most times they were encouraged to start wherever they saw fit to. This allowed for a contextualised understanding of the 'main' reason that they were being interviewed for. In most cases, the respondents wanted to talk at length - in fact many would say "My story is still not over"); "It will take two full nights if I sit down to tell you all about my life"); "Actually I think I've forgotten to give you some details"); "I've never talked about this to anyone before and I didn't know I had so much to tell"); "Now I feel I can talk more freely to others as well" and so on. To my specific question about feeling empowered or disempowered, almost all said that they felt better at the end of the interview in terms of hope and empowerment. People who had been tense in the beginning, smiled and relaxed towards the latter part. The fact that they had so
much to say about themselves would become self-evident to most respondents, with surprise as well as pride lighting up most faces. The two right wing men (one Hindu, the other Muslim), after a few moments of assessing me, decided that I was an eager student and thereafter took pride in educating me about religion, culture and tradition. All the boys in remand homes (held there on charges of rape, sexual assault, attempt to murder or murder - one of them had confessed to committing an 'honour related killing') relaxed after they had convinced themselves that I was not from the law enforcement agencies.

There were surprises and shocks in almost every interview. These 'aha!' and 'oops!' moments enhanced my world-view, and also made me aware of the 'stereotype' of the respondent that I had constructed in my mind before the interview. Every respondent had a unique and sometimes unexpected way of approaching and dealing with the 'main' issue I had outlined for her/him; s/he had experienced unexpected outcomes from that event; and, had concerns that were quite different and more insightful from what I had imagined a priori. However prepared I may have gone to conduct each interview, I came back with mixed feelings: exhilaration, humility, uneasiness, hope, anger, despair, tears, shock, uncertainty, delight, trepidation - yet always grateful, and hopefully a bit wiser.

Total dependence on the tape recorder for my interviews would have been fatal to the research. The situations in which I took the interviews (remand homes or semi-open spaces for example) had so much background noise that the voice of the respondent who sometimes spoke in whispers or through tears was almost always drowned. The notes, almost verbatim (with details of body-language, emotions and silences) were much more accessible. The memories, smells, sights, sounds and emotions of each interview are deeply etched upon my mind and heart. Those will never be erased.

c) Ethical considerations

Ethics cannot be conceived or put to practice without being conscious of power and power relations that govern the respondent's life as well as the process of the field work (see Collins 1991 earlier in this chapter for the basic principles associated with feminist epistemology). Protecting the rights of the respondent (and certainly not
conducting research against their interests) is the duty of the researcher, especially when dealing with subordinated groups (or those under institutional control) and while discussing sensitive issues such as violence, sexuality and rebellions. I strove to follow the strictest ethical guidelines, deriving the latter from my three decades of experience of qualitative enquiry using feminist methodology, and from being part of the first national collective that formulated ethical guidelines for research in the social sciences involving human subjects in India (Jesani et al., 2000). As in every other research project that I have been involved in, I formed an ethics committee to oversee my work. Since field work was based in the work-area of two women’s organisations, namely SANGRAM\(^{18}\) / VAMP\(^{19}\) and MASUM,\(^{20}\) senior members from these groups were invited to be on the committee. Two renowned feminists from Pune city, not connected with the above organisations and who had no conflict of interest with the research work were also invited to join the ethics committee. This five member committee saw and approved of my research design, the guided questionnaire, ethical framework and informed consent procedure before the focus group discussions and the field work began.

My experience with taking detailed informed consent has always been very positive. Respondents listen carefully and ask questions: the more details you tell them about respondent rights, the more they seem to respect you. My conversation related to informed consent was strong enough to turn away anyone who was not really convinced that s/he wanted to talk. The fact that I was researching for my own degree, that it was not going to be of any use the narrator, that there was always an element of risk of inadvertently sharing intimate information did not deter respondents.\(^{21}\) The informed consent process during the FGDs with MASUM’s rural

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\(^{18}\) Sampada Grameen Mahila Sangathan, working on HIV/AIDS and issues of women in prostitution in Maharashtra and Karnataka states

\(^{19}\) Yeshya Anyay Mukti Parishad, the collective of women in prostitution in Southern Maharashtra and Karnataka

\(^{20}\) I also took permission from the board of trustees of MASUM to work on my thesis and from the staff of MASUM to conduct focus group discussions with some of our rural staff. Two of my respondents are MASUM staff too. The fact that they readily agreed to be named has resolved my own dilemma about keeping the content of their interviews ’confidential’.

\(^{21}\) The only exception was related to my conversation with girls in one rescue home: Manasvi, one among four girls from the Bedia tribe who was earlier speaking on behalf of all the others refused to talk and walked away. I had decided not to conduct an interview with any of the girls even though they were eager to talk because the girl’s angry question to me “Can you get us out of this place?" remained unanswered from my end. However in her absence the other girls insisted that I interview them, saying that she didn’t have the right to not let them talk. Later on, Manasvi returned, sat close to me, explained why she had refused and told me that she appreciated my honesty. We chatted for a while as she held my hand and rested her head on my shoulder.
staff also created lively discussions about me following strict ethical guidelines while talking to staff, in spite of being the head of the organisation. They saw this as a lesson to not accept anything unquestioningly just because it came from a senior person in the organisation, or, in conventional terms “because it's come from the top” (varoon aalay mhanun). This discussion also snowballed into older staff members 'inducting' the newer ones into envisioning MASUM as a feminist and democratic structure, and not as a vertical one. I believe that my PhD work strengthened the internal transition process of handing over the community-based work of MASUM to our local rural staff in some measure.

*d) Ethical dilemmas faced*

Interviewing people who were in institutions was the most ethically daunting decision. CEHAT's 22 ethical guidelines give a succinct opinion on interviewing people in custody (Jesani et al., ibid). Excluding them from research studies merely increases invisibility and discrimination; yet tremendous concern needs to be employed so as to not take advantage of their vulnerability. One has to constantly strive to deflect or minimise the power that authorities have over them. Getting past the 'gatekeepers' and listening to the voice of the incarcerated is a tricky job; the researcher has to be cognisant that her conversation could precipitate backlash upon the respondent. Diplomacy has to be employed; especially about the fact that the interview (especially the damming, or 'confessional' bits) will not be shared with the authorities. Most times, a 'listener' may be assigned by the authorities at the beginning of the interview - after a few minutes of listening, s/he will usually leave if the conversation doesn't seem to be of a suspicious nature. One has to be careful while crossing these thresholds and fences, maintaining a relationship with both parties without resorting to insincerity, succumbing to naivety or compromising one's politics. Reconstruction of succinct points related to tricky issues, immediately upon leaving the premises help, so that notes, even if confiscated cannot harm the respondent. Since I had a good relationship with women superintendents of most remand homes, they were cooperative and helpful in identifying potential respondents. I was allowed to interview in the relative absence of authority figures.

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22 Centre for Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes, the research centre of Anusandhan Trust
Interviewing people inside the prison is not allowed; however, the prison authorities (through the goodwill of the Deputy Inspector General of Prisons) granted permission to take addresses (not phone numbers) of released prisoners who had been incarcerated on relevant criminal charges. This act was also fraught by ethical dilemmas: how could one land up at people’s doorsteps and barge into their lives without prior warning? Being a trained social worker, the superintendent of the male prison was empathetic when I asked him this question. He narrated how recently, people who had been released after life imprisonment or after escaping the death sentence had been eager to talk of their experiences to a film maker. Yet, even though I collected names and addresses of men and women who had been released, I couldn’t bring myself to visit them at home, and thus gave up on those potential respondents. The one respondent in my field work who had spent 15 years in prison after killing her violent husband in self-defence was contacted through an organisation that works on prisoners’ rights and rehabilitation. Personal contact was made only after two phone conversations with her (the first phone contact being initiated by her, not me).

Interviewing young people in remand, rescue and observation homes was equally disquieting. Not only was one talking to someone in custody, but also to a traumatised minor separated from family members through design, accident or force of circumstance. Once again, CEHAT’s guidelines proved valuable. Explaining informed consent to the potential respondents (identified by the superintendents for my research) was important - it had to be done simply, yet without dilution of content. I usually explained the research on one day and conducted the interview on another. I spent many days in the remand home, participating in activities (such as the ‘beautician’ course, where some of the girls gave me a pedicure); finding legal or school support for some of the inmates (one of my respondents was a 12 year old sexually abused child); chatting with the staff and superintendents (I had met most of the superintendents in training sessions, where I was the resource person); and, advocating on behalf of inmates (all my respondents had some pending requests to the authorities, most of which I was able to negotiate). During my routine visits, I would not in any way coax anyone to talk to me. Often, the identified respondent would come up to me for the interview and bring along a ‘best friend’ who also
wanted to chat. Having a long and exclusive conversation with a non-threatening outsider was perhaps seen as a privilege. This was true of the observation home for boys in Pune as well.

The experience in an observation home in Mumbai was different though. Having been rescued during raids on liquor bars (as being dancing girls) or on brothels, with parents having been denied their custody, the adolescent girls and young women were understandably bitter and resentful. In this rescue home, I had to meet six girls before I could meet a Bedia\textsuperscript{23} girl. My visit to the Mumbai rescue home was specifically to meet girls from the Bedia or Bachhda tribes, where prostitution or dancing is approved of and even expected from some daughters of the family (Agrawal 2008). Due to ethical considerations I had earlier given up on contacting two Bedia women - a sex-worker\textsuperscript{24} and a housewife\textsuperscript{25} when I realised hesitation on their part for an interview. While it seemed somewhat acceptable to follow-up with a 'mediator', it didn't feel right to do so with a potential respondent. My uneasiness began to surface and so I abandoned the idea of meeting both of them. The refusal of one 'rescued' Bedia girl from a rather sombre rescue home made me almost give up, but once again, supportive social workers led me to another observation home where I was able to talk to a Bedia girl who had been sold by her family as a baby to a brothel-owner.

Interviewing people I knew well also created an ethical dilemma. In the earlier months, not knowing how easy it would be to contact potential respondents, just as a back-up plan I had tentatively spoken to friends whose life-histories I knew would enrich my understanding of patriarchal honour. However, as the overwhelming response from respondents came in, I decided to reduce the number of 'friends' in my

\textsuperscript{23} Three young women refused the 'Bedia' tag or knowledge about the stigmatised caste, saying they were Rajputs. They carry names that the Madhya Pradesh state authorities say are gonor or sub-castes within the Bedia tribe. Agrawal (2011) details how the Bedia community claims upper-caste identity in order to deflect the stigma that mainstream society places upon them.

\textsuperscript{24} Since sex-workers also traffic minor nieces or neighbours from their village to the cities, the sex-worker who had been telephonically 'introduced' to me didn't seem interested to meet, especially when she found out that I was a social activist. "The girls are scared to talk" she told me. She kept inviting me to her brothel in Mumbai, but would not answer the phone when I would ring up to confirm the interview. All I could hear was erotic songs on her mobile ring-tone!

\textsuperscript{25} This young woman had been part of a five day training that I had conducted for Bedia-Bachhda women a couple of years ago. She was now married to a boy from Mumbai. It took me four phone calls to him just to be able to talk to her. Though she was interested, she didn't call me back after our preliminary conversation and so I didn't get back to her.
field work because of the worry that sharing of intimate details might create some uneasiness in our friendship later on. Only one respondent is from my personal friend circle; one is an acquaintance; two are my colleagues within MASUM; and, a few are known to me professionally, namely from SANGRAM / VAMP and AIDWA.\textsuperscript{26} Most respondents were not known to me prior to the field work. The support of friends, colleagues, ex-colleagues and other social contacts has been truly overwhelming. Not only was I able to interview people from every 'category' that I thought was pertinent and possible to contact; I was able to reach out to more respondents than I had ever imagined, in the shortest possible time.

One unexpected ethical dilemma was about compromising on my own politics of visibility / invisibility in terms of 'naming' respondents. People from NGOs or mass based organisations have been named whenever they said so. Two other respondents clearly and repeatedly told me to use their real names, yet I have used pseudonyms for both of them. One was a 23 year old survivor of the honour killings of her husband's family by her brother; I perceived a risk to this young survivor's safety since along with her small daughter, she is still being guarded by an AIDWA activist who later confirmed that she was at continued risk of being stalked by her family. The second respondent\textsuperscript{27} was a mother of a mentally challenged girl. After having taken the interview I heard from the principal and staff of the school for mentally challenged children about her history of paranoia attacks during the past five years. I'm not sure that I would have gone ahead with the interview if I had been told about her mental health status earlier on. The staff assured me that at present she was quite okay or else they would not have suggested that I interviewed her. So I retained her interview for my work but decided not to use her real name.

The decision to withhold names of these two sprightly respondents has kept me uneasy - instead of accepting these women's agency, was I conferring victim status to them? Does that amount to patronising? For years I have believed that respondents should be named if they so choose, because the politics of invisibility for most people in research projects (such as respondents and junior partners in research) results in marginalising the less powerful and in increasing the credibility

\textsuperscript{26} All India Democratic Women's Association, the women's front of the Communist Party of India (Marxist).
\textsuperscript{27} When I had asked if she would like to be named, she had forcefully said "Why not? I'm like this. Let people think what they want. I don't care about people."
and visibility of the few at the top who wield academic and financial power. Yet, in this instance I chose to take the blame of not naming the above two respondents for two reasons (a) while it would be possible to rectify my error of judgement in withholding the real names by identifying them at a later date, the act of naming would have been irreversible, and (b) the safety of the respondents was more important than me accepting a 'blame' - I wasn't at risk of as much hurt through blame as they could be through being identified. Ethical dilemmas as usual are contextualised and have no easy solutions.

Analysis of information collected

Transcription of every focus group discussion and in-depth interview was done manually - listening to tapes and organising verbatim notes of focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and 'observations'. Thereafter the material was translated from Marathi or Hindi into English by me. Wherever it seemed essential to retain Marathi / Hindi / Urdu words or where literal translation was not possible, they have been included in the English text. Care was taken to absorb and maintain the essence of all the interviews. All 'raw' data have been preserved safely.

The material from the interviews was processed using ATLAS.ti., a software used for qualitative data analysis of large bodies of textual, graphical, audio, and video data, especially that which is difficult to analyse using formal statistical approaches (Muhr 2004). However, to be honest, ATLAS.ti served its best purpose only in 'tagging' the rich data into discrete headings; it was more creative to leaf through the interviews or focus group discussions over and over again so that the context in which a particular statement was made could be consulted while analysing the text. Microsoft Excel was used to generate bar-charts based on personal characteristics of respondents.

This thesis did not use triangulation because of the vulnerable physical location of most respondents. The intention of information gathering (through FGDs,

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28 New researchers have been included as co-authors wherever possible in MASUM's publications. Respondents who have participated in focus group discussions and who agree to be named always feature on the inner cover of all of MASUM's flip books.

29 Triangulation compares the results from two or more different methods (i.e., data from interviews and observation), or two or more data sources (interviews with members of different groups) to check for
interviews, conversations or observation) was not as much to “unearth reality” as it was to centre-stage different voices in order to get a glimpse into people’s interface with patriarchal honour and power. In many cases, validation would have been dangerous to respondents who were incarcerated. Wherever public documents (such as charge-sheets or police records) were available, I read them to see if any additional information would be of use for my work. This thesis is not expected to result in immediate, direct intervention; thus validating information was not considered imminent. Though I have always taken information and analysis back to respondents in my research, in this case, taking raw data back to every individual will neither be possible (many of the respondents were transient sojourners in remand homes) nor safe (many are under the control of the State). ‘Findings’ will be shared with participants through their respective organisations.

The field work was carried out with the feminist consciousness that no interview exists in a vacuum, and that it is located in a particular time, space and power-dynamics. Being conscious of the power operating upon the respondents from their locales as well as from that of the researcher, I am grateful to each participant for letting me into her / his life and for sharing whatever they perceived as important, pertinent and possible during the few hours that we spent together. I have no reason to believe that any of them deliberately chose to lie to me, since it was they who decided which events they would like to talk about, not I. The only people who may have ‘adapted’ their conversation with me were the two men from religious right wing organisations – but then, they were sharing their views and not personal lives with me. I regard the conversations that I’ve had with all the participants as transverse sections of reality, where the tiny sample is part of the person but does not represent the full person. It is akin to looking at a photograph or video clip of a person, taken at a particular time and in a particular setting or location. It captures a candid vignette, but nothing more.

consistency in answers and attitudes...getting all sides of “the story,” for example, or understanding all the shades of meaning in the answer to a question (Mays & Pope 2000).

30 Read later in this chapter for my brief interaction with a woman inmate in the women’s prison and my chance meeting with the woman jailor later on.
**Feminist Consciousness and Methodological Challenges**

Below I elaborate upon two examples to illustrate methodological challenges that arise due to the omnipresence of structures and agency in the research process. I believe that these observations are important to methodology (namely ‘how’ to conduct research) and to the issues that Collins (1991) raises in terms of feminist epistemology.

_a) Dispelling the notion of unearthing reality through research_

I met Kaveri in the woman’s prison, or rather in the tiny room of the jailor of the women’s prison in April-May 2009. As part of her rigorous imprisonment, she worked in this office; she was extremely dignified, quiet and efficient. Then in her late 40s or 50s she had been in prison for around 11 years and was serving a life sentence, being charged with the murder of her husband. Though she could instantly spot any file the jailor wanted, she never ventured to do so on her own, instead waiting to be specifically ordered to do so. She gave me eye contact and a smile only when the prison staff wasn’t present in the room. On one such occasion when I asked her why she was in there, she told me the charges after a long silence. “They said I killed my husband.” The husband had been found dead within the house at night, murdered. “We were alone at home when it happened” she told me and held my eyes, daring me to show some reaction. I asked her whom she meant by "they." “People like you and me (tumchya majhya saarkhey)” Kaveri said. "They said I did it, and I'm here." When I asked about what had happened in reality, she gave me long look and counter-questioned "Does reality matter anymore? I'm here, that's reality." Our, whispered, disturbing and furtive conversation ended as soon as one of the staff members entered the room. The only interaction thereafter was when I said 'thank you' to everyone in the room as I was leaving. Though she had her back to me, I could see her nod her head, ever so slightly.

A couple of weeks later, Pushpa (one of my respondents who had recently finished serving 15 years in prison for killing her husband) mentioned that around 50% of the women, especially those on murder charges inside prison are innocent or are the weaker party in the crime and thus get implicated the most.
In February 2010, I met the jailor of the women’s prison at a training session in a
government capacity building institute where I was the resource person (see my
notes on power, below). When I asked her how Kaveri was doing, she shared
Kaveri’s story as the latter had told her. Kaveri and her husband, who was a Deputy
Superintendent of Police (just like most the other participants in my class were that
day) had both been married earlier. Kaveri’s husband used to bring home other
women and sleep with them without any consideration for Kaveri’s feelings. Once,
Kaveri’s niece came over to stay with them. When her husband tried to sexually
assault the girl, Kaveri killed him. Though the 2010 meeting wasn’t strictly part of
my field work, it throws light upon the fact that information collected can never be
‘entirely’ real – it is contextualised within the time and space of field work, the
intimacy and trust with the interviewer and the nature of the questions asked.31

In the light of the conflicting information I got in February 2010, I realised that my
questions to Kaveri were based on the frugal information she had shared with me.
Had we had more time to chat, I would have realised that her flat answer “They said
I killed my husband” could also be interpreted as “They said I killed my husband” –
meaning that after all that he did to me, they said that I killed him? Had I been privy
to more information about Kaveri’s life, the physical act of the killing (if at all what
she confessed to the jailor was true) if juxtaposed against the daily humiliation and
death Kaveri had felt, could have been better understood by me. Accordingly my
line of questions would have been different, further leading to different answers and
questions being elicited. Did Kaveri want to protect me from the truth; was she
worried about scaring me; did she think it was useless telling me something I had no
business meddling into; did she for one moment want someone (especially from
outside the prison system) to not see her as a murderer; was she performing; was she
actually telling me the truth, versus having confessed to the authorities about a
murder that she did not commit (may be her niece did)? How does one know what
the truth(s) is / are? One can only speculate and hope to be challenged and enriched
with the renewed understanding of the ambiguity and complexity of people’s lives,
rather than be frustrated by the same. What I’m trying to emphasise is that people

31 See Porter (2000:xii) for how a “narrative is constructed, how it acts upon us, how we act upon it, how it is
 transmitted, how it changes when the medium or the cultural context changes, and how it is found not just in the
 arts but everywhere in the ordinary course of people’s lives, many times a day.”
will share some portion of the ‘truth’ (not actively telling lies about everything) but that their responses can have different meanings that cannot be understood linearly, accurately and in entirety.

Yet, we have to move on with what we have – a piece of the mosaic, a tentative glimpse into people’s lives and memories, and be grateful for being allowed that privilege by our respondents. It is not for us to try and complete the entire jigsaw puzzle or even claim to know how to do it, based on the small pieces that we hold in our tape recorders or notebooks or memories, but to trust and do justice to that voice of the respondent which s/he felt comfortable sharing with us during the short span of the interview. We can enhance the respondents’ comfort level and earn their trust by following stringent ethical guidelines, by maintaining respect and mutuality, by always telling them the truth, by maintaining confidentiality (especially from those who have control over the respondent) and by not being judgemental about what they dare to share with us. The process of the interview, including being aware of the power dynamics that exist between the interviewer and the respondent are important, not only in order to elicit candid answers, but also as binding upon anyone who claims to conduct feminist research.

\textit{b) Power as it affects the research methodology}

One can re-visit the women’s prison experience once more, also to illustrate the dynamic nature of power. During my field work, in April-May 2009 I had made a few visits to the women’s prison mentioned above. One immediately observes the difference between the offices of the superintendent of the men’s prison and the jailor of the women’s prison. The former has grandeur in terms of size, the coat-of-arms and other impressive objects on the wall, oversized glass-top table, red carpet flooring – in a word, it is awe-inspiring. The women’s prison doesn’t have a woman superintendent; only a woman jailor who is subordinate to the jailor of the men’s prison. The office of the jailor of the women’s prison is barely 100 square feet in size, has a couple of bare wooden tables and chairs, the bigger one being reserved for the woman jailor. The small office is crammed with cupboards and is right opposite the equally small room where women prisoners meet their families from behind bars. The woman jailor shares her office with other staff as well.
It is in this office that I met the woman jailor for the first time. She had just joined this post. My ‘permission’ to meet women prisoners was not being granted because everyone was waiting for the permanent jailor to assume duty. The young woman jailor (probably in her late twenties or early thirties) in starched uniform was rather formidable — stiff, arrogant, addressing everyone (except me) with the singular pronoun “tu” and scolding staff and inmates alike. I was treated with cordiality and respect in both the prisons, possibly due to my acquaintance with the Deputy Inspector General of Prisons whom I meet occasionally as co-faculty in a government training institute.

As mentioned earlier, I met her for the second time in February 2010 at a training programme in the above institute where I was the resource person and she was the trainee participant. She was in simple civilian clothes (salwar-kameez). She didn’t utter a single word in that room full of male Deputy Superintendents of Police (DySPs) during both my sessions with the group. During the tea-break in-between, she came up to me on her own and started speaking about domestic violence faced by women colleagues. She was lucid and progressive; her interventions against violent husbands in the staff quarters had been firm, her support and sensitivity to the survivors astonishingly feminist. She defended Kavcri (the woman prisoner I had briefly interacted with in the jail earlier) and said that she wasn’t surprised that she had murdered her husband, considering how police officers behave. “Kaveri’s husband was a DySP like all these people” she said, waving her hand towards the other participants “They can drink and abuse their wives, but what can the wives do? These are senior police officers.” She told me how she had joined the police force within two years of completing her university degree. She was relaxed, smiling and by the act of sharing her phone number with me, seemed keen to meet me again. It was as though the shedding of power, even if for a few hours was liberating, and that from being a slightly insecure and despotic jailor, she had transcended to become a sensitive human being. I want to flag this conversation to illustrate that the shifting dynamics of power percolate, affect or even reverse mundane transactions between people, including fleeting interviewer-respondent or trainer-trainee relationships.

The four criteria detailed by Collins (1991) to interpret truth and knowledge (however transient) namely, the primacy of lived experiences of subordinate
people; the use of dialogue in understanding this experience; the ethics of caring; and, the ethics of personal accountability have been used as the methodology of my thesis because it resonated best with my own activism during the past four decades. Burawoy’s (2002) call for academic disciplines to forge connections between sociology and the community and to render “the invisible visible” has also been a source of inspiration. Knowledge arising out of everyday engagement with subordinate women helped blur the line between “I” and “They,” as much as the power differential between me and my respondents / colleagues could allow. Acknowledging this power and using it to the respondent’s advantage and constantly trying to equalise it as much as possible has been an essential element of methodology. This thesis is not just about honour but also about patriarchal and related power; thus, theory and methodology are intrinsically related in this work. Attempting to bring philosophy, epistemology and struggle together is what this thesis attempts to do.