

# Outliers of Motherhood

## Incomplete Women or Fuller Humans?

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This paper asks if women have an authentic “choice” vis-à-vis motherhood. It probes notions of agency, autonomy and subjecthood within the narratives of childfree women or those who choose not to have children, and the fence-sitters or those who are ambivalent about having children and procrastinate inconclusively.

...(stri) shiksha ka strot agar iss tarah se chalta raha to desh mein santanon ka abhaav ho kar samaaj ka sarvnaash avashya sambhaavi hai (...if [women's] education continues to flow in this manner, the country will face a paucity of children and our society's destruction is guaranteed – Vidushi 1938: 47).

Public anxiety about procreation and the expectation that women become mothers – corporeal and symbolic – undergirds pronatalist cultures. A cavalcade of reproductive technologies promising fertility adds to procreative possibilities for the privileged few, though government-funded assisted reproductive technology (ART) centres have been launched in India. Naturalisation and normalisation of mothering and the heteronormative family continue to pitch “mother” as the apex of womanhood.

Against such discursive settings that glorify the woman-mother, this paper asks if women have an authentic “choice” vis-à-vis motherhood and explores the “deviant” (Basten 2009) “choices” of voluntarily childfree<sup>1</sup> women. While they stoke a sharp debate about the ethics of procreation, my feminist frame focuses on fuller currencies of personhood<sup>2</sup> for women via non-embodied self-envisioning. I probe notions of agency, autonomy and subjecthood within the narratives of (a) childfree women or those who choose not to have children, (b) fence-sitters<sup>3</sup> or those who are ambivalent about having children and procrastinate inconclusively, and (c) a biological mother who refused the custody of her children when she separated from her husband. As feminist epistemology, the research practices reflexivity, values subjectivity and emphasises diversity; the deconstruction of the normative from the peripheral positions of these outliers is inspired by post-structuralist feminist and postcolonial scholarship (Sedgwick 1990; Talpade 2003; among others).

### Motherhood, the Mother of All Norms

Sociocultural norms and individual behaviour share a more variegated relationship than mere post hoc rationalisations. While individuals do not always act as per mandates, prescriptive discourses can be enduring influences that enact themselves in a myriad complex ways. As Dworkin wrote: “We have taken the fairy tales of childhood with us into maturity, chewed but still lying in the stomach, as real identity” (1974: 33). Motherhood needs to be historicised to understand how its proselytisation, practice and understanding get naturalised in women's lives. Studies on early Indian *weltanschauung* and sociocultural traditions corroborate overwhelming emphasis

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on women's procreative role (Kosambi 1988; Krishnaraj 2010; Nandy 1980; Patel and Sharma 2000; Srinivas 1989). Religious discourse is replete with the maternal principle – from the *dharmasastras* and *stridharmapaddhati* (Leslie 1989) to the Mahabharata, *hadith* (Islamic historical documents, adjunct to the Quran)<sup>4</sup> and the Bible (“Be fruitful, and multiply”; Genesis 1: 28). The woman-mother is a fixture in Indian cinema (Somaaya et al 2012) and even the State's Reproductive and Child Health Policy which is steeped in “essentialist maternal imagery...” (Kumar 2006: 175). The state's perception of women as “biological reproducers of citizens, cultural reproducers of Indians...” (Chaudhuri 2003: 341-64) is well-documented.

### The Atypical and the Heterodox

Non-reproductive sexuality is enough to constitute abnormality (Thadani 1999: 151).

However, it will be inaccurate to imagine that normative discourses steamroll individuals into passive conformists. As Foucault and Butler argued, regulation not only produces the subject but also the abject (Butler 1993: 107). Alternative paradigms of womanhood have a historical and discursive presence in India. The *sadhvi*, for example, could bypass marriage and childbearing (Ramaswamy 1992: 134). Besides women joining the Buddhist *sangha* (Roy 2010: 187), Hinduism abounds with figures such as Mirabai, Janabai, Āndāl, Akkā Mahādevī, among others, who resisted conjugality and reproduction. The Brahma Kumaris are well-accepted for their circumvention of familial roles (Chowdhry 1996). Madhavi's myth has been mined by scholars such as Bhisham Sahni (1982) for the story of its resistance against patriarchal control.<sup>5</sup> The heroic marital warrior of folklore or *virangana* (Hansen 1988) such as Rani Chennamma or Ahilyabai Holkar are “discursive insurgents” (Meyers 2002). These insurgents throng literature and cinema too – the self-abnegating mother in R K Narayan's *The Dark Room* (1938), the unwed mother in Kamala Markandeya's *Two Virgins* (1974), Suniti Namjoshi's quasi-matriarchal *The Mothers of Maya Diip* (1989), Mahesh Manjrekar's *Astiva* (2002) and many others speak words seldom spoken about motherhood. Despite these diverse examples, the non-mother remains an oddity, perhaps more now than ever.

### The Childfree Enterprise

I did not know that voluntary childlessness is an unacceptable crime to cop to...I thought that people who want – or have – children, would accept that I do not, just as I accept their choice. After all, it's my (notional) babies I am rejecting, not theirs. I was wrong... Babies are the newest archetype on the happy ending, therefore not wanting them is tantamount to not wanting to be happy (Vernon 2009).

Such forthright expression from the childfree is common in the western public domain where their numbers are growing (Bartlett 1995; Basten 2009). Writing about “voluntary childlessness” in India more than a decade earlier, Kohler Riessman (2000: 2) wrote “...(it) is rare in India, and research about it is absent”. Unlike the west, the childfree in India are often closeted. Their numbers are not known.<sup>6</sup> The married childfree get enumerated as “childless”, while the unmarried ones count as “unmarried”. They do not seem to make a critical

mass to count as a viable “category” of data. Even though they may not be revolutionary in their statistical presence, their idea, philosophy and practice is rather revolutionary.

The childfree are seldom covered by the news media.<sup>7</sup> While the internet brims with “mommy blogs” (exchanges between women/mothers about parenting), I found a few Indian childfree women. Among the exceptions is *Ruminations of a Childfree Woman*,<sup>8</sup> a free-wheeling blog where the author reveals her identity and photographs. She announces:

I love my childfree lifestyle...my ability to do what I please whenever I please...I'm from India. Here the concept of 'childfree' seems to be totally unheard of. In fact to this date I've not met any woman/couple who are voluntarily childfree...it seems to upset and offend most people with children and the diatribe they almost dutifully launch into.

On the *Childless by Choice Project* blog<sup>9</sup> run by childfree proponent and author Laura S Scott, an Indian childfree woman, writes:

Choosing to be childfree is definitely an evolving concept in India. While the reason behind this choice is varied and completely personal, in today's scenario, the woman in question must also be prepared to face inquisitive questions, biased judgments and a phenomenal amount of pressure...

A Mumbai-based childfree woman I interviewed started a blog on my suggestion (<http://childfreebychoice-india.blogspot.in>). A couple of messages on it read as follows:

Excerpt from an article on the blog:

Every day I dodge bullets of suspicion, missiles of derogatory adjectives and cannon balls of emotional blackmail. My reproductive system has become an exhibit...Fortune tellers are being actively sought, the Gods are being appeased, examples of happy 'complete' families are being thrown on our faces...

Comment left by a visitor:

I think it is good news that we are coming together like this and speaking up. We need to support each other mentally. Reading this article has helped me in more ways...Thank you because I was always worried and felt forced into giving in by relatives/in-laws/parents...

*Women's Web*, an “online magazine and community for the thinking woman”, has a post titled “Is motherhood overrated?”<sup>10</sup> where the author asks aloud:

Is motherhood the ultimate goal in a woman's life? Or can it be just a part of the journey? Are women who are non-mothers unhappy and feel they are lacking something in life? *Am I wrong in even thinking such things now that I am a mother?*

The last question in the above-mentioned quote reveals women's Foucauldian self-surveillance. The author asks if it is even ethical for her – a mother – to have second thoughts about motherhood and question its sanctity. Such is the cultural muscle and social engineering of “matrigyno-idolatry” (Meyers 2002) that it cripples women's critical abilities and agency to an extent that thinking such thoughts amounts to sacrilege. In thinking those taboo thoughts aloud on a public fora and then asking her readers if it is wrong to do so, she ironically endorses and sets into motion the very ideology she had started to question.

The ethnographic fieldwork comprised in-depth interviews with 16 childfree women in Delhi. Locating them necessitated a snowball approach, like for any “hidden sample”. Despite

reaching across demographic divides through personal and professional contacts, I found participants with (noteworthy) demographic similarities<sup>11</sup> – highly educated and predominantly middle/upper-middle class professionals. This skewed representation of women from a certain socio-economic strata reveals links between, among others, women's education, paid employment and procreative decisions. Western studies on the childfree (Gillespie 1999; 2003; Ireland 1993; Movius 1976; Ramu 1984; Veevers 1974) reported such similarities that were later confirmed by Bulcroft and Teachman (2004) and Basten (2009). I found some congruence between the reasons offered by some participants and Bulcroft and Teachman's (2004) broad motivational categorisations of childfree-ness as: (a) biological/evolutionary, (b) cultural, (c) rational choice and exchange, (d) family or life course development, and (e) feminist. Yet, like all subjectivities, the reasons expressed by the participants were not as neat as these five categories. The spotlight was often reversed to fall upon my childfree status – intimate self-disclosure followed in tandem with my feminist epistemological frame.

Ten “childfree”, four “fence-sitters” and a biological mother who undid her motherhood by refusing to raise children she had birthed in a non-consensual and abusive marriage. Among the 10 childfree women, there were both “active and passive deciders” (Gillespie 1999) or those who were directly negating motherhood per se and others whose decisions were strongly influenced by other factors (responsibilities of siblings, hectic work lives and so on). The distinction between the “childfree” and “fence-sitters” can be blurry and porous. Besides, sharing personal details with a researcher is itself a fraught exercise.

### Living Large, Free, Unapologetic

Without exception, all participants (aged between 24 and 58 years) claimed to deeply value self-determination, through socially relevant work or creative professional pursuits. A former advertising professional feminist activist and film-maker, 47-year-old Vandita had “vaguely” considered adoption in her twenties as a “fresh-thinking life that had a purpose to it... like social work”. In her 22-year old marriage, she had conceived but medically terminated the pregnancy. Shortly after our meetings Vandita left for the us on a prestigious Ivy League fellowship. She explained:

I did wonder...if I could be pregnant and have a baby but not bring up the child...I was bodily curious but I don't want to bring up a child.

I was not in a dilemma but it is not an easy choice. I have always made the big decisions of life myself. This I had to make with him, but it was *finally* my choice...I conceived but had an MTP.

...I don't have that sense of wanting another human being look like me...of propagating family...it's fundamentally narcissistic...you want that person to replicate something of what you are/believe...this is my fundamental rebellion to parenting. So even if you adopt a child, you replicate...

I live an extremely privileged life...love the work I do...live with people I like...my identity is full in many ways. The many vacuums in life will be there no matter how much you fill it with things and people you like.

As the editor of a leading national English daily, 40-year-old Naaz is relieved to be childfree, but does not idealise her

decision. For the last several years, she has worked six days a week from noon to past midnight, while being married to a journalist with equally erratic work hours. Sitting in her aesthetically done-up but very busy-looking office, Naaz calls her refusal to have a child “cowardice”. Yet she is relieved that her choice of a hectic job over motherhood allows her financial ease, intellectual growth and indulgent holidays:

I am not anti-baby. I am just anti-responsibility...mostly it has been cowardice. We would have to give up our way of life, our work and take on the responsibility of another person...and there are enough (babies) in this country. For me the reason is not because this world needs to be saved from extra burden. If I really believe in that, I could do other things like not using plastic bags, etc.

Valli, on the other hand, manages the corporate social responsibility (CSR) programme of a big multinational. Married to her long-time boyfriend since 1999, both promised to be childfree rather early. A passionate dog-lover, this 38-year-old has adopted several street dogs, besides financially supporting many animal and environmental charities. To rid herself of “pregnancy fears”, she has been “pleading” with doctors for a hysterectomy, but to no avail:

If people think I am selfish, so be it. But I would rather contribute to making a difference than making babies. And look at parents...all they do is “cereals *kha lo*, doodh *pee lo*, exams *mein pass ho jao*” (eat your cereals, drink your milk, pass your exams). What about the stress on good values? People don't even want to know why they want kids... and if I *really* wanted a kid, I may have adopted. Why produce a new one when there are so many kids without parents?

Yet, the affective pull of genetics can sometimes unsettle staunch resolves, revealing the provisional nature of identities. Two years back, Valli's husband donated sperm to his us-based lesbian cousin's partner. After the baby's birth, the lesbian couple split. As the cousin fights a battle to gain custody of the baby, Valli feels betrayed, partly responsible for “a kid with a broken home” and strangely drawn to a “baby with my husband's nose”:

There is a baby out there with my husband's genes...it created complications between me and my husband for sometime...it's my husband's child too in some ways so I felt left out. Now my husband's family wants that child because he is the youngest member of the family tree!

Avni asserts that she put aside her mothering desires in her twenties soon after she realised her calling – film-making and working with a radical left-wing party. The alumna of a reputable film-making school, 24-year-old Avni is relocating to Mumbai to work on her first film as an assistant director to an eminent Indian film-maker. Avni's “boyfriend” supports her childfree choice:

I want to make films that speak of the unheard, suppressed voices...of people's movements. I would be the coolest mother, but I would never have the time to be one. It will always be a vicious circle of guilt and repentance. I am sure however much I might want a child, the child would never want a mother who is a workaholic. One can't make good cinema and be an active communist without being a workaholic!

The decision to live without children is often the result of difficult negotiations between the “attraction or pull of being childfree” and the “rejection or the push away from motherhood” (Gillespie 2003: 48). The two of course are

interconnected and tied to other and diverse factors which may not be articulated during interviews.

### Reimagining 'Family'

A "childfree" status may not always be free of children or care-giving, but entails diverse parenting relationships, family forms, living arrangements, thus denting the myth of a "type" of woman and circumstance. Dipti defies any boilerplate image of a childfree woman. A 40-year-old women's health activist, she credits her "progressive" university for an expansive world view. Married to her boyfriend from her early twenties, Dipti remembers always wanting a childfree life and a close-knit "family of friends". Yet she has persistently raised children in a manner that Bell Hooks called "revolutionary parenting" (Hooks 1984: 133-46). Her case teasingly asks if non-embodied, non-genetic care-giving must only be seen through mothering frames as quasi-motherhood or non-motherhood:

I absolutely love kids, so does my partner. We imagine starting a crèche someday! My husband and I are the legal 'undertakers' of a single friend's adopted child...In fact, we live in this house so that we could all be together, and help raise the child. Friends with children often leave them with us...we babysit regularly. Another friend of mine used to travel quite a lot...I used to babysit her daughter. I call this child "my first daughter" and many others followed (giggles). I have trained to be a special educator so I have spent time with children with special needs too.

Responsibilities of her younger siblings made Sabina "happily" decide to be childfree in her early twenties. Once married, she refused to adopt children, a stance that she has stuck to with conviction although her husband accepted it gradually. However, her divorced sister's sudden death forced her adolescent son to move in with Sabina, making her his "mummy". Sabina also brought her old mother to live in her marital home ever since her father abandoned the family. At 42 years she minces no words in expressing her dislike for the role even though she is very glad to be contributing to a child's life:

...I know I cannot be a "good mother"... taking care of my sister's son is an effort...initially I used to get irritated. I resented waking up early to give him breakfast or being tied to his school schedule. Our privacy got affected though now I am okay. My son once said he feels unloved...now I am a practical person, so I tried to change myself. But I am not the sacrificing mother... I do go out with my friends, without him...the blessing is he came to me as a 12 year old ...so I did not have to make major adjustments to my life and routine.

### Stigma: Perception or Reality?

*It is easier to get sympathy by saying that I'm trying to start a family. Rather than declaring, I'm not interested (Prakash 2008).*

Much social research on stigma, inspired by Goffman (1963), looks at how individuals strategically reveal information about personal conditions that could slur their public image. Riesmann (2000) critiqued Goffman's theory for suggesting that individuals only negotiate with stigma and not destigmatise themselves by discrediting hegemonic perspectives. A few participants of my research shared their techniques to manage their social identities. Vandita, for example, felt the need to portray herself as caring:

...you do end up manufacturing some of it to sort of convey that you are a decent human being, not a heartless person. There is this attack

on your autonomy. I do it when I feel like it. But nobody is questioning me anymore. I am at a different stage so I don't need to prove anymore.

All the participants knew about the stereotypes attached to the childfree (lazy, selfish, deviant); a few had experienced stigma or occasional "awkwardness". Some had learnt to insulate themselves while others found/built like-minded communities. A few were keen to meet other childfree individuals through me, while some felt like anomalies in their own families yet confident publicly.

On a social networking site, Angel introduces herself as "lazy...no cats or children...an iconoclast..." A well-respected journalist-turned-novelist, she is 58 years old, once divorced and currently in her second marriage which was formalised after 17 years of living together (only because policies such as medical insurance, etc, are favourable to married couples). Barring momentary flirtations with the idea of a child, Angel stayed firm to her decision largely because of her socio-political views. She conceived thrice and had an MTP (medical termination of pregnancy) each time. For Angel, revealing her choice to live without children has been a prudent exercise:

People see you as abnormal. Even my mother called me 'selfish'. We fought over this often. She thought travelling on work was "fun" but having a child a lot of work and so I avoided it. She was a gynaecologist...she told how unhappy childless women were. I once asked a female relative if she thought I was evil because I have no children. She said '...if you desired a child but could not have them, you would be seen as jealous, casting an evil eye on children. But since you chose not to have a child, you are not evil...just strange'.

Sheetal, 39, has escaped the stigma by carefully choosing her friends. After a brief marriage at 19 followed by intermittent spells of relationships and singledom, she has been in a live-in relationship with a man who is separated from his wife but yet to be divorced. A senior manager with a large, private head-hunting firm, Sheetal claims she has never desired children because they will "cramp her lifestyle":

Touchwood! I have the best of both worlds. I don't want kids anyway... he has kids from his earlier marriage. Then people imagine a "live-in" as physical relations...casual...so they do not even expect babies. But I am careful about who I tell about us. Our landlords think we are married. Friends know and are cool. I have not told my parents yet...they live in another city...because they may not like it. But then it (live-in) is like a marriage though far better...I mean no expectations from in-laws. I have never met them...if I do, they'll see me as a *bahu* (daughter-in-law) and then it all starts...you know...the role-playing. So we only hang out with his cousins and my friends... they are all cool about it...

After seven years of marriage, Sunila remains as ambivalent about children as ever while her husband is keen to be a parent. A high-flying corporate manager, she spends her evenings rescuing stray dogs and setting up sterilisation camps. Besides her strained marriage (she claims her maternal ambivalence is not the reason), Sunila is self-conscious about "the childless-animal lovers" association, but argues against her "love" for dogs being seen as a substitute for kids:

My friends are mostly undecided too. So there is peer pressure among us to *not* have babies! If I get pregnant, my best friend will say, "What's

wrong with you dude? You are not equipped!” We are a strange lot but like-minded...so it's good.

In office, jaws dropped. Colleagues were like, “How's it possible that you do not want a child?” Sometimes at family gatherings, I deliberately stand next to people who I know will quiz me about the child or pass snide remarks. It's fun being cheeky with them!

Mahak, 31, has been married to a businessman for eight years, a period she has spent completing an MPhil in Sociology, researching run-away street children and dealing with the painful repercussions of her desire to be childfree, including a rocky marriage that has nearly reached its end:

My husband was open to being childfree but his family made such a big issue about it for years that our own relationship has become unhappy. We may separate. I have no right to force my decision on him. About stigma...the only place I do get self-conscious is the street we live in. I am looked at negatively here by older women whose daughter-in-laws do not work. They dislike me because I am always traveling on work, don't have a child. They think I am doing “time pass”. It kills me. Some even stare at me. So I walk quickly, making no eye contact.

Naaz's meteoric rise to a very senior position in her organisation made her colleagues remark “She can do all this because she does not have kids...that's why she's getting promoted each year”. Her childfree status was seen as an “unfair advantage” in the workplace as she works till 2 or 3 am. Naaz (problematically) said “...being a mother is a choice they made and not being one is a choice I made...so why complain?” Women, sadly, do not have much of a choice vis-à-vis motherhood. Besides, why should they have to choose between work and motherhood?

### Deconstructing Maternal Desire

Unlike most childfree women who spoke of the “child decision” in retrospect, the fence-sitters were content to postpone having children (biological or adoptive) to an indefinite future. Yet they too deconstructed the need and desire for children. Some stated that their urge for a child was not strong enough and hence they were “waiting for it to grow”. Others blamed lack of time as a strong hindrance. Meyers argued that “postponers” delude themselves by imagining they desire children because “by avoiding the issue and deferring closure maintain a never-enacted maternal self-image borrowed from matrigyno-idolatry... (women) never articulate richly individualised self-portraits” (2002: 763).

With a tattooed owl peeking from her shoulder, 34-year-old Sakshi spoke candidly about why she feels the occasional need for a child. The product of an A-league business school (like her husband), she is Marketing Director for a branded fashion retail company. She said:

I don't feel “maternal” at all! Should I still have one? Some couples do this and stay together because of kids...So earlier I used to say I may have a child when I am 35. I am going to be 35 next year but now I am saying later. It is not that I don't want a child. I just don't want a child now... If I want a child, it will be because of the old age. I am paranoid about growing old... If not for social stigma a lot of people will move their parents to old age homes.

### Mother Who Undid Her Motherhood

Married forcibly at 20, Savneet is a biological mother who decided to relinquish her children when she walked out of a

non-consensual and abusive marriage after several years of violence:

When I got married, I did not know what sex was...my husband would force himself...he was violent...we were totally incompatible. I never liked the marriage or the children because I was not ready! But I still tried to live there for many years...my parents kept on saying “stay there” even though I was very unhappy.

When Savneet finally ran away from the house without clothes or money, her parents threatened to kill her if she did not return to her husband, blaming her for the shame she brought to the families:

It was a very tough decision...you know how they ingrain it in you that the mother must raise the children, be around. So after years of thinking, I left the kids with my husband. I did not want to separate the two children.

...I saw the children as a burden. I never wanted children in that marriage... I was forced to have them! My mother could never leave her unhappy marriage. See...it's a very difficult decision for most women.

Savneet's case raises disturbing questions about the heteronormative family and what it could mask – discrimination against girls/women, non-consensual sex (marital rape), enforced procreation, lack of autonomy, flawed notions of “honour”, gendered household labour and so on. A woman's rejection of the compulsions of marriage and lifelong and devotional mothering (Gustafson 2005) is enough to invite lifelong stigma as a “deviant” (Arendell 2000: 1195). Savneet was doubly stigmatised and shamed – both as a divorced, single woman and a mother who relinquished her children. We need to “... release motherhood from an institution that negates women's selfhood and that uses children as hostages to compel women's obedience” (Roberts 1995: 24).

### Discussion

If political theory holds choice and agency as central to human flourishing, why does motherhood not find a place in that frame? The outliers' narratives complicate our understanding of women's “choice” vis-à-vis motherhood – their disillusionment with glorified femininity and caregiving, the ubiquity of salient cultural ideologies, as well as human yearning for approval, and women's (Foucauldian) “self-surveillance” all confront each other in this life-altering decision. It seems as if the terrain of motherhood presents women with more difficult, partial and less real choices. The narratives chronicle the contingencies and provisionalities of these sometimes de-gendered identities. The enactments and meanings of choice are heterogeneous: a “yes” to motherhood may not be an affirmation to its ideologies and a “no” may not even be directed at the desirability of motherhood per se but the ethics of making more humans or conflicts between paid work and caregiving. Why else would Naaz cherish her childfree lifestyle yet call it “cowardice”?

Choices – always impressionably shaped within larger socio-economic structures – are ambiguous and contradictory, while agency simultaneously works its way through competing discourses that constitute and shape the subject. Reader's (2007: 604) advice is worthwhile at this juncture: “We have to resist the temptation to tidy personhood up, to present it like a

student on graduation day, all neatly turned out to receive a prize for its achievement.”

My research suggests that in her search for a wider canvass of possibilities and meanings, the childfree woman's self-discovering and resistant agency stands in contrast to Mahmood's (2005) agent who is the norm-inhabiting, non-resistant pious Salafi woman in Cairo's mosques in the late 1990s. There is another foundational difference in these conceptions – Mahmood negates the supposedly secular-liberal-“western” assumption that humans seek freedom and autonomy, whereas my project rests on the philosophical premise that choice and autonomy are fundamental human goods, inextricably tied to fulsome lives. It can, although, be argued that if non-motherhood equals freedom and autonomy, why do more/most women not choose non-motherhood and dread “infertility”? Scholars such as Meyers (2002) view ubiquitous pronatalist discourse as a major cause that stymies women's imagination, aspirations and agency, and ‘baby lust’ supplants autonomous choice” (ibid: 764). However, feminist scholarship recognises

the gratifying potential of motherhood when lived in non-oppressive ways (Ruddick 1980).

Unlike the negative image thrust on them, voluntarily childfree women can be a trope for transformatory and empowering possibilities. As exemplified earlier, their lives present diverse examples of caregiving, marriages without “husbands” and “wives”, partnerships without marriages, non-genetic “families”, men as caregivers, communal parenting and so on. My intention though is neither to valorise nor propagate childfree-ness, but to make motherhood a genuine choice and non-motherhood an acceptable one: “...to release the creation and sustenance of life into the realm of decision, struggle, surprise, imagination, and conscious intelligence, as any other difficult, but freely chosen work” (Rich 1979: 280). My political project is self-envisioned, stigma-free, autonomous women's lives – women not as means to an end, but ends in themselves. More research on the childfree by choice and maternal ambivalence will prompt us to search for fuller accounts of autonomy, especially as the community of outliers grows.

## NOTES

- 1 Following feminist interpretations, I use the term “childfree” for women who do not have children, either by choice (voluntary) or circumstance (involuntary). To me, “childless” suggests that a woman lacks what she *ought* to have, thus endorsing the cultural mandate of childbearing. Researchers have used different terms – Ireland (1993), for example, calls them “transformative” and Houseknecht (1987) uses the term “early deciders”.
- 2 This paper is extracted from a wider doctoral project on the negotiations of non-mothers and non-normative mothers (unwed biological, voluntarily adoptive, sex worker, among others) with the imperatives of motherhood ideologies through concepts of choice, autonomy and citizenship.
- 3 Unlike the “childfree”, the “fence-sitters” claim a provisional space to keep their parenting options open. Ireland calls them “transitional childfree” or those who “delay childbearing until it is seemingly too late to have a child” (1993: 41). Houseknecht (1987) refers to them as “postponers”.
- 4 Women who die during delivery or soon after are called *shaheed* (martyr). Source: *Islamic Information*, URL: <http://www.islamicinformation.net/2008/05/virtues-of-pregnancy-in-islam.html>.
- 5 Sage Galav asked King Yayati for 800 moon-white horses (with black ears!) to gift to Vishvamitra. To avoid disappointing a sage, Yayati leased out his daughter Madhavi to different kings as a procreative tool in exchange for horses. A boon helps Madhavi recover her virginity after each birth. When his reputation as a generous giver is salvaged, Yayati wanted to marry Madhavi who instead retreated to a forest as a celibate. Whether Madhavi's rejection of marriage was a quasi-feminist response to patriarchy or the brahmin myth-makers' moral censure against women's sexual permissiveness is a moot point.
- 6 Usha Ram from the Indian Institute of Population Studies is reported to have said that while marital “childlessness” has increased especially in urban India, it is not voluntary. As per her research, the number of “childless” women among the 15-44-year old section has moved from 11 to 16%, while among the “permanently childless” between 35- and 49-year olds, it has

increased from 4-6%, comprising about 51 lakh women.

- 7 Chhappia and Iyer (2010) write, “India has a rising population of DINKs (Double Income, No Kids) couples in India.... In the new India, people are childless by choice. And the stigma attached to the concept is slowly wearing off” (Source: Chhappia, H and Iyer, M [2010] “Oh Baby, No Baby”, *The Times of India*, 23 September 2010, URL: [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2010-09-23/man-woman/28214410\\_1\\_monisha-childless-couple-ias-officer](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2010-09-23/man-woman/28214410_1_monisha-childless-couple-ias-officer)).
- 8 Guha (2011) writing in *The Hindustan Times* stated “This is something the world still finds difficult to grasp – that a woman might want to have a life without a child... The shift in priorities for women has been the most remarkable social development in India over the past two decades, and much of society has failed to keep up. Add to that the amount of control Indian society still wants to exercise on a woman's life choices, and things get really tense” (Source: Guha, S [2011], ‘Mum's Not the Word’, *The Hindustan Times*, 3 September 2011, URL: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/News-Feed/TopStories/Mum-s-not-the-word/Article1-741051.aspx>).
- 9 Ritu Khobia, “Ruminations of a Childfree Woman”, *Ritu's Weblog*, URL: <http://ritusthoughtcatcher.wordpress.com/2010/06/06/ruminations-on-being-a-child-free-woman/>
- 10 “From Mumbai: It's a Blessing Not to Have Children”, *Childlessbychoiceproject.blogspot.in*, 28 September 2010, URL: <http://childlessbychoiceproject.blogspot.in/search?updated-max=2010-12-08T16:51:00-08:00&max-results=7&start=21&by-date=false>. The blog is run by Laura S Scott, author of *Two Is Enough: A Couple's Guide to Living Childless by Choice* (2009). An Indian woman I met through this blog said: “I have a spiritual bent...motherhood to me is a way of increasing your involvement with the world. We constantly feel incomplete. To achieve completeness within ourselves, liberate from the *mayajaal*....avoid the child and avoid a lifetime of *karmas*...I spoke to my guru. He said childfree couples are lucky, contrary to what people think.”
- 11 “Is Motherhood Overrated?”, *Women's Web*, an “online magazine and community for the thinking woman”, URL: <http://www.womensweb.in/2011/08/is-motherhood-overrated/>
- 12 Twelve women identified themselves as atheists. All were politically oriented; seven identified themselves as feminists. Barring one, all women had chosen their own partners. Seven women had secular and non-ritualistic (court or Arya Samaj) weddings, and most of these were dowry-less. As many as six women did not change their names after marriage.

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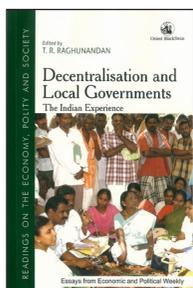
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## Decentralisation and Local Governments

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T R RAGHUNANDAN



The idea of devolving power to local governments was part of the larger political debate during the Indian national movement. With strong advocates for it, like Gandhi, it resulted in constitutional changes and policy decisions in the decades following Independence, to make governance more accountable to and accessible for the common man.

The introduction discusses the milestones in the evolution of local governments post-Independence, while providing an overview of the panchayat system, its evolution and its powers under the British, and the stand of various leaders of the Indian national movement on decentralisation.

This volume discusses the constitutional amendments that gave autonomy to institutions of local governance, both rural and urban, along with the various facets of establishing and strengthening these local self-governments.

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