
Studying Silences and Marginality: Micro-Narratives of Violence Against Women from a Village in Purulia, West Bengal ¹

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This paper delimits violence of its physical nomenclature and intends to delve into attributes that are apparently non-violent in nature and operate under the aegis of culture, tradition and norm, also read as patriarchy. Not all women are tortured, beaten up, raped, abducted or kidnapped; but wherever there exists a binary of man versus woman, or powerful versus powerless and all other such phallogocentric discourses- the woman, goes through a form of violence that is violence against human dignity. Subtle violence, emotional abuse, psychic violence are all a part of hegemony that leads to the actual acts of physical violence or exist at all levels- often more if the woman in question is at a power differential that demands subordination, like that from the maid, house staff, daughter-in-law. Set in a village in the Kashipur block of Purulia District, this paper attempts to view violence from a micro-sociological perspective- it is about the narratives of how women socialised in a particular rural set up view violence around them.

Keywords: caste, patriarchy, normalised-violence, otherization, labour, marriage

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This paper is an attempt to delve into the micro-sociology of everyday violence set in a village named Sonathali, block Kashipur, of Purulia district, West Bengal. Some other villages of the same block have been mentioned or referred to elaborate upon. The form of violence that this paper deals with is non-violent violence; that is violence that has been normalised to an extent that it does not fall into the category of violence. This form of violence does not involve physical atrocities like beating, thrashing, rape and other forms of sexual and physical torture assault; nor does this involve intimate partner violence. This paper focuses on emotional-psychic-subtle violences and in that the main act that has been found as a repetition in most of the households is silent treatment, otherization and neglect. According to Abbott et al. (1990), women face three types of violent behaviours- 'derogatory remarks', 'unwanted sexual attention' and 'sexual compulsion'. In the context of the Indian sub-continent the prevalence of 'sacrificial mother' as the sanctification and ultimate 'duty' according to Chitnis (2004), is also a prime reason as to which women are socialised to 'tolerate-adjust-compromise' with the situation rather than voice against it. The UNFPA (ICRW & UNFPA, 2004) mentions mental and emotional as 'manifestations' of domestic violence. Chodorow's concept of 'mothering' (1978), can be referred to here; gender socialisation in India witnesses women specially mothers as passing on the fear of violence and the reciprocating action of silence to their daughters as the 'normalised' ways of surviving. Massey (1994) talks of the allotment of spaces and gender relations, but what remains unchanged is that, even the insides of homes experience gendered violences which escalates in inverse proportion with the power credentials of the person suffering it. So, the 'otherization' of women as de Beauvoir (2015), explains remains in all stages of life.

This paper stands on the narratives of the respondents, their understanding of what violence is and how they perceive it, or their pre-conceived notions of it. As such, subtle violences are actions that are felt and experienced by only a certain section of individuals and appears to have caused no harm at all to others (men), or so is believed. These are acts that are so unseen in their appearances that do not incur physical injury and not read to be violent to the majority of population. The present researcher while conversing with her respondents observed that many of them do not consider such acts

of violation of dignity as acts of violence; this is the depth of internalisation that patriarchy has over the belief systems of the subordinates, that violence is not considered to be violent, rather norm, culture and so. This researcher is maritally related to the village of Sonathali and has been staying in the village for long spans from the year 2009. As such, she did observe such normalisation of physical violence and the internalisation of patriarchy to the point that women themselves are of and do not defend other women in the face of patriarchal domination. But such conversation began as an insider closely talking about the everyday lives. These were random nonchalant small talks. It was only around the time of Covid-19 that is from 2020-21, when this researcher was collecting data for a research work on folk culture in a field that included this village, that a detail query and purposive questioning on the non-violent aspects of violence begun. The methodology was sitting down with women (which was done repeatedly from 2023 up to the 2025-26), who wanted to converse on this subject, not as objective respondents to positivist questionnaire but as agents and hence the researcher depended on unstructured questions and allowed them to talk. Also, because this village is a part of this researcher's lived-in reality, hence she needed time to follow-up each case interviewed (not just as an 'insider' but as an outsider) so that, the voices of the respondents could be understood and studied not as value-loaded leading interpretations but as an insider-outsider observing the surroundings and then collecting and organising the data.

Violence in this case is read from two perspectives- violences that are occurring on an everyday basis and silence that is non-communication, as a form of violence. To explicate upon everyday violences the focus area is inter-caste discriminations that are in such villages experienced the most by woman who are employed in different capacities in upper caste and often co-incidentally upper-class households. This researcher did come across incidences where men who are employed in similar household face discriminations on the lines of caste in their everyday lives; but she chooses to limit the focus of this paper to women only. Two groups of women were interviewed- the first group (20 years and above) were of those who belong to the schedule caste of Bauri and work as helps, or share croppers or landless labourers.

Their experiences involve mostly caste-based discriminations some of which they have also normalised. The other group belong to young daughters-in-law irrespective of caste identity, aged 20 years and above; this group has first generation women employed in organised sectors, apart from the traditional and seasonal occupations of brick kiln work or agricultural work or as maids; these are occupations that involve some kind of educational qualifications. A few women who are the mothers-in-law and are employed have also been interviewed to create a comparative analysis and delve into inter-generational or inter-caste perspectives on violence. The daughters-in-law who have not yet attained the status of mother-in-law are the primary respondents for this purpose.

Of Caste and Marriage

Outside the main gate of a modest looking household belonging to the upper caste family situated in the 'upper' caste neighbourhood of Sonathali village, Kashipur, Purulia, a pair of footwear waits for its owner daily, twice a day. The footwear is united with its owner after she comes out of the house and glides them on. This process repeats itself daily, twice a day. Every time the maids and her family members enter the houses of the employers, their slippers are left outside the premise of the house, on the road; the slippers or footwears and its owner are not audacious enough to enter with their slippers on. The fate of the slipper is decided by the owner's 'caste' it belongs to. This researcher has been observing this procedure of in-dignification repeat itself for years (roughly a span of nine year starting from the 2015, as a resident) and has been internalised to the extent that the person keeping her slippers out considers it to be only normal, like while entering any sanctum sanctorum the impurities are kept out. From within the same household, comes the next glimpse that we shall have before we delve into its sociological analyses is where the daughter-in-law is preparing food for the entire family. It is in the wee hours of the morning, the locality has not really woken up, the local *madhukar* is just venturing out of his house. The daughter-in-law, a first-generation salaried women working as a health worker is preparing breakfast and lunch and if possible, a few meal preps shall be made for the dinner, before she is allowed to venture out for work that provides her salary. She has to complete strenuous household

chores that are already exhausting her and then she embarks for next 'job'. This is a lot like having more than one job but being paid for only one. Also, there are two aspects to her working – she performs clerical jobs in her place of work but ends up doing multiple silly mistakes most of the days, along with making excuses to leave for home early or take leaves very often. This researcher's argument rests on the normalisation of the entire process of violence at both paternal and in-law's house. Of how the place of residence, her in-law's house is a symbol of social standards and not one of food security and comfort. This system oppresses and endures itself with the consequences of deviance as physical violence and or breaking away of the entire set up of 'patri-virilocal' residences. In a reference to varying acts of domestic violence, Abbott and others (1990) mention that the cause of domestic atrocities can be anything from 'not bringing' enough 'dowry' to 'not completing wifely duty' and the definition of this 'wifely duty' is rather vague. Now, urban, self-dependent educated women would at the hindsight suggest keeping a maid, to lessen the work pressure or to smoothen out the everyday functioning but that is where the 'dialectics' reside. Keeping a maid is a status symbol, when they are performing apparently impure chores, but if the maid has to do the pure chores like cooking, then the household is shamed, as that means that the women of the house are not capable enough. This is a regular everyday routine in the villages that this research paper focuses on.

A 'deconstruction' of the mentioned scenarios reveals that there are layers of 'working women' in this household. The household help who comes from a caste with which food commensality is not permitted by 'upper caste' scriptures and norms. In this case, the maid belongs to the lower caste of the Bauri, which is considered as 'untouchables', they are scheduled caste. The next in the hierarchy are women employed in the same household, who do not work on a daily basis in any given household, or so to say that they are not bonded to a particular family and are included within the purity circle and perform jobs as making puffed rice or grinding spices. In this multi-caste village, they come from communities like the *bairagi* bearing the surname of Das who are though scheduled caste but not considered as completely impure or untouchable. The next on the hierarchy are daughters-in-law (who have not become mothers-in-law yet) and

then there are the mothers-in-law who hold the maximum power in this pyramid; and if the grand mother-in-law is alive and active then she tops to be the matriarch. So, in a patriarchal society with androcentric norms, there is marginalisation of women not only by men but also by women themselves, depending upon the 'vectors' or 'indexes' of class position they stand in McDaniel (2003) mentions how women are raised to be 'virtuous' in ways that are in effect controlling them.

The violences that the above two cases hold may seem to be non-existent apparently but violence is not always violent- it might not necessarily be physical violence. Like refusing them entry with shoes is stripping them off their dignity, or strenuous work, marginalisation, sweet-coated insult, humiliation, otherization, insult, discrimination and more, as prices that women pay for belonging to a group or just earning a salary by working for/under someone and sufficing for the family and often it comes across for existing. Does that imply that these are narratives that do not witness any form of physical violence? The answer shall be negative; because whatever an individual goes through rather whatever forms of violence- subtle, psychic, emotional or silent an individual goes through are received by a body. It is a body that is put through cornering, insult, neglect and deprived of autonomy, made to sit and eat in a corner, to open their shoes, walk barefoot or work relentlessly. Hence, all forms of violence are violence on the body, the body is the individual. But surprisingly for women even the bodies are not their own. Is the conditioning of violence not changing in rural India? Yes, it is, but at a much slower pace than the numerical growth or figures indicating overall development of the nation. Also, the fact that women are the perpetrators of the above-mentioned form of violence by upholding or repeating stereotypical division of labour is what makes it hard to evade, because it is not the 'men' who are directly perpetrating violence rather 'women' fed by the control mechanisms set by 'men' who for their personal empowerment continue control. In both glimpses mentioned above the mother-in-law is the one who sees to stringent following of rules leading to oppression or normalisation of oppression on daily basis.

Ot(her)Voices

Shefali Bauri (57 years, name changed) is a resident of Sonathali village, Block Kashipur

has been working in the households of Banerjee(s) for the last fifty years. She was five or seven when she was married off to the neighbouring village of Bhalukgajar. She does not remember the exact age of her marriage but does remember that her father kept on reminding her that when inquired by the in-laws she should state that it is five years only. Having born in house without any hospital facility, Shefali never had the birth certificate that the grandchildren of her extended family now hold. She never went to school. She played and stayed with her parents for some time after marriage and then was sent off, and as she narrates it was in the month her first menstrual cycle began. Soon after, her only dead-child was born; her husband expired a few months later and she came back to this parental village. Her entire life it seems has been spent working in the households and fields owned by the Banerjee's, who are an upper caste landed gentry; she works both as the house help and as a share cropper in their fields with her brothers. As a help her work is 'unclean', she cleans the cow shed, courtyard, washes clothes, utensils and mops the floors of the household. At times if demanded or ordered, she will cut vegetables and keep them aside without washing them or without water. The violence in this sort of interaction is denial of dignity to a human being. She cannot touch any woman of the household while performing the afore mentioned activities, her touch is considered to be dirty or impure, particularly if it is related with water. For example, if she chops vegetables and washes them after, then those would not be touched or taken by the household, they need to be dry; which is why she would refrain from chopping vegetables which cannot be further dipped in water once they have been chopped, as okra or lady finger (which would become mushy if washed, when cooked, especially in the Bengali way). Before the reader understands this as about food it needs to be noticed that it is not about cooking tradition or method where alternatives can be suggested, rather it is about a deep-seated belief in the idea of a touch having the power to unclean bodies, homes and things. In a similar instance another family in the same village does not touch washed utensils until they are sun dried and no water remains in them, in case if any specific utensil that has just been washed by the lower caste maid is needed urgently then, either any male member of the house re-washes it with water or the women themselves pour some water over it without touching and then use. The

present author would again point out that it is not about the detailing or intricacies of how the cleaning is done, but rather the fact that what is unclean or dirty is varyingly located in value-identities. The processes of such cleaning are dehumanising in the sense that they snatch away the human agency from 'humans' are told that they are located in the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy. This being told comes to become their reality, something that they believe in, and have thus normalised and internalised the attitude that they face every day. So, what is 'dehumanising' or violence against human entity for the present researcher is 'only normal' for the ones facing it, as it has been going on for ages and coated with cultural traditions and norms. Another intriguing fact is that there are changes and alternates that are happening to this situation- the new generation of workers. These are youngsters of the family who are getting educated under governmental schemes and reservation policies. They chose not to enter in professions that take them into the 'insides' of the upper caste households because that is where these ways of caste atrocities function and work. Constitutional prerogatives, political and financial literacy and more specifically awareness about basic rights as a citizen has raised a voice against such acts in the public sphere, but in the more private spheres of the house these acts continue. So, Shefali Bauri (name changed) who works in the household of the Banerjee's is not allowed to help the daughter-in-law in cooking food even though it would reduce work load of the latter or even if the former intends to be helpful. In a conversation with the researcher Shefali (name changed) opened up on how physically challenging it has become for her to continue working as an agricultural labour and that chores related to the insides of the house like washing and cleaning are comparatively easy on her body but the machines like washing machine and vacuum cleaner are replacing her labour. Which for her indicates that soon she will be out of work or her income may reduce as extra chores meant extra income, if she could stay in this household as a maid, it would ensure good pay for some more years. She mentioned how the matriarch of the house would not entertain such provisions of Shefali (name changed) helping in everyday clean chores even though the young daughter-in-law would have appreciated it. This is the loop whereby more and more youths of such villages belonging to so called 'lower' castes move out of such settlements into places

where heterogeneous living is so incorporated that the only commonality becomes the need to earn more money rather than essentialising caste identities. All the encounters mentioned as of now are not incidences of physical atrocities but when has violence been only physical? It is this mere normalisation of other non-violent acts of discriminations that have caused us to understand violence as only physical abuse in everyday life. This researcher would intend to deviate the attention of the readers to documentations of violence in Africa, such as the one talked about by El-Zanaty et al. (1996) in Egypt, where beating by husband comes across in huge numbers. The larger incorporation of all discriminations and prejudices as violence has not yet occurred to the ones suffering it in general and there is a generation gap to that. Shefali Bauri's (name changed) nephew works 'outside' (she does not know where) as a labour and sends money home, which is why his wife refuses to join as a maid in the houses of the upper caste gentry as a maid doing the unclean job of cleaning the daily dirt of clothes and utensils or cow sheds. She stays at home and in the sowing season joins to work alongside other labours in the fields only. Another young woman named Sarala Dom (27 years of age, name changed) belonging to the Dom caste, that is the ones who help in cremating bodies is neither allowed to nor chooses to work as maid rather she insists on working as a wage worker in government projects of building roads or as a help to masons building houses and so. The increasing number of brick kilns have employed the most of young ones who are here working with others of similar caste backgrounds under the supervision of upper caste and upper classed man who does not mind the caste binary or as Sarala (name changed) says is a man and hence can choose to adhere to rules of caste-based discriminations when he feels like or move away when he feels so. Sarala (name changed) too complains of the matriarchal voice that echoes in from within the houses that reduces them to only the castes they are born into and not of their contributions made as individuals. Sarala (name changed) narrates how every time they enter the houses of the 'upper' castes there is a scan of who she is, and immediately mentions how her mother-in-law and her aunts or mother consider it to be only normal that the women of the upper castes intend to keep their traditional values intact. So, caste identity works in two ways- for the upper caste women matriarch it is a tool by

which she intends to hold up honour and for the lower caste their identity is a result of their past life *karma* so they cannot complain. The other way that this works is the ones who resist or deviate from such panopticon coils of caste, who do not intend to see caste as an omnipresent essential qualifier of who they are rather they view themselves as individuals who have varying needs and for that need to be fulfilled caste identities can be and should be buried. But other than caste-based dilemmas and audacities these women often face violence in different forms in their own houses. Not physical though, as they claim (respondents often did not respond to conversations on physical violence on themselves). Also, it needs to be mentioned that caste-based discriminations as to what is allowed and what not is very localised and often depends on the village norms. The village or localities with stricter control mechanisms are often suffocating for the ones who are not able to abide by them. In these scenarios first generation working women experience othering at the cost of being called employed. Employment means working extra time in both at home and office, also it comes with behaviours of being cornered at various stages. To communities that have not witnessed the presence of women in work places it seems challenging and unsettling; specially in cases where they are the first generations moving out for work every day in an organised sector which means that the times are stricter and lesser flexibility. Dayamoyi Banerjee (27 years, name changed) who is working as a health staff states how demanding it is to pre-plan every meal and organise other chores so that she could still be called a good wife and an average worker. Dayamoyi (name changed) herself has no higher ambition of excelling at work or proving her efficiency instead always has back loads of incomplete registers and documentations. When the present researcher mentioned that this may cause a slow bureaucracy, Dayamoyi (name changed) had no answer; instead pointed out that the work pressure is at its maximum. But what needs to be understood is that change in this belt will come only slowly and with change in the insides of the house because by the time she reaches the office she is exhausted, she is apologising for the trainings she is undergoing and the absences caused in her home. So, violence does not always incur wife beating it is also engrossed in acts of guilt formation, otherising, cornering and silent treatments in one's own house, as that is how the girls

are oriented to believe in patriarchal set ups where marriage results in migration to in-law's residences. Dayamoyi (name changed) mentions about another married colleague of her who faces dominance everyday by her great grandmother-in-law only and not by her mother-in-law as she herself works as staff in the *anganwari* centres of her village as a cook. This respondent named Balika Das (32 years, name changed) belongs to the general caste but are *bairagi* in community who are much lower in their rungs; according to the Hindu varna system they belong to the Shudra but are not untouchables or scheduled castes. It needs to be clarified that all the communities belonging to the extended Shudra varna do not necessarily fall into the untouchable category. Balika Das (name changed) details on her poverty as being the only reason for which she moves out of the house every day to her job it pays her modestly of course but this is existential need for her family which once faced dire hunger. Balika (name changed) whose husband does not have any regular job and ends up drinking alcohol whatever he earns has been accused of beating his wife. Balika (name changed) mentions that she was beaten every day when she herself was thirty or so, but as she grew old the physical violence has reduced but the verbal abuse exists even now in the hands of her mother-in-law and her husband. Balika also states that since they are not economically well-off like the Banerjee households so there is not much detail cooking that needs to be performed. There is not much to cook. She cooks the rice and fries' fish when they occasionally buy some or get a good catch in their nearby pond and the daughter-in-law who is also employed prepares the breakfast and one vegetarian gravy dish for the lunch and her own tiffin or so. Balika (name changed) complaints of how cooperative she is as a mother-in-law who allows the later to work; so, the idea of what violation or violence is very different from the urban notions of it. Caste, income and marital status locate the definition of violence.

The 'Matriarch'

In the field work that this paper entailed, and in the village this researcher studied, matriarch is a woman who has birthed a son or more, as that forms the basic criteria to hold power- birthing a son; it needs to be mentioned that when this researcher stated about a man's role in chromosomes and how that detrimental it is, she was brushed off

or laughed off more. One respondent aged Sima Das (67 years, name changed) belonging to *bairagi* community, scheduled castes but not treated as untouchables in this village, claimed that a visit to a nearby temple has helped her birth two sons and it is the same for her daughters-in-law whom she forced to go to that particular temple after they got married and she believes that, that is how they conceived early and birthed boys. For Sima Das it is a happy household though there are often fights between the sons regarding property of whatever little they have, and both the sons might soon end up having separate kitchens or kitchen hours along with their wives and children, while residing in the same house, but that does not matter. She further adds that her first born is a daughter and her own mother-in-law would perpetually hurl slurs for birthing a girl child who is around 50 years of age now and has a family of her own residing in the adjoining block of Hura. Sima Das added that with visits to temple there are other cautions she took like the position of moon which according to her determines the sex of the fetus. This is not about the indigenous practices that existed much before medical advancement in controlling woman's body but the sheer epistemology that there has to be ways to control a woman's body and subjectivity so that patriarchy can be hoisted. Any woman choosing differently or undermining such ways do not come near the ladder of power or the hold to the position of the matriarch. What power does a matriarch have? To the outsider she is just the one voicing oppression but to her own family she does decide upon the minor decision making and the major ones like buying land or vehicle are decided upon by her husband or sons and she does agree to whatever decisions she takes going against her daughters -in-law many at times. So, it is not power but the appearance of it that makes her a matriarch; it is because no other woman in her family is yet to challenge her authority that she thrones herself to be one. To this researcher what stood out be the violation of intimacy is the fact that intimate decisions of family planning between partners or the decision to become a mother are non-existent because these do not come with choices that can be decided or brooded upon, these are mandates that come with the timeline of as soon as possible. Her younger daughter-in-law was suggesting about delaying motherhood three years ago right after she got married and came to this household; but the former made sure that she does comply to

what has to be done and on time; no use of physical violence, none at all she claims, but yes, they did not talk to her properly for months and threatened to send her back. Now, this stands out as one of the most heard of responses that this field gave- it is the sheer fear of being sent off to one's parental family which acts like a threat and often finds women following the dictates. These young women are not illiterate or unskilled or at fault but what makes them comply are the sheer fear of ostracization and shame of labelling that comes with being ousted from the new found patri-virilocal family. Rarely ever do these women quit from their roles as wives and mothers, until their own father steps in to stop physical violence (because other forms of violence and marginalisation like emotional abuse or subtle violences like not talking, misbehaving and so are often not understood by anyone as violence other than the person bearing it, who also often normalises it as the only way the in-laws are expected to behave) or chooses to take her away in cases of infidelity or unfaithful husband and so. In another response a young girl aged 23 years, Dhanasri Mallik belonging to the *vashyi* community and general caste category declared that she is married to a well-off family of Mukherjee's, residing in Adra which is the nearest town of about 20kms in distance, her husband is a school teacher and she herself is a graduate; but she has been staying with her parents for the last one year after her daughter's birth. She clarifies that her in-laws did not force her to stay here with her parents but she herself refrains from going to their place because she believes that she could not make them happy by birthing a girl. She agrees that it is not her fault, and that in this age of empowerment women are not a burden but years of internalising androcentric culture transmitted to her by her parents and grandparents and relatives, friends, peer groups have firmly grounded the root that birthing a boy is the highest form of empowerment probably more empowering than a job or earning employment. In this case there is more than violence there is a believe that she herself could have done better or needs to perform better by birthing a boy next time that she conceives. So, conceiving is almost like a sacred duty performed with utmost vigour and not by choice of responsibility sharing and so. What is more violent than violence is the belief that the victim has of her worth in being eligible only for violence or as that being her only fate. It is how the victim accepts violence instead of voicing against it.

This paper does not claim in its micro-sociological purview that the above-mentioned scenarios prevail everywhere or that none raise voices, or even that the law of the nation is absent about it. The attempt here is to identify that violence works in various ways and one such way is accepting it as 'normal', internalising it and passing it on to the next generation as norm and culture. Violence sustains itself by creating the fear of ostracization, labelling, otherization and the prize or award if following the norms is deification into the sacrificial mother and other idealised roles which often acts as impetus for women to follow suit and marginalise those who want dignity and deviate.

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