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Dharma, Class and Aspiration:
The Shifting Religious Worlds of
Urban Rajasthani Women

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Jennifer D. Ortegren.
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An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Emory University
In pal fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Dharma, Class and Aspiration:
The Shifting Religious Worlds of
Urban Rajasthani Women

By Jennifer D. Ortegren

This dissertation analyzes the relationship between religious and class identities among upwardly mobile Hindu women who have relocated from rural areas of Rajasthan, in northwest India, to Pulan, an urban neighborhood of Udaipur. It examines how upwardly mobile women – members of what I call the "aspirational middle class – are reconfiguring the aesthetic, narrative, and community dynamics of their ritual lives in ways that enable them to form and perform new middle class identities for themselves, their families, and their neighbors in urban areas. In doing so, women are also formulating new middle class models of *dharma*, the socio-moral grounding of Hindu identity that guides behavior according to caste, gender, and life-stage. Often translated as "religion" or "duty," *dharma* helps Hindus understand who they are and who they can or should become. I show how new models of *dharma* expand the traditional boundaries of caste, gender, and life-stage *dharmas* in ways that sanction women's shifting lifestyles, values, and aspirations in the urban middle classes and enable them to embody new middle class moral subjectivities. In analyzing class through the analytical lens of *dharma*, this dissertation outlines how class, like caste, gender, and life-stage operates as a *dharmic* category, introducing new social and moral frameworks for "how to be" in contemporary urban India. I conclude that upwardly mobile women do not simply adopt new values and practices in the process of becoming middle class, but rather, are creating new ways of *being Hindu* within India's middle classes.

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would not have been possible. My brothers and sisters-in-law, Jason, Tabatha, Marco, and Fran, and my nieces, Shelby Lane and Siddha “Bear” (who I am sure would want me to clarify that she is not, in fact, a bear. She is a tiger!), have kept me grounded and laughing throughout this entire process, for which I could not be more grateful. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Ajay Verghese, who became my best friend during fieldwork because only he could share in my triumphs and empathize with my failures, and who has since also become my emergency editor, my favorite comic, my greatest supporter, and much much more.

As this dissertation addresses how women come to understand who they are, and who they can and want to become, I want to thank my grandmothers, Martha Ortegren and Thelma Elwell, whose lives have both inspired, and constructively challenged, my own feminist thinking and who have provided me with powerful models for understanding who I am, and who I can and want to become. I dedicate this dissertation to them, in life and in memory.

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A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

Many terms in this book are shared across Indian languages with slightly different pronunciations, and thus transliterations. For example, in Sanskrit, the name of the god Rama is pronounced with the final –a, but in Hindi is pronounced as Ram, without the final –a. Or the term for vow in Sanskrit is pronounced *vrata*, but in Hindi, *vrat*. Other terms have greater variations; for example, the festival of lights may be called Divali or Dipavali (lit., row of lights). Throughout this dissertation, I will use the Sanskrit transliteration for proper names (Rama, Ganesha) but will leave off the final 'a' for other nouns (such as *prasad* instead of *prasada*, *darshan* instead of *darshana*, *vrat* instead of *vrata*), since these are closer to the vernacular pronunciations used by the women with whom I work. I also retain the Sanskrit transliteration for *dharma*, rather than the Hindi *dharm*, because I draw upon and employ definitions of *dharma* that are outlined in Sanskritic texts.

In contrast to standard academic transliteration of Indian-language terms, I have elected not to use diacritics, on the assumption that those who do not know Indian languages will not know the conventions of the diacritics and that those who do know Indian languages will not need diacritics to correctly pronounce the word. Rather, I render transliterations as close as possible to what will result in correct English pronunciation. Thus, I render both *ś* and *ṣ* as 'sh'; *shakti* (spiritual power) rather than *śakti*. Further, I have indicated aspirated consonants with an 'h,' such as *chaturthi* (fourth day) – as found in Ganesha Chaturthi – rather than rendering the word according to standard academic transliteration of *caturthi*.

I have also deviated from standard Hindi transliteration in translating the claims

of residents to be "in-between" in terms of their class identity. In the phrase "*hum beech men hain*" (we are "in-between"), I have transliterated the long "e" of *beech* (middle) as "ee" rather than the standard "ii" and the short "a" of *hum* (we) as "u" rather than standard "a" because this phrase is central to the argument of this book and it is important to me that this phrase not become associated in readers' minds with either a favored Easter treat or a female dog. For all other phrases and words, standard transliteration is used.

In direct quotations from authors who have used diacritics, the diacritics will not be indicated; so in these cases, the reader will notice, for example, spellings of Shiva as Siva, or Vishnu as Visnu. I have indicated Indian-language terms (except for proper nouns) with italics and, for clarity, have chosen to italicize the 's' that indicates plural in English although this 's' is not the way in which Indian languages indicate plural.

All words spoken in English in quotations are marked with two asterisks, so they appear as *English word*.

INTRODUCTION

Many of my conversations with the Hindu women, whose lives and voices fill the pages of this dissertation, began with marriage. "Are you married?" was one of the first questions women would ask when I met them in Pulan, the small, upwardly mobile urban neighborhood of Udaipur, in the northwestern Indian state of Rajasthan where I lived and conducted ethnographic fieldwork for fifteen months in 2012-2013. Asking about marriage was a way of placing me in their social and religious worlds; one of the most important – if not *the* most important – shifts in a Hindu woman's life is when she gets married. Marriage is a moral obligation for both Hindu women and men as a means of perpetuating the lineage and upholding social and moral order. Marriage signals social, cultural, and ontological changes; only with marriage does a girl become a "woman" and her marital status will inform what she should wear, what she should do in her everyday and ritual life, and what she should be called. As a married woman, she earns the respectful title of Auntie-ji by those younger than her.

Part of the reason women asked me if I was married, I think, was this attempt to understand what they should call me. When I answered in the negative, they would invariably ask my age and express surprise to learn that I was thirty-one. This was because being single at that advanced age is unusual in India and made it difficult to "place" me. I was older than many of the women with whom I spent time, but my status as a single woman made me more akin to a teenager, by which time most of the women in Pulan had gotten married. I eventually learned to point out to women that I was still a student and would get married when I had finished my studies – circumstances that fit an

emerging paradigm for when young women should get married – and neighbors settled on calling me "Jenni Didi," or "older sister Jenni."

I often tried to turn the conversation about my marriage (or lack thereof) into an opportunity to ask women about their own marriages, as I did with Kamala, a young woman my age who lived a few *galis* (lanes) away from me. I had gone to Kamala's house one afternoon to visit with her mother-in-law, Kaisi-bai, who, along with her husband, had been one of the first families to move into Pulan when it was still the *kachi basti* (lit: unripe neighborhood) and who served as a sort of matriarch in the neighboring *galis*. Kaisi-bai was not home, but Kamala offered me chai and as we sipped the hot tea, I asked about her life and family, including her parents, her husband, and her two sons, aged thirteen and ten. In a brief lull in the conversation, Kamala turned to me and asked, "Are you married?"

I gave my usual explanation about being a student and as Kamala nodded her head, I asked when she had gotten married. She explained that her marriage had been arranged when she was eight years old and performed when she was sixteen, at which point she left school and moved from her parent's home in a different neighborhood of Udaipur to her current home in Pulan. Her eldest son was born when she was nineteen and the younger when she was twenty-two. "Have you arranged your sons' marriages?" I asked. She shook her head no and said, "First, they should study and find good jobs and *settle*. Then they will get married." She noted that the practice of postponing marriage for the purpose of education and employment is one of the biggest differences between her generation and that of her parents, which prompted me to ask her how she felt about

the fact that her parents had arranged for her to be married so young. “Does that seem good to you?” I asked. She paused for a moment and replied:

> It wasn’t bad or good, but now there are a lot of differences. What our parents believed then, that was correct (*sahi*), but what we believe is correct now is different.

Significantly, Kamala does not critique her parents’ decisions about her marriage. What they did was “correct” for their particular time and circumstances. Yet, as Kamala’s life has changed with upward mobility, and she had developed new aspirations for her children that were not necessarily available to her parents, she can and must construct new understandings of what is “correct.”

In this dissertation, I analyze shifts in the ritual practices of upwardly mobile, Hindu women who have relocated from rural areas of Rajasthan to Pulan in order to understand the relationship between religious and class identities and practices in contemporary India. The residents of Pulan are members of what I call the “aspirational middle class”; they are upwardly mobile, but have limited access to the social and economic resources that would secure the middle class status to which they aspire. In exploring the role of religion and religious practices in constructing and achieving middle class identities, I focus on the following interrelated issues. First, I examine how taking up new aesthetic, narrative, and ritual practices that conform to emerging middle class sensibilities enables women in Pulan to perform new class identities for themselves, their families, and their neighborhood. Second, I analyze how changes in religious practices illuminate shifts in Hindu *dharma*, the socio-moral grounding of Hindu identity. Derived from the Sanskrit root *dhr*, meaning “to hold, support, maintain,” *dharma* operates at

both universal and individual levels. At the universal level, *dharma* is that which "holds the world together," a metaphysical concept often translated as "religion" or "way of life," and at the individual level as one's "duty," or that which individuals must do to help hold the world together. *Dharma* guides Hindu behavior and helps them understand who they are, who they can or should become, and what is "correct" – to use Kamala's language – behavior.

Although classical models of *dharma* demarcate caste, life-stage, and gender (*varnashramadharma* and *stridharma*, respectively) as the categories that shape the social and moral obligations of individual Hindus, this dissertation adds the category of class as informing and shaping moral being. I argue that in changing their everyday and ritual practices, women in Pulan are formulating new models of *dharma* that help to sanction their emerging class aspirations and urban lifestyles within traditional religious frameworks. They are not simply experimenting with new ways of being middle class; they are developing new ways of *being Hindu* within the middle classes. As Kamala's words suggest, they are formulating and validating new understandings of what is "correct" for Hindus *as Hindus*.

This approach brings discussions of religion to bear on scholarship in anthropology, sociology, women's studies, and political science regarding India's "new middle classes," and vice versa. I draw on *dharma* – both as that which "holds the world together" and that which is "correct" behavior for individuals to help hold that world together – as an analytical lens through which to understand how upwardly mobile women experience, accommodate, experiment with, and/or resist new of ways of "being" in the rapidly shifting world around them. Unlike many scholars in the social sciences,

my work analyzes gender and caste as indigenous, Hindu categories of moral selfhood, rather than primarily as socio-political identities, and offers a model for understanding how new middle class values and identities are evaluated, negotiated, sanctioned and embodied through the everyday religious practices that shape moral subjectivity. This approach expands the understandings of both religion and class and helps to recognize the ways in which class operates as a religious category in contemporary urban India.

The Shifting Landscapes of Udaipur

> The first night I spent in to Udaipur in 2005, I wrote the following in my journal: So I've arrived. Though I had a two-hour delay in Delhi, I finally made it to the single-strip airport that is Udaipur. I caught a taxi – with spider webs and all – and quickly learned to stare fixed out the side window so as not to see the cars, rickshaws, cyclists or cows in the middle of the highway – which the driver barely missed. But I am already more comfortable in Udaipur because of the rural feel of it.

When I made that same trip seven years later, almost to the day, to begin dissertation fieldwork in 2012, the airport, the city, and I had all changed. The rocky, desert landscape surrounding the runway was the same, but the single-story concrete airport had been replaced by a looming, two-story, modern building with glass walls and shiny steel. I did not walk across the hot, asphalt of the tarmac, but instead exited into one of two jet-ways linking the plane to the air-conditioned airport. The porcelain squat-toilets of the old airport had been replaced by western-style toilets, and electric hand-dryers eliminated the need for the bathroom attendant who had handed me toilet paper and paper towels seven

years before. I no longer feared the traffic and instead of staring out the window in trepid silence, I engaged the taxi driver in conversation, as eager to practice the Hindi I had learned in a year-long immersion program two years before as he was to exercise his broken English and knowledge of American culture.

Most tourists who fly to Udaipur enter the city to the south, along a new interstate that leads from the airport in Dabok, 35 kilometers east of the city, past the flat, arid plains and rural agricultural plots of the Rajasthani desert and into the lush, green hills of the Aravallis that surround the city. Relics of the ancient walls and battlements that protected this former capital of the Mewar dynasty – a royal dynasty of Rajputs, the mal caste that has long been dominant in Rajasthan – are still visible high along the hills that form a majestic backdrop to the city and which house expansive marble, granite, and mineral mines that attract migrant workers from throughout rural, southern Rajasthan. The tranquility of the Aravallis soon gives way to the increasingly narrow and crowded streets that lead to the Old City at the center of Udaipur. The boundaries of the Old City are marked by large stone walls erected by Maharana Udai Sing II (1520-1572) when the capital of the Mewar kingdom was relocated from Chittor to Udaipur. The royal heritage of the city remains visible in preserved *havelis* (mansions with distinctive Mewari architectural styles) that have been converted into hotels and the enormous city palace complex that sits high atop the steep eastern bank of Lake Pichola, a large man-made lake that is perhaps the most distinguishing feature of this desert city. In the center of Lake Pichola sits the smaller, but equally stunning, Lake Palace, which was converted into a five-star hotel in the 1970s and made famous when it was featured in parts of the James Bond movie *Octopussy*. To the west of the city, atop a high hill, sits the Monsoon Palace,

whose decay is indiscernible when it is lit up at night, shining like a beacon of Udaipur's erstwhile royal heritage.[1]

Udaipur's Lake Palace
(photo courtesy of Courtney D'Aquino)

Due to the majestic palaces, and the twinkling lights that reflect in the lake from the surrounding buildings each night, Udaipur is hailed in guidebooks as the "Venice of the East" and "the most romantic city in India." In the fall and winter, the Old City is overrun with international and domestic visitors who crowd into the hotels built up around the lake, eager to take in the picturesque views from rooftop restaurants and to indulge in traditional dance and puppet performances hosted in various hotels. Within the Old City, "traditional" Rajasthani culture is consciously preserved alongside modern

[1] For a discussion of how this architecture and the royal heritage it represents continues to speak to the members of the Rajput caste, the ruling caste of the Mewars, see Harlan (1992). For the role of the tourist industry in constructing and maintaining this emphasis on history, see Bautes (2007)

amenities that will attract tourist dollars; shops selling Indian clothing, miniature paintings, and camel-leather goods crowd next to “German bakeries” advertising espresso, chocolate cake, and wireless internet. Along the narrow, winding streets further away from main tourist areas, three-story buildings, which often house multiple families living in single rooms, rise up in tightly-packed neighborhoods. The Hindu and Muslim communities who reside here can trace their families’ histories in Udaipur back multiple generations, and many claim relation to the noblemen who once served in the court of the Maharanas (Harlan 1992, 4).

City Palace Complex
(photo courtesy of Courtney D’Aquino)

Despite a persistent reputation that Rajasthan is one of the most conservative states in India, and that Mewar is the area within Rajasthan most resistant to social

change, Udaipur is a city in transition.[2] Lindsey Harlan, who conducted ethnographic fieldwork among Rajput women in Udaipur in the early 1990s described the city as such:

> In the old and new cities alike there are languid camels pulling carts, lines of burros transporting construction materials, cows napping, pariah dogs (all of which bear a strong family resemblance), and of course everywhere people, sometimes on bicycles or in horse carts, less often in auto rickshaws or motor scooters, and only occasionally in automobiles. Some of the men are dressed in western trousers; many others wear turbans and dhotis, long pieces of cloth wound about the waist, pulled between the legs, and tucked into the waist in the back. Some of the women wear saris, long the fashion elsewhere in India but relatively recent arrivals in Rajasthan; others don varieties of traditional Rajasthani dress, consisting chiefly of bright blouses, tight vests, and long flowing skirts (1992, 3).

While Harlan's description of the Old City remains relatively accurate today, the landscape of the "new cities" of suburban Udaipur are radically different. In these rapidly expanding neighborhoods, where few foreigners venture, the growing presence of the "foreign" is almost more conspicuous than in the Old City.

Unlike most tourists, I usually entered Udaipur to the north toward Fatehpura, a suburb of the city where Seva Mandir is headquartered. Like many of Udaipur's suburbs, Fatehpura is rapidly growing, modernizing, and diversifying, blending the "global" and the "local." Billboards for new, multi-story malls advertise foreign stores such as Nike or

[2] Harlan notes this reputation and describes that Rajput residents in Udaipur, Jodhpur and Jaipur confirm that Udaipur is "more backward" than other places (1992, 2). I found similar responses among people in Jaipur and Udaipur who pointed to Udaipur as a "quieter" place where things are "slower" than the fast-paced life of larger cities.

United Colors of Benetton and posters for upcoming films – from both Bollywood and Hollywood – that will appear in the malls' air-conditioned, multi-screen cineplexes. Apartment high-rises in the process of being built are fronted with signs displaying the luxury amenities that will be available upon completion, such as indoor gyms, spas, and rooftop pools. Cars line the streets in front of Reliance Fresh and Big Bazar, newly-popular chain-stores that offer produce, Indian and foreign foodstuffs, clothing, cookware, home-décor, and electronics items all in one location. BMWs jockey for space on the road with young men dressed in jeans and brightly colored t-shirts, driving shiny new motorcycles, and teenaged girls, dressed in tight jeans and western-style blouses, driving motor-scooters. Older women, themselves driving scooters or cars, wear synthetic saris, *salwar-kamiz* suits of loose pants and long tunics, and even loose western-style pants and blouses, like their male counterparts who dress primarily in Western-style business clothes.

These changes in architecture, aesthetics, and amenities reflect recent shifts in the in the broader social, cultural and economic landscapes of much of urban India. Following economic liberalization in the early 1990s, an influx of foreign products, mass media, and new jobs began to reshape the everyday lives of many Indians and created new opportunities for rapid upward socio-economic mobility. These changes ushered in what scholars call India's "new middle classes."

India's "New Middle Classes"

The "new" of the new middle classes refers not only to the fact that their acquisition of wealth and middle class status is relatively recent, but to the fact that the

middle classes are becoming defined in new ways. Although the emergence of the new middle classes throughout the globalizing world remains under-theorized,[3] the literature regarding the culture formations of "new middle class" in post-liberalized India continues to grow.

Unlike the "middle class" that emerged in colonial India, which was marked by access to English education, employment in the Indian Civil Service, and high-caste status, or the post-independence "middle class" that was similarly distinguished in terms of education and occupation in the state-run Indian Administrative Service, the neo-liberal "new middle classes" are marked primarily by new consumption practices and lifestyle patterns. The "Gandhian ideals of austerity" and production-based identities that marked the post-Independence middle class have given way to extravagant displays of wealth and consumer-based middle class identities rooted in the capacity to participate in a globalized marketplace. As Leela Fernandes notes, "gaining access to membership in the new middle class in liberalizing India…is not merely a question of money but of linguistic and aesthetic knowledge and respectability" (2006, 34). Entering today's new middle classes is tied less to income, occupation, or land ownership than to learning how to act, look and sound middle class in the correct ways.

To discuss the new middle classes in India is difficult because of the nebulous and shifting boundaries of what makes them "middle" both in terms of differentiation from those above or below, and in terms of internal cohesion. The Center for Global Development, based in Washington D.C. and London, estimates India's middle class, when defined as "having reasonable economic security in today's globalized world," to

[3] Similar shifts and emerging middle classes are occurring throughout the globalizing world. For an excellent introduction to the anthropological approaches in a variety of contexts, see Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty, 2003.

be around 70 million people, or less that than 10 percent of the Indian population.[4] Yet, this research, and most like it, relies on traditional markers such as income, occupation, property, assets, and/or capacity for consumption of durable goods. It does not account for those who subjectively identify as middle class not just as an economic position, but as a social, cultural, and moral positionality. More recent ethnographic research shows that the population of Indians who self-describe as middle class is expanding as more products and institutions associated with middle class lifestyles become accessible across a wider demographic (Derné 2008; Dickey 2012; Saavala 2001, 2010; Waghorne 2004). Increased access to education, new occupational trajectories, and public consumer cultures that have been historically accessible only to the social and economic elite are becoming more widely available across diverse caste, communal, and regional boundaries, although these resources are not evenly distributed (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995; Donner and De Neve 2011; Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase 2009; Oza 2012).

Ethnographic approaches to class in India examine the "on the ground," everyday ways in which liberalization and globalization impact the overlapping frames of consumer cultures, politics, and gender. Practices related to leisure and space (Brosius 2002; Nisbett 2006; Srivastava 2012), fashion (Lukose 2009; in Nepal, see Liechty), television, film and advertising (Derné 2008; Dwyer 2014; Mankekar 1999; Mazarella 2003; Rajagopal 1999), and work (Atmavilas 2008; Nisbett 2009; Radhakrishnan 2011) have all been highlighted as sites for understanding how middle class identities and values are negotiated and performed. Religious sites and practices have also been highlighted as playing a critical role in the construction and performance of middle class

[4] http://www.cgdev.org/doc/2013_MiddleClassIndia_TechnicalNote_CGDNote.pdf. Accessed 7/15/14.

identities. New practices and architecture in both urban and rural homes (Hancock 1999; Wadley 2000a; 2000b), temples (Brosius 2010; Waghorne 2004), and roadside shrines (Flueckiger 2015) display the cultural, economic, and religious capacity to conform to middle class sensibilities that can heighten the class status of the family. Minna Saavala has suggested that for lower class and lower caste families, adopting practices that have traditionally been performed by higher class and higher caste communities can be understood as a "strategy of upward mobility" (2001; 2010). New media, including god posters, tape recordings, comic books, ritual pamphlets, and television serials about Hindu gods help to promote new, pan-North Indian aesthetics for religious practices that inform the everyday Hindus' understanding and experience of middle class religiosity (Babb and Wadley 1995).

An underlying current of much of this work is shifting paradigms of gender, morality, and the family as it intersects with the "consumer-citizen." As Mark Liechty contends, based on his work with middle class communities in contemporary Nepal, "middle class notions of propriety are typically rooted in a sense of community: the middle class is a moral community that "restrains" its members in a sphere of "suitable" behaviors" (2003, 72. See also Saavala 2010), which are determined in connection, and contention, with other predominant social hierarchies in South Asia such as caste and gender.

Signs of upward mobility, shifting consumer cultures, and emerging middle class lifestyles and religious practices are apparent throughout Udaipur. Yet, perhaps due to its small size and distance from other urban centers in southeastern Rajasthan, these changes have only come recently and exist side-by-side with signs of older ways of life. Auto-

rickshaws and tempos (large rickshaws that run pre-set routes like a bus system) remain popular modes of transportation and the occasional cart pulled by a camel can still be seen. Although less common than in the Old City, cows and water buffalo still roam the streets and donkeys continue to provide a valuable means of transporting heavy materials. Single-room "general stores" open to the street, in which the proprietor navigates the tightly packed shelves to retrieve packets of laundry detergent, biscuits, or spices, and open-air produce markets set up each evening along the streets, remain the preferred and most affordable options for many of the city's residents who crowd together in the early hours of the evening to compare prices and quality and eventually make their purchases.

Many of the families who make up Udaipur's "new middle classes" – such as those like Kamala's family – are rural migrants who have relocated to the city in the past twenty to thirty years in search of work, and are members of what I call the "aspirational middle class." They are upwardly mobile, but have limited access to the social and economic resources that would secure their middle class status. As new neighborhoods spring up seemingly overnight in whatever spaces are available, these migrant families live side-by-side with their more established, elite counterparts – who inform the newcomers' understandings of, and aspirations for, middle class status – and with diverse neighbors from various caste, class, geographic and religious backgrounds. Although this growing population of upwardly mobile residents is beginning to experiment with the new consumer cultures and lifestyles that are increasingly available in the city, including those related to education, fashion, and leisure, the formation of their middle class identities is restrained by both socio-economic resources and continued commitments to

the values and religious ideals of their rural communities and heritage, which play a critical role in shaping their understandings of what is "correct" – *dharmic* – behavior.

Dharma *in Rajasthan*

The values of these rural communities and the particular heritage of Rajasthan play an important role in negotiating what is "correct" for contemporary Rajasthani women. Like the city itself, which is defined as much by the preservation of a royal, Mewar heritage as by the cultivation of visible markers of modern luxury, members of the aspirational middle class struggle to balance their new, urban, middle class aspirations and lifestyles with their commitments to the "traditional" values, ideals, and practices of the village. In Rajasthan, these "traditional" values are deeply embedded in the regional history of the Rajputs. Historically, the socio-politically dominant and idealized caste in Rajasthan has been the royal and mal caste of the Rajputs. The presence of the Rajputs has been noted as early as the ninth century BCE and is lauded through song, stories, and histories of Rajasthan for their masculinity, mal prowess, and resistance to both Mughal and British influence (Unnithan-Kumar 1997). Rajasthan literally translates as the "land of kings" and the Rajputs are the "son of kings," those who are the rightful heirs to the land, and who perpetuate a distinctive regional ethos of bravery and strength. As Antoinette DeNapoli notes:

> The widespread association made between Rajasthan and Rajputs, between a specific land a specific lass of people, has perpetuated a distinctive ethos of the mal Rajput, in which the "peculiarly and uniquely" Rajput ideals of bravery, self-sacrifice, honor, and the protection of truth in the name of a generalized Hindu

> *dharm* are seen as having made Rajasthan the heroic land that many Rajasthanis and non-Rajasthanis imagine it to be (2014, 120. See also Hitchcock 1958; Harlan 2003; Gold 2001).

A distinct sense of Kshatriya (warrior caste-group) identity permeates Rajasthani culture and shapes the everyday religious lives of most communities - both Rajput and non-Rajput. To be Rajasthani is, in many ways, to be linked to Rajput identity, which is preserved in in narrative, myth, architecture, fashion, ritual practice and tourist packages (Weisgrau and Henderson 2007).

The ethics of protection, bravery, and honor and shame that shape Rajput identity is rooted in particular understandings of gender and the religious and social roles of women. As Maya Unnithan-Kumar suggests:

> Both in the self-presentations of the Rajputs as well as in the writing of commentators on the the [sic] Rajput state, references to women are used to describe the characteristics which distinguish the Rajputs form other groups and people in Rajasthan and elsewhere in India (1997, 47).

The bravery and strength of Rajput men is evaluated and articulated in terms of their capacity to protect women, and in turn, reflected in the capacity of their wives – through the strength of their ritual practices – to protect them (Harlan 1992; 2003).

Rajput women's ritual and everyday practices are a significant source of prestige, status, and honor for Rajput, and by extension, Rajasthani communities. Preserving traditional values and domestic roles for women is one way of preserving and maintaining this prestige (Harlan 1992, 37). Perhaps the most obvious and pervasive feature of Rajput culture as it relates to the everyday lives of Rajasthani women has been

the practice of *purdah* (lit: curtain). Historically, *purdah* referred to the division of the household – particularly the royal household – into separate quarters: women's quarters (the *zanana*) and men's quarters (the *mardana).* While married women were not traditionally allowed entrance into men's quarters, husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons could enter women's quarters for brief visits. While *purdah* historically refers to the literal, physical separation of male and female space, it has translated into the practice of veiling (*ghungat*) – whereby women cover their entire faces in the presence of men in the home – and other forms of comportment that maintain physical separation and women's seclusion even within homes that do not have separate gendered quarters. Moreover, the practice of *purdah* has traditionally restricted women's movement outside of home for both everyday and ritual practices (Harlan 1992; Wadley 1984)[5], although it is important to note that women's restricted behavior is not a sign of their powerlessness, and in some ways may enable other forms of mobility and agency.[6]

Perhaps most importantly, maintaining *purdah* and women's seclusion within the home has historically been interpreted in Rajasthan as a sign of wealth. Only families that are not economically dependent on the income acquired through women's extra-domestic work can afford for women to remain in the home. Women's work outside of the home – or lack thereof – becomes a marker of her husband's wealth and status and helps to perform social proximity to the Rajput nobility (Unnitahn-Kumar 2997, 66). For women

[5] The persistence of a noticeable lack of Rajasthani women's presence in public spaces was suggested to me when an American friend – who was on a three-week tour of South Asia and had spent ten days in South India (Kerala, Karnataka and Goa) – came to meet me in Udaipur. We spent two days in Udaipur and on our third day, when we had arrived in Jaipur, she abruptly turned to me and said, "Where are all the women in this place?! I feel like I haven't seen *any* women!"

[6] See Raheja and Gold (1994) for a discussions of women's resistance to the implications of veiling and the ways in which they may manipulate it to acquire agency for themselves, and Abraham (2010) for the role of veiling in constructing space. See Abu-Lughod (1986) for a similar discussion among Bedouin women in Egypt.

in lower castes and classes, who must work outside of the home, the practices of *purdah* may be more flexible (although they may be expected to maintain full *ghungat* while engaging in manual labor), but the Rajput model of *purdah* continues to informs the ideals of lower class, lower caste Rajasthanis. Although the institution of *purdah* can be found among Muslim and Hindu communities throughout India and beyond, within Rajasthan, it remains closely linked to Rajput ideals women's *sharm* (modesty) and is "an extremely cogent symbol…[that] summarizes what is deemed admirable in the character of Rajput women and serves as a standard for evaluating behavior" (Harlan 1992, 39).

Another Rajput ideal that has become pervasive throughout Rajasthan is that of a woman serving as a *pativratas (*lit: one who has made a vow to their husband). Just as it is a Rajput man's *dharma* – or religious, moral obligation – as a Kshatriya warrior to protect his wife, family, and community through martial means, so too it is the *dharma* of the Rajput woman to protect her husband and his family through devotion to both him and his family's *kuldevi* (family goddess). A breach in her capacity to uphold this *dharmic* ethic of protection can threaten the safety and security of the family and the broader community. The concept of a *pativrata* is not unique to Rajput women, although Rajput women do see "their Rajput constitution as enabling them to be particularly good *pativratas*" (Harlan 1994, 80) as they are born with the capacity to uphold the ethics of protection and sacrifice that define their caste. A good wife is synonymous with being a *patrivrata* and she expresses her devotion in two ways; first, she selflessly serves her husband and his family in their everyday, domestic lives and, second, she performs *vrats* (fasts/vows) for both his *kuldevi* and (usually) Shiva. Often these *vrats* center around protecting her husband and the family through the ritual power and favor she generates

through ritual fasting. On the one hand, she has the power to protect him. On the other, should he die, she can be considered culpable.

These particular Rajput understandings of how women's bodies and practices form the cornerstone of social prestige – and *dharmic* order – for their husbands, families, and communities remain powerful in contemporary Rajasthan; but it is also these *dharmic* ideals related to caste, gender, and region that are being challenged by emerging middle class ideals. The boundaries and expectations of proper *dharmic* behavior are changing in relationship to geographic, social and economic mobility and new middle class sensibilities. Restrictions on food and eating practices according to *jati* are being loosened in the public contexts of modern India, such as in schools, workplaces, and restaurants. As girls' access to higher education increases, they are granted greater opportunities and freedoms outside of the home, and are imagining futures for themselves that are sometimes radically different than those of their newly urbanized mothers and rural grandmothers. Traditional joint family structures in rural areas are being replaced by nuclear family models in urban areas, fostering new relationships between husbands and wives and diverse neighbors, and extending the traditional boundaries of caste and gendered *dharma*. The sense of the community to which one belongs, and is obligated, is being refashioned from caste-homogenous village communities to the diverse, urban neighborhood, shaped by shared class identities. Yet, class does not simply disrupt traditional *dharmic* categories; rather, it operates as a *dharmic* category itself, becoming interwoven with and mutually constitutive of the *dharmas* of caste, gender, and age.

Defining Dharma

Dharma is one of the most important categories of Hindu religious thought and practice, but is notoriously difficult to define for is varied and nuanced meanings. Derived from the Sanskrit root *dhr*, meaning "to hold, support, maintain," *dharma* orders the social, ritual, and moral world of Hindus. Alternatively defined as "religion" or "way of life," as well as "ethics" or "duty," *dharma* has both an ontological and normative dimension. In its ontological dimension, *dharma* may be characterized as:

> the cosmic ordering principle that upholds and promotes the evolution of the universe as a whole and of each of its individual parts. *Dharma* structures the universe as a vast cosmic ecosystem, an intricate network of symbiotic relations among interdependent parts, in which each part has a specific function to perform that contributes to the whole system. *Dharma* establishes each part in its proper place and ensures that every aspect of the cosmic system is properly balanced and coordinated with every other aspect and thus contributes the maximum to its own evolution and to the evolution of the whole system (Holdrege 2004, 213-214).

Ontologically, *dharma* functions as a cosmic principle, asserting that each class of natural being has an inherent function and it is each being's *dharma* to fulfill that function for the sake maintaining both social and cosmic order. As Holdrege beautifully notes, "it is the *dharma* of the sun to shine, it is the *dharma* of the river to flow, it is the *dharma* of the bee to make honey, and it is the *dharma* of the cow to give milk" (214).

The normative dimension of *dharma* refers to ways this cosmic principle comes to order the everyday social, moral and ritual lives of humans, particularly within a

brahmanical caste hierarchy that has come to dominate understandings of Hinduism within and outside of the tradition. At the human level,

> the principle of *dharma*, operating in consonance with the cosmic law of *karma* to ensure that each individual's inherent nature corresponds to the code of conduct, or duty, allotted to that individual by virtue of the circumstances of his or her birth and social status" (Holdredge 2004, 214).

At the level of the individual, *dharma* has come to mean something loosely translated as "duty," "law," "ethics," and even "moral conduct" or "right way of living," which are most commonly recognized as operating according to *dharmic* stratifications of caste, life-stage, and gender. Each individual Hindu man or woman has his or her own *dharma* (*svadharma*), or particular obligations to fulfill – defined by the categories of gender, age, caste – to help maintain both the social and cosmic *dharmic* order. The *dharmic* obligations of individuals, however, are not fixed; they shift over the course of one's lifetime and can vary within and across regions or communities. Although *dharma* is often associated with what is assumed to be a rigid caste system in India, the concept of *dharma*, as it has developed in both textual and everyday traditions, is delineated and operates as a fluid and flexible category that, while always operative as a cosmic principle of moral order, is defined, enacted, and upheld according to localized standards.

The language of *dharma* can be traced to the earliest Vedic *samhita* (hymn) of the Rig Veda (1500-1200 BCE), where the term is invoked with a broad range of possible meanings, but functions primarily to uphold *rita*, "the principle of cosmic order that ensures the integrated functioning of the natural order, divine order, human order, and sacrificial order" (Holdrege 2004, 214; Horsch and Brereton 2004). In this early Vedic

context, *dharma* is upheld and enacted primarily through the ritual and sacrificial practices of Brahmin priests.

Yet, as Patrick Olivelle demonstrates, the term *dharma* appears relatively infrequently in entire corpus of the Vedas. He suggests that, "*dharma* was at best a marginal term and concept within the vocabulary of these [Vedic] texts, and it did not play a central role in the religious world depicted in them" (2004, 492). Within the middle and late Vedic texts of the Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and the Upanishads (800-300 BCE), *dharma* is invoked primarily to establish a relationship between the Vedic god Varuna – who is viewed as the *dharmapati* (father/lord of *dharma*) overseeing cosmic *dharmic* order – and the human king – who serves as the *dharmapati* of human and earthly *dharmic* order. In this usage, "*dharma* was part of the specialized vocabulary associated with royalty…[and] in all likelihood, *dharma* referred to social order and the laws of society that the king was obligated to enforce." that was then abstracted as a cosmic force standing above the king (Olivelle 2004, 503).

Shifts in Mimamsa hermeneutical and philosophical thought in the 3rd century BCE began to expand the category of *dharma* beyond the ritual realm to include socio-cultural practice, and *dharma* began to supersede *rita* as an understanding of cosmic order. Yet, it was only with the rise of Buddhism and the reign of the Buddhist Indian king, Ashoka (304-232 BCE), that *dharma* became central to Hindu thought, not only in religious terms, but as a discourse of social power. As Olivelle explains,

> once *dharma* had become a central concept in the religious discourse of Buddhism and once it had penetrated the general vocabulary of ethics especially through its adoption by the Maruya emperors, certainly by Asoka and possibly by

> his predecessors, in developing an imperial theology, Brahminical theologians had no choice but to define their own religion, ethics, and way of life in terms of *dharma* (2010, 31).

This reaction to Buddhism prompted the emergence of the Dharmashastras (treatises related to *dharma*) – written between the 5th and 2nd centuries BCE – which delineate in a more comprehensive and cogent form how *dharma* operates in the everyday lives of Hindus as both a cosmic and social moral order.

Dharma *in the Dharmashastras*

Like earlier *shastric* (from the Sanskrit root *shas*, meaning "instruct") texts, which serve as instruction manuals for understanding and performing Vedic rituals, the Dharmashastras offer instructions for understanding the nature and proper performance of *dharma*. The corpus of the *dharmashastric* texts includes the *Dharma Sutras*, academic treatises written in aphoristic form concerned with rules and conduct, the *Dharma Shastras*, treatises on *dharmic* legal and social codes of conduct written in prose, and various commentaries (*bhyasa*) and digests (*nibandha*), which analyze the meanings of specific *sutras* and organize *sutras* according to content. This *dharmashastric* literature introduces the conception of *varnashramadharma*, or "duty" according to the parallel, but interwoven, systems of *varna* (caste-group[7]) and *ashrama* (life-stage). The four *varnas* include: Brahmins, the priestly, scholar-teachers whose duty was to uphold cosmic *dharma* through ritual practice; Kshatriyas, the kings and military rulers whose duty was to protect the people and maintain a functioning kingdom; Vaishyas, the

[7] Although *varna* is often translated as "class," referring to a class of beings who share internal qualities (*guna*), which distinguish them from others in different classes in the ritual and social hierarchy, I translate it here as "caste-group" to avoid confusion with "class" as a modern socio-economic and cultural category.

merchants, farmers, and artisans whose duty was to promote and maintain the economics system of society; and Shudras, the servant class whose responsibility was to serve members of the three higher twice-born (*dvijana*) *varnas*.[8]

The *varna* classification intersects with four *ashrama* life-stages, which are primarily expounded in terms of the male Brahmin, and include: *brahmachariya*, the celibate, student life-stage during which one's duty is to be devoted to a *guru* and learn the Vedas; *grihastha*, the married, householder life-stage whose duty is to reproduce a male lineage, support his son in study and his father in retirement, and perform rituals and work appropriate to his caste for the maintenance of social and cosmic *dharma*; *vanaprasta*, the forest-dwelling stage during which one begins to retreat from householder duties; and *sanyasa*, the state of renunciation and full withdrawal from the world, during which one commits to attaining *moksha*, or release from the cycle of rebirth. Although even the earliest Dharmasutra literature delineates the ritual and social obligations of *varna* and *ashrama*, and punishments for infractions of these obligations, the most celebrated of the Dharmashastra texts is the *Manava Dharmashastra* or *Manusmriti*, a code of law attributed to Manu (100-200 CE). Perhaps the most significant contribution of Manu's Code of Law was a reformulation of the *ashramas* as successive life-stages to be completed over the course of one lifetime; whereas earlier texts suggest that, following the *brahmachariya* life-stage, a Brahmin male may choose the life of a householder *or* the life of a renunciant, Manu declares that one must first fulfill the *dharmic* obligations of the householder life-stage before entering the renunciant life-stage (Olivelle 1992).

[8] Male members of the three highest *varnas* are considered "twice-born" (*dvijana*) because they undergo a "second birth" in the Vedic initiation right of *upanayana* (sacred thread ritual).

The *varnashramadharma* system exemplifies one of the most critical aspects of *dharma*, namely that it is a relational and relative category that changes over time. The *dharmic* obligations of caste and life-stage are not defined only, or even primarily, in terms of the individuals themselves, but in terms of others in the broader system. Both hierarchy *and* reciprocity[9] characterize the caste system and, to a lesser extent, the *ashrama* system.[10] There is no one *dharma* for all people, or even all people within a particular caste or life-stage – the *dharma* of the Brahmin student differs from that of the Brahmin householder, which differs from that of Kshatriya householder, and so on. Within the *varna* system is a complex caste system arranged according to *jati* (birth), a hierarchical caste system rooted in where and of what "kind" one is born. This more nuanced *jati* hierarchy is neither universal nor fixed. The social hierarchy of *jati* groups within a *varna* and/or a within a particular community vary across region; some Brahmin *jatis* may be more socially and ritually powerful than other Brahmin *jatis* in one state or village, but the same might not be true in other areas.

Yet, it is important to note that only men from the twice-born castes – Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya – can fully participate in the Brahminic *varnashramadharma* system. Shudra men, and women of all castes, have *dharmic* responsibilities according to their *varna* (and *jati*), but have neither the rights nor the same responsibilities of the *ashramas* (including the *upanayana* ritual that confers twice-born status), the option to study the Vedas, perform sacrifices, or seek renunciation. Shudras and women do participate in the institute of marriage and, therefore, the householder life-stage, but their married lives are

[9] See for example, discussions of the *jajmani*, or reciprocal client-patron, relationships in rural India in Wiser 1936; Raheja 1988; Wadley 1994.
[10] For example, part of the responsibility of the householder male is to support both his son in the student life-stage and his father in the retirement stage who have and will support him as well.

not granted the status of an *ashrama* (Holdredge 234; Olivelle 1992). Gender does play a critical role in shaping one's *dharma*, however. *Varnashramadharma* implicitly includes gender as a *dharmic* category insofar as it applies only to men, but the *dharma* of women – *stridharma* – is separate. Although there are no texts explicitly dedicated to outlining the rights and responsibilities of women and *stridharma*, the *Manusmriti* speaks at length about how women are to be revered, in order to ensure the prosperity of the family, but also to be controlled or punished for violating certain moral codes.

The fundamental principle underlying Brahminic *stridharma* is that women should never be independent and, as such, much of the guidelines for or about women in the *Manusmriti* are explained in relationship to men. For example, the life-stages of a woman are implied in the dictum that a woman should be guarded in her childhood by her father, in her youth by her husband, and in her old age by her son (*Manusmriti* 9.3). These guidelines of protection coincide with what are usually thought of as the three life-stages of women: a daughter; wife/daughter-in-law; and widow/mother-in-law. Unlike men, whose *dharmic* rights and responsibilities shift in each successive *ashrama*, the *dharma* of women – which is synonymous with the *dharma* of "wives" – is more narrowly focused around the family. As a daughter, a girl should care for her father and family as preparation to become a good wife. As a wife, a woman should be unwavering in her devotion to her husband and his family, and help her husband to fulfill his own *dharmic* duties through shared ritual practices and bearing him a son. This devotion should continue even after his death, when she enters into widowhood and withdraws as much as possible from everyday life.

Dharma *and* Achara: *The Fluidity of* Dharma

The Dharmashastras succeeded in codifying a brahmanical socio-ritual hierarchy, based on relative purity and pollution, which secured the superiority of Brahmin men. While this hierarchy continues to be strongly associated with Hinduism and Indian society more broadly, the *dharmashastric* texts were – and are – only one source for determining moral conduct that were, themselves, articulated in a particular time and place. The *dharmashastric* literature itself recognizes the extra-textual sources of *dharma*. Although the source of *dharma* is, according to Brahminical sources, first and foremost the *shruti*, revealed texts of the Vedas, the secondary sources of *dharma* include *smriti*, the "remembered" texts written by priests and sages (including, for example, the epics and Puranas), and *achara*, or "normative conduct." As Donald Davis outlines, while the Vedas are the starting point for all Mimamsa philosophers, "the Vedas have power and authority only insofar as it is known, understood, and followed by human beings" (2004, 815). The role of individuals in determining *dharma* is critical for articulating *dharma* in particular contexts. Although there is always a *dharmic*, morally correct way to behave, what that behavior is must be carefully weighed in any given circumstances not only against texts, but the standards of the particular community, or *achara*.

Achara is most commonly translated as "custom" or "normative conduct," although Davis (2010) notes the multiple glosses of the term, including its relationship to *shila* (habits; propensities) and *anusthana* (performance), and suggests an alternative definition as "*dharma* in practice." *Achara* is "custom" in the sense that is passed down over time and across generations, but is more fluid and flexible as the particular values and practices of *achara* must be continually authorized within specific communities as

appropriate in any given time. *Achara* becomes linked to *dharma* – and in fact, becomes *dharma* –as localized customs are authorized by leaders in the community who model *sadachara* or *sistachara* (conduct of virtuous people and learned people, respectively); they define what is "good" or *dharmic*, based on what "good" or "learned" people already do. Through this circular logic, *achara* and *dharma* become mutually constitutive. Insofar as the proper conduct of *achara* must be learned, and carries ideals, values, and notions of what is good or right from past generations into the present, modifying them as necessary to suit particular circumstances, "all *acara* is *dharma* and, in fact, constitutes the practical embodiment and performance of *dharma*" (Davis 2004, 824). In this sense, to abide by one's *dharma* is to abide by localized customs and expectations, and *dharma* is operative only insofar as it is "practical" and applicable to local contexts.

Although the Dharmashastras point to Brahmins – who have access to and knowledge of the Vedas – as leaders who can authorize *achara* as *dharma*,[11] the relationship between *achara* and *dharma* helps to understand both the historical development of *dharma* as a moral category and how *dharma* continues to be formulated in contemporary India, particularly within low-caste, low-class communities, who do not have access to, or rely upon, Brahminical textual sources for understanding their place and role in the world. As Olivelle notes,

> Scrutiny of the early meaning of *dharma* within its Dharmasastric use suggests that it was not the Veda but the "community standards" prevalent in different

[11] Davis (2004) includes a discussion of the "hermeneutical gymnastics" involved in Mimamsa claims that in the case of a rule, made by a "good" Brahmin who knows the Vedas, but that can not be traced to a particular place in *shruti*, *smriti*, or *achara* can be presumed to exist in a "lost Vedic text," therefore maintaining the primary authority of the Vedas in all circumstances.

> regions and communities that were taken to constitute *dharma*. The early texts on *dharma* speak of *desadharma, jatidharma, kuladharma* – the *dharma* of region, castes, and families/lineages. Clearly these texts regard *dharma* as multiple and varied (2010, 32).

In other words, the Dharmashastras represent the "textualization" of local, Brahmin customs of the time. This runs counter to the assumption that the term and concept of *dharma* has always been central to Brahminical thought, and points to the Dharmashastras as *descriptive* texts that have come to be recognized as *prescriptive*.

The parameters of *varnashramadharma* developed in the Dharmashastras continue to function as a "meta-discourse" in the everyday lives of many contemporary Hindus, as evidenced by the continued significance of caste, age, and gender in shaping understandings of what is expected, appropriate, and desirable. Yet,

> if Dharmasastra is a 'meta-discourse' that derives its contents from *acara*, then it would follow that *acara* must be the primary discourse, i.e *dharma* in practice. Dharmasastra texts contemplate and systematize *acara* without replacing the ongoing value of extra-sastric *acara* to the evolving practical, day-to-day negotiations over the proper course of *dharma* (2004, 824. See also Lariviere 2004; Olivelle 2005; Wezler 2004).

That is, the particularities of what constitutes *dharma* in the modern world are continually *re-contextualized* in communities in specific contexts, adapting to and incorporating shifting standards of moral conduct shaped by regional, local, and familial values. Although *dharma* always operates as a cosmic principle for "holding the world together," the moral conduct that guides everyday life is – and historically has been – rooted in the

immediate social context. The *dharma* of the individual or the community is inherently fluid and flexible; it can, and indeed *must*, change, formulated from within the family and/or community to address the shifting realities of the world.

Leela Prasad, in her analysis of the narrative construction of Hindu ethics (*dharma*) among Brahmins in the town of Sringeri in Karnataka, South India, articulates ethical practice as an "imagined text."

> I argue underlying ethical practices is a dynamically constituted "text" that draws on and weaves together various sources of the normative—a sacred book, an exemplar, a tradition, a principle, and son. Such a text is essentially an *imagined text*. It is a fluid "text" that engages precept and practice and, in a sense, always intermediary. In this imagined text the normative manifests as emergent, situated in the local and the larger-than-local, the historical, and the interpersonal (Prasad 2007, 119).

Following Prasad, this dissertation examines how the "imagined text" of *dharma* – as ethical practice and moral code for everyday and religious life – is continually constructed, tested, and formulated from multiple sources in the particular circumstances of the diverse, upwardly mobile, urban neighborhood. *Class* is one category of moral being that fundamentally shapes how *dharmic* codes of being are being reimagined, "rewritten," and re-contextualized. Middle class identity in contemporary urban India carries its own moral weight; there are rules and expectations –a *dharma* – of how to be "properly" middle class and uphold the middle class world of the family, community, and neighborhood. These middle class expectations, however, may run counter to traditional

notions of appropriate moral conduct according to caste, gender, and life-stage, and must be mediated

Class as a Dharmic *Category*

In understanding and defining the increasingly heterogeneous middle classes in Udaipur, I follow the theoretical model of class as cultural process outlined by Mark Liechty in *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society*, which examines emerging middle-class identities in Kathmandu, Nepal. Liechty's approach to class incorporates Marxist emphases on *inter*-class conflict, Weberian models of *intra*-class conflict, and Bourdieu's concepts of social, cultural, and symbolic capital to understand the middle class as a:

> domain of *internally competing* cultural strategies, systems of prestige ("status"), and forms of "capital" that are not, strictly speaking, economic (Bourdieu 1985). But…this internal cultural dynamic is always also part of a middle-class project to construct itself in *opposition* to its class others, above and below (2003, 15, italics in original).

The middle class, as analyzed here, is defined by both distinction *and* belonging, as achieved through everyday narrative, aesthetic, and moral practices that are considered "suitable."

This "suitability," however, is neither fixed nor universal; it shifts as the socio-cultural landscapes of Nepal, much like India, continue to change. Thus:

> The middle class emerges as a never-ending cultural project that is simultaneously at odds with itself and with its class others. The middle class is a constantly

> renegotiated cultural space – a space of ideas, values, goods, practices, and embodied behaviors – in which the terms of inclusion and exclusion are endlessly tested, negotiated, and affirmed. From this point of view, it is the process, not the product, that constitutes class (Leichty 2003, 15-16).

In this definition of class as cultural process, middle class is always a state of *becoming* and, as Liechty suggests, we can only know what class *is* by paying attention to what class *does* (2003, 38. See also Ortner 1998, 2003).[12]

Like Liechty's interlocutors in Kathmandu, members of aspirational middle class in Udaipur are in transition in terms of lifestyle and class identity. The configurations of the economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital that produce, and are produced by, their class identities are in constant and *conscious* flux. They are *trying* to form new class identities for themselves, their families, and their broader community in urban areas by adopting and adapting everyday aesthetic, narrative, and cultural practices.

What Liechty calls "suitable" – what Kamala called "correct" – I call *dharmic*. Recognizing class as a *dharmic* category pushes past a sense of class as primarily a performative identity; it identifies class as an embodied category of moral, religious being, although one that is always emergent and continually negotiated. Liechty's definition of class as a cultural process that is defined as much by what people *do* as what they *are* corresponds to indigenous definitions of *dharma* as shaped by *achara*, or community standards; Hindus, too, come to know their *dharma* by what they do. But

[12] In many ways, Liechty's model of class mirrors that of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984), which highlights how the conditions of one's upbringing and education produce particular "tastes" and aesthetic "dispositions" that become the means of defining and performing class distinction. The concept of *habitus* identifies how these tastes and dispositions for practices, ranging from food to fashion and art, become embodied and naturalized as markers of distinction within and between class groups. Whereas Bourdieu's work points to how class positions are *reproduced* in almost unconscious ways, Liechty's work is helpful for thinking about how new class identities are consciously *produced*. For a more nuanced critique of Bourdieu's use of *habitus*, see Mahmood (2008).

there are deeper implications. What Hindus do in the process of becoming middle class does not simply reshape who they are as members of the middle class, but who they are *as Hindus*, with rights and responsibilities for upholding social and cosmic moral order.

In this dissertation, I employ *dharma* as an analytical lens through which to understand how categories of moral being – shaped by class, caste, gender, age, and the local, neighborhood community – are mutually constructed, and mediated through the everyday and ritual lives of women and families who make up localized middle class communities. As the dynamics of the family, household, community, and region change in globalizing India, and the ideals, values, and standards that shape everyday life are influenced by emerging middle class expectations, so too are understandings of, and prescriptions for, the *dharmas* of class, caste, gender, age, and community being reformulated. A *dharma*-centered approach to class pushes past analyses of class, caste, gender as descriptive ways of understanding the shifting landscapes of middle class urban India to understanding them as *prescriptive* categories for determining who one is, and who one can become, as a middle class Hindu.

As we have seen, women's lives, bodies, and ritual practices are one foundation upon which broader conceptions of *dharma* are determined; this is especially true in Rajasthan. Insofar as *dharma* is constructed within immediate social contexts, women play a critical role in formulating the moral codes that guide broader society. Women's everyday and ritual practices are central to teaching, maintaining, and fulfilling *dharmic* obligations within and beyond the family and the community. By taking up new religious practices, and adapting older practices, women construct and authorize new understandings of *dharma* that incorporate middle class values and aspirations into

already existing socio-moral frameworks for both women and men Moreover, in demonstrating how women's shifting practices produce new *dharmic* models that also apply to and reshape the *dharmic* lives of men and multi-caste neighbors, this dissertation highlights the central role and authority of women – including low-caste, upwardly mobile women – to determine contemporary codes of Hindu morality.

Chapter Outline

The first chapter of this dissertation, "Pulan and the Aspirational Middle Class," introduces the space and place of Pulan, the neighborhood in which I lived and conducted research, and around which much of this dissertation centers. This chapter focuses on defining the "aspirational middle class" in economic, cultural, social, and moral terms and elaborates on the indirect ways in which *dharma* is articulated and taught within the neighborhood.

The chapters that follow examine the relationship between class and *dharma* in different ritual contexts. Insofar as "it is the household that structures both the exposition of and the conceptualization of *dharma*" (Davis 2010, 35), the first three chapters focus on rituals related to the home, marriage, and the family within the neighborhood. The final two chapters move outside of the domestic, familial context to consider festival practices that carry devotees out of the neighborhood into other parts of the city (Chapter 5) and to their rural homes (Chapter 6).

Chapter 2, "Education, Aspiration, and Marriage: Negotiating *Dharma* in Pulan" introduces the Mali family (in whose home I rented rooms), whose socio-economic and familial dynamics epitomize the lifestyle of the aspirational middle class. This chapter

examines shifts in the attitudes and practices surrounding the marriage of the eldest daughter. As arranging marriages includes the negotiation of caste, life-stage, and gender *dharma*, and the means of arranging marriages are changing to accordance with emerging middle class sensibilities, this chapter raises many of the themes that will be addressed in subsequent chapters and serves as a guide for understanding how I draw upon *dharma* to analyze class identity.

Chapter 3, "Solah Somwar and a New *Dharma* of Conjugality," analyzes how the relationships between husbands and wives are changing in the context of nuclear families in Pulan. It focuses on one married couple's decision to take up the newly popular ritual practices of the Solah Somwar *vrat* (sixteen Monday fast), a four-month ritual period dedicated to the deity Shiva, during which young married couples perform weekly fasts and rituals together at the temple in order to jointly maintain the ritual purity of the home. I suggest that these shared, public performances sanction an emerging *dharma* of conjugality in which husbands and wives in nuclear families become committed, and obligated, to one another and the home in new ways as they work together to maintain middle class lifestyles in the nuclear family, thereby creating new understandings of gender *dharma*.

The fourth chapter, "Karva Chauth and Neighbor *Dharma*," moves beyond the conjugal couple to examine shifts in the relationships between diverse female neighbors in Pulan. This chapter centers around Karva Chauth, an annual fast undertaken by married women for the health and longevity of their husbands, for which they gather together in the evening to read the *vrat katha* (fast story) related to the ritual and offer worship to the moon. Women in Pulan have introduced a practice of cross-caste ritual

exchange between neighbors during these evening rituals, which reflects and reinforces what I call a new "neighbor *dharma*." Neighbor *dharma* operates in two ways that are critical for the project of upward mobility. First, female neighbors become like extended family to one another, serving as mothers-, sisters-, and daughters-in-law to each other by offering domestic, emotional, and occasionally even financial support that enables other women to sustain their homes and lifestyles in Pulan. Second, the *dharma* of neighbors includes learning, modeling, and teaching one another how to *be middle class*. The ritual arena becomes a space for communally negotiating, validating, and maintaining definitions of middle class propriety within neighborhood.

This latter aspect of "neighbor *dharma*" is explored further in Chapter 5, "Ganesha Chaturthi and Neighborhood *Dharma,*" which examines the newly popular communal celebrations of the ten-day Ganesha festival, honoring the elephant-headed god Ganesha. Celebrating the Ganesha festival represents participation in a distinctly urban, middle class religiosity and generates a new "ritual *dharma*" whereby neighbors develop and communicate new responsibilities to expand their ritual repertoires in ways that signal and fostering their entrance into Udaipur's broader middle classes. Yet, what is a performance of middle class identity in the neighborhood can be perceived as a performance of lower class identity to more stable middle class outsiders as devotees leave Pulan for the ritual immersion of the *murti*. As such, this chapter examines the limits of ritual practices to successfully produce and perform middle class identities outside of the neighborhood and highlights the neighborhood as the primary space within which class identities are made meaningful.

Chapter 6, “Contesting *Dharmas* During Navratri,” examines Navratri, a nine-day festival honoring the goddess in all of her forms, for which many families return to their rural homes to worship localized goddesses within caste-homogenous communities. Like Chapter 5, this chapter analyzes the ways in which middle class and religious identities are mutually constructed in relationship to localized communities, but focuses on distinctions between the urban neighborhood and a rural village. This chapter points to ways in which commitments to the values and ideals of two distinct communities shapes the extent to which members of the aspirational middle classes can successfully and “comfortably” embody new middle class moral subjectivities.

CHAPTER 1

Pulan and the Aspirational Middle Class

Within Udaipur, my home and primary fieldsite was in the small neighborhood of Pulan,[13] located approximately three miles northeast of the Old City. My arrival in Pulan, like many successful ethnographic encounters, was born of a combination of failure and fortune. I had originally intended to conduct my dissertation research among women employed by Sadhna, a women's clothing manufacturing cooperative affiliated with Seva Mandir, where I had conducted pre-dissertation fieldwork. But, when I reached the small factory Sadhna operates in Udaipur, I was told by the director that I would have to wait six weeks before beginning interviews because production orders were backed up and feared my presence would distract the women and further delay their work. Frustrated at the thought of losing six weeks of valuable time, I met with Rashmi, the coordinator for Seva Mandir's Urban Block Office, which organizes community outreach within the city boundaries. I described my project to Rashmi, outlining the demographic with whom I was interested in working – namely upwardly mobile women who had relocated to Udaipur in the past twenty to thirty years with their families. When I had finished, Rashmi turned to her young assistant and said, "Go call Usha."

When the young woman returned, she was followed by an older woman with a long gray braid stretching down her back, dressed in the long skirt, blouse, and half-sari wrapped around her shoulder and tucked into the skirt that is traditionally worn by Rajput

[13] Pulan actually consists of two neighborhoods—Bhagat Singh Nagar and Tirupati Nagar—which are separated by a dried-out river bed and, for the most part, operate as distinct communities. My fieldsite was technically in Bhagat Singh Nagar, but in keeping with the vernacular of the women with whom I lived and worked, I refer to it simply as Pulan and, when necessary, refer specifically to Tirupati Nagar.

women. Usha tentatively approached and flashed a wide, warm smile of crooked teeth. Rashmi spoke to her briefly and turning back to me said, “You will go home with Usha tonight. She lives in Pulan, near where you are.” Usha appeared as surprised as I felt, but we quickly exchanged phone numbers and established a time and place to meet. I did not know it then, but Rashmi’s exercise of managerial authority, done in part to get me out of her office, would prove to be one of the most fortuitous moments of fieldwork.

That evening, I met Usha and followed her along the busy highway leading out of the rapidly growing suburb of Fatehpura, where I was renting a small “flat” in the back of a family, toward Pulan, approximately one mile away. As we entered the neighborhood, the main road that runs the length of the neighborhood narrowed. On the right, the road was bordered by a high, stone wall marking the property of a government-operated train-engineering school and to the left, by twenty-four numbered *galis* (small lanes), stretching back from the main road. Each of these *galis* was approximately eight feet wide, and lined on both sides by homes built with adjoining walls; even glimpsing down the *galis* as we passed, I could see that the homes ranged in size, style, and extent of their development. Single-story buildings with exposed bricks and unfinished roofs were attached to three-story homes painted bright colors and decorated with elaborate hand-drawn paintings.

Usha occasionally nodded or said hello to the women she passed, who were returning home from purchasing vegetables for the evening meal. I tried to ignore the stares of the men sitting on the front steps of the businesses on the ground floors of the homes along the main road, but smiled at the women who peered toward us from where they were gathered on the front steps of their homes in the *galis*. I enjoyed the confused

looks of the young children returning home from tutoring courses, their shoulders hunched against the weight of their large backpacks.

Usha led me to the small, two-story home she shares with her elderly mother in *gali* number 20. The single room on the ground floor, where her mother was sleeping, was dominated by a large wooden bed frame and metal bureaus, piled with blankets and bags of clothing, lined the walls making the room seem smaller that it was. Usha led me upstairs, past the room where she sleeps, to a small, open-air section of the roof and laid out a blanket for me to sit on while she went to prepare chai (sweet, milky tea). Within seconds, her neighbor across the street, Meera, appeared in her window, six feet from where I sat, along with her adult daughter Priya, and Priya's teenaged daughter, Sonal. They began teasing Usha about my presence and when I replied to them in Hindi, they laughed in surprise. I offered them the same explanation for being in Pulan that I had begun to tell everyone – I had come to study how women's lives changed when they move from the village to the city – and they insisted that I must come to their house also.

When Usha and I finished our tea, she led me downstairs, across the narrow *gali* to the ground floor entrance of Meera's home, and up to the second-story rooms occupied by the family. I immediately recognized the economic disparities between Meera and Usha's homes. Off of the small central foyer of Meera's home were doorways to a kitchen, a small, separate *puja* (worship) room, a single bedroom, a small bathroom and a living room. The high ceilings made the rooms seem bigger than they were. In the kitchen, dishes were expertly stacked on the green marble countertops and/or hung in stainless-steel dish racks on the walls to make maximum use of the limited space; Meera deftly maneuvered around the large refrigerator that jutted out into the room. The "living

room" was decorated with a couch, matching armchairs, and a television, and one wall was covered with built-in, floor-to-ceiling, marble shelves decorated with a dizzying, but carefully arranged, display of knickknacks, such as plastic flowers, brightly painted plastic animal figurines, and a stuffed doll resembling Santa Claus. As I sat with Meera and her family that evening, discussing their perceptions of the differences between the rural area where Meera and her husband had grown up, and the urban neighborhood in which they now lived, I realized that I had found precisely the demographic I was seeking. I began returning to Pulan regularly, and three months later, I rented rooms in the family home of one of Meera's neighbors, becoming a neighbor myself.

In many ways, Pulan is a quintessential, upwardly mobile neighborhood. Many of the members of the older generations who currently live in Pulan moved from rural areas of Rajasthan, or other neighborhoods in Udaipur, in the past twenty to thirty years. At the time that they moved to Pulan, the neighborhood was known as the *kachi basti* (lit: the unripe neighborhood). This is a common term in North India to refer to undeveloped areas without access to government facilities such as water or electricity, where people live in tents or makeshift homes. As many residents suggested, this was an apt description of the neighborhood when poorer migrants began flocking to what was then the outskirts of the city in search of work and upward mobility. While the neighborhood is still colloquially known as the *kachi basti*, Pulan now boasts of an increasingly wealthier population who have come to build, or expand upon, its *pakka* (lit: certain, secured; here meaning concrete) houses in what has been officially incorporated into the city of Udaipur as Bhagat Singh Nagar. Many residents own new motorcycles and scooters,

modern appliances, such as refrigerators, televisions, and washing machines, and the level of education among children is on the rise.

The residents of Pulan are overwhelming from low-caste backgrounds. Most are from Other Backwards Classes (OBCs) or Scheduled Castes (SCs),[14] although there is a wide range of diversity in terms of *jati* (caste), as well as in religious and regional backgrounds. In *gali* 20, for example, a Mali, a Bhoi, and a Yadav family (all recognized by the Rajasthani government as OBC) live side-by-side with three separate Harijan[15] families, three separate Charan Rajput[16] families, and one Muslim family that operates a metal works shop on the ground floor of their home. Nearly all of the families on the street were from different rural areas, although most spoke Mewari, a dialect of Hindi, within the home and to one other on the street. The caste diversity of the families in Pulan was perhaps best evident in the deities displayed on domestic *puja* shelves, which include images of various localized *mata-jis* (goddesses) who are specific to certain families, castes, or villages, alongside images of popular, pan-Indian deities such as Shiva, Krishna, and Ganesha. Despite this diversity, many of the Hindu families across the neighborhood share in the celebrations of festivals such as Navratri, Diwali, and Holi.

[14] OBC and SC, as well as Scheduled Tribes (STs), are legal classifications designated by the Indian constitution to denote, and protect, socially and economically disadvantaged caste communities. OBCs and SCs can generally trace their origins to the so-called "untouchable" caste groups in a classical, brahminical hierarchy of caste, but the particular castes that are classified as OBC or SC vary from state to state, depending on local histories of socio-economic advantage.

[15] Meaning "children of God," the term "Harijan" was popularized by Gandhi as a kinder way to refer to "untouchables." Although today many former-untouchable communities refer to themselves as Dalits, and Dalit has become standard in academic usage, "Harijan" was the name with which these families self-identify, which is why I use it here.

[16] Rajputs, like many castes in India, are subdivided into distinct *jatis*. Although the higher *jatis* of Rajputs have historically been among the highest and wealthiest castes in Rajasthan, Charan Rajputs are lower-caste and recognized by the state of Rajasthan as OBC.

While the majority of Pulan's residents are not Rajput,[17] the influence of Rajput culture and ideals was visible. I learned early in my fieldwork – after numerous mistakes – not to assume that women wearing traditional the Rajput dress of a long skirt, fitted blouse, and a half-sari were, in fact, Rajput. Rather, as multiple women explained in correcting my assumptions about caste, Rajput dress has become widespread as a formal dress. When my host family – who were not Rajput – repainted the outside of their home in honor of the impending nuptials of their oldest children, they hired an artist to hand-paint traditional images of Rajasthani men, riding on horses and elephants as if into battle, which functioned as a display of wealth and prestige.

As I became immersed in the neighborhood and heard the stories of the women living there, I began to recognize the limits of the "rural vs. urban" frame in which I had initially situated my research. Few women brought up the village without my prompting, and many of the young people had never lived in the village. I knew that I wanted to think about change in terms of class, but even though people talked about difference in terms of things that I understood as markers of class identity, such as income, occupation, housing, fashion, and education, I struggled with finding indigenous ways to speak about class.

I first found a way to talk about class a few weeks after I had moved to Pulan. I was sitting in the third-floor foyer of the home where I lived with Heena, one of my closest friends who, along with her husband and two young sons, rented a single room on the third floor of our home. The foyer served as Heena's kitchen, with a gas stovetop

[17] I did not conduct a complete survey of caste backgrounds of the neighborhood, and therefore, cannot confirm the precise demographics of the neighborhood. Yet, from the women I knew in various *galis*, and their comments on the caste backgrounds of their neighbors, it seemed that at least one or two Rajput families resided in each *gali*, but usually no more than four. Of the Rajput families I knew, all were members of what the upper-caste royal and noble Rajput families Lindsey Harlan worked with call the "*chote bhai*" (little brother) Rajput castes – the "ordinary, non-aristocratic" and village Rajputs (1994, 9).

arranged on a small table in the corner across from the family's bathroom. As we sat chatting while she prepared dough for *rotis*, unleavened bread commonly served with meals in North India, she asked what work my parents did for a living. I explained that they were both retired, but had been teachers. "Are they wealthy (*paisewale*)?" she asked. Unsure how to respond, as Heena would likely consider my parents to be exorbitantly wealthy but they themselves do not, I said, "They're not extremely wealthy. Other people have more money. They're *madhya varg* (lit: middle class)." Although *madhya varg* literally translates as "middle class," *varg* means something more akin to "category" or "genus," and does not connote the socio-economic sense of class in which I attempted to use it. Heena, however, was unfazed. She simply nodded and repeated my meaning in her own words: "*Han, beech men hain, jaise hum* [yes, they're in-between, like us]." With this, Heena introduced me to the framing and language I would continue to use to ask questions of class identity, namely of those who are who are wealthy, those who are poor, and those who are "in between."

These clear distinctions between the wealthy, poor, and in-between was not something that came up in conversation without my initiation of the topic. Although people regularly and openly talked about money in terms of how much money people earn and spend, the subject of class identity or what it means to be "in-between" was not common in everyday conversation. Yet, when prompted, the people in Pulan consistently identified as being "in-between," and when I pressed them to explain how "in-between" people are different from wealthy or poor people, they told me that wealthy people live in "bungalows" (free-standing homes), own cars instead of motorcycles, and travel in planes, rather than buses or trains. They usually contrasted this to the urban poor who live

in tents, travel in tempos (large rickshaws that function like a local bus system), and cannot afford even the most basic modern amenities such as televisions or kitchen appliances. Heena even suggested that wealthy people are able to eat different vegetables every night, while poorer people can only afford same, cheap vegetables every night.

Heena pointed to family as a source of differences between the upper and middle classes.

> We are not wealthy, but we are not poor. We're in the middle. … Wealthy people are good people. They have good jobs and good businesses. They are that way from the start. Like, my father was *rich*, so that is why he had a good business and [my siblings and I] could study more. But my father-in-law was poor and he died young, so that's why [my husband and I] still have troubles. [My father-in-law] didn't have any land, and we got no money from him, so that's why we can't build our own house.

Despite the struggles that distinguish her from the wealthy, Heena considers herself to be "in between" because she and her husband can afford to rent a room in a *pakka* home, which she keeps clean and tidy; her children attend a private school and are themselves always clean and tidy; and the family always has enough food to eat, even if it is not extravagant. These features of her life –secure housing, education, and hygiene –align with middle class sensibilities of "respectability" (Dickey 2010; Saavala 2010; Wadley 2008), and simultaneously distinguish Heena from the urban poor and mark her similarities with her neighbors in Pulan. To be "in-between," for Heena, is to join the ranks of the "new middle classes."

Yet, most of the people in Pulan fall below what has traditionally been considered the lower boundaries of the middle class, and potentially outside of the "new middle classes." Only recently have scholars begun to discuss the differing strata of non-elite middle classes. Steve Derné (2008) offers a helpful model for recognizing different strata within the middle classes by distinguishing between the "globally oriented" and "locally oriented" middle classes. Whereas affluent, English-speaking Indians who have benefited from the economic and political reforms of liberalization have "globally oriented" understandings of their middle status between the Indian working classes and wealthier consumer classes in Western countries, the "locally oriented" middle class see themselves as being in between Indian elites and the urban or rural poor. Unlike their affluent counterparts who travel internationally, send their children to top Indian universities in major cities and/or universities abroad, and "employ at least one fulltime servant and avoid shoddy public services," the "locally oriented" or "ordinary" middle classes – what William Mazarella (2008) calls the "vernacular middle classes" – "lack the English-language skills and the global connections which would allow them to take off with the global economy" (Derné 2008, 44). Instead, they pursue college degrees at local universities and seek to acquire stable, government jobs.

Much of the scholarship on the "new middle classes" in neoliberal India has focused on the globally-oriented middle class and the more affluent locally-oriented Indians whose economic and housing circumstances are relatively stable and secure, and who can take advantage of the new consumer and occupational opportunities offered by globalization even at the local level. Only more recently have scholars begun to engage ethnographically with non-elite populations within the "new middle classes" (Derne

2008; Dickey 2010; Saavala 2010). While the residents of Pulan are clearly members of the "ordinary" middle classes, certain aspects of their lifestyles and attitudes distinguish them as "aspirational" in comparison to their more stable counterparts within the locally-oriented, new middle classes.

In outlining the aspirational middle classes, I draw upon Arjun Appadurai's (2004) conception of the "capacity to aspire." The "capacity to aspire," is a "navigational capacity" that enables groups (and the individuals therein) to construct a "map of possibilities" for the future and point to the pathways by which these possibilities can be realized. As Appadurai notes, this capacity is not evenly developed in any given society – the wealthier and more powerful a group or individual, the greater their resources both to imagine and construct a "map of possibilities," and to achieve those aspirations through social, cultural, political, and economic means. I draw on this "capacity to aspire" to highlight the ways in which upward mobility is reshaping the lives of women and families in Pulan; developing new capacities to aspire is central to their self-definition as members of the middle class. Increased access to education, stable occupations with higher incomes, and transnational flows of products, media, and culture enable the residents of Pulan to construct new maps of possibility, although their access to the social or cultural resources necessary to achieve those aspirations remain limited. While this might cause outsiders, both within and outside of India, to categorize the residents of Pulan as "lower" or "working" class, *they themselves* do not identify as such. They define themselves less by their "lower" status, than by the ways in which they are developing new aspirations for themselves, their families, and their community within the neighborhood.

Economically, the aspirational middle class is defined both by the instability of income and conscious decisions to investment what little money is available into products that display middle class identities and/or into practices – particularly education – that will increase the capacity to aspire. A fair number of the men in Pulan have steady, salaried jobs, primarily in public or private service industries, such as the post office, water plant, phone company, or electric company. Many men, however, work as skilled, wage laborers in construction, painting, auto mechanic repair, or driving a rickshaw, occupations that provide unsteady, seasonal, and limited sources of income. The economic circumstances of these families are inherently unstable; they cannot confidently prepare for the future and should a man become injured or laid-off, the family could lose the capacity to maintain its lifestyle in Pulan, even with the additional income provided by his wife.

These families invest what little money they do have in their aspirations for upward mobility. In some cases, this investment in "moving up" is quite literal; the neighborhood is filled with the constant sights and sounds of construction as families add additional floors to their one- or two-story homes. This construction invariably occurs in stages as reserves of savings become exhausted and work must be halted until the family can save up the money to continue. Insofar as the type, size, and location of housing is a marker of middle class identity, literally "moving up" to reside in the rooms of a newly constructed second floor of a home – which also often creates an opportunity to rent out rooms on the ground floor for additional income – is a conspicuous sign of economic advancement and raises a family's class status within the neighborhood.

Children's education is perhaps the most common, and expensive, investment that upwardly mobile couples make in their families futures. Education is one of the most significant markers of middle class and identity. In *Anjali's Alliance: Class Mobility in Urban India*, Sara Dickey describes the experiences of one young woman, Anjali, in her struggle for upward mobility in the South Indian city of Madurai. The economic circumstances of Anjali's family are very similar to those of the families in Pulan. Dick write:

> [Anjali's] parents, like most parents without much money, decided how long to keep their children in school by balancing each child's interest and success in school against the expenses of sending them there. They were also typical in seeing education as the single most important factor in improving their children's chances for the future (2010, 196).

The same is true in Pulan. Sending children to school not only signals that a family has the economic capacity to survive without the small wages children may earn, but also becomes the very means of achieving upward mobility for both children and parents.

Education is expensive, however, particularly at the private schools that are the preferred choice of most families in Pulan because they are reputed to offer significantly better education than government-run, public schools. In addition to the tuition for private schools, families must provide uniforms, books, paper, pens, additional tutoring courses, and transportation to and from the school each day. What distinguishes the aspirational middle classes in Pulan, as opposed to even members of the more economically stable "locally oriented" or "ordinary middle classes," is that educational expenses may consume more than half – and in some cases all – of their income in any given month.

Residents of Pulan see their sustained commitment to their children's education, despite the economic hardship it may incur, as distinguishing them from the urban poor; families in Pulan find ways to cut costs and save money, making sacrifices in other aspects of their lives, in order to maintain their investment in their aspirations for upward mobility and the performance of middle class values.

Culturally, the aspirational middle class is marked by "slippages" in the performance of "proper" middle class identity, such that what they imagine themselves to be performing or what they intend to perform do not always align with how these performances may be perceived by outsiders. For example, although parents in Pulan are deeply committed to their children's education, and make personal sacrifices in order to send their children to private schools, most children attend Hindi-medium – rather than English-medium – schools. For most families in Pulan, a dialect of Hindi (Mewari) is spoken in the home, making *Hindi* the aspirational language of the neighborhood. This is in marked contrast to their more stable counterparts in the ordinary middle-classes, for whom Hindi is the language of the home and English the aspirational language. Thus, while families in Pulan recognize that sending their children to expensive private schools is a means of performing and securing their middle class status, linguistically this education continues to perform their lower class status relative to others in the new middle classes.

These "slippages" may be aesthetic as well. For example, as part of her preparation to begin attending college a local women's college, my youngest host sister Deepti went on a shopping spree in the Old City to purchase new clothes. She returned to the house and eagerly spread her new shirts over my bed to show them off. All of the

shirts were Western-style t-shirts with foreign images and English writing on them; yet, nearly all of the images and quotes were from Disney movies. For Deepti, the "foreignness" of the clothing was a demonstration of her middle class capacity to participate in a globalized marketplace, but her limited access and exposure to American culture kept her from recognizing these images as markers of childhood both in the United States and, most likely, among her more elite counterparts in India. This kind of "slippage" between the middle class identity Deepti thought she was performing and the lower class identity she may be perceived to be performing by more elite outsiders is a subtle, but significant, marker of the aspirational middle class.

Socially, the aspirational middle class in Pulan is defined by the significance of the relationships between neighbors for defining and supporting the project of upward mobility. Margit van Wessel, working in the rapidly growing Gujarati city of Baroda, which has seen an emerging middle class population explode in recent years, examines how narratives of privacy, respectability, education, and class come together to create different moral understandings of urban space. Residents in Baroda distinguish between the *city* (using the English word) and *society*. The *city* – identified in Baroda as the main markets at the center of the city – is marked by high levels of activity and intimacy between neighbors.

> The streets are lively. … [They] are crowded with people moving around or standing about talking. On the main roads there are stalls where all kinds of small good are plied…and shop-fronts are fully open, so that goods and trading are more or less out in the open for all the publics to see. Neighbours often enter each other's homes, to see who has come to visit, or just sit and talk; in fact, many

> people keep their front doors open all the time. Residents often earn their livelihoods on the spot, in shops, in-house offices and workshops. Also outdoor spaces are used for significant interactions between residents. Doorsteps, front porches and streets are places where people socialize after work is done (van Wessel 2001, 76).

This image of the busy *city*, where neighbors are in open interaction with one another is contrasted with the suburban *societies*, which are entirely residential. *Societies* are a place of low intimacy between neighbors where doors are "kept closed." Van Wessel points out that residents of the societies come from diverse regional and caste backgrounds, but share their relatively high incomes, as evidenced by their capacity to purchase suburban homes. Unlike the *city*, where residents have lived for generations, often within more caste-homogenous groups, and have long-standing relationships with their neighbors, many of the residents of *societies* have only recently become neighbors and maintain a courteous distance from neighbors.

Residents of the *societies*, many of whom moved from the *city*, point to these different levels of intimacy as the primary distinction between the two areas, although they frame high levels of intimacy in the *city* as a lack of privacy. They see "the experience of being observed, questioned and judged, as making the companionship of neighbours as more of a burden than a joy" (78). People in the *city*, they suggest, are prone to "gossip and slander," a sign of a lack of self-discipline, which marks both their lower levels of education and their inferior class position; moving to the *societies* is a marker of upward mobility that includes adopting the middle class value of privacy, a sign of respecting one's equally well-educated, "civilized" neighbors.

The different levels of intimacy within *city* and *society* communities, however, presents a moral dilemma. Insofar as *societies* violate "the established moral ideal of community living that asks people to seek togetherness not just with relatives and friends but also with neighbours" (82)," the *city* emerges as "morally ideal." People in *societies* recognize this, and occasionally lament the lack of support from neighbors, but point to ways in which *societies* support a different kind of moral life that emphasizes self-discipline, abstinence from excessive alcohol consumption or gossip, and home-oriented family life, which are central features of the everyday *dharma* of the middle class.

Variations of the neighborhoods that van Wessel describes can also be found throughout Udaipur, and this model between *city* and *society* is helpful for thinking about the socio-moral space of Pulan. Due to the architecture of the homes, Pulan is a place of close proximity and high intimacy between neighbors, as in the *city* in Baroda. Neighbors speak easily to one other across rooftops, through open kitchen windows and from doorsteps. The sounds of televisions, radios, doorbells, bleating goats, and occasional domestic disputes carry the entire length of the *gali*, and any news moves swiftly into neighboring *galis* as women and men gather on the steps of the temple, local shops, and the homes of friends and relatives to visit and gossip. On the other hand, like *societies*, Pulan is a place of upward mobility where families and neighbors have only come to know one another in the past generation and are bound by shared class status, rather than caste background.

Residents of Pulan also frame their morality and middle class status in terms of evolving forms of self-discipline, as they compare themselves to the previous tenants of Pulan – the poor, uneducated migrants who initially lived in the neighborhood when

many of them moved thirty years ago – who would openly drink and fight on the streets. Those people, many women told me, either left the neighborhood because they could not afford to purchase land when it became regulated by the local government and/or reformed their behavior to align with the emerging values of greater self-restraint. Yet, community and care for others, including new, diverse neighbors, is the everyday *dharmic*, moral norm in Pulan.

In the cases where residents of Pulan raised the topic of middle class identity without my prompting, they often pointed to the differences in how people of varying classes treat one another. This was first expressed to me by my host sister, Kavita. During the ritual practices in Pulan for Dasha Mata *puja*, a fast to the goddess Dasha Mata undertaken by married women to maintain the health of their families, I met a woman named Indu who had come to watch the ceremonies being performed by a friend of hers. Indu did not live in Pulan – she told me she lived in the adjacent neighborhood of Karjoli Complex – but in our brief conversation, I learned that she had grown up in the city of Ajmer, moved to her husband's village after her marriage, and then had relocated again to Udaipur. I was excited to learn more about her life and what she experienced as differences between rural and urban areas, and asked if I could come to meet her sometime. She agreed, but just at that moment, the women with whom we had come completed their ritual practices and ushered us apart.

Although I was not sure where Karjoli Complex was, and did not think to ask Indu to speak her phone number into my voice recorder, I felt confident in my language skills and ethnographic ability to find her as I would find any woman in Pulan – by simply showing up and asking around to neighbors to find her. My confidence, it turned

out, was misplaced. Karjoli Complex, although located only a few *galis* away from my own, was a small middle class enclave of free-standing homes, separated from the street by walls and gate. It was essentially a *society* nestled within the neighboring *city* communities. I only encountered two women outside sitting outside of their homes, but neither recognized Indu's name or my description of her.

That evening, I explained my failure to locate Indu to my oldest host sister, Kavita, pointing out that without knowing where or what Karjoli Complex was, I had assumed it would be like Pulan, and that I would be able to find Indu through her neighbors. Kavita nodded and said, "It's because they're rich and rich people don't care about their neighbors. Here, in Pulan, we're *middle class,* which means that we take care of each other." With this, Kavita pointed to the moral framework that shapes how class is experienced and understood in Pulan.

Class identity for those who are "in-between," as Kavita suggested, is about both the interests and values that "in-between" people share *and* what distinguishes them from, in this case, those above them; "we [as middle class people] take care of each other" but "rich people don't care about their neighbors." Others echoed the centrality of caring for others as a marker of middle class identity. As I sat with my middle-aged friend Neelima on her front steps one afternoon drinking chai, she suggested that the difference between the middle class and "rich" people has to do with their habits.

> Rich people don't sit outside. They sit inside. They don't talk to their neighbors. They watch TV or go to sleep. They just *pass time*. They read the paper and feed their children, but they don't sit outside. Like how we are, they don't do that. We don't like staying inside. Sitting outside, meeting people, that's how we *pass

> time.* … We believe that all of these other people are our family. Neighbors are your family. Here they help with the work, if your child gets sick, if you have to go to the hospital, etc., because our family is far away, but our neighbors are close. So they help us. Your neighbors become your family.

Wealthy people, she suggested, would not ask me to come sit with them or offer me tea or water because "they are very haughty (*veh bahut ghamandi hain*) and that's why they wouldn't talk to you." Middle class people, on the other hand, are much less haughty and need only "the kindness of god."

Like Kavita, Neelima defines middle class identity in terms of *dhyan* (care), and to whom and to what extent one gives care (*dhyan dena*). Wealthy people can afford to separate themselves from others. Even if they sit outside, which Neelima imagines they never do, the high walls and gates that front their homes enable them to maintain physical distance from neighbors and passing pedestrians with high walls and gates, a feature that is physically impossible in the narrow lanes of Pulan. This physical distance, in turn, enables an emotional and psychological distance from others and fosters an (imagined) ethos of care that extends only to the immediate family.

Another neighbor, Priyanka, more carefully articulated this difference in *dhyan*. She concurred that the "in-between" people in Pulan are distinguished from their rich neighbors by the fact that they give care, suggesting that rich people only care about their stomachs and will give money for expensive food, but will not give even ten rupees to a poor person. But she also noted that what distinguishes "in-between" people from poor people is that the poor have no *dhyan* to give. "They don't have anything," she said, "so how can they give *dhyan*?"

As these women's words suggest, being middle class in contemporary India is not simply an economic identity. Rather, being middle class is defined as a social and moral position that is achieved and maintained by the care that one can, should, and does give to others in the community. Humility and generosity are as important as refrigerators, televisions, and motorcycles.

This is not to say that inhabiting a moral middle class identity is unrelated to economics. Properly embodying a middle class ethos of care includes financial expectations that can be burdensome. My friend Anu made this point when she explained that "upper" – meaning wealthy – people can afford to be independent and, therefore, have fewer demands and greater control over their socially hospitality. Their middle class counterparts, alternatively, must care for others at all times, even when they may not want to or feel that they cannot afford to.

> The upper people are making relationships with their minds. They are very concerned with their how they appear and think "If I make a relationship with lower people, what will it look like?" The higher think 80% with their mind and 20% with their heart. The poor are the opposite because they don't have money or *status* – if their minds match, then they can be friends. It's hardest for *middle* people because it's 50/50. They have to maintain their *status.* Everyone looks at them. If anyone comes in their house, they have to welcome then and make tea, etc. They can't offer just water. They have to feed them, regardless of whether or not they have enough, so that is the problem.

While the wealthy are imagined to avoid interactions with those below them in the socio-economic hierarchy, lest it reflect negatively upon them, and poor people have little to

offer and no image to protect, those in the middle class are morally obligated to care for those both above and below themselves if they want to maintain their "status." Middle class people are "stuck" because they are so concerned with what people with think of them. One woman pointed to divorce as an example of being "stuck," explaining that the wealthiest people in India can get divorced because they are wealthy and it does not matter, and the poorest people in India can get divorced because they are poor and it does not matter, but the middle class people cannot easily divorce because they are afraid of how it will look to others. This effort to maintain status produces what Sara Dickey points to as the "pleasures and anxieties of being in the middle" (2011).

Although women in Pulan occasionally bemoaned how the relative lack of privacy in the neighborhood opened their lives, families, and domestic behaviors up for critique by others, they also relied upon the strong support systems that the intimacy of the neighborhood fostered among neighbors. These networks of support radiated out from the microcosmic network of individual *galis* into the neighborhood as a whole. While privacy is an increasingly valuable and desirable aspect of middle class "respectability," the women in Pulan remain committed to nurturing and performing *dhyan* for one another as a the preferred moral norm, which helps to mark their belonging in the aspirational middle class.

The ethos of care that binds neighbors together in Pulan forms the foundation of a new community, rooted in shared class identities, that works together to determine what "counts" as appropriate and proper behavior within the neighborhood. Residents of Pulan are aspirational not just as individual families, but as a neighborhood community, and as this dissertation demonstrates, they learn from and teach one another the aesthetic,

cultural, ritual, and moral practices that shape localized understandings of *dharma*. In their struggle to negotiate emerging ideals and expectations of propriety, they are, I suggest, formulating new forms of *achara*, or community standards. This localized *achara* become the new standard by which certain behaviors and ways of being are – or are not – authorized by community members themselves as forms of *dharma* that incorporate middle class values into existing expectations of morality according to gender, caste, and age. The upwardly mobile, urban neighborhood becomes the site for contrasting and making meaningful new middle class and religious identities.

Yet, these formulations of middle class *dharma* are rarely explicit. Few Hindus, particularly in lower castes and classes, spend time consciously contemplating the expectations and obligations of their *dharma* or that they explicitly point to *dharma* when articulating their identities. They do not. On the rare occasions that I heard women use the word "*dharm*" during my fieldwork, it was invoked as an almost self-evident explanation of difference or compulsion that need not be elaborated. For example, when I asked one neighbor about the meaning of the green flags flying on the rooftops her neighbors – knowing full well that it was an Islamic symbol and designated the homes of Muslim families – she replied, "Oh, that's just because they have a different *dharm*." On another occasion, when I asked my host sister to explain a ritual practice I had witnessed in another woman's home, and why that woman would choose to observe the practice when others did not, she too replied that, "it is her *dharm*."

Rather, the women in Pulan, like most Hindus, learn, enact, and fulfill their *dharma* through stories, rituals, and everyday social practices. Although no one I met during fieldwork laid out for me the history of the Dharmashastras or quoted the Laws of

Manu, the guidelines of caste, life-stage, and gender *dharma* that are formulated in those texts permeate the everyday actions. Neighbors are well aware of one other's caste identities and can easily point out with whom they can and cannot eat according to the norms of caste separation. The essence of one's *jati* is embodied and can be passed on through bodily fluids such as saliva, meaning that one can only eat with someone of a higher caste ranking; to eat with someone of a lower caste threatens the possibility of exchanging and absorbing the "pollution" of their caste essence. When mothers explain to their children with whom they can and cannot eat, they implicitly teach their children a caste *dharma* that precludes the non-ritual exchange across castes because it threatens the moral order of caste. Parents are not necessarily teaching their children that families from lower castes are inferior, although that may also become an implicit message, but are impressing upon them a sense that order between and across castes must be maintained. These commensal social mores, particularly around food and eating, are rapidly shifting in India, particularly among higher class communities, and the continuing significance of caste restrictions around food in Pulan helps to mark their aspirational status.

Other restrictions are not changing as rapidly or significantly, such as those surrounding marriage. Young girls are taught from very early ages to prepare food, in part to feed the family, but also, as they are explicitly told, as training to become good wives and daughters-in-law. If they do not learn to cook, their mothers tell them, no one will want to marry them, a threat that makes clear that becoming a wife is an ideal to which they should aspire. This gendered *dharma* becomes intertwined with caste *dharma* as they come to understand that they will marry a boy from their *jati*. Growing up, girls watch their mothers, aunts, and female neighbors perform *vrats* (fasts/vows) for the

health and longevity of their husbands and hear the stories telling of the power of a women's devotion to protect her husband. This introduces them to the expectations of wifely devotion that make up *stridharma*, the obligations of which they will fulfill through similar rituals after their own marriages.

Yet, young girls are also being taught that they should be educated, and complete a college degree before their marriage, as a means by which both they and their parents uphold the emerging middle class expectations of the neighborhood. Young wives learn to rely on, and offer support, to their multi-caste neighbors, and they commit to new life-long ritual practices to popular, pan-Indian deities as a marker of their capacity to join the broader urban middle classes. New practices of fashion, food, and leisure, which are carefully monitored and occasionally restricted, by family and neighbors become the means of expanding the standards of moral propriety, and become critical in formulating and articulating new *dharmic* models of gender, caste, and life-stage that are shaped by new community standards rooted in class identity.

By analyzing the formation of class identities through the analytical lens of *dharma*, this project takes seriously the ways in which taking up new ritual practices enables women to construct new "maps of possibility" – not just as middle class women, but as *Hindu* women. Insofar as rituals are one way in which women come to understand their caste, life-stage, and gender *dharma*, and *dharma* shapes the socio-moral boundaries of what is possible for Hindu women to do and to become, I analyze new ritual practices as a means by which Hindu women redefine their *dharmic* expectations and obligations in accordance with emerging middle class aspirations in order to create new worlds of possibilities for themselves within the middle classes. The means of constructing new

maps of possibility, through new practices related to education, marriage, and work, is the subject of the next chapter, which demonstrates how *stridharma* (lit: woman/wife *dharma*) is being reshaped in Pulan in ways that produce new understandings of the moral rights and responsibilities of middle class women in their roles as wives.

CHAPTER 2

Education, Aspiration, and Marriage: Negotiating Dharma *in Pulan*

(From left to right)
Kavita, Deepti, and Arthi on the first night of Kavita's wedding celebrations.
Photo by Jennifer Ortegren

"You have to come to my wedding," Kavita told me, turning to face me where I sat next to her on the couch. "You can come with the other people from the street. You will get everything you need for your *research* there."

"I will come, I will come!" I replied enthusiastically.

I had only met Kavita, and her two younger sisters, Arthi and Deepti, mere minutes before this invitation was extended. I had initially come to Pulan that day to meet another woman, Heena, whose family rents a room on the third story of the girls' home.

We had been sitting in the furniture refurbishing store Heena operates with her husband on the main street of Pulan when Deepti passed by. Heena introduced us and told me to go with Deepti to meet her family.

When we reached the three-story house, the biggest in their *gali*, Deepti led me past the empty rooms on the ground floor – the rooms I would eventually begin renting – to the second-story living room to meet her sisters. When Deepti and I entered the room, Kavita and Arthi were organizing clothing and jewelry they had purchased earlier in the day for the wedding festivities later that month. Kavita made room for me to sit next to her on the couch and began asking me about myself. I immediately warmed to her, not only because of her open, friendly smile, but because, unlike many of the older women I had met in the neighborhood who spoke with thick rural accents that I struggled to discern, Kavita spoke "clearer" Hindi, which I delighted in being able to understand. I explained that I had come to India to study differences in women's lives in rural and urban areas, and Kavita assured me that she and her family could be very helpful resources because her parents had come to Udaipur from Raj Nagar, a large village thirty-five kilometers north of the city, and the family would be returning for her and her older brother Krishna's weddings.

Prompted by my description of my research, Kavita commented on differences that she recognized between the village and the city. The biggest difference, she suggested, was the experience of caste, namely that in the village, people from different *jatis* (lit: birth-group) live separately, whereas in the city, people are "mixed." Like the sisters, most residents in their family village of Raj Nagar were from the Mali (lit: gardener) *jati*, while Mali was a minority *jati* in Pulan. Another difference she pointed to

was education. “People in the village don’t study,” she told me. Although their father had left school after 8th grade, and their mother after 5th, all of the Mali children would receive college degrees. The eldest son, Krishna (age 25), was completing a bachelor’s degree in computer science at a local college, Kavita (age 22) would be returning to Udaipur a few months after her wedding to take the final exams for her degree in commerce from a nearby women’s college, Arthi (age 19) was in her second year of studies for a bachelor’s degree in accounting, and Deepti (age 17), who was finishing 12th class (the Indian equivalent of her senior year of high school), would begin studying commerce the following year at the same women’s college her sisters attended.

As the conversation turned back to the wedding, I asked Kavita if she had met the boy she would marry. “Yes, I’ve met him. We talked and walked together. My mother and father told me about him, but they asked me if I liked him or not. If I don’t like him, they don’t force me.” She explained that although her husband’s family was originally from Rajasthan, they moved to Surat, Gujarat, where her soon-to-husband worked as an interior designer. “So, you like him?” I asked, causing all of the girls to giggle. “Yes,” Kavita replied somewhat sheepishly, “I like him.”

In my fieldnotes that evening, I described the sisters as “amazing” and wrote that, “This family is the ultimate example of how class and gender roles can change when you come to the city.” While my sentiments were perhaps dramatic, they were not far off. In many ways, the Mali family exemplifies the aspirational middle class experience; they have acquired the capacity to perform certain aspects of middle class identity – the children’s higher education, their Hindi language skills, and their consumer practices all speak to their rising class status – but the family also remained closely tied to their rural

communities and caste traditions, which sometimes conflicted with and limited the ways in which the children – especially the sisters – were allowed to engage with middle class practices.

In this chapter, I examine shifts surrounding marriage in order to ethnographically describe the experiences of upward mobility and aspiration in Pulan, and raise the themes of class, gender, aspiration, and shifting *dharma* within contemporary urban Hindu communities that are explored throughout this dissertation. I turn my attention away from Kamala to the Mali family in whose home I rented rooms and who, in many ways, epitomize the experience and lifestyles of the aspirational middle class. I focus primarily on the articulations and experiences of their oldest daughter Kavita, who was married during my time in the field. Kavita returned to her parent's home on multiple occasions in the months following her wedding for festivals and to complete her college degree, during which times we discussed her experience of transitioning into the role of a wife.

Young, educated, urban women in the aspirational middle class are raised with multiple, sometimes conflicting, discourses for how they should behave and what they should hope for, or expect, in their lives. The rules and expectations that regulate middle class decorum may contrast with the caste, gendered, and life-stage *dharmas* that also inform their understandings of what it means to be a Hindu woman. Marriage, particularly as it is being reshaped by education, is a critical site for navigating between these contesting expectations and desires. Although marriage remains central to preserving and promoting caste *dharma* through caste-endogamous marriage and to maintaining the basic structures of *stridharma* (woman/wife *dharma*) – whereby women should aspire to the role of wife and mother – the features of where, when, and how she

gets married, *are* changing, as are understandings of what she can expect, hope, and potentially ask for in her role as a wife and daughter-in-law following her marriage. This chapter demonstrates the ways in which young women of the aspirational middle class contend with how to be good Hindu wives, daughters-in-law and women in the face of radically shifting socio-economic circumstances and new aspirations surrounding education, marriage, and work, and how they are beginning to are carve out new understandings of urban, middle class *stridharma*.

The Mali Family

The upward mobility of Kavita's parents – whom I only knew as Auntie-ji and Uncle-ji[18] – was typical for Pulan. Uncle-ji had grown up in Raj Nagar and Auntie-ji in a smaller village about fifteen kilometers further away. They had moved to Pulan nearly twenty-five years ago when Uncle-ji's older brother, who lived in Udaipur, was able to secure Uncle-ji a salaried, government job working as a welder in the city-run water plant. A tall, wiry man with graying hair and a broad smile, Uncle-ji would leave for work early each morning in cleanly pressed slacks and a collared shirt and often returned in the late evening, whereupon he would retire to the living room to sip inexpensive whiskey and watch television. His thick, rural, Mewari accent made it difficult for us to communicate at length, but he greeted me warmly every morning and often stopped in my doorway in the evenings to ask, "Have you eaten?" (*tum ne khana kha liya*?), a phrase I quickly learned had little to do with food and was a way of asking, "Is everything ok?" Uncle-ji regularly asked about my family and instructed me to reassure my father that I was being taken care as if I were one of the daughters in the family.

[18] Fictive kinship terms such as Auntie and Uncle, and the honorific "-ji", are signs of respect.

Shorter and plumper than her husband, Auntie-ji did not share quite the same warmth and easy affection with me as her husband. Although quick to laugh with her children and neighbors, she and I shared similar language struggles as her husband and I had, which made her more hesitant towards me. Her approach to me was more directorial; she would occasionally step into my kitchen to observe, and correct, my cooking and/or cleaning habits, creating a relationship perhaps more akin to that between a mother-in-law and new daughter-in-law. Auntie-ji earned a small income selling vegetables from a cart along the main street of Pulan at the end of the *gali*. Many mornings, she left with Uncle-ji to be dropped off at a nearby market, where she would purchase vegetables for that day and return in a rickshaw. In the afternoons, she would sit in the ground floor foyer washing, paring, and arranging vegetables before wheeling the cart out to the street, where she would sit until after dark, yelling to her children when she returned to help her unload the cart and store the vegetables in a small closet until the next day.

When Auntie-ji and Uncle-ji first moved to Pulan, they purchased a small, one-story home with two rooms and a small kitchen area on the plot where their current home stands. After several years, when Uncle-ji had saved up enough money, they rented a one-room flat in a different *gali*, where they lived with their four young children while construction was completed for the three-story house in which they currently reside. The economic success of the Mali family was apparent in the details of the architecture and décor of their home. The house was the largest in their *gali*, its walls jutting out beyond and above those of their neighbors, and one of the largest in Pulan. It was impressive not only for its size, but also for the decorative details that neighboring homes lacked. The

front door of their home was flanked by elaborate, hand-painted images of mustachioed men dressed in traditional red and gold Rajput clothing – one atop a prancing horse and another on a decorated elephant – which had been added in preparation for the weddings of Krishna and Kavita as one of the ways to announce their impending marriages.[19] The fresh paintings, the latticework carved into the roof, the clay tiles decorating the window overhangs, and the marble steps that lead to their large, carved, wooden front doors were all small, but significant, signs of relative wealth. They were the only family on the street with an electric water pump installed inside the house that enabled running water at all times; most families manually attached hand-held pumps to pipes in the street to transfer water to large barrels on the roof through hoses draped up stairs or through windows.

The signs of their relative wealth continued inside the home. The living room on the second floor was furnished with a couch and matching set of chairs, as well as a green velvet chaise lounger. On three of the walls hung professional, poster-sized, framed pictures of the children – two of all four children and one of Krishna alone. Along the fourth wall, a large television was squeezed into a set of recessed shelves and surrounded by decorative knick-knacks, including as a silver picture frame embossed with the word "Love" that contained a black-and-white photo of a Caucasian couple strolling on a beach, which had come in the frame. A large, wooden bed frame dominated the second-floor bedroom and the walls were lined with metal bureaus holding the family's clothing. A washing machine sat in one corner opposite the domestic altar, which consisted of two marble *puja* (worship) shelves built into the wall. In the large kitchen, new appliances

[19] Marriages are also announced by repainting the house and adding artistic details to the frames of the windows and doors The new color for the home is a decision that women discuss at length with neighbors, arguing about which will attract the most attention, but the least ridicule. Of the homes I saw painted for weddings while living in Pulan, those details added to the Mali home were by far the most elaborate—most families simply re-painted the home, but did not add the additional portraits.

were displayed on the green, marble countertops[20] and the shelves were neatly lined with pressure cookers and pans of various sizes.

The architecture and "modern" décor of the Mali family's home reflects their rising economic and class status. The furniture and the professional pictures of the children in the living room display the family's economic capacity to participate in middle class consumer cultures. Yet, subtle details also reveal the limits of their socio-economic and cultural capacities to successfully perform middle class identities. For example, the framed photograph of the Caucasian couple, while intended to display access to Western culture, suggests an incomplete understanding of the purpose of the frame that would likely not be lost on their more elite middle class counterparts. The house did not have water heaters, western toilets, or showers installed – features that are increasingly common among wealthier, middle class families – and the drainage water from the sinks and bathrooms was flushed out through exposed pipes on the street into a small drainage ditch that ran beneath the marble, front steps, and those of the adjoining houses, to drain into an empty river bed that marked the eastern border of the neighborhood.

The fact that Auntie-ji sold vegetables from a cart also reflects the lower class status of the family, although the fact that she only sold vegetables in the evening – unlike other women in the neighborhood whose families relied more heavily on the income they earned by selling vegetables and who, therefore, would set up vegetables stands in pre-designated areas where they sat throughout the entire day – reflected the relatively stable economic status of the family. Thus, while the relative wealth and

[20] Udaipur is known for the green marble mined in the surrounding Aravellis. While the marble is significantly more expensive than stone used in other homes, it is also relatively less expensive in Udaipur than elsewhere.

elevated socio-economic class status of the family is clearly marked within Pulan and from the perspective of rural relatives, it does not necessarily conform with the aesthetic expectations of the broader middle classes in Udaipur or other areas of urban India.

While Auntie-ji and Uncle-ji successfully shifted into an urban neighborhood, they consciously nurtured their own, and their children's, connection to their rural heritage and caste community in Ram Nagar. Every other week, Uncle-ji returned to Raj Nagar to care for the temple in the courtyard of the home they maintain there and to offer *puja* to the localized deities therein. On the weeks that he did not go, his older brother, who also lived in Udaipur, tended to the temple. The whole family returned regularly to celebrate community festivals, such as Navratri (See Chapter 5), and both Krishna and Kavita's weddings were held in the village. While the decision to hold the weddings in the village was surely influenced by the fact that it is less expensive to host multi-day wedding celebrations in the village, the location in the village and the particular ritual practices dedicated to localized deities nevertheless reinforced for the Mali children the significance of their family's rural backgrounds and the traditions of their *jati*.

Simultaneously, however, the Mali children were thoroughly urbanized and attuned to the middle class practices that distinguished them from their parents. This is perhaps nowhere more obvious than in their language skills and education. Whereas I often struggled to communicate at length with Auntie-ji and Uncle-ji, their children became some of my closest confidantes, in large part because they spoke more standardized Hindi, and some English, and in part because my lifestyle was closer to their own than their parents.

Despite the fact that I was almost seven year older than Krishna, he treated me much like a younger sister, helping me to resolve issues with my computer or the internet and offering me rides on the back of his new motorcycle when he saw me leaving the neighborhood. Handsome and friendly, Krishna affectionately teased his sisters and female cousins, but was generally quieter and more restrained than many of his male cousins and neighbors of a similar age. He was only person in the neighborhood whom I ever saw with a laptop computer, from which he regularly blared songs by American artists such as the Backstreet Boys, Justin Beiber, or Beyoncé, and he was one of the few young men with a Facebook account (although increasingly, the young people in the neighborhood were acquiring smartphones and access to the internet). Two days after Krishna's wedding in Ram Nagar, he returned to Udaipur to complete his last exams for a bachelor's degree in computer science and graphic design from a small local college before immediately returning to the village for Kavita's wedding. One month after his marriage, he spent six weeks in Ahmedabad pursuing additional training.

Krishna struggled, however, to find a job. He explained that the technology industry had not taken off in Udaipur as it had in other, larger cities such as Ahmedabad or Mumbai, meaning there were few job opportunities related to his degree. Yet, other factors may have contributed to his difficulties in securing employment, such as the family's lack of social connections in the city, the fact that Krishna's degree was not earned from a more prestigious technology institute, and his low level of English competency. Instead, he accepted a temporary job in the offices of a bank while he continued his job search.

Krishna's college degree in computer science and the fact that he owned a laptop, a new motorcycle, and fashionable clothing were important signs of how the Mali family has achieved middle class status in their consumer capacities. Yet, Krishna's struggle to find work points to the broader ongoing struggles of upwardly mobile families that help to mark them as members of the aspirational middle class. Krishna had taken many of the "right" steps for joining the new middle classes, namely pursuing a degree in computer technology, a booming industry throughout much of India that has helped foster the rapid advancement of many upwardly mobile Indians. Due to his class, caste, educational, and socio-economic background, however, working as a graphic designer remained only an aspiration, not a reality.

Although Kavita had left to live with her husband and in-laws in Gujarat by the time I moved into her childhood home, I anticipated her occasional returns with the same excitement of her sisters, including when she returned for two months to complete her Bachelor's degree in commerce at a local women's college in Udaipur. In spite of a nearly ten-year age difference, Kavita and I occupied similar spaces in our respective lives and shared the experience of adjusting to a new life, family, and language away from home. We shared a mutual admiration of one another and often discussed her new life as a married woman, the differences between women's lives in India and America, and what we both wanted for our futures. I felt drawn to her not only because she was outspoken and confident, but because she never grew impatient with my endless stream of questions, many of which were befitting of a five-year old ("What's the word for this?" "What is that?" "Why do you this?" "Why?" "Why, why, why?!?"). If I did not understand her initial explanations, rather than brushing me off in annoyance or

frustration – as many women understandably did – she would pause and say "Hmmm…How should I say it?" She would then offer an alternative explanation, using Hindi and occasionally English words that might be more familiar to me.

Arthi, the middle sister, was more introverted and serious than her siblings. She was studying for her first round of exams for an accounting degree and most days would leave the house, dressed in tight, skinny jeans and a loose, western-cut t-shirt, to walk the one mile distance to library of Seva Mandir, a nearby NGO, where she could study in peace. She kept track of the family's bills and it was she who would check the electricity meters installed in my rooms to calculate how much I owed the family each month. Of the three sisters, Arthi was the quickest to chastise my behavior if she felt it was inappropriate or to laugh at my questions as though she could not believe I could be so ignorant. Whereas Kavita would ask or tease me about my romantic life in America, Arthi was more likely to ask about politics, education, and employment practices in the United States. Often, when she saw me working on my computer in my room, she would stand behind and in a slow, monotone voice read the English words on the computer, pausing if she was unsure of pronunciation for me to offer assistance. When I once asked if she understood what she was reading, she told me she recognized some words, but not the whole "meaning." While quieter and shyer around other people than either of her sisters, Arthi was more outspoken in the home, particularly when it came to decisions about her own life.

Deepti, who was still a teenager when we met, was the most vivacious of the siblings. She was the most likely to playfully wrestle with her male cousins or show them physical affection in public, and was more interested in my opinions of her new, purple

high-tops, Western-style t-shirts, and smartphone than in the particularities of my life or research. Unlike Kavita, who would stand in my doorway to ask how my day was, or Arthi, who would quietly step into my room to look at the computer, Deepti was most likely to walk right into my room to show off a new hairstyle or tell me a funny story from her day, slapping my hand in appreciation of her humor even when I did not entirely understand. Deepti was also the only one of the children to have enrolled in an English tutoring course and she often sought me out for brief, stilted conversations in English to use the new vocabulary she had learned that day, which usually ended with us collapsing in laughter.

The fact that all of the Mali children, particularly the three daughters, would earn college degrees, and that Deepti was beginning to study English formally, were critical to the ways in which the family constructed, performed, and achieved new middle class identities. Kavita once explicitly made this claim.

> Very few girls in the neighborhood have studied in college, and none of the girls in our *gali* finished college. Our father decided that because he wasn't able to study [in college], all of his children would study. And all of us girls showed an interest. The girl next door decided she didn't want to study, so she got married. The neighbor's daughter went to college, but she quit after 2 years because she got married. … But it is changing. Girls my age don't go to college, but girls Deepti's age do. It is because we are *middle class* that now the girls are studying.

As Kavita's words suggest, educating daughters, particularly at the college level, is an emerging feature of the lives of many of the families in Pulan, and one that

distinguishes them as middle class. Many of the older women and men in Pulan had studied through 5th or 8th class – some as many as 10th class – but none, that I knew of, had attended college. Within Pulan, education, especially for girls, was framed as a distinctly modern, urban practice. Before, women told me, girls did not study. Early marriage, the need for girls to contribute to domestic and agricultural work, and a simple lack of "understanding" of the value of education in the village were reasons women gave for why girls in rural areas did not, or do not, study, although the explanations are undoubtedly more complicated.[21] The attitudes of urbanized parents toward their daughters' education are changing, however. A significant reason for this change is economics; for example, moving from the village to a salaried job in the city enables Kavita's father to offer his children the opportunity to pursue higher education. Not only could he afford tuition, but it is not necessary for the children to contribute to the financial stability of the household.

Yet, Kavita's words also points out that acquiring higher education requires "interest" on the part of girls. While the opportunity to go to college may result from the emerging desires of upwardly mobile parents, pursuing a college degree allows for and demands that girls develop new aspirations for themselves *as middle class girls*. This provides an important contrast to understandings of educating girls as primarily a means of heightening a young woman's potential to secure a more highly educated, and hopefully wealthier, husband. Middle class men, and their parents, increasingly prefer

[21] For example, depending on where schools are located in rural areas, young girls may have to travel long distances , use public transportation, and/or pass through parts of the village dominated by other caste communities in order to reach the school building. The expense and time lost in commuting and/or fears for daughters' safety—rather than a lack of understanding or appreciation for education—contribute to parents' decisions to withdraw their daughters. To counteract these particular problems, NGOs and state governments have implemented programs, such as Bihar's Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana, to provide rural students with bicycles, thereby reducing the cost and increasing the safety of transportation, which have proved very successful for increasing the enrollment rates of girls..

brides who have college degrees in order to equip them with the skills to provide intelligent companionship to their husbands and to help children with their studies (Jeffrey and Jeffrey 1996; Wilson 2013). Yet, none of the women in Pulan framed education as being for this purpose. Rather, they spoke of the ways in which education and companionate marriages equip women to care for themselves and to assert their own opinions and desires.

These new desires, however, must be carefully negotiated in relationship to marriage. Should a girl not develop an interest in pursuing a college degree, her alternative is to get married. Even if she does demonstrate an interest in studying and begin to attend college, marriage can interrupt and even preempt the completion of her degree. In this way, class identities, which inform practices of education and girls' burgeoning aspirations, become interwoven with models of *stridharma*, which shape understandings of gender and marriage, in new, mutually informative ways for upwardly mobile girls and families.

Education, Like-Marriages, and Ashramadharma

The "like-marriage" that Kavita had described the first time I met her, whereby she and her potential husband were allowed to meet and "walk and talk" in order to determine if they "liked" each other, accommodates and promotes the growing significance of both higher education and personal desire among middle class girls. Unlike her mother, who stopped going to school after 5th class and had an "arranged marriage" at the age of 14 without meeting her husband first, the process for arranging Kavita's marriage did not begin until she was 17 years old and in 12th standard. After a

few brief meetings with her potential future husband, Mahindra, they both agreed to the marriage, and it was arranged to take place five years later. In the interim, they texted one another and talk on the phone for brief periods.

This practice of companionate marriage represents new understandings of marriage among Hindus in the middle classes. Traditionally, Hindu marriages have been seen as a social binding of families, rather than acts of or for individuals. Decisions about arranged marriages have traditionally been made by senior men and women who are primarily concerned primarily for the security and advancement of the lineage. Here, "desire, choice, and love are thus separated from the institution of marriage, which is about social reproduction and not about individual needs and their fulfillment" (Chowdhry 2007, 2). The happiness of one's daughter or son is important, of course, but that happiness is not measured primarily in terms of personal, emotional gratification, but rather in terms of social and familial continuity in terms of shared caste, regional, and linguistic backgrounds. While caste endogamy continues to be central to decisions about marriage – it is critical, for example, that Kavita's husband is of the same *jati* and that his family hail from a Rajasthani background – the practice of companionate marriage reflects emerging middle class ideals of marriage, youth, and gender that challenge more "traditional" models of marriage. If, traditionally, "grooms and brides – especially brides – are admonished to constrain their own desire to conform to family expectations and needs" (Harlan and Courtright 1995) – often articulated as the need to "adjust" – then the middle class model of "like marriages" highlight how upwardly mobile families are placing new value on "desire, choice, and love" in the process of arranging marriages.

One example of these changes is the emergence of new discourses about "love" as a fundamental concern in choosing potential spouses. The issue of love has become particularly pertinent in recent years as television serials and Bollywood movies increasingly depict romantic couples that fall in love despite the differences between themselves and their families. These fictionalized stories center around the couple's struggle, which is usually successful, to convince their respective families to accept their choice and approve the marriage, creating a "love arranged marriage" (Dwyer 2014).

Kavita and I discussed love and marriage one afternoon when she had returned to Pulan to take the exams for her bachelor's degree. As we sat with Krishna's wife, whom I only called Bhabhi-ji (elder brother's sister), on the kitchen floor paring vegetables for dinner, Kavita noticed me looking at my phone and asked if I was missing my "husband," referring to my boyfriend, whose picture I had shown them. I corrected her that he was not my "husband" and struggled, as I had many times before, to explain dating in America. Realizing that I lacked the vocabulary explain my relationship, I simply shrugged and said, "I don't know. It's different in America." Kavita agreed and summarized the differences between marriage in America and India as she understood them.

> People in America have many marriages because they can get divorced. But it's not that way in India. People here get married for their whole life. In America, *love* comes first, then marriage, but in India, it's the opposite. First comes marriage and then *love.* Nowadays, though, in this generation, people do want to *love* the person they marry. It wasn't that way before.

While Kavita rejects "love marriages" as inherently unstable and potentially dangerous for their capacity to end in divorce, she simultaneously emphasizes the potential for romantic love to develop between husband and wife as a newly important factor for determining whom she should marry. By pointing to the significance of "love," she frames her marriage as a way of emulating upper-middle class practices, but in ways that do not violate or threaten the security of family. Her marriage reflects her status as a traditional, but distinctly modern, woman.

Although "love marriages," particularly to the extent that they may violate caste boundaries, remain an undesirable option among upwardly mobile families (Derné 2008; Fuller and Narasimhan 2008; Kalpagam 2008; Mody 2002), companionate marriages are becoming a more common feature of middle class life in in contemporary India (Fuller and Narasimhan 2008, Wilson 2013). Attention to the desires of young women and men, and their "potential happiness as congenial partners" (Fuller and Narasimhan 2008, 737) is considered a marker of modern, urban, middle class sensibilities. Taking up the new practice of "like-marriages," in which both parents and children share control over decisions of marriage, is a way that upwardly mobile families like the Malis can reproduce and maintain their caste identities while simultaneously experimenting with new middle class practices that help to produce new *class* identities.

But these practices are not simply "performances" of new middle class sensibilities. Acquiring higher education and participating in "like-marriages" fundamentally reshapes the course of a young woman's life. In a classical model of *stridharma*, women participate in three life-stages: daughter, wife/daughter-in-law, mother-in-law/widow. A woman's *dharma* as a daughter is to care for her parents and

siblings, in part as a means of preparing to become a wife and daughter-in-law. Girls in the new middle classes, however, have new opportunities and obligations to become educated, and the shift from daughter to wife is marked not just by marriage, but by the completion, or near-completion, of the requirement of earning a college degree. In some ways, we could imagine this as the creation of a modern, middle class revision of *varnashramadharma* (caste and life-stage *dharma*) whereby the *brahmachariya* "student" life-stage is no longer limited to upper-caste men, but is extended to both women and lower-castes. While the modern student life-stage of women does not operate in the same way as a classical *brahmachariya* model laid out in *Dharmashastic* texts – it does not involve devotion to a *guru* (master), explicitly studying the Vedas, or require the same disciplinary practices – it does offer young women a time between adolescence and adulthood that is dedicated to self-improvement outside of the family as does the *brahmachariya* life-stage.

Participating in this "student life-stage" distinguishes girls in the aspirational middle classes from their mothers or many of their rural cousins and enables them to think of themselves and their lives differently. It enhances their "capacity to aspire" and allows them to imagine alternative futures for themselves as wives, as daughters-in-laws, and as women. For Kavita, these new aspirations centered around emerging desires for mobility and the opportunity to work outside of the home in a professional capacity, features that challenge traditional notions of *stridharma*, but align with emerging middle class values.

Education, Work, and Stridharma

Acquiring higher education and attending college outside of the neighborhood also inform how Kavita and the young women like her understand what it means to "be middle class." They are exposed to the world beyond their family and neighbors and are allowed to "experiment with modernity" (Dickey 2010, 78). They learn new ways of speaking, dressing, and carrying themselves as modern, educated, middle class women, and bring new aesthetic sensibilities back into the neighborhood. This was perhaps most obvious with Deepti as she carefully chose her most fashionable, Western clothing and arranged her hair half-up in a barrette, rather than a ponytail, to attend her English courses with her friend Payal, who would also arrive dressed in her most modern clothing. Again, however, attending school and adopting new fashions and aesthetics are not merely performances of middle class sensibilities. They reshape how girls in the aspirational middle classes understand who they are, can, and want to be not just as members the middle classes, but as married Hindu women.

Kavita expressed this primarily in terms of her desire to work outside of the home. A few days after I had first met Kavita and her sisters, I returned to ask for their help in mapping out the families who lived in their *gali*. The girls were again preparing clothing for the wedding, and Kavita showed off the sari she had bought for one day of the festivities, onto which she was hand-sewing a decorative border. As she worked, I asked her again about her studies. She clarified that her "B.Com" meant a bachelor's degree in commerce, which included studying the subjects of accounting and economics. "When you get to Surat, will you work?" I asked. She paused briefly and she replied.

> No, [my in-laws] will not let me, *but* I will [work outside of the home]. I mean, after a few years. When I have lived there for two or the years, then I will. Normally, [my in-laws] would not let me, *but* I will.

With her last repetition of "I will" she laughed quietly.

At the time, when I was in the early stages of fieldwork and still struggling with Hindi, I did not fully appreciate the insistence of her claim. I did not recognize that she was explaining that she would work outside of the home, *in spite of* her in-law's disapproval. In my ignorance, I continued. "If you work with your husband, then will it be ok?" "Yes," she said, "His parents will have to decide. But, it's no problem. We'll see what happens." To clarify, I asked if she *wanted* to work outside of the home.

> Yes, I want to. That's how my *knowledge* expands. I don't like to just sit around the house. Because, here [in Udaipur], I can go out. I very rarely just stay in the house. Because here I go out to college, etc. Before I went to college, I didn't go out every day, but after I started college, I could go out every day and now I like it.

It is important to note that unmarried girls in their natal home experience relatively more freedom of mobility (although they would ideally not be out alone, especially after dark) than married women in their *sasural* (in-law's/husband's home) due to stricter restrictions, related to *stridharma*, to protect women from being seen by, or speaking to, unrelated men. Kavita's point that "here, I can go out" likely anticipated the shift in restrictions on her mobility that would change after her marriage.

Yet, Kavita also claims that attending college changed her as a person. Going to school every day enabled her to become the kind of woman who wants to move outside

of the home with relative freedom and in order to continue "expanding her knowledge." Attending college is both the means and justification for Kavita to experience relative freedom of mobility, and part of what fuels her adamant claim that she *will* work outside of the home.

The relationship between mobility and Kavita's resistance was also brought up in conversations about veiling (*ghunghat*), which is an increasingly important site for negotiating caste and class identities. Historically, especially in Rajasthan where Rajput practices influence everyday practice, it has been traditional upper-caste women to observe *purdahh* (lit: curtain), remaining secluded from the outside world within the family courtyard or separate parts of the home, as was often the case in royal Rajput families. The capacity to observe *purdahh* also reflected high-class status, as the women in these families did not need to work outside of the home to contribute income to the household. For lower-caste, and usually lower-class women, seclusion was (and is) not an option; they must leave the home to work, although they practice veiling as a means of demonstrating modesty and honor. Susan Wadley, in her work among rural Brahmins in North India in the early 1990s, points out that, "Not surprisingly, a newly rich family will often seek to put its women in purdah, for the ability to maintain purdah is itself a sign of wealth and status. … Thus women's roles become constitutive of class" (1994, 54). Yet, the meanings of *ghunghat* and *purdahh* are being reversed in contemporary India through the practices of education and women's work in professional careers outside of the home (see Abraham 2010) and today, *not* wearing a veil or observing restrictions in everyday life can be perceived as a sign of upper class status and, conversely, continuing to veil in everyday life can be considered a marker of lower class status.

I once asked Kavita and Bhabhi-ji about this. Bhabhi-ji, who maintained strict observations of veiling—she kept her face fully covered when in the presence of Uncle-ji or visiting men, she usually left the room when he entered, and never spoke directly to him—explained that she liked veiling because that is what the do in the village. Kavita, on the other hand, did not because it meant that she could not talk to people. Her father-in-law told her that she did not have to cover her face with her veil, only her head, and she could have conversations with him. When I asked about the difference, Arthi suggested that it was because Bhabhi-ji was from the village and veils out of *sharm* (modesty). When I teased Kavita by suggesting that that must mean she does not have *sharm*, she laughed and pointed out that the difference was that she was raised in the city, where it is not as necessary. This story suggests that Kavita is comfortable not only speaking directly to her father-in-law, but making requests for herself that may challenge traditional expectations, due to her understanding of "proper" conduct for herself as an urban, middle class young woman.

Yet, there are still limits to the extent to which Kavita can negotiate new practices and opportunities for herself. Nearly nine months after Kavita's marriage, when she had returned to Udaipur to celebrate Rakshaband, an annual ritual honoring the relationships between brothers and sisters, I asked her if she was happy to be home. She explained that she is much happier in Udaipur than in Surat, in part because she has less work to do in her parent's home than in her in-law's home, but primarily because she has her sisters and friends in Udaipur. She was the only young woman in her husband's home – his younger brother was not yet married – and she would rise early in the morning to begin domestic chores and remains home with only her mother-in-law throughout the day while

husband was at work. Even when he returned later in the evening, she would have more domestic work to complete and did not get to spend as much time with him as she would have liked. She told me that she did not have many friends in Surat because the other young women in her neighborhood were equally busy and most were Gujarati, so they did not share her cultural or linguistic background. Moreover, her mobility outside of the home was severely restricted. Her father-in-law was adamant she should not go out often, especially in the evenings, because she was unfamiliar with the neighborhood, and it was both unsafe and inappropriate for her to be out alone as a young woman. If she had a friend or sister-in-law with whom to go out, she told me, she would have more freedom.

Having forgotten about our conversation from months earlier, I asked again about Kavita's potential to work outside of the home, suggesting that might be a way for her make friends in the city. This time, she offered a fuller explanation of why that was not an option. When Kavita's marriage was arranged at the age of 16, she had understood that the wedding would be delayed until after she completed college. At the time of the engagement, she thought that she would be able to use her college degree in commerce to find work outside of the home following the marriage. It was only five years later – and one year before the wedding –that she came to understand that her father-in-law would not, in fact, allow her to work outside of the home. But at that point, she said, shrugging her shoulders, "What could I do?"

Kavita's father-in-law was strictly opposed to allowing her to work outside of the home because of the danger of engaging with unrelated men. The only acceptable option would be for her to work with her husband. In order to realize that possibility, Kavita had formulated a plan – she would go back to school to earn a degree in interior design, like

her husband, in the hopes that they would then be able to open their own interior design business. This, she pointed out, would enable her to work outside of the home using her degrees in both business and design.

At stake in Kavita's plan are not simply issues of mobility or work, but rather, a new model of being a woman and a wife in the urban, middle classes; a model that is appeals to education as a means of legitimizing and fulfilling new aspirations. Kavita had grown up surrounded by women who worked outside of their home, including her own mother. Lower-class and lower-caste women throughout India have long worked outside of the home as agricultural or domestic laborers, and the economic contribution of many women in Pulan was critical for the financial stability of the family. Yet, most of the women in Pulan worked in traditionally female-dominated, unskilled labor positions, including cooking or cleaning in the homes of wealthier families, schools, daycare centers, and hospitals, or in caste-specific occupations, such as Kavita's mother selling vegetables. Others worked helping to run small family businesses, such as jewelry stores or general stores within the neighborhood. Like Kavita, most women spoke to the fact that engaging in this work required permission and approval from husbands, and to a lesser extent, in-laws, for the reason of possibly interacting with unrelated men. For example, Heena, the woman who rented rooms in Kavita's family's home and worked with her husband to operate a furniture refurbishing store in Pulan, pointed out that, "I am working because I have my own shop. If we didn't have our own shop, I would not be able to work with another employer. Neither my husband nor my family would allow it. But it's good. My earning helps our family a lot."

Kavita's younger sister, Arthi, echoed Kavita's desire to work outside of the home, and suggested that for unmarried girls in the "student" life-stage, the attitudes toward working among unrelated men is changing. As she prepared dinner for the family one evening, I asked her about her academic and professional goals. She explained that, following her exams in accounting, she would personally make contact with "managers" at various businesses in Udaipur in order to acquire an internship that would allow her to shadow them, learn how they run their businesses and potentially gain access to a job for herself.

JDO: Are there *managers* who are women?

A: Yes, there are. But most of them are men.

JDO: Is it ok for you to work for a man? Would you want to work for a woman?

A: No, I'll work for a man. It's fine for me.

JDO: Really?! Other women say they can't work because they can't be around men who aren't in their family.

A: It used to be like that. But now, if it's for your studies and it's *business* then it's ok.

JDO: Do you want to be a *manager*?

A: Maybe. I don't know. How can I say?

Regardless of whether or not Arthi will be allowed or able to secure an internship in Udaipur, the fact that she was aware of this possibility and was making plans for it speaks to how education was beginning to fuel her own aspirations and reshape her understanding of the occupational possibilities of middle class women.

Later, when I asked her if she will work outside of the home after marriage, she initially replied that it would require permission from both her own and her husband's family. She cited Kavita as an example of someone who could not work outside of the home because her father-in-law had refused. I conceded this point, but asked if, in a scenario in which her father-in-law who would assent to her working outside of the home, would she want to? "Of course!" she replied, "That's why I'm studying in college!"

Unlike their mothers and neighbors, for whom working outside of the home in primarily unskilled labor reflects the *struggles* of the upwardly mobile, Kavita and Arthi view working outside of the home in a professional urban setting as a marker of *success* in the project of upward mobility. They see working outside the home as a display of their advanced education, economic stability, and relative personal, social, and financial capacities within and beyond the domestic space. They frame work in terms of desire, ambition, and entitlement, not need; they *want* to work outside of the home in part because they do not *have* to. Yet, working outside of the home requires careful negotiations of *dharmic* notions of gender and women's roles within the family and developing new strategies for Kavita.

The relationship between marriage, education, and work operates differently for girls than for boys. Educating sons is, and has long been, understood as a valuable means for achieving upward economic mobility. Higher education will hopefully enable them to acquire jobs that provide higher incomes, attain greater financial security than their parents, and move into higher socio-economic stratum, although many in the aspirational middle classes may face hurdles similar to Krishna's. In discussions of education and

work, young men and boys rarely invoked the subject of marriage, whereas young women and girl almost always did. This difference is rooted in the nature of gendered *dharma*.

Both girls and boys are expected to get married; it is as much a requirement of men to enter the householder stage as it is for women. But the roles that they undertake while in the householder stage are distinct. While in classical models of *dharma*, men's responsibilities *as men* include ritual obligations to the family and the caste- or family-specific deities, one of his fundamental responsibility is to support the family, and broader society, through the performance of his (often caste-associated) occupation outside of the home. Even as middle class men become less strictly tied to caste occupations, their role with marriage continues to center around work outside of the home. In traditional models of *stridharma*, a woman's primary responsibility after marriage is to support the family through her work *inside* the home. She should ideally dedicate herself fully to her husband and to "respectively fulfilling obligations to all senior family members, including senior women, and by directing and caring for junior family members" (Harlan and Courtright 1995, 8) through everyday domestic and ritual acts. She is traditionally expected to subsume her own needs and desires to those of her husband and his family and her central focus should remain within domestic spaces.

Women have long resisted internalizing such binary, patriarchal discourses that accompany these models of *dharma* and have found myriad ways of acquiring agency, authority, and mobility through everyday practices and narratives (Raheja and Gold 1994).[22] Young women like Kavita do not reject models of gendered *dharma* that

[22] See also Maggi 2001 for discussions of the relationship between claims of "freedom" and agency and women's mobility.

distinguish between the expectations of women and men and emphasize women's roles in the home nor does she eschew the importance of devotion to her husband and family. Rather, she constructs a new model for how this might be possible along with working outside the home.

Kavita appeals to education as both the cause of her desire to work outside the home and as the means by which she hopes to realize her goals. While she cannot work outside of home on her own, she can, it seems, go back to school for a second degree in interior design in order to work with her husband. Continuing her education may challenge traditional gender norms for wives, but it aligns with emerging middle class *dharma* of what is expected by and for young middle class women. Her continued education may even bolster the middle class status of her husband's family. Kavita may also be in a unique position to achieve her desire to work outside of the home because of the nature of her husband's career, which itself challenged family tradition. Kavita's father-in-law is a carpenter, and operates a small wood-working shop in Surat. Traditionally, the eldest son – Kavita's husband – would be expected to train in his father's trade in order to take over the family business. But Kavita's husband chose instead to pursue a degree and career in interior design – a distinctly middle class career – and his younger brother was training with his father to become a carpenter. Perhaps their shared aspirations will help enable Kavita to achieve her goal of working outside of the home.

While it remains to be seen what Kavita's future will hold for her, her emerging aspirations highlight how taking up new middle class practices of education and companionate marriage are reshaping girls' and young women's understanding of who

they are and who they can become. In her desire and strategy to work outside of the home, she imagines different kind of life as a wife and a woman than her mother, in which the boundaries of traditional *stridharma* are reconfigured as a middle class *stridharma* that includes and allows for her to contribute to the home in new ways, although the fact that she cannot yet do so continues to mark her and her family as members of the aspirational middle class. The emergence of new forms of *stridharma* is explores further in the next chapter, which examines how the relationships between husbands and wives are shifting in the context of nuclear families in the aspirational middle class.

CHAPTER 3

Solah Somwar and a New Dharma *of Conjugality*

One evening a few weeks after I had begun visiting the women in Pulan, but before I had moved into the neighborhood, I sat with Heena in the middle of the 3rd floor foyer of the Mali home that serves as her kitchen, helping her peeling garlic for dinner. Although I had only eaten with Heena three times before, that was enough for her to stop protesting my attempts to help and she began assigning me tasks to help with dinner preparations; that evening, my task was to wash and trim coriander leaves. I had ostensibly come to help Heena prepare *diyas* (oil lamps) for the impending celebrations of Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights, and ask her about the meaning of the festival. Yet, when I had arrived earlier in the evening at the furnishing refurbishing store she ran with her husband, Kishore, on the bustling main street of Pulan, she had been chatting with two neighbors about a different upcoming celebration: The Mansa Mahadev *puja* (worship) that would signal the end of the Solah Somwar *vrat* (Sixteen Monday fast).[23]

At the "sofa store," as Heena called it, the women had described for me the rules and regulations of the fast – every Monday, for sixteen weeks, participants would rise early to bathe, after which they could not eat, drink, or use the bathroom until they had gone to the temple to hear the *vrat katha* (story of the fast) read by a Brahmin *pujari* (priest) and offer worship to the god Shiva. The Mansa Mahadev *puja*, a three-hour long worship service marking the conclusion of the sixteen-week ritual period of Solah Somwar, would take place four days after Diwali. On that day, the women told me, the

[23] Although the proper name of the fast is the Mansa Mahadev *Vrat*, women commonly referred to the Monday fasting and devotional practices as Solah Somwar, distinct from the final worship ceremony of the Mansa Mahadev *puja*, and I do the same here.

temple would be overflowing with homemade *laddus* (Indian sweets) that, upon being blessed by god and becoming *prasad* (blessed food), would be handed out to neighbors, friends, and family throughout the neighborhood. By performing this fast, they assured me, one could receive their *man iccha*, or the desires of the heart.

As I sat on the floor of the foyer with Heena a few hours later, helping to prepare food, I asked her to tell me again about the *vrat*.

> Jenn (JDO): Why do people celebrate it?
>
> Heena: It is according to desire [*iccha se*]. I'm doing the *vrat* for god out of my own desire. Our personal desire is why we like it. People who like to drink a lot can't do it. It's not possible for them. But a lot of people do it, you'll see at the temple. … Anyone can do it, it's not about *jati* [caste]. This is the first time I'm keeping this *vrat*. In every month, we keep this *vrat* four times, on every Monday.
>
> JDO: One minute, one minute. This is your *first* time celebrating it?
>
> H: Yes. We haven't done it before.
>
> JDO: How did you make the decision that "now I will start this fast?"
>
> H: The neighbors told me that it is good. … And I like it that my husband and I do it together. We eat together. We do *puja* together. I do it because it brings happiness. Celebrating god makes us happy. It is fun [*maza ata*]. It is fun that we go to the temple together to do puja. So, this is why I do it.

A number of things stood out to me about Heena's explanation for taking up Solah Somwar; namely, her repeated emphasis on her personal desire combined with the clear influence of her neighbors, her use of the word "fun", and her description of her husband's participation. These were not the typical reasons women gave for performing

vrats. Often, women said that they fasted because it made god happy, it brought them peace or strength, it was good for someone else, and/or because it was a tradition, passed down by their mother or mother-in-law. Heena's response, however, suggested that something different was happening.

In this chapter, I unpack Heena's experience and articulation of Solah Somwar to analyze how taking up this new practice both reflects and creates her and Kishore's aspirational middle class identities in Pulan, and their shifting *dharmic* relationships to one another. The fact that Heena took up Solah Somwar due to the advice and encouragement of her neighbors points to how shifts in the social worlds of upwardly mobile Hindu women lead them to take up new ritual practices and how the ritual contexts both inform and fuel class aspirations. That Heena enjoys the ritual because she performs it with Kishore highlights perhaps a more important shift, however, regarding a new middle class mode of conjugality between couples in a nuclear family. By participating in Solah Somwar, Heena and Kishore recast an emerging *middle class* ideal of a strong conjugal bond between couples in a nuclear family as a *religious* ideal, thereby creating new Hindu understandings of the *dharmic* relationships and obligations between husbands and wives in the new middle classes.

Conjugal Couples in the Aspirational Middle Class

Heena was the woman to whom I became closest in Pulan as a result of the combination of her proximity as my upstairs neighbor, her generosity in spirit, words, and food, her infectious laughter and easy teasing of me, and her patience with my endless questions. The rhythms of my daily life became intertwined with hers; I was awoken at

6:30 each morning by the sound of the front door slamming behind her as she left to purchase milk for morning tea and would often wait until I heard the door slamming again on her return to get out of bed. When she would descend from the 3rd floor to leave for the sofa shop, freshly bathed, her synthetic sari pinned neatly over her left shoulder, and her hair oiled and smoothly plaited into a long braid down her back, she would stop to ask, "Are you coming?" "Yes, yes," I would inevitably reply, "I'll come later." This daily conversation was the signal for me to start my work of transcribing recordings and fieldnotes from the night before. In the afternoon, when she returned to make tea and begin preparing dinner, she would pause again on the steps, this time headed up rather than down, and repeat her question from the morning. "Are you coming?" This conversation was the signal for me to start my evening fieldwork, visiting with women during the "free time" they had to chat with me while preparing food.

Heena and Kishore in the "sofa shop." Photo by Jennifer Ortegren

Heena grew up in a small neighborhood on the outskirts of Udaipur, not far from her home in Pulan, with a younger brother and sister. Her marriage to Kishore was arranged by her father when she was fourteen, after her father attended a festival near Kishore's village in Madhya Pradesh and a family friend introduced them. Kishore was the youngest of seven children and his father had died when he was four years old, leaving the family in a struggling financial situation. Heena said that her father had liked that Kishore and his siblings all took care of each other following their father's death and that was part of why he had agreed to the marriage. Following their marriage, when Heena was sixteen, she moved to Kishore's village. After two years, however, she insisted that they move to Udaipur, largely because Kishore had been unable to find work in the village and was spending his idle time drinking with his other unemployed friends. They returned to Heena's parent's home in Udaipur, where her father trained Kishore in the traditional sewing and refurbishing trade of their Jingar caste.[24] After two years living with her parents, Heena and Kishore decided to move to Pulan and open their own refurbishing store. "We wanted to live apart," she told me, "We wanted our own *world*."

Heena and Kishore began renting the single room in which they still live with their sons, Ajay and Vijay (aged ten and eight, respectively) nearly seven years ago. The room itself was small and sparsely decorated. The recessed shelves built into one wall were carefully stuffed with blankets, kitchenware, and toiletries, and covered with a cloth curtain. Along the back wall, a small backless, armless couch sat next to a stack of suitcases that held the majority of the family's clothing. On the wall opposite the couch,

[24] Historically, in Rajasthan, Jingars have been "saddle makers" and once, while watching Kishore complete a new leather cover for a scooter seat – the modern day "saddle" – I recognized a fitting example of how caste occupations have modernized.

an old television sat atop a small table. Each evening, Heena spread foam mattresses out on the floor, where the family slept side-by-side.

As described in the introduction of this dissertation, Heena was the first woman to explain that she, and the other residents in Pulan, self-identify as "in between" in terms of their class identity. Like many of the women in Pulan, Heena struggled to help her family sustain their "in-between" status, negotiating the demands of working outside of the home and maintaining her household without the support of an extended family.

> I wake up at five in the morning and make chai and food and get the kids ready for school. Then I clean and bathe and go to the store. I work all day there and then come home. I wash the children's uniforms and make chai and cook dinner and clean and then go to sleep at eleven. Then I wake up and do it all over again. I never go anywhere because I am always working. I go from home to the shop and back and that's it.

For Heena, this grueling and monotonous routine is the layered expectations of her role as an upwardly mobile Hindu wife. Her *stridharma* – her moral obligations as a Hindu wife – is to support her husband, family, and the home. In addition to the domestic work that this requires, Heena works outside of the home, alongside her husband, to contribute vital income that will maintain the emerging middle class expectations of the family, namely her sons' education in a nearby private school. Her work, both within and beyond the home, is centered on upholding traditional *dharmic* expectations for women.

Her sons' education was Heena's top priority because it demonstrated her commitment to the family's upward mobility and proper moral orientation as members of the rising middle class. Heena and Kishore both studied until 10th class, but quit after they

got married, and Heena recognized that education was the only way for her children to have a "good *life*." She criticized other women in Pulan who showed off nice saris and jewelry, but did not pay attention to their children or send them to school. Alternatively, she pitied the children whose parents could not afford to send them to school and/or who had to stay home to take care of younger siblings while their mothers worked. I once asked her if she wanted her sons to go to college and if she expected them to take over the responsibility of operating the sofa store. She laughed and responded that they were too young to worry about college and that she simply wanted them to study and then see. "But," she added, "if they do well then they can go into *business* and then they can become *rich*!"

Heena was especially proud of the fact that Ajay and Vijay attend a private, Hindi-medium school a few kilometers outside of Pulan and worked hard to earn high marks, a sign of fulfilling their own *dharmic* responsibilities in a modernized "student life-stage" (See Chapter 1) and upholding the middle class respectability of the family. Like many of her neighbors, Heena spoke to her sons and her husband in Mewari – a dialect of Hindi common in rural areas – while at home, but she had also learned to speak a clearer, sharper form of Hindi by virtue of, and for the purpose of, communicating with customers in the sofa store. Flipping through Ajay's notebook in the sofa store one afternoon, I found sentences written in English: "This is a book; This is my book; This book is red." I asked Heena if she knew any English, but she shook her head no. "I know a little bit, but I never studied it. But my sons know English. The older one is fluent. He can read anything in English. In his entire class, he is first!" Months later, Ajay returned home with a certificate proclaiming that he was, in fact, first in his class. Kishore

promptly took him out to buy candy and ice cream. “Jenni Madam!” he shouted at me as they returned, his face beaming with pride, “Did you hear? First in class!” Ajay smiled sheepishly as his father handed out chocolates to neighbors to announce his son’s feat. The fact that Ajay and Vijay were learning English, though not yet attending English-medium schools, points to the aspirational status of the family, distinguished from their more elite middle class counterparts who could send their children to English-medium schools. Yet, Ajay’s success in his school was a sign of his parent’s success in the project of upward mobility and fulfilling their obligations as middle class parents.

Just as often as Heena spoke of her sons’ achievements with pride, however, she also lamented the serious financial burden the expenses of school placed on the family. She would list the things they had to pay for: monthly tuition, bags, notebooks, pencils, uniforms, shoes, additional after-school tutoring, and the cost of the rickshaw that transported her sons to and from school each day. The unstable and limited income of the sofa store made her sons’ education a difficult priority to maintain. There were times when Heena and Kishore could not pay the rent of their room on time because what little money they had made that month went directly to Ajay and Vijay’s education. Occasionally, Heena would tell me bluntly that she was not in the mood to talk because there was a lot of “tension” in her mind. Invariably, this tension was related to the family’s financial struggles.

The social relationships and ethos of care that define the “in between” status of Pulan residents – the fact that, unlike wealthy and poor people, “in between” people give *dhyan* (care) to one another – was particularly critical for Heena and Kishore because of their limited and unstable financial situation. For example, as I sat chatting with Heena

one day from my usual perch on the floor of the foyer, we heard the voice of another friend, Prema, calling to Heena as she walked up the stairs. Reaching the foyer, Prema explained that she had come for her money and Heena rushed into her room to retrieve a few 100 Rupee notes. When Prema had left, I turned to Heena with a questioning look and she explained that she had borrowed money from Prema a few weeks earlier when she did have enough to buy vegetables. In the interim, she and Kishore had received money from a customer and she could afford to pay Prema back. Similarly, Auntie-ji and Uncle-ji (the homeowners from whom they rented their single room) often allowed them to pay their rent late, demonstrating how the close-knit communal ties within the neighborhood were necessary for success in the project of upward mobility.

While Heena and Kishore's economic situation is unstable and limited, their aspirations are not. They want more, if not for themselves, then for their sons. This combination of limited resources for economic advancement and their investment in the performance of middle class propriety, regardless of personal cost –demonstrated here by their commitment to providing for their sons' education – help mark Heena and Kishore as members of the aspirational middle class. It marks their likeness to their upwardly mobile neighbors. Yet, it is through ritual practices like Solah Somwar, and participation in the social networks they foster, that Heena and Kishore's create and establish their *belonging* in the neighborhood. Simultaneously, the ritual brings the blessings of Shiva into their home and their business, which helps to increase the success of their business, and marks a distinct shift in their relationship to one another as they share in the ritual practices of Solah Somwar over the course of sixteen weeks. The ritual secures their

status in Pulan and ritualizes new understandings of their obligations to one another in more personal, gendered *dharmic* ways.

Observing **Solah Somwar** ***in Pulan***

Although many Hindus worship Shiva through everyday ritual practices, weekly fasts, and annual festivals, the Solah Somwar *vrat* is popular primarily among the urban, aspirational middle classes in Udaipur. Almost unanimously, women told me that Solah Somwar is not observed in their natal villages and that they only learned about the ritual after moving to Pulan. Likewise, none of the more elite women I knew in Udaipur were familiar with the ritual.[25]

Many Hindus keep a Monday fast year-round for Shiva, but the Solah Somvar *vrat* is marked by more stringent forms of fasting and requires the weekly reading of a *vrat katha* (fast story), which describes the origins and power of the ritual. For the entire sixteen weeks of the ritual period, all members of the household, even those who are not fasting or participating in the ritual practices of Solah Somwar, must abstain from meat and alcohol in order to maintain the purity of the home. Each Monday during these four months, participants go to the Shiva temple in the center of Pulan to listen a Brahmin *pujari* read the *vrat katha* in Hindi from a printed pamphlet and offer *puja* (worship) to Lord Shiva. Upon arriving at the temple, devotees stepped into the inner sanctum of the

[25] A friend who was concurrently conducting fieldwork in a village an hour south of Udaipur told me that women there did observe this *vrat*, but *only* young women – their mothers and mothers-in-law did not – suggesting that the popularity of the fast has been transmitted from urban areas outward. Some women, whose daughters had grown up in Pulan, but had been married into rural families, said their daughters observed the fast in their homes in the village, and returned to Pulan for the public *pujas* that marked the beginning and end of the ritual period. Ann Gold, who has recently conducted research among women in Santosh Nagar, a neighborhood in the Rajasthani town of Jahazpur with similar socio-economic backgrounds as those of women in Pulan, told me that she is not familiar with Solah Somwar, but that women in Santosh Nagar have begun taking up other new *vrats* (personal communication. See also Gold 2014).

temple and crowded together to add garlands of flowers and *kumkum* (a bright pink vermillion powder used in ritual ceremonies) to the *lingam*, an aniconic symbol of Shiva, housed there.[26] They continued adding *kumkum* to the small images of gods placed along the walls of the inner sanctum, a small shrine to Krishna in the corner of the temple outside of the inner sanctum, and to the forehead of the statue of Nandi, Shiva's bull, where he sat on his haunches facing the *lingam*. Then they sat on the marble floor of the temple, the women in front of the inner sanctum and the men to the side, to wait for the *pujari* to arrive.

Performing *puja* to the Shiva *lingam*. Photo by Jennifer Ortegren

[26] Daily *pujas* and all major events in the temple were presided over by the male members of a Brahmin family (one of only three in the neighborhood) that lived next to the temple. Performing these ritual practices were not, however, as far as I could tell, a source of significant income. The patriarch of the family held a government job in the city water sanitation department and the women in the family helped run a general store. The Pulan community had as much control over the temple practices as the Brahmin family, as the devotional practices of the women and men inside the inner sanctum demonstrates. The role of the Brahmin men was more ceremonial, granting legitimacy to certain temple practices, than strictly authoritative, which also marks the temple itself as belonging in an "aspirational" space.

The mood in the temple in the minutes before the priest arrived was relaxed, but with a sense of formality. The women and men chatted comfortably with one another and passed around restless toddlers who had accompanied their mothers or grandmothers. But they spoke in low, soft tones and hushed the children if they got too loud. Around 9 a.m., the priest arrived and read the Mansa Mahadev *vrat katha*. The women, the ends of their saris pulled over their head and loose hair,[27] lowered their eyes as they listened to the steady rhythm of the priest's voice, occasionally saying "yes, yes" as a sign of their appreciation. Following the reading of the *vrat katha*, the priest performed *arati* (flame offering) and the mood of the room shifted as the women and men clapped, sang, and rang bells strung from the ceiling. *Prasad* of fruit, yogurt, and nuts combined with rock sugar, was passed out for the devotees to consume, thereby ingesting the blessing of Shiva.

Most Mondays in Pulan, only a small, regular group of 15-20 women, and five young men, the husbands of the younger women, gathered in the temple to hear the *vrat katha* read by the priest, although they were not the only devotees observing the ritual in the neighborhood. Other men and women, who could not attend the weekly reading of the *vrat katha* due to conflicting work schedules, would come to the temple earlier or later and read the *vrat katha* at home. Likewise, women who could not enter the temple due states of pollution related to menstruation or birth, read the *vrat katha* to themselves at home. During the final Mansa Mahadev *puja* at the end of the sixteen weeks, however, all of the participants from throughout the neighborhood gathered at the temple, making it a

[27] Joyce Flueckiger notes that "Hair is a particularly permeable boundary of the body, and the deity can enter more easily if it is loose. … [usually,] because it leaves a woman vulnerable to entry by outside forces, traditionally Hindu women have bound their hair in buns (a custom that is shifting rapidly among some upper-class, educated, urban women)" (2015, 207, footnote 7).

large, public event. Women, dressed in their best saris, crowded shoulder-to-shoulder in the temple and spilled out onto mats placed on the road. Other groups of women and men gathered on the marble steps of a small, open platform across the street from the temple. This final *puja* was much more elaborate than the weekly rituals, requiring devotees to bring yogurt, milk, honey, flowers, and large, homemade *laddus* to be offered to Shiva in addition to the reading of the *vrat katha* for the final time.

The first year that I attended the Mansa Mahadev *puja* in 2012, a small group of men stood in the doorway of temple, relaying the instructions of the *pujari* inside to the participants outside, and gathering their offerings in large bowls to be passed through the temple to the inner sanctum. The following year, however, the large speakers that had been brought in to play Bollywood songs during Navratri celebrations a few weeks before were repurposed for the ritual. Placed on the steps outside of the temple, the speakers projected the instructions of the priest and the reading of the *vrat katha* to those sitting outside, his voice carrying into the neighboring *galis*, where groups of curious women and men gathered in doorways and on rooftops to watch the proceedings. Following this final *puja*, the participants distributed the *prasad* of *laddus* to their neighbors, friends, and family throughout Pulan and the city, spreading the blessings they had received far beyond themselves.

Mansa Mahadev *vrat* at temple 2013. Photo by Jennifer Ortegren

The ritual acts of Solah Somwar help to deepen and reinforce social bonds between neighbors and help Heena and Kishore secure their belonging in the neighborhood. Unlike weekly fasts carried out in the home or rituals performed on a single day or series of days on an annual basis, Solah Somwar participants meet each other publicly and repeatedly over an extended sixteen weeks. Unlike most larger communal festival celebrations, however, the Monday rituals for Solah Somwar are carried out in the intimate, quiet setting of the small temple. Relationships are nurtured inside the ritual space as women from various parts of the neighborhood who have not met in other contexts socialize before and after these weekly *pujas*. These relationships are carried outside of the ritual space as women who recognize Heena from the temple pause to speak with her at the sofa store, sometimes if only to ask why she did not attend the Monday worship that week. Distributing *prasad* following the final Mahadev *puja*, including to those who did not participate, further secures relationships with neighbors

and helps Heena and Kishore establish their belonging within the broader ritual and social networks of Pulan.

Yet, Solah Somwar practices are also a means by which, over four months, practitioners can slowly generate ritual purity in their bodies and homes that brings success into their personal and professional lives, helping them to achieve their *manicha*. In this way, at least for Heena and Kishore, the ritual becomes a powerful means for not only performing, but earning money that helps them to achieve middle class status. The potential for this change is narrated repeatedly in the Solah Somwar *vrat katha*,[28] which lays out the proper way to perform the *puja* and the reasons for undertaking the fast.

Solah Somwar **Vrat Katha**

The Solah Somwar *vrat katha* is central to the ritual itself, and to women's understandings and explanations of the fast. The *vrat katha* that women in Pulan read opens with Shiva and his female consort, Parvati, deciding to play a game of dice for their own amusement.[29] Shiva declares that they will need a third person who can objectively decide who has won and who has lost, so Parvati creates a son to act as the arbiter (in other versions, they call upon a nearby priest). Although Parvati has won, the son thinks to himself that if he declares Shiva the loser, Shiva will curse him, and he resolves to continue declaring Parvati the loser. Parvarti, who can hear her son's thoughts, becomes angry and curses him to be a wandering leper in the forest (*jangal*). One day, the son happens upon a Brahmin priest, the wives of the god Indra, and a group

[28] There are various versions of this story, but I rely here on my own translation of the pamphlet read by the *pujari* each week in the temple.
[29] For an excellent discussion of the varied meanings of Parvati and Shivaa's habit of playing dice across Hindu textual traditions, see Handleman and Shulman 1997.

of other (unnamed) goddesses performing a *vrat puja* beneath a sacred peepal tree. When he inquires about the rituals, they explain that they are performing the Maha Mansadev-ji *puja* and outline the detailed requirements of the ritual and the fast. When he asks what the benefit (*phal* – lit: "fruit") of the *puja* is, the women tell him, "Doing this fast fulfills all the desires of the heart" (*is vrat ke karne se man ki sab icchayen purna hoti hain*). They instruct him to observe sixteen weeks of Monday fasts for Lord Shiva and on the 17th week, to offer a *puja* and make *prasad* to be distributed to his family and friends. The son joins them in the fast, beginning the first Monday of that month, and continues the fast for four years in order to remove his curse of leprosy.

After some time, Parvarti remembers her son and remarks to Shiva that he has not come back in a long time. Shiva then instructs *her* to perform the Mansa Mahadev *vrat* and after four years, it occurs to her son to visit his mother. When Parvati's son comes to stand next to her, and she realizes who he is, she laughs, causing her son to recoil. "Why do you shrink from me?" she asks and he remarks on her laughter. Parvati explains that she is not laughing at her son, but at the power of the *vrat* to bring her what she wants. She asks her son what he wants and he says he wants to become the ruler of a kingdom, which he does, and eventually narrates the entirety of the story to his wife, who wants to have a child without getting pregrant. She completes the fast and miraculously find a child in a crib by the banks of a river, whom she recognizes as a gift from god because as soon as she sees him, she begins to lactate. Eventually, she narrates the entire story to her son when he inquires about his birth and he performs the *vrat* in order to get married. And so on and so forth.

The *vrat katha* repeats the proper means of observing the *vrat* multiple times throughout the story, which commits the details of how the fast is to be observed to memory, and describes the wide range of miracles it can produce. The story repeats, both explicitly and implicitly, how performing this *vrat* will bring devotees the desires of their hearts, while reinforcing the significance of hearing the story of the *vrat* as a critical part of its power. As didactic tools, *vrat kathas* teach Hindus the power of their fasts to fulfill their *dharma* and/or to effect change in their lives and the Hindu cosmology more broadly (Narayan 1997). For Solah Somwar, the story points both to the possible ends of the fast – achieving the desires of one's heart – even as it reinforces that the fast itself is the means for reaching those ends.

Vrat katha pamphlets are growing in popularity among upwardly mobile, newly literate people, replacing older oral traditions that may vary according to caste, region, and vernacular language with more standardized messages that are told in Hindi across regions and caste; local traditions are being replaced with pan-Indian stories written outside of the local community. *Vrat kathas* in Hindi are a distinctly modern, educated, "middle-class" way of accessing religious narratives and the "increasing importance of these texts as purveyors of a modern Hindu dogma cannot be overstated" (Wadley 1983, 150). Printed *vrat kathas* help to compensate for changes in the social and ritual structures of geographically mobile families, who may longer have access to the stories and traditions of their parents and in-laws (Wadley 1983). For women and couples in Pulan, like Heena and Kishore, owning these printed *vrat kathas* and publicly displaying them in the temple and home is a display of literacy and helps to perform their middle class identities, and to shape their understanding of the *vrat*.

Heena once described the purpose and power of the *vrat* and *vrat katha* to her mother and sister during the celebrations of Rakshabanda, a ritual honoring the relationships between brothers and sisters. I had traveled with her, Kishore, and their two sons to the home of her mother and brother twenty minutes outside of Pulan. Heena's sister had also returned with her children, and the sisters greeted each other warmly before retiring to the kitchen with their mother to prepare food. I joined them there and in a lull in the conversation, I asked if her mother and sister were also observing Solah Somwar. Heena's mother explained that she had stopped observing fasts years before due to ill health, and her sister said that people where she lives in Madhya Pradesh do not perform Solah Somwar. Heena then launched into an explanation of the *vrat* and its power.

> For Mansa Mahadev, we keep a fast. And no one can drink alcohol. It is so powerful and effective that it can change your life. I heard a story that there was a woman suffering from leprosy, and even though she didn't do the fast, she simply heard the *vrat katha* and was healed. The rule is that you have to go listen to the story in the temple and after that you can drink water or chai, but not before. A person who does this fast properly definitely gets a benefit. If you can do it right, then you should. If you can't do it right, then you shouldn't try. Shiv-ji comes to your house only if your house is pure. You can make your house impure if you eat meat or drink alcohol. We usually eat meat on Sundays, but not for these four months. By doing it, all of my wishes are coming true. Whatever I wish for, it comes true the next day. We stopped eating meat and immediately someone came to the shop and gave [Kishore] 10K rupees. I was hoping for money for the

> children's school and then the next day, god heard me and sent the money in a check from a customer.

While the weekly Monday fasts of Solah Somwar are an important sign of dedication to Shiva, it is this deeper power achieved through generation of ritual purity within the home and body that is essential for acquiring the desires of one's heart.

Heena was particularly careful to monitor her own and her family's behaviors, as well as those around her, during the sixteen weeks of Solah Somwar. In addition to the entire family abstaining from their usual Sunday treat of mutton (goat) curry, and Kishore refraining from drinking alcohol, which he did regularly throughout the rest of the year, Heena became particularly careful about her interactions with me. One evening, after I had sat with her while she cooked dinner, she poured the lentils she had made onto a plate, placed it between us to share, and handed me two *rotis* (breads). I ripped off a piece of the warm bread, dipped it in the broth of the lentils, and took my first bite. She too ripped off a piece of bread, but just as she was about to dip it into the lentils she looked at me and asked, "Have you eaten meat?" Slightly surprised, I had to stop to think because I did occasionally prepare chicken myself or eat meat when out with European friends. As I thought back to what I had eaten recently, she explained that if I had not bathed since the last time I had eaten meat, I was still impure and she could not share a plate with me, lest my impurity be transferred to her. She told me neither I nor anyone else could even enter their room if they had not bathed since the last time they ingested meat or alcohol because their presence would threaten the purity of the entire room. At that point, I had paused long enough that she clearly did not want to take the risk and she pushed the plate toward me, making a separate one for herself.

For most women, the desires of their hearts centered around the family. Many women told me they perform the ritual for the health and safety of their family and pointed out that girls have begun observing the *vrat* in order to attain good husbands (which they assured me would happen for me if I too observed the fast!). As such, the ritual reflects and reinforces for women the traditional expectations of *stridharma* – namely that the desires of their heart should be to become a wife, have a family, and support the family and home – although the ritual is inflected with middle class aspirations. For example, one unmarried girl who regularly attended the Monday ritual practices in the temple explained that in addition to wanting a good husband, the desires of her heart included pass her college entrance exams.

The desires that Heena hoped to have fulfilled by performing Solah Somwar are also related to the family, specifically the need to earn income to support her sons' education. Yet, these benefits are not her only motivations for undertaking the ritual. Rather, the "fun" of the shared process of generating ritual purity with Kishore is what makes Solah Somwar particularly powerful and meaningful for her. The ritual transforms their personal and professional lives, bringing them closer to one another and advancing their economic success. Working together to generate this purity both reflects and creates the new relationship they have as a conjugal couple in the aspirational middle class.

Solah Somwar and Conjugal **Dharma**

Changes in the economic, social and family structures of the aspirational middle class create new roles for, and relationships between, husbands and wives. According to orthodox brahmanical textual discourses on *dharma*, men's roles as married householders

are articulated primarily in relationship to their sons, fathers, and the other men in society. Even as male *dharma* has continued to develop and expand across castes, their roles and responsibilities have not been redefined in terms of their relationship to their wives or their obligations as *husbands*. Conversely, *stridharma* refers primarily to a woman's role and responsibilities as a wife toward her husband, and by extension, his family. While the particular rituals women perform may be specific to their caste or region, the expectation of devotion to men has historically been expected from women in all castes. Taking up the new ritual practices of Solah Somwar, however, expands the traditional *dharmic* expectations of women and men as individuals and as a couple.

Kishore, Heena, and a neighbor's son. Photo by Jennifer Ortegren

Much of women's traditional ritual lives revolver around the *dharmic* responsibility to support their husbands and serve as a *pativrata* (lit: one who makes a vow to her husband), ideally subordinating her own desires and suppressing her own desires and wishes if necessary in order to enable her husband to succeed and fulfill his

own *dharmic* duties (Harlan and Courtright 1995). Women recognize the cosmological power of their rituals to bring auspicious marriages and they accept the responsibility to protect the longevity of their husbands' lives by undertaking specific *vrats*, such as those for Karva Chauth (Chapter 3) and Teej (Gold 2000; Harlan 1992). *Vrats* and the *vrat kathas* that accompany them teach women their *dharma* as women/wives to remain dedicated to their husbands and his family, even as they help them to fulfill that *dharma* and achieve their aspirations to be *pativratas*.

Women have rarely passively complied with or internalize these classical *dharmic* expectations and, instead, have much more nuanced, complex understandings of why they observe religious fasts, including the fact that it enables them to participate, albeit in limited ways, in the ascetic paths of spiritual advancement that have been traditionally reserved for men, to develop alterative ritual roles for themselves and to create ritual relationships with other women across castes (Pearson 1996; Pintchman 2007). Women are also critical of a socio-religious system that simultaneously insists on their unfailing devotion to their husbands and curtails their intimacy with them. Women's songs, stories and oral expressive traditions illuminate their resistance to and critiques of these sometimes contradictory expectations as they call for their husband's attention and loyalty over and against that of his natal kin (Raheja and Gold 1994).

Heena's assertion that her decision to take up Solah Solwar was driven by her personal desires, and because it is "fun," also challenges these more traditional narratives about why women perform *vrats*, namely by emphasizing her own volition in taking up the *vrat*. While she was encouraged by her neighbors to begin the ritual, which highlights how neighbors of nuclear families in urban, aspirational middle class neighborhoods

come to serve as mothers- and sisters-in-law who guide one another's ritual lives – Heena's emphasis on performing Solah Somwar according to her own desire (*iccha se*) emphasizes her capacity to act for her own benefit and her own agency in her ritual life. Since Heena lives in a nuclear family, her mother-in-law does not directly control her ritual life, and she recognizes a freedom to experiment with new forms of religious expression and religious practice in part for the ways that they bolster her own happiness and allow her to participate in broader cultural trends – interests that are beyond the traditional reasons for taking up ritual practices. This emphasis on personal desire not only reflects Heena's new power and position in a nuclear, middle class family, but suggests new understandings of *stridharma* that are not limited to a wife's devotion to her husband. Rather, they include a *dharmic* right and responsibility for women to achieve their own happiness and spiritual advancement. It suggests a *stridharma*, formulated in middle class contexts, that is not simply for a woman *as a wife*, but for a woman *as a woman*.

For Heena, Solah Somwar is still fundamentally about fulfilling her *dharmic* responsibilities to the family, as her *man iccha* is to earn money to support her son's education, and it does revolve around her husband, but in a new way. Heena is clear that she is acting on her own desires and does not frame the ritual as being about devotion to her husband. Yet, one of her desires is to share her ritual world with her husband. She finds the ritual to be both effective and fun because it brings her closer to Kishore.

This points to a new experience of the relationship between husbands and wives. Traditionally, particularly in rural communities, public expression of strong conjugal ties have been seen as threatening to the cohesion of the extended family. The ability of a

married woman to disrupt relations between her husband and his patrilineal kin is viewed with some uneasiness, lest a man's commitment to his wife take precedence over his obligations to his father and brothers and threaten the security of ownership and inheritance (Raheja and Gold 1994). This is not to claim that historically husbands and wives in Hindu societies have not enjoyed intimacy. Rather, it is to emphasize that this intimacy is closely monitored and controlled, usually by the mother-in-law, to restrict the development of a relationship that will weaken a son's loyalty to his mother or siblings, and that the intimacy of the conjugal couple, historically, has not been displayed *publicly* (Raheja 1995, 37). In her discussion of rural, North Indian women's use of subversion in their songs and stories, Gloria Raheja claims that, "When women's expressive traditions place [an] emphasis on the husband-wife bond, they are envisioning, I think, a rather dramatic alteration in the relations of power. They are envisioning a world in which relationships among and through men are not always given moral primacy (1994, 122). For Heena and Kishore, Solah Somwar also represents a shift in the power relations within the family in terms of the between the conjugal couple, a shift that has come about through the processes of upward mobility, urbanization, and changing nature of the family itself.

As Heena and Kishore's lives demonstrate, moving into a nuclear family structure in an urban area signals new roles for women within and beyond the home, and creates new possibilities, and even demands, for a strong conjugal bond. Heena is in a position to control the everyday decision-making of the home and direct her relationship with her husband that is neither directly guided not limited by the influence of in-laws or siblings. That fact that she and Kishore jointly operate the sofa store, and equally contribute to

financially supporting the family, creates a unique dynamic for them as a conjugal couple, and a uniquely public display of their conjugal bond. Far from threatening the stability of the family, the intimacy and co-dependence of Heena and Kishore is critical for maintaining both their familial and professional success in Pulan and achieving middle class status. Publicly displaying their independence and interdependence is not only acceptable and necessary, as it demonstrates the means by which they can achieve upward mobility, but in some cases, is a desirable as a sign of middle class status.

It is important to note that Heena and Kishore's relationship with one another, even within the aspirational middle classes, may have been unique because they work together, and that my relationship with them was unique for the same reasons. I spent more time with Heena and Kishore together than with any other couple in Pulan. This was partly due to logistical reasons. In most other families, either or both the husband and wife left the neighborhood each day for work. This meant that when I visited women during the day, their husbands were not home, and in the evenings, I spent my time with women while they were preparing food in the kitchen – a separate space in which men rarely dwelled for long if they entered at all. Although women would often offer me food at the same time that their husbands and children ate, which was before they themselves ate, I would remain in the kitchen with them and leave the home before the couple would have an opportunity to spend any time together alone. Thus, I spent very little time with women's husbands, except for Kishore.

I spent time with Kishore because he and Heena were together throughout the day in the sofa store near their home. Also, unlike many other women, Heena regularly ate with Kishore and their children, and, because we lived in the same house, I could stay

with the family later into the evenings than I would with other families. Moreover, because Heena and Kishore reside in a single rented room, there was no separate gendered space. When either Heena or Kishore had friends visit in the evening, they all sat together in one room; they were friends with each other's friends.

These logistical differences did not simply create a different window into Heena and Kishore's life for me, however; it also created a different kind of *public* relationship between them. There was an ease with which they teased one another and laughed together, both publicly and privately, that I did not witness with other couples. I commented on the nature of their public relationship frequently in my fieldnotes when I first met them, and once asked Heena if was common for husbands and wives to be friends (*dost*). She replied that it was very rare, and when I said that it seemed that she and Kishore were friends, she laughed and agreed, saying, "We spend all of this time sitting here together!" Perhaps the most telling sign of their unique relationship was the fact that Heena felt comfortable occasionally speaking Kishore's name. Traditionally, Hindu women refrain from saying their husband's name as a sign of respect and modesty; instead women refer to their husbands indirectly, using other kinship relations such as "my children's father," "my [name of sister-in-law]'s brother," or, as Heena often did, using the English word "husband." I never heard any other woman in Pulan other than Heena speak their husband's first name. When I asked Heena about this, she explained, "In the store, it has become a habit and I will say his name to the customers. They ask me his name and his telephone number, so I have to say it. Kishore-ji. I said it 10 or 15 times and now it's ok."

This is not to say that Heena and Kishore do not struggle in their relationship or that it is a relationship of equality. While Heena contributes to the work at the sofa shop, Kishore does not equally contribute to the domestic duties, making Heena's work more difficult. Moreover, although Kishore was hardly unique in his drinking habits, he drank regularly, sometimes to excess, in which cases they were forced to close the store. This was a source of embarrassment and frustration for Heena and caused tension in their relationship, in part because it impacted their financial situation. She once explained that:

> [My husband] is causing me a lot of trouble. He worked a lot this week and is tired, there is a lot of tension on his mind – from work and money – [but] if we don't work, we don't make money. And he hasn't gotten the money yet from the work he did [outside of Pulan] this week. They have to take it from the bank to give to us. They owe us 5,000 rupees. We [paid for] the materials ourselves too. And this is why he drinks.

At another point, when Heena and Kishore had been fighting more often than usual due to financial constraints and his drinking, she was too pre-occupied to talk with me. I had brought my computer upstairs, where my internet reception was best, and sat silently on the steps leading up to the roof, reading online. My own reverie was broken by her loud sigh and as I offered a sympathetic smile, she gathered her sari into her lap, pulled the roti dough she was preparing closer to her, and shook her head. "God did not remember to give me a life," she said and went back to work.

During Solah Somwar, however, their personal and professional lives are dramatically transformed. While Heena maintains that Kishore only began to drink so heavily in the past few years due to financial struggles, his drinking habits became a non-

issue during the four months of Solah Somwar. During the ritual period, he rose early each morning with Heena to open the store early and often returned to the store after eating dinner with his family to work late into the night. The final weeks of Solah Somwar coincide with the busiest time of the year for the sofa store, in the weeks leading up to Diwali. For Lakshmi *puja*, a feature of Diwali practices, Hindus must rigorously clean their entire homes, which often includes refurbishing furniture. These few busy weeks also precede the slowest months of the year when Heena and Kishore have the least amount of income, meaning that what they earn during October and November (depending on when Diwali falls) must continue to support them through March. It is fortuitous that Kishore's sobriety and productivity increases when they need it most.

For Heena, however, the fact that the last half of Solah Somwar coincides with this busiest and most profitable time of the year is only coincidental. She does not attribute their financial success during these weeks to ritual preparation for Lakshmi *puja* and Diwali, or to the ways in which Kishore's sobriety affects his ability to work. Rather, she points to the power of the ritual purity that she and Kishore generate together through fasting and worshipping Shiva for Solah Somwar. It is not enough that Kishore quits drinking; that may increase his productivity, but that alone will not bring more business to the sofa store. While Kishore's commitment to abstain from meat and alcohol for four months, and publicly perform this ritual with Heena, signals his respect for Heena's decisions and his commitment to the stability of their marriage and success of their family in ways that reflect and create middle class ideas of companionship (Belliapa 2013; 81), it is more than that. Both their class mobility and the rituals of Solah Somwar transform them as people and as a couple. The power of Shiva's blessings, brought

through their devotion and purity, recreates them as devotees, which brings them customers and money. This is evident in the story she tells her mother and sister: "We stopped eating meat and immediately someone came to the shop and gave [Kishore] 10K rupees. I was hoping for money for the children's school and then the next day, god heard me and sent the money in a check from a customer." Her and Kishore's shared ritual practices have a direct impact on their economic advancement. During Solah Somwar, God hears her, he does not forget her, and their home, business, and bodies become pure enough for Shiva to enter and fulfill their desires.

Their increased business at the sofa store is not the only way in which Heena and Kishore's lives are affected by the shared ritual practices of Solah Somwar. The ritual fasts of the Solah Somwar *vrat* imbue their daily lives with new meaning, and create alternative spaces to share with each other. This, in turn, reshapes their relationship with one another as husband and wife to one another and as a couple in Pulan.

To begin with, the public nature of Solah Somwar is an important way that Heena and Kishur perform their middle class status within the neighborhood. When they arrive at the temple each Monday and attend the first and final *puja* of the ritual period, wearing the right kinds of clothes in the right kinds of ways, they display for the entire neighborhood their economic capacity and cultural competency for engaging in middle class religiosity and proper middle class socio-moral and religious orientations as they are defined within Pulan. As they hand out *prasad* to neighbors, friends, and family following the final *puja*, they perform their identities as an ideal *Hindu* couple. While the strength and public nature of their conjugal bond may be viewed as unorthodox and potentially threatening in traditional, joint families, or not at all acknowledged in the

classical *dharmic* systems, it is increasingly common in middle class families. Through Solah Somwar, Heena and Kishore's public presence as a couple is refigured as a means of displaying and strengthening a new kind of *dharmic* order that necessitates strong conjugal bonds. They recast the middle class values that guide their lives *as Hindu values*.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, Kishore's public participation in the ritual practices and his commitment to abstaining from alcohol and meat points to a significant shift in how upward mobility creates new Hindu understandings of marriage and gender, namely in the development of a sense of men's responsibilities and obligations as *husbands* to their wives. In her book *Because It Gives Me Peace of Mind*, Anne Mackenzie Pearson notes that whereas women are socialized to perform outwardly-directed fasts for the attainment of the well-being of others, such as husbands, children, and family, men tend to perform inwardly, self-directed *vrats* to advance their own spirituality and well-being (Pearson 1996, 7). Pearson herself points to how these assumptions are challenged by women's narratives about their ritual lives, but the practices of Solah Somwar suggest shifts in men's understanding of why they perform *vrats*. Heena, like many of the women with whom Pearson works, asserts the importance of her own desire in taking up this *vrat*. But more strikingly, during Solah Somwar, Kishore performs an outwardly direct *vrat* that is explicitly for the purpose of generating purity for the home and the advancement of the family.

Even as women have begun to imagine, appropriate and occupy new social and *dharmic* worlds within and beyond the home, the public, shared observances of Solah Somwar suggest new orientations for young upwardly mobile men toward their wives. It

signals recognition of their responsibilities *as husbands to their wives* that mirror the ways in which women become obligated to their husbands in upholding *stridharma*. It points to new personal and *dharmic* identities for men that are defined, in part, vis-à-vis *women*. We might imagine this as a "*purushadharma*" (male/husband *dharma*) that operates in the everyday and ritual lives of Hindu couples in the aspirational middle class in ways similar to that of *stridharma* in terms of conjugal commitments.

While men do perform some individual *vrats*, they tend to do so less frequently than women and, according to many of the women in Pulan, it is not common for husbands and wives to undertake joint fasts[30] over an extended period of time nor it is common for them to perform them publicly. It is important to note that while the husbands of all of the women performing Solah Somwar had to abstain from meat and alcohol, it was only younger men, in their mid-30s or younger, who attended the public practices in the temple each week with their wives. This suggests a shift in how younger couples, moving into nuclear families in the aspirational middle classes, understand their relationships with, and obligations to, one another as co-partners, who must become committed to maintaining their lives and supporting one another in new ways.[31]

Class mobility and transitioning into nuclear families does not undo male privilege or female subordination. Unlike their elite counterparts, women in Pulan are not engaged in modern discourses of women's rights, equality, or empowerment. They

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[30] There are exceptions in which husbands and wives perform joint fasts, such as the Satya Narayana *vrat* (See Flueckiger 2015 and Saavala 2010), but these *vrats* often last for one day, not four months.

[31] I did ask Kishore why he observed the fast. But because he and I did not share the same type of intimate relationship that Heena and I did, and he was not used to offering the elaborate answers that she would, I struggled to push past his stock answers of telling me that I would understand if I read the *vrat katha* and claiming that by keeping the fast, one can attain all of his/her desires. When I explicitly asked, "Do you do it for your wife?" both he and Heena paused, looked at each other briefly, and laughed before he returned to pointing out that Shiva is the highest god and that is why there is power in the *vrat*. Later Heena explained that like her, Kishore took up Solah Somwar according to his desire.

continue to lack significant social, economic, or political power and there has not been a dramatic shift in gender hierarchies of their lives. Yet, it is precisely because many traditional filial, social, and gendered expectations *are* maintained that Heena and Kishore's shared public performance of Solah Somwar is so striking. As the things that hold their world together shift – the *dharma* of family, gender, and work – so too does their relationship and their *dharma* vis-à-vis one another shift. Performing Solah Somwar sanctifies a new ways of being husband and wife and these new forms of conjugality become encoded into the *dharmic* obligations of married couples in a specifically Hindu religious context. By participating in Solah Somwar, Heena and Kishore establish themselves as devotees in the broader ritual and social communities of Pulan and as a Hindu couple who belong in the aspirational middle class community of Pulan. The ritual is an active, public performance of their intertwined religious and class identities that reflect proper middle class socio-moral orientations and sanction middle class values as Hindu values. In doing so, they reimagine and publicly perform a new kind of "householder" *dharma* in which the conjugal bond *itself* is central and requires the shared maintenance of both a man as a husband and a woman as a wife.

CHAPTER 4

Karva Chauth and Neighbor Dharma

On a warm afternoon in late October, when the stifling heat of the summer months had finally given way to pleasant breezes, I sat on the front steps of the house where I rented rooms in Pulan, chatting with Auntie-ji (my landlady) and her daughter-in-law, whom I only called Bhabhi-ji (older brother's wife). Auntie-ji and Bhabhi-ji sat just inside the front door, on the marble of small, ground floor foyer, cleaning vegetables for Auntie-ji to sell from her cart that evening. It was Karva Chauth, an annual one-day *vrat* (fast/vow) undertaken by married women for the health and longevity of their husbands. This ritual was strikingly different from Solah Somwar (Chapter 2) as only married women performed it. Unlike Solah Somwar, which included the participation of men and young girls, traditionally, neither men nor unmarried girls undertake the Karva Chauth ritual, but nearly *all* married women in Pulan – across class, caste, and regional backgrounds – observed the fast. When I asked Auntie-ji and Bhabhi-ji how and why they observed the fast, Bhabhi-ji replied, "We do it for our husbands, so they will have a long life." Her response was precisely what I had expected; nearly every woman I asked about Karva Chauth gave this simple and straightforward response. Our neighbor from across the street, Kusum, was returning home from her job as a cook for a wealthy family in a nearby neighborhood and she stopped to sit next to me on the steps. "Why do *you* celebrate Karva Chauth?" I asked her, and she responded exactly as Bhabhi-ji had, "We

do it for our husbands." Yet, Kusum's response was somewhat surprising considering she did not, in fact, live with her husband.[32]

Kusum had moved to Pulan nearly 25 years ago, although her reasons and circumstances for relocating were different than many other families. She had grown up in a neighborhood of the Old City of Udaipur where members of her Rajput community[33] were dominant. Following her marriage at the age of 18, she had moved with her husband to a different, upwardly mobile neighborhood of Udaipur near Pulan, where she had two children: a daughter and a son. Shortly after her son was born, however, Kusum's husband left her to take a new wife. Following his departure, Kusum's family told her to move back in with them, but she refused, insisting that she would live alone and raise her children by herself, which she had successfully done in Pulan. Although Kusum was not legally divorced, she thought of herself as a divorced woman, primarily because of the social and economic hardships she had faced living independently from her husband. Her husband did occasionally visit, and had done so increasingly in recent months as they prepared for their son's marriage, but there was clearly still tension between them.

Kusum was an outspoken woman and we often teased one another from across our doorsteps or kitchen windows. I began teasing her that afternoon, suggesting that she should not perform the rituals of Karva Chauth for her husband because I did not like him and did not think his life should be longer. All of the women laughed at my comment and Kusum agreed, saying that her husband is a *badmash* (hooligan). But the conversation

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[32] Ann Gold (2015) reports asking a similar question when collecting narratives surrounding Karva Chauth, although receives markedly different responses from the divorced women to whom she speaks than I did from Kusum.

[33] Although Rajputs are historically the most powerful caste-groups in Rajasthan, and locate themselves within the twice-born, Kshatriya *varna* (caste-group) – lower only than Brahmins in an orthodox, Brahminical ritual hierarchy of purity/pollution – Kusum was a Chandar Rajput, a relatively low *jati* (birth group) within the Rajput *varna* and listed as OBC in Rajasthan.

grew more serious as I explained that I genuinely did not like the rare occasions when he would visit, because he would sit on her front steps smoking and she would sit behind him, inside the narrow foyer of her home, where she was barely visible and we could not speak to one another. She nodded as I spoke, knitting her brows in disapproval. When I asked her, in all seriousness, why she performs Karva Chauth if she does not approve of her husband and his behavior, she shrugged and replied, "Everyone – all the women from the street – they all go there. And I have to take my [new] daughter-in-law now."

Kusum's response offers an alternative understanding of Karva Chauth that is unrelated to husbands. In spite of considering herself to be divorced, Kusum dutifully fasts each year, and gathers with her female neighbors to recite the *vrat katha* (fast story), which narrates the origins and power of Karva Chauth and details the ritual of worshiping the waning moon. She is motivated to undertake these ritual actions less for her husband, that for her neighbors and, beginning in 2013, her daughter-in-law. Ostensibly, women gather together for Karva Chauth because of a shared commitment to fulfilling the demands of *stridharma*; the ritual is a means both for teaching women about their obligations as wives to be devoted to their husbands and a means by which they ritually fulfill their *stridharma* as devout wives. Yet, Kusum's words highlight the importance of the ritual for developing relationships and fostering solidarity between female neighbors.

In this chapter, I analyze the how the narrative, aesthetic and community dynamics of Karva Chauth are changing within and beyond Pulan to understand how the ritual is taking on new meanings in middle class, urban India. Among upper-middle and upper class women, Karva Chauth is an increasingly popular celebration of wealth and luxury, and a platform upon which emerging middle class gender values are contested

and negotiated. In Pulan, the significance of the ritual lies in how it fosters ritual relationships and obligations between female neighbors, producing a new *dharma* of *neighbors*. As this chapter demonstrates, participating in and upholding the expectations of "neighbor *dharma*," whereby neighbors come to serve as extended family members to one another, is critical for success in the project of upward mobility.

Celebrating Karva Chauth in Pulan

A few hours after my conversation with Auntie-ji, Bhabhi-ji, and Kusum, I joined our neighbor Meera, who would be hosting the evening's rituals for the women who lived in the *gali*, as she prepared a small altar on her rooftop. Meera's roof was lined with lush potted plants and felt like an oasis in the rocky, desert landscape of Rajasthan. From her roof, I could glimpse the distant twinkling lights of the Nemach Mata temple set high upon a hill of the Aravalli mountains that surrounded Udaipur, and see down onto neighboring rooftops where other women were similarly preparing for the evening's rituals. As I watched, Meera placed a framed lithograph of the god Shiva, surrounded by his family – his wife Parvati, their sons Skanda and Ganesha, and Shiva's mount (*vahana*), the bull Nandi – on a small table set up along the wall of roof. At the top of the lithograph were emblazoned the words "Karva Chauth," but they were soon hidden by a garland of flowers and a red and gold sari piece that Meera draped over the frame. To the left of the altar she placed two small *karvas* (pitchers), covered with a piece of red sari fabric and filled with water.[34] She performed a brief *puja* (worship), lighting sticks of

[34] Although I did not ask to whom the ritual was dedicated – as I assumed it was dedicated to Shiva and his family due to the lithograph, Gold (2015) reports being corrected that the ritual is dedicated specifically to Chauth Mata (Fourth Mother), who can be represented by the *karvas*. She ultimately concludes, however, that "deities are not the point of women's vows on Tij or Karva Chauth" (218).

incense and placing fruit, sweets, flowers, and a one rupee coin on the small altar, and as she finished dotting the foreheads of each of the figures in the picture with *kumkum* (bright pink vermillion powder used in Hindu rituals), we heard Kusum's voice rising from the second floor. "Come upstairs. Come!" Meera called out.

Kusum emerged onto the roof trailed by her new daughter-in-law, Bhavana, her twelve year-old granddaughter, Anjali, and Meera's granddaughter, Sonal, who was Anjali's classmate and best friend in the neighborhood. Kusum asked where everyone else was, to which Meera replied, "Who knows? They all had to work and then bathe and then they will come. Come!" Kusum and her daughter-in-law sat in front of the altar to perform a *puja* similar to Meera's, adding their own food to the altar and dots of *kumkum* to the lithograph. When they finished, they joined Meera and me where we sat on a thin rug laid out in the center of the roof in front of the altar and Kusum and Meera began chatting about their day. Meera told Kusum that she had been invited by a Christian woman, with whom she worked in the kitchen of a large, public school in the southern suburbs of Udaipur, to eat in the woman's home that evening. When Meera told the woman that she was observing Karva Chauth, the woman had insisted that she could break the fast at her house, but Meera explained that she could not eat at the house of a Christian woman. "She's the same caste, but Christians are lower, so I can't eat there. And besides," she continued, echoing Kusum's sentiments from earlier in the afternoon "why wouldn't I go with my neighbors?"

In a lull in their conversation, I asked how long it would be before the moon rose and Sonal suggested close to eleven o'clock. "Eleven o'clock?!" I said, "I'll be asleep by then!" prompting Sonal to insist that I would have to wait for the moon to rise. "They

don't do this *vrat* in her village," Pushpa told to her daughter-in-law, pointing toward me. "They don't do any *vrats* there!" cried Meera, "What *vrats* do you do?!" Laughing, I shot back, "Well, I don't have to do this *vrat* because I don't have a husband! So, while you sit here waiting and waiting, I'm going home to eat and go to sleep!" We all laughed and Kusum assented, "That's true, that's true."

As Meera began cutting the brightly colored protective strings (*rakhi*) the women would tie around their wrists following the ritual, she talked about the rice, lentils and *khir* (a sweet, milky rice pudding) she had made for that evening, as these were the appropriate foods to prepare for the Karva Chauth fast.[35] "Do people do this *vrat* in the village?" I asked. "Yes, they celebrate in the village," Kusum responded at the same time her daughter-in-law, who grew up in a village two hours away, said, "No, they don't celebrate it in the village." Pausing for a second, I asked them to repeat their answers. Kusum's daughter-in-law clarified that they do perform Karva Chauth in the village, but much less so than in the city. "And why do you celebrate it?" I continued. "It is so our husbands will have a long life," Kusum explained matter-of-factly, echoing her earlier explanation.

After a few minutes, two more neighbors, Heena and Manju – both younger women in their late 20s – arrived. Stepping onto the rooftop, Heena held her chest and, panting, said, "I'm so old! It's such a long way up those steps!" "If your husband is going to have a long, long life, you have to come a long, long way!" Meera responded. Like Kusum and her daughter-in-law, Heena and Manju performed a brief *puja* before the altar and Meera, watching carefully, offered instructions. "Now put the flowers," she said,

[35] See Narayanan (2000) for a discussion of the relationship between food, rituals, and auspiciousness.

"here take these." When they finished, they too sat on the mat to form a small semi-circle in front of the altar.

Heena complimented Meera on her sari, which prompted a conversation about which clothes are proper to wear for which occasions. Meera had purchased her sari specifically for Karva Chauth, but purposely bought it in a light material, she explained, so that she could wear it again for weddings in the hot months. The mention of heat prompted the women to discuss the difficulties of keeping a strict fast for Karva Chauth because the heat of the day made them so thirsty and tired, especially while working outside of the home.[36] All of the women admitted they had drunk some water that day and Kusum exclaimed, "You can't live without drinking water, so you should drink water! It's good!" Meera even admitted that she had drunk chai that day at work, but noted that her daughter-in-law, who does not work outside of the home, had maintained the strict fast the entire day. "Next year," Kusum assured her, "Next year, my daughter-in-law and I will both do the full fast." After another brief lull in the conversation, Meera – whose family runs a small jewelry store – asked Manju where she had gotten her bangles. When Manju explained that she purchased them while visiting her parents in Ahmedabad, Meera insisted that she must bring back more the next time she goes for her to sell in the jewelry store, although Manju insisted that the bangles would break while traveling. The women then began discussing jewelry, debating which bangles are best and where one should buy gold.

Auntie-ji and Bhabhi-ji arrived next. "I had to bring in the vegetables and give one slap to my husband before I could come," Auntie-ji joked, causing the women to

[36] Gold (2015) finds similar narratives of women claiming Karva Chauth to be an urban ritual, but the women with whom she works suggest that it is because rural women must engage in agricultural labor, and therefore cannot go all day without water. The same claims seem to be true here.

erupt in laughter. As she and Bhabhi-ji took their place before the altar to perform their own *puja*, Meera again offered corrections. “No no! Light the candle first!” Heena interrupted to tell Bhabhi-ji to take off her veil so she could see what she was doing. This generated yet another discussion about whether or not a new daughter-in-law should wear her best jewelry to perform Karva Chauth and what style of veiling she should observe.

Finally, the last participating neighbors arrived – Gopi, her two daughters-in-law, and her three-year-old grandson, Yuvi, who was perhaps the most gregarious and beloved child on the street. Gopi was from the same village as Uncle-ji (my landlord) and had helped to arrange the marriage of his son, Krishna, to Bhabhi-ji, who was a member of Gopi’s extended family. Like Auntie-ji, Gopi sold vegetables for a living, but operated a larger stall in a small market bordering an elite neighborhood a few kilometers away. Meera teased Gopi for being so late and told Yuvi that he should have pushed his grandmother so she would move faster.

Neighbors gathered for Karva Chauth on Meera’s roof. Photo by Jennifer Ortegren

When the final *puja* at the small altar had been completed by Gopi and her daughters-in-law, the women moved closer to one another in a small semi-circle to hear the *vrat katha*. Bhabhi-ji was elected to read the story aloud from a pamphlet purchased in the market, and printed in Hindi. Bhabhi-ji was chosen in part because she was a new daughter-in-law in the ritual community, but also because she was the most highly educated of the women present; Auntie-ji and Uncle-ji were paying for her tuition to earn a bachelor's degree at the same women's college her sisters-in-law attended. Bhabhij-ji proved adept at narrating the story rapidly and with little inflection, as is often the style of priests in the temple, and when she was done, the older women cajoled one another into telling other *vrat kathas* from memory. Gopi and Kusum told stories of how women's enduring devotion to Ganesha brought miracles into their lives and Auntie-ji narrated a story about a woman's devotion to the goddess restoring her brother's life. Although the stories told from memory were not directly related to Karva Chauth, they each exemplified the power of women's devotion and *vrats* to realize their wishes and improve their lives, and follow a pattern of worship stories for Karva Chauth in Rajasthan which requires three stories (Gold 2015; 209, f.n. 3). Following the stories, the women stood in front of the altar to perform *arati* (flame offering), led again by Bhabhi-ji. When, halfway through the song, the women all began to falter and could not remember the words, they began laughing and told Bhabhi-ji to retrieve the *vrat katha* pamphlet and sing the lyrics printed there for the remainder of the song.

When the *arati* was complete, the women put away the pamphlet and resumed their positions on the rug to wait for the moon to rise. Although we could see other groups of women on neighboring rooftops beginning to perform *puja* to the moon, the

storage room on top of Meera's house continued to block our view of the moon. As we waited, Meera again told the story of the Christian woman who had invited her to her home and how she had refused in order to celebrate with her neighbors.

Eventually, Sonal announced that moon was fully visible and the women took turns performing *puja* toward the sky, lighting the small oil lamps (*diyas*) on their *puja* plates, flicking water in the direction of the moon from the small *karvas* (clay pots) they had brought with them, and asking for blessings for their husbands and family. When they finished, they performed *arati* to the moon, but this time singing a common *arati* song that even the granddaughters knew from worship in the temple.

Only then, after the final *puja* to the moon had been completed, could the fasting women take what was supposed to be their first sip of water of the day. Traditionally, especially in rural areas where women observe Karva Chauth, they return home after completing the female communal *vrat* ritual, to have their husbands pour the now-blessed water from their *karvas* into their hands for their first drink (Wadley 2008). This act of exchange signifies both women's devotion to their husbands, and the giving and receiving of his blessings. In Pulan, however, the women did not return home. Rather, they exchanged their *karvas* with each other, passing the *karvas* back and forth and taking turns pouring water into one another's hands. While there was no obvious discussion of who should exchange with whom, the women paired off according to what seemed to be differences in life-stage. Auntie-ji and Gopi, both older mothers-in-law, exchanged with one another, while their two daughters-in-law did the same next to them. Only after these exchanges did the women return to their own homes to eat the special types of *dal* and *khir* that they had prepared earlier in the day.

Karva exchange. Photo by Jennifer Ortegren

I once asked my host sister Kavita if caste played a determining role in how women decided with whom they exchanged *karvas*, but she said that caste was not a barrier, as long as both women had observed the fast in the same way. That is, if one woman has observed the fast completely – not drinking any water – but another woman has drunk water or chai, they should not exchange *karvas*; only if both have abstained entirely from water and food *or* if both have violated this expectation can they ritually drink from one another's hands without threatening the purity and power of their fast. While I never heard women explicitly discuss with whom they would exchange their *karvas*, the claim that drinking water is necessary and good if one is working suggests that they generally assumed they had all broken the fast in limited ways throughout the

day, with the exception of the two daughters-in-law who did not work outside of the home (and exchanged with one another).

I noticed, however, that caste *did* seem to matter. Although the women gathered at Meera's house were from a range of caste backgrounds – Rajput, Mali, Bhoi, and Jingar – not all of the women who lived in their *gali* had been invited. None of the women from the *adivasi* or Harijan (as they called themselves) families who lived on the street had been invited to the join the other women on Meera's rooftop, suggesting that some caste boundaries continue to be operative even within diverse, cross-caste, middle class ritual communities in the neighborhood.

I begin with this detailed description of one neighborhood Karva Chauth ritual in order to highlight the kinds of relationships that these neighbors share with each other and to emphasize the significance of female community for understanding and analyzing the meanings of Karva Chauth in the aspirational middle classes. The easy ways in which these women teased one another, their conversations about clothing and jewelry, their admission that they had drunk water that day, and their instructions to one another during the ritual reveal they are more than just neighbors; they have become friends, counselors and close confidantes over the years, as they have shared in their struggles to create new homes and lives for themselves in Pulan. Their conversations about clothing, jewelry, and how or with whom one can break the fast become important ways of negotiating proper middle class and religious decorum within the neighborhood. Participating in this ritual community, and ritualizing these cross-caste relationships, is central to Pulan women's understanding of Karva Chauth's meaning and value. Focusing on these relationships between women, and how Karva Chauth brings them together in ways that reflect and

produce new middle class identities, helps to challenge traditional understandings of Karva Chauth as centered primarily around men and recognizes new aspects of women's *dharmic* roles vis-à-vis one another in the aspirational middle classes.

Karva Chauth as a Ritual for/about Men

The most common and popular stories surrounding Karva Chauth center around women's *dharmic* obligations as wives to protect and assure the long lives of their husbands. The *vrat katha* read by the women in Pulan narrates the story of an unnamed moneylender's daughter who is observing the fast of Karva Chauth in her natal home with her mother and sisters-in-law. Her brothers decide to play a trick on the women and, having lit a fire outside of the town to create light, tell their sister that the moon has risen and she can now break the fast. The sister relays this to her sisters-in-law, who explain that her brothers – their own husbands – are playing a prank and that the moon had not yet risen. The sister, however, believes her brothers and, having worshipped the light of the fire, breaks her fast. Upon realizing that she has improperly broken the fast, Lord Ganesha becomes upset with her and, as a result, her husband becomes very ill. His family proceeds to lose all its wealth in desperate attempts to restore his health. The young woman eventually comes to learn to she has been tricked by her brothers and asks Ganesha for his forgiveness, vowing to perform the *vrat* in future years without any mistakes. Ganesha, impressed with her commitment, restores her husband's health and the family's wealth.

In other versions of this *vrat katha*, the young woman is named as a queen – sometimes specifically Queen Viravati – and her brothers lead her to break the fast

because they are distressed at seeing her struggle without eating or drinking – but the general framework remains the same. As soon as she improperly breaks her fast, she receives news that her husband has died. As she is returning home, she meets Shiva and Parvati (or Chauth Mata) on the road, who explain that her husband has died because of her failure to keep the fast properly (Gold 2015; Jones 2011). Viravati pleads with the deities, much like the moneylender's daughter, and they agree to restore her husband's life, although warn her that he will remain ill. When Queen Viravati reaches her husband's side, she finds him unconscious, with hundreds of needles inserted all over his body. Every day, for an entire year, the queen removes one needle from his body until finally, the day before Karva Chauth, only one needle remains. Viravati diligently observes the Karva Chauth fast, but when she leaves the palace to acquire the necessary implements for the evening ritual, the maid removes the final needle. This wakes the king who mistakes the maid for his wife. The maid is installed as the queen and Viravati is forced to assume the role of maid. She remains virtuous and dedicated to her husband as a maid until the following year, on Karva Chauth, when the King overhears her singing the story of her life. When he questions her about it, she explains the truth and is restored to her rightful position as the queen.

Other popular stories associated with Karva Chauth include descriptions of Parvati performing Karva Chauth under the instruction of her husband, Shiva, or Draupadi, wife of the five Pandava brothers in the Mahabharata, performing the *vrat* in imitation of Parvati in order to call Krishna to aid her husbands in battle. Multiple stories involve Yama, the god of death, being persuaded, tricked, or intimidated by a woman's cunning and *shakti* (power) as a *pativrata* (one who has taken a vow to her husband) into

not taking her husband away to his death.[37] While there are still more variations on the Karva Chauth story[38], and they differ from older versions[39], as Gold notes, the proliferation of standardized pamphlets printed in Hindi means that "The core of Karva Chauth's now dominant narrative remains highly consistent across contexts. … [The *vrat katha*] is a lesson in the imperative – never break a vow! – as much as it is a lesson in the power of a woman's self restraint" (2015, 219). The *vrat katha* emphasizes wifely devotion as an obligation of *stridharma*, but simultaneously reinforces the power of the *vrat* itself.

While many women perform weekly and annual fasts for the general health of their families or the particular needs of the home, Karva Chauth is exceptional for its primary emphasis on the husband and women as *pativratas* (Pearson 1996, 71). The *vrat kathas* are explicit about both the dire consequences of not properly performing the *vrat* and the powerful rewards that can come from a woman's devotion when the *vrat* is properly performed.[40] Virtuous devotion should be maintained at all times, even in circumstances such as Queen Viravati, who is rewarded for remaining devoted to her husband even in a subordinate position as a maid.

This traditional emphasis on women's devotion to husbands has been both perpetuated and challenged in contemporary discussions of Karva Chauth. The ritual has become a controversial issue in recent years with the emergence of new gender politics in neo-liberal India. Each year, as Karva Chauth approaches, opinion pieces appear in

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[37] This story is reminiscent of the Savitri and Satyavan story from the Mahabharata, and the woman is sometimes explicitly named as Savitri, but in other versions, she is referred to as a woman named Karva.
[38] Gold (2015), for example, includes one version of a woman spending an entire year in a cremation ground protecting her dead husband's body from being cremated.
[39] See for example Freed and Freed 1998; Marriott 1972; Tiwari 1991.
[40] I did ask one woman what would happen if a married woman decided not to undertake the fast. She replied that nothing bad would happen if a woman did not do it, but she would acquire many benefits if she did.

newspapers and online blogs scrutinizing the ritual's underlying message of women's devotion and the implicit superiority of men/husbands. Karva Chauth is invoked as symbolic of an indigenous, religious, repressive, patriarchal Indian culture that should be resisted by Indian women and men in the name of progress. For example, in a discussion of beauty pageants in India, Madhu Kishwar, a senior fellow at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies and editor of *Manushi: A Journal about Women*, writes that "challenging the monopoly of the westernised elites did not necessarily bring a more benign culture. The home-bred elite can easily bring with it repressive karwa chauth culture and khomeinivad for women (2002, 184). Here, Karva Chauth and "repressive" are used almost synonymously. Similarly, Mohan Rao, a doctor specializing in women's health at Jawaharlal Nehru University, has described the decline in India's sex ratio as being symptomatic of a "Karva Chauth capitalism," which he defines as "a conjunction of consumerism, anti-feminism and Hindutva in a time of globalization" (2006, 1).

Sanjay Srivastava, a professor of sociology at Delhi University, notes in a 2011 opinion piece in the *Indian Express* that despite the critiques of Karva Chauth as representing repressive gender politics, the ritual is gaining popularity through the forces of the market and globalization. Although the ritual practices for Karva Chauth have historically varied from region to region, it is increasingly becoming a more uniform, pan-Indian tradition through the influence of the media, Bollywood, and advertisements for consumer goods (especially clothing and jewelry) to be purchased for the occasion.

> In a post-liberalisation era when women are enthusiastic participants in consumer culture, the wild popularity of a festival that mainly positions them as dutiful and self-sacrificing wives might seem contradictory. However, Karva Chauth in our

> times is such an amalgam of desires, anxieties and aspirations that such contradictions are more apparent than real (Srivastava 2011).

This amalgamation of "desires, anxieties and aspirations" includes the notions of Karva Chauth as a romantic ritual, and of "being romantic" as an expression of choice. In a culture in which arranged marriages remain dominant, observing Karva Chauth "appears to provide the bridge between actual constraints and apparent freedom" (Srivastava 2011). When considered a romantic act that one consciously takes up for the purpose of one's spouse, Karva Chauth can be interpreted a way of women exercising agency with regards to marriage and conjugality. For elite Indian women, who are in a position to exert greater socio-economic and political equality with their spouses and who participate easily in globalized culture, Srivastava suggests that growing participation may also be, in part, an attempt to perform an "authentic" Indian identity.

The ideas of Karva Chauth as a site for women to negotiate "modern" and "traditional" identities, and for both men and women to enact romantic fantasies, is further perpetuated in Bollywood films, television serials, and popular advertisements (Dwyer 2014; Mishra 2002; Munshi 2010). Marketing campaigns directed at elite Indian women advertise Karva Chauth as a kind of "Valentine's Day," for which they can expect lavish gifts, indulge in luxury consumer practices, and enjoy an exemption from their normal, daily duties. Even a cursory internet search reveals a wide array of websites offering Karva Chauth sales on saris, jewelry, kitchen appliances, designer handbags, and luxury ritual implements, such diamond and crystal-studded *channis* (sieves) through which upper-class women view the moon. An article in the Indian edition of Reuters examines these changes through the practices of one woman, Kanika Syal.

> Since a very long time ago, we have been looking at our mothers celebrate," says the 25-year-old Syal, who is making her Karva Chauth debut as a newlywed. "It is our turn now." But it's different for the teacher-turned-homemaker, who, as a member of India's rapidly growing middle class, will be doing a lot more than her mother ever did for the festival. While it is customary for women to apply henna on their hands, buy clothes and expect gifts from relatives, the new generation of fast-keepers, with money to spare, is exploring a range of pampering options. They are spoilt for choice. Syal will indulge in a 5,000 rupee ($102) diamond facial and body spa treatment to make sure she looks her best. Also on the must-have list for the urban elite are botox, laser-hair reduction and chemical peel treatments at spas and beauty parlours offering Karva Chauth packages (Madhok 2011).

The creation of "Karva Chauth packages" at spas and beauty parlors highlights how the consumer cultures surrounding the ritual are being re-organized in the upper-middle classes to center around women's increased personal enjoyment, on the one hand, and new pressures of middle class aesthetic expectations of what she should do to "look her best" for her husband.[41]

The romantic nature of Karva Chauth is perhaps best recognized in shifting narratives in films and social media regarding *men's* participation in Karva Chauth as a marker of their "modernity." In the Bollywood film *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), for example, the heroine fasts on Karva Chauth for the man she loves, who is *not*

[41] Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) discusses similar issues among Egyptian Bedouin women as they increasingly participate in globalized consumer cultures. She points to the "romance of resistance," highlighting how new consumer powers may create ways for women to resist localized narratives and practices perceived as perpetuating their subordination, but simultaneously immerses them in broader, globalized power relations and structures of domination.

the man to whom she has become engaged through the insistence of her father. Here, her choice to fast on Karva Chauth is an act of defiance, an assertion of her own agency in the name of true love, a choice that is rewarded when she finds that he, in a gender-bending twist, has also chosen to fast for her for the entire day. The final exchange of this scene shows the illicit partners laughing and feeding one another atop a moonlit rooftop. Here, observing Karva Chauth is a portrayed as a modern act of gender equality, and the ritual has emerged as a form of middle class cultural capital (See Uberoi 1998).

The middle class cultural capital of Karva Chauth as linked to gender equity has been generated through other media platforms, such as texts messaging and Twitter. Joyce Flueckiger notes an advertisement in a Jaipur newspaper in 2012:

> THIS KARVA CHAUTH, GIVE HISTORY A NEW STORY. Once upon a time, a woman fasted all day to pray for the safety and longevity of her husband. Today, we know this festival as Karva Chauth. Here's your chance to show your wife that she means as much to you, as you do to her. The Times of India invites its male readers to follow their wives' example and observe the fast with them this year. Take the pledge. And watch tradition take a turn. Will you keep the Karva Chauth fast for your wife? SMS KC<space>YES or NO<space>Your Name<space>YourCity to 48888 (2015, 167).

In 2014, a leading Indian online matrimonial site, Shaadi.com, launched a twitter campaign with the hashtag #FastForHer, encouraging men to perform the day-long fast with their wives. The website produced a short video showing male celebrities (most notably author Chetan Bhagat, television actors Jay Bhanushali, Hiten Tejwani and Varun Badola, restaurateur Riyaaz Amlani, and musician Sulaiman Merchant) pledging

to participate in the fast, largely as an act of gratitude toward their wives.[42] It is telling that the men in the video speak in English and that a *Times of India* article on the response to the campaign notes, "Claiming to bring in equality, the campaign has been asking men to pledge for their wives this Karva Chauth. And looks like *city men* are taking it seriously"(Charu 2014, italics added). For urban, elite, English-speaking men in India and the diaspora (see Vora 2010), Karva Chauth is being linked to a progressive politics that endorses gender equality, highlighting how a tradition that has nominally been constructed as symbolic of the repression of women in India is being transformed to promote new ideals gender equity and explicitly subvert gender norms within marriage.

While these public debates about Karva Chauth raise important issues about the intersections of religion, gender, and politics in contemporary India, many of them presuppose a fairly narrow understanding of how Karva Chauth is practiced and understood in the everyday lives of Hindu women, particularly those in the non-elite classes. Many of these commentators continue to operate on, and reinforce, the assumption that the Karva Chauth is fundamentally performed by women for men, overlooking how *vrats* can be socially and religiously empowering for women as an expression of their ritual and devotional power and valuable for building *dharmic* relationships outside of the husband or the immediate family.

Karva Chauth as a Ritual for Women

At the most basic level, Karva Chauth is an expression of women's ritual and devotional power. As Joyce Fluckiger notes in her discussion of gender and *vrats*

[42] See Shaadi.com, "Why are these celebrities pledging to go on a #FastForHer," October 2, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_lbb04mcV8

> Women's *vrat* traditions such as Varalakshmi Vratam often been analytically interpreted as a visible indication of women's secondary status in Hindu traditions; because while women fast for the long lives of their brothers and husbands, men do not fast for women's long lives. However, such an interpretation does not fully account for indigenous interpretations of female ritual power, which is not perceived to be simply symbolic, but quite literal. *Vrats* have performative power to shift *karma*, to strengthen devotional relationships with deities, to change the course of family life, and bring prosperity at numerous levels (2015, 164-164).

The ritual itself and the narratives surrounding it tell women that they have the ritual power to alter the cosmos in ways that will directly impact their husbands and speaks to the ways in which this ritual practice can be empowering for women and offer them new forms of agency.[43]

The specific practices of Karva Chauth in communities such as those described above in Pulan highlight the significance of women's rituals for fostering community and solidarity among women. In a 2013 op-ed in the *Deccan Chronicle*, entitled "The Purpose of Karva Chauth," Sant Rajinder Singhji, director of the non-profit organization Science of Spirituality, relays an alternative explanation of the origins of Karva Chauth.

> It is said that Karva Chauth originated as a very sweet and noble concept. In olden days, girls were married at a very early age and often had to live with their in-laws in remote far-off villages. And for the new bride it was difficult to adjust at a place where everyone was a stranger and the surroundings completely new. If she

[43] For discussions of women's agency as they relate to *vrats*, see also McGee 1987; Narayan 1997; Pearson 1996; Pintchman 2005; Wadley 1983.

> had any problems with her husband or in-laws, she would have no one to talk to or seek support from. Thus the custom started that after the bride would reach her in-laws' village, she would befriend another woman (generally of her age) who would be her friend for life. During any difficulty, including problems with her husband or the in-laws, these women would be able to confidently talk or seek help from each other. Thus Karva Chauth started as a festival to celebrate this relationship between god-friends or god-sisters. Later it evolved into praying and fasting for the sake of husband's longevity and health (Singhji 2013. See also Monger 2013, 397-398).

Although this explanation is not a part of the narrative repertoire of any woman I knew,[44] traces of the "god-sister" (*dharma behen*) relationship that is formed through Karva Chauth are present in Pulan, as well as in other middle class contexts, and points to how the ritual serve to solidify relationships between women.

The most common relationship that is cited in modern discussions of Karva Chauth is not that between friends, but between wives and husbands and, to a lesser extent, between mothers- and daughters-in-law. Puja Sahney (2006), who has examined her own mother's practice of Karva Chauth in a wealthy neighborhood of Mumbai, describes the modern practices of exchange between mothers- and daughters-in-law. On the morning of Karva Chauth, mothers-in-law prepare *sargi*, a "sumptuous meal" for the daughter-in-law to consume before she begins fasting at sunrise. In return, the daughter-in-law presents her mother-in-law with *baya*, a gift of a sari and dried fruits (Sahney 2006, 18-19). While the practice of preparing *sargi* for daughters-in-law may be waning

[44] This story of the "god-sister" origin of Karva Chauth is likewise absent in the accounts of women about whom Sue Wadley (2008) or Ann Gold (2015) write, although it does appear in other popular literature and newspapers written in English, although invariably without citation.

with the rise of nuclear families, the exchange of gifts continues to be marketed, but with specifically middle class sensibilities. Gifts labeled as those for a daughter-in-law to give a mother-in-law – the modern forms of *baya* baskets – include teddy bears, flowers, greeting cards and Cadbury chocolates in addition to fruits and nuts. Other gifts are marketed as items women can buy for themselves or ask husbands to purchase for them, or to purchase for female friends to exchange at "kitty parties" held in private homes or in organized groups at upscale hotels.

The act of exchanging *sargi* and *baya* represents the blessings that are exchanged between women within the family. Sahney further describes how her mother gathers with other families and friends in one woman's home, all dressed in their best saris and finest jewelry, for the reading of the *vrat katha*, during which the narrator pauses seven times for the women to pass their *puja ki thalis* (*puja* plates) around to one another in a circle, signifying exchange within a broader community of married women, which helps to solidify their relationships with one another and create a sanctioned space outside of traditional female-only spaces (such as the kitchen) for women to occupy.[45]

The centrality of female community for experiencing and enjoying Karva Chauth is also described by women in the diaspora, who lament the lack of community in their homes outside of India. In October 2010, the *New York Times* published an article/slideshow titled "Sacrifice and Devotion in the Indian Tradition" based on interviews with four women and one man regarding their own practices of Karva Chauth

[45] Interestingly, Sahney – who appears to draw primarily on her mother's own narratives for describing Karva Chauth – claims that "In ancient India, women would buy new *karvas* and put bangles, ribbons, home-made sweets, make-up articles, and small articles of clothing like handkerchiefs inside it. They would then go visit each other's houses and exchange *karvas.* But today women do not do this anymore" (2006, 18). This suggests that an awareness of the practice of exchanging *karvas* among elite women, but that the practice has been lost in relationship to their class status.

(Vora 2010). Each interviewee articulated her personal tradition, her greatest challenges, and her greatest rewards in performing the ritual. Anjali Bhandari suggests that the greatest challenge of celebrating Karva Chauth in the United States centers around a lack of female community that was available to her mother in India: "I grew up watching my mom celebrate the day with her friends, but I feel alone. I know there are other women fasting, but the holiday doesn't have the sense of solidarity I wish it did" (Vora 2010). Another woman, Chandni Prasad, echoes these sentiments, explaining that, "As the mother of two school-going kids, I have no time to rest, so my day goes on as usual. In India, women dress up in Indian clothes and spend the holiday with their family friends, but it's hard to do that in New York" (Vora 2010). As the responses of these women suggest, even beyond Pulan and India, Karva Chauth is imagined and experienced as a holiday that brings women closer to one another, and family and friends, in new and lasting relationships.

Ritualized friendships between Hindu women is not a new practice, although it is not an entirely common practice, either. Both Joyce Flueckiger (1996) and Jay Edward (1973) describe practices of cross-caste, non-kin ritual friendships between women in Chhattisgarh. Adrian Mayer briefly addresses practices of tying *rakhi* (bracelets) to create ritual sister-sister or brother-sister bonds among young people in Madhya Pradesh, which he points out is most significant for offering support to a woman in her conjugal village (1960; 140). In Benares, Tracy Pintchman describes the practice of women becoming *sakhi* (female friends) through the ritual exchange of gifts and vows. The *sakhi* bond, which is imagined as an imitation of the marital bond and should, therefore, only be undertaken with one other woman, "represents an earthly female-female bond

characterized by ties of mutual trust and caring, and it may imitate or even surpass blood or marital kinship bonds in terms of its professed emotional valuation in women's lives" (Pintchman 2007, 61). Pintchman points to the work of Susan Seymour, who recalls the love and affection that the women with whom she worked regularly expressed to her, in part out of a fear that she would leave and forget them. As Seymour notes, "They wanted to build into our relationship some sense of *dharma* – some agreement that I would take the friendship seriously and, after leaving India, would continue to communicate with them (1999, 85). Pintchman concludes that it is precisely this "sense of *dharma*" that is addressed in the *sakhi* friendship "through the deployment of religious and marital symbolism, ritualization, and the elaboration of rules and obligations entailed in forming and maintaining the bond" (2007, 63). While Karva Chauth in Pulan does not operate in precisely the same ways as the rituals describe above – it is not discursively or explicitly dedicated to female friendship, the relationships it creates are not necessarily life-long, and it does not ritually bind women with only *one* other woman – it does carry an important "sense of *dharma*" between neighbors that takes on new meanings in the context of upward class mobility.

Karva Chauth and the Dharma *of Neighbors*

Unlike rituals that create bonds of friendship to offer women support *outside* of the family, Karva Chauth is an example of bringing outside neighboring women *into* a "family" of neighbors, producing a new form of *dharma* that I identify as "neighbor *dharma*." The *dharma* of neighbors mirrors the *dharmic* relationships between mothers-, sisters-, and daughters-in-law in terms of both their supportive and didactic roles. In

addition to providing domestic support, it is the responsibility of mothers-, sisters-, and daughters-in-law maintain, and teach one another, the rules or expected behaviors of the home, family, caste, and/or village. It is their *dharma* to teach each other their *dharma* and to help one another uphold those *dharmic* expectations. These are precisely the capacities in which female neighbors in Pulan come to rely on each other. Neighbors offer vital emotional, domestic, and even financial support to one another, and their everyday and ritual practices reveal and construct relationships of obligation; women learn through ritual practices to whom they are responsible - as mothers-, sisters-, and daughters-in-law – and, in turn, from whom they can ask for help. Yet, as neighbor *dharma* is formulated around both proximity of women and shared class identities and aspirations, a fundamental aspect of neighbor *dharma* in Pulan is the responsibility for women to support one another in struggles for upward mobility, and to teach one another how *to be middle class*.

Karva Chauth ritualizes the relationships between immediate neighbors, and the ritual community helps to identify members of these extended neighborhood families. The ritual communities who gather to observe Karva Chauth in Pulan are organized according to residence; women gather with the other women who live in their *gali*. If a woman moves, she joins a new ritual community, as was the case with Usha, an elderly woman who, together with her husband, had rented the rooms on the ground floor of Meera's home for nearly ten years. In the first year that I observed Karva Chauth in Pulan in 2012, Usha was the eldest woman present. Following the reading of the *vrat katha* by the youngest woman in the group, Usha recited two separate *vrat kathas* from memory. She was a regular presence in Meera's kitchen and foyer as a confidante. When Meera's

eldest son was injured in an accident and required leg surgery, however, Meera was forced to ask Usha and her husband to vacate their rooms for her son and his wife to occupy during his recovery.

Two days before Karva Chauth, I helped Usha carry a number of small items from her rooms on our *gali* to the rooms she and her husband had begun renting in a family home four *galis* away. As we sat sipping tea in her new kitchen, I asked Usha if she would still observe Karva Chauth at Meera's. She shook her head and explained that she would celebrate it now with the women in her new home and street. "You go where you live," she told me. While this was not true for all rituals – some rituals were organized about shared caste or regional backgrounds – with whom one observes Karva Chauth is not determined primarily by caste or friendship. Rather, it is intrinsically linked to the home and to the other women who are present in that home as immediate neighbors, thereby helping women to recognize one set of neighbors to whom they can turn for help and support.

Fulfilling neighbor *dharma* in terms of support comes through offering domestic, social, and even economic aid to neighbors as though they are extended family. One woman, Neelima, offered specific ways in which this was true.

> We believe that all of these other people are our family. Neighbors are your family. So, here they help with the work, like if your child gets sick, if you have to go to the hospital, etc. Because our family is far away, but our neighbors are close, they help us. So your neighbors become your family. This is why you need good neighbors.

I witnessed these kinds of familial support in my own home. For example, when Manju contracted malaria and was severely ill for nearly a week, Heena prepared tiffins (lunchboxes) for her children to take to school each day. In a joint family, this task would likely have fallen to Manju's mother- or sister-in-law. In Pulan, it is her *best friend*, as Heena once said, who stepped in to provide domestic support. Similarly, when Auntie-ji's daughters and daughter-in-law, who usually prepared dinner for the family while Auntie-ji sat at her vegetable cart, returned to the village for two days to participate in a festival, Manju prepared a small evening meal for Auntie-ji and Uncle-ji. Manju was comfortable in the house as she regularly sent her two young children to Auntie-ji's home in the afternoons, where Arthi, Deepti, and Bhabhi-ji provided childcare and tutoring so Manju could complete her own work repairing saris for a local tailor.

These types of domestic support not only reflect and reinforce the bonds between women – and fulfill the requirement of giving care (*dyan dena*) that residents of Pulan point to as marking their middle class moral identity – but are also critical for the financial success of the upwardly mobile families in Pulan. By cooking for Auntie-ji, Manju enables her to continue her work selling vegetables, which provides vital additional income to the family. In providing childcare, Auntie-ji's daughters allow Manju to complete her own extra-domestic work to supplement her husband's work as a rickshaw driver. Sometimes such economic support was more direct, as when Auntie-ji and Uncle-ji allowed Heena and Kishore to be late in their rent in the months that they could not afford it in addition to paying their sons' private school tuition. The support that these women offer one another in these ways as extended family members helps to

provide the very economic means by which they achieve upward mobility for themselves and their families.

Yet, the *dharma* of the neighbor is not limited to offering physical, emotional, or financial support; it also includes a responsibility to help determine and heighten the performance of middle class propriety among neighbors. The *dharma* of neighbors includes modeling and communicating to one another the middle class decorum of the neighborhood. As the achievement of middle class identity is an ongoing process and the markers of middle class propriety are always emergent, neighbor *dharma* illustrates the ways in which women in the neighborhood continually negotiate and communally validate new aesthetic, intellectual, and moral practices.

Through conversations about the types of clothing, jewelry, and community members with whom it is appropriate to observe Karva Chauth, women establish and promote operative models of class propriety within the neighborhood "family." When they say that a daughter-in-law must wear all of her jewelry for her first Karva Chauth, and Meera points out where and why she bought her new sari skirt for the ritual, they teach both the ritual and aesthetic values of the community. When they exhort Manju to bring back bangles from Ahmedabad, they are not simply exhibiting a desire for jewelry; they are both stating and mandating the types of jewelry that will properly display their access to middle class culture. As the women openly discuss the difficulties of, and even failures to, completely abstain from water or chai for the entire day while working outside of the home, they collectively re-negotiate and validate the expectations of the ritual in light of the demands of their personal (working) lives. When Meera describes her

rejection of her Christian co-worker's invitation to break the fast by eating at her house, she invokes the caste boundaries that remain operative for the women in the *gali*.

The *dharma* of class overlaps with individual understandings of caste and gender *dharma* – for example, how to dress or veil – but can be negotiated in new forms. Through their words and actions, the older women teach themselves and their daughters-in-law how to fulfill neighbor *dharma* by outlining the socio-moral rules they are expected to uphold in the neighborhood, and to help others follow them. Daughters-in-law learn not just how to fulfill their *stridharma* as Hindu wives through observance of Karva Chauth, but also how performing this ritual with their neighbors fulfills their neighbor *dharma* to support one another as Hindu *women* in the middle class.

The significance of Karva Chauth for securing relationships with neighbors who provide critical social, domestic, and economic support and promote middle class ideals is perhaps best exemplified by Kusum, the woman with whom we began this chapter. Though Kusum is not technically divorced, and her income as a cook for an elite family in a nearby neighborhood is supplemented by her son's salary as a teller in a bank, she thinks of herself as an independent, divorced woman. The difficulty of living alone was a subject Kusum and I discussed often, comparing my life in the United States with hers in India. Yet, Kusum recognized that she has been able to live alone successfully and comfortably in large part because of the support of her neighbors in Pulan. As she once explained:

> When my husband left, my family said, 'Come live with us,' but I said, 'No. I will live separately in a house that I will build. [In India], people don't let a woman who lives alone live peacefully. They say bad things about you. But I am

> successful and my children studied and these neighbors are good to me, so I am happy.

She noted that although the neighborhood has changed over the past twenty-five years, relationships with her neighbors have remained strong.

> People were poorer before. Now there are people with more money. The people who are here now used to live in different places, like in the villages. When I came, your [host] family was here, and Meera, and the neighbors across the street. [Your host mother] was very good to me.

Pausing, she reiterated the final point, but in the present tense, "She is very good to us."

Kusum's simple claim that her neighbors had been "good to her" was expressed in different variations by women throughout Pulan. Women easily pointed to the neighbors in their own or nearby *galis* who had lived in Pulan when they arrived, and narrated the ways in which they had aided them throughout the years. These stories often centered around moments of transition or crisis; women described neighbors helping before and after the delivery of children or grandchildren, and one woman enumerated the ways her neighbors had helped her after her husband had died.

For Kusum, the support of her neighbors seemed to revolve around a more general sense of acceptance of the unorthodox circumstances of her life. In ritually binding themselves to her, Kusum's neighbors accept and validate her decision to live independently from her husband. Divorce and widow remarriage has not traditionally been as strictly forbidden among lower-caste or lower class women; in fact, and Kusum's wealthy, English speaking, employer, Mala, suggested that part of what distinguished the "middle class" community in which she lived, from the "lower" class women like Kusum

was the fact that women in Mala's class could not divorce for fear of being judged. However, the women in Pulan would certainly *not* advocate such a lifestyle as an option for their own daughters or daughters-in-law and would still see it is an *adharmic* (not *dharmic*) situation, even if they could accept its necessity.

Kusum's place in the ritual community of Pulan reflects both the elements of neighbor *dharma* as constructing a new family – Kusum's neighbors are like kin who offer her safety and security as an independent woman – and the element of neighbor *dharma* as upholding middle class propriety. Despite the fact that her decision to live independently from her husband violates traditional Hindu propriety for many women, Kusum maintains the middle class values of the neighbors in the type of home she keeps, her personal appearance and behavior, and the ways in which she has raised her children and grandchildren.

Kusum herself lauded how her own family had served as a positive model for others in the *gali*. She proudly noted that her daughter was the first girl on the street to attend college and that this decision influenced the other young women on the street, including my host sisters.

> On this street, no one used to go to college. But my daughter went. After that, [your host sisters] Kavita and Arthi asked her about college and how she went and how she did it and then they started going too. No one used to study before. [Meera's daughter] didn't go to college. Kavita and Arthi went because they saw my daughter. My daughter was studying, and they were very happy watching her go.

Kusum's daughter attending college was a sign of success in the project of upward mobility and a valuable display of middle class sensibilities that was important not just for Kusum and her own family, but also for her neighbors. Kusum framed her daughter's education in terms of how it elicited positive responses from neighbors and exerted positive influence. Part of her pride in her daughter's path-breaking decision to attend college was the fact that it had been endorsed and imitated by other families.

The example of education points to the ways in which neighbor *dharma* provides the very means of upward mobility while simultaneously heightening the class status of neighbors and the neighborhood. Kusum had herself been influenced and encouraged by the wealthy family for whom she worked, whose son and daughter both attended college in America. She once explained that the reason her granddaughter, Anjali, lived with her, rather than with her own parents on the outskirts of the city, was for the purpose of attending a private school near Pulan. Kusum's employer had offered to sponsor Anjali's attendance by giving Kusum additional money each month to cover the cost of tuition, which neither Kusum nor Anjali's parents would be able to afford on their own, and helping to secure her entrance into the school. Anjali's successful performance in the school, Kusum once suggested, had played a critical role in securing entrance for the granddaughter of Meera, her neighbor in Pulan who had hosted Karva Chauth. Kusum recognized her daughter's college education, her granddaughter's success in a private school, and her own influence in helping Meera's granddaughter attend the same school as ways of displaying and promoting middle class sensibilities that helped secure her belonging in the neighborhood. These acts also demonstrated how creating and upholding the bonds of neighbor *dharma* became critical in the project of upward mobility beyond

one's own family – her fulfillment of the obligations to aid Meera as a fictive sister-in-law had a direct impact on the educational opportunities of Meera's granddaughter.

This is not to suggest that were it not for Kusum and her daughter and granddaughter, the young women in her *gali* would never have begun to attend college or particular private schools. Certainly they would have. Nor it is to elide the other factors that might contribute to Kusum's acceptance into the Karva Chauth ritual community, including her (perceived) higher caste status - relative to her neighbors – as a Rajput, and the fact that she is not "technically" divorced. Rather, it is to emphasize that the ritual communities that women form in urban neighborhoods, and the *dharmic* values these rituals inscribe, are being inflected with middle class values in ways that reshape and expand the boundaries of both community and *dharma*. While Kusum may violate traditional expectations of *stridharma*, she exemplifies emerging middle class codes of social and moral conduct. That the neighbors' daughters can point to Kusum's daughter as a model of behavior is particularly important for Kusum, as she herself, a woman living apart from her husband, is *not* a model of behavior that neighbors would endorse for their own daughters. Her neighbors are important criteria by which she is judged, and by which she overcomes potentially negative judgments.

Maintaining these positive relationships with her neighbors is the fundamental reason that Kusum performs Karva Chauth. Recall that when I initially asked Kusum why she observes the *vrat*, she had offered the standard response that "we do it for our husbands," but that when I pushed her about her disapproval of her husband, she explained that, "Everyone – all the women from the street – they all go there. And I have to take my [new] daughter-in-law now." For Kusum, Karva Chauth is only tangentially

about preserving her husband's life and fulfilling her *stridharma* as a wife. She continues to dedicate the ritual to preserving the longevity of her absent husband, but as her words make clear, the primary significance of the ritual is related to renewing her commitment to, and belonging among, the neighbors who serve as her surrogate mother-, sisters-, and daughters-in-law. Gathering with these other women to chat, catch up, listen to the *vrat katha*, and perform the Karva Chauth rituals strengthens her bonds with them, and theirs with one another. The practice of exchange ritualizes, concretizes, and authorizes these women as *dharmically* bound to one another. Karva Chauth is also a critical way that Kusum, as a mother-in-law, introduces her daughter-in-law both to the rituals and obligations that are expected of her as a wife – the traditional understanding that she must perform the ritual for the health and longevity of her husband – *and* to the community of women to and with whom she will be ritually and morally bound as a daughter- and sister-in-law – the new understanding of neighbor *dharma*The latter is a new moral orientation that recognizes the significance of neighbors for developing, maintaining, sustaining, and promoting middle class life.

Recognizing the emergence of neighbor as a *dharmic* category highlights the ways in which the *neighborhood* becomes the locus of class identity in contemporary urban India. Ritual practices like Karva Chauth not only reflect the close relationships that upwardly women form with their neighbors, but in ritualizing a kind of neighbor *dharma* that includes the communal negotiation of middle class propriety, promotes the significance of neighbors – and the neighborhood – as the site in which both religious and class identities are formulated and made meaningful. The ways in which class operates at the neighborhood level is explored in greater depth in the next chapter, which looks at

how the performance of middle class identity in the ritual practices of Ganesh Chaturthi are *limited* to the neighborhood.

CHAPTER 5

Ganesha Chaturthi and Neighborhood Dharma

In the morning of the last day of the 2013 celebrations of Ganesha Chaturthi, a ten-day festival celebrating the birth of the elephant-headed god, Ganesha, which occurred in September that year, I visited the home of a woman named Neelima. I had met Neelima the previous evening when my friend Prema had taken me to visit the various families she knew in the neighborhood who had purchased Ganesha *murtis* (temporary images of Ganesha made of plaster-of-paris), which are central to the festival worship practices. While most of the women in the *gali* where I lived had observed a one-day fast on the first day of Ganesha Chaturthi, the day of Ganesha's birth that marks the beginning of the festival, none had purchased *murtis* or were observing the full ten days of the festival in their homes. Women cited a number of reasons for this, including the fact that the festival was primarily a Maharashtrian tradition that has only become popular in Udaipur in recent years, that it was not the tradition of their family or village, or simply that observing the festival in one's home required too much time and money. I was excited to speak more with Neelima about her *murti*, which had been installed in her *puja* room next to the floor-to-ceiling marble shelves that served as her domestic altar, and how and why she came to celebrate the Ganesha Chaturthi.

As Neelima and I settled down in the large, empty, central room of her one-story home to drink chai, along with her eleven year-old grandson, Amit, I asked her how long she had been celebrating Ganesha Chaturthi.

> We started taking a *murti* six years ago because my grandson wanted to. He said, "Nani [maternal grandmother], everyone takes a *murti*. There is a *murti* in every house. [But] we don't. I want to." So I said, "If it is your desire, get one. No problem." … There are *murtis* costing one or two lakhs [100,000 rupees]. … This *murti* was 400 rupees. … We gave the money to my son and he and my grandson and [my grandson's] mother went to get the one he wanted.

As we continued talking, she insisted that I join her, her two neighbors who had also purchased *murtis*, and the other neighbors who had been celebrating with them for the final *puja* and *visarjan* (ritual immersion) at a nearby lake, which would mark the conclusion of the ritual.

Neelima's explanation that her decision to begin observing the Ganesha festival because of her neighbors and her grandson's desire to participate in an increasingly popular practice echoes many of the discussions in previous chapters regarding how women, families, and neighbors communally construct middle class identities through ritual practices. Taking a *murti* displays Neelima's family's socio-economic and cultural capacity to participate in emerging forms middle class religiosity. It helps her both to create and perform a middle class status for herself and her neighbors. Unlike many neighborhood rituals and festivals, however, the *visarjan* practices of the Ganesha festival carry the ritual community outside of the neighborhood, where their performance of middle class identity through rituals is displayed and can be evaluated by others, who may perceive their performance quite differently.

This chapter traces shifts in the meanings of Ganesha *murtis* as they are worshipped within, and move outside of, Pulan to analyze both the success and limits of

new ritual practices to enable upwardly mobile families to successfully perform new middle class identities in urban areas. Neelima's decision to purchase a *murti* reflects the operations of "neighbor *dharma*," as it both conforms with, and heightens, the middle class status of her neighbors. However, it adds a new dimension to "neighbor *dharma*" by expanding the ritual repertoires of the neighbors and offering new ways to engage with pan-Indian deities.

This chapter also traces how transporting the *murti* outside of neighborhood for *visarjan*, and where and with whom one transports it, are means by which outsiders evaluate the class identity of the ritual community. Drawing on the comments of wealthier women in Udaipur who do not live in Pulan, I show how the ritual and *visarjan* practices that are considered a performance of middle class identity *in* the neighborhood can become a performance of lower class identity when the *visarjan* procession *leaves* the neighborhood, underlining the neighborhood as the locus of class identity and the relatively bounded space in which class and *dharmic* identities are made meaningful.

The Ganesha Festival

The elephant-headed god Ganesha, often portrayed with a pot belly and the limbs of a chubby child, is one of the most popular and beloved deities of modern Hinduism, known for his penchant for sweets and subtle pranks.[46] The son of the god Shiva and the goddess Parvati, he plays a role in the everyday ritual lives of many Hindus; images of Ganesha can be found on most domestic altars, in both rural and urban areas. Also known as the "Remover of Obstacles" (Vinayaka) and the "Lord of Beginnings," Hindus pray to

[46] See Ann Gold's "Purdah is as Purdah's Kept: A Storyteller's Story" in *Listen to the Heron's Words* for an example of Ganesha-ji's humor.

Ganesha when beginning new ventures in their life (he is particularly popular among students during exam times) and rituals often begin with invocations to Ganesha. As a guardian, his image can also be found above the doorways of homes and office buildings.

Although many Hindus, both men and women, have long observed a one-day fast in honor of Ganesha's birth, the origins of the Ganesha Chaturthi festival are more recent and can be traced to the early 20th century and the influence of Marathi nationalist leader and journalist Bal Gangadhar (Lokmanya) Tilak (1856-1920). In the context of emerging nationalist sentiments, Tilak began the longer festival and its processions as a means to promote Hindu pride and unity; during the festival, caste and class were, at least narratively, undermined in favor of religious and national commonalities (Barnouw 1954; Cashman 1970, 1975; Courtright 1985; Shinde, 2015). Publicly installed *murtis*, purchased through communal donations from neighborhood residents, neighborhood organizations, or other types of informal associations such as athletic clubs, labor unions, employees of private companies and government worker associations, were central to both ritual worship and the promotion of nationalist ideologies.

As the political urgency of the festival began to wane in post-Independence Maharashtra, the popularity of the festival began to spread into neighboring states. Celebrating Ganesha Chaturthi has become increasingly popular throughout Udaipur in recent years, and is celebrated in both public and domestic spaces. *Murtis*, purchased by individuals and groups, are installed in homes, Ganesha temples, along the streets and in opens areas of neighborhoods, and/or community halls, and the deity is called upon to inhabit the *murti* for the duration of the festival. In some cases, public *murtis* are purchased through communal donations from within the neighborhood and serve as sites

of worship and celebration for neighbors within the community. Others are purchased by organizations or communities gathered around shared identity markers, such as the Jai Maharashtra Ganesha Mandal, organized by Maharashtrians living in Udaipur, who organize public social and cultural programs (such as traditional Marathi dancing) to display their Marathi heritage. These public *murtis*, which can reach up to sixteen feet, are visited by devotees both for worship and entertainment, as many communities hire deejays to play Bollywood music each night, and friends and neighbors socialize while their children and grandchildren dance.

For many residents of Udaipur, the Ganesha festival remains strongly associated with Mumbai. Women told me that festival is "biggest" or "best" in Mumbai, facts that they glean from images in newspapers and on television, and which they seek to emulate. My friend Anu, who lives near the most popular *visarjan* site on the banks of Lake Pichola in the center of the Old City, described this to me when I aked who does or does not purchase a *murti*:

> People do it according to their own descire [*log iccha se karte hain*]. Some people also do it because of tradition. If you've been doing it in your house for so many years, so then you will take [a *murti*]. But I don't get one. If they don't do it in my house, but I want to, then I can get one. [But] It's like *dandiya* [a dance that has become popular during the festival of Navratri]. [Dandiya] is a Gujarat thing. But if Gujaratis come here, they go to different cities, then they celebrate it and the people who live nearby see it and start celebrating it. It's like that with [the Ganesha festival]. In Mumbai, it is very *famous.* But once people from

> Maharashtra come here and they started celebrating it, then everyone in every neighborhood started to celebrate it.

When I told her that I had heard that the festival only became popular in recent years, she corrected me, pointing out that festival has been observered in Udaipur for many years, but the *ways* in which it is celebrated has changed in recent years.

> People here have been celebrating [Ganesha Chaturthi] since the beginning. But before it was very *simple,* and everyone came to one place. Now, they do it in every neighborhood and in every place and use loud music and lots of fireworks, etc. That only started 10-15 years ago. … Now people want to *show off.*

A Muslim friend, Hussein, from whose hotel I had watched the *visarjan* practices in the Old City in earlier years, was more blunt in his assessment. "People just do it now because it is *popular.* They see the rich people in Mumbai doing it and think, 'Oh, well if they do it, then we should do it too.'" As Hussein and Anu's words highlight, the expanded celebrations of Ganesha Chaturthi are perceived as a performance of wealth and a distinctly urban, middle class identity that aligns devotees with the broader (imagined) pan-Indian, middle classes.

Within Pulan, most *murtis* were installed in domestic spaces. One public *murti* had been installed along the street at the northern entrance of the neighborhood, but none of the women I knew attended celebrations there. Rather, they joined friends and neighbors in their *puja* rooms, living rooms, or rooftops to offer worship and chat while other people danced. For Neelima, and the women who worshipped in her home with her, the display of a middle class identity was more localized. Neelima did not speak about the practices in Mumbai, but she does understand the ritual as marking her and her

neighbors' urban, middle class identities in Pulan and Udaipur, through displays of both wealth and upholding an expanding middle class ritual *dharma*.

The Ganesha Festival and Ritual Dharma *in Pulan*

Neelima, her grandson Amit, and a neighbor's son. Photo by Jennifer Ortegren

Neelima and her husband moved to Pulan thirty years ago from their shared natal village of Mavali, two hours north of Udaipur. Her family, and many of the other Charan Rajput residents of her village, including her husband's family, had originally migrated from Gujarat, and Neelima had grown up speaking Gujarati and Hindi – not Mewari – which made it easier for us to communicate. Like many families in Pulan, Neelima and her husband moved to the city in order for him to find work. Her husband eventually secured a salaried position with a telephone company and with his income, they were

able to build the single-story *pakka* home in which they still lived, consisting of three bedrooms, a kitchen, a bathroom, and a spacious *puja* room, all built off a large, central room. Neelima's three grown daughters were al married and lived in their respective rural *sasurals* (in-laws'/husband's home), and her unmarried, twenty-one year-old son, who worked in an office of an insurance company in Udaipur, still lived with his parents in Pulan. Neelima's closest companion was her grandson, Amit. Amit's parents sent him from the village to live with his grandparents in Pulan primarily for him to attend a nearby, private, Hindi-medium school, but also, as Neelima told me, to keep her from getting lonely. "I don't like not having children around," she said.

A thin, kind woman in her early 50s, with a weathered face, Neelima was outgoing and friendly, and many of the older women in her *gali* (*gali* 13) could be found gathered on her front steps in the evenings, chatting and watching the traffic pass on the main road of Pulan. Like most of the residents of Pulan, Neelima considers herself to be "in-between" in terms of her class identity; it was she who first told me that "neighbors become like your family," pointing out the ways in which they help to care for children when extended family members are far away in the village. When I would sit with Neelima and her neighbors, she would take turns fanning her own face and mine with a shawl to keep the mosquitoes away.

When I met Neelima on the last day of Ganesha Chaturthi, having only met her briefly the night before, she offered me a small, wicker stool in the empty, central room of home and sat on the floor in front of me, with Amit to her side. I had told her the previous evening that I wanted to ask her about the festival, and I prompted our conversation by saying that I had heard people only began celebrating Ganesha Chaturthi

twenty years ago. Neelima confirmed that this was true, and that while her family in the village had observed a one-day fast for Ganesha's birth, they had not purchased a *murti* or observed the full festival. But, she noted, that was changing.

> Before, people in the village didn't celebrate [the festival for] Ganpati [a common name for Ganesha], but now they have started. … We have worshiped the *kuldevi* [family goddess] from the very beginning, but now they are starting this other festival. … If they go to someone else's house or village and see that they are celebrating it, then they start celebrating.

For example, she told me, in her daughter's *sasural*, they had purchased a *murti* for the first time that year.

Neelima had begun celebrating Ganesha Chaturthi a few years after she and her husband moved to Udaipur, but had originally traveled to nearby temple for the ten days of the festival to offer *puja* to the *murti* installed there. She pointed out, however, that she did not always like it: the temple was crowded with people and children, there were not enough places to sit, and she could not get close to the *murti*. It was in this conversation that I asked how she made the decision to begin purchasing a *murti* for her home and she explained, while Amit smiled proudly, that she had taken up this new practice six years before because *he* had wanted to: "He said, 'Nani [maternal grandmother], everyone takes a *murti*. There is a *murti* in every house. [But] we don't. I want to.' So I said, 'If it is your desire, get one. No problem.'"

As this was my first time speaking with Neelima, it took some coaxing for me to get her to elaborate on all of her answers in this way. "So, every night, all of your neighbors come to your house?" I asked. "Yes," she replied. "For *arati* (flame offering)?"

I asked. “Yes,” she replied. “And they dance?“ “Yes.” “And they are all from different castes?” I asked. “Yes,” she replied. I returned to my initial tactic of raising questions, telling her that I had heard that people in the village only celebrate with people from their own caste. “Is that true?“ I asked. “Yes” she replied, and when I waited for a few seconds, she continued.

> In the village, they don’t do in their houses. People from the same caste get one *murti* and everyone in the village goes to that one. Here, everyone from the neighborhood goes together. The big ones [meaning high caste] and the little ones [meaning low caste] all get a car together and go for *visarjan*.

When I pointed out that I knew of another family on the street – a Jain family, whom I had also met the night before – had purchased a *murti*, Amit interjected to say, “Yes yes. They will come with us for *visarjan*. And there is another family near them who got a *murti*, and they will come with us also.” Neelima interrupted to point out that each of these three families had given money to pay for the truck that would transport the *murtis* and ritual community to a nearby lake for *visarjan*. Amit again interjected to say that I must come with them that afternoon in order to see the *visarjan*.

Even in this brief conversation, Neelima pointed to the features of celebrating Ganesha Chaturthi that mark her urban identity, including the fact that she celebrates the festival in her home with multi-caste neighbors. Her rural family, if they celebrate the festival at all, does so within a caste homogenous community in one public space. My host brother’s wife, Bhabhi-ji, had offered a similar explanation about how Ganesha Chaturthi is observed in the village where she grew up, and both their descriptions resonated with Anu’s description of how Ganesha Chaturthi used to be celebrated in

Udaipur, before residents began to "show off" with separate *murtis*, Bollywood music, and fireworks.

Purchasing a Ganesha *murti* is also an important display of Neelima's relative wealth within the neighborhood. Multiple women had told me that part of the reason that did not purchase a *murti* was because it required too much time and money. In addition to the cost of the *murti* itself, properly observing the festival required one to perform a special nightly *puja*, provide food for the deity and *prasad* (blessed foods) for any neighbors who might join for worship, and arrange for the *murti* to be transported to a local body of water for *visarjan* at the end of the festival. Moreover, they told me, once one decides to purchase a *murti* once, they *must* continue to do so every year. Purchasing a *murti*, then, is an expensive, life-long financial commitment. For Neelima, purchasing a *murti* demonstrates both her family's relative wealth, and the stability of their economic circumstances; they can afford to invest in both the *murti* and their future.

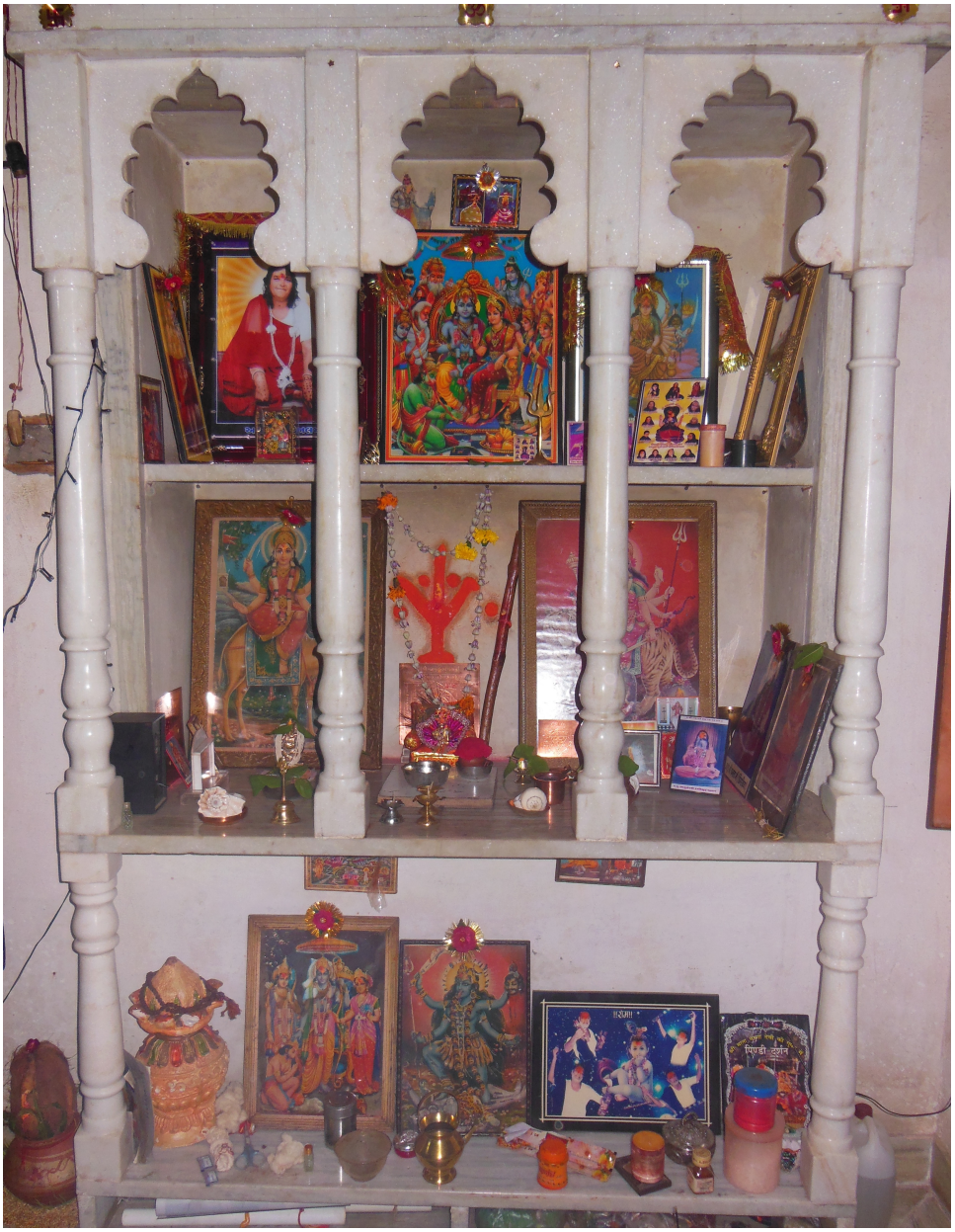
Neelima's capacity to purchase a *murti*, as well as her *pakka* home, her cleanly pressed saris, and Amit's attendance in a private school all help her to perform her family's middle class status. Yet, her performance of middle class aesthetics and consumer practices was limited. The central room of her home was empty; there were no couches or photographs that marked middle class sensibilities in other homes. Likewise, her *murti* was smaller and more sparsely decorated than others that I had seen in the neighborhood, including that of the Jain family on her street, whose *murti* was lit up each night with a multi-colored, electric, disco ball. Another man in a neighboring *gali* had installed his *murti* on the roof, underneath a tarp and a lattice of multi-colored lights, next to a set of large speakers, and he invited his neighbors to dance each evening in this

makeshift discotheque. Insofar as the size, style, and decorations surrounding the deity communicate middle class status, Neelima's small, simple, two-foot image, placed on a high table in front of a decorative cloth and draped with a single strand of blue lights, was relatively simple (although still more elaborate than some other *murtis* installed in homes in the neighborhood).

Neelima's *murti*. Photo by Jennifer Ortegren

Yet, Neelima installed her *murti* in her separate *puja* room, next to the largest and most impressive set of *puja* shelves I had seen in Pulan. Neelima's altar was a three-tiered, marble, floor-to-ceiling set of shelves built into the wall in the center of the *puja* room. It held a number of carefully arranged, framed lithographs of various deities, including Durga, Lakshmi, Kali, and Ram and Sita, and photographs of two different female *gurus*.

The shelves were so crowded that some of the lithographs had been placed at the ends of the shelf facing inward like bookends. Smaller photographs of *gurus* and clay or metal images of deities, such as Ganesha, as well as the various implements used in ritual practices, such as lamps, incense, and vermillion powder filled out the rest of the shelf. A large, orange trident – representing the family goddess – had been painted on to the wall behind the center shelf.



Neelima's *puja* shelves. Photo by Jennifer Ortegren

While other women in Pulan had small, separate *puja* rooms filled with various images of deities, none were as large or distinctive as Neelima's.

Neelima's altar was impressive not just for its size and organization, but also for the images present. As I took photographs of the *puja* shelves, I asked her about each of the images. Pointing to the orange trident, Neelima explained, "This is the *kuldevi*, our family's *mata-ji*, [literally translated as "mother," but here meaning their family's goddess]." Neelima's *mata-ji* is Son-bai Ma, a Gujarati village goddess. She explained that she performs *puja* to the *mata-ji* every day, and to the other gods present, to bring *shant* (peace) into her home. She elaborated that "[the *mata-ji*] also comes during Navratri. We worship her a lot then and keep the lamp lit for nine days." Pointing to the picture on the top left of the *puja* shelf, depicting a woman with loose hair and dressed in a red sari, I asked, "Who is this?" "That is the *mata-ji* for our [Gujarati] community [*samaj*]." she replied, "And [so is] this one," she added, pointing to a different picture of a similarly dressed woman on a lower shelf. "She's a guru?" I asked, and both Neelima and her grandson agreed. "Yes, yes, we ask her for things," Neelima explained. "We get *knowledge* from her," her grandson elaborated. Although I had seen pictures of Sai Baba on many other women's *puja* shelves, as well as Neelima's, I had not seen such modern pictures of female gurus before.

I asked Neelima if the women in her village had *puja* shelves like this, suggesting that, in my experience, women in urban areas tend to have larger *puja* shelves like hers, with multiple images, while women in rural areas have smaller, less diverse displays. Before I could finish, Neelima interrupted.

> We have the goddesses that we want. It is according to our own interests and desires [*Hamare shauk hai aur hamare iccha*]. Listen, every goddess is for our *samaj* [caste community]. But [for the goddesses you keep on your shelf], you have to do *puja* every morning and keep a lamp lit for Navratri. So, some people have a lot, but others don't keep as many. Some people have the desire and some people don't.

As her words suggest, the more deities present on an altar, the greater the obligations of the devotee; each person decides how elaborate her *puja* shelf will be depending on how much time and energy they can dedicate to its physical and ritual maintenance.

In this conversation, Neelima emphasized one's personal desire and time in constructing their altar, but later, when we were discussing how Pulan has changed in the thirty years she has lived there, she pointed to how economics have impacted women's ritual lives.

> Before, people did not have money. They were not earning wages. They were working in the fields. Before, there was no *service* work [meaning salaried government jobs]. But now, all of the children study, and people are doing *service* work. People are making money and the *support* seems good. … Before, no one thought about *puja* because they had no money, but now people have enough money to do *puja*. So this is why we celebrate all [of the festivals].

Here, Neelima explicitly points to the ways in which acquiring more stable jobs with higher income has enabled families in Pulan to afford to take up new ritual practices. Implicitly, she also suggests that with money comes not only the opportunity to expand one's ritual repertoire, but the *expectation* to do.

While Neelima's home may not display typical middle class consumer sensibilities, her *puja* shelf and her participation in Ganesha Chaturthi are displays of what she recognizes as proper middle class religious sensibilities, namely that she invests the time and money that her middle class lifestyle afford her into ritual devotion. As Neelima must continue to purchase a *murti* and to observe the full Ganesha festival every year, she also makes a life-long ritual commitment. Committing herself to caring for a large *puja* shelf, with multiple deities, and participating in "all" of the rituals, even when they can be burdensome in terms of time and money is, for Neelima, her *dharma* as a middle class devotee.

This middle class ritual *dharma* aligns with, but also adds to the "neighbor *dharma*" described in Chapter 3. The fact that Neelima began purchasing a *murti* because her grandson wanted to, in order be like "everyone else," reflects how "neighbor *dharma*" is operative for her; she and grandson learn from watching their neighbors how to "be middle class" in terms of which rituals she celebrates, and how and with whom she celebrates them. By taking her own *murti*, Neelima conforms with these ideals of middle class behavior as defined among her neighbors, demonstrates her belonging as a middle class woman in the neighborhood and heightening the performance of middle class identity for both herself and her neighbors. Each of these is a part of "neighbor *dharma*." Yet, when Neelima implies that expanding one's ritual repertoires and devotional practices is a part of middle class ritual *dharma* that not all of her neighbors can afford, Neelima both adds a middle class *dharmic* expectation to expand one's ritual repertoire *and*, along with her other neighbors who purchase domestic *murtis* for communal

worship, provides the very means by which other neighbors can to fulfill these new *dharmic* expectations.

Not all Ganesha *murtis* in Pulan were communally worshipped like Neelima's. I met two women in Pulan who had purchased small, temporary festival *murtis* to whom they offered special *puja* each night, but only with their immediate families and with little fanfare. In contrast, Neelima invited neighbors within and beyond the *gali* to join her each evening for *puja*. One of the reasons she suggested that the neighbors came to worship in her home was related to money; if they were to go to a temple for worship during Ganesha Chaturthi, they would be expected to give a donation. When they come to her house, however, they are not expected to give anything. Neelima freely offers access to her *murti*, hands out *prasad*, and offers entertainment in the form of Amit playing Bollywood music from a speaker for dancing.

These practices help to strengthen and reinforce her relationships with the women with whom she shares *dharmic* obligations as neighbors and extended family members, and they with one another. The ritual simultaneously teaches and helps neighbors fulfill an expanding middle class ritual *dharma* they might not otherwise be able to on their own. Here, neighbor *dharma* functions not only in terms of the process of upward mobility, but also in observing the ritual practices that become incumbent therein.

The Ganesha festival, however, is not simply a socio-cultural performance of class identity or middle class ritual *dharma*. It is a ritual period when Hindus can engage with Ganesha in a unique form and in unique ways. The temporary festival *murti* of Ganesha is not simply an extension of Neelima's *puja* shelf. In his temporary, festival *murti* form, surrounded by different aesthetics, rituals, and ritual community, Ganesha is

experienced as a different *kind* of god than those on the *puja* shelf. During the festival, he becomes a distinctly urban, communal, middle class deity, whose devotion is supported by, and in turn supports, the middle class lifestyles of his devotees. Unlike the small clay image of Ganesha that resides on Neelima's *puja* shelf at all times, who serves as a deity from whom she asks for *shant* (peace) in her home each day, the temporary festival *murti* represents a more universal deity who can bring new kinds of "*shubh-labh*" (auspicious benefit), as Neelima told me, into her home and life. This particular form of *shubh-labh* that the festival *murti* bings has only become available to Neelima since acquiring economic security in the city; in opening her home to neighbors who cannot afford the costs of hosting a *murti* and/or do not want to pay to attend festivities at a temple, she also offers them access to the *murti's shubh-labh* that they might not otherwise receive. She enables her neighbors to also form a new relationship with Ganesha that, perhaps like Heena and Kishore experience as they enter into a new relationship with the god Shiva during Solah Somwar (See Chapter 2), can help bring auspiciousness into their lives that may aid in the project of upward mobility.

Joanne Waghorne, in her discussion of the rising popularity of Tamil *ammans* (village goddesses), suggests that new temples practices and deities themselves are "fomenting a new urban solidarity that somehow cuts across caste lines, crosses class distinctions, and bridges the urban-rural divide, all under the banner of a new middle-class respectability" (2004, 133). Within these temples, middle class patrons "renew and create themselves religiously as middle class people" (2001, 230), making the temple a "site for a rising middle-class to become conscious of itself within the wall of a religious public space" (2001, 260). Her claims are helpful for thinking about Ganesha *murtis* and

the Ganesha festival that are similarly sites for negotiating and enacting middle class identities within the neighborhood and the city more broadly. Within the walls of Neelima's home, and those of her neighbors who have also purchased *murtis*, the deity becomes central to the performance of middle class respectability – a new middle class ritual *dharma* and relationship to Ganesha – that helps them to become conscious of themselves, and create themselves religiously, as a new middle class community that transcends caste, class, and religious backgrounds in the *gali*. These neighbors learn from, and teach, one another not only about how to celebrate the Ganesha festival, but that celebrating the festival is an expected aspect of the middle class religious lives of families in Pulan.

For those who can afford the *murti*, and the neighbors they invite into their home for nightly worship, the Ganesha festival demonstrates success in the project of upward mobility; they mark themselves and the neighborhood as middle class and among the ranks of urban middle class communities in in Udaipur and beyond. Yet, as the festival takes them out of the neighborhood for *visarjan*, and through other middle class spaces in Udaipur, their performance of a middle class identity through the ritual becomes relative, if not to themselves, then to the members of the more elite middle classes who witness and evaluate their procession for *visarjan*.

Visarjan and Neighborhood **Dharma**

After meeting with Neelima and Amit in the morning, and promising to return later to participate in their *visarjan* procession, I walked the 1.5 kilometers to the shopping district of Fatehpura to run errands. While I was there, I received a telephone

call from Shoba, one of Neelima's neighbors. Shoba asked where I was, explaining that she and her family were leaving to perform *visarjan* and that I should come along to take pictures. When I explained my location Fatehpura, she instructed me to wait on the corner – she would be there soon.

After a few minutes, a small, red, hatchback car, with a placard on its roof advertising driving lessons, pulled up and Shoba's son climbed out of the passenger seat, lifting the seat forward and urging me to squeeze into the back seat with his mother and sister. In her lap, Shoba held a small, clay statue of Ganesha that she had kept in her home for her family to worship each evening of Ganesha Chaturthi; now, she said, her nephew was driving them to immerse it along the banks of Fateh Sagar.

Fateh Sagar is one of the two large, man-made lakes around which Udaipur was built. The more famous lake, Lake Pichola, forms the center of Old City. Whereas Lake Pichola draws foreign tourists on vacation, Fateh Sagar is a site of Indian middle class leisure. Along the southeastern banks, a small food court offering Indian and foreign dishes, such as pizza and Chinese noodles, is a popular dining spot for teenagers and families who gather there in the early hours of the evening to eat and socialize. A pedestrian promenade on the northeastern banks is a popular place for early morning exercise; groups of older women, dressed in *salwar kamiz* (long tunics and baggy pants) and tennis shoes, walk in groups alongside older men dressed in slacks or track suits, and are passed by younger men, and even the occasional young woman, jogging. While exercise culture is growing in India, it remains primarily a middle class practice. In the early evenings, families crowd onto the concrete benches along the promenade, eating ice cream sold by vendors with pushcarts, to take in the view of the lake and the mountains

beyond, and as dusk settles, a few young couples can be seen hunched together on the same benches.

For *visarjan*, however, we drove to the far northwestern banks of the lake, where there were no homes or businesses. The act of immersing *murtis* in local bodies of water, which happens for other festivals as well, such as Navratri, has become a contentious ecological issue in recent years. The construction materials and synthetic dyes used for painting the *murtis* can wreak havoc on aquatic ecosystems and pollute sources of drinking water. State governments have called for the use of more eco-friendly materials throughout India; in Udaipur, the city government had designated certain sites as acceptable places for immersion, including the spot where Shoba's nephew stopped the car.[47]

The scene at the *visarjan* site that afternoon was boisterous. Multiple groups were gathered around different *murtis*, ranging in size from six inches to four feet high, lined along a concrete wall surrounding the lake. Devotees offered *puja* – garlanding the necks of the *murtis* with flower garlands and applying *kumkum* to the trunks of the Ganesha *murtis* – and danced in the street to competing songs blaring from the speakers of the trucks and cars parked nearby. One by one, individual ritual communities carried their *murtis* out onto a small plot of land jutting into the water. As the women watched and performed final acts of *puja*, groups of young men and teenaged boys carefully walked into the water with the *murtis*, some swimming out in to the water, waiting for it to fully submerge. This usually led to a bit of rough-housing and friendly splashing among the young men before they climbed out of the water to clear the way for the next ritual

[47] For an example of college students in Udaipur purchasing a *murti* for the purpose of raising awareness of eco-friendly *visarjan* practices, see Goswami 2013.

community to immerse its *murti*. There were no officials present, religious or otherwise; the rules and decisions about how, when, and who was to perform *visarjan* were decided within and between the ritual communities themselves.

Shoba's immersion practice was brief. She walked toward the water, and off to the side a bit, with her two children and nephew. Bowing her head briefly, she placed the small clay *murti* in the water, urged me to take a picture of the family near the water, and we returned to the car. As Shoba passed out *prasad* of *laddus* that she had brought with her, I asked about her clay *murti* and how it was different than that of Neelima's. "This is our own *murti*," she said, meaning it was only for her and her family. Neelima's *murti*, she said, was for everyone; all the residents of the street, and the people she knows on neighboring streets, can go to her *murti* to do puja.

The differences between these personal and communal *murtis* became clear in the practices of *visarjan*. When I returned to Neelima's house later that afternoon, she and a number of her female neighbors, flanked by their young children and grandchildren, were crowded into the *puja* room. A pre-recorded song played from a small stereo in the corner and the women took turns performing *arati*, waving a small hand-held oil lamp in clock-wise circles in front of the *murti*. Following the *arati*, Neelima passed out homemade *laddus* and a sweet dish made with crushed almonds that she told me was a specialty of her village. The older women sat along the walls of the empty central room, chatting and eating *prasad*, and the teenaged children attached speakers to the stereo to play Bollywood music from a CD. Led, and encouraged, by two teenaged sisters from the Jain family who had also purchased a *murti*, the young people began to dance wildly in the center of the room, occasionally pulling the older women (and the ethnographer!) into

their dance circle. The older women laughed, enjoying the revelry. The dancing continued for 15 or 20 minutes while the group waited for the hired car to arrive to carry them and the *murti* to the lake for *visarjan*.

There were no adult men present at any of these celebrations, because they were at work, and when the small truck that had been hired by the families who purchased *murtis* arrived, the teenaged boys began directing the driver to back into the small *gali*. The boys alternated between shouting instructions to the driver, each other, and the women watching. As it began to drizzle rain, the women crowded together underneath the overhangs of the neighboring homes, laughing at the chaotic scene before them.

When the three *murtis* had been arranged in the back of the truck, the older women were boosted up next to them and we began a slow crawl out of the neighborhood. The truck trailed behind a car, owned by the nephew of one of the women on the street, which blasted Bollywood songs at top volume through its open windows. Every one-hundred yards or so, the car stopped and the teenagers walking alongside it would erupt into *bhangra* (a popularized form of Punjabi dance) for a few minutes before the car began to move again and the scene was repeated a few minutes later. The women in the back of the truck found this display highly amusing, as did the residents and store owners of Pulan who emerged in doorways and rooftops to witness the event. The public parade continued until we were well out of the neighborhood and had reached the busy highway leading out of Pulan. The teenagers crowded into the car and the back of the truck and began singing songs and initiating call-and-response shouts as we sped through the upper middle class neighborhoods of Fatehpura that line the five-kilometer route from

Pulan to the *visarjan* site on the northern banks of Fateh Sagar where I had gone with Shoba.

The scene at the *visarjan* site when I arrived with Neelima was markedly different than it had been earlier in the day. Storm clouds had begun to roll in, casting a dark shadow over the events, and the site was empty, except for five police officers leaning against the railing along the water. The officers explained to Neelima that someone had almost drowned earlier in the day and they had come to regulate the proceedings; only two or three people would be allowed in the water with their *murti* at any given time in order to avoid a similar scenario. These newly imposed regulations did not, however, interfere with the jubilant atmosphere as the teenagers began to dance anew, drawing even the oldest women into their circle.

Eventually, the *murtis* were unloaded from the truck and one by one the families performed *visarjan*. While Neelima squatted along the banks of the lake, performing *puja* and flicking water toward the *murti*, her grandson and his friend slowly walked the *murti* into the water. When they were finished, they stepped back behind the railing and waited for the Jain family to perform *visarjan* with their *murti*. When all of the *murtis* had been immersed, everyone piled back into the car and truck and the jubilant tone returned as the teenagers again began singing and shouting along the route back to Pulan. I asked the driver to drop me off in Fatehpura, so I could take a tempo to the Old City to watch the *visarjan* practices at Gangaur Ghat, the most popular *visarjan* site in the city, located along the banks of Lake Pichola.

Neelima performs a final *puja* during *visarjan* at Fateh Sagar.
Photo by Jennifer Ortegren

The *visarjan* practices at Lake Pichola, which I had also witnessed in previous years, were significantly different than at Fateh Sagar. Starting early in the afternoon, individuals, neighborhood residents, and temple communities begin transporting their *murtis* to the Old City, blocking its narrow lanes from any other traffic. Transported in the backs of trucks and accompanied by local bands (the same bands hired for wedding processions) or the sound of Bollywood music blaring from car stereos, the parade of *murtis* slowly moves toward through the Old City toward the *ghat* (steps leading into water). Groups of young men dance, clap, and sing to the music, throwing brightly colored powder on one another and those gathered along the street to watch. Groups of

young girls perform choreographed dances alongside older women dancing in circles. Professional dance groups and flame-throwers show off their talents for the amused spectators. Devotees from throughout the city join tourists and residents of the Old City line the side of the roads and gather in windows, doorways, or rooftops to witness the spectacle and receive *darshan* (sight of the deity).

Many families arrive to transport small, individual *murtis*, but the larger neighborhood and temple *murtis* gain the most attention. Reaching up to twelve or sixteen feet, these *murtis* tower over both the crowds and the devotees who attend to them. The floats carrying these deities are decorated with banners announcing the name of the community, organization, or temple that purchased the *murti*, such as the "Saraswati College of Nursing." Police officers line the route to the Old City, directing the order of the trucks, and cluster along the railings of the *ghat* to monitor the crowds. At the height of the festivities, in the late afternoon and early evening, a police boat is brought to the *ghat* to aid in the process of *visarjan* and ensure that the *murtis* are immersed in pre-designated sites, but also not all in one space. This helps to keep the debris from the *murtis* concentrated in one small spot, but not so piled up so as to keep the *murti* from being fully immersed.

Devotees move their *murtis* to the steps leading into the water from the *ghat*, handing them to the police officers in the boat, and a select group of male patrons and/or priests accompanying the *murti* climb into the boat. This process is repeated until the boat is full, sometimes with up to eight different *murtis*, ranging in size, style, and decoration, and the accompanying the devotees. As on-lookers watch, the boat makes a tight, 180-degree turn to the south side of the *ghat*, stopping fifteen or twenty yards away from the

ghat itself. One by one, the devotees immerse their *murtis*, after which the boat returns to the steps, the passengers disembark and a new group is directed on board to repeat the entire process. For *murtis* that are too large to fit in the boat, the crowds are directed to make a path for the float to back up to the south side of the *ghat* so the *murti* can be immersed directly into the water from the back of the truck.

Ganghaur Ghat. Photo by Jennifer Ortegren

The festivities continue well into the night, with the aid of bright spotlights strung along the *ghat*, and conclude with fireworks erupting in the sky from the nearby City Palace. The following day, local volunteer and religious groups return to the lake and begin the arduous process of sweeping up the remaining trash on the *ghat*, pulling the remains of the murtis out of the water, and swimming out to drag back the garlands of flowers and pieces of trash that remain floating in the lake.

For Neelima and her neighbors, performing *visarjan* at Fateh Sagar is equivalent to participating in the increasingly popular and elaborate practices of Ganesha Chaturthi performed at Gangaur Ghat. The public act of immersion demonstrates their belonging in the broader middle classes of Udaipur, even if it is not as widely viewed as the *visarjan* practices in the Old City. Yet, as I was to find out, purchasing a *murti* and performing public *visarjan* at Fateh Sagar – complete with cars and Bollywood music – may not enough to achieve a middle class status and, in fact, can have the opposite effect.

The varied interpretations of Ganesha Chaturthi celebrations was first suggested to me the day after the conclusion of the Ganesha festival while I was visiting with a woman named Swati in the gym that I had joined in a wealthy neighborhood near Pulan. Swati and I often worked out at the same time and had become friendly acquaintances. She regularly asked about my research and had even invited me to join her family in religious celebrations in her neighborhood near Fatehpura, a wealthy enclave with large, free-standing homes that our *visarjan* procession had passed by day before. It was clear to me, even in our cursory conversations, that Swati was from an upper middle class background and that, when we left the gym, we returned to very different lifestyles.

After exchanging greetings, Swati asked, in English, if I had gone to watch the *visarjan* practices the day before and I eagerly described traveling with Neelima and her neighbors to the northern banks of Fateh Sagar. "Did your family take a *murti*?" I asked. "Yes," she replied, in a polite, even tone, "But we only go to Gangaur Ghat for *visarjan*. There, things are much more organized and are done properly. It is not as nice at Fateh Sagar. It is mostly poorer people who are going there."

I was immediately struck by the classed implications of Swati's claims, and slightly offended at her suggestion that the women in Pulan, who had taken great pride and joy in their celebrations, had somehow not performed the ritual "properly." Her comments were especially striking because when I had told Neelima and Amit that I was planning to go to Gangaur Ghat after participating in *visarjan* with them, Amit had told me that would not be necessary. He assured me that I would see everything I needed for my "research things" at Fateh Sagar, pointing out that both big *murtis* and small *murtis* went there and I could talk to anyone. Besides, he told me, at Gangaur Ghat, they take the *murtis* back out of the water the next day. "This is wrong [*yeh galat hai*]. At Fateh Sagar, they leave the *murtis* [in the water]. So that is why we go to Fateh Sgar." For Neelima and Amit, unlike their higher class counterpart, Swati, the immersion practices at Fateh Sagar were considered more "proper" because they followed stricter regulations regarding treatment of the *murtis*.

For Swati, I think the presence of police officers and Hindu priests, the fact that the ritual is primarily organized by men, and the recognizable religious value of the *ghat*, lends a sense of order, propriety, and authority – both religious and governmental – to the proceedings. Unlike the boisterous lay performances in the unmarked landscape of Fateh Sagar, many of which are directed by women (even though women did not enter the water), the festivities in the Old City are simultaneously more controlled and more elaborate, granting greater legitimacy as a place for the performance of "proper" *middle class* identities.

When I asked another upper middle class friend, Mala, who lives in one of the wealthiest neighobrhoods in central Udaipur, how Ganesha Chaturthi is celebrated in her

neighborhood, she highlighted privacy as the cetnral feature of both nighlty practices and *visarjan* processions. In her neighborhood, she told me, most people celebrate Ganesha Chaturthi, but they do so in privately in the homes with only immediate family. She knew that her neighbors had purchased *murti*s, but she had neither gone to worship with them in the evenings nor had she invited her neighbors to her home; she does not need to participate in nightly events with her neighbors because they can all afford their own *murtis*. For *visarjan*, her family had taken their *murti* in their car to Tiger Lake, located twenty kilometers from Udaipur. Tiger Lake is another widely recognized space of middle class leisure due to its distance from the city and the requirement of either a motorbike or a car to reach the lake and surrounding park.

Going to Tiger Lake requires time, money, and proper transportation, and performing *visarjan* there is a performance of upper middle class identity. Other people, Mala suggested, who did not have the time or desire to go to Tiger Lake might go to the south-easetern banks of Fateh Sagar to quietly and quickly immerse their *murtis* (a practice that I myself had witnessed in previous years), but did not make an ostentatious show of their practices. For Mala and her neighbors, privacy and modest are the most valued feature of new middle class respectabiliity, and the relatively subdued nature of their ritual practices marks their wealth and upper middle class status. She would not even go to Gangaur Ghat for *visarjan* because the crowd is too boisterous for her.

These contesting and contrasting sentiments about Ganesha Chaturthi, and attitudes regarding where and how one performs *visarjan* "properly" point to ways in which taking up this new festival enables upwardly mobile women to participate in middle class religiosity, while simultaneously revealing the boundaries within which new

religious practices can heighten class status. Neelima and her neighbors seemed to have "missed the boat," both literally and figuratively, in "properly" perfoming their middle class identities. Even though they performed *visarjan* in the *ritually* and *religiously* "proper" place – where the *murti* would not later be extracted from the water – they did not transport the *murtis* to the right location in the right way and with the right people for it to be recognized as a demonstration of middle class sensibilities in the eyes of their more elite counterparts.

What is a sign of relative wealth and middle class status within the neighborhood – namely, the economic capacity to purchase a *murti* and arrange for its procession for *visarjan* – becomes a performance of relative poverty and lower class status to more elite outsiders who may witness the *murti* and ritual community as they move through the city to the *visarjan* site on the barren northern banks of Fateh Sagar. These are precisely the kind of 'slippages" in the performance of middle class identity, whereby the residents of Pulan intend to perform a certain kind of middle class religiosity that is interepreted differently by members of higher class communities, that mark their aspirational middle class status as such. But it also helps to recognize the neighborhood as the space within which new middle class identities – and the new models of *dharma* that define them – are constructed and made meaningful.

Scholars of India have analyzed ways in which class operates at the level of the individual and/or the family. Karin Kapadia (1995) has pointed to how becoming educated and attaining a higher paying job enables individuals to develop a class identity that is both distinct from their family and formed outside of, or even in spite of, the

family (See also Thiruchendran 1997). In contrast to this, Sara Dickey contends that the *family*, not the individual, is the locus of class identity.

> First, other people judge an individual's class standing by looking at the individual's family, using signs such as family members' occupations, education, housing, and consumer goods. Second, it is primarily the family that provides and decides upon the resources and opportunities available to each individual ... Finally, each generation passes on cultural and social as well as economic "capital" – including knowledge, values and social networks – to the next generation (Dickey 2010, 195).

The significance of the family for achieving success in the project of upward mobility, both in terms of resources and reputation, is obvious in Pulan and ranges from who has lived there longest to people's occupations and to which schools they send their children.

Yet, as the ritual practices of Ganesha Chaturthi, and others, demonstrate, neighbors are also critical in the process of upward mobility, and this process is inextricably linked to the formulation of new *dharmic* identities. Creating and participating in "neighbor *dharma*" is central to defining, promoting, and fulfilling what "counts" as middle class in social, aesthetic, and moral terms. The "family" extends to include neighbors, and the values and practices that shape new middle class identities are validated among neighbors, who contribute to one another's resources and reputations through their everyday and religious practices. This points to what can be considered a broader "neighborhood *dharma*" insofar the neighborhood becomes the site for constructing new models of *dharma* that enable the development and performance of

middle class identities, and the boundaries within which these identities are made meaningful.

When Neelima and her neighbors leave Pulan for *visarjan*, their understandings of the value of Ganesha Chaturthi – and who they are, how they should be, and what is "proper" – are still traced back to the values and the community in the neighborhood. As this chapter has shown, their own *dharmic* models may or may not align with different middle class *dharmic* models constructed in other middle class neighborhoods. The next chapter, which explores Navratri, a more widely celebrated festival in Rajasthan, dedicated to the goddess in all of her forms, and which also centers around *murtis*, examines a different set of boundaries, analyzing how the new religious and class idenitities formed in the urban neighborhood are performed and negotiated in rural areas.

CHAPTER 6

Contesting Dharmas *During Navratri*

"You have to learn to dance and come dance with us!" Radha exclaimed, smiling down at me where I sat on her neighbor Shoba's front steps, her deep brown eyes twinkling with excitement. A gregarious young woman who had moved to Pulan a few years before from Gujarat with her husband and two young children, Radha's enthusiasm was infectious. I grinned back at her and noticed similar smiles spreading over the faces of Shoba and her teenaged daughter, Uma. Like me, they never seemed to tire of hearing Radha speak; her rapid-fire pace, wild gesticulations, and the way her face lit up as she reached the climax of a story always drew in her audience.

Today, that audience was the usual group of neighboring women who gathered on the front steps of their homes in *gali* 13 during the early evening hours to chat and enjoy the breeze. Shoba was peeling garlic for the evening meal and two other women were stitching details onto *kurtas* (long tunics) for their work with Sadhna, a local women's cooperative known for its hand-crafted "artisan" clothing. I had come to meet the women to ask about the approaching celebrations of Navratri (lit: nine nights), a popular North India festival honoring the goddess in all of her forms (a different form each night). I had anticipated stories of Durga Mata, the warrior goddess whose fierce triumph over the buffalo demon, Mahishasura, is the most popular story associated with Navratri in urban North India. I was also curious if the women performed particular rituals or *pujas* to village-, caste, and/or family-specific goddesses (*kuldevi* or *mata-ji*) in their urban homes.

Yet, Radha was more eager to discuss two other aspects of Navratri: fashion and *garba*, a popular form of dancing that is central to nightly festivities.

> In the village people are simple, but in the city, people are *VIP*. They dress really well in the city, but people in the village don't have time for it. I'm from Gujarat and no one there dances without a *gagra* and a *chule* [formal clothing, often made new for Navratri]. *Garba* is very good in Gujarat. You should go and see it there. There is also nice *garba* in the Field Club [a nearby private athletic club]. You can go and see. Only rich people go there though because you have to pay to get in. There is a 500-1000 rupees charge to get in, but you can give it. I went there once, but then I said, 'Let's not go. I don't want to dance. Why should I pay just to see the *garba*?' The people going there are so well dressed, I can't even tell you. If you see the clothes, you will become dizzy. Their jewelry is so expensive. The foreign girls go there to try to learn about Indians and how Indians speak. However Indians dress, that's how they dress, too. I will buy a new dress, but I have to go to Gujarat to buy it.

Although I did not realize it at the time, Radha's words offered a prescription for how to experience, understand, and analyze the meaning of Navrati for women in Pulan, namely by focusing on the public, communal aspects of the festival, rather than the stories of the goddess. As the nine nights of Navratri celebrations began and I spoke with more women, our conversations would often return to the topics that Radha had brought up: dancing, fashion, the Field Club, and the differences between urban and rural practices.

Yet, Radha's words stood out to me for the ways in which in they contrasted with the claims that my oldest host sister, Kavita, had made a few weeks earlier on the eve of

her return to her in-law's home in Gujarat after a month-long visit home. As we sat together on the couch, our legs curled beneath us and our knees touching, I asked Kavita about all of the upcoming autumn festivals, including Navratri. Like Radha, Kavita talked about how eager she was to experience her first Navratri in Gujarat because the dancing was more popular there. She brought out the sari material her mother-in-law had purchased for her, pointing to the trim along the bottom that depicted a man and woman dancing. Unlike Radha, however, Kavita raised the issue of caste in our conversation.

I told Kavita that I was also excited to dance because in the previous years that I had attended Navratri celebrations in India, I had always refused join, not wanting to draw unnecessary attention to myself. I told her that now that I felt like part of the community in Pulan, I would not be so shy. She shook her head in agreement, but told me she had never danced in Pulan. This was in part because her parents had told her not to and in part because she, too, had wanted to avoid the stares of young men. "I only dance in the village," she told me, "there we can dance comfortably [*aram se*] because everyone is from the same caste [*ek hi samaj hai*]."

As Radha and Kavita's stories suggest, celebrating Navratri involves an evaluation and negotiation of competing desires and expectations of propriety related to class, caste, and gender. As with the Ganesha festival, class identity plays an increasingly salient role in configuring Navratri ritual communities and practices in urban areas, as neighbors mobilize around shared class identities. Unlike the Ganesha festival, however, Navratri is neither a new practice nor is it centered on a pan-Indian deity. For most people in Pulan, the festival remains dedicated to localized caste-, family-, and/or regional-specific forms of the goddess, and many families return to rural homes for

Navratri to honor these goddesses within caste-homogenous communities. Thus, while Navratri brings together new middle class communities in Udaipur and Pulan, it also reinforces caste and regional identities in ways that not all other rituals do.

In this chapter, I analyze Navratri as a site of contestation. I focus on celebrations in the urban neighborhood of Pulan as well as those in Ram Nagar, the village of my host family, where I traveled for the last evening of celebrations. I draw on women's descriptions of the differences between rural and urban areas as well as my own experiences in both locations to show how upwardly mobile, urbanized families negotiate the different valences of class, caste, and gender that inform their identities. As a public communal festival, Navratri is a time to see and be seen; the aesthetics of both ritual spaces and personal appearances becomes public performances of individual wealth, class status, and community belonging. Yet, decisions about where, when, how, and with whom to dance (and be seen) involves navigating overlapping, and sometimes contrasting, expectations. These negotiations point to the broader struggles of upwardly mobile, urbanized families to reconcile and balance competing *dharmic* expectations of "how to be" as they formulate new middle identities for themselves. Returning to the village, where they feel more "comfortable," suggests a way in which upwardly mobile, migrant families establish continuity between older and newer models of class, caste, and gender *dharma*, but also exposes the limits of the bodily and aesthetic practices that mark class identity in urban areas to engender shifts in the embodied moral orientations.

Navratri as a Middle Class Practice in Udaipur

Navratri is a nine-night festival celebrating the *shakti* (power) of the goddess. The nine-night celebrations are held both in the spring and fall; however, the biggest and most popular celebrations, especially in North India, are for the Shrada Navratri festival held during the first nine lunar days of the lunar Hindu month of Ashvina, usually falling in September/October, near the fall equinox. The festival commemorates the goddess Durga slaying the buffalo demon Mahishasura, and as C.J. Fuller explains, coincides with the end of Vishnu, and by extension, all Hindu gods', four-month slumber.

> Navratri therefore falls at a predominantly inauspicious time, when the gods are inactive or weakened and the demons are at the high of their power. But from this reversal of order and good fortune finally comes Durga's victory, and out of the chaos engendered by the demons–as well as the blood and gore of a terrible battle–a new universal order, presided over by the gods under the king, is created and established (Fuller 2004, 111).

Though some form of Navratri celebrations are held throughout most of India, the particulars of the ritual worship vary across and within regions.

In Udaipur, Navratri celebrations center on *murtis* of the goddess displayed in public spaces in the neighborhood. In the early morning of the first day of Navratri, individuals and community members travel to various markets throughout the city to purchase *murtis* of the goddess, usually in her form as Durga Mata or Amba Mata, with elaborately painted features and clothing. Some temples in Udaipur sponsor their own *murti* and festivities, such as those in the Sutharwara Mitr Mandal, which has one of the

largest *murtis* in the city, and a stage reaching nearly fifty feet high.[48] Most *murtis*, however, are collectively purchased by residents of local neighborhoods. The *murtis* range in their size and style of decoration, but unlike the diverse *murtis* made for the Ganesha festival (Chapter 4), the *murtis* for Navratri are more uniform in their depiction of the goddess.[49] They show her seated on a tiger, with different implements representing the range of *shakti* in each of her eight arms: she holds a conch shell, a trident, a sword, a bow and arrow, a ring of light, and a lotus bud, and her eighth arm is held up in a mudra symbolizing her protection and blessings.

The chosen *murtis* are transported back to the neighborhood to be installed (*sthapna*) within a *pandal* (decorative tent). Although these *pandals* may be made out of rented tenting, in Pulan, they were constructed of bed sheets. During the ritual installation, which can be performed by priests or laypeople, the goddess is called to inhabit the *murti*, thereby transforming the plaster-of-paris image into a sacred embodiment of the deity. For nine nights, the goddess is worshipped in the early evening with public *arati* (flame offering) and *puja*, followed by hours of dancing in specially designated areas in front of the *murti*. A final *arati* and *puja* conclude the evening's festivities and the goddess is allowed to rest for the evening. On the tenth day, the *murti* is transported to a nearby body of water for *visarjan* (dissolution) marking the end of the ritual period.

When I asked women in Pulan about the meaning of Navratri, most responded simply that, "it is for the goddess." When I pushed for stories of the goddess, I was often

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[48] I was told by multiple women in Pulan that this was the best *pandal* in the city and where I should to understand Navratri, although none of the women had been there themselves. Instead, their claims were primarily on what they had seen and read in the local paper.

[49] See Mumbai Mirror, "Increase in Demand for Murtis," Accessed Septerm 2, 2014, http://www.mumbaimirror.com/mumbai/others/Increase-in-demand-for-murtis/articleshow/16166699.cms

directed to older women and men or given newspaper clippings depicting the nine forms of the goddess and explaining the power of each. Shoba, the woman on whose front steps I had been sitting when Radha invited me to dance, asked if I had seen the television program about Durga killing the demons. When I said that I had not, but that I had heard that story before, she responded bluntly, "Whatever you heard is right." As evident in these responses, the "official" stories of Navratri are something about which people are aware through public media, but do appear to dominate personal or public worship. The domestic practices center around the need and desire for the goddess to enter their home, and sometimes themselves, in order to bring blessings to the family. Instead, most women, like Radha, focused on the dancing and the fashion.

Dancing was central to every Navratri celebration I witnessed throughout Udaipur, and the music provided for the dancing was invariably popular Bollywood music, played either by a hired deejay, or at smaller gatherings, by a member of the community, usually a young man with access to a laptop and rented speakers. Women in Udaipur used the words *garba* and *dandiya* interchangeably to describe the dancing, although these are different types of dances. *Garba* is a style of dance traditional in Gujarat, where public Navratri celebrations are considered by women in Pulan to be most popular. The choreographed dance steps of *garba*, performed in a circle, involve elaborate hand gestures and the dancers match the rhythm of the music by clapping their hands. *Garba* is usually performed by groups, and can involve partners clapping their hands together, but also includes movements performed without a partner.

Dandiya, at least as it is performed in Udaipur for Navratri, always involves partners. Usually arranged in two co-centric circles, dancers repeat a series of a few steps,

forwards and backwards, during which they keep rhythm by tapping two wooden sticks together (sometimes their own two sticks, and sometimes with their partner). In Udaipur, *garba* is considered to be more difficult, as it requires training, and I only witnessed people dancing *dandiya*, although women often used the word *garba* to refer to practice of dancing in general, perhaps to affiliate their own practices with a broader, pan-Indian, religiosity. It was widely recognized, and often pointed out to me, that dancing during Navratri only became popular in Udaipur twenty to thirty years ago. Most women cited the influence of films and television serials depicting dancing during Navratri – people in Pulan also regularly watched televised images of Navratri celebrations in Gujarat during the festival – and an increased presence of Gujarati immigrants as the sources for these changes.

Women also often commented on differences between urban and rural celebrations of Navratri. For example, Neelima, with whom I celebrated the Ganesha festival, explained that:

> Look, for Navratri, we do *puja* to Mata-ji [the goddess]. They celebrate Navratri in the village, but they didn't used to dance *garba*. They just started to dance *garba* in the last eight or nine years when they got lights and music. They saw a tape of it. But they don't purchase a *murti*. There, they just worship the village Mata-ji in the main place and they all play *garba* there. Here, they dance on the main road in front of the *mandir* [temple to Shiva] … There are a lot of differences in the village. Like, here, everyone dances *garba* together. In the village, only the people that we can eat with [meaning people in the same *jati*] dance together … In the village, the upper *jatis* celebrate separately. The lower

> *jatis* celebrate separately. They worship different gods. … In the village, we take the same amount from each person [for decorations], but we only take from our caste community (*samaj*). Depending on how much our debt is, we divide it evenly, and every one gives the same amount. Here in the city, you take money from everyone.

As Neelima's description highlights, part of the transformation of Navratri as an urban, middle class practice is the construction of new ritual communities oriented around the neighborhood and shared class identities. While some of the features of urban traditions are becoming increasingly popular in rural settings – such as dancing – rural ritual communities continue to be defined by caste and shared commitments to a particular, localized goddess.

The understanding of how to celebrate Navratri as a middle class urban practice within Udaipur is influenced and reinforced by the pervasive recognition and discussions of the celebrations at the Field Club. Modeled after British athletic clubs, the Field Club posits itself as an institution of tolerance and inclusiveness where neither "caste, creed, trade, taste or political alignment" keeps one from joining the "fraternity" that the club seeks to foster.[50] This statement exemplifies an urban, middle class rhetoric of egalitarianism that women in the aspirational middle classes also adopt narratively. Even Neelima had said, "Here, everyone celebrates together." But Navratri lays bare the fault lines of this rhetoric; while caste or politics may not keep one out of the Field Club, money can. The celebrations at the Field Club, as they are perceived both by those who do and do not attend, epitomize how the festival has changed in urban areas in

[50] See website http://www.fieldclubindia.com/. Accessed 8 August 2015.

relationship to middle class consumerism and sensibilities. Celebrations at the Field Club are also emblematic of the tensions between class and religion.

Mala, an elite woman whom I met through my neighbor Kusum (See Chapter 3), who has cooked and cared for the Mala's family for nearly twenty years, regularly attends celebrations at the Field Club. Mala grew up in Mumbai, where her father amassed a small fortune in the hotel industry. Her father had arranged her marriage when she was seventeen to a young man studying for a business degree in Mumbai, where he assumed Mala and her husband would continue to reside. Following their marriage, however, Mala and her husband returned to his parent's home in a village an hour outside of Udaipur. Although her husband's family was one of the wealthiest in the village, the transition proved difficult for Mala; she laughed as she recounted an early conversation with her mother-in-law in which she pointed out that she had been pampered as a child and had not been trained to cook and clean, especially over an open fire. "I told [my mother-in-law] this and said, 'I don't want to hear you complain about my mother and father. You just teach me and I will learn." Mala and her husband relocated to Udaipur a few years later, where they acquired extensive wealth through the marble factory he owns and operates, eventually building a large home in an elite neighborhood near Pulan.

Speaking in English, Mala commented on her disparate experiences of Navratri celebrations in three areas – the village, the small city of Udaipur, and the major metropolis of Mumbai.

> Nowadays, the festival is very high. It is only for the professionals. For Navratri, fifty years ago, it was very nice and calm. They really prayed for Amba Mata and then they danced. Now there is an orchestra and it is all professional. … The

> people in Panchvati [an upwardly mobile neighborhood near hers] put a very big *murti* on the main street. The people in this [elite] neighborhood go to Field Club. They are going in upper class places only. Only the lower class people are going to Panchvati. … Those people enjoy it very much. Even at 14 or 15, I would go dance *dandiya* in the streets and come back at three o'clock in the morning, but I was with my father. Now no one is going there. In south Mumbai, the people don't like it [outside] as much now. Now they are going to rich, private places.

Mala's description speaks to what is perceived as the diminishing significance of worshipping the goddess in public, communal celebrations. Whereas people in the village used to "really pray" to the goddess, now, as the festival becomes "professionalized" in the Field Club and other upper class places in Mumbai, having an orchestra is equally, if not more, important than worshipping the *murti*.

My friend, Anu, a jovial woman in her late thirties with a quick, deep laugh and a sharp wit, who had moved to Udaipur from a village near the Rajasthani city of Ajmer following her marriage, was more explicit in her criticism of upper class celebrations.

> Now [upper class people] are only *showing off* in decorations, songs, DJs, etc., because they have a lot of money. It doesn't matter which form [of the goddess] you worship, because if you worship god you can do it without the *murti*. God is in your heart. In the Field Club, [celebrations are] happening for nine days and you need a pass to enter which costs 500 rupees and god is not a part of it at all. You buy the pass and go in and dance and you rent a dress, etc., which can cost up to 500 rupees per dress per day. That's not about god at all. That's why I don't go because there are so many young people who are just going there for fun and

> earning money in the Field Club. In the end, they give prizes, like a new scootie, [scooter] to attract the youth. It's become a *business* … Before, it was about god. Now it's not about god. It's just about fun, *business,* and dancing.

Like Radha, whose voice introduced this chapter, Anu recognizes the displays of fashion in the Field Club as impressive markers of elite class status. Unlike Radha, however, Anu is not impressed. She laments that the increasing decadence of celebrations overshadows and sublimates the significance of the ritual and devotional foundations of the festival; rather than attend such gatherings, Anu worships only with her family and those in her neighborhood. Her sentiments about the "business" of Navratri echo those of Mala's claims about the "professionalization" of the festival.

As the descriptions of all of these women suggest, there are multiple discourses surrounding how, where, when, and with whom one should celebrate Navratri. Scholars have long recognized the role of festivals in constructing, negotiating, and performing identity for individuals and communities. In some cases, festivals can function to foster a sense of community that transcends normative social boundaries, such as caste or class (De Neve 2000). In this way, they are a valuable means of emphasizing pre-existing bases of social cohesion or upholding different shared values around which a new community can be built. In Pulan, Navratri helps to solidify a new middle class community who gather around shared class status and values (in Bengal, see Ghosh 2000). Insofar as public festivals become sites of public scrutiny, in which reputations are managed and status is maintained or enhanced (Rao 2001), Navratri helps individuals, families, and the community in Pulan perform their class status to themselves and outsiders. As a public communal festival that helps to produce ideas of modernity and

authenticity, simultaneously bringing the "global" into the "local," and vice-versa (Gabbert, 2007; Magliocco 2001), Navratri links the community in Pulan to the broader middle classes.

The performance of middle class sensibilities are found in features of nightly worship such as the presence of a deejay, the size and style of the *murti*, the material and decorations of the *pandal*, and the location of the ritual area. All of these become public statements of the relative wealth and aesthetic knowledge of ritual communities. They reflect and create urban middle class status, both for participants themselves and for outsiders who pass by. Likewise, fashion choices reflect and perform the class identity of individuals. For some young people, both female and male, "dressing up" to dance during Navratri meant donning their most "Western" clothing: skinny jeans, high-top sneakers, button down-dress shirts, or t-shirts with American cartoon characters and/or English writing. For others, it meant displaying their most traditional, elaborate Indian clothing, such as new *salwar* suits (baggy pants with a long tunic) or gauzy, bejeweled saris with elaborate jewelry and make-up, many of which were more expensive than "Western" clothes.

Yet, as much as these types of performances can help to elevate individuals and/or communities and work as a unifying force, so too can festival celebrations demarcate distinction, reflecting and potentially exacerbating the tensions between and within communities. The increased significance of emerging middle class aesthetic values and consumer cultures is criticized for the ways in which it restructures the meanings of the ritual itself and can become a site for critiquing the morally and ritually lax lifestyles of wealthy, urban Indians. But new tensions arose within Pulan as well. Despite Neelima's

claim that everyone in the city celebrates together, the neighborhood became divided between two different *murtis* during the festival, although women offered alternative narratives about what distinguished the ritual communities from on another. Although the boundaries of ritual communities for Navratri in urban areas are widening, and becoming more flexible and shifting, they are not unbound. Class, caste, and gender identities continue to play a critical role in shaping how and where people celebrate Navratri and make public how these identities are experienced and embodied.

Two* Murtis – *Celebrating Navratri in Pulan

As I walked home along the main road of Pulan one evening in the week leading up to Navratri, I noticed a group of teenaged boys gathered in the middle of the street next to the Shiva temple at the center of the neighborhood. I watched the boys as they purposely stepped in front of passing cars and motorbikes, holding their ground against the impatient honking, to wave pads of paper in the faces of the frustrated motorists. I steeled myself for their potential harassment, tightening my jaw, setting set my gaze directly ahead of me, and quickening my pace

As I approached the group, a boy I did not recognize tapped the shoulder of the small, thin boy next to him, pointed to me, and cried out, "Jenni Didi!" the name by which I was known in Pulan, meaning "older sister Jenni." The smaller boy raced toward me and I relaxed as I recognized him as Neelima's grandson, Amit. I smiled, raising my eyebrows in mock skepticism as he came closer. "Jenni Didi!" he said excitedly, thrusting a pad of lined paper at me, "Will you give money for the *murti*?" It took me a moment to understand his request for a donation. "Um, maybe tomorrow," I responded,

buying myself time to ask my neighbor Heena what would be the appropriate amount to give.

I decided to walk straight to the sofa store Heena owns with her husband to ask her how much I should give for the *murti*. As I approached the store, located ten *galis* past where Amit had approached me, I encountered a different group of boys similarly asking for donations. I tried to wave them off, explaining that I had already been asked, but one of the boys insisted that this was for a different *murti*. Confused, I sat next to Heena on the steps of the store and asked if there were, in fact, two different *murtis* so close to one another in Pulan. She confirmed that there were and I pressed her to explain why. What is the difference between the two? Who goes to which one? Should I give money for both? How much should I give?

Heena told me that people go where they wish to and that it was up to me to decide how much and to whom I wanted to give money. Still confused, I insisted. "But why are there *two murtis*?! What's the difference between them?" Exasperated, she replied, "What can I say?" her usual cue to me that she was no longer interested in answering my ceaseless questions.

After the first day of Navratri, when the two *murtis* had been installed in Pulan, I surveyed their differences. The first *murti* was installed in a small, open lot next to the temple, near the center of the neighborhood. The plot of land, measuring approximately 15x18 feet, was usually occupied by a cow belonging to the Brahmin family who tended to the temple and ran a general store on the next block. For Navratri, the cow had been removed and the entire space converted into a large *pandal*. The ground had been covered with a rough green rug, and walls and a canopy had been constructed with poles

and sheets. A red, embroidered cloth provided a makeshift roof, and the cloth sheet that formed the backdrop of the *murti* at the far end of the lot, away from the street, depicted a quintessential American winter scene; two young boys trudged through a snowy, star-filled landscape toward a large, brightly lit home with their toboggan in tow. The foreignness of the imagery seemed to add a certain prestige to the setting.

The *murti* of Durga Mata, reaching about ten feet high, had been installed atop a small dais covered with a shiny, white, silk cloth that sat at the back of the *pandal* space, creating space for devotees to gather within the *pandal* to offer *puja* and take *darshan* (sight of the deity). A hired deejay had arranged his large speakers at the front of lot, but also within the *pandal*, which helped to demarcate the space outside the *pandal* from that within. Durga, sitting astride a tiger, was painted in a sparkling red sari with a matching cloth draped over the golden crown atop her head. A wig of long, curly, synthetic hair cascaded over her shoulders and chest, pooling in her lap. Each of her eight hands held the different implements signifying aspects of her *shakti* that I had seen in nearly every *murti*. The detailed, placid expression on her face, towering over devotees, inspired a mix of calm reassurance and awed respect. In front of the *murti* and slightly to her right, atop a small table painted gold, sat a three-foot tall statue of the elephant-headed god Ganesha, reclining on a silver conch shell.

First *murti* near the temple. Photo by Jennifer Ortegren

The second *murti* was installed ten *galis* away on a small, permanent, marble and granite stage built into the stone wall that runs along the western boundary of Pulan's

main street. Although depicting Durga in a similar way, this *murti* was slightly smaller and had cruder, less well-proportioned features. An orange, cotton sari was draped over the multi-colored sari painted onto the statue and a small beaded chandelier, which hung directly over the *murti's* unadorned head, was lit up with strings of lights. A statue of Ganesha, also smaller than at the first *murti*, sat in front of the Goddess, surrounded by an array of *puja* implements. The small *pandal* housing the *murti* was heavily decorated with colored lights, but as it covered only the *murti* and the small stage, devotees gathered on the street in front of the image to offer worship and take *darshan*. The deejay hired by the community sponsoring the second *murti* had arranged his speakers and equipment on the main street, in front of, but to the right of the *murti*.

Second *murti*. Photo by Jennifer Ortegren

In general, I was struck by differences in the size and spatial arrangements of the two ritual spaces. In my fieldnotes that evening, I wrote, "The biggest difference between the two [*murti*] set-ups is that [the first one near the temple] is bigger and seemingly better organized." The communities who gathered at the two *murtis* were not strikingly different, however. Only small crowds gathered at either location for the first *arati* and *puja*, as nearly everyone in the neighborhood offered a special *puja* in their home to the form or forms of the goddess that reside on their domestic altars at all times. As a *puja* is performed in the home, attending the *arati* at the *murti* each evening is not mandatory. People may come and go as they choose and for some, public *arati* at the *murti* occurred while families were eating dinner, meaning they would wait until after the meal was complete to witness or participate in the celebrations. Others, especially those who were fasting for the festival, would come to witness the *arati* first before returning home to eat, or wait until after the dancing was complete at 11 p.m. to break their fast.

Arati at the *murtis* was performed each night by a different male member of the community. It was explained to me that these men were chosen based on their power in the community,[51] their recognized religious devotion, and/or their relationship to those who had made large donations for the *murti*.[52] Although the Brahmin priest who presided over formal temple functions helped perform *arati* each night at the *murti* near the temple, the prominence of the lay members at both emphasized the communal nature of the festival.

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[51] One man, I was told, was considered a "big man" (*voh bare admi hain*), a claim based on his relative wealth.

[52] The *arati* was performed by lay members at most of the other gatherings I attended, but was not always limited to men. In another upwardly mobile neighborhood of Udaipur, I witnessed a newly married couple perform the *arati* together.

In both locations, an area of the street was cordoned off with ropes, which were let down during the day and tied up again each evening, to demarcate a dance space. A lattice of decorative lights strung between rooftops and the boundary wall along the street decorated these dancing areas and added to the overall sense of festivity. Each evening, women would gather on front steps, in windows, on roofs, or mats spread on the ground to watch the dancers. Groups of young men, who traversed the city on motorcycles to watch dancers in different neighborhoods, formed tight clusters along the perimeter of the ropes. For the first few evenings of Navratri, and in the early hours of dancing, it was primarily small children and younger girls who came to dance, their attempts to wield adult-sized *dandiya* sticks providing delight to all who watched. Later in the evenings, and especially on the later days of the festival, the crowd of dancers would shift as teenaged girls and boys displaced the small children. A few pairs of older women and men would join, but dancers were primarily young people, in their late teens or early twenties. A city-wide curfew mandated that the music be turned off at eleven p.m., a law that was strictly enforced by police officers who traveled to different neighborhoods over the course of the evening, often pausing to watch the dancers for a few minutes before moving on.

View of second *murti* dance area from above. Photo by Jennifer Ortegren

Young girls dancing *dandiya* in Rajasthani outfits. Photo by Jennifer Ortegren

Based on my initial observations, I had assumed that people in Pulan simply went to the *murti* that was closest to their home and that choosing where to dance or watch the dancing was primarily a matter of convenience. When I asked women about the separate *murtis* and their decisions about where to offer *puja*, most echoed Heena's response that it was according to one's desire (*icchaa se*). Over time, however, different narratives began to emerge.

One of the first women to offer an alternative narrative was Kaisi-bai, whose home faced the second, smaller *murti*, and whose family I joined for dinner the first night of Navratri. Kaisi-bai moved with her husband to Pulan over thirty years ago from Deolwara, a growing town an hour north of Udaipur. Kaisi-bai and her husband had been among the first families to move into the neighborhood and she explained that, at that time, people lived in tents and makeshift houses. Over time, as people began making more money, facilities like water and electricity were brought to the neighborhood, and she and her husband were able to build a large, three story house with his salary as a chef in the 5-star City Palace Hotel. "First," she explained to me, "we built a small home. Then we built a second home. Then we built this one. And now we are making another one!" referring to the separate, free-standing homes that two of her sons, who have become quite wealthy through their work as a chef and an owner of a tourist company, respectively, were building outside of Pulan.

When I asked Kaisi-bai about Navratri and the presence of the separate *murtis* in Pulan, she shook her head.

> Thirty years ago, everyone went to one place [for Navratri]. People from every neighborhood went there. Everyone in Udaipur went to the Amba Mata temple.

> Before, people didn't worship separately. They all went to the Amba Mata temple and danced *garba* there. People only started to dance *garba* in the streets here separately ten or fifteen years ago … The families that live on this *gali* are the older ones. The other ones [pointing in the direction of the other *murti*] are new. The new people live over there. They came after us. They came after the people built houses. … About ten or twelve years ago they started taking *murtis* there. I don't like that we don't all dance together. But it is a different area and they said "We will stay on our side."

Kaisi-bai's description was the first time I heard someone suggest a distinction between two communities of residents in Pulan. While I knew that my neighbors in *gali* 20 did not directly know women the women who lived in *gali* 13, most women claimed that they "knew everyone" in the neighborhood and could usually offer some details about families in different *galis*. I had never heard anyone speak directly about explicit tension that divided the neighborhood and I could not recognize any coherent, visible signs of substantial socio-economic difference between families living on either end of the neighborhood.

Yet, Kaisi-bai's description of the "old" and "new" highlighted an implicit difference in the class identities of the current residents. The "new" people that Kaisi-bai described were not just residents who came later, but residents who moved into a very different neighborhood than the "old' residents and for a different purpose. Early residents, like Kaisi-bai and her husband, had moved to Pulan when it was still essentially a slum area precisely because they had little money. They struggled over the years to build their own houses and create a new life for themselves and their children. Those who

Kaisi-bai perceived as the "newer" residents, who "came after the people built houses," had relocated to Pulan for the opposite reason; they had the economic resources to purchase an existing home and came to Pulan because it was an upwardly mobile and an increasingly desirable place to live. The "new" people, at least in her mind, created a different community and claimed a desire to remain separate, as demonstrated in their decision to purchase a separate *murti*. Kaisi-bai framed this rift within Pulan in terms of the shifting social fabric of all of Udaipur, and the increased privatization of middle class celebrations, as residents throughout the city no longer gather to celebrate together at the Amba Mata temple.

The next afternoon, the second night of Navratri, I returned to *gali* 13where Radha and Shoba lived, which bordered the first *murti* next to the temple, to ask about this apparent rift. As usual, I found the women gathered on their steps chatting, sewing, and preparing for evening meals. I greeted them and sat next to Shoba on her front steps. I knew that Shoba's father- and mother-in-law had moved to a neighborhood on the southern outskirts of Udaipur twenty years earlier from their village two hours north of the city and that for the first two years of her marriage, Shoba and her husband had lived with them. When they decided that they wanted to live separately as a nuclear family, they initially moved into a small house in Pulan. After a few years, her father-in-law paid to build a new house on that location, which she and her husband slowly bought back from him.

When I asked Shoba about what Kaisi-bai had said the previous evening regarding different communities in Pulan, she laid out a broader history of the neighborhood. She explained that before, Pulan was like a "village," but now it is like a

city. She noted that how people dress, what they eat, and their general lifestyles have changed in ways that resemble other developed, urban neighborhoods. The cost of living has risen as well. Twenty or thirty years age, she explained, before the neighborhood had developed, poor people fought to decide who would own land. Shoba labeled these early residents who fought as "low" or "weak" castes. Eventually, she said, the government claimed the land and installed a system of selling it. At that time, a plot of land in Pulan cost 200 rupees. When her father-in-law bought the land sixteen years ago, the total price was 50,000 rupees. By the time they paid him back, six years ago, its value had risen to 80,000 rupees.[53]

According to this narrative, Shoba is precisely the type of "new" resident that Kaisi-bai had been describing; she and her husband had moved into the neighborhood after it had already begun to become developed and had purchased an already existing house, which they eventually added onto. For the younger generation of Pulan residents like Shobha, who moved into the neighborhood from a higher socio-economic position and acquired property through standard legal procedures, living in Pulan is a sign of achieving upward mobility. This is radically different than the experience of Kaisi-bai, for whom moving to Pulan was a demonstration of her poverty. Whereas the first generation of Pulan residents created a "village" in the city, this second generation, moved into Pulan *because* it was "the city."

[53] At the time that Shoba and I had this conversation, in November 2013, the exchange rate between the Indian rupee and the US dollar was approximately 50 INR to 1 USD, meaning that buying land in Pulan then would cost 1,600 USD, as opposed to the 1000 USD Shoba's father-in-law had paid. Adjusting for inflation, the approximate value of 200 INR in 1985 - when people first began moving to PUlan – would have been approximately 12 USD. I cannot confirm Shoba's claims about exact prices for land in Pulan, and they strike me as particularly steep, but what is important is the sense it is become increasingly expensive, and likely prohibitively so, in some cases, to purchase a home in Pulan.

Although Shoba's narrative of how Pulan has changed resonated with that of Kaisi-bai, when I asked why there are two *murtis*, she offered a different explanation for the division between the communities.

> There are two *murtis*. There is a *function* on that side. There is one *society* here, but it has become two areas. The people over there go to that one. The people over here go to this one. There is no difference [between the two], although their community [*samaj*] is a little different on that side. They are all from one *caste*. They all have the same *caste.*

Confused, I pointed out that I knew the people attending celebrations at the other *murti* and could confirm that they were, in fact, from multiple castes. She conceded that this might be true, but insisted that the people who had pooled their money to purchase the *murti* were from one "main" caste. She was emphatic that, unlike the other *murti*, "All castes come to ours."

Shobha corroborates Kaisi-bai's claims that there are two separate societies and also frames the distinction between the two societies as related to economic and generational differences. Yet, she points to caste and makes two important, but contrasting, claims about caste and class relationships. On the one hand, she sees caste as a determining factor in organizing separate social and religious functions in Pulan. On the other hand, she distances herself from the significance of caste, making the subtle point that caste only matters for the older residents of Pulan, who are all from the same caste. Shoba implies that the decision to create a new ritual community and purchase a new *murti* was an act of resisting a perceived caste dominance reinforced by the "older" residents. Shoba raises caste for the purpose of articulating a middle class egalitarian

rhetoric similar to the creed of the Field Club that caste does not matter, although her emphasis on caste suggests that it does, indeed, matter.

These distinct, but complementary, narratives of class and caste division were further complicated by another friend, Susila, who was one of the first residents to move to the neighborhood thirty years ago and, perhaps not coincidentally, lives equidistant between the two *murtis*. When I reiterated the claims of both Kaisi-bai and Susila regarding the reason for divisions between the ritual communities – class on the one hand, caste on the other – she laughed.

> Yes, before they put the *murti* in the school and everyone played *garba* there. … Now it's like this because of boys. Groups of boys decided, "We will take our own *murti*." Sometimes they are fighting and they don't want certain boys dancing with certain girls or with their girlfriends. One time, one girl ran away with a boy that she liked so now they don't want them coming here. It doesn't matter that they're separate. I don't have any fight with the *murti*, so I go for *darshan* [taking sight of the deity] and then I leave.

Susila introduces gender as a critical issue of contention. She is clear, as other women had been, that the ritual and devotional aspects of the two *murtis* are identical; the power and the purpose of the goddess is equal at both. Yet, she points to the practice of dancing as problematic because it threatens appropriate gender relationships, particularly in terms of the potential for girls to "run off" with boys who may or may not be from a different caste. This possibility threatens the stability of the marriage system, which remains primarily a system of arranged marriages even in the practice of "like" marriages, and threatens the possibility for young boys and parents to control their fate.

All three of these narratives share a concern with how traditional boundaries between communities are breaking down in diverse, urban areas, but without clear ways of how to rebuild them. They highlight an inherent instability in how the residents of Pulan define themselves as individuals, families, and a community. Pulan residents continue to be in a process of transition, not only from rural to urban spaces, but in developing middle class identities that accommodate their aspirations for upward mobility and their commitments to their rural and caste communities. Their identities are in flux and Navratri is a performance not just of who they are, but who they *want* to be; but those desires are always emergent and shifting. The ruptures in the ritual community do not revolve around clear distinctions, but rather point to the lack of clear distinctions between residents and/or a lack of clear coherency as to what unites them. Unlike the urban elites, whose membership in the ritual community at the Field Club is clearly demarcated by both space and wealth, or rural communities, whose membership in the ritual community is defined by caste identity, the residents of Pulan are in the process of figuring out where and with whom they belong, negotiating between old and new social, cultural, and moral models of *dharmic* behavior.

The claims about the distinctions between the communities in Pulan are tied to efforts to create and maintain some kind of continuity and order amid the diversity and constantly changing landscape of Pulan – that is, to create and uphold *dharma*. This reflects what Minna Savaala, in her work on upwardly mobile communities, calls the "paradox of control." She suggests that this paradox is a central feature of middle class life in India, as elsewhere, and is "the modern attempt to secure predictability and to maintain control of the lifeworld and its categories" (2010, 29). Exerting control over

emerging middle class expectations surrounding reproduction, marriage, work, and the body – both in terms of fitness, hygiene, and clothing – signals proper middle class moral comportment, especially in terms of gender (Derné 1999; Saavala 2010). The paradox of these behaviors, however, emerges when a notions of modern, middle class "freedom," which champion egalitarian caste and gender ideals, conflict with more traditional modes of control precisely in terms of caste and gender separation.

These issues become particularly critical during Navratri because the festival, in its modern, middle class forms in the city, is a sanctioned time and place for alternative social interactions, particularly among young people. Young girls and women are allowed to openly display themselves and be viewed publicly; the rules and regulations that might otherwise guide their behavior are temporarily suspended. This also means that there is the possibility, and even the expectation, that women will be viewed by strangers, including unknown men, which is a significant departure from rural practices. Young women and men from different castes may engage with one another while dancing during urban festivities and balancing multiple expectations of desire and decorum – young people want to dance, but must carefully regulate how they do so – can become burdensome. While these types of interactions and negotiations of propriety are constant in the everyday lives of individuals, within and beyond the aspirational middle classes, during Navratri they are publicly displayed for the entire community. It is in part to escape from these pressures and return to what is at least *imagined*, and perhaps romanticized, as a more traditional, controlled, normalized social and *dharmic* order that motivates a desire on the part of many Pulan residents to return to the village to celebrate Navratri and the claim that there one can feel more "comfortable."

"Being Comfortable"– Celebrating Navratri in the Village

On the sixth night of Navratri, my teenaged host sisters, Arthi and Deepti, stopped in my doorway, dressed in nice, cotton *salwar* suits and holding *dandiya* sticks to ask, "Are you coming?" "Where?" I replied. "We're going to dance!" Arthi cried out. I was surprised by the invitation because of their older sister Kavita's claim that her parents had not allowed her to dance in Pulan, and I had assumed the same would be true for Arthi and Deepti. When I confessed this to Arthi, she said that she and Deepti can dance, but only with each other. Checking the clips in her hair, she told me to hurry, and we headed toward the dance area in front of the second *murti*, three *galis* from our home.

I had noticed that there were at least two distinct patterns of dancing *dandiya* at the various celebrations I attended in and around Udaipur. In one version, the two concentric circles of partners facing each other move in opposite directions; after a certain number of steps, each person stepped to their left, bringing them face to face with a different partner. In another pattern, the one used by people in Pulan, partners remain together and switch from being in the outer circle to the inner circle. In this way, Deepti and Arthi were able to maintain one another as partners. This pattern of dancing was critical for Arthi and Deepti to participate: "we can dance, but only with each other." Maintaining one another as partners eliminated any risk of partnering with someone who may be an unacceptable.

That evening, I sat watching with other neighbors gathered on the front steps of the shops across from the *murti*. I waited expectantly for someone to try to coax me into dancing with them, but the invitation never came. When the music stopped and the final *arati* had been performed, Arthi asked why I had not danced. "You didn't ask," I said, "I

didn't have a partner." "Oh," she replied sheepishly and repeated Kavita's words from a few weeks earlier, "We'll dance when we go to Ram Nagar. There, we can dance comfortably because everyone is from the same caste." The next morning, Krishna, who had been traveling the city the night before with friends to watch dancing in other neighborhoods, asked if I had danced. When I explained that no one had asked me, he repeated the trope that I would be more comfortable in the village due to the caste-homogeneity there.

On the seventh day of Navratri, I joined Deepti, Arthi, Auntie-ji, and Charishma, a cousin who lives in the old city in Udaipur, at a nearby bus station to travel the hour north to Ram Nagar. The other family members would arrive later by motorcycle. When we reached the one-room home the family maintains in the village, the girls and Auntie-ji first performed a brief *puja* in front of the courtyard temple and began cleaning and preparing for dinner. Pulling a bug zapper shaped like a tennis racket off the wall, Deepti attempted to rid the room of mosquitoes, and when that proved futile, Auntie-ji built a fire with cow dung in the front room and began funneling the smoke inside. Deepti surveyed the food stocks and determined that we would have only *roti* (bread) and *dal* (lentils) for dinner, but no vegetables because the vegetables available in the village are not very good. I joined them on the floor, peeling garlic while they began kneading dough for the *roti*, and asked Auntie-ji about Navratri.

Auntie-ji claimed not to know the story or reason for the festival and, like others, told me to ask someone else or look in the newspaper. When I asked about the goddesses, she explained that their *kuldevi*, or family goddess, is Piplaj, a goddess local to the region. While her *kuldevi* is the same as her husband's, her *pirwala*, or the goddess of her

home village an hour away, is different. She told me that I should come with her tonight to the temple where they do *puja* for Navratri and I could see for myself what they do.

At this point, Uncle-ji, Krishna-bhai, and Bhabhi-ji all arrived from Udaipur, along with Uncle-ji's older brother and his wife. Uncle-ji requested *maki roti*, a thick corn bread popular in rural areas that is prepared over an open fire, for dinner. The task of preparing *maki roti* fell to Auntie-ji, whose daughters, raised cooking over a gas stove in the city, do not know how to properly prepare the dough or cook it over the fire. She went outside to cook over the *chulha* (lit: oven; here, a clay, fire oven) and I joined her, watching as the men gathered in the courtyard temple to conduct a ritual *puja*. They prepared and performed *arati*, ringing bells and banging pots as neighboring men in the housing complex joined.

I was struck by the gendered dynamics of the ritual practices in the rural temple. Auntie-ji assured me through the thin *ghunghat* (veil) that she had pulled over her head after leaving Udaipur that I could go inside the temple even though there were no other women present. She did not join, but remained in the courtyard rolling out *rotis* in her hands and observing from a distant. The rest of the girls remained inside cooking over the gas stove and no other women from the surrounding homes joined. In Pulan, it is primarily women, and often *only* women, who attend evening *arati* at the Shiva *mandir* and who care for the temple. Yet, as I watched these men performing the *arati*, I realized the contrast that women in Pulan care for god most of the ritual year, in both the home and the temple, but during Navratri, the presence and control of men increases.

After we ate, I followed the girls to the nearby home of a neighbor, where they would prepare to go dance. The house was owned by the father of Manju, a young

woman in her late twenties who was also a neighbor in Pulan and a regular presence in the Mali home as she was friends with both the family and with Heena. Manju explained that her parents had moved to Ahmedabad many years before, where her father owns an electric store, but he kept their home in Ram Nagar for when they returned for family occasions. I had been to the house before, during Kavita's wedding because unlike Auntie-ji and Uncle-ji's home, it had an attached bathroom with a porcelain squat toilet.

Manju, dressed in a sari draped neatly over her left shoulder, offered her opinion on the girls' outfits as they got dressed. As I sat watching the girls get ready, I noticed that Deepti and Arthi were dressing much more formally to dance in the village than they had when they had danced in Pulan. In the city, they wore nice, cotton *salwar* suits, but nothing that they would not have worn for everyday use. In Ram Nagar, they donned the vibrant, expensive, nylon clothing they had purchased for Kavita's wedding the year before. When Deepti had put on a bright pink and yellow sleeveless *kurti* dress with matching tights – a middle class style of dressing that was currently popular in Udaipur – she turned to ask for approval from Manju. But Manju shook her head and told her to put on a long-sleeved shirt underneath the sleeveless *kurti* dress. Concerned, I pointed to my own sleeveless, slightly worn, cotton *kurta* from Fab India – my own version of my best clothing – and asked if I should also change, but Manju dismissed my concerns. She explained that while Deepti could wear a sleeveless *kurti* dress in Udaipur, it would be inappropriate for her to do so in the village, but because I am not Indian, it would be fine for me. The girls carefully applied additional make-up and jewelry, something they had also not done in Pulan, and loosened their ponytails to rearrange their long hair in barrettes, so that it was half was held up and half flowed down their backs. Deepti

arranged – and rearranged – the bobby pins holding back her bangs repeatedly until they lay at the perfect height.

When the girls were finally satisfied with their appearances, we began walking toward the *murti* and dance area at center of the village. As we walked, I could hear the girls speaking in low tones behind me. I slowed down to try to overhear their conversation, but when I could not make out their words, I asked, "What are you saying?" Arthi, with her characteristic forthrightness, immediately replied, "We are embarrassed [*sharm lagta*] that you're here because everyone will be looking at us." Her comments both hurt and surprised me; for all of the times that they had reassured me that both they and I would be more "comfortable" dancing in the village, their admissions of embarrassment confused me. If anything, I had been worried that they would drag me around to show me off as a status symbol, but as I would come to realize, I had misunderstood their claim to "comfort."

At the center of the village, a significantly larger crowd of people were gathered at the than had been present at either of the locations in Pulan. As with the urban areas, a large *murti* of Durga was set up inside a *pandal* to one side of the small circle designated for dancing. A hired deejay blasted Bollywood from his perch atop a small platform overlooking the dancers. The dance area was cordoned off on two sides by a house and a temple structure and on the other two by ropes, beyond which plastic chairs were set up ten rows deep, where men and boys sat watching the dancers. Groups of women were gathered on mats on the ground on the other side. When we first arrived, it was entirely young girls between the ages of 8 and 16 who were dancing. Eventually, as the night went on, some younger men also joined the dancing, although I recognized all of them as

being from Pulan. A few of the younger, married women joined, including Bhabhi-ji, who had not danced in the city, although she kept her face veiled the entire time and danced only with a female cousin. Very few of the older women joined and at no point did any older men.

As in Pulan, the dancers did not switch partners. At first, I told the girls that they did not have to dance with me. Angered, and embarrassed myself, I said I would sit alone and simply watch. Arthi reluctantly insisted that I dance with her, although she soon passed me off to Manju, who seemed not to be as embarrassed by my presence. The space was crowded and it was difficult to avoid bumping into other people, so I was relieved when, after thirty minutes, Manju announced that she was tired and asked if I wanted to go to the temple with her. We walked one block away from the *dandiya* circle to a small street lined with two-story, concrete buildings. The street came to a dead-end at the front door of a large two-story house. A crowd of women and men sitting on rugs stretched along the length of the street, with most of the men toward the far end away from where we entered. We quickly found Auntie-ji and joined her where she sat chatting with other women.

I peered over the women's heads at the men gathered in front of the doorway of the last building on the left hand side of the street. Unlike the other building, it was only one-story, with a thatched roof and a heavy, wooden door. From where I was sitting with the women, I could not see inside, but recognized a bright orange drawing of a trident painted on the outside wall that represented the goddess. As I watched, a man dressed in white *dhoti* (cloth tied around the legs and waist into loose pants that is traditionally worn

by men) and a turban emerged from the building and turned to mark the trident with *kumkum*, a bright red vermillion powder used in ritual ceremonies.

I asked Manju what was happening. She explained that everyone on this "side" of the village was from the same caste – the Mali (gardener) caste – and the men inside were performing a ritual for the goddess of their caste. Everyone comes to the temple, she said, because it brings good fortune (*labh*). When I asked why there were only men going inside, she said it is because, for the goddess, men are "higher" (*admi unche hain*).

We sat talking to one another for thirty minutes or so, at which point Deepti and Arthi joined. Arthi told me we only had to wait thirty minutes for the ritual *puja* to be completed and then we could leave. After about thirty minutes, the men inside the temple began ringing bells and banging pots with increased fervency, signaling the appearance of the goddess. After a few moments, one woman sitting outside of the doorway became possessed and after a few more minutes, the sound receded. Men emerged from the temple to hand out *prasad* (blessed foods), which consisted of small *laddus* (balls of sweetened dough). As Deepti and I waited for the women in the family to finish chatting and move forward for *darshan*, I began nibbling on the *prasad*. Deepti, seeing me, cried out "You're dropping the *prasad* on the ground! You can't do that" and held up the perfectly intact *laddu* that remained in her hand. Again, I felt embarrassed and realized that in Pulan, while small amounts of *prasad* had been passed out to those who had come forward to receive it, neither Deepti or Arthi, nor any of the other women with whom I had sat during the festivities in Pulan, had taken *prasad*. Here in the village, however, participating in this ritual was crucial and I had not given proper care to the blessing that had been offered by the goddess.

A number of small details stood out to me about the Navratri practices in Ram Nagar. To begin with, unlike some women who claimed that rural communities do not invest in *murtis*, but instead focus on permanent images of local goddesses, the residents of Ram Nagar *had* purchased a *murti* of Durga and hired a deejay to play popular music for the dancing. The features of dancing, a *murti*, and a deejay reflect the ways in which popular practices, religious or otherwise, move from urban to rural areas. Just as dancing to Bollywood music enables residents of Pulan and other upwardly mobile communities to perform a middle-class identity, so too do they enable rural communities to perform a cosmopolitan identity.

The homogeneity of the caste community in Ram Nagar, however, created other differences. Both the *murti* itself and the crowd who gathered to dance or observe the dancing, were much larger than in Pulan because residents throughout the entire village had donated money to purchase one *murti*. The gender dynamics of the dancers were also different. In Ram Nagar, it was only the young men who live in Pulan who joined in the dancing; the village boys did not dance Whereas in Pulan, *puja* to localized goddesses was domesticated and private, in Ram Nagar, the Durga *murti* and dancing were located *alongside* the public performance of worship to a local goddess. In the village, the dancing was complementary to the ritual worship of a local goddess taking place within viewing distance of the dance area.

However, it was the confluence and contrasts of Arthi and Deepti's performance of their urban and rural identities in Ram Nagar, and my misinterpretation of their claim to being "comfortable," that I found most striking. On some level Arthi and Deepti's embarrassment of my presence reflects what may be a universal experience of self-

consciousness among teenaged girls. Manju may have been less embarrassed because, as an older, married woman, she has more security in herself and in the community than either Deepti or Arthi. I also think they were less "embarrassed" by me than annoyed; they had to "babysit" me to make sure I did things properly, as Deepti demonstrated with her chastising of my spilling the *prasad*. Yet, their language of "comfort," and their own claim to feeling "comfortable" in the village raises important questions about the extent to which their middle class identities are performed and embodied.

While I had assumed that they invoked "comfort" in the way that I might have used, primarily to mean that they could relax in the village and be less self-conscious about their appearances, the opposite was true. Arthi and Deepti were clearly more concerned about their appearances in the village than they had been in Pulan. Their brightly colored, nylon *kurti* dresses with matching tights were in keeping with the latest fashions for young, middle-class girls, readily available to them in the markets of Udaipur's Old City. They stood out among the girls in Ram Nagar, most of whom wore more traditional *salwar* suits with a long *kurta* shirt and baggy *salwar* pants.

Instead, the claim to "comfort" had to do with the different ways in which they did or did not have to monitor their own behavior, and the extent to which they could "comfortably" inhabit their identities. In Pulan, their belonging in the community was marked by their presences as recognizable residents and their participation in the public practices of dancing. An overt display of their class identity was unnecessary because it was known, accepted, and shared by the other participants. Yet, they had to carefully, internally monitor their performance of caste and gender identity. They could only dance "with each other," or other members of the extended family lest they violate the codes of

gender and caste conduct laid out by their parents. While the community in Pulan seemed to agree on the importance of certain elements of middle class performance of Navratri – the deejay, the dancing, the decorations – the ideals for *dharmic* behavior according to caste and gender were not necessarily shared in the exact same ways by all residents of the neighborhood. There *were* young men and women in Pulan from different castes who danced together and Arthi and Deepti had to be careful to distance themselves from these kinds of interactions. They did not have to be overly concerned about their *appearance*, but they had to pay special attention to their *bodies*.

The opposite was true in the village, where they embodied their belonging in the community through their caste identity and the rules of caste and gender were implicitly agreed upon and maintained by the entire community. They could "relax" in the terms of the diligence with which they had to maintain their bodies, which conversely, opened them up to feel more free in expressing and performing their class identities through their appearance. By putting on their best, most fashionable clothes and attending so carefully to their appearance, Deepti and Arthi were presenting the fullest display of their wealth and urban, middle-class sensibilities. While they were still careful not to violate the caste rules of the village, as demonstrated by Deepti changing into a long-sleeved shirt under her sleeveless *kurti* dress, they could more "comfortably" inhabit a sense of who they are, in terms of their class, caste, and gender identities.

Their sense of being comfortable in the village centers around an assumption of *dharmic* order and control that is pre-ordained by caste homogeny. Although Arthi and Deepti may have more "freedom" in the city in terms of the expanding boundaries of caste and gender behavior – they can walk alone to school or the library in skinny jeans

and t-shirts – so too must they be more individually vigilant about recognizing, negotiating, and maintaining new boundaries in an expanding world of choice and opportunity.

It is telling while Kavita was not allowed by her parents to dance in Pulan, Arthi and Deepti were, but with strict guidelines to dance only with each other. This suggests that their parents' attitudes have changed over time in the middle class urban setting, and the boundaries they enforce surrounding caste and gender are becoming more flexible and expanded; but that they still remain firmly committed to passing on and maintaining certain caste and gender ideals that their daughters must reconcile with their own middle class aspirations. The shift in Auntie-ji and Uncle-ji's attitude toward dancing in Pulan reflects the negotiation of overlapping *dharmic* worlds and the attempt to make the *dharmic* expectations of class, caste, gender, and age align with one another. But Arthi and Deepti's language of comfort, and implicitly of discomfort, points to the difficulties of that attempt.

The aspirational middle classes are creating new *dharmic* worlds for themselves, but the boundaries of those worlds are still being formed. The disparate reasons cited for the formation of two communities in Pulan, and the stated desire to return to rural caste communities because of the possibility of being "comfortable" there are all articulations of how class is reshaping the *dharmic* world of contemporary Hindus, but in ways that remain unstable, unclear, and "uncomfortable." As Navratri is fundamentally a festival that honors localized goddesses, and reinforces caste and rural commitments, it highlights the ways in which the women and families in Pulan must pull "double-duty" in the development and performance of their identities. They can, with relative ease, adopt the

performative aspects of middle class sensibilities – *murtis*, deejays, fashionable clothing – and articulate a liberal, egalitarian middle class rhetoric that caste does not matter. But their behaviors contradict this, as they create distinct communities and eagerly return to the village where a more stable form of social order and a more stable definition of "how to be" are operative, at least as they imagine it.

The competing narratives about the origins of community conflict and the implicit discomfort in urban areas – at least some of the time – suggest that they are not yet fully comfortably *embodying* new middle class caste and gender ideals. They can speak to and perform "middleclassness," but have not necessarily come to embody new middle class moral orientations. It is this instability and discomfort in their middle class identities that mark the aspirational middle class as just that; aspiring to a place where their class, caste, gender, and life-stage *dharmic* identities align with one another in clearer, more "comfortable" ways. For now, for young women like Arthi and Deepti, and their neighbors in Pulan, this is something to which they continue to aspire.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has analyzed how shifts in the everyday and religious practices of upwardly mobile, urbanized Hindu women in Rajasthan reveal the nuanced relationship between religion and class in contemporary urban India. My focus on the dynamics of ritual change demonstrates both how aesthetics, narrative, and rituals become central to negotiating, developing, and performing new middle class identities, and the ways in which the process of becoming middle class produces new understandings of Hindu *dharma*. It highlights the role of women in constructing these new middle class models of *dharma* for themselves, their families, and the urban neighborhood community that allow them to incorporate emerging middle class values and aspirations into existing religious frameworks of morality. It shows both how class operates as a *dharmic* category of morality and how upwardly mobile families struggle to embody new moral subjectivities as middle class Hindus.

Upward mobility creates new opportunities, demands, and expectations for women. Acquiring higher education, shifting into new models of family and community, and accessing transnational flows of media, consumer products, and technology all change the ways in which understand they how understand who they *can* be, who they *should* be, and who they *want* to be. The experience of upward class mobility enables the "capacity to aspire" (Appadurai 2004) and allows them to generate new "maps of possibility" for themselves and their families that include new socio-moral frameworks for defining what is "right," "ideal," or "proper" – i.e. *dharmic* – in terms of emerging middle class sensibilities and values.

Women in Pulan negotiate, define, and authorize these new *dharmic* models through everyday and ritual practices. New practices surrounding education and marriage practices creates new understandings of what young women in the new middle classes can expect and request from their parents, spouses, and in-laws – such as later and "like" marriages, and the possibilities of working outside the home. They are developing new models for what is "correct" behavior as daughters, wives, daughters-in-law, and mothers, and as middle class women, that expand the boundaries of women's *dharma* beyond the home. Similarly, by participating in new diverse ritual communities women are reimagining their obligations as mothers-, sisters-, and daughters-in-law in ways that expand beyond the immediate family to include those of female neighbors from different caste backgrounds. In nuclear families, the ways in which husbands and wives relate to each, and particularly the ways in which men's orientation toward the home and their obligations to the family, are shifting within a new middle class *dharma* of conjugality. In this way, the women's decisions about their own ritual lives and practices impact the lives and expectations of morally "correct" behavior for their sons, husbands, and other men in the community.

Taking up new ritual practices both reflects and creates middle class identity for individuals, the family, and the community, but within limits. These emerging aspirations are still implicated with older, more traditional models of caste, gender, life-stage, and regional *dharma* that prescribe appropriate or "proper" behavior and expectations. Where, when, how, and to or with whom one gets married, observes *vrats*, and celebrates festivals are still determined in terms of caste and gender, even as ritual communities change with class dynamics

For families and the community in Pulan, developing new middle class *dharmas* can be difficult and inconsistent; they have not fully embodied these new middle class *dharmic* identities. For example, when my Auntie-ji and Uncle-ji allow their oldest daughter Kavita to have a "like marriage," in part to ensure that she will receive a college degree, they construct new understandings of intersecting *dharmas* that create new models for what is acceptable for daughters in Pulan. They introduce a new middle class *dharmic* expectation into their own family, and the neighborhood, that daughters should be educated – a middle class *dharmic* value that is likely influenced by the practices of their elite counterparts, which they witness in Udaipur and in films and television. These practices expand the timeline and boundaries of traditional *stridharma*, but in a limited, incremental way. Kavita's parents' decision regarding her marriage communicates to neighbors that, as middle class people, they should educate their daughters and take seriously their daughters' own opinions and desires in arranging marriage. However, they are not willing to expand the *dharmic* model of marriage and *stridharma* so far as to allow for love marriage or the potential for cross-caste marriages. Nor, in the case of Kavita, does her family's emerging middle class *dharma* include the option to realize all of her desires, such as working outside of the home. For her in-laws, this, for now at least, is one *dharmic* bridge too far.

Yet, whereas Kavita was offered a "like marriage," arranged when she was seventeen, the marriages of her younger sisters, Arthi and Deepti, were arranged when they were children to the sons of one of their father's close friends. Marrying two sisters into the same household is an attempt to secure their happiness outside of the conjugal relationship; as sisters and sisters-in-law, Arthi and Deepti are guaranteed a support

system in their in-law's home, which can help to stave off the potential loneliness and isolation that a young bride may feel in her married home. But Arthi did not want the marriage, and she told her parents as much. By the time I completed my fieldwork, it was still not clear whether or not Arthi's engagement had been officially called off, but I have since learned that it was not. Her and Deepti's marriages were performed in February of this year and they have moved to their *sasural* in Ahmedabad.

This example suggests the ways in which upwardly mobile families are experimenting with modernity and "trying out" new ways of being that are both new ways of being middle class *and* new ways of being *Hindu*. The moral expectations of middle class identity – such as educating one's daughter – reshapes the moral obligations of Hindu marriage, such that it comes later and women have more choice. But the *dharma* of caste endogamy continues to limit the extent to which the practice of marriage is being transformed. In this way, class and religious (*dharmic*) identities are mutually constitutive; they both shape, and are shaped by, one another.

I have suggested that class can be considered a *dharmic* category of moral being that becomes part of a religious identity. Shifts in ritual practices, such as delayed marriages for the sake of education, are the mechanisms by which class becomes *dharmic*, as they reshape the *achara*, or community standards, of the neighborhood. The process of becoming middle class is, in part, learning the right ways to dress, act or speak as a middle class person; it is about recognizing and incorporating middle class ideals and values related to education, food, and fashion into the everyday lives of residents. Perhaps more importantly, however, as the neighborhood and the standards of the neighborhood community, becoming middle class is about understanding who one is in

the world and who one *should* be in the new community; it is about creating new ways of *being* that feel "correct" and "comfortable" in sustainable ways.

Generating new forms of *dharma* together in these new communities helps to ensure the continuity and coherency of *dharma*, while simultaneously demonstrating how *dharma* continues to develop and evolves in contemporary India. *Dharma*, as a socio-moral identity that grounds Hindus being and belonging, has always been rooted in the immediate social world – growing out of and responding to shifting localized contexts and standards (*achara*). This ethnographic exploration of contemporary women's lives helps us to understand the interpersonal ways in which *dharma* is negotiated within specific communities and how *dharmic* ideals must be renegotiated as the dynamics of the community change. It shows how *dharma* operates and is produced in non-elite, non-Brahmin communities and the shifting factors of caste, gender, age, region, and class that constitute moral being and Hindu belonging in the middle classes. Analyzing class in terms of *dharma* helps to recognize how both class and *dharma* are ongoing processes

In this way, this dissertation demonstrates how *dharma* is emergent category that continues to operate in fluid and flexible ways in the rapidly shifting landscapes of globalizing modern India, making the capacity to become middle class possible. New models of middle class *dharma* constantly being negotiated and generated anew as the circumstances in which they operate, and the desires, aspirations, and communities that inform them, continue to change. On the one had, female neighbors communally generate new *dharmic* models through shared ritual practices, helping to construct new communities of belonging that stabilize their understandings of who they are and to whom they are obligated. On the other hand, as these new *dharmic* models synthesize

new middle class values and "traditional" ideals, they create a space and means by which to understand and assert oneself as Hindu in the middle classes

While scholars of Hinduism have examined the ways in which new middle class narrative, aesthetic, and ritual sensibilities are reshaping temple spaces, ritual communities, and even the deities themselves, this study introduces class as a *dharmic* category. Approaching class as a *dharmic* category expands the ways in which we can draw upon *dharma* as an analytical category to understand what shapes the everyday lives of Hindus and how they understand their roles in maintaining, upholding, and supporting the new socio-moral and cosmic orders that define their lives. It also expands what "counts" in the study of religion to include fashion, food, education, and other emerging middle class practices. Continuing to watch the ways in which the next generation of young women in the aspirational middle classes negotiate and embody new models of middle class *dharmas* will help us to see how the Hinduism itself changes. Indeed, insofar as *dharma* forms the "spirit" of Hinduism, women and women's lives reflect and engender the "spirit" of *dharma* – and Hinduism itself – by constantly evolving to account for and respond to changing circumstances while remaining constantly committed to maintaining a morally "correct" world.

GLOSSARY

arati (*arati*)	flame offering
ashrama (*āśrama*)	life-stage
darshan (*darśana*)	taking sight of the deity
dharma	socio-moral order; code of conduct; ethics
dhyan (*dhyān*)	care
diya	oil lamp
Ganesha Chaturthi	annual festival celebrating the birth of the elephant-headed god Ganesha
garba	a type of Gujarati dance; popular during Navratri
ghat (*ghāṭam*)	steps leading into water, usually a holy site
gali (*galī*)	lane
ghunghat (*ghūṅghaṭ*)	veiling of the face to show respect and modesty
guru	master; teacher
jati	lit: species, birth; caste identification according to birth
kachi basti	lit: the unripe neighborhood; slum area.
karva	pot
Karva Chauth	lit: pot fourth; annual *vrat* observed by women for the health and longevity of their husband's lives
kuldevi	caste-specific goddess
kumkum	vermillion powder
laddu (*laḍḍū*)	sweet made of sweetened dough
maniccha (*manicchā*)	lit: desires of the heart
mata-ji (*mātā-jī*)	lit: mother; goddess
murti	physical image of deity made of plaster-of-paris
Navratri	lit: nine nights; festival for the goddess in all of her forms
pakka	concrete (as in house); confirmed; proper
pandal (*paṇḍal*)	decorative tent
pativrata (*pativṛatā*)	lit: one who has made a vow to her husband
puja (*pūjā*)	worship
pujari (*pūjāri*)	priest
prasad (*prasādam*)	blessed food
samaj (*samāj*)	society; caste community
Solah Somwar *vrat*	Sixteen Money fast/vow
sasural (*sasurāl*)	in-law's/husband's home; conjugal home

shakti (*śakti*)	power; female power
stridharma (*strīdharma*)	woman/wife *dharma*
svadharma (*svādharma*)	one's own *dharma*

varṇa (*varṇa*)	lit: color; caste-group; caste-level
varṇashramadharma (*varṇāśramadharma*)	*dharma* according to caste and life-stage
visarjan	dissolution
vrat (*vratam*)	vow; fast
vrat katha (*vratam kathā*)	vow/fast story; explains the origins and power of a *vrat*

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