



Sarah Lamb

Being Single in India: Stories of Gender, Exclusion, and Possibility

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reviewed by [Kanchan Biswas](#)

Sarah Lamb, Professor of Anthropology configures her ethnographic studies on gender and identity formation among different age cohorts, with primary focus on west Bengal India. Her prior studies looked into ageing, self-care and gendered identities broadly. Her current publication *Being Single in India: Stories of Gender, Exclusion and Possibility* examines single women in India across classes, and locates their mobilities and identity formation through gendered personhoods. This book is divided into nine sections including an introduction and conclusion. In the first section titled 'Thinking outside marriage,' Lamb introduces her readers to the wide vocabulary used in mundane life to express single-hood, which includes words and phrases like 'choice,' 'circumstances,' 'hostility,' 'astonishment,' 'hassles,' 'disrespect,' 'sexual harassment,' 'discrimination' and so on. The key research question of the book is, 'What makes living outside marriage in India so challenging for women and at the same time increasingly possible?' (2). She uses film narratives, OTT releases, newspaper clippings and ethnographical insights (multiple anthropological and sociological representations) to reflect upon the said question. Lamb prefers using the term 'hanging out' (15) to describe what most anthropologists call participant observation. In doing so, she reflects upon the formation of friendship bonds and secures constant support and improvisation (language translations) from her three female research assistants alike. She discusses existing literature that is focused on single women, widowed women, relationships beyond marriage, lesbian women, etcetera to theoretically and empirically understand the precarity of women in different socio-cultural and geographical contexts.

Her interlocutors were purposively chosen using snowball sampling, within the age group of 35–92 years, providing the rationale that women of 35 and beyond age in India are not preferable choices for marriage. She classifies her respondents into the following:

35 women living in the large metropolis of Kolkata, 10 from smaller towns, and 9 from rural villages. In terms of social class, the group included 9 elite, 21 middle-class, 14 working-class, and 10 poor participants. 9 were from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities (16).

The autobiographical and other stories these women tell intricately elucidate their socially and culturally mediated subjectivities. Through face-to-face open-ended interviews, she documents around 54 case studies of women, where she dismantles the very idea of 'being single.'

In chapter one titled, 'On being single,' Lamb discusses the economic differences which determine

singlehood. Only respondents from elite cosmopolitan backgrounds choose 'singlehood as a distinctive lifestyle emerging from a claim to freedom of choice' (32). Most solo-living women are of urban origin and have attained a considerably good education that ranges from graduation to a PhD and they have established careers and stable incomes. That said, 70 percent of her interlocutors did not wilfully choose to stay single. In both the cases (whether one chooses to stay single, or has been married, but is now single due to circumstances), the situation is driven by multifarious socio-cultural and political-economic agents. Even, the spatial context plays an important role, as one of her interlocutors mentions. Western women have more sex education, awareness and control over their bodies and access to birth control; it is easier for them to avoid sexual vulnerability. While in India, young women are compelled or pressurised to marry, due to the ideologies over gender and associated roles. Lamb concludes the chapter by unfolding the multiple intersecting layers of reasons for averting marriage, which range from education, work, natal care or support provider, stigmatised identity, health and fertility, spiritual life, queer identity and gender preferences. She also brings to our notice, the anomalous usage of language towards the formation of gender identity. She writes,

Bengalis use passive voice stating 'marriage has not happened' (*biye hoy ni*) to refer to women—articulating, that girls' or women's marriages 'happen'; while boys or men 'do' marriage, and parents 'give marriage' as in case of Kanyadaan rituals where father gives away his daughter to a gentleman (8).

Her findings suggest that solo living is a rare phenomenon for Indian women, although independence is the most desirable trait, that emerges out of 'freedom of choice.' However, Lamb critiqued the rhetoric of freedom of choice, stating that choice needs to be seen in a social and cultural context, and it must not be assumed that individual autonomy and freedom are universal desires.

In chapter 2 titled 'Education and work,' Lamb explores women's aspirations to learn, earn, work; which jeopardises their chances of getting married at a preferable age (according to the norms of the society). These aspirations are 'the overlapping and blurring together of constraint and freedom, exclusion and possibility, as single women build their lives' (49). Taking insights from narratives of her respondents (with pseudonyms of Medha and Nayani), Lamb discusses the phenomenon of unmatched class status, where achieved status or living status is way better than the original or natal status of such individuals. This creates a hindrance towards a marital match. This marital exclusion in turn makes single women isolated from love, care and reciprocity from natal kins (consanguineal). Although their unmarried status allows them to dispose of their income on their affines, acceptance into the kinship fold is far from what would be expected. Lamb argues that this crisis relegates unmarried women into a state of kinship limbo. Rich women/families tend to hire poor single women to compensate care within the family.

Lamb also pointed out how education for girls/women is seen as an obstacle towards marriage. It is seen to consume valuable youth years and being highly educated means there is a dearth of eligible grooms. In addition, education is thought to make women less feminine, as educated women might not be docile and adaptable to performing household chores. Lamb's findings suggest, although there is a high level of aspiration among young women to achieve education, families tend not to support such choices, especially among lower classes and in rural places. Moreover, marriage tends to make women subservient to somebody. This can prohibit them from pursuing jobs which have frequent transfers. One of Lamb's respondents narrates, 'When giving a daughter's marriage, the whole extended family will help out. They will all pitch in to offer money. They will say "Don't worry. We are here." But ? if a girl wants to study, no one will help!' (57).

In Chapter three, titled 'A Daughter's and Sister's Care,' Lamb spotlights 'how gender, social class, and marital status intersect to produce the unequal distribution of the labour and goods of

care' (73). Lamb explores women's experiences (10 out of 24 respondents) who preferred to care or financially cater to natal kins, over marrying; specially in poor and working-class families. In return, the married brothers do not feel obliged to reciprocate support for their unmarried sisters. She also highlights the imbalanced circulation of labour and care within families caused by marriage. Not only is there a gendered disparity, but age is also a factor among married women such as mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. Further Lamb poignantly showed how 'rich appoint non-kin members to supplement their own possibilities for social reproduction, while the impoverished are left with no recourse beyond kin, in a system where kinship for women without marriage is very fragile' (90).

In chapter four titled 'Who Will Care for Me?' Lamb explores futurist visions, present predicaments, and mechanisms of procuring care for older single women. She examines old-age homes which once served as a site of abjection, but which have become aspirational and appealing specially for single women. She writes, 'Solo single women with economic resources are especially well situated to take part in new ways of non-kin-centered aging' (92). Further Lamb discussed the 'independent forms of sustaining self-care,' which include daily exercises, drinking water, yoga, meditation, solo retreats, preparing healthy diets, maintaining a fit body through swimming, workouts, walking, etcetera. She concludes by arguing, 'Older single women may be viewed as vanguards in a broader societal reckoning of expanding ways to live meaningfully and achieve security in old age' (107).

In chapter five titled 'Sexuality and Love' Lamb explores 'how and why single Bengali women experience such immense constraints over their sexuality when living outside the dictates of heterosexual marriage' (112). The biographies discussed in this chapter also reveal the variations that happen across class which determine women's understandings of sexuality and affection (love). Lamb begins with narratives that suggest that single women are devoid of the friends they used to have in their younger days, since most of their female friends are married and have a different social circle. Indeed, some married women resist intermingling with unmarried women, because of the fear that their husband may get sexually allured by such women. Even in terms of socialising, married women make friends in their neighbourhoods or in their children's schools which many single women (without children) fail to do.

She further discussed the magnitude of hassles, dangers and criticism faced by her interlocutors. For single women, sexual pleasure or masturbation is perceived as a sin and must be avoided, while sex within the ambit of marriage is procreative and not recreative. In case of lesbian relationships, there are more possibilities than heterosexual sex in relationships, however these are often interpreted as homo-social friendships (111). In the latter half of the chapter, Lamb discusses the strategies used by her respondents to avert sexual violence. One example is Shubhangi, a day labourer of scheduled caste origin, who explained 'how she always took care to avoid dressing up, so that people [i.e., men] would not do anything to me, "touch" me or anything' (118); while Sukhi di resorts to keeping a knife under pillow for defence at night when travelling with male colleagues. Nabami and her sister restrain from going out and mixing with people, in case else they are labelled vulgar and slandered by people.

In chapter six titled 'Never Married Single Moms,' Lamb highlights the struggles and challenges of three single mothers. She notes, around 4.5 percent of Indian families are headed by single mothers (135) and discusses the case of adoption by an urban professional woman pseudo named Indrani, where the adoption agency counsellors preferred that she promised to stay single, as dating or marriage might endanger the adopted child. Nevertheless, Lamb writes, 'True singlehood in terms of living on one's own without parents or other kin makes it difficult to be approved as an adoptive parent, as there is a strong sense that no one can raise a child alone,

and that a child needs a family' (145). Lamb argues that adoption and new reproductive technologies are accessible, primarily to urban elite women.

The second case study she discusses is of a rural woman Suravi, who gave birth out of wedlock and stays with her natal kin. She has spent her life struggling legally and socially towards gaining respect and recognition, both for herself and her child, since a child outside wedlock is treated with extreme stigma. She dons herself with the marital symbol (Sankha, Pola, sindoor) and builds up narratives of elopement (and getting secretly ritually married in a temple) to proclaim the legitimacy of her child's identity. She even makes her child follow death rituals when anyone in the paternal ancestor's family dies.

The third case is about a journalist KumKum, who conceived her child through IVF. Despite the law having no prohibition for single mothers to have a child through IVF, doctors and clinics were reluctant and exhibited adverse responses towards her request. She was continually asked, why she was not married or, why didn't she come back (to IVF clinic) if required after marriage. However, Lamb points out there is a preference towards single IVF mothers due to 'intercourse-free virgin birth' (148). Society places utmost pressure on a single mother to demonstrate that the child was conceived in a sexually chaste or asexual manner. Lamb concludes by arguing that these three single mothers have reconfigured conventional gendered kinship and reproduction in a patriarchal and patrilineal society.

In chapter seven titled 'Pleasure, Friendships and Fun,' Lamb discusses the obstacles faced by single women in seeking pleasure, friendships and accessing public spaces for fun or joy. The majority of her respondents were devoid of friends. However, in old-age homes, some close bonding had developed among residents simply because they dined together (commensality). Further, one big joint family living together provided a nurturing essence, and they shared similar life-chances. In many instances, single women felt guilty about caring for themselves or spending money on themselves. In such cases, they resorted to care, by virtue of caring for Gopal (a mythological God-figure and household deity). They treated Gopal to sweets, fruits, milk, etcetera; which are later consumed by the devotees. Lamb concludes the chapter by noting that there are some sources of amusement, pleasure and excitement, ranging from travelling solo or with friends; gardening, pleasurable reading, purchasing home furnishings, enjoying one's own company and so on. She further highlights that middle-class and elite single women with independent incomes can be successful at pushing boundaries to create meaningful spaces of pleasure and fun in daily life? (168).

Throughout the book, Lamb questions the given understanding that for women to attain kinship ties and social/economic security is only through means of marriage, that is, a socially sanctioned sexual life. Probing into the life of unmarried, single, lesbian, single mothers from different parts of Bengal, belonging to different social classes, castes and geographical locations, Lamb pointed out the nuances, challenges of such choices/dispositions of women ranging from accessing public spaces, fighting stereotypes, avoiding the male gaze, resisting sexual atrocities, finding housing accommodation, travelling, pleasure, fun and negotiating for care and sexual intimacies. Lamb meticulously identifies the core reasons why some women still opt for being single despite its unending challenges. She argues that for some educational opportunities surpass the choice of marriage; further non-kin housing like hostels and flats are on the rise, and these allow urban women the choice of existing beyond consanguineal or affinal ties. It is also worth mentioning the modern ideas of love, which are beyond existing paradigms of conventional marriage in India. For example, she mentions lesbian relationships, live-in, polyamorous life relationships, etcetera. Weaving these distinct identities into a narrative whole, Lamb attempts to challenge the existing theories of gender by critiquing the assumptions and taken for granted-ness of heterosexuality

studies.

Lamb has beautifully ensembled these chapters as categories in which single woman can be understood. However, such categories like a single working woman and a single mother, are not watertight compartments. The intersection of identities makes the study more rigorous and worthy of a multitude of perspectives. Such an analysis is readily available throughout the book in various chapters where instances of one case study are cited through various lenses. Lamb made her point clear, that single women are not a problem that she researches, rather marriage and the relative confinement that marriage produces in the lives of women, are the real problems that she wishes to address through women's studies, queer studies and gerontological lenses.

However, the population of the study has even more categories of single women, who could have been considered for study sample. Akin to the 'differentially-abled single women'; categories like rape victims and female eunuchs whom society despises, or the acid survivor women who face atrocities and are pushed aside by society and considered to be incompatible with marriage. These women could have been incorporated to extend the scope of the study. While the book title *Being Single in India* suggests women across the country have been included in the study, Lamb has conducted extensive exercises in ethnography in parts of West Bengal. Therefore, generalising Bengali women with the rest of the country seems erroneous, since there are women in many matriarchal tribes to be found in the northeast of India (e.g., Khasi women) or in the south of India (Nayar women) who experience a different outlook on life, social intercourse and marriage. Also, women in Anglo-Indian communities have different experiences due to their unique social upbringing.

This book comes to its readers as a story book (non-fictional) that includes brilliant insights and is written in an academically diligent manner. The stories of women invoke readers to reflect on the multitude of ways in which individuals forge meaningful lives that emerge out of dilemmas and constraint. The book, though focusing on challenges and struggles, does not undermine the efforts, attitudes and potential journeys of women who deliberately or out of circumstances have opted out of the straightjacket pathways of marriage, heterosexual monogamous conjugal life that lead to procreation. Further adding to the discourse on gender studies and women studies, this book is a must read to broaden the horizon and understanding of women's issues. Empirically grounded and theoretically sound, Lamb has incredibly flagged off a very modern side-effect of marriage, that is 'being single.'

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