Chup

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Breaking the Silence About India's Women

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I did not set out to do research or to write a book. Having written seventeen books on poverty policies and poor people's empowerment published by the World Bank and academic presses, I had decided not to write any more. But this book forced itself upon me. It emerged from my determination not to be complacent after the rape of Jyoti Singh, or Nirbhaya. The brutality of the rape, the public outrage, the non-stop news coverage and the fact that it happened in my Delhi shook me, like millions of others, to the core. The public debate focused on law and order and the police and to a much lesser extent on the issue of culture.

As a trained social scientist I decided to turn to the cultural question. But culture is a big idea. What is it about a culture that can explain both rape and everyday sexism? The question began to obsess me. I was invited to give talks on poverty and development in Delhi, and I said I would go if I could explore the gender question. As I talked to young women and men at the renowned St Stephen's College in Delhi one afternoon, I was startled by what I heard. One young woman said her seven-year-old niece, who loves chocolates, gave her only piece of chocolate, without being asked, to her nine-year-old cousin brother when he demanded more than his share. The reverse never happened. Nor was it expected. The definitions of a woman given by some

of the brightest male and female students dripped with words like 'nice, caring, compromising'.

After what I heard from women and men at St Stephen's, I went to Gargi College, Lady Shri Ram College and Amity University. And then one more college. And so it continued. I could not stop. I also met women and men in their homes, in cafes, in universities, in malls, in offices, in airports and in parks. I met women, men and children living mostly in Delhi, but also in Bengaluru, Mumbai and Ahmedabad. I was surprised by what I heard from women who were competent, educated, gender aware and often fighting for gender rights. Often men seemed less conservative, until the discussion turned to what a couple should do after the birth of children. I met young people in slums. I met Indian students and women of Indian origin in Seattle, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and New York. Sometimes it seemed that only their clothes had changed.

What I heard women saying was disturbing. Over and over I would shake my head in disbelief that yet another smart and smartly dressed woman, an artist, a business manager, a financial analyst, a professor, a dentist, an engineer, a lawyer, a researcher, a scientist, a teacher, an educated stay-at-home mom was so unsure of herself. Or that she sounded, after the obligatory gender equality claims and sometimes passionate lecture, like her mother would have sounded thirty or forty years ago.

As unexpected inner realities unfolded, I became aware that I had taken on too much. I decided to focus on trying to make sense of women's complex lives, and I stopped interviewing men after fifty in-depth interviews to give me a comparison. This was a difficult decision. We

do need a book on men, on their inner lives, thoughts, confusions, hesitations and burdens.

I also decided to focus on younger women, between the ages of 17 and 35, because every time I spoke to someone or saw a discussion on television, people asserted that young women today are 'modern' and are very different from the past generations. I did not want my findings to be dismissed because the women I interviewed belonged to an older generation. Of course there have been changes. But the outer changes may have just camouflaged what has not changed. Sex ratios at birth or child sex ratios have worsened since Independence even as incomes have gone up. Female fetuses and girls 0–6 years old are still being killed or dying in large numbers.

It became obvious that I needed a team. I developed an interview guide using a methodology similar to the approach I followed in conducting the *Voices of the Poor* study, which involved 60,000 people in sixty countries, while I was at the World Bank in Washington, DC. I wasn't interested in abstractions or in how women and men *should* behave, but how women and men actually behave in their everyday life. And so I used open-ended questions that do not suggest any answers. Such research does not yield numbers or percentages, but throws up patterns of behaviour and beliefs that you did not know existed. Only very occasionally did I count the number of times something was mentioned. In this more open-ended context the researcher becomes a deep, empathetic, non-judgemental listener.

I trained six women from the middle and upper classes living in different parts of Delhi, and they conducted interviews in different geographic areas based on a simple

sampling plan to contact women who fit certain age and income demographic criteria. In all, we conducted 600 interviews with women, men and schoolchildren in Delhi and some other metros. I have changed names and occasionally key identifying details to protect the women who trusted us enough to speak to us.

I ended up with approximately 8000 pages of notes from interviews with highly educated women in the cities. I took an inductive approach, letting the data speak to me, reading and rereading interviews and systematically aggregating data into larger and larger analytical groupings. I also used text analysis and searched for keywords. It takes time and patience to detect patterns. I trained new researchers who had not done any of the interviews to analyse them, to search and categorize the same data independently so as to minimize interpretation errors. This took another half-year.

As I analysed the interviews and read and reread them, the power of cultural habits, emotions and morality over education and the rational intellect pierced through the reams of documentation. There is a wide gap between our intellectual beliefs and our actual behaviour. This book is about the power of everyday culture over the intellect. It is about the all-pervasive cultural indoctrination that starts with childhood and prepares women to be deleted and then enrols women to delete themselves as well as other women, all without their conscious awareness.

The old explanation for gender inequality is patriarchy. This concept serves to highlight systemic bias against women, but it has been so overused it has become flaccid – it merely stops conversation and therefore action. In addition it blames men, without whose participation

change in gender relations cannot happen. We need new ideas.

There was much I did not know when I started this inquiry. I had not foreseen the deep emotional impact the interviews would have on my team and me. It was cumulative. It crept up on us. Young women doing the interviews started telling me that listening to women's stories was stirring up trouble in their own psyches. Nor had I foreseen the torrent of emotions talking would release in women being interviewed. I had been afraid women would have no patience for the interviews, but instead they started thanking us for letting them talk about issues they had kept bottled up. It was like witnessing the breaking of dams. In the absence of any judgement, the interview process became a safe emotional space. My researchers wrote their own stories. Some continued over several months. I offered support based on my experience in leading groups in emotional literacy. Mostly I just listened. It started affecting me as well, stirring up my memories.

I scoured the extensive research literature from India and the USA, some of which is referenced at the end of the book. Despite many good departments of psychology, social sciences and management in India, most of the behavioural studies on gender differences are from the USA; the few published behavioural studies on women and men in the middle and upper classes in India focus on buying behaviour. It is clear that the behaviours of educated American women are very similar to those of educated Indian women in cities, a remarkable fact given the different histories of the countries. Government National Family Health Surveys, census data, crime

statistics and surveys by non-governmental organizations provide most of the Indian statistics used in this book.

My approach to reporting on research in this book is not academic. Rather I tell stories that reveal patterns. I focus on the everyday behavioural details in the hope that both women and men will be able to see themselves and hear their own voices or the voices of their families and colleagues.

A word about the definition of the middle class, although we could argue about it forever. Everyone in India likes to label themselves middle class even when they go on foreign holidays every year! In this book, I define the middle class as families earning 12–19 lakh rupees a year. I consider families earning 20 lakh rupees and more a year upper class. I focus on the educated middle- and upper-class people because these are the groups that can bring about change. I hope reading this book will change you, just as working on this book for the past several years has forced me to change.

Many men have asked me if this book is just for women. No. Since this book is primarily about *cultural systems*, it is as much for men as it is for women – the same cultural system that creates women also creates men, and intertwines their lives. We need to become cultural detectives. We need to share our dilemmas with other cultural creatures rather than hide alone or pretend not to see. We can be more creative collectively. We are after all in the land of jugaad. We need to invent new ways to change the unequal cultural world that resides inside and outside each one of us.

1

Introduction

The Making of a Woman

Meera, 25, sits across from me, leaning forward, in a meeting room at Harvard University, USA. She looks striking, in a black kurta, silver jewellery, a tribal shawl and with kajol lining her dark eyes. But she shares her life hesitantly, pausing to breathe, trying, as she says, 'not to cry'.

'I remember that deep sense of choking. In my family, as a child, I learned to observe too much, silent, listening. My mother is a good listener; not my father – he is very dogmatic, always strong opinions. My father is a liberal in his thoughts, "you are free to choose anything, it is your life" but "being a doctor is desirable". He is a doctor. There is a big disparity between how he thinks and how he lives. I wanted to study psychology, but it was forbidden. I went to medical school . . . it was my father's dream . . . It's very embarrassing . . . I ran away from medical college after three weeks. I was seventeen. I left all my things in the hostel. I felt…I had no other way . . . I was dying. I took a bus and then a train for two days and nights and landed in Chennai to go to college to study psychology – I got admission…but I had no place to stay. It was already evening, I had very little money, I saw these women at the bus stop, it was at Marina Beach. I started talking with them; baaton baaton mein, *by and by, I told them I was hungry. They gave me a beedi to smoke. I had no place to stay. I did not want them to know I was vulnerable, so I said I am on this research project and want to live with*

you to understand your ways. The women agreed on the condition that I would look after their children when they went out at night for dhandha, *sex work. They would pay me. I lived with them.'*

Meera is a Delhi girl. She grew up in Saket, New Delhi, with her dadi, chacha, bua and parents in a middle-class family that prospered with the opening up of the Indian economy.

But Meera also lived in a slum community with sex workers under a broken bridge for over a month before her many relatives arrived with the police. I ask her if she felt safe with the sex workers in the slum. She says, 'Most safe. The most secure I have ever felt. In my family we lived together but there was a rule of silence. Nothing was ever said. It was so hypocritical; we never were a family, just individuals living together. I grew up thinking unless my father sanctions my existence, I am not alive. I was always waiting for validation. If he said you are fine, I would be fine.'

Her existence was his reflection.

* * *

India is in the middle of an independence movement. For women. As the country marches forward with high economic growth rates, millions of women in the cities have come out of their homes. They go to colleges, universities, IITs and IIMs. They can be seen on the streets, in buses, metros, offices, malls, movie halls, coffee shops, pubs and in Parliament. They drive scooters, cars, airplanes and fighter jets. They are employed in large numbers. They are government officials, entrepreneurs, scientists and wrestlers. We thought that when women became educated, they would be valued, free and

unafraid. They are not. We thought they would speak up. They don't. We thought that when women earn their own money, violence against them would stop. It has not. We thought that when laws change, and women have rights to property and maintenance after a divorce, they would become independent and safe. Women are still not safe.

While it is deeply satisfying to focus on the outer independence movement of women – we can count the changes – this approach is also deeply flawed. It is misleading and, worse, it is diversionary. Just because women are visible, it does not mean that they are not invisible at the same time. This focus on visible external change assumes that the cultural ideology that kept women invisible, and even denied women life itself, has evaporated. This assumption is wrong.

We are all cultural creatures. We are born naked. Our cultures sculpt us into becoming Indian or Sri Lankan or English or American. Living with our families in particular homes and in particular neighbourhoods, we absorb through osmosis our values, behaviours and characteristic ways of being and thinking. We inhale the dos and we exhale the don'ts. We absorb these cultural values early, unknowingly. They seep into our body, our mind, our morality and our spirit. They are our foundation. Our belonging. Our core. Our culture. Our compass.

And this invisible cultural compass leads to camouflage, contradictions, condemnation and even death. We worship goddesses, but we murder unborn girls by the hundreds of thousands. Our cultural compass is inside us and we take it everywhere we go, even when we leave India. The moral compass that guides us, usually without our awareness, can be distilled into our response to one

core cultural question: *What does it mean to you to be a good woman or a good man?* The strength of this seemingly simple question is that it pushes people into going beyond 'enlightened', politically correct answers.

I asked this question for three years. After meeting students at the elite St Stephen's College, I asked this question of 600 women and men, young and old mostly in Delhi but also in Mumbai, Bengaluru and Ahmedabad. Again and again I was surprised by what I heard. I started asking women and men to write down their answers so it could not possibly be an issue of hearing wrong or misinterpretation. I thought maybe the next generation had changed. I spoke to younger and younger children. In many ways they were little echoes of their elders. I met young women and men from Greater Kailash, Moti Bagh, Khan Market, Aurangzeb Road, Rohini, Punjabi Bagh, Noida, Gurgaon and Ram Das Colony, the home of those accused of Nirbhaya's brutal gang rape in December 2012 in New Delhi. I could hardly see any links between what women said and their education, their wealth or where they lived.

In early February 2013, while New Delhi was in turmoil awaiting justice for Nirbhaya, two Supreme Court justices also in New Delhi ruled that killing a boy is worse than killing a girl. It was a small news item in the *Times of India*. Justices P. Sathasivam and J.S. Khehar, in a ruling that justified the death penalty for a man in the killing of a seven-year-old boy, wrote, 'The parents of the deceased had four children – three daughters and one son. Kidnapping the only male child was to induce maximum fear in the mind of his parents. Agony for parents for the loss of their male child, who would have

carried further the family lineage, and is expected to see them through their old age, is unfathomable . . .' Higher valuation of boys, or one could say devaluation of girls, has been decreed by the Supreme Court of India.

This deeper cultural story touches all of us without our conscious knowledge, from Supreme Court judges to the local policeman to the male or female CEO, to each father and mother and son and daughter. The same culture that leads to violence against women also leads to fewer women in technology and leadership positions. It leads to talented young women being locked up at home for their own safety. It leads to educated women saying they are afraid to speak up. It leads to the seemingly harmless behaviour of women waiting for men to speak first while they listen. It leads to women feeling a bolt of raw fear when they see a group of men walking towards them.

A life lived in fear is an abbreviated life. It is a feeble life. Meera's story is in some ways extreme so we can see the fear patterning clearly. But fear and the search for physical and psychological safety – where women feel free to express themselves without fear of being laughed at, humiliated, demeaned, followed, threatened, punished, cut off, stalked, trolled or raped – shape the lives of many women.

Fear traumatizes. Fear truncates. Fear drains life. Women's fears keep society stable. It serves society but it costs women.

The statistics on acceptability of wife-beating have not changed dramatically. Even in Kerala, the state with the highest literacy rate in India, large numbers of women experience both physical and sexual violence. Clearly, education and income are important in their own right,

but are not enough to change the cultural arithmetic that reduces women from a plus to a minus, to less than zero. This is not just an Indian problem, it is a universal problem. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that one in three women in the world experiences violence in her life, usually from an intimate male partner. Sexual violence and harassment are also widespread problems in the rich countries of the West including the USA, the UK and Sweden as evidenced in the #MeToo movement.

Based on the thousands of hours of listening to girls, boys, women and men, I offer one unifying idea that helps make sense of the hundreds of definitions of a good girl or a good woman and a good boy or a good man, our cultural and moral compass.

Our culture *trains women not to exist.*

Being a woman is itself taboo. Not allowed. Invisibility is just one manifestation of this cultural training. One way of ensuring that women do not exist is to kill them. A safer and less crude way is to train women to disappear. This helps explain the hundreds of ordinary, everyday behaviours, proverbs and admonishments that are part of a cultural morass that sucks us all in to perpetuate a culture of non-existence for women. The idea that women should simply not exist explains the deep and persistent inequality between women and men despite laws, education and wealth across many cultures. I focus on India, but the behavioural research reported in this book seems to indicate that the same forces are at work in the USA.

The culture of non-existence is kept in place generation after generation because nobody talks about it. It is a nameless cultural secret. It is so unpalatable that it is

disguised and buried in the cultural morass; otherwise women would surely object. Instead what we see is hundreds of cultural practices that we learn so naturally growing up that hundreds of young women say, 'Ma'am, this is normal.' Why is it normal for young girls not to tell anyone that they have been sexually molested or for a girl not to be kick-ass strong or for a woman not to share her opinions in front of men?

The culture of non-existence gets locked into clusters of behaviours that women and men absorb through training. In isolation, these behaviours seem harmless, inoffensive, sweet and even morally virtuous. But in combination they destroy, they kill softly. These clusters of behaviours observed and repeated become the *habits* that define a good woman and a good man. I deliberately use the word habits, because habits are learned and can be changed. The focus on habits also makes the big idea of culture manageable. But these habits acquire great power because they become entangled with our notions of goodness. They become moral habits. Parents everywhere teach their girls and boys good habits, to make them good women and good men. Habits make our behaviour run on autopilot. Habits beat rationality. They become shortcuts to decision-making.

Drawing on the details of the lives of women and men I interviewed, each over several hours, I found that girls are trained in seven cultural habits of non-existence. These are deny the body; be quiet; please others; deny your sexuality; isolate yourself; have no individual identity; and be dependent. It is deep training in these habits that makes so many women feminists in belief but not in behaviour. Feminists with bad habits.

These habits are not personal. But each woman thinks she is alone, she is the only one, and so she hides. When ten women are apologetic it may be personal. But when hundreds and thousands of women are constantly afraid and apologetic, it is no longer personal. It is systemic. It has to do with the lack of power of a group that is not supposed to exist. When women can't speak up, blame themselves, despair and collapse and repeat the behaviour the next time, it serves cultural expectations. *An unequal culture survives on collapsed women.* It is political strategy. This collective problem cannot be solved through the escapes of individual women. It takes collective action, working together to change unequal cultural, economic and political systems.

In writing about these habits, I describe patterns of behaviour and tendencies. I do not constantly qualify, but please know that I do not mean 'every woman in New Delhi, Bengaluru, Mumbai or Ahmedabad' or 'all Indian women' or 'all men' all the time. It is cumbersome to constantly qualify. Readers will have to decide what patterns apply to them or women in their circles. Sometimes the patterns emerge more strongly at home and at other times in offices and sometimes most unexpectedly and occasionally not at all.

Many of the behaviours I write about have been portrayed in essays, in poems, in novels and most recently in films ranging from *Secret Superstar* to *Lipstick under My Burkha*. There are also inspiring books on divas and other women leaders who have won many awards. This book is different. In my book I take apart women's everyday behaviours that do not always make women look good. My reason is simple. Unless we understand the grip these

behaviours have on us, we cannot change despite our intellectual beliefs. And our world will not change.

This book is about us. It is about women in the middle and upper classes. We need to talk about ourselves and not just 'them', those poor, uneducated and unfortunate women out there. We need to break our silence about our own lives. But silence too has cultural meaning.

Is silence a virtue or is silence betrayal?

I was taught that silence is a virtue. Silence is polite. Silence is good. Silence is spiritual. But there comes a time in one's life and in the life of a society when silence becomes betrayal. A betrayal of goodness. A betrayal of decency. It is time to end this silent betrayal now.