

# A Dream of One's Own: Understanding Daughters' Selfies in Rural Haryana

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The popular appeal of some progressive slogans and schemes around the theme of valuing the girl child is self-evident in Indian society. The emphasis on daughters' education and her dreams of flying high has led to an almost iconic presence of celebrities and influencers who focus on this thematic communication with their representations and creative interventions through the social media. Education has emerged as the most talked about route to empowerment in this context. Thus *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* (Save Daughters, Educate Daughters) has emerged as perhaps the most significant message when it comes to giving voice to the aspirations of the girl-child in a society facing the paradoxical existence of daughter-aversion and son-preference discourses, and their roots in a patriarchal social structure. It is in this context only that the idea of 'missing women' has been discussed (Sen, 1992) which not only foregrounds the evidence-based analysis of adverse sex-ratios but also highlights the accompanying invisibility of women in the developmental and socio-political frames impacting policies, opportunities, socio-cultural spaces and individual agential capacities alike. Both Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's capability deprivation approach (Sen and Nussbaum, 1993) finds a resonance with regard to these gaps and imagining of new practices for empowerment and agency concerns of women. In addition to this, GAD (Gender and Development) based arguments have already been an important source of theoretical redrafting of the discourses addressing these concerns in the feminist

frameworks as well. This paper addresses certain categories of these debates, specifically with regard to the cultural dimensions of imagining education and dreams of a 'good life' shaping the lives of daughters, as witnessed in rural Haryana, also seen as the heartland of north Indian patriarchy.

## **The educational resolution of the women's question:**

While a number of success stories are seen as having the symbolic strength to project the inherent potential of women in the face of a limiting social order, the most dependable route to find expression is visualized in the context of education. Education has been emphasized as an important medium in the upliftment of the marginalized sections beginning from the reformers like Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule, Tarabai Shinde, Periyar, Pandita Ramabai etc.

After many years of careful observation and thought, I have come to the conclusion that the chief needs of high-caste Hindu women are:- 1st, Self-Reliance; 2<sup>nd</sup>, Education; 3<sup>rd</sup> Native Women Teachers.

... Girls of nine and ten when recently out of school and given in Marriage are wholly cut off from reading and writing, because it is a shame for a young woman or girl to hold a paper or book in her hand, or to read in the presence of others in her husband's house.... Her literary pursuits are now at an end unless the proceedings of the elders

be interfered with by her progressive husband; but alas, such husbands are extremely rare. Our schools too are not very attractive to children; the teachers of primary schools, (and it is to these schools that girls are usually sent), are but nominally educated, and do not know how to make the lessons interesting for children. Consequently, a great many of the girls who have been educated upto the second or third standard (grade) in these primary schools make it their business quickly to forget their lessons as soon as they find an opportunity. Shut in from the world and destitute of an ability to engage in newspaper and useful book reading, they have little or no knowledge of common things around them, and of the most important events that are daily occurring in their own or foreign lands. Ignorant, unpatriotic, selfish and uncultivated, they drag the men down with them into the dark abyss without hope, without ambition to be something or to do something in the world (Ramabai, 1888).

At the same time the idea of education for women is further understood by some within the framework of nationalism in India during the struggle for independence. Partha Chatterjee (2010), who called it the 'nationalist resolution of the women's question', writes:

No matter what the changes in the external conditions of life of women, they must not lose their essentially spiritual (i.e. feminine) virtues; they must not, in other words become essentially westernized... There would have to be a marked *difference* in the degree and manner of westernization of women, as distinct from men, in the modern world of the nation (Ibid, Pg. 243). Formal education became not only acceptable but in fact a requirement for the new *bhadramahila* (respectable woman) when it was demonstrated that it was possible for a woman to acquire the cultural refinements afforded by modern education without jeopardizing her place at home. Indeed, the nationalist construct of the new woman derived its ideological strength from the fact that it was able to make the goal of cultural refinement through education a personal challenge for every woman, thus opening up a domain where woman was an autonomous subject (Ibid, Pg. 246).

In the post-independence India too, the question of

empowerment for women was sought to be addressed in a manner which could sustain the cultural equations spelling out the balancing of the peaceful Indian adaptation with modernity and scientific temper. This implied that the relational sphere of gender equations remained conscious of the tensions and strain caused by the new aspirations, being carved out as the feminine subjectivities oscillated between the two seemingly opposite poles of the cultural past and the idea of the modern. The image of the new 'modern' Indian woman was not just that of a shopping/beauty-salon oriented consumer but someone who had the unique ability to pursue goals of a modern life within the parameters of respectability earned with ethics of care alongside the privileging of familial bonds. The most convincing evidence of this is present in Indian cinema which showcases this aspirational journey undertaken by Indian women during the first five decades of independence. In many cases the choice aspirations are projected in the format of the affective in conjunction with the scriptural ideals of Hindu marriage and family. The sphere of education, including that of music and other performing arts, painting, knitting and embroidery, aesthetics as well as culinary accomplishments etc. formed the mediating zones of interest in the achievement of the goals envisaged. Schools and colleges for women provided access to this transition by setting the experiential agenda for realizing new ambitions and dreams of the aspiring families and their daughters. A range of magazines and media shows also became instrumental in advancing this educational resolution of the women's question.

### **Mediated images of the new 'modern' subjectivities:**

The journey of the Indian woman into modernity has been heavily influenced with a variety of print and audio-visual media interventions. Popular TV serials in 1980s like *Rajani* and *Udaan* depicted the empowering potential of education and critical thinking for Indian women who start questioning social injustices and systemic ills, giving new directions for making society progressive, and also remaining grounded in familial bonds and responsibilities. The women, playing central characters of such shows became household names in India and inspired thousands to envision such paths for themselves through education. The case of popular women's magazines like *Sarita*, *Grihshobha*, *Women's Era*, etc. was another link in the chain. The rationale for

the changing contours of the modern Indian woman's negotiation with a patriarchal, tradition-bound social order was generated with powerful images ruling the minds of young women, primarily in the urban centers. The growing appeal of urbanism, and the new market-centric avenues, provided an impetus to the aspirations of women further. This is also a time when the rural and urban gets both structurally and ideologically differentiated in perceptions of women-centric issues and empowering spaces. The schisms are directly aligned with an invisibly ruptured educational fabric. The ruptures have psychic orientations and social manifestations.

### **Dreams of 'success' and a 'good life': Changing equations through the 1990s and beyond:**

The 1990s brought winds of globalization and the Indian media changed through the introduction of satellite TV and internet. Some have seen this shift primarily in terms of a market economy being mainstreamed leading to the rise of the neo-liberal imagination. However, the picture is not so uncomplicated. The introduction of new modalities of convergence/communication has actually recast the whole imagination of what consists of masculinity, femininity and the new images of self. Globalization resulted in an increased flow of such images which lead the young to explore their lives with an unprecedented complexity in meaning making and objective thinking. The sheer speed of the reflexive inputs to a 'self' successively passing through innumerable filters and the scrutiny of social registers, is deeply challenging. This has made vulnerability the essence of our daily existence and an almost compulsive reliance on finding technological solutions has gained ground. Thus, access to ideas of 'success' and 'good life' is also mediated in the present context. This study foregrounds the concept of 'Selfie' in understanding the transient yet relatively enduring image of hope from self as an important indicator of the shift in this navigation in the present.

### **Methodological routes to the 'field':**

Understanding aspirations and dreams in an educational context basically means engaging with the learning subjectivities and the shaping of *collective cognition* in this regard. In an attempt to understand the working of psyche, it is important to acknowledge that close observation and sustained interaction is the only possible route to access the field and its complexity. Thus, actually living within the spaces (fields) of research

becomes central to such an investigation. It can be considered an observation built upon participation. Such research is heavily bent towards transforming the pedagogical experience of both the researcher and the participants in the process of research. Thus, ethnography comes to be redefined as an exercise having a therapeutic pedagogy at its core. Experiential reflection provides a new dimension to reflexivity. The engagement requires a creative use of different pedagogical routes having a constructivist standpoint at the root. For the purpose of the present study an analysis of this kind was performed while living and teaching sociology and gender studies over almost a decade at a women's university in rural Haryana. This paper is an outcome of reflecting upon certain aspects of women students' negotiation with academic spaces and the society at large as they visualize their learning, identities and the challenges associated with one's journey through life. Some other considerations guiding the choice of the ethnographic as the interpretative can be seen in the following observation.

First are the symbolic forms, patterns, discourses, and practices that help to form it and give it shape, so that the ethnographic enterprise is about presenting, explaining, and analyzing the culture(s) that locate(s) experience. Second, and more widely, for us the best ethnography also recognizes and records how experience is entrained in the flow of contemporary history, large and small, partly caught up in its movement, partly itself creatively helping to maintain it, enacting the uncertainty of the eddies and gathering flows dryly recorded from the outside as "structures" and "trends". To borrow the formulation of E. P. Thompson (1978), seeing human beings as "part subjects, part objects, the voluntary agents of our involuntary determination". Ethnography and theory should be conjoined to produce a concrete sense of the social as internally sprung and dialectically produced (Willis and Trondman, 2000, p.6).

Further, elaborating upon the creative (and constructivist) side of meaning making in ethnographic encounters, it is argued that ethnographic understanding is both socially situated and autonomous.

Symbolic production and meaning making can never be a mirror of their enviroing/encompassing conditions of existence because they work through forms of consciousness and

self-understanding. Equally, though, this “autonomy” must be understood in relation to the conditions of existence within which humans act, work, and create. Cultural change cannot be entirely free floating. It cannot disconnect from its moorings, whether contemporary and social or historical as embedded experience within cultures and cultural orientations that are inherited. It is autonomous because of the unpredictability of the ways in which it consciously and unconsciously “handles,” productively and reproductively, the social, not because it abolishes the social. It is exactly the showing of relations of indeterminacy embedded within the social (socioeconomic constraints) that is the source of elegance, the “traveling quality” beyond place and time, in the best ethnography (Willis and Trondman, 2000, p.8-9).

The questions which constituted the research format for this paper primarily revolved around the idea of imagining a present and future in consonance with what really is seen as providing enough strength to imagine a viable plan for life, rooted in one’s understanding of one’s preferences and choices. Forum discussions and interactive sessions around the theme provided an important channel for sharing of ideas and imagining sisterhood. Apart from this, in-depth (ethnographic) observation aligned with individual and group-discussions, including unstructured interviews, was also conducted to understand the subjective dimensions of student perspectives.

### **Conceptual linkages and reflections upon findings:**

The idea of understanding daughters’ imagination of their life is rooted in the engulfing of their agency amidst

cultural currents and spaces which limit their courageous strides into their educational futures. Conventionally speaking, north Indian patriarchies have been seen functioning through practices like *Ghunghat* (veil), caste-centric norms of honour and *Bhaichara* (brotherhood), ideologies of son-preference and daughter-aversion, discourses of deprivation related to autonomy in decision-making and other agential expressions, a gendered valorization of sacrifice, reinforcement of silence etc. (Chowdhry, 1994; Dube, 1988; Kakkar, 1988; Uberoi, 2006; Roy, 2024). In the contemporary situation this picture is further contrasted with rising crimes against women. Consider the following observations in a media report with the title, “Patriarchy meets Popular Culture”:

With more girls venturing out of their homes for education, work and sport, developing friendships with boys and seeking to assert themselves, a new trend of “use and throw” seems to have emerged, says Jagmati Sangwan, state vice-president of the All India Democratic Women’s Association....”There is also desire at a certain age, but since marriages are still largely determined by considerations of caste endogamy, village exogamy, etc. men look at these women as objects of fun, with no intention of marrying them,” says Sangwan.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, there exists a complicated and paradoxical structuring of aspirations and social realities with regard to ideas of empowerment of women. The popular culture, accompanied with new social media interventions, is also fundamentally altering the understanding of these paradoxes and alternatives to find agential expression. It is in this context also that one has to now understand the significance of certain interpretations attached to schemes like *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*<sup>2</sup> and references to

1. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/patriarchy-popular-culture-unemployment-why-haryana-is-india-s-rape-capital/story-MGXBCioEeVZ9yNYEXmKsFJ.html>
2. *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* (BBBP) was launched by the Prime Minister on 22nd January, 2015 at Panipat, Haryana. BBBP addresses the declining Child Sex Ratio (CSR) and related issues of women empowerment over a life-cycle continuum. It is a tri-ministerial effort of Ministries of Women and Child Development, Health & Family Welfare and Human Resource Development. The key elements of the scheme include Enforcement of PC & PNDT Act, nation-wide awareness and advocacy campaign and multi-sectoral action in select 100 districts (low on CSR) in the first phase. There is a strong emphasis on mindset change through training, sensitization, awareness raising and community mobilization on ground. The NDA Government is trying to bring about a transformational shift in the way our society looks at the girl child. PM Modi in his Mann Ki Baat lauded the Sarpanch from Bibipur in Haryana who started a ‘Selfie With Daughter’ initiative. PM also urged people to share their selfies with daughters and it soon became a world-wide hit. People from across India and the world shared their selfies with daughters and this became a proud occasion for all those who have daughters. [https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/government\\_tr\\_rec/beti-bachao-beti-padhao-caring-for-the-girl-child/](https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/government_tr_rec/beti-bachao-beti-padhao-caring-for-the-girl-child/)

campaigns like '*Selfie with Daughter*'.

The idea of gaining entry into a new zone of empowerment, material riches and respect, plays an important role in many young women's lives in rural Haryana. Their envisioned routes are through government jobs or success in professions linked with the aviation, media, tourism and hospitality etc. The ones who wish to play safe aspire to join teaching, health and medicine, commerce, management and legal fields, giving primacy to government jobs over other kinds of avenues. However, the dreams of good life have a high degree of similarity in most of the imaginations.

The cultural turn in social sciences is adequately poised to address these shifts as well. The symbolic and the imaginary now appear to change the social as much as the structural shift itself. Thus, feminist pedagogy, with its post-colonial framing became a significant counter to the binaries of the modern. However, its emphasis on *speaking* (Spivak, 1988) still placed a premium on voice and simultaneously fixated certain expressions as the vernacular versions of modernity. This rendered a utopian-realist assertion of affectively rooted, wishful subjectivities as marginalized subalterns, hoping to discover ground beneath their feet. The realization of imaginative acts, often visualized as dreams, with their unique creative underpinnings in everyday lives is what orients and posits a *new sisterhood of imagination* towards pedagogical recovery. It is rather an epistemic error to characterize these responses as and similar to what has been called the 'weapons of the weak' (Scott, 1985). Some have seen the emergent responses in terms of reformulation of the feminist discourses in the post-globalized, alternative realities (McRobbie, 2004; Gill, 2016).

#### **Dream-selfies and a felt life of one's own:**

The study primarily began with the question of understanding the educational resolution of the woman's question in the light of some recent developments in the wake of globalization and its aftermath. However, the impact of rurality was taken up as another important dimension alongside the aspirational paradox for the educated young women situated in the patriarchal context of north India. It was noticed that though these women students were influenced with ideas of empowerment and better status, the word 'feminism' caused an anxiety related to a perception of its 'undue' advocacy of women's claims to certain privileges *vis-à-vis* the role

of men in their lives. The anxiety is often fueled by media projections coupled with misogynistic overtones present in certain cultural ways of discussing the feminist project of gender equality. An added dimension is the idea of vulnerability (purportedly interpreted as inherent weakness) associated with the assessment of women's situation when it comes to theorize patriarchal influence in one's life.

Social media is an existential reality in crafting dream-selves amongst these young women. The selfies they take and keenly pursue on different platforms are not just momentary pictures of their lives' routine. They are imagined paths and sought-after experiences for seeking happiness, freedom and choice, even though not appearing to be long-lasting. They also result in quick affirmations through likes and validations received from their circle on social networking sites as well as the close group of people always fussing over each other's posts and impressions. Influence is a word which has acquired the image of an art-form, apart from the idea of what is trending, when it comes to visualizing a good life.

The ethnographic insights which emerged point out the perception of structural gaps as definitive for the shaping of subjectivities which feel solace in their transient excursions to an imagined space of having popularity, social influence, adequate material comfort and a relatively happening, pleasure-filled life. These felt aspirations of living fully, even if from moment to moment, alongside a deep sense of vulnerability springing from the weight of social expectations premised upon a denial of autonomy and agential expressiveness of women, are instrumental in shaping everyday projections of *dream-selfies* as a result. These projections are expressions of finding possibilities to have dreams and imagine a good-life that caters to one's unique, shining-self. Being a girl now becomes an aspect of this sought-after uniqueness, embedded in the feminine-self. This is also what explains the unease with discourses that critique the mystique attached to femininity (Friedan, 1963) as well as the idea of having structural roadmap for equality and empowerment, that Virginia Woolf spells out as the simple claim for having a room of one's own (Woolf, 2004).

Further, the findings suggest that there exists a huge gap between the *felt-self* and the socially presented one amongst the young women studying in a university. The self that dreams and imagines a meaningful, happy life can be understood only through certain expressions of it which remain guarded with learned ways to adapt with a

cultural isolation of this inner dynamic of self. The routinely ritualized self that engages with the pedagogical is often being trained to work at a safe inner distance from one's felt-self. However, moments which capture the inner consistency, and agential capacities to articulate the expression of a *self-seeking self*, do appear on the surface when a reflective mode (springing from the felt-self) is present and the expressive-situation is not seen as synonymous with experiences which have resulted in an inner imbalance earlier. These situations and their images have a lot of meaning for the subjective appraisal of this dynamic as well as for interpreting resilience on part of one's pedagogical-self. The term *dream-selfie* has been used here to refer to these moments and their constructive memories. The spaces which enable these are the ones where a dream of one's own dwells. The university must aspire to nurture a creative space which acts as a pedagogical bridge to this zone of imagination. Thus, the understanding of *dream-selfie* frames a new agenda for feminist pedagogy and the educational resolution of the women's question in the present-day India.

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