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BRAVE NEW WOMAN


She is single by choice, not because Mr Right didn't come along. And she is putting up with priggish societal norms to celebrate her freedom.

Standing in her balcony in New Delhi's cramped Lajpat Nagar locality, she stares into the distance, thinking of the things that once brought her joy but now sit around her apartment gathering dust, like the guitar she hasn't strummed in a while. Break-ups are tough. Commitment even tougher. At 39, Chandni (name changed on request), is certain she will never marry. An arts and culture consultant, she is part of a demographic that is fast becoming an economic and political force to reckon with- the single woman.

The 2011 census records a most staggering statistic: a 68 per cent decadal increase in the ranks of the never- married woman in the age group 35-44 years. See this in the context of the 27 per cent overall increase in the number of women in the same age bracket over the same period. And now wrap your head around the significance of these two seemingly innocuous pieces of data. These numbers are a statistical validation of an emergent reality most of us have some anecdotal evidence of- the rise of the unattached, independent woman, who has rejected the socially sanctioned default setting of a married life.

The urban Indian single woman is answerable to no one but herself. She is armed with an education and a career and the empowering financial independence it brings. Her life choices are her own. She works hard and parties, if she so pleases, even harder. She may have a partner in her life, or a friend with benefits, or no one at all. She is travelling places, solo or with soul sisters. She gets lonely, but thinks marriage is too heavy a price to pay for her independence. She does not need marriage for a fulfilling life, or children- adoption and IVF help her realise her goal of motherhood.

"I relate the growing number of single women to the expanding cities and increasing migration along with the cities offering spaces to network and meet people of your kind," says Dr Pushpesh Kumar, associate professor in the Department of Sociology,



University of Hyderabad. A large number of women in cities, therefore, are able to lead fulfilling lives without having to marry.

SINGLE, BY CHOICE


'I've never been married,' 37-year-old Aditi Bishnoi, editor with feminist publishing house Kali, writes in her essay 'Slouching towards Singlehood', published along with 11 other essays by women aged 27 to 70 as part of Kalpana Sharma's anthology, *Single by Choice: Happily Unmarried Women!*. 'Never quite felt the need to pledge undying love (or semi-servitude, if you're an average Indian woman) in front of a million people, who are only interested in discussing the wedding menu and the bride's weight and fairness quotient threadbare. I've never felt the compelling urge to go in for a secret engagement or even a steady boyfriend (men always, always seem to disappoint after the initial dating rituals)... In short, meet yours truly, a confirmed single girl, who hasn't been able to whip up an appetite for 'grand love' or 'eternal wedded bliss'.

Meera Bhojwani, 37, a clairvoyant who divides her time between Rishikesh and Delhi, too, was clear since her childhood that she would never get married. Watching her mother live through two abusive marriages put both Meera and her sister off marriage forever. "A paradigm shift happened in my formative years," she says. "Today, I am financially, emotionally and spiritually independent."

For Anukriti Pandey, who grew up in Bihar and now works as a writer in Bollywood, being single is a conscious choice, which means taking care of herself, her beliefs, self-respect. "There's a certain poetry in my life as a single woman- whether it is about being at peace with myself or not having any bitterness towards others. I don't depend on an external source for validation," she says.

FREEDOM TO BE

The committed singleton apart, what makes the more amatonormatively-inclined eventually give up on the idea of marriage? In the non-judgemental sorority of feminist terrace parties, often featuring young professionals in their 30s or early 40s, it is not unusual to hear why men don't quite cut it as mates/ partners/ significant others. A common refrain is: men don't know how to love them. They wonder aloud what a single life might entail- the perks and the price. And for many who still wonder if the grass is really greener on the other side, the swirl of ideas aired in these gatherings is rich material for reflection on their own choices.




More women are choosing to remain single not because they cannot find a man, but because they see themselves and their lives beyond such a relationship and marriage. More than economic independence, it is the freedom to be who you are that is the attraction of singlehood. Soma Bhowmik, for instance, chose to end her relationship with her boyfriend when she realised he wanted to control how she interacted with other men. The 40-year-old director of the ArtsAcre Museum says: "The day my boyfriend objected to my being so liberal, I knew I couldn't allow someone to dictate my behaviour."

Yet others have tried dating apps and come out underwhelmed, if not scalded. "It is full of psychotic creeps," says Kolkata-based author Sreemoyee Piu Kundu. When Chandni reinstalled two dating apps- Hinge and Bumble- after a hiatus, she found the same men she had encountered two years ago. She quickly uninstalled the apps. "I can't go through this casual dating scene," she says. Nitya Wallia, 43, a Delhi-based flight attendant with an international airline, goes on dates arranged online when she is out of the country. "In Delhi, I am sceptical," she says.

For Sonia Kapoor, singlehood came organically. The 48-year-old lawyer, who shuttles between Delhi and Guwahati, didn't start out wanting to be single. But when she was younger, she wanted to concentrate more on her career than on finding a man. And as she grew older, she began enjoying her individuality: she loved travelling solo, indulging her hobbies, hanging out with an eclectic group of friends. "All of this was very fulfilling, so there was little need for me to find a man. Later, when I did make a half-hearted effort, the men out there did a good job of putting me off the idea," she says. She tried online dating for a while but was put off when the men she met were intimidated by her success. She is now reconciled to the idea of staying single.

For these single women, the absence of a man does not mean it's the end of their lives. Her single status, for instance, did not stop Ashima Chibber, 44, director of the 2013 hit *Mere Dad Ki Maruti* and the popular web series *Ladies Room*, from going for an IVF (in-vitro fertilisation) procedure at age 40. She had a son at 43 and says the past year has been most fulfilling. "My biological clock was ticking and I could not wait forever for a man to come along. And since I always wanted to be a mother, I went ahead with the decision." She talked about the experience in a session titled 'Box of Laddoos', on *Maa Hoon Naa*, an event that celebrated single mothers in Mumbai this May.

What does the rise of the financially and emotionally independent urban Indian woman mean for the wider social and familial set-up? "I look at the rise of single




women in terms of the multiple possibilities bigger city spaces offer to migrants and citizens," says Dr Pushpesh Kumar of the University of Hyderabad. "With legal freedom to LGBTQIA+ communities, many would opt to remain single. Friendship may become an alternative to kinship." However, he also sees a class dimension. "Only if you are from a privileged or upper middle class can you speak the language of 'choice' and 'freedom' and aestheticise your existence as a distinctive lifestyle, but marriage still remains the dominant ethos for the majority even when live-in relationships and other ways of organising personal lives have become possibilities. All 'deviations' are normalised through marriage."

Marriage does remain the default setting for most women in the patriarchal Indian set-up, the ultimate safety net, after which a woman is considered to have 'settled' down. Parental pressure to get married is often driven by fear or concern about a lonely middle age and beyond. Pragya Laal, committed to the idea of being single since the age of 35, has to routinely calm her parents down. But 41 now, she has herself occasionally started worrying about what will happen to her after her father dies. "But then it is part of the package," she says.

Kolkata-based architect Runjhun Gupta, 35, says society conditions women for marriage through stories of "prince charming on a white horse" coming to rescue them from eternal singlehood. "As a kid, I bought into these expectations, roped in by these wonderful stories, also because they were related by someone who loved me dearly- my grandmother," she says. Then there is the whole wedding industrial complex that celebrates marriage as the key to happiness. Most couture fashion in India, for instance, celebrates the bridal look.

It turns out single women in Japan are having entire weddings minus the bridegroom. The thrill is in the dressing up, the photoshoot, without the hassle of an actual marriage. Back home, Kundu did something similar. She had always dreamed of a white wedding. She dressed up in a white and gold sari, her grandmother's choker around her neck. Bollywood music completed the setting. Except that the occasion was her 40th birthday, not her wedding. She was accused of overdoing it, but remained unapologetic about it. "By the time I was 35, I decided marriage wasn't for me," she says. Her 2018 book, *Status Single: The Truth about Being a Single Woman in India*, documents the experiences of 3,000 single women, including her own. Next year, Kundu will be organising the first-ever summit of single women in Bengaluru.

WOMEN, INTERRUPTED




However, despite the many positive changes, singledom is still an affliction in the eyes of many. 'There must be something wrong with her', 'She must be mentally ill' and, for the single woman past a 'certain age', 'she is ruined!'

"It is like going through different levels in a torture chamber," says architect Gupta. "People constantly ask, 'Is everything okay with her? Any medical issue? Any mental problem?'" Her parents were constantly told that they shouldn't have "overeducated" her. Gupta became the black sheep of the family and eventually her parents, embarrassed and afraid of being inundated with questions about their unmarried daughter, stopped going for family get-togethers. "My personal success in my own eyes became worthless. My relatives called me shameless for celebrating and dancing at other people's weddings and, as I crossed 30, started telling me how I was only going to end up with 'a second-hand divorcee or a widower'. As I hit 35, according to them, I had lost the chance for a husband, children and, basically, a fulfilling life, Gupta adds.

Society has failed single women, says Archana Mittal, advisor, resource mobilisation, at School of Development and Impact in Delhi. A therapist as well, Mittal talks about how single women, often termed 'witches', struggle to get housing and are subjected to abuse every step of the way. For instance, renting or buying apartments in Kolkata has been an exercise in answering intrusive questions about her personal life for Bhowmik. "People were interested to know if I was buying the flat with my own money or if I had a godfather supporting me financially. And when I was living in a rented place, I was strictly told I could not bring my parents or [male] friends over to my place. There were rules about what time I could come and go, and if I was throwing a party, friends would have to leave by a set hour. No drinking alcohol or hurly-burly," she says. Another time, when Bhowmik sought help from her local guardian and mentor in the city, he took it as an invitation to grope her. According to Mittal, the general assumption is that single women must have multiple partners or are lesbians. "Or that they are jholawala, nari morcha (feminist, activist) types. People also assume they must be lonely and lost."

Such judgement permeates workplaces as well, making professional spaces tricky to navigate for single women. According to Gupta, the immediate assumption about any woman in her workplace 'past her prime' and living on her own was 'she must be easy! Great to have a little bit of fun with'. Working late or travelling alone with men for work is not considered passion for work, but inappropriate, even promiscuous. "The shocking thing was that a lot of the judgement was coming from women, not just men," says Gupta. Fifty-year-old Priya Gandhi, a Delhi-based



fashion designer, encounters similar stigma. "Because relationships are breaking, people feel single women are a threat," she says. "I have to be careful when I approach a man at a party. It is very annoying to be seen as a woman who is looking to get your man."


ONE FOR THE SISTERHOOD

Tired of the stigma and difficulties they face, single women are coming together to form networks. Gupta is in the process of starting Rahee, a community that will function as a safe space for singles to meet and share their stories. The aim, says Gupta, is not to preach the benefits of singlehood. "All I am saying is that marriage is a beautiful partnership of equals, but it should be an option not a mandate. To get married or to remain single or divorced or be separated is a personal choice," she says.

Last September, the Majlis Legal Centre, a forum for women's rights discourse and legal initiatives, launched its Happily Unmarried project to encourage women across age groups to post personal stories of how they chose to remain single on their Facebook and Instagram accounts. Whether a story about a woman walking out of an unhappy marriage or one refusing to adhere to societally dictated timetable of when she should get married and have children, each story inspires the reader to choose their own path.

"For single women, the main issue is to be able to survive, and with dignity," says Parul Chaudhary, a social worker with the National Forum for Single Women's Rights (NFSWR), a collective of women's rights groups with 130,000 members across 12 states and one Union Territory. "Besides policy, mindsets need to be addressed. Property rights and health insurance benefits are a must," adds Mittal. Especially for single women in smaller towns and in villages, who may be financially insecure and where the stigma attached to the single status is much higher. For instance, in February 2016, a village in Gujarat banned mobile phones for single women and girls. They could use phones under supervision only if they wished to talk to their relatives. The reason offered was that girls and single women should focus on their education, not on addictive activities such as using a mobile phone.

NFSWR is urging the Centre and states to ensure a monthly pension of Rs 3,000 for women whose incomes are below the tax threshold and who don't receive pension from any other source. In 2009, the forum fought for the disaggregation of 'divorced' and 'separated' women in the census- a change that was reflected in the 2011 census.



The government's draft national policy on women last May recognised single women as an independent entity for the first time. It talked of creating a "comprehensive social protection mechanism" to address issues of social isolation and difficulties in accessing ordinary services.

The most radical change for single women, however, came in 2017 when the government decided to facilitate adoption by single women. A committee set up under the Union ministry of women and child development (WCD) decided to give financially stable single women above the age of 40 years a date seniority of six months when they registered for adoption. Data from the Indian Association for Promotion of Adoption and Child Welfare shows that the number of single women who are adopting has grown steadily after these measures. In July 2015, the Supreme Court said it was not mandatory for a single woman to mention the name of the father of her child while applying for a birth certificate; an affidavit would be enough.

Such measures help enormously, yet, the challenges and the stigma that comes with a controversial choice remain. But it is not stopping a few brave women from prioritising their happiness over a life bound by rules set by a society refusing to move fast enough. So, ready or not, the Age of the Single Woman is here!

- with Romita Datta

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