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*Marital conflict, uncertainty and ordinary ethics:
Forms of life and care in a Delhi slum neighbourhood*

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Marital conflict, uncertainty and ordinary ethics:

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Abstract

Marriage, into the contemporary times, has come to be understood as an icon of the archaic and the ordinary. In critical scholarship, it is never enviable, but when seen as inevitable, it is pictured as an unacceptable host of dark and violent domesticities that must be purged as we deepen our relation into the modern through radically reimagined forms of intimacies. In this inevitability, however, marriage exists and it is in this plane of existence and its ordinariness that my work in general and this essay in particular belong. The trail of enquiry, however, does not eschew the diagnosis of marriage as host to constitutive violence rather, it looks at the embedded expressions of modes of violence and crisis in ways in which they shape a particular form of marriage. Continuing in this double vein of what is both existentially difficult and mundane, we sense that notwithstanding marriage's ordinariness, like other ordinaries and imaginaries of social institutions as forms of life, this plane of existence also has a complex affirmation; an affirmation that I consider to be tied to the moral doing of nibhana. That nibhana as an imperative, both at the level of the normative and of the self, is heavily sided towards abiding and keeping of marriage brings us to confront the question; what might nibhana look like at the face of marital violence, strife and separation? In building a response to this question through an ethnographic conversation with my decade old field interlocutors from a Muslim neighbourhood of an urban slum in South Delhi, I arrive at the formulation that it is in fact nibhana that in turn makes and remakes room for care and self preservation, even at the cost of staking the marriage. This care, I show, borrowing from the writings of Veena Das and Sandra Laugier, does not necessarily abstain from the courtly and stately solutions but nevertheless inordinately relies on how kin and family come to intuitively inhabit and conceptualize the sufferings of the affected relative, friend or neighbour. It is through this conceptualization and acknowledgement that an affirmative ground – of moral becoming and remaking of the social – emerges in the marital lives of my interlocutors that is stricken with crises and loss.

Keywords: Domestic violence, separation, bereavement, matrimonial alliance, remarriage, narratives, Muslim, mothers, kinship

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This essay is my new initiative in more than a decade long engagement in studying marriage amongst urban poor in a Hindu-Muslim neighbourhood of south Delhi.¹ In this longitudinal study of marriage, I have particularly been interested in locating the living history of the verb ‘nibhana’ (Bapna 2012, 2016). The newness of the initiative is in elucidating practices of conflict, suffering and peril within the doing of marriage as nibhana. I take nibhana as a named assemblage for what in contemporary anthropology and philosophy is proposed as ordinary ethics.² That a simple phrase like ordinary ethics hides such complex terrains also enables us to see the hidden potentials in the out-in-the-open simple verb: *living*. Nibhana as a verb is interpreted in the field by the unmarried and the married alike within an imaginary of resignation. It construes marital living with the weary acknowledgement that not only must one do the social but one must also participate in its deep moral *actualization*. No wonder then, the conceptualization of nibhana that emerges in my work from the field carries an ironic double adage of resignation (given that marriage is seen as a heavy orbit of life) and self-avowed moral imperative of participation (Bapna 2016). With this ironic background that may very well be the uneven ground of the social it does not come as a surprise that violence and suffering, as do love and grace, provide texture to this fabric. The question is how do we begin to apprehend this togetherness of violence, love, suffering and grace? My long association with the field that allowed me to participate in this learning also required that I train myself to hear the unfolding voices of not just my interlocutors and their sufferings but also that of embedded violence. The difficulty in apprehending marital violence and suffering within nibhana, in order to narrativize it, is not, it seems to me, that I could not separate one act (of violence) from another (of love) but the fact is that I kept hoping long into fieldwork that there must be a healing equivalent available in the ordinary social to the violent and the perilous. It turns out that suffering and healing are complicit in the ordinary. The remains of violence and peril have very few antidotes and they must be carried as personal cosmic weight. But then I also gradually discovered that this weight is shared with others in kinship as some of it becomes partible³ with kin and in language. It is to this scene that this essay is committed in description,

¹The present work is part of a broad attempt to locate crises within marriage. Although a work of this kind speaks of culture and shared socialities in a general way, the essay should be read within the social limits of the Muslim families described here. Further, crises has a certain kind of specificity and this comes across in respondents accounts presented here. The respondents in fact feel they are unique in their suffering. Given this allusion, I want to further qualify that this account is not representative of heterogenous Muslim socialities at large within North India.

²There has been a lively debate in anthropology on how might one begin to think of the place of the ethical in human life. In one genealogy the ethical is often imagined at a distance from the ordinary, routine and quotidian life. We find here an image of certain breakdown of ethical moments or magnified moments of ethical dilemmas (Faubion 2011). It is precisely against such an image of the ethical that a set of anthropologists have put forth the notion of what they call as ‘ordinary ethics’ (Lambek 2010; Das 2012; Laugier 2016). Far from seeing the ethical as a separate domain of life in the pursuit of good and the virtuous as is the case within the realm of moral reasoning, ethics here is seen as embedded and woven in everyday ordinary actions. Such a conception of ordinary ethics takes us to the crossroads of morality, normativity, ethicality, vulnerability and practices of return into the lived textures of wear-and-tear of self and the world.

³ I borrow the term ‘partible’ from the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern’s conception of the partible person by which she implies a conception of personhood that is not bounded and fixed but is constituted in relation to other persons and is thus

thought and analysis. Lest all this be taken as a scene of a forsaken rudiment of the pre-modern that awaits social movements, courts, rights and empowerment, I must hastily add that the scene presented here is of the contemporary. I have seen with the help of my field encounters that living in the contemporary is suffused with all the promises of the modern but is also laden with the revelation that justice, equality, empowerment have their ordinariness too. Let us then return to the scenes but before that let us familiarize ourselves with the setting of the accounts.

The migrant community and its social habitat

My field site, a small Hindu-Muslim urban neighbourhood, is nestled within the interstitial spaces of a large government residential colony in South Delhi. In its administrative nomenclature the settlement is a single entity that shares a common proper name. On the ground, the proper name unites two small settlements that are organized on the lines of religious affiliation.⁴ The ethnographic descriptions in this essay are primarily drawn from a community of fisher-folks (*machere*) who belong to the Muslim settlement. The Muslim habitation has a population of approximately 280 people from 45 households. The people have been living here since the early nineteen eighties. The neighbourhood is densely populated; most of its inhabitants are first or second generation migrants, principally from the town of Meerut, Uttar Pradesh. A large majority, about two-thirds of the populace, belong to the caste group (*biradari*) of *machere* whose occupation is butchering and selling fish and meat. The work is referred by the occupants as *murge ka kaam* (chicken-work) with chicken as the most acceptable face and name of meat in the city. *Murge ka kaam* includes several forms of work, such as transporting chicken and other kinds of meat from the wholesale market (meat *mandi*), working as helpers, disposing animal remains, peeling feathers and chicken wings for small pieces of flesh, besides the work of butchering and selling the produce.⁵ The work of peeling the flesh from the

permeable, fluid and connected. Thus the self of the person is a composite self that is relationally linked to others in different degrees and intensities. See Marilyn Strathern (1988)..

⁴ One settlement, my field for this essay, primarily consists of low caste Muslim migrants (*Machere*) from Meerut, Uttar Pradesh who occupationally rely on work associated with processing and selling of meat and fish. The adjacent Hindu settlement, is a multi-caste settlement comprising of migrants from the mixed North Indian states of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. It has a few non-*machere* Muslim households as well. The settlement takes its name after a well known people's leader of the 1970's.

⁵ I translate *murge ka kaam* as chicken-work with some risk of the possibility of confusion with 'chikan work', which in North India is a very well known form of thread embroidery. The motif of the vulnerable bird, lined-up, cooped-in, fed to feed, enlivens in an ironical sort of way the occupational universe of meat-work in the neighbourhood. Meat vending in the neighbourhood is equally 'cooped in', with regular police raids during which the vendors indeed (quite like the chicken) run helter-skelter and then tiptoe back to the business of vending. The repeated demolition of the meat and poultry markets has been tied to several contingencies, ranging from bird hit incidents - at the nearby International airport due to improper dumping of animal and poultry waste which attracts birds in the area - to illegal slaughtering. In practice the shifting of the abattoirs from the city centre to the far off Ghazipur at the city outskirts has had few takers. Small time vending economies sit uneasy with the procuring of the meat from Ghazipur and continue with the practice of slaughtering within the neighbourhood. Notwithstanding the intermittent ban on the sale of meat products that push many residents to take up informal-casual paid work on a daily basis, this occupation remains the prime signifier of their habitation.

feathers of the already worked upon animal, the butchered chicken (*kata hua murga*), locally referred to as *baazu cheelna*⁶ is exclusively undertaken by women and young girls. Thus while as a community, women do not go out to work, they are firmly embedded within the occupational economies of their husbands and male children's work. One of the older women, fondly called Badi Amma, who lives in the neighbourhood with several of her children and grandchildren said to me:

In our community, women do not work; it is seen as highly objectionable. Why would you shamelessly send your 'mothers and sisters' to work outside? There are some who do venture out to work. But, if you must work, work from home. Whatever little you must earn, earn from working at home.

Besides chicken-work that constitutes the occupational livelihood of about two-third of the residents, there is also a lane taken up by first generation migrant Muslims from Mathura who deal in scrap. The scrap-dealers (*kabadis*) identify themselves as Alwi Sayyad and differentiate and distance themselves from the supposedly homogenous, meat-selling migrant Muslims from Meerut as cleaner, vegetarian, and importantly as upper caste Syeds. The Meerut residents are related to each other through actual and classificatory kinship ties and that is how they come to be typified as a collective. There is cultural homogeneity within the collective in terms of language, regional kinship ties, gender roles as well as everyday practices. Most residents have their own dwellings in Meerut and movement is frequent between Delhi and Meerut. Folks are always going there—for the weekend, for celebrating Eid, for the famous Nauchandni mela⁷, after a spousal fight, after a kin's illness or death, when relatives are getting married, for medical treatment or operations, or, at times just for a 'change of air'. In terms of marriage practices, siblings are often married off together to save on expenses. It is equally common to perform an engagement known as *roka* for young girls whose match (*rishta*) is agreed upon by the elders and subsequently the pair are, in ideal circumstances, married in the next three to five years. As we shall see this aspect of elders formalizing alliances in anticipation of their children growing up to actualizing the pre-set marriages inaugurates and structures a whole range of desires and recriminations. In terms of residents' engagement with education, well, no one from the neighbourhood has a job on the basis of their educational qualification. Jobs are by default available on traditional occupational practices. It is of little surprise then that most members do not want to participate in the 'rigors' of schools and do not invest in the hope of an infinitely deferred job

⁶ The word *baazu* in the phrase '*baazu cheelna*' may refer to the arm, shoulder, side or the wing of the slaughtered chicken while the activity of *cheelna* may be translated as to skin, to peel or to shave.

⁷ The Nauchandi mela is an annual fair held in the city of Meerut in the month of March. It originally started off as a cattle fair in its over four hundred years of existence. Overtime, it has transformed itself into an important annual festival where different communities from the state of Uttar Pradesh showcase their art and artefacts. The mela is marked as an important recreational calendar event for the young boys and girls from the neighbourhood.

prospect. Instead, almost everyone concedes to the importance of the Madarsa's values and children are sent there to learn how to read and recite verses of the holy Quran.

With this brief background of the habitants let me present to you two cases of marital turmoil and disquiet from this small Muslim neighbourhood. The first case study attempts to fragmentarily chronicle the life of Kareema Baaji (Daughter of Badi Amma) who is twice separated. In the second case study, I revisit the life of Ameena, who was one of my central respondents from the earlier round of fieldwork in 2008-10. I rewrite her life history in light of the new situations that have evolved and emerged over the past decade. Through both these accounts, I arrive at an ethnography of nibhana where nibhana alters from within to preserve the participant in the face of marital strife. Reimagining both the self and the relationship, here nibhana turns from a moral ideal of keeping marriage at any cost to ways which allow the self to reassemble its wherewithal amongst kin and language.

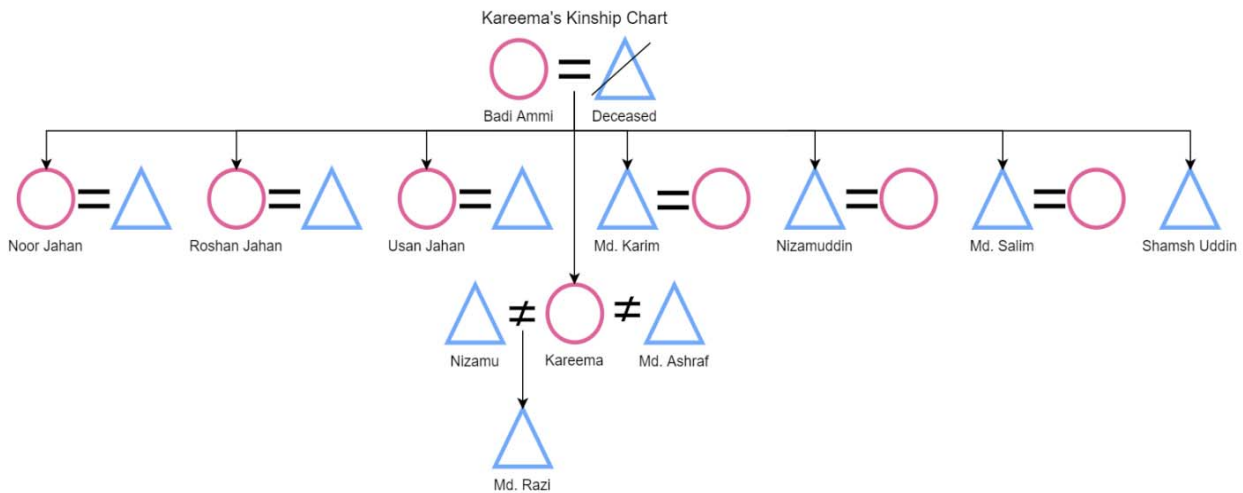
Kareema

Kareema baaji (Kareema, from here on) is the youngest daughter of Badi Amma (BA). BA herself lives with her sons, married daughters and several grandchildren in the same neighbourhood. All of BA's children are married with the exception of the youngest son Shamsuddin and the youngest daughter Kareema. Kareema's marriages, as we shall see, ended in painful separations. Kareema's first marriage lasted thirteen months while the second one about eighteen months. When she first married at the age of twenty, she was already engaged to her mother's distant brother's elder son (MBeS) Md. Ismail in Meerut. But as things unfolded she married not the elder son to whom she was initially engaged but his younger brother Nizamu. Nizamu too, at the time of their fateful union was engaged to his mother's sister's daughter (MZD) before he married Kareema. Kareema's older sister Usan Jahan described to me the events leading up to her marriage to Nizamu:

Nizamu! Well, he was already engaged to his mother's sister's daughter. He broke that engagement. Around the same time we were taking forward the pre-set match between Kareema and Nizamu's elder brother. However, Nizamu and Kareema, wonder what happened between the two of them, started talking to each other. She left the elder brother and started going with Nizamu. If you keep that relation in mind, as we all did, Nizamu was going to be Kareema's younger brother-in-law. Well, as they say, there is no telling how human minds change in no time when it comes to such matters. They started chatting secretly. The meetings and the conversations would go for hours at end. We never got to know how it all bloomed so intensely between the two of them. She then broke the alliance with the elder brother. Soon after, Nizamu got himself engaged to Kareema. Nizamu's whole family was against the new alliance vis-à-vis us. They were of the view that she has spurned the older boy and now she cannot be welcomed in the same house. Later the families, sort of, reconciled. Following this the two of

them got married with much love. God alone knows in his infinite wisdom what was on their minds to do such a thing.

The ominous turns of love and marriage seen from the position of the young couple Kareema and Nizamu could be visualized as a dramatic victory over the set dice of their fates sealed by respective parents with their *roka* (*roka*, literally means, to stop, to station) or word of engagement. There is more to ominousness, however, when a deep past of family promises and an anticipation of familial consummation squarely linked to the marriage of children are turned topsy-turvy. This social drama must have been difficult on everyone, even the love-victors.⁸



It turns out that the self chosen marriage of Kareema and Nizamu barely survived the first year. Kareema's family claim that her in-laws made sure that the newly weds' union did not last. They incited and goaded their son against Kareema and little over a year into the marriage Nizamu left Kareema. When the marriage broke Kareema was six months pregnant. She moved to her mother's house with the child in her womb and a written separation was worked out in the presence of the community elders (*panchayat*) in Meerut. A few days after he left Kareema, Nizamu married his mother's sister's daughter (to whom he was first engaged and, who was unwed till then). Meanwhile, Kareema gave birth to a boy, Md. Razis. Md. Razi was later adopted by Kareema's sister-in-law who

⁸ Cousin marriage in the context of Muslim kinship where cousins are frequently promised to each other by their parents inaugurates both a certain anticipation of love and desire as well as the possibility of betrayal, hurt and recrimination when the pre-set matches are spurned by either of the parties involved and are not realised for a variety of social contingencies (See Das 1973).

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had remained childless after eight pregnancies that had not materialized into living births. Speaking of her ex-husband and the relation Kareema woefully surmised:

I don't know what got into his head. Anyway, he left me. May be he was still hooked to his earlier match, his mother's sister's daughter. Eventually, he eloped with her.

Five years after her separation from her first husband, Kareema married for a second time. This time the match was from outside the kinship network. The family lived in Jama Masjid, Delhi and her husband Md. Ashraf owned a parking lot in the area. A few months into her second marriage though, Kareema's troubles started. She was subjected to physical beatings on a daily basis. Ashraf would drink and beat her blue. For months Kareema endured this humiliation before she sought an exit and refuge. When things became unbearable one last time, she found an opportune moment to run away from her husband's house and returned to her mother's at the neighbourhood described above. Speaking of her second marriage, one of Kareema's close neighbour told me:

He was into drinking. He used to hit her very badly. She did not disclose it to the family initially. Then when she could not tolerate anymore, when it had crossed all limits, is when she finally decided that it was completely worthless to stay on. She told them. Now it is okay, it is better. She is on her own. Thank God! She is in her own house.

This time around Kareema and her family decided that she could no longer keep the marriage. The settlement was long drawn and once again it happened amidst the community elders in Meerut. As Badi Amma explained to me the settlement was not favourable to them. The boy's side took the line 'I am not leaving her and she is the one who is leaving the marriage'.⁹ She rued how she had married Kareema the second time with due gifts during the rituals and provided an accounting of the lost and retrieved for the second time.

Ask me how I married her! With such fanfare: gold and silver, food and delicacies, tent and show. O, I married her with great joy. I did not even take her dowry back from them. They ruined me. I had given a double bed, an almirah, a washing machine and what not for the dowry. Everything! But they broke my heart. I did not go to police, I did not report to any authority, Geetika. There were so many other small things I gifted her at the time of her wedding. They kept everything and did not return a single thing. The community too did not rule in our favour. I had to rescue my daughter from that house so I bore with everything. It wasn't as if he (the

⁹ A wife-initiated divorce or *khul* is an extra judicial option for separation available to Muslim women. It involves arriving at a written agreement through mutual negotiation between the spouses in the presence of an appropriate witness. A *khul* divorce also frees the husband from the obligation to pay *mehr* as well as other allowances during the *iddat* (See Vatuk 2017).

Geetika Bapna

boy) was mentally ill, he was just capricious. I appealed to his family that if you are not going to do justice to us, I am going to leave it to your conscience and time will bring it upon you someday.

In both the marriages, the girl's side did not register any police complaint and did not want to take the matter to the court. As Kareema explained her family's decision she said:

If you wish to take it to the police and to the court, well, you must have the money for it. Then you must have your own people, your natal family folks to run around and support. I said, chuck the whole damn thing. There was no point thanklessly wandering around the police station and the court.

I had left the first one, the same way. Told him to get lost!

And, I said the same thing to this one, the second one. Go, get lost!

(Pehle wale ko bhi maine aise hi chod diya tha, dafa ho! Isko bhi maine kaha, dafa ho!)

From Kareema's use of the imperatives in describing the separations it seems as if she heroically expunged the husbands out of her life. The truth is that in both cases she was at the receiving end for making such a choice. Yet, this use of the imperatives does tell us something. We gather that she uses the imperatives to self-exorcise and efface them out of herself. 'Dafa ho jaa' is a common Urdu phrase of everyday usage in the neighbourhood. It carries a strong sense of disapproval on the speaker's part and mostly means 'get out of my sight!'. In Kareema's usage it acquires a subtle tone of wishing such an absence for her ex-husbands, but not just asking them to move out of her sight; rather seeking an absence that is brought by their deaths. Marriage's relation with death is multiple and integral to its ordinariness, what we have here is perhaps the following question: what is more damaging? Is it the betrayal and physical violence or this thymotic death wish that emerges out of the ordinary? It may seem that in this mutual recrimination we may have found a symmetry of negative reciprocity in love and violence but it is precisely in an asymmetry of physical and spiritual damage that Kareema's existence is predicated.

It has been eight years since Kareema's second separation. Since then she has been living with her mother and youngest brother in the neighbourhood. She has had proposals coming her way but they have all been from unmarried men. Badi Amma and her older sister Usan Jahan rued 'we will marry her but not to an unmarried man (*kuanra*). But it seems to be etched in her fortune to get matches from unmarried men only. Three offers of marriage came her way and they all were from unmarried men.'

Reflecting on her own and her sister Kareema's marriage Usan Jahan told me once:

It is kismet that such perils fall on people. My child's father may not earn much but he has never hit me. I move around, here and there, he never raises any objection. If Kareema's husband were to be only into drinking we wouldn't have gone so far as separation. The one who has to drink is going to drink. We would have consoled ourselves that she had such a man in her fortune. What affected us all was that he, the second husband, used to hit her very badly. How would she have lived with such daily beatings? It was his daily practice to shove her, harass her and hit her. After bearing all that beating she (Kareema) has become mentally sensitive.

We arrive at this poignant statement of Kareema's suffering in the words of her sister. While Kareema herself speaks in a language of lament, we notice that her neighbour, her mother, her sister put together a narrative portraiture of her situation and self that differs in its imaginative scope from her own characterization. They are pitching to accommodate viability for her. That life at this juncture, after two snapped marriages, can be re-imagined and it can be conceptualized as viable either in Kareema staying at her natal house or remarrying a formerly married man (a moral investment into an imaginary of matching two suffering souls). One can begin to think of this kind of almost unnoticeable caring allusion as the affirmative ground that also defines the ordinary of kinship apart from the entanglements of *jubaan-jori* (violent speech) and bad blood that might animate and calcify the same relations on another occasion. Indeed, just as Veena Das in her decades long work has emphasized upon the spectral and practical possibilities of harm and repair within the moulds of family and kinship — I think we have an instance in the case of Kareema — Sandra Laugier (2016) emphasizes the ambit of what constitutes care in the ordinary. In her essay 'Care, the Ordinary, Forms of Life', she writes: 'Measuring the *importance* of care for human life means recognizing the possibility of a subjectivity defined not by agency or self-assertion or autonomy, but by dependence and vulnerability as ordinary (emphasis in original) (2016: p.111).

Let us now turn to my second case study to see further in the vein of Das and Laugier, how the ordinary and care come to vivify into forms, that borrowing from Ludwig Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell, they call as forms of life. Das in her earliest articulation of affinities between Wittgensteinian philosophy and anthropology clarifies with the help of Stanley Cavell that 'form of life' has to be seen as *life* becoming forms and not the other way round, where we may imagine form to be an institutionalized convention of life. Further she draws from Cavell to highlight that this form of life is not just ensnared into a social and a cultural matrix but a natural one too, that encompasses and makes present the biological sense of existence (Das 1998: 180). This expansive realm of the natural

and biological that has perennially emerged in Das's work as the realm of natural kinship, is this zone, where she sees the possibilities of everyday conceptualizations and practices of care among kin (See Das 1976). Thus we move from Kareema Baji to Ameena to find further expression to how violence saturates everyday domestic life and how it is received, spoken about and addressed. We must remember that the very voicing of violence and peril in itself cannot be taken for granted. In the same essay 'Wittgenstein and Anthropology' Das posits that in several accounts from her fieldwork everyday domestic violence would often get articulated as 'past continuous' while the debilitating shock of partition violence made that voice frozen in the women who had suffered (1998: 181). In her subsequent works, Das has nuanced the hardline between saying and freezing of voice but what remains constant is the question of how care gains life and form in the subject's relation with speech and language.

Ameena is one of my central interlocutor from the earlier round of fieldwork in 2008-10. I revisited her after a decade and I could gauge the monumental changes in her life within the first few minutes of our conversation. Can the researcher be such a confidante? Perhaps, yes. Based on this longitudinal familiarity, I am going to provide two portraits of Ameena. One, tied with details of our encounter in the years 2008-10 (See Bapna 2016) and second as I encounter her life in the present (2019-20).

Ameena I (2008-10)

Though married for the last fifteen years, Ameena hardly ever lived with her in laws or at the affinal house. Being the eldest daughter of her parents, she continued to live with her parents after marriage, sharing residence in the same neighbourhood while establishing her own household with kitchen. This aspect of a compulsory and contingent residence with her natal kin (Ameena's three brothers with their spouses and children live in the same neighbourhood) has been a marked feature of her life after marriage. Contravening the norms of patrilineal descent, her continued residence with the natal kin becomes more intelligible when juxtaposed with the circumstances of her marriage. I learnt, not from Ameena, but from others in the neighbourhood, more specifically her mother's younger sister, that she had run away with a boy from the neighbourhood in her younger days, much to the shame and humiliation of her parents. This was reiterated to me by several of Ameena's nieces. When the alliance did not work, she returned to her parents' house after a few days. Later, another match was found and she married the man who is her present husband. A mother to four children now, two sons and two daughters, the eldest daughter Shagufta was witness to the troubled early years of Ameena's marriage when her husband Khaleel left her. The newly weds had found it difficult to adapt to their new conjugal situation in view of Ameena's previous liaison. It was only when Shagufta was a few

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years old that Khaleel returned to Ameena and many of her kin were involved in the reconciliation. Shagufta recollected the time when her father was not around:

Mummy brought me up. We used to live in our maternal grandparents' house. Mummy sold oil to make a living. But she ensured that I lacked nothing, and no one could say that I had no father. She loved me more than a father, she looked after me more than a father.

It was Shagufta who revealed to me that her parents' marriage was an inter-caste one; her father being a Pathan while her mother's *biradari* was that of machere. The alliance was never accepted by Ameena's in-laws, which is why she continued to stay near her parents. She often blamed the lack of support from in-laws as the reason for their present fate, living in a dilapidated *jhuggi* (shanty) without a piece of land of their own. This agony of unsettled habitation was repeated time and again by both Ameena and her teenage daughter Shagufta.

The early years of her marriage was also when Ameena was subjected to the harsh temper and physical beatings of her husband, a fact that Shagufta now holds as being responsible for her failing eyesight. She explained to me that during the initial months of marriage with Khaleel, her mother took several pills to kill herself, unaware that she was pregnant. This affected Shagufta's eyesight and gave her a blurred vision. However, according to Shagufta, with the passage of time things changed between the husband and wife. Ameena in time acquired what she viewed as a necessary attribute of living, a certain street smartness. While speaking of her husband and his work (*hotel ka kaam*) Ameena's persistent complaint was what she called his simple mindedness. She rued:

This much simplicity is of no use. Because there is no cleverness in my man, the world beats him from all sides. The lightweight [person] is squeezed by his own family and squeezed by his in-laws. Everyone tramples [such a person]. It is all because of the man being such a simpleton... What to do, one is helpless.

Even as she lives with her natal kin, Ameena's relations with her mother remain equally strained and there were frequent squabbles between them. Ameena's complaint was that unlike her other sisters she did not receive matrimonial presents and gifts from her mother. The reason for being denied the dowry gifts were the obvious circumstances of Ameena's marriage. While Ameena's mother on several occasions reiterated her impartiality in giving gifts to all her children, Ameena continued to attribute this incomplete ritual performative on the part of her mother as responsible for her present circumstances. In her narratives the mother became the quotidian site of all resentments, as it were, and her numerous trips to the shrine of Ajmer Sharif to avert specific crises of habitation and of children signified religious efforts to set her familial life in order (Bapna: 2012).

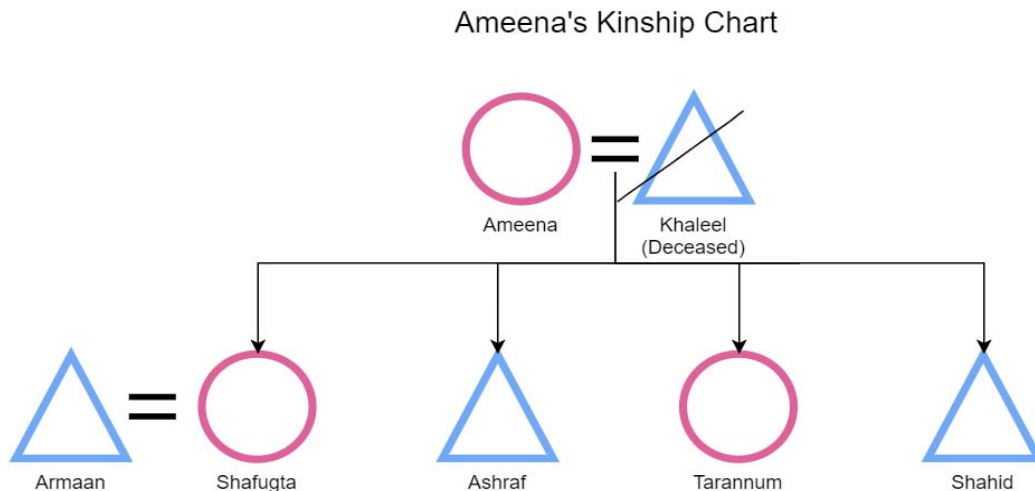
Ameena II (2019)

Let me now move to the year 2019. When I encountered Ameena again in the winter of 2019, almost a decade after my initial meetings with her, much had changed in her life. She had lost three of her closest kin. The year was 2014. First she lost her father, eight months later her mother and three months after that she lost her husband Khaleel. As I extended my heartfelt condolences to her, she choked, tears rolling down her cheeks. As she gathered herself, her first words were 'It is okay, we are killing time, that's all' (*Thee khai, bas time pass kar rahe hain*). Speaking of the vacuum, Ameena said that within a span of two three months from each other Allah took all three.

Papa died, mummy died, then her (pointing to Shagufta) father died. One shock after the other kept coming our way. Now, the harm and the hurt is what remain with me.

Her father died, zip-zap, in three days. Got sick on Sunday, was admitted in Safdarjung Hospital on Monday and died on Tuesday.

Ameena was still in disbelief about the death of her husband. With Khaleel gone, life became more



troubled and she was enmeshed into an admixture of helplessness, responsibility and a grim hope for what the future may hold for her and her four children. After the death of the father, the older son Ashraf (19 years) fell into bad company and started doing drugs (smoking ganja). He would be away from home for two-three months at a stretch, compounding the difficulties for Ameena and the siblings. Ameena felt pulled down with the way her son was turning, instead of being her support and aid, he was surrendering his life to substance abuse. After much cajoling she enlisted him at a de-addiction centre located in the far flung eastern limits of the city in Anand Vihar. She would make day trips along with Ashraf to Anand Vihar making a pretext of her own illness (knee pain) to prevent the neighbours from gossip mongering:

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He gives me a lot of pain. He would be missing for months at a stretch, sometimes for three months at a stretch. (Shagufta added): Ever since papa died, he has made us miserable.

The addiction made Ashraf irregular with his work and he stopped contributing to the household expenses even on days he earned a wage. The whole night we would be tense and stricken. He (Ashraf) won't stay in the house. How to run the house? He won't do a thing. He made a few earnest attempts but failed to cope without the dose and soon returned to the old ways. Ameena too failed to persuade him to stop. Of the other three children, Tarannum, bright and diligent, is now in Class X at Sarvodaya Vidyalaya. She is in fact the only one in the entire neighbourhood who has managed to reach class Xth without failing and the eventual fateful dropping out. The youngest, Shahid lives and studies at a Madarsa nearby. Ameena literally wanted to evacuate her youngest child from the mahoul (cultural air) of the basti with its bad influences and enrolled him at the Madarsa. She visits him once a week and he comes home every weekend. The oldest child Shagufta, who has been a witness to the movements in her parents' biographies has had her own share of misfortunes and heartaches.

While her father was still alive Shagufta was engaged to a young man. However, just before her father died, Shagufta fell seriously ill. Already stricken with a poor eyesight, this time she got a severe infection in her kidneys and was on ventilator in the ICU for over a month, first at Safdarjung hospital and then at Sir Ganga Ram hospital before she recovered with grace and providence. But the boy's side had already decided that they did not want to go ahead with the relation. They suspected that the girl had poisoned herself. She emerged from the ICU with a frail health and a broken heart. The parents had to sell a piece of land to cover part of the expenses for her treatment. A couple of years after the death of the father Shagufta was engaged to a boy named Armaan in village Sardana near Meerut. The boy was poor but the mother and daughter vouched for his good character.

Yes, her husband does not have any failings. He is not fair and not good-looking but is good at heart. He belongs to a poor family but the real thing is that Shagufta will be able to abide (nibhai) with him. Suddenly remembering Khaleel, Ameena added: It is because of his papa's good nature that four years have passed since his death and I have not been able to forget him. Whenever someone is talking to me it feels as if he is standing right there. Good natured match is all you need. At another time Shagufta describing her future home said:

Where my match is fixed, they do not even have a proper house. It is a mud house, they are poor; that's how things are. The only grace is that the boy does not have any bad habits. Doesn't smoke, doesn't drink, nothing of the sort. In our set-up if we get this much, it is more than enough. In our community, most men are into drinking. And once you are married to them, your life is ruined. That's how it works.

It was during one such afternoon spent with Shagufta that she also spoke in greater detail about her papa's illness. I learnt that Khaleel's kidneys were not functioning well and the family accidentally discovered this when they took him to a doctor to treat his excessively swollen feet. This medical condition of dysfunctional kidneys was diagnosed just a year before he died. After the death of Ameena's mother, his condition deteriorated further; he was unable to continue working, became more home ridden but nevertheless kept his spirits up. Shagufta remembered his words 'He could not make it to work for a whole year but still used to say that we all must not worry. That he will recover soon and get hold of a job'. Just before his death his condition witnessed a steep decline and he passed away on the third day after being hospitalized at Safdarjung. He was then brought to Meerut for the funerary rituals. Shagufta explained to me:

Then we took him to Meerut. Here we would have had to buy the grave; in Meerut we have ancestral graves. It is easier and simpler there.

The time of ritual mourning for Ameena (that involved four months of confinement indoors) was a particularly tough one. On the one hand she was grieving for her dead husband in Meerut, on the other hand Ashraf who had taken to addiction, was not providing for his siblings who often had nothing to eat for days and survived on the goodwill and kindness of neighbours. When Shagufta shared with her mother their situation back in the neighbourhood, Ameena broke down and was forced to return from Meerut halfway through the mourning period.

In November 2019 Ameena raised the issue of Shagufta's impending marriage with the boy's family and eventually got them to agree to a date. Shagufta married Armaan the same month after being engaged for two years and she has now moved to Sardana, near Meerut. Ameena somehow managed to marry off Shagufta without any contribution from Ashraf, right from arranging the dowry, ritual gifts, printing the wedding card, making arrangements for the *haldi* and *mehndi* and the wedding feast. She told me she gave her everything other than a washing machine and fridge.

She was fortunate that she got it all. God made it right, I was so anxious that I am alone, how would things happen, what to do? There were 300 guests from the boy's family and 200 from here. There were 500 people to be hosted. But God saved our honour. The food did not fall short. Even I did not expect it to go so well. Thanks to God, it all went well indeed. I was very tense.

With Shagufta gone, Ameena and Tarannum are the only ones left. Ashraf barely stays at home and Shahid spends the week at the school. Let me end these partial scenes from Ameena's life with a last

vignette. I was chatting with Tarannum one afternoon and waiting for Ameena's return who had gone out for some work. When she returned Ameena greeted me and sat down. We chatted briefly. Ameena's gaze was shifting, gesturing that she was in a rush. As I rose to leave, she said:

Shahid, he waits for me, does not eat without me. He gets food over there but he doesn't eat. He would be sitting there, waiting for me that Ammi will come. Namaz is over, now he must be waiting. If I don't go then he sits and cries. His lament is that Papa is not there and the brother doesn't care. So, on this day, each Friday, wherever I am whatever work I have, I make sure to visit him. I manage to cook well on this day.

Conclusion

In many ways the accounts mentioned above can qualify for typical scenes of marital and domestic violence (See Malvika Karlekar 1998). Further on, it is these lamentable scenes that typically also have been the backdrop in feminist critiques to signify marriage as institutionally structuring violence against women (See Gayle Rubin 1975). That the marital practice is violently gendered is the biggest gain of feminist enquiry, which in many ways has become common place. What explains the violence is that the structuration¹⁰ could be because of its heterosexual make up, or it could be because of the sacramental nature of the sexual union in marriage or it could be because of the internal complexity of sexuality, motherhood and intricate codes of tradition and familial existence. All these three facets are undergirded by the sociological fact that women bear the burden of these structurations entirely or in any case proportionately more than men. It is in this sense when both of these critical pictures are merged, that of marriage as a host of gendered violence and an overwhelming sphere of dutiful, impossible responsibilities, that the declaration of 'death of marriage' becomes a social horizon. This horizon declares death of marriage as a universalistic and singular form of legitimate sexual union and poses other competing forms as the future of companionship (See Borneman 1996; Stacey 2011). One of the ways in which my present paper enters this discussion is with the guarded assertion that what seems to have become step one, two, three, from domestic violence to death of marriage, is actually to be dealt with one step at a time gradually. From a moral anthropological perspective it seems that marital peril is by no means deductible to 'death of marriage' as a moral form to think of life as actualized and as an imaginary. However, the suffering produced in marriage is also not deflected and made invisible. My larger point is that marriage is tied to an ethics of *doing* that respondents call as nibhana. My work brings up a strong association of marriage as life and the

¹⁰ The theory of structuration, put forth by the sociologist Anthony Giddens is an attempt to overcome the duality of structure vs agents in understanding human social experience. It rather sees them as intertwined and provides equal analytical weight to both of these processes without privileging one over the other. See Anthony Giddens (1984).

evocation that this life is of nibhana, which I have marked as a name for ordinary ethics for its everyday sprawl and openness to future as contingency. To be clear, when I use marriage as life, I use it in the spirit of Stanley Cavell's strain on *life* in the Wittgensteinian idea of form of life (Cited in Das 1998; Laugier 2016). Cavell says that life acquires a certain dimension of form through living. I posit marriage as this taking form (as a verb), a becoming that is accessible to the practitioners and the ethnographer over shared matrices of language, biography and nibhana.¹¹ With this spirit of summary recollection of the essay let me offer a reading of the lives I have highlighted above. Since marriage is life, when a particular marriage loses its vital promise and reaches unviability because of its own internal precedences nibhana outstretches its learning to recognize life outside that particular marriage. In other words, nibhana enacts an internal moral shift inherent in the adage that I received from the field that marriage is life, it downplays marriage and harps at vital signs of life for the time being. Crucial here is to acknowledge that a return to marriage and family is how the restorative is envisaged. Or, in case of Ameena, it is the world of mother and children's relatedness of care that becomes the restorative canvas of life.

Second, it can be argued that sociologies of marital peril would depend on the socialities through which these perils are articulated. For example, a law court proceeding for divorce and separation may create its own activation of wounds and re-presencing of violence. Similarly, in case of Kareema we see the two sides of the conjoined intervention: on one side she suffered the physical violence for far too long and on the other side it created this unambiguous urgency that her mother posits of 'extracting' her daughter from her marital family. But it is in Kareema's words that we find the most poignant articulation of distancing and separation. It is when she says, 'I had left the first one, told him to get lost! And, I said the same thing to the second one. Just get lost!' (*Pehle wala maine aise hi chod diya tha, dafa ho! Isko bhi maine kaha dafa ho!*)

¹¹ My sincere thanks to the anonymous reviewer for the detailed critical appraisal of the essay. One of the dominant strains in the review is vis-à-vis my methodological use of narrative, so I take this opportunity to spell out my understandings of the same, especially how they have undergirded the construction of the accounts presented in the essay. The reviewer's comments can be summarized as the following two questions: One, is the construction of biography not incomplete or even mis-represented when one is reliant on narratives about the person (Kareema or Ameena, as the case may be) from others' accounts rather than their own particular words? Two, is the moral register of nibhana enough to do justice to the many contexts of deprivation and marginalization that emerge discursively through the essay? Before addressing the above two outlined questions, I must highlight that I think of the organization of the narratives on the lines of an assemblage, where an assemblage precisely shows the thick, thin and variable connections of things being described rather than claiming to cover the plentitude of every element of description. Now to briefly answer the narrative question. I do not think of narrative as representative of a person's truth. Rather I think of language, broadly, and narrative in a personalized sense, as an inter-subjective enactment of experience. I am persuaded by Cheryl Mattingly's (1998) deployment of narrative as that which structures experience. Further, drawing once again from Mattingly, I would say that there is an 'emplotment' that various accomplice narrators bring about and it is within this narrative emplotment that we come to recognize the person's subjectivity. About the question whether nibhana is enough? It is clearly not in terms of resolving the concerns of deprivation and marginalization but my point is different. I am asking the sociological question that how an ethics of keeping and abiding acquire a form of life at a time of marital conflict and peril? It is to find an answer to this question that my line of enquiry is invested.

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Here the word ‘dafa ho’ although can be translated as ‘get lost’, in its spoken weight should be understood as saying ‘you cease to exist for me’, ‘go to oblivion’. It is in this sense that a certain feminine articulation of accursed social death emerges within marital peril. I pointed earlier in the essay that it is not just at the level of effect of such a curse that we must take note of this lamentation but also for what kind of imaginaries of death can be called upon within the everyday world. In Ameena’s case, the death of the husband settles her down to a new rhythm of life with the older son getting addicted to drugs and the daughter’s ill-health leading to her engagement being cancelled, but it is also the case that Ameena’s own marital conceptualization gets reconfigured. In a repetition of her own biographical moment when she had returned bitterly within a week’s time from a marriage of choice, the new marriage had initiated two counter experiences to settle in, one, that the new husband inflicted physical violence using the first alliance as a thymotic basis and two, she came to think of him as a simpleton who was too upright and straight headed for the ways of the world. As her daughter has to now let go of her first match and settle with a good natured but very poor boy it is the dead husband whose simple mindedness and straight headedness become a retroactive virtue. It is the recognition of this register that leads the mother and daughter to hold up his good character. ‘Yes, her husband does not have any shortcomings. He is not fair and not good-looking but is good at heart. He belongs to a poor family but the real thing is that Shagufta will be able to abide (nibhai) with him.’

In positing the final point I want to flag this movement between marriage and life as synonymous but differentiable social viabilities. The question to ask is what nourishes this movement towards recognizing vitality and potential for a better existence? Scholars such as Veena Das (2007) and Cheryl Mattingly (2014) have noticed this facet as a feature of ordinary lives in perilous situations. It seems that while the fabric of the ordinary is constituted to an extent by the prevalence of suffering and peril it is also the case that the same ground also provides potential ways in which a remaking of that perilous life can become available to people. Mattingly calls this a site of ‘hope’ (2014). To make the point about the realm of the ordinary containing the dual possibilities of annihilation and restoration through Mattingly’s evocation of hope, it is sufficient to cite what she calls as the paradox of hope (Ibid.). She suggests while studying families with chronically ill and disabled children that hope has to be situated not so much as an emotion but as a social practice. It emerges intertwined and contingently, and that is its paradox, to how suffering emerges as a social practice. Similarly, Das (2007) offers the very homely and familiar idiom of ‘second chance’ as a restorative potential but that too is not without a perilous social suffering in the background. The affirmative ground of care within kinship does not necessarily have a determinate relation to either ‘hope’ or ‘second chance’ but finds a diffused presence within the landscape of suffering and conflict. It is within such an

indeterminate realm that we arrive at care which involves an articulation and acknowledgement of pain of the other. Thus we come far from a hyperbolic idea of family and marriage that is taken to be synonymous with love and care. Instead we arrive at figurations of care that emerge out of the lived and are woven into the everyday while retaining the possibility of reflecting and reconceptualizing the proceedings of the same lived everyday. Care thus is not an antidote to the pathos of the ordinary and the everyday, but almost an unnoticeable but vitalizing response in contrast to the magnitude of violence and suffering that saturates the marital and the domestic.

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