C H A P T E R  O N E

Introduction

January 1989

At 5:30 a.m. I awaken to the sound of coughing and retching just outside my window. In the cool Bhubaneswar winter people suffer from respiratory problems. Mr. Misra, my landlord, has arisen early to go out to buy fresh food for the day (traditionally, a man’s task). Before going out to shop, he needs to cleanse himself for his morning worship, and this requires a cleaning of the respiratory system. As the coughing and throat clearing die down, I hear the familiar sound of running water against a bucket followed by the sloshing of water poured by hand over a lightly clad body in the early morning cold. Mr. Misra is purifying himself before entering the family “worship room.” These sounds of water mingle with the cries of egrets, red-waddled lapwings, and turquoise kingfishers as they move into the rice fields behind our house. The muffled sounds of bells and the chanting of priests rise from the ancient temple across the road and mix with the early morning traffic in front of our house. Soon the chanting and ringing are echoed and magnified. Mr. Misra is in the “worship room” just on the other side of our bedroom wall. He waves a bell and offers food and prayer to an array of pictures and statues representing Hindu gods and goddesses.

Other sounds of life begin in the courtyard. Someone is washing last night’s cookware. I can hear the outdoor water tap running again and the sound of brass and stainless steel pots and pans being scrubbed on the concrete floor of the courtyard. It is time to rise and begin my own morning ablutions and prepare for breakfast. Soon the aroma of Mrs. Misra’s cooking from next door will begin. The astringent smells of onion, garlic, chilies, and other spices being cooked in
mustard oil will waft into the house. As my husband says, “India fills all of one’s senses.” The morning has barely begun and the senses already seem full, but most of Bhubaneswar’s sounds, smells, and sights are yet to be taken in.

My husband, our twelve-year-old son, and I are living not far from the neighborhood where my time in Bhubaneswar, Orissa, India, began nearly twenty-five years ago. What began as a two-year study of changing family organization and child-rearing practices has become a long-term witnessing of social transformation. I have been following the lives of the 130 children and their extended kin, whom I first studied in 1965–67, and have returned this time to focus upon women – the mothers, daughters, and grandmothers that I have known for so long – in order to learn firsthand from them about the changes that they have seen and experienced as residents of a rapidly urbanizing town and center of government and education. Change for women in this part of India in the past quarter of a century has been dramatic.

In 1946, Bhubaneswar – an ancient temple town in eastern India dating back to the early centuries B.C.E. – was selected to become a new seat of government (Figure 1). Thus began its transformation from a small agricultural town renowned for its medieval Hindu temples to a new capital city. The British had created Orissa as a province in 1946. With India’s independence from Great Britain in 1947, Orissa became a state and Bhubaneswar a full-fledged capital city. In the 1950s, land to the east of the old temple town (the “Old Town”) was bulldozed and on it government offices and housing were constructed, creating the “New Capital.” Within a decade, Bhubaneswar’s population swelled from about ten thousand to nearly forty thousand residents. By 1965, when I began research there, its population had grown to about fifty thousand. By 1989 it had jumped to four hundred fifty thousand.

Within four decades Bhubaneswar grew from a large village, where the same families, which for generations had resided in caste-based neighborhoods, knew one another, to a sizable city, with many of the institutions of modern urban life as well as its social anonymity. In growth of population alone Bhubaneswar experienced dramatic change. The change, however, has gone far
deeper than mere demographics would indicate. The establishment of schools – from the kindergarten to the postgraduate university level – has provided both old and new residents potentially transformative educational opportunities. Along with schooling have come new job opportunities, ranging from all levels of government service to the many kinds of work that go into building an urban infrastructure, for example providing transportation and lodging, moving and selling food and other goods, and supplying a multitude of services such as clothes washing, house cleaning, and cooking. An age-old agrarian way of life has had to come to terms with a modern life based less upon ascribed caste status and temple rituals and more upon achieved status through education and new forms of secular employment.

Because of its rapid growth and transformation Bhubaneswar was an ideal microcosm for observing the impact of urbanization and modernization upon traditional Indian principles of family structure, gender roles, and socialization practices. I began examining those processes of change in 1965 when, as a member of the Harvard-Bhubaneswar Project, I spent two years studying family organization and child-rearing practices. At the time I never imag-
ned I was beginning a long voyage – that my study of 130 children and their extended families would evolve into a thirty-year study of changing family structures and gender systems. However, my initial two-year stay enmeshed me in the lives of Bhubaneswar families and whetted my appetite to understand better the forces of change in a society that resembled my own in its degree of socioeconomic complexity but was also strikingly different.

This book is a synthesis of my three decades of research in India focusing upon how a set of extended families have adapted as they have confronted life in a rapidly urbanizing and modernizing region of India. Applying a longitudinal perspective to what has happened to a cross section of Bhubaneswar families makes it possible to address change in the cultural and structural dynamics of Indian family life – particularly as it affects women and children – and to theorize about further change. In writing this book, I have had several goals. The first, and most basic, is to introduce American readers to a system of family structure and gender roles based upon strikingly different cultural assumptions and structural principles than those predominant in the contemporary United States. In doing so, I also want to give readers an empathic understanding of the Indian system so that they can comprehend why, despite the restrictions such a system imposes upon them, most Indian women find it satisfying. Nonetheless, this is a family and gender system undergoing dramatic change. Will it, as Western social scientists once predicted, come to resemble that of the West? Will multigenerational extended households based upon kinship ties traced through men be replaced by two-parent nuclear households?

Another of my goals is to describe a variety of households so that readers will understand that the ideal patriarchal joint family system in India is no more monolithic than is the nuclear family system in the United States. Although in both societies there is a culturally ideal system that predominates and motivates people to behave in certain ways, also in both societies family and gender systems vary by class and caste status, ethnic and religious identity, rural versus urban residence, and regional location. Just as there are diverse family structures in the United States, the joint family
Introduction

in India can take a variety of forms. It can range from as few as four to over twenty-five members living together, and it can vary dramatically with respect to the constraints that women experience. How are these different families, which vary by caste and class status and by Old Town–New Capital residence, adapting to the forces of urbanization and modernization? Are there discernible patterns of adaptation and change? These are some of the questions I shall address.

One way to garner insights into a particular family system and its underlying cultural premises is to examine its child-rearing practices. In every society, adults try to produce, through a set of conventional child care practices, children who will fit either their society or their subculture of society. In India, for example, mothers are expected to sleep with their young children rather than with their husbands. Why, compared with much of the Western world, is the mother-child relationship in India given priority over the husband-wife relationship in this and other respects? Different principles of personhood and gender identity underlie Indian child care practices and distinguish them from predominant American practices. What happens, then, when a society undergoes fundamental change, such as India is experiencing as it moves from a predominantly agrarian base to an industrial one? Will changes in child care practices accompany changes in India’s family and gender systems as they adapt to such transformations? My longitudinal research in Bhubaneswar provides some answers to these questions.

In describing India’s predominant family and gender systems and their associated child-rearing practices, I have chosen to focus upon the lives of women. By following daughters from early childhood to adulthood and comparing their lives with those of their mothers and grandmothers, I hope to make the texture of women’s lives in Bhubaneswar accessible to American readers and to challenge some Western stereotypes of South Asian women. Americans often assume, for example, that a family system that practices early arranged marriage and female seclusion must force women into passivity and powerlessness. From an outside perspective, these women appear to be victims of an unjust patriarchal order. And yet
in India a woman rose to be the head of state, women are governors, and women constitute a greater percentage of the mathematics, science, and medical students than in the United States. How can we reconcile such examples with stereotypes of female passivity and powerlessness?

I approach this and other such questions with some caution, recognizing the dangers inherent in trying to speak for or to represent the lives of women of another society, particularly a formerly colonized one. The synthesis of women’s lives that I shall present, however, is based upon what Bhubaneswar women of all ages have taught me over a long period, and I shall use their voices as much as possible to represent their attitudes and perspectives. I am convinced that they would want me to try to correct misperceptions that women in the “first world” have of women in the “third world.” Furthermore, that they are proud of their society, their families, and their ways of life, does not mean that they cannot imagine or desire change.

A final goal of this book is to expand its readers’ concept of what is “normal” by examining certain assumptions about culture and human development. For example, much of Western psychological research treats the individual as central, and the tendency is to focus upon individual self-development. Accordingly, the individual’s acquisition of the cognitive and affective skills that will enhance that person’s independence and achievement of goals is emphasized. Self-reliance and self-realization are the expected outcomes of child development, and close dyadic bonds between mother and child, for example, are considered part of the normal developmental process. What happens, then, in a society such as India’s, where the preference is to rear children collectively—that is, where there are many “mothers” – and where close dyadic bonds are discouraged and even considered dangerous? And what happens when children are taught that familial, not individual, goals are primary and that independence from the family is not desirable? Among different societies conceptions of personhood may vary dramatically, as may the outcomes of different socialization practices and expectations for children. Through an in-depth examination of family life in India, I shall try to expose some of the
Introduction

cultural assumptions that underlie Western conceptions of human development, interpersonal relationships, and intrapsychic processes, while explicating some of those cultural assumptions that are characteristic of India.

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It is the dry, cool season in Bhubaneswar, the season of weddings and the season when I first arrived in Bhubaneswar twenty-four years ago. Up the road taped music blasts from a neighbor’s house for everyone to hear and to know that another family is about to celebrate its daughter’s wedding. For this purpose numerous loudspeakers have been installed outdoors. I listen for other indications of the momentous event, and it is not long before there are distant sounds of drumming. The drumming, together with untuned blasts of horns, gradually grows closer and closer in the darkness of late evening. The bridegroom’s party is nearing the bride’s house and, along with other bystanders, I go out to the road to watch.

The entourage is led by a band – a somewhat bedraggled set of outcast musicians who walk, only in a semblance of order, while playing their instruments. Their irregular, staccato sounds are punctuated by occasional blasts of firecrackers. Behind them are the “merry makers,” friends and relatives of the bridegroom. In the 1960s a bridegroom’s party consisted only of men, but tonight there are also young women dancing in the streets. There are 75–100 young men and women surrounding the bridegroom, who rides in an automobile decorated with garlands of flowers – strings and strings of jasmine and marigolds. The scent of flowers mixes with other night smells – those of dust, cows, diesel fumes, and spices mixed with dung-fire smoke and people crowded together. Formerly arriving on horseback, the bridegroom now travels perched high on the back of an open automobile. He, too, is bedecked with garlands of flowers that cover his white robes and gold crown. Accompanied by friends and relatives, he is on his way to collect his bride who, together with her family and friends, awaits him and the beginning of the wedding ceremony and feasting that will fill much of the night. Soon the groom’s family will gain a daughter-in-law and the bride’s family will lose a daughter, but only after much lavish celebrating. First, it must be made clear to everyone that she comes from a family of status and constitutes a sacred gift. A new stage in the cycle of the family is underway.
Women, Family, and Child Care in India

Weddings in India mark a highly significant moment of family transition – the moment when two extended families come together not only to celebrate their union through marriage but also to transfer a girl from one family to another. To provide a context for subsequent chapters of this book it is important first to introduce some of the principal structural features and accompanying ideology of India’s predominant family and gender systems and their implications for child-rearing practices and women’s lives. This is followed by a brief description of contemporary Bhubaneswar, its recent transformations and its long legacy as an administrative and cultural center in this part of India.

Patrilocal Family Structure and Ideology

In contrast to an American cultural system that tends to emphasize the individual and to idealize the autonomous nuclear family unit – which is just one segment of a potentially much larger family unit – India’s culturally idealized family system places the welfare of the collective extended family above the interests of the individual; traces descent and inheritance through males (patrilineality); encourages sets of related men to reside together and bring wives into the outside (patrilocal residence); gives males authority over women; and bases family honor, in part, on the sexual purity of women, using such institutions as early arranged marriage and purdah to control female sexuality. This extended family unit, commonly referred to as the “joint family,” is male oriented in both its structure and associated beliefs and values; hence, my use of the term “patrilocally oriented family structure and ideology.”

Although India’s contemporary patrilocal family system is unique in some respects, its patriarchal heritage is not. Over thousands of years India, like other state-level societies based upon intensive agriculture, evolved a system of social stratification and a set of dominant structures and beliefs that give precedence to males over females – to sons over daughters, fathers over mothers, husbands over wives, and so on. Although they are more pronounced among upper castes and classes than among lower-status ones
and are more predominant in North India than in South India, these male-oriented structures and beliefs nevertheless constitute a sociocultural complex that profoundly affects women’s lives throughout India.

Ideally, a set of related men – a father and his sons or a set of brothers – and their wives and children constitute a joint family. Wives are outsiders who enter the family through marriage, whereas daughters are born into the family but must marry out. Because sons remain within the family, inheriting the family property and producing the next generation, they are preferred over daughters. Daughters not only leave the family when they marry, but their marriages may drain the family of economic resources. To arrange a daughter’s marriage often requires that a dowry, or substantive gifts, be given to the groom and his family. However, to give away his virgin daughter in marriage is also considered a man’s most sacred gift, and thus it is important to have daughters as well as sons.

In the past, a girl’s marriage might be arranged when she was an infant or a young child and be consummated at puberty, at which time she would move to her in-laws’ house and village. Two principles would have been operative: to marry off a girl before she is sexually mature and to marry her to someone older than herself. The latter principle would help to affirm the gender hierarchy and authority system that should prevail in the joint family, whereas the former would protect a girl’s family from the potential dishonor that a sexually mature girl could produce if she were to have contact with inappropriate men outside of marriage. Both principles are still operative today, although in a somewhat changed form. Accordingly, from puberty on girls are increasingly protected until they marry and move to their husbands’ and parents-in-law’s household. Ideally, the girls are socialized to be obedient, self-sacrificing, and hardworking so that they will adjust well and contribute positively as wives and daughters-in-law in their new households. It is important to emphasize, however, that such qualities do not imply passivity; an initially shy, respectful wife and daughter-in-law must one day become a forceful mother, mother-in-law, and grandmother.
Shifts in women’s roles are dramatic in India and are associated with significant changes in status and responsibility. At marriage, for instance, a girl leaves her natal family and comfortable position as a daughter to become a wife and daughter-in-law in her husband’s household. She must abruptly switch from a relatively high status and reasonably carefree position in a familiar setting to a potentially low status and heavily work-laden position in a strange household. It is motherhood that marks a significant improvement in her position and a rise in status, particularly if she produces sons. Furthermore, with sons a woman will someday become a mother-in-law with authority over a set of daughters-in-law, and she will become a grandmother to her sons’ children. Familial roles are particularly critical to a woman’s identity and status in India.8

In describing India’s patrifocal family system in a context of change I have, for several reasons, chosen to focus upon the lives of women. Although the literature on Indian women has improved, there is still very little that addresses women in urban settings and that focuses upon processes of modernization.9 In Bhubaneswar I have had the opportunity to witness dramatic change for many young women as its first set of highly educated daughters has come of age. On the whole, the change has been more profound for women than for men and has raised serious questions about the relationship of women’s education to marriage, dowry, and economic security – issues that will be explored in subsequent chapters. Furthermore, my initial focus on child-rearing practices provided me with an intimate perspective from which to view these women’s lives. For two years I spent most of my time in the inner courtyards of peoples’ homes watching children and their principal caretakers, mostly women – mothers, grandmothers, aunts, older sisters, and female cousins. As a woman doing research among women and children, it is not surprising that I tended to develop particularly close ties with women in Bhubaneswar.10

There are also theoretical reasons for my concentrating on women. When I began research in Bhubaneswar, the most recent women’s movement in the United States had not yet begun. There was little of feminist consciousness and no feminist anthropology. I returned, however, in the late 1960s, to a country torn apart by the