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Parda and Female Sexuality[1]

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The notions of honour, shame, purity and pollution, and *parda* play vary-
ing roles in controlling women and regulating their sexuality in Medi-
terranean, African, Middle Eastern, Indian and Bangladeshi societies.
Examples from these diverse cultural and religious backgrounds serve
to show how at a general societal level female sexuality serves as an
important boundary marker (Yalman 1963; Douglas 1966; Goddard 1987;
El Saadawi 1980; Fruzzetti 1982; Peristiany 1965). In my research in the
village of Doria, in Dhaka district, Bangladesh, I found that notions of
parda (seclusion, veiling) and the control of female sexuality were of cen-
tral importance for women's lives. These notions were associated with
all of the three religious traditions in the village (Catholic, Hindu and
Muslim), but also formed part of a general body of Bengali cultural val-
ues shared by all villagers.

Here I shall review the cross-cultural literature on the regulation of
female sexuality in society, and then survey concepts of honour, shame,
purity and seclusion in Mediterranean, Middle Eastern and South Asian
societies. I shall also look in general terms at how these values are mani-
fested in the village of Doria.[2]

The Sex/Gender System

Feminist writers (Oakley 1972; Rubin 1975) have argued that sex and gender are distinct concepts. While sex refers to biological sex, gender is used by feminists to refer to the culturally and socially imposed division of the sexes. In her pioneering work *Sexual Politics* (1971), Kate Millett systematically analysed relationships between the sexes and saw sex as a status category with political implications. That unequal relationships between the sexes cannot be isolated from the wider political and socio-economic situation is now fairly well established in feminist literature, where arguments are advanced against the biological determination of female subordination, which instead is attributed to economic, political and social factors.

Marxism starts from the premise that we are not what we are because of what we think, but that we think in certain ways because of what we do, or are kept from doing. Women are oppressed by men because of the forms their lives take in a class society, where one class (of men and women) is oppressed by another class. In Marxist terms, the special oppression of women as women, as well as of women as workers, lies in the fact that capitalism tries to use reproduction, sexuality and the gender socialisation of children to make women more exploitable, rather than to satisfy human needs (Guettel 1974). In other words, the oppression of women is a consequence of capitalism, and the liberation of women can take place only under socialism where the ownership of the means of production is common.

However, the inequality between men and women in precapitalist societies is now a well-established fact (Hartmann 1982). The fact that sexual inequality persists in socialist countries shows that the subordination of women cannot be adequately explained by conventional Marxist theory. Marxists have not only underestimated the significance of reproduction and socialisation of children within capitalism, but have offered no explanation for oppression of women in pre-capitalist societies.

The term "patriarchy" was introduced to distinguish between economic systems and sexual systems and to point out that sexual systems have a certain autonomy and cannot always be explained in terms of economic systems (Rubin, 1975). Hartmann (1982:447) argued that "before capitalism, a patriarchal system was established in which men controlled the labour of women and children in the family", and in the process "men learned the techniques of hierarchical organization and control". Her argument is that the continuing interactions of two interlocking systems, capitalism and patriarchy, have created a vicious circle for women. As long as capitalism, by enforcing lower wages for women,

encourages women to marry and remain dependent on men, men benefit both from higher wages and the domestic division of labour. This domestic division of labour in turn acts to weaken women's position in the labour market. Hartmann asserts that even though capitalists' actions are important in explaining the current job segregation by sex, labour market segmentation theory overemphasises the role of capitalists and ignores the actions of workers themselves in perpetuating segmentation.

Some writers argue that patriarchy refers to specific forms of male dominance in which the power of men is founded as fathers or patriarchs. Many feminists prefer "sex/gender system" as a more neutral term which refers to "a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention and satisfied in a conventional manner" (Rubin 1975:165). For Rubin, what is different in the term sex/gender system is that it indicates that oppression is not inevitable in this domain.

Whatever term is used, however, what is most important for our present purposes is the way in which female sexuality is socially and politically organised.

The Regulation of Female Sexuality

In many pre-industrial societies kinship relations are also relations of production and are the organising principles in economic, political and religious spheres. But most significantly kinship systems "are made up of, and reproduce, concrete forms of socially organized sexuality" (Rubin 1975:169). In *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969), Levi-Strauss constructs an implicit theory of sexual oppression by basing kinship systems on an exchange of women between men. He uses the notion of gift, which was first introduced by Mauss (1967) to explain one of the most significant features of primitive societies. Mauss argued that "gift" (exchange) is the means of establishing social links and alliances between exchange partners. Following Mauss' theory of primitive reciprocity, Levi-Strauss sees women as the most precious gifts, being exchanged in marriages. For him the incest taboo has to be seen as a mechanism to guarantee such exchange of women between families and groups. The function served by the incest taboo and the consequent exchange of women through marriage is that of forming alliances, i.e., kinship, with other families or groups. In marriages women are circulated by men who are linked as a result; it is they who realise the benefits of such social organisation.

Although Levi-Strauss' theory locates the oppression of women within the social system rather than in biology, the exchange of women is a

problematic concept (Rubin 1975). Because Levi-Strauss sees the incest taboo and its practice as constituting the origin of culture, it follows that the oppression of women is a necessary component of culture. If one follows his line of argument, the subordination of women is to be explained principally as a product of the relationships of kinship in its organisation of sex and gender while their economic oppression becomes derivative and secondary.

Rubin (1975:179) summarises the organisation of human sexuality from Levi-Strauss' theory of kinship as "the social organization of sex" in which kinship "rests upon gender, obligatory heterosexuality, and the constraint of female sexuality". To Rubin kinship and family organisation form the core of a given society's sex/gender system, although details vary cross-culturally. This sex/gender system includes the social creation of two dichotomous genders from biological sex. This involves the exaggeration of differences and the suppression of similarities between men and women; a particular sexual division of labour, the effect of which is to make men and women dependent on one another; and the social regulation of sexuality (Thorne and Yalom 1982).

Meillassoux (1975), on the other hand, linking women's oppression directly to the economy, argues that it was with agriculture that women's reproductive capacity came to be rigorously controlled. He argues that in a hunting and gathering society procreation does not give rise to strict social control because the key mechanism of social reproduction is the free and voluntary movement between bands of adults of both sexes whose offspring are adopted by members of the band as a whole. But agriculture "involves the formation of productive cells adapted to a process of delayed production requiring investment of energy in the land.... The slow rhythm of production keeps the producers together throughout the agricultural cycle and beyond it" (Meillassoux 1975:27). Thus "reproduction of the agricultural cycle involves a necessary and practically permanent solidarity between the producers who succeed one another in the cycle" (Meillassoux 1975:47).

For Meillassoux, in agricultural societies women are wanted for their reproductive capacities and are subject to aggression by men from other productive units. So women are put under the protection of the group's men. It is argued that women are forced into dependent relations to the men both in their own group who protect them and in other groups who abduct them, leading to their time-honoured submission. However,

> when the domestic community succeeds in governing reproduction peacefully through the orderly circulation of pubescent women, the latter are not to the same extent protected. But their past history of alienation pre-

disposes them to a submission which remains necessary if they are to accept the alliances and the exile imposed on them by marriage and above all if they are to give up their rights over their progeny (Meillassoux 1975:76).

Thus women's inability to acquire an autonomous status within the relations of production in agriculture-based societies is concomitant to the control of their reproductive capacities and thereby their children by men (Meillassoux 1975).

Meillassoux's theory cannot be applied equally to all societies. Aaby (1977) analysed the situation of the Australian Aborigines to re-examine Meillassoux's argument. Like O'Laughlin (1977), he comes to the conclusion that, in the interplay between ecology, demography and production in Aboriginal society, it is ecology and socio-biological reproduction which are the critical factors. This questions Meillassoux's theory of free and voluntary mobility as the dominant mechanism of social reproduction among gatherer-hunters. "In the Australian societies both reproduction and mobility were socially controlled" (Aaby 1977:42). Similarly, from examining the situation of the Iroquois women who had control over the economic organisation of the tribe and who were not "reified", Aaby (1977) shows why Meillassoux' theory cannot be accepted as a general explanation for the original subordination of women. The case of the Iroquois shows that agricultural production does not necessitate control of social-biological reproduction, or "reification of women". Many of the South-east Asian societies which are cognatic and in which women retain control over their own production and reproduction do not fit in with Meillassoux' theory either. Edholm, Harris and Young (1977:110) were critical of Meillassoux' ignoring women's role as producers and his conflating of "women as biological reproducers and as means of controlling labour".

Western feminists (Mitchell 1971; Firestone 1970; Oakley 1972; Reed 1978; Greer 1984) argue that it is woman's role in reproduction that has made her socially inferior, because the bearing and rearing of children together with other unpaid household duties prevent her from participation in the production, or public sphere, the only recognised sphere of status and power. In many cultures (Middle Eastern, some African, Indian and Bangladeshi societies), the subordination of women is more directly related to mechanisms controlling their reproductive capacity (sexuality), which is obtained by excluding them from production, the men's world of status and power. Nevertheless, the end result of the lack of public childcare facilities for Western women and women's exclusion from the sphere of production in other societies is the same, i.e.,

women's dependency on men for their livelihood and lack of any control over their own lives.

The constraints upon female sexuality are not absent from Western societies. For instance, Summers (1975) specifies two stereotypes which affect women's lives in Australia: one is "god's police" (positive and prescriptive) which emphasises women's role in the family, while the other is "damned whore" (negative), which by defining women purely in terms of not fulfilling these roles is "pejorative and punishing". The "damned whore" stereotype is avowedly a sexual category in contrast to "god's police" and is used to keep women "in line". Included in the "damned whore" category are not only prostitutes but also "women who are sexually 'liberated', who have extramarital sexual relationships and especially those who bear children out of wedlock" (Summers 1975:155). Summers argues that lesbians, who are not sexually or emotionally dependent on men, are seen as defying the patriarchal precept that men are superior to women and indispensable to women's survival.

Although at present Western women enjoy a certain amount of freedom in relation to their sexuality, in Victorian times a large group of them were denied their sexuality altogether (Oakley 1972; Weeks 1981). Foucault (1978) argues about the importance of the "apparatus of sexuality" in modern structures of power, although his notion of power is problematic (Weeks 1981). Similarly, Bleier (1984:ix) argues about the significance of "sexuality and the heterosexual structuring of consciousness and institutions" in relation to women's economic, political, legal, emotional, physical and ideological oppression as well as all forms of violent control of women in patriarchal cultures.

Hence it appears that there is concern about regulation of female sexuality in most cultures, even if the mechanisms of controlling it vary. Murdock divided societies into two groups: one group enforces the respect of sexual rules by a "strong internalization of sexual prohibitions during the socialization process"; the other enforces that respect by "external precautionary safeguards such as avoidance rules" (Mernissi 1975:3). Murdock places societies which practise veiling in the second category, and Western societies in the first category. However, Mernissi argues that the difference between these two types of societies rests in their differing concept of female sexuality. In societies which practise veiling, the implicit concept of female sexuality is active; while in societies which do not practice it, "the concept of female sexuality is a passive concept" (Mernissi 1975:3).

The differentiation El Saadawi (1980) makes between Western and Islamic thought in relation to sexual satisfaction supports Mernissi's assertion. El Saadawi argues that in the West the sublimation and sup-

pression of sexuality are encouraged while in Islam sexual satisfaction of both men and women is necessary to avoid disruption to the established order of society. These different concepts of female sexuality in the two types of societies result in different mechanisms for its control.

The following discussion of the notions of honour, shame, *parda*, purity and pollution/impurity is based on an appreciation of this concern to regulate and control female sexuality in all cultures. Since there are different forms of ideological control of female sexuality we can ask whether the ideological control of female sexuality in Bangladesh is a version of a similar theme in all other cultures. In order to understand this control of female sexuality we need to consider certain specific Bangladeshi characteristics and practices. In Doria the important ideological mechanisms observed in the control of female sexuality involve honour and shame, purity and pollution and *parda*.

The concepts of honour, shame, purity, pollution and *parda*, are not unique to Doria or to Bangladesh but are present in many cultures although their specific meanings may vary. The notions of honour and shame are common throughout Middle Eastern and Mediterranean societies of Christian and Muslim background (Peristiany 1965; Schneider 1971; Pitt-Rivers 1977; El Saadawi 1980), while sexual purity is found almost everywhere, specifically in cultures with Christian and Hindu traditions (Allen and Mukherjee 1982; Yalman 1963; Harris 1984; Warner 1976). On the other hand, the ideology of *parda* is commonly associated with Islamic societies, the meaning of which also varies from one Muslim society to the other. In Middle Eastern and Bangladeshi societies observance of *parda* by women is often a concomitant of the honour of their families or lineages, and is also practised by non-Muslims.

I argue that the end result of the ideologies of honour and shame, *parda* and purity is restrictions on male and, more specifically, female behaviour, with the consequent subordination of women. The pervasiveness of some of these values in different cultures and religions raises the question why different societies share a similar orientation in relation to women. Although a thorough exploration of this question is beyond the scope of this study, I look briefly at these values in five different cultures: Mediterranean, Egyptian, Moroccan, Indian and Bangladeshi. These societies belong to the three religious traditions of Hinduism, Christianity and Islam.

Honour and Shame

Honour and shame are terms used to evaluate the behaviour of males and females, but their specific meaning varies with context. Pitt-Rivers (1977) sees honour having a general structure and including qualities

such as reputation, honesty and loyalty, while shame involves sensitivity to public opinion. These terms apply to general conduct as well as to sexual conduct.

Codes of honour and shame are reported to be found in both the northern and southern Mediterranean, that is, in both Christian and Muslim parts, and also with variations in northern and southern Europe (Pitt-Rivers 1977; Peristiany 1965). For Pitt-Rivers (1977), the general principle of honour is a "universalized" concept, although the linguistic structure may vary from culture to culture. The ideologies of honour and shame, essentially related to female behaviour, are also common throughout Middle Eastern, African and Indian cultures. These ideas play important roles in the control of women as well as in the wider politics of Doria.

In Doria honour is clearly a positive quality and is seen primarily as a male virtue in their relations with one another. The term "shame" has connotations beyond its English equivalent. It has negative qualities as well as positive virtues. To have shame is a good quality which prevents a person going against the social norm. From this viewpoint, to have shame is desirable because shamelessness is dishonourable for the person and his/her family or lineage. In Doria in the course of a day one several times comes across the phrases "she has no *lazza-sharam* (shame)" or, "if she/he had any *lazza-sharam* she/he would not do this". Although these phrases do not always have sexual connotations, in the case of women, they are most likely to. A woman's "misbehaviour" does not have to involve sex directly, as an impression of her sexual status is often formed from her day-to-day behaviour – how she walks, dresses, handles her hair, as well as how she behaves with her family, neighbours, etc. Hence the great concern on the part of parents of mature unmarried women to keep them in line in every possible way. Keeping mature women in line is possible when they have shame.

However, a person may also cause or bring shame and make himself/herself as well as his/her lineage shameful, resulting in loss of status. In this sense shame is negative. In Doria I often came across remarks like "she is the cause of *lazza* (shame) for her family" or "she has 'drowned' her family", meaning "she is the cause of total loss of honour for her family". On the whole, the idea of shame acts as a restraint on female much more than on male behaviour. A shameless woman is liable to lose her sexual purity, bringing serious damage to her family's honour, whereas absence of shame in a man is not of such critical importance. There is a difference, however, between "virginity" and "sexual purity". While virginity is concerned with direct sexual contact of women with men, sexual purity involves a more general behaviour of women in relation to men which may also include virginity. Unlike in Egyptian

and Moroccan societies, women in Doria do not go through virginity tests (defloration rites) on their wedding night, but this in no way reduces the significance of their sexual purity. Because there is no ritual of proving virginity, it appears there is all the more reason to take strict measures so that women's sexual purity can be maintained beyond all doubts. *Parda*, immobility, modesty, silence and dependency of women are very important qualities ensuring their sexual purity.

It is generally believed that virginity can only be assured for girls and not for boys. While women's sexual purity is guaranteed by an intact hymen, men lack such a physiological assurance (Pitt-Rivers 1977; El Saadawi 1980; Mernissi 1982). This is the justification for the double standard of sexual morality in many societies. In reality, however, virginity or control of female sexuality in these societies, including Doria, has to be explained in terms of women's role as boundary markers and carriers of group identity.

While in theory codes of honour and shame refer to the behaviour of both men and women, honour is seen more as men's responsibility and shame as women's. This division of honour and shame is related to the fact that honour is seen as actively achieved while shame is seen as passively defended, resulting in different expectations of behaviour from men and women. It is through their role as protectors that men's honour is determined. Women's honour or status is related to their having shame or preserving their purity voluntarily. By voluntarily preserving their shame women can retain what Abu-Lughod (1986) refers to as "honour of the weak" *(hasham)*. In explaining why those at the bottom of the social hierarchy (men and women) of Bedouin culture accept the ideologies which in fact legitimise their subordination, Abu-Lughod (1986:104) argues that voluntary deference to those in authority is the "honourable mode of dependency".

Studies of Mediterranean society (Peristiany 1965; Pitt-Rivers 1965) have tended to analyse the cultural codes of honour, shame and female sexual purity essentially in normative terms. Schneider's (1971) use of an ecological model to analyse these ideologies has more relevance in the context of Doria. She argued that honour became a major concern in areas where agriculturalists and pastoralists were brought into conflict over resources and boundaries. In the absence of a state to interfere in such conflicts, these communities developed their own means of social control – the codes of honour and shame. Schneider (1971:2) refers to honour as "the ideology of the property holding group which struggles to define, enlarge, and protect its patrimony in a competitive arena". When women are one of the "contested resources", their shame defines the honour of the group.

For Schneider honour and shame have much to do with the institutional arrangements for the distribution of power and the creation of order in society. She argues that concern with honour is greater when the definition of a group is problematic, its boundary is difficult to maintain and internal loyalties are questionable. In Doria and its surrounding villages, the concern of Christian men about the increased physical movement of their women in the bazaar, frequented by men of all religious communities, is related to their own vulnerable position within the Muslim/Christian male power structure. When they saw Muslim men were taking "advantage" of the Christian women in the bazaar, Christian men not only became concerned about their communal boundary, but saw it as a challenge to their honour and thereby to their power. Muslim men, whose women observed strict *parda*, did not face similar boundary problems.

Schneider (1971) found no significant differences between practices of the Christian agriculturalists in the north and Muslim pastoralists in the south Mediterranean society in relation to the ideologies of honour and shame.

> Christianity, the source of so many of the rules governing domestic life on the European side, is also not "opposite" to Islam. It simply went further to advance the hegemony of agriculture.... Where Islam offers partial inheritance rights to women and protects them from arbitrary divorce, Christianity offers them full rights and prohibits divorce altogether. Where Islam dignifies women by shrouding them in veils, Christianity removes the veil and offers the Virgin Mary as a model of feminine virtue (Schneider 1971:20).

Schneider argued that on the European side of the Mediterranean the importance of agriculture and religion also had an impact on the capacity of kin groups to maintain spatial arrangements and organised force to protect and control their women. Nevertheless the competition among men for women remained intense. In the Christian Mediterranean women are socialised to present a defensive front to the world through posture – lowered eyes and conservative clothing – which is couched in the ideology of shame. In other words, much of the burden of safeguarding their sexual purity is transferred on to the women themselves in the new situation. However, the significance of their sexual purity which determines related men's honour is not different from the Muslim Mediterranean.

The Institution of *Parda*

Parda, literally meaning curtain, refers to the practice of female seclusion. In the strictest sense *parda* involves keeping women confined within the home and covering them in veils whenever they venture out of the home. In a wider context, *parda* refers to women's modesty and restric-

tions on their interactions with males who do not fall in the specified categories with whom contact is permitted (Papanek 1982; Jahan 1975; Alamgir 1977). In Bangladesh only a small number of women follow strict *parda*, but from puberty onwards all women are required to observe *parda* in the wider sense.

The significance of the veiling of women is that on entering the men's world they are made non-persons and thus are unapproachable. At the same time veiling affords women the privacy required to move about outside the home without breaking the system of sexual segregation. The concept of *parda* follows the logic of segregating men and women and separating the tasks which each performs in society as well as preventing the participation of women in the extra-domestic sphere.

Although the institution of *parda* has been essentially associated with Islam, there is evidence that other religious groups, such as high caste Hindus in North India, also practised *parda* (Jeffery 1979). El Saadawi (1980) argues that the veil was a product of Judaism long before Islam came into being.

There is some controversy among Muslim scholars regarding female seclusion and the role of women in the Quran. The Quranic texts may be interpreted in different ways. The Islamic reformists in nineteenth-century India saw the seclusion of women as problematic. Ameer Ali commented that "Muhammad recommended to the women-folk the observance of privacy. But to suppose that he ever intended his recommendation should assume its present inelastic form, or that he ever allowed or enjoined the seclusion of women, is wholly opposed to the spirit of his reforms" (Jeffery 1979:19). Orthodox Indian Muslims, on the other hand, use sexual differences to justify seclusion of women. For example, Maulana Maududi, a Pakistani Muslim theologian, argues that "the most important problem of social life is ... how to regulate the sexual urge into a system and prevent it from running wild" (Maududi 1962:145). He sees the human sexual urge as uncontrollable and therefore dangerous. It is, he says, to guard against this dangerously uncontrolled sexuality that *parda* must operate.

In an attempt to explain the logic behind women's seclusion and veiling and the basis of sexual segregation, Kacem Amin (in Mernissi 1975:4) argues that "women are better able to control their sexual impulses than men and that consequently sexual segregation is a device to protect men, not women". Why such concern about controlling sexual impulses, be it male or female? In Islam raw instincts are viewed as energy, which is neither good nor bad. But, according to the demands of religious laws, the use of such instincts can be either beneficial or harmful to the social order. From her research in Morocco, Mernissi (1975) argues that

aggression and sexual desire serve the purposes of Muslim order if har-
nessed in the right direction, but if suppressed or used wrongly, they
can destroy that order. Because of this, control of sexual impulses is nec-
essary to the survival of an Islamic social order.

Muslim society is characterised by a contradiction between what
Mernissi (1975) calls "explicit" and "implicit" theories of female sexuality.
The explicit theory is that men are aggressive and women are passive in
their interaction. In the implicit theory women are seen as destructive and
men as the passive victims. As Mernissi points out, the two theories have
this in common: they represent woman's *quaid* (power), "the power to
deceive and defeat men, not by force, but by cunning and intrigue ... the
whole Muslim organisation of social interactions and spatial configura-
tions can be understood in terms of woman's *quaid* power" (Mernissi
1975:5). The Muslim social order then can be seen as an attempt to con-
trol woman's power and neutralise its disruptive effects.

Within the Islamic social order, sexual desire is legitimate only in a
marital situation; sexual activity outside marriage is harmful and can
destroy the social order. To prevent sexual activity outside marriage,
emphasis is placed on the sexual satisfaction of both men and women.
A wife may be penalised for her failure to provide sexual services to her
husband. In Muslim law a husband may refrain from providing the wife
with food, clothing and lodging if she refuses his advances. The institu-
tion of polygyny can be seen as a means to prevent men from resorting
to illicit intercourse. Polygyny recognises a need for a man to have sexual
intercourse with more than one woman and thus allows him to have as
many as four wives at a time. Women are not allowed to have more than
one husband at a time, even though their need for sexual satisfaction is
equally stressed within marriage. For instance, although women can
initiate divorce on very limited grounds, sexual dissatisfaction is one of
them. Women rarely initiate divorce for this reason, owing to all the
other restraints on female behaviour as well as their consequent depend-
ence on men. Nevertheless, this emphasis on sexual satisfaction is re-
lated to the fear of unrestrained female sexuality. Men's satisfaction is
emphasised because otherwise they will be tempted to indulge in sexual
relations outside marriage while women's sexual satisfaction is empha-
sised to prevent them tempting men.

Despite the apparent concern with sexual satisfaction, coitus is con-
sidered polluting; every effort is made through ceremonials to create an
emotional distance between the spouses and treat the act solely in its
reproductive role. Seeing women as the "symbol of unreason, disorder,
the anti-divine force of nature and disciple of devil", an antagonism is
created between Allah and women (Mernissi 1975:62), an attitude mani-

fested in the requirement that couples turn their heads away from Mecca during intercourse.

The conjugal tie is considered dangerous, because it brings men close to women, symbols of evil. Some argue that polygyny is a direct attempt to prevent an emotional dependence on the conjugal bond. In polygyny a man divides his time and affection between two or more wives, while at the same time the wives are made aware that none of them holds exclusive rights over the husband. In modern Muslim societies, although polygyny is rare, its assumptions still pervade monogamous marriages. The East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) Muslim Family Law Ordinance of 1961 has imposed certain restrictions on the practice of polygamy. According to Section 6 of the Ordinance "No man, during the subsistence of an existing marriage, shall, except with the previous permission in writing of the Arbitration Council, contract another marriage, nor shall any such marriage contracted without such permission be registered under this Ordinance" (Choudhury 1983:264). Although polygamy is rare, the fact that a husband may, if he wishes to and can afford it, acquire additional wives, is a continuous threat to women. Mernissi sees the whole Muslim social structure as an attack on, and a defence against, the disruptive power of female sexuality.

Although sexually frustrated men or women are liable to disrupt Islamic order, it is women who have the power to tempt men. El Saadawi (1980) argues that, in matters related to sex, Islam inherited the old image of Eve which depicts women as the instrument of Satan. Even the Prophet Muhammad, who was concerned about the welfare of women, is said to have warned about the danger associated with women's power of attraction or *fitna* (seductiveness) (Mernissi 1975; El Saadawi 1980).

Sabbah (1984:3) raises the question, "Why are silence, immobility, and obedience the key criteria of female beauty in the Muslim society?" Why are women who do not express themselves more desirable to men? She argues that these female qualities have implications that go beyond the sexual field and are interwined with the political field. Sabbah analyses the Muslim erotic and legal orthodox discourse in an attempt to deal with these questions about female desirability.

Erotic discourse answers the questions of the Muslim believer in relation to what is permitted and what is forbidden in the act of copulation, and in sexual desire. This is also a religious discourse because the answers are given by the religious authorities – sheikhs, imams, and *qadis* – who are vested with the responsibility of guiding and channelling the acts of the believer. In this discourse women are portrayed as mere sexual beings, "omnisexual". Their sex is viewed by the men who approach it "as a pole of animal energy, irresistible, vibrating, and mak-

ing the universe vibrate to a rhythm all its own, where the male body is reduced to simply looking on, hypnotized" (Sabbah 1984:26). Women are seen to be motivated by one sole objective – sex. Faithfulness and virtue are therefore not natural for omnisexual women; in the light of such a portrayal, men needed to immobilise women, lock them up, hide them and separate them from unrelated males.

While erotic discourse belongs to the realm of the marginal and the individual, the orthodox legal discourse belongs in the realm of power, legitimacy, dominance and the collectivity: the first is sexual and second is sacred. The sacred is, among other things, also a discourse about sexuality. The relationship between the sacred and the sexual is a power relationship. Sabbah argues that the relationship of the Muslim God to man is different from the one he maintains with woman, and that woman's relationship to man is only understandable through an analysis of the triangular relationship between God, the male believer and the female believer. She argues that obedience, silence and immobility – the three attributes of female beauty in Islam – are also the three qualities of the male believer *vis-à-vis* his God. In the sacred universe, the male "believer is fashioned in the image of woman – deprived of speech and will, and committed to obedience to another" (Sabbah 1984:118). The conditions of men and women are not different in the end except that while men's lives revolve around the divine will, women's lives revolve around the will of men.

Sabbah's analysis shows how the categorisation of women exclusively as sexual beings serves to maintain the Muslim social order between God and men, between different strata of men and between men and women. The institution of veiling which serves to constrain female sexuality is therefore of fundamental importance to maintaining the sexual and social hierarchy of Muslim society.

The regulatory mechanisms of sexuality consist of "a strict allocation of space to each sex and an elaborate ritual for resolving the contradictions arising from the inevitable interferences between spaces" (Mernissi 1975:81). The institutionalisation of spatial boundaries is a manifestation of unequal power between the sexes. Breaking these rules poses a threat to the social order which acknowledges an unequal relationship between the sexes as well as between men themselves.

A good example of how the use of veiling creates spatial boundaries between the sexes as well as reflecting the division between those who hold authority and those who do not is the case of the camel-herding Tuaregs. While it is usually women who are veiled, with camel-herding Tuaregs the situation is different. There men and women cooperate, with the result that their social roles become ambiguous and overlapping

(Murphy 1964). Predictably, the social distance between status and gender categories would tend to break down in such situations. Tuareg men adopted the practice of wearing a veil across the nose and mouth to distance and place themselves in the existing social networks as well as to protect their self-esteem. In this case, the high-status men wear veils more strictly than do slaves; women wear no veils (Rosaldo 1974).

The Tuareg veiling practice is obviously related to authority and power, because veiling allows men the social distance necessary for them to manipulate and control their social interactions. Thus it appears that in a situation where Tuareg men could not separate the social roles of men and women by secluding women, they had to build up a new ritual – the veiling of men – to define their superiority over women. Thus the veiling of either men or women serves the same purpose of defining the authority relations between the sexes.

Pastner (1974:409) defines *parda* as a "highly ritualised expression of explicit values, usually referred to as 'honor' and 'shame', which are directly concerned with the status of women". Although both men and women are seen as repositories of honour and shame, women are seen as most susceptible to breaches of these important qualities. Male honour is dependent upon the honour of women and *parda* is one effective means of preventing the dissolution of male honour. The notions of honour and shame in Pakistani Baluchistan (where Pastner conducted her research) are not really different from the Mediterranean societies where the honour of a family is also maintained through control of their women.

El Saadawi (1980) convincingly argues that underlying the practice of female seclusion in Muslim Middle Eastern societies is concern about the preservation of the virginity of young girls and their chastity after marriage, on which depends the honour of a family. She supports her argument with much data from her medical involvement with and political concern about the position of women in Eyptian society. El Saadawi (1980:26) argues: "An Arab family does not grieve as much at the loss of a girl's eye as it does if she happens to lose her virginity. In fact, if the girl lost her life, it would be considered less of a catastrophe than if she lost her hymen". This she relates to the close association of the honour of a family with the virginity of its unmarried women. Loss of virginity brings almost everlasting shame, which can only be "wiped out in blood", as the common Arab saying goes. El Saadawi relates:

> Numerous were the nights which I spent by the side of a young girl in a small country house or mud hut during my years in rural Egypt, treating a haemorrhage that had resulted from the long dirty finger nail of a *daya* cutting through the soft tissues during the process of defloration.... The father of the bride then holds up a white towel stained with blood, and waves it

proudly above his head for the relatives assembled at the door to bear wit-
ness to the fact that the honour of his daughter and of the family is intact
(1980:29).

Similarly El Saadawi was called many times to treat complications
arising from the circumcision (clitoridectomy) of girls of seven or eight.
The operation is performed by the *daya* or local midwife. The idea be-
hind the circumcision of young females is that by removing parts of
their external genital organs, their sexual desire is minimised. Thus fe-
male circumcision is meant to preserve the virginity of young girls and
thereby the honour of their families, by reducing their desire for sexual
intercourse.

Such concerns about the virginity of girls are responsible for what
Mernissi (1982) refers to as "artificial virginity" (sewing up the remains
of the hymen), a new phenomenon in Morocco. Because the cost is high,
only the upper classes can engage in this game. Mernissi points out that
the price is lower than before, which to her proves that the operation is
more common than it was a few years ago.

The point that should be reiterated in the light of Mernissi's and
Sabbah's analyses of the role of orthodox Islam for female seclusion,
and El Saadawi's explanation of the subjugation of Muslim women is
that they do not attribute Muslim women's oppression to Islam as such.
Rather they draw attention to certain economic and political forces which
misinterpret religion and utilise it as an instrument of fear, oppression
and exploitation of all kinds, not only sexual. El Saadawi sees Christian-
ity to be much more rigid and orthodox than Islam where women are
concerned. She attributes the relatively better position of Western Chris-
tian women to the higher level of socioeconomic and scientific attain-
ments in Western countries.

While the ideology of *parda* essentially works to the disadvantage of
women, for wealthier women it can sometimes be advantageous. Like
their men, these women participate in the perpetuation of the *status quo*,
which is dependent on the control of women. They look down on poor
women who must work outside their households for survival. A good
example of this is the *Pirzada* women of Old Delhi (Jeffery 1979). *Pirzada*
women follow strict *parda*; their husbands are custodians of the shrine
of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya. The maintenance of *parda* is very impor-
tant for the *Pirzada* men and their women satisfy most of their expecta-
tions of *parda*. *Pirzada* men's position as custodians of the shrine and
their dependence on the incomes which pilgrims bring, provide very
compelling economic reasons why the men should wish to appear "or-
thodox" with respect to *parda*. *Pirzada* women not only go along with

this *parda* system, but actively perpetuate it. Although overall the norm of *parda* has the effect of devaluing women, segregating them from the men's world, making them dependent on men and thereby powerless, it also has its benefits for *Pirzada* women. They are not only superior in ancestry but their husbands are involved in honourable work and they enjoy the economic security provided through their husbands' association with the shrines. *Pirzadà* women's internalisation of a culture "which simultaneously devalues them and elevates them" enhances the stability of the *parda* system (Jeffery 1979:114).

Moreover, although women in *parda* are economically powerless and have no say in major decisions outside the home, they can nonetheless exercise some influence over their own lives and those of other people (Collier 1974). Jeffery (1979:171) argues "If *parda* has its dark side, it also has its light one. *Parda* is both abhorrent and attractive, both deprivation and privilege." She argues that *Pirzada* women in Delhi have tremendous control over information, especially in relation to suitable marriage partners, on which men rely. Through networks of friendship and gossip and access to the homes of other people, it is the women who can best assess the eligibility of young couples. Moreover, *parda* prevents women from adopting a psychological dependence on male romantic love, as is common in Western societies.

Most importantly, women in *parda* hold indirect power over men because of their ability to disrupt orderly relationships in the men's world. This power is implicit and finds expression in the very practice of *parda* which men find necessary to control female sexuality.

Jeffery (1979) argues that keeping women in seclusion may be valued by most people, but the very poor cannot afford the expenses involved. Additional quarters, servants and special garments are some of the requirements for keeping women in seclusion which would be beyond the means of the poorer sections of society (Papanek and Minault 1982).

El Saadawi's, Mernissi's and Jeffery's lines of analysis of women's situation in Muslim societies are highly relevant for Bangladesh. As in Morocco and other Middle Eastern societies, underlying the practice of veiling in Bangladesh is also the fear of female sexuality which, out of control, may jeopardise the honour of a family. Given the poverty-stricken situation of most people, *parda* cannot be practised by women of the poorer classes. For the wealthy it thus becomes a status symbol which contains a message not only about the "purity" of their women but also about their wealth and power. *Parda* indicates that the family can do without the income of its women. This can be compared with the situation of Western middle-class families which can afford to live with one

income, with the wife concentrating on domestic duties (e.g., inculcating manners in children, cooking proper food, maintaining the house in immaculate condition).

Jahan (1975), McCarthy (1978), Abdullah and Zeidenstein (1982), as well as my research in Bangladesh, show that although some form of *parda* is practised by all mature women, its degree varies from one social class to another. Very few families like their women to work outside the home and endanger the family's reputation. Many women who work outside the home do so out of economic necessity, but as soon as their families can dispense with their earnings they may be required to live in much stricter *parda* (Jahan 1975). Thus although seclusion and withdrawal of women from the public realm is costly, it is highly valued because it guarantees family honour (Jeffery 1979; Rozario 1986). My findings in Doria also reveal that the degree of observance of *parda* varies among religious communities.

Although the controversy over whether the seclusion of women is an Islamic ideology remains unresolved, there is no doubt that the orthodox explanation of the position of Muslim women still has significant force in several Muslim countries, including Bangladesh. Maloney *et al.* (1981:61) observe that while in all the traditional civilisations such as Hinduism, Confucianism and early Christianity, women tended to be isolated in the home and restricted from public activities, "in Islam this became raised to the highest ideal". They point out that in West Bengal women work outside their home but "Islamic influence has restrained this in Bangladesh". From their survey they have found that, although Hindu women are less *parda*-oriented than Muslim women, "in the midst of overwhelming Islamic values", Hindu women in Bangladesh seldom work outside their home (Maloney *et al.* 1985:62).

While *parda* in the wider sense applies to women of all three religious communities in Doria, the most consistent explanation of it is found among the Muslims, who follow its norms most strictly. Since the "principles of social organisation and regulation of human behaviour are part of a religious system in Bangladesh" (Maloney *et al.* 1981:78), one can see why the institution of *parda*, presented as an Islamic ideal, has been successful in secluding and thereby excluding women from the public domain.

The practice of *parda* in Doria and other parts of Bangladesh is not identical to that of Middle Eastern societies. While at the ideological level *parda* is a mechanism to control female sexuality and thereby secure the honour of a family, in reality, new definitions of *parda* are being developed to justify new forms of female behaviour. The spatial mobility of some Muslim women within Doria is no longer seen as breaking the norm of *parda*. Women informed me that until only a few years ago

they never ventured outside their *bari* (household), whereas now they regularly go to the Christian locality for the cooperative and Jute Works *samity* meetings. From her research in Bangladesh, McCarthy (1978:16) noted that there has been a shift in the conceptions of *parda* from being "structurally and outwardly defined by *bari* and *burqa* [veil] to internal definitions of individual responsibility and control". This is indeed true of women in Doria, except for the women of a few Muslim families. Although the spatial mobility of women within the village is not frowned upon to the same extent, strict *parda*, practised by wealthy women, is still very important in determining a family's honour and thereby its power.

I suggest that in Doria the use of women as status indicators hinders their economic and personal independence. The lower strata women, who from economic necessity must find outside employment, enjoy a certain degree of economic independence and freedom, which, however, necessitates breaking the norm of *parda*. By arguing that *parda* contributes to the stability of the existing social structure, I suggest that in Bangladeshi society most women can hope to gain economic and personal independence only at the cost of social marginality.

Purity and Pollution

The notions of purity and pollution (impurity) have pervaded the Indian subcontinent for centuries (Maloney 1981; Blanchet 1984; Allen 1982a; Krygier 1982). Louis Dumont (1972:81) sees the whole of the Hindu caste system to be grounded on the opposition of pure and impure: "This opposition underlies hierarchy, which is the superiority of the pure to the impure, underlies separation because the pure and impure must be kept separate; and underlies the division of labour because pure and impure occupations must likewise be kept separate." Caste is a major component of Bengali culture. Dumont's notion of purity and impurity may indeed provide the basis of caste divisions among Hindus in Doria, but this model does not apply in its entirety to Muslims and Christians. Nevertheless, they have been exposed to, and to an extent influenced by, the Hindu notion of purity and impurity. Like the Hindus, Muslims are also divided into hierarchical groups. Siddiqui (1973) and Bhattacharya (1973), from their studies in West Bengal, argue that the emphasis placed by wealthy Muslims on cleanliness and a sense of hygiene as reasons for refusing to eat with lower class Muslims (Momins, Patuas and Shahs) is connected to their concept of ritual purity and pollution.

Siddiqui (1973) points out that the existence of a hierarchical order generally receives overt denial from the great traditional values of the Muslims. However, both Siddiqui and Bhattacharya show that Islamic

ideology does not correspond with Muslim practice in West Bengal. As Bhattacharya (1973:294) so aptly notes:

> Inequalities in the social status of different Muslim ethnic groups, in contrast to their conscious Islamic model of an egalitarian society, make them mentally insecure. They try to overcome this mental dilemma ... by re-thinking the undeniable social fact of status inequality in terms of suitable idioms that can be successfully related to their traditions.

Thus it can be argued that the Muslims try to overcome the dilemma of variations between Islamic ideology and practices in terms of new idioms such as *parda*, pollution and wealth. In order to maintain a good relationship with God, Dorian Muslims have to be pious and "pure", and their pure status is often related to their wealth. Women's pollution (e.g., menstruation, childbirth), of course, is not always controllable, but the idiom of *parda* is of the utmost importance to safeguard the sexual purity of Muslim women as well as to avoid other forms of pollution. For instance, observance of *parda* is believed to prevent various complications of children's or women's disease, illness or death which is caused by certain spirits (bad air, *bhuts*). A woman may come in contact with *bhut* or "bad air" only when outside the confines of the household, i.e., by not observing *parda* – but to observe the various rules of purity and pollution, including observance of *parda*, one has to be wealthy. In other words, one could say, one has to be wealthy to be a "good" Muslim. Again, it is the good, obedient Muslims who are believed to be rewarded by God making material riches accessible to them. Questioning inequality is thus questioning the will of God and hence risks disorder.

In West Bengal, Bhattacharya found that Sayyads, Sheiks, Pathans and Mughals denied equal status to the Shahs, Patuas and Momins because of the latter groups' failure to observe *parda*. Similarly the upper ethnic groups assign low status to the lower three ethnic groups because they claim that the latter do not observe certain ritual practices concerning *paksaf,* physical purity or cleanliness. It is claimed by the upper strata that the lower strata do not maintain purity according to Islamic traditions, e.g., ablutions after urination. Once more the Muslims assume a direct correspondence between caste position and wealth. Thus all high ethnic groups are considered well-to-do and all low ethnic groups are regarded as poor, even though this may not always be the case.

There is no doubt that it would be wrong to attribute the hierarchical structure of Muslim social structure in Doria or West Bengal to the acculturative influence of Hinduism alone. According to Ahmad (1973:15): "The system of local groups with emphasis upon birth and unity of blood which had existed in Arab society before the coming of

Islam survived the egalitarian preaching of the Quran." From his studies in India Ahmad argues that Islamic law supports caste distinctions based on birth and descent and that it was used to justify a rigid social stratification in Indo-Muslim society from time to time. Similarly, Arefeen (1982) argues that the Muslim stratification system in Bangladesh is based on the "mobility of descent". However, he denies the existence of Hindu caste principles in the Bangladeshi Muslim stratification system. While I agree with Arefeen in that Hindu caste and Muslim stratification systems are very different, it cannot be denied that the Bengali notions of purity and pollution (associated with Hinduism) play important roles in legitimising and maintaining Bangladeshi Muslim and Christian hierarchies.

Although their principles vary, Hindu notions of purity and impurity make very good sense to the Muslims of Doria. Some aspects of these notions are well-entrenched within Islam itself, including beliefs about menstrual pollution and concern about female sexual purity. Similarly, the day-to-day belief systems of Christians in Doria combine the acculturative influences of Hinduism and Christianity. The ideologies of purity and pollution also play important roles in Christian social organisation. For instance, the notion of sin, by which Christians differentiate between "good" and "bad" people, corresponds to impurity. The two feminine figures, the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, typify Christians' attitudes to women and sex: Mary as a virgin (pure) and Magdalene as a whore (impure) until her repentance (Warner 1976).

One can generalise even further and argue that in all societies with social hierarchies (including those based on class such as the West), notions parallel to that of purity/impurity (ability/inability, success/failure) are part of the legitimating discourse of the dominant group. In the West the middle-class emphasis on elaborate manners and etiquette can be seen as a boundary device to separate them from the workers.

The Purity and Impurity of Women

The notion of relative purity in the development of social hierarchy in India "has had a doubly unfortunate effect on the lives of Hindu women" (Allen 1982a:5). On the one hand, during menstruation and childbirth women are a source of pollution and in this respect comparable to the Untouchables, yet, on the other hand, the honour and status of men depends on the purity of their women. The purity of one's caste is dependent on the sexual purity of women who give birth. Both anxiety about women's pollution and concern about maintaining their purity result in male preoccupation with control over women.

Traditional Hindu practices of child-marriage and widow-burning *(sati)* have to be understood in the light of beliefs about women's purity and pollution. A post-pubertal woman's purity can only be maintained by a husband "capable of transforming her destructive capability into generative power" (Allen 1982b:180). Menstrual blood is seen as destructive, and every menstruation is considered an "embryo murder" if a woman remains unmarried after puberty. As menstrual blood is polluting and has destructive powers, it endangers the purity and safety of other members of the household. Furthermore, "the purity of a Hindu caste is a direct function of the purity of its womenfolk, since one can gain caste membership only by birth" (Allen 1982a:6). Thus child-marriage serves to get rid of any danger associated with pollution from menstruation. Widow-burning serves the same function, as well as removing the danger associated with a woman's potential sexual creativity and autonomy in the absence of a male partner. The consequence both of men's concern with the preservation of female sexual purity and men's fear of pollution from menstruation and childbirth is women's loss of autonomy and submission to male control in Hindu society (Allen 1982a:5). Discussing the purity of women in South India, Yalman (1963) draws similar connections between sexuality, pollution, purity of caste blood and forms of control over women (including *parda*). His main argument centres upon caste purity and bilaterality of caste which narrows and focuses attention on the purity of women.

Allen argues that in Hindu ideology impurity is associated with danger and thus an impure woman is believed to have some form of power. On the other hand, purity connotes total absence of power and hence the pure woman is seen to be in danger and therefore in need of protection. Thus women are viewed as doubly in need of control – in order for men to avoid the danger posed through menstrual pollution and female sexual impurity, and to enable men to protect women's purity.

Hershman (1977:270) argues that one of the most basic moral and social values of Punjabis (whose culture is basically Hindu) is that "a man is intrinsically pure and a woman impure". A similar argument was put forward by Krygier (1982) in her analysis of "Caste and Female Pollution". A woman's impurity is related to the physiological processes of her body (sexual intercourse, menstruation, birth and lactation). The essential association of women with these physiological processes, viewing them as closer to nature than men, has been argued to be fairly common throughout the world (Ortner 1974; Ardener 1972). The categories of pure and impure used by Dumont (1972) to explain the Indian caste system correspond closely to the distinction between culture and na-

ture, in which culture is always seen to be superior to nature, which Ortner (1974) found useful in explaining the universal oppression of women. She claimed that it was by associating women with nature that the devaluation of women became possible. While both men and women have some "natural" qualities, women were believed to be closer to nature than men. If culture is superior to nature because it bends and controls nature, women's association with nature makes them inferior to men and justifies men's control over them.

By comparison, Islamic pollution beliefs relating to menstruation and childbirth are not as extreme. In Islam, menstruation is considered polluting and women are prohibited from fasting, praying, entering the mosque, and touching or reading the Quran during their menstrual period. Marcus (1984) points out that although these restrictions apply equally to polluted males, the difference is that male pollution is controllable, while female pollution is not. Associating menstrual and other forms of pollution (semen, tears, saliva, excreta) with the crossing of bodily boundaries, Marcus (1984) argues that pollution categorises women as uncontrolled. For instance, while a man can control the major source of his pollution through celibacy, a celibate woman cannot control her menstruation. Like Mernissi's argument (1975) about Islamic notions of female sexuality, Marcus also stresses the uncontrollability of women which threatens the structure of Muslim community. For Marcus (1984:12), Muslim "pollution concepts have the effect of preventing women from regular contact with God and of regularly pushing women outside the community of believers".

During menstruation, sexual contact between Muslim couples is not forbidden so long as the man does not touch menstrual blood. A menstruating Muslim woman does not contaminate food. On the other hand, a menstruating Hindu woman becomes so polluted that sexual contact with her husband is out of the question; she is not allowed to cook for others during this period.

To a certain extent, Dorian Christians are influenced both by the Hindu ideal of female sexual purity and by the Islamic ideals of a family's honour and shame, although, the prevalence of these ideologies in other Christian cultures indicates that such notions about female sexuality are not foreign to Christian thought. In the Bible, women's virginity before marriage and fidelity afterwards are highly valued features. Defloration rites (El Saadawi 1980; Millett 1971) in which bloodstained underwear or bedsheets are produced for public viewing, are said to be still common among Christian ethnic groups in the U.K., U.S.A. and Australia

(Harris 1984). Although such rituals are absent in Doria, the cult of the Virgin Mary plays a significant role in the ideology of Christian purity.

In Doria, women are generally more religious than men and participate in a number of religious organisations. The most popular one is the Daughters of the Virgin Mary, which is made up of essentially married, i.e., sexually active, women. Their attachment to the Virgin Mary expresses concern about their own purity. The story of Adam and Eve, which portrays woman as evil, weak and sinful, also has particular effect on the position of Christian women. Palashi Christian men habitually use the example of Eve's "weak" character as a reason why women cannot be included in important affairs of the Church, e.g., the Mission *samity*. Christian (1972) argues that the symbolic representation of woman as Eve and Mary establishes a sense of impurity.

As it is for Hindus and Muslims in Doria, menstruation for Christians is also unclean. This notion is not only related to their Bengali cultural background, but is also found in the Bible. Christian behaviour in relation to menstrual pollution is similar to Hindu behaviour. Until about thirty or forty years ago, older Christian women refrained from going to the Church during menstruation. Most women still avoid entering the cowshed during menstruation, a prohibition also observed by Hindus and Muslims.

Christians, however, do not have an explicit ideology, as do the Hindus, that every menstruation is an "embryo murder". But the fact that women aged twenty and over are considered unmarriageable may be related to the Hindu ideal that a woman must be married before she reaches puberty. Christian ideology permits Christian men to countenance a transitional period between a woman's first menstruation and her marriage, but when this transitional stage becomes protracted it becomes problematic (Rozario 1986). Their beliefs regarding pollution associated with childbirth and *bhut* (ghost, evil spirit) are very similar to Hindu and Muslim beliefs.

The purity and pollution beliefs practised among the three religious groups in Doria have much in common. In all three groups, women are associated with nature, beliefs about female pollution being the best example of this. However, concern about Muslim women's sexual purity is related to the honour of a lineage rather than to the purity of its blood, which is more the case for Hindu castes, but Muslim concern about female sexual purity is not any less than that of the Brahmans.

Blanchet's (1984) analysis of rituals of birth in rural Bangladesh captures the similarities more than the differences of female pollution beliefs between Muslim and Hindu women. According to Blanchet

(1984:30), "in Bangladesh and possibly elsewhere in Muslim India, the notion of purity and pollution appears in another guise, mainly that of a pervasive philosophical outlook which links purity with auspiciousness and impurity with misfortune, illness and catastrophe". This philosophical outlook is shared by Muslims, Hindus and Christians in Doria.

One major difference among the three religious belief systems about female sexuality is that while in Islam female sexuality is active, among Hindus and Christians it is viewed as passive. Thus while women are controlled by men in all three groups, their ideological rationales for doing so vary. Muslim women are segregated from men so that they will not tempt men away from their religious and social duties. On the other hand, because female sexuality in Hinduism and Christianity is viewed as passive, control over women is rationalised as a means of protecting them from men. Thus while *parda* among Muslims is more a means of protecting men from the temptation of women, similar practices among Hindus and Christians are to protect women from the "attacks" of other men. The concern of Christian men about the increased spatial mobility of their women in the bazaar was related to their fear of Muslim men taking "advantage" of their women and not vice versa. In Doria, Muslims generally view Christian women, who are relatively more mobile than their Muslim counterparts, as loose and "asking for trouble", referring to a sexual confrontation. Such a view is consistent with Islamic notions of female sexuality, which is seen as wild and in need of control. The Christians, on the other hand, rely more on the inner restraint of their mobile women, and although the female sexual drive is acknowledged, it is thought to be subject to their control. So long as the women's mobility is confined within a tightly defined community, their spatial mobility in itself is not problematic. However, because the bazaar is also frequented by Muslim men who hold different notions and use different mechanisms to control female sexuality, a problem arises in this context.

Whatever the ideological differences, female sexual purity is of the utmost importance for all religious groups. For all three groups, this is related to the honour, status and reputation of a *paribar* (lineage), except that with the Hindus it serves an additional function of maintaining caste purity. Concern about female sexual purity in all three groups results in a loss of female autonomy and in male domination.

Notes

1   *Editors' note:* This paper is a lightly edited version of Chapter 6 of Santi
    Rozario's monograph, *Purity and Communal Boundaries: Women and Social
    Change in a Bangladeshi Village* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, Women in Asia
    Publications Series, 1992). The editors of this volume thank Allen & Unwin
    and the Editorial Committee (Asian Studies Association of Australia) for
    permission to reprint this chapter which provides the background for un-
    derstanding the impact of socioeconomic changes on women expressed
    through notions of honour and shame, purity and pollution, and *parda* in
    Doria, Bangladesh.

2   In later chapters of the monograph, concrete examples are used to illus-
    trate the significance of these ideologies in defining the status of women
    in the Palashi region where Doria village is situated.

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