



The author is an independent market strategy consultant.

The new Indian women

I RECENTLY heard a point of view from a society watcher on Indian women that had me scrambling for my research boots. Had I got it wrong? Had the women's liberation and empowerment revolution happened in the few moments when I was not paying attention? The point of view was that the mainstream urban Indian women never had it so good before. She has truly become the all powerful *ghar ki rani*, a long way from her *naukrani* status of not so long ago, and has a career to boot.

Apparently, thanks to burgeoning economic independence, she is now 'confident' and 'discerning' and 'demanding', and her backward sisters who aren't quite there yet find her very 'aspirational' and want to emulate her. All of these words, of course, are the marketing folk's mumbo jumbo for justifying the kind of women that look great in advertising. Who wants a beleaguered wife and mother who is

perennially worried about stains on the rugs, kids' tiffin *dabbas*, and husband's grumbling about the quality of dinner!

But what really is the reality of what the Indian woman of today is like? Is economic independence really there? Or is this a new kind of 'forced to work' pressure being perpetrated on her by the family, and how much of her pay cheque does she get to keep? How does one reconcile these 'never had it so good' theories based on sound anecdotal evidence with the hard statistics of the gender ratios? The usual argument does not hold here — that the rich have evolved but the poor have some way to go. The gender ratios are at their worst in richer states and cities.

Well, here is that same old lesson about India that we keep forgetting and struggle to learn again and again. That India changes in insidious ways. She changes slowly and in a morphing kind of way. Change slowly creeps its

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The Indian woman is now stressed out in her new role as provider partner

way up, accompanied by a lot of evidence to the contrary. And for ever, whatever we say about Indian women, the opposite will also be true. There will be positive empowerment as a result of panchayat reservations and change in inheritance laws and gender-friendly police stations, but it may take several generations before women actually ride on these newly built roads.

It is true that women are getting more of a say in homes and families and their own lives than they have had before. They are getting more educated, more entrepreneurial, and more gutsy about narrowing the gap between them and authority figures in their lives — more so spouses and in-laws than parents. This is going to keep increasing because once the worm turns, there is no stopping it.

So, let's try and separate the signal of change from the noise, and examine how urban women's lives are changing in India and understand what is driving this change. At the least, we will be able to market to them better, and at best to help them evolve further.

The Twist In The Tale

While it is true, by women's own admissions, that mothers-in-law are more tolerant and husbands less repressive, and she has equal voting rights on family issues, it isn't social evolution that is driving this change as much as the state of the economy. In other words, we have God (or Goddess?) EMI or equated monthly instalment to thank for driving this change. The concept of family has changed from a predominantly social unit to an economic unit. The new truth about Indian marriages is the old truth — that its business model is around a pragmatic 'life business' partnership rather than around romance. Ask any young man, or woman, and you will know!

Taking a loan for whatever purpose is the new Indian way of life. The EMI is here to stay. And everyone has to do whatever they can in the family to enable family earnings to happen, so that the quality of living can be improved or the house can be owned or made liveable.

What is the role of the woman in this? In the lower social class, she must either earn and be a co-contributor or she must look after the housework and the children of the extended family so that the men and the women who are working outside the home can maximise their earnings.

In the middle and upper class households, she must take care of all home and 'outdoor work' of the family so that she facilitates and

insulates the man who is better qualified and who can earn big bucks to continue to do so with no distraction.

At the very top social class, if she can be an equal earning partner, she must contribute and do so. But only up to a point of 'adequacy', because the idea is to optimise the unit's earnings, not maximise the woman's earning. Therefore, predictably, 20 per cent of social class (SEC) A housewives work outside the home going down to 16 per cent as you proceed towards SEC B and C. And from D as you make your way towards E (husband unskilled worker and uneducated too), that number rides up from 16 per cent to almost 40 per cent.

Have no doubt about it — the beleaguered wife and mother is still around. But instead of being worried about stains on the rugs, kids' tiffin *dabbas*, and husband's grumbling about the quality of dinner, she is totally stressed out in her old role as nurturer and her new role as provider partner, either directly or indirectly contributing to the offering to Goddess EMI.

The good news is that as her economic role in the marriage becomes more and more important, she gets treated better and better, and she gets more and more freedom in terms of what she does when she is outside the house earning her living or doing 'outdoor' family work. The bad news is what an analysis of last week's matrimonial ads showed.

I first looked in the 'wanted brides' section, under the title 'cosmopolitan'. Well educated, beautiful, homely/ convent educated, charming, extremely beautiful... the emphasis on education is hard to not notice. Because in her new role as provider facilitator, education helps for sure. Does that explain at least in part why enrolment of girls in college, even in the smaller towns, is increasing?

Then there are those seeking career oriented bride/ seeks working, very beautiful bride/ seeks beautiful professionally qualified girl/ working girl preferred. The ratio was 60 per cent of the latter and 40 per cent of the former. Need I say more on this subject?

I went to look at the Brahmin brides section because I thought maybe those hide-bound enough to stick to caste may have a different view on this. I should have known better. Preferable engineering graduate/ suitable medico girl/ seeks engineer / doctor / MBA beautiful, fair slim girl from decent family/ seeks qualified Maithil non-vatsa bride...

Yes, the times, they are a changing. But not exactly in the way we think they are! ■