

CHAPTER 1

The Practice of Femicide in Postcolonial India and the Discourse of Population Control within the Nation State

The world is going to hell if those people don't stop breeding.
—*National Geographic*, October 1998

I will keep this one only if it is a son.
—An Usilampatti woman, *The Hindu*, November 1994

The selective killing of the female fetus in postcolonial India has received serious commitment from activists in the Indian women's movement(s) but scant rhetorical and theoretical analysis. This omission in postcolonial feminist theory is curious given the fact that the Indian women's movements were the first organized groups in the 1970s and 1980s to call attention to the use of new reproductive technologies for feticide and the selective breeding/nurturing of male fetuses in modern India.¹

Our objective in this chapter is to attempt a rhetorical and discursive analysis of the violence visited on Indian women. Therefore, our discursive analysis begins by foregrounding the conjunctions between the discourses of femicide and the rhetoric of overpopulation, and examines the ways in which femicide is inscribed, rationalized, and co-opted into the rhetoric of population control in postcolonial India. We argue that the discourses of modernity, development, population control, and new reproductive technologies work together to claim the Indian woman's body as object and to name femicide as informed choice and family planning.

This women's collective eschews the ahistorical, simplified, and colonialist explanations that trace present day femicide in an unmediated manner to nineteenth-century practices of female infanticide in colonial India. The telos of such explanations is a continuist history of femicide in terms of the anti-woman bias of Indian traditions. In refusing to see tradition as the overarching explanatory framework for female infanticide in the past and its resurgence as femicide in the present, we are in conversation with Lata Mani's pioneering work on the practice of sati in colonial India. Lata Mani has

conclusively shown that explanations concerning the oppression of Indian women that center on Indian traditions are in fact a product of colonialist discourses (*EPW* 21.7, 26 April 1986). Thus, feminist analyses that focus exclusively on Indian traditions run the risk of omitting and eliding histories of resistances, heterogeneous locations, and discontinuity in history.

Our scholarly commitment is to the study of the condition of postcolonial modernity in its specificity. We understand femicide as a specifically postcolonial violence, which is facilitated by the patriarchal family, reproductive technologies, the nation-state, and the discourses of global agencies and international organizations. The first section addresses conceptual errors that are in wide circulation concerning female infanticide in India; we suggest that it is in and through the conjunctions between the discourse of modern femicide in India and the rhetoric of overpopulation that these conceptual errors come into play. The second section examines the political text of the Emergency in the 1970s in India in order to demonstrate that the effect of the conjuncture between the overt rhetoric of overpopulation and the covert discourse of femicide is that female populations are targeted for extermination. The third section analyzes alternative paradigms and possible solutions.

It is symptomatic of this crime of gendered violence that the available statistics for female infanticide are conflicting. In 1998 the Indian Association for Women's Studies reports that 10,000 female fetuses are killed every year in India. The editorial of a national daily puts the annual figure at 50,000 female fetuses (*Times of India*, August 6 1994). Yet another study determines that from 1978 to 1983, 78,000 female fetuses were reported killed, or 13,000 female fetuses annually were aborted, following the use of amniocentesis as a sex determination test. These conflicting statistics indicate that this violence has become the undetectable crime against women and at the same time, the estimated numbers indicate the proportion of a genocide.

Another indicator of this genocide is the declining sex ratio in India. In colonial India the gender imbalance indicated by the 1901 census is a sex ratio of 972 females per 1,000 males. After India's independence this gender imbalance is exacerbated rather than redressed: the 1981 census shows that the female to male ratio drops to 935 females per 1,000 males. The number of missing women increased to 22 million in independent India from 3 million under colonial rule. This trend continues unabated, currently the female to male ratio is 933 females per 1,000 males. While the world over women outnumber men, India is unique in that here men outnumber women. The normal sex ratio favors the birth of female babies; however, India has a steadily declining sex ratio skewed in favor of male births. This phenomena of missing women is proof that it is not only the female fetus that is endangered but the overall conditions for many Indian women are life-threatening.

In our view exclusive analytical attention to the female fetus does not illuminate the real nature of the problem. Instead we relate the violence of femicide to the birthing mother, the surviving sibling sisters, and to other forms of violence perpetuated on women in postcolonial India like rape (every 54 minutes in India), dowry deaths (every 102 minutes) and the estimated 500 “accidental” suicides of housewives that occur in major cities annually (*India Abroad*, July 1998). By situating the problem in this continuum, we argue that the modern holocaust of femicide signifies not only the serial killing of female fetuses but also girl-child murder by negligence through discriminatory practices such as uneven food allocation causing nutritional deficiencies, uneven access to medical care, family resources, and minimum survival needs. These traditional forms of gendered neglect have increasingly been recognized by feminist scholars as a weeding out process and as virtually undetectable infanticide. Many studies have demonstrated that the girl-child is at risk not only at birth but also in infancy. For example, one writer notes, “The significant decrease in the female population occurs after birth and before the age of four. From 1978 to 1983 . . . of the twelve million girls born each year, only nine million will live to be fifteen” (Balakrishnan 1994, 276). The victims of female infanticide are not only the aborted female fetus, the girl child, the birthing mother, and the infanticide survivors who grow up with the knowledge that they and their female siblings survived attempts to murder them. The list of casualties include the large population of women who are disciplined by the violence visited on other women.

Some Pedagogic Issues Concerning Femicide in Postcolonial India

As teachers and scholars our concern is with the distortions that occur when students and colleagues discuss femicide in India within the rhetorical framework of overpopulation. The chief anthropological misconception is that femicide is a traditional method of population control in Asiatic societies. This misconception has to be dismantled discursively and empirically. The discursive logic of this belief is to portray femicide simply as the resurgence of age-old practices of female infanticide, thus reinforcing the popular belief that the social problem of femicide is facilitated by ancient customs of population control, not by the discourses and institutions of the postcolonial nation state.² Furthermore, this perception is ahistorical and is not borne out by women’s history. Feminist scholars have shown that in the indigenous cultures of the South (Asia, Africa, Latin America) women knew and had access to a variety of sophisticated and noninvasive contraception to limit pregnancy and for the purposes of spacing children. These methods fell into disuse and were not communicated intergenerationally because women were forced to forget their

traditional body-knowledges with the advent of colonialism and neocolonialism. In these indigenous cultures of the South infanticide and feticide was one practice coexisting with a variety of methods, child murder was certainly not the dominant method of population control.³

Teaching about the violence against Indian women involves battling the persistent Orientalism wherein Indian women are viewed as passive victims of absolute and undifferentiated customs of patriarchal oppression. Our extensive historical and literary research enables our understanding that female infanticide was never uniformly or universally practiced in India. For example, in nineteenth-century colonial India female infanticide was confined to select landowning propertied families and communities in certain regions in north-west India and with the exception of one tribe, female infanticide was unknown in southern India. Even in these infanticide-endemic districts female infant killing was a discontinuous practice. The paradoxical fact about India's social and cultural traditions vis-à-vis women is the heterogeneity of practices. Historically women-related practices in India were plural and contentious; for example, traditions of cherishing daughters were always in conflict with traditions of daughter-devaluation and daughter-murder.⁴

The British perspective that the commission of female infanticide in India is causally related to the family's burden of providing excessive dowry for the daughter is a viewpoint shared by many in India. Nineteenth-century colonialist female infanticide reform efforts in Gujarat addressed the problem posed by the daughter's dowry by instituting a dowry fund. Colonial administrators promised landowners exemption from land tax for one year on condition that they preserve their daughters. Official documents reveal that the measure failed to have any effect on the incidence of the crime. Our own view is that in contemporary India the dowry system is not so much a hallowed tradition as a patriarchal capitalist means of devaluing daughters and daughters-in-law as worthless objects, a means by which the natal family rids itself of a female claimant on family wealth, and a quick and easy way of acquiring capital for the marital family. Thus in the natal and marital family the system of dowry works within the femicidal logic of woman devaluation. Femicide and dowry deaths are on a continuum because the former requires reproductive technology to destroy the daughter within and outside the womb, and the latter functions in the private sphere as a way of destroying the adult daughter and daughter-in-law. In effect dowry deaths are yet another contemporary aspect of femicidal logic of treating women as valueless consumers.

Family poverty is mistakenly perceived as the source of the problem of female infanticide, in accordance with the popular belief that daughters are neglected because their parents are too poor to take care of them. Our study of the infanticidal clans and communities in nineteenth-century India has shown that infanticidal families had no dearth of money and in many cases

owned property in land. Contrary to the economic reasoning, the serial killing of female fetuses and infants is not a function of the class and wealth-status of the family but rather an index of the totality of women's condition, status, and value in family and society.⁵

The solutions to female fetus killing, hypothesized by current research on modern femicide, also tend toward economism. The economic solution is family affluence on the principle that it is natural for a rich family to value all its children, including its female children. For instance, Vaasanthi's recent case study of femicide amongst the infanticidal tribe of Kallars in Usilampatti taluk in Madurai district concludes that to prevent female infanticide the Indian Government should deposit 1,000 Rupees at the birth of a girl child for her marriage dowry (*The Hindu*, November 20, 1994). Dr. K. J. Kurian's observations on the Kallars in Usilampatti concur with Vaasanthi's economic solution to modern female infanticide, "The main point is that a girl needs to be married, which needs a few thousand Rupees which poor villagers cannot afford" (*Eubios Ethics Institute Newsletter* 3, 1993, 3).

A similar economic solution to female infanticide was attempted in nineteenth-century India by British colonial administrators. The British solution was three-pronged: penalize infanticidal families with fines and land seizure, establish a British-administered Infanticide Fund from these fines, and offer to pay the dowries of surviving daughters from the fund in order to encourage infanticidal families to preserve their daughters. Our research shows that despite regular census by the colonial government to monitor female infant deaths, the economic solution was a complete failure.

The failure stemmed in part from British collusion with the infanticidal logic wherein daughters are viewed as financial burdens. We discern a fundamental contradiction between the British analysis of the problem of female infanticide in terms of tradition/custom and their solution in economic terms. If we are to take the economic solution seriously then we must suppose that customs and traditions can be changed by the simple logic of economics. Conversely, if we take the British analysis of the problem of female infanticide as Indian custom seriously, then we must suppose that a woman-related custom cannot be eradicated by economics because the custom of female infanticide survives despite family affluence. The fundamental contradiction we have noted in British analysis continues to be reproduced by post-colonial analysts like Vaasanthi and Kurian. We designate this particular kind of analysis the colonialist-economic approach to female infanticide. Colonialist-economic solutions do not address the fundamental problem of inequality between the sexes nor challenge the fundamental premises of woman devaluation, instead they offer a stop-gap solution.

We believe in a woman's choice and her ability to be self-determining; we recognize that the small family norm is generally less oppressive on the

wife/mother, and generally speaking fewer pregnancies are conducive to the health and longevity of the childbearing mother. We nevertheless take into account the fact that in postcolonial India the small family norm lacks class specificity. The sociopsychology of childbearing of the rural poor woman is markedly different from middle-class woman's discourse about children. While the latter is concerned about the effect of frequent pregnancies on maternal health, childbirth, and child rearing, the poor woman has many children in the hope that some of them will survive the high infant mortality rate. For the poor woman the period of pregnancy is often the only period when her diet, her health, and need for rest has priority. The poor woman cannot buy into the middle-class woman's dream of fewer children, more leisure, health and self-cultivation, and greater family resources for the children.

Western feminists fought long and hard for the choice to have fewer children so that daughters could have more opportunities for education and self-cultivation than their mothers and grandmothers.⁶ This narrative of First World emancipation becomes an obstacle in understanding the imperatives for the rural poor women in India who wish to preserve the right to have children. The poor woman's reasoning is explored in Deepa Dhanraj's film *Something like a War* (1991) where the rural women of Rajasthan repeatedly point out that the wealth of the poor inheres in children (*garib ka dhan uske bacche*). Therefore, more children means more labor power for the poor woman and her family. We do not endorse child labor nor do we advocate large families. Nevertheless, we have to recognize that for the poor woman her children are her support structure and her only resource against total destitution, while middle-class children require long-term investments of education to make them productive members of the family.

The economic perspective on female infanticide tends to delink the economic factor from classed attitudes to women and children, thereby occluding the fact that the laboring classes value women and children as producers while the upper classes generally regard their women and children primarily as consumers. From an early age the rural poor woman's children work as laboring members of the family; the eldest daughter often assumes the maternal role of childrearing younger siblings; children relieve the mother of labor intensive household chores like collecting firewood, bringing water from far-off places, tending livestock, cooking and cleaning; the children also take care of the mother in times of illness and in old age, often substituting for the male or female parent on the days that either of them is too ill to work. The children of the poor are earning members in their own right, contributing to the mother's subsistence production in the household or in the field, in addition to taking up part-time jobs to augment the family resources.⁷

At the present time this distinction between the attitudes of the middle class and the poor working class toward their children is in danger of being

lost as the poor working class as well as the rural poor begin to adopt middle-class values and attitudes toward women and children. The adoption of these values and attitudes have been materially facilitated by displacements of people from their traditional occupations and lifestyles by development projects like the building of dams, mining, and the creation of factories. These displaced populations face alienation at all levels and at the same time are subjected to the pressures of patriarchal capitalism, which is disseminated as a homogenized national culture.

Therefore, the heterogeneity of class- and community-specific gender practices are in danger of being swallowed by the anti-woman capitalist logic. For example, in western and southern India female infanticide was virtually unknown; instead there existed strong traditions of matriarchal organization of the family; women's labor was valued both in the natal and marital family and women had property rights. At the present time in the rural areas of southern and parts of western India, like Usilampatti taluk of Madurai district, the practice of female infanticide has become widespread. In these remote areas where reproductive technology for sex determination is not yet widely available, capitalist patriarchal devaluation of women has become so pervasive that long-forgotten methods of child murder are being revived in order to commit female infanticide. We believe that a persistent colonialist patriarchal devaluation of women, accompanied by the capitalist logic of accumulation through violence, and an increasing emphasis on privatizing of property at the cost of the general community leads to socially sanctioned female infanticide and daughter killing. Under global capitalism it is commodity-relations between men and women that take precedence over earlier heterogeneous modes of upward mobility in India, facilitating the devaluation of women's labor and productivity and finally devaluing women as daughters.⁸

In the capitalist discourse of development the cliché that the poor are poor because there are too many of them implies that it is the poor of the world who rapidly consume the planet's resources while giving nothing back to society and the environment, while rich nations and peoples of the world work hard at producing wealth and conserving the environment. These slogans are resuscitated in a speech by Ted Turner, the American media magnate, at a real estate development conference. The context of Turner's remarks is his billion dollar gift to the United Nations, which the latter intends to channel into the U.N. population programs. Turner suggests that globally families should practice a one-child-only norm. Turner's public statement exemplifies First World thinking about world population, therefore it is instructive to examine it more closely:

If you have two billion people you could have automobiles, and everybody could have a good standard of living. I've got to worry about the totality of

the planet because there are some people who think we can build a wall around the United States and keep the misery out. (They think) we can just let Africa and Central and South America and parts of Asia stew in their own juices. I don't agree with that at all. A lot of people will stay in India and Bangladesh and Africa and El Salvador. A lot of them will stay there and starve. There's no question about that. But a lot of them won't. They're going to come to where the prosperity is—and they know where the prosperity is, baby. We need to have a one-child family (policy) globally. People who abhor the China one-child policy are dumb-dumb, because if China hadn't had that policy, there would be 300 million more people in China right now. (*India Abroad*, 38, September 25 1998)

Turner's philanthropic, democratic, and conservationist posture dismantles as he speaks. Turner first confesses that even though he is a spokesperson for the small family he himself has a large family. Turner asserts "a personal responsibility to worry about overpopulation" in order to underline his disinterested concern for the future of humankind. The claim that he is worried about "the totality of the planet" is contradicted by his exclusive focus on Third World populations in Africa, Central and South America, and parts of Asia. Turner's statement, "People who abhor the China one-child policy are dumb-dumbs" makes it clear that he is in favor of coercive measures for population control although his speech appears to support democratic persuasion. Turner's admiring reference to China's population policies implies an endorsement of China's human rights violations and coercive state apparatus. In effect Turner's implication is that democracy and democratic procedures are appropriate in United States but coercive population control policies used exclusively in the Third World, are necessary to control those populations.

Turner's appeal continually shifts grounds because he cannot find the one convincing appeal that will convert his audience to work toward and support the control of the poor in the Third World. He observes that a small family improves the "quality of life" so that everyone can have "automobiles" and "a good standard of living." This blatant consumerism changes into a concern for the totality of the planet. When that is not enough the rhetorical appeal changes from disinterested philanthropy toward the Third World to xenophobia: according to Turner it is not possible to build a wall round the United States to ward off the starving millions from invading America. Quite apart from the cultural imperialism of assuming that all of the people in the Third World desire the American Dream, Turner also commits the fallacy of surmising that it is possible and even ecologically desirable that the South aspire to the same level of affluence as the North. The shifting and changing rhetorical grounds of the speech reflects the sanctioned ignorance in the First World

of the unequal exchange between the North and the South and the damaging impact of unfettered development on the environment.

The causal link between affluence and the small family norm in the North and poverty and the large family in the South has to be radically rethought in the context of global capitalism and the international division of labor. From the 1970s critics like Samir Amin have made us aware that capitalist accumulation and continued development in the North is made possible by the growth of underdevelopment in the South (*Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism*, 1976). The North is enriched through collaboration with indigenous elites of the South, and the most damaging consequences of this collaboration are visited on women and environment in the South.⁹ Therefore, a study of the relationship between poverty and family size in a country like India needs to be complicated by considering the unequal exchange between the North and the South and the role of international agencies like the United Nations, World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund in this unequal exchange.

The capitalist model of development adopted by India is inspired by the North and is anti-poor, anti-woman, and anti-environment, contributing to the prosperity of the North and the native elites of the South. This development model excludes the poorest classes in India from the material benefits of the nation state, displaces them from their homelands and destroys their life-sustaining natural environment.¹⁰ Within this model of development the Indian nation-state promises affluence for all. However, the unequal exchange in global capitalism means that the prosperity of the First World is predicated on the poverty of the poor in the Third World. In fact, the wealth, accumulation, and affluence of the North is only possible, given the limited nature of the planet's natural resources, on the continuing impoverishment of the poor of the South.

Unable to deliver on its promise of prosperity for the poor the Indian nation-state offers, with the help of international agencies, the palliative of family planning. The poor are told that their eligibility for a share in the nation state's prosperity is dependent on their acceptance of population control. They are asked to voluntarily reduce their numbers even as they are being displaced and further impoverished by development projects. It is in the interstices of these persuasive/coercive strategies that femicide emerges in postcolonial India as the underbelly of the discourses of development and the official version of ecological conservation.¹¹ Modern femicide is inserted into the global frame of reference through the international discourses of development and the official version of ecological conservation operating as population control.

Our first epigraph from the *National Geographic* represents the popular cliché that the world is going to hell because "those people" are having children or "breeding." In the discourses of development and the official version

of ecological conservation the poor, the dispossessed and disenfranchised female population of the South is subject to and blamed for the destruction and depletion of the environment. "In global terms," notes a United Nations report, "the impact of a drastic decrease of population in the poorest areas of Asia, Africa, and Latin America would be immeasurably smaller than a decrease of only 5 percent of the richest countries at present consumption levels" (*UNICEF, Children and the Environment*, 1990). Even though this report acknowledges the error in the blame-the-poor population policies of the governments of the South, there is no attempt to reconceptualize United Nations programs and take effective action.

The large abstractions of development discourse and population theory become concrete everyday realities in Indian women's lives through the notion that to be progressive and desire prosperity for the family, it is necessary that they accept reproductive technology in their lives. It is widely and erroneously believed that the techniques of amniocentesis and ultrasound for sex-selection purposes is a regrettable side effect in the transformation of an underdeveloped nation. In short, there is nothing inherently wrong with the new reproductive technologies. If the Third World misuses these material-discursive practices to visit violence on their own women, that is simply their problem. Thus, the gender bias of invasive fertility control technologies and the violence visited on Indian women are often perceived as incidental and aberrant misuse of gender-neutral science. In contradistinction we argue that the role of new reproductive technologies evolved in the North and exported to the South functions to control Third World women's reproductive choices even at the cost of their health and life expectancy.

The postcolonial state's population program strips the rural poor woman of her only resource and without changing any of the material economic conditions that causes her poverty, persuades her that the simple fact of less children and less labor power will result in more prosperity and better conditions for her. Thus, the state ignores the root cause (her poverty) and attacks the symptom (her many children). She is correct in perceiving that the family planning program is of a piece with the inroads made into her resources of water, soil, seed, and forest by depriving her of firewood through deforestation, sale of pasture land, and the systematic destruction of her living environment. The state's family planning and family welfare programs do nothing about the health of women; when they ask for contraception they are given sterilization.

In unpacking the different strands of discourse that function to keep femicide a rational and national choice in postcolonial India we come to the counterintuitive insight that development and modernization have not always enabled the emancipation of all women in all parts of the world. Madhu Kishwar suggests that in postcolonial societies like India, "progress and eco-

conomic development can have very differential impacts on women's and men's lives, and sometimes can even have a harmful impact on women's lives" (*Man-Made Woman*, 1985, 33). This is certainly true in the area of femicide: three decades of political independence from colonial rule has meant that the heterogeneity of familial-social attitudes toward the girl-child are marginalized and modernity ushers in scientifically efficient methods of femicide.

It is social forces of our own modern times that introduce the practice of female infanticide in regions and communities that hitherto had no traditions of girl-child murder. It is in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s that the violence of femicide is generalized and universalized among all classes, regions, and communities of postcolonial India. History teaches us the profoundly anti-modern and anti-progressivist lesson that political independence and modernization means further attrition of the survival conditions for postcolonial Indian women.

Femicide in the Public Domain: The Nationalist Populist Rhetoric of Family Planning

Exactly a century passes between the ineffective abolition of female infanticide in British India in the 1870s and the re-emergence of a new and far more generalized form of scientific genocide of female fetuses in the 1970s. Female infanticide (traditional methods of killing new-born female infants practiced in northwest India) reappears as modern femicide (scientific methods of aborting female fetus combined with traditional methods of killing through neglect and discrimination). Our focus is on the function of nationalist populist rhetoric of family planning in this re-emergent and modernized discourse of femicide.

We deploy the term "nationalist populist rhetoric of family planning" in this section to prevent readers from interpreting family planning in India in Western terms. Family planning connotes to First World women choice, planned parenthood, care of maternal health, choice of contraception, and control over their bodies. Family planning carries a very different set of connotations for most Indian women—state coercion instead of affirmation of a woman's individual choice, disregard of maternal health rather than care of maternal health, women selected for experimentation with unsafe contraception rather than an informed choice of contraception. The political issues around family planning for many women in United States may well be the right to life versus the right to choice, however the political issues concerning family planning for an Indian woman involve discourses of development, overpopulation, and the fact of state coercion. Therefore, we examine family planning not merely as an accepted value-free norm but in the discursive context of

state intervention and the dominant political rhetoric of the 1970s, namely nationalist populism in the Indira Gandhi era.

Nationalist populism has its discursive roots in the First World, in the notion shared by corporate America, the U.S. government, the United Nations, and Third World governments that all the problems of underdevelopment stem from overpopulation in the Third World. In the nationalist populist vocabulary national interest connotes the larger good of the greatest number of citizens as well as the imperative for swift development in order to compete with advanced countries of the world in the global market. The corollary to this populism is the notion that coercion is justified as means for the desirable goal of population decrease. This rhetoric is neo-imperialist because it covers over the nexus between the international community and indigenous governments both of which colonize the poor. The indigenous governments are “persuaded” by international interests to buy reproductive technologies and services, which keep the big multinational pharmaceutical companies in business. The forms of coercion adopted by this international conglomerate of interests consists in linking foreign aid and credit to Third World countries with the level of performance in the field of population control. Instead of resisting this carrot-and-stick approach of the North, nascent democracies of the South like India attempt to jump-start development by undemocratic programs of population control.

The nationalist populist analysis of underdevelopment is predicated on the center/periphery binary and carries profound implications for Indian women. First World women’s rights over their bodies—their right to maternal health, right to contraception and abortion, their informed choices about, as well as their free access to, a variety of scientific means for determining if and when they wish to be pregnant—coexists alongside Third World women’s lack of rights over their bodies. At the very time that American women organize themselves around issues like the environment, nuclear proliferation, women’s rights over their bodies and reproductive choice, elsewhere in the world First World scientists and private corporate interests in the U.S. cooperate with the postcolonial state to unleash new and untested reproductive technologies that deprive Third World women of their right over their own bodies and reproductive choice. This combine consisting of corporate and scientific First World interests and the Indian government discover their ideal subjects for trying out new untested contraception among the poor women population of the Third World. Third World rural and urban women are perceived as guinea pigs who can be easily coerced and need not be informed about the side effects of new contraceptive devices, partly because it is assumed that these women do not know that they have a right to refuse and consequently can be intimidated by the medical profession into accepting injections or pills or surgery, and partly because they are unorganized and politically powerless.¹²

The chief rhetorical feature of nationalist populism is a narrative of the “nation” within which alternative visions and political dissent is disallowed and delegitimated. Indeed, the nationalist populist rhetor speaks alone because there is no debate or dialogue in this rhetorical situation. This is true of the 1970s in India; after two decades of political independence the 1970s is marked by social upheaval and economic crisis; many intellectuals, activists, and cultural workers raise doubts about the social justice in India’s chosen development model and offer alternative visions. It is precisely at such a politically dynamic moment that the ruling Congress party declares the Emergency. The Emergency of 1974–1977, declared by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, mark the watershed years of unprecedented state terrorism through suspension of all democratic institutions, repression of dissent, and large-scale arrests of political dissidents as well as a media blackout on all forms of reportage on state excesses.

Nation and democracy are no longer coeval in the Indian nation-state’s political discourses in the 1970s, thus the imaginary construction of the nation does not include democracy/democratic procedures and institutions. As a direct result the powerful new discourse of family planning does not denote counseling and advising the family, instead family planning in India comes to mean social engineering of the postcolonial family.¹³ The watershed years of state terrorism also mark, in our view, the period of social engineering of the postcolonial Indian family through the nation’s coercive and persuasive apparatus. For the first time a spectrum of coercive strategies are evolved to limit family size. The euphemism for state coercion is “motivating” and every branch of the government, national media, and youth organizations are involved in “family planning motivation.” In the mid-1970s an employee’s certificate of sterilization and the number of people “motivated” is a precondition for promotions, loans, housing, licenses, and permits. State employees are required to undergo vasectomy as well as meet sterilization targets by forcibly “motivating” the poor to undergo vasectomies in mass sterilization camps. These camps are set up in railway stations, slums, villages, and some areas with a high density of the minority Muslim population.

Populist slogans that overpopulation is the single source of India’s underdevelopment and poverty are internalized by the middle-class intelligentsia as part of their everyday speech and political discussion. Contemporary political discourse of the urban elite has a unidimensional view of national problems and solutions: the urban elite espouses the notion that overpopulation is the source of all national ills and population control is the efficient route to development and national prosperity. While the middle-class patriarchal family’s political engagement with nation building lies in consenting to the Prime Minister’s call for a small family, the middle classes also come to

believe that the recalcitrant poor need not have a voice in determining their family size and must be coerced for their own good.¹⁴

The political pieties about overpopulation are not subject to debate and question. Instead, the coining of a phrase suffices for genuine political debate in the nationalist populist simulacrum of the public sphere. The state embarks upon a sustained multimedia propaganda about the small family norm. Large billboards, radio jingles, television and cinema advertisements, puppet shows, politicians' speeches all counsel the Indian couple that happiness and prosperity is defined by numbers. The nationalist slogans of the times are, "A small family is a happy family" (*Chhota parivaar sukhi parivaar*) and catch phrases like, "We are two and we have two" (*Hum doe hamare doe*), "Stop at two or three" (*Do ya teen bus*) and "Wait after one and none after two" (*Ek ke baad abhi nahin, doe ke baad kabhi nahin*). Contemporary films include set situations and dialogues deriding the traditional large family and expounding the benefits of a small family. These slogans and set pieces scold, shame, exhort, and silence the citizenry and in so doing have long-term effects on the subjectivity of the postcolonial family.

Collective resistance first appears as people's fear; rumor and unofficial grapevines serve as the channel for people's information about, and anger against, governmental excesses.¹⁵ Nationalist populist slogans are parodied on the streets, for instance Indira Gandhi's election slogan "Remove poverty" (*Garibi hatao*) is parodied as "In the process of removing poverty they removed/ exterminated the poor" (*Garibi hatate hatate garibon ko hi bata diya*). This slogan refers to the combination strategy by the government of setting up sterilization camps as well as removing the poor from the cities and resettling them outside the city in resettlement colonies. The subsequent political overthrow of the Indira Gandhi government in the elections is widely interpreted as people's rejection of coercive male sterilization. In the post-Emergency electoral campaign the anti-poor politics of Indira Gandhi's "family planning" and prodevelopment policies are exposed by populist slogans coined by the opposition, "Denounce mass male sterilizations" (*Nasbandi hai! hai!*). However, the rhetoric of this oppositional critique, being populist in nature, does not address the anti-woman bias of family planning policies, and it is this omission that predetermines the aftermath of the Emergency.

We do not simplify the discourse of modern femicide in India by suggesting that female fetus killing is merely the outcome of a top-down change imposed in the 1970s on a passive people who fall prey to the coercive and persuasive apparatus of the government. In our view the discursive connection between the Emergency and modern femicide is that under conditions of extraordinary state coercion, femicide is the patriarchal family's invested decoding of the official nationalist populist rhetoric. This decoding is a far

more complex process than the passive internalizing of state directives by the people. The patriarchal family is faced with a dilemma, they are anxious to stake their claim on the economic opportunities offered to a few by the state so they wish to comply with family-planning directives for a small family, and at the same time they are equally determined to preserve and continue their own patriarchal interests through having one or more sons. However, the traditional method of having a male child through large families is a source of social shame in the 1970s. Nationalist-populist messages—prosperity is accessible to all people if they achieve the perfect small family—is reinterpreted by upwardly mobile households to accommodate son-preference. Thus the post-colonial family deciphers the slogan “Stop at two or three” (*Do ya teen bus*) to mean “Stop at two or three sons.” It is in this crisis that many families negotiate between traditional son-preference and the modern small family norm by deploying new, available reproductive technologies like amniocentesis and using them for sex determination and sex selection.

Reproductive technologies imported from the West not only solve the problem of the unwanted female child for individual families, science also quick-fixes the nation’s problem of overpopulation through mass female sterilizations. Referring to the immediate post-Emergency years Alaka M. Basu notes, “In 1977–1978 female sterilizations suddenly made up as much as 80 percent of all sterilizations” (*EPW*, vol. xx, no. 10, 1985, 422). The long-term effects of the Emergency on women in general, and the twentieth-century resurgence of female infanticide in particular, only gradually became evident. Family planning in the Emergency mainly targeted poor men. Post-1977 family-planning policies exclusively target poor women in urban and rural India. The targeting of men in the Emergency causes a government to fall, the targeting of women by the state in the post-1977 years causes no political repercussions. Unlike the Emergency period, the targeting of women in the 1980s and 1990s family planning remains unresisted by the postcolonial family because the patriarchal family is willing to submit their women for sterilization so long as their men are protected. The patriarchal family sanctions female sterilizations despite the fact that the female sterilization operation is more complicated, unsafe, and expensive than male sterilizations. The post-Emergency family-planning focus on female sterilizations is premised on the cynical assumption that women constitute the one group in society against whom violence carries no repercussions. Therefore, this collusion among the international agencies, the state, and the patriarchal family in mass tubectomies does not by any means offer reproductive “choice” to women, instead these mass sterilizations constitute yet another mechanism whereby state-sponsored violence is unleashed on women.

The postcolonial family did not suddenly become a conscienceless predator of women, especially since the majority of families practicing

modern femicide do not belong to the traditionally infanticidal families of northwest India. The predatory behavior of the post-1977 Indian family toward its own women is the cumulative effect of the criminal negligence of state planners. From the first Five-Year Plan these planners do not concern themselves with how population-control measures, in the context of the untransformed feudal-patriarchal necessity for a male child, put increased pressure on the birthing mother and the female child. Modern femicide could not have reached its present genocidal proportions if the nation state had not turned a blind eye toward new forms of violence on women.¹⁶ It is precisely when the state wages war on the postcolonial family that the patriarchal family retaliates by turning predatory on its own women.

The infringement of civil liberties by the state in the Emergency period as well as the forms of state coercion on the postcolonial family triggers a major discursive shift in the Indian women's movements. Women's resistances are cohesively organized around the issue of family and the violence perpetrated on women by the state via the patriarchal family. In the words of a leading activist Brinda Karat, "The [women's] movement became more focused in the post-emergency period. . . . It was only after the emergency that the movement's focus was directed toward the family" (*India Abroad*, December 27, 1996). In 1974–1975 at the very outset of the phenomenon of modern femicide, women's groups call attention to the fact that scientific technology meant for the detection of genetic disorders in a premier research hospital in Delhi (All India Institute of Medical Sciences) is misused by seven out of eight couples to abort the female fetus.¹⁷ In the 1980s and 1990s the ultrasound test is the most widely used method for facilitating female infanticide. Ultrasound technology is hawked by charlatans in private clinics that do not require patients to produce a doctor's permission for the test. These clinics mushroom in every Indian city and reach small towns and villages in mobile vans and many gynecologists habitually require pregnant women to undergo this test.

From the late 1970s, despite growing criticism and information-gathering by women's organizations about this scientific weeding out of female fetuses, no governmental legislation was enacted to monitor or prevent it. The law of 1994 that prohibits the administering of prenatal tests for the purpose of femicide and threatens those who take or administer the test with a three-year prison term and fine comes too late and offers too little to combat this epidemic.¹⁸ Nationalist populist rhetoric of the 1970s has a lasting effect on the ways the postcolonial family justifies female infanticide. The fusing of the nationalist populist rhetoric of family planning with the patriarchal interests of the postcolonial family has the following effects: within the postcolonial family femicide is named as the practice of the small family norm and femicide exacerbates the violence on all women in general.

Femicide and the Condition of Women in the Private-Familial Sphere: Lalli's Suicide/Murder

Manjira Dutta's 1995 documentary film *Relationships (Rishte)* deals with the contemporary problem of femicide. The film documents the 1993 case of Lalli Goel and the subsequent efforts of the woman activist Shyamkali to raise the community's awareness in order to organize collective resistance by women. Lalli Goel was a Delhi housewife who fatally poisoned two of her four daughters and committed suicide on June 8, 1993, because she was misled, after several sex-determination tests, into aborting her male fetus. Throughout the film most of the characters display enormous confusion about whether Lalli's death is a criminal offense for which they should seek legal redress or whether Lalli's death can be written off as a suicide. Amidst all this confusion there are no questions raised about Lalli's murder of her two daughters, which is accepted as a "natural" impulse of a desperate mother.

Dutta's film does not isolate the female fetus as the victim of gendered violence. Instead the film visually constructs a chain of female victims—Lalli, her two dead and two surviving daughters, Lalli's mother-in-law, the new wife, and the neighboring women of the community. In Lalli's case three females pay with their lives for the death of one male fetus, thus the numerical ratio between male and female casualties is three women to one male fetus. The violence does not stop there but continues to spiral forward. Five months after Lalli's death, her husband Gopal marries again. A new list of potential victims springs up in the wake of the earlier death toll. The list comprises Gopal's second wife who is submissive because she has come from a poor family and still has to face the family abuse if she does not give birth to the male heir. The list also includes Lalli's two remaining daughters who are constantly reminded that their siblings' cause of death is due to the fact that they are daughters and not sons.

As Indian women viewers we find it remarkable how the film captures an essential ingredient in the phenomenon of femicide: men constantly speak for women and about women. Many of the women in Manjira Dutta's film do not speak with the exception of Shyamkali the activist. Lalli's female relatives do not speak at all. Her mother is reported as saying that it is too late to seek legal justice. Lalli's mother-in-law moves silently before the camera performing her household chores. Lalli's female neighbors listen with somber expressions to Shyamkali who says, "Today it has happened to this one, tomorrow the same thing can happen to another." Thus visually and discursively the film allows us to come to our own conclusion that it is the male members of the family who make decisions about women's reproductivity.

Lalli is the victim of the most widespread and socially sanctioned abuse in postcolonial Indian families, a form of abuse that can be described without

exaggeration as the colonization of the Third World women's womb. As a child-bearing mother Lalli faces a variety of psychological, physical, social, and economic abuse because she does not give birth to a son. There are no laws, institutions, governmental or nongovernmental agencies, or women's shelters that can offer Lalli protection from the violence visited on her due to son-preference. Lalli is more educated than her husband but despite her higher level of education the passive collusion of her natal family and her economic powerlessness as a housewife combine to severely limit her options. Lalli and her daughters are at the mercy of her married family and unable to walk away. Infact Indian women's education and employment alone cannot ensure that their status will automatically improve to the degree that they will no longer be subject to the sorts of abuse visited on Lalli. In the postcolonial patriarchal family, the educated and employed married woman is subject to the same sorts of controls as the uneducated, unemployed, or underemployed married woman as is obvious from the dowry death killings in India.

A program of resistance to the systemic violence of femicide involves, in our view, a debate and discussion on the discourses and popular idioms in which that violence is enacted, interpreted, and sanctioned. Each character in the documentary offers their own version of the reasons for the suicide/murder. The filmic text constructs Lalli's victimage in such a way that as spectators we are impelled to focus on the ways in which tradition enmeshes with modernity in making Lalli a victim.

In India the abuser and the female victim's subjectivity is produced and shaped by the material and discursive apparatus of overpopulation theory. Each character in Manjira Duttas' film situates female infanticide in the discursive concepts and terminology of Malthusian population theory. The dead woman's husband Gopal Goel explains the reasoning for the mistaken abortion in terms of numbers, "My Mrs. felt mental *tension* because we already have four daughters and this fifth daughter will add to the numbers." In contemporary India the "numbers game" as we term it, constitutes the popular idiom for the Malthusian connection between a nation's population and the state of national prosperity.¹⁹ In this popular idiom the numbers game refers to the *number of expendable females* because postcolonial modernity ushers in the view that women are not producers but consumers and destroyers of family prosperity.

Gopal attributes the numbers game to his dead wife. Nevertheless the vocabulary in which he describes his own thoughts after his wife's abortion reveals that he habitually thinks in the binary of women as expendable numbers versus men as cherished members of the family. For instance, Gopal refers to the male fetus as his *umeed* or hope, revealing his belief that male children are the family's hope and are never counted in the "numbers game" among the unmourned female casualties. In front of the camera Gopal refers

to his new wife as being on “trial,” he uses the English word in the idiom of spoken Hindi-English to openly admit before the filmmaker that the new wife’s ability to please him and produce sons will determine her fate as a replaceable number.

In a similar rhetorical maneuver Goel’s father uses population theory indirectly by attributing it to the victim. Lalli, he claims, killed her two eldest daughters because she wished to save the family ten lakhs in dowry. He says, “She wanted to save us ten lakhs for our profit (*faida*)” thus outlining the Malthusian idea that children are a drain on the nation’s resources and their accidental death or murder adds profit to the family and nation. Both men, Gopal and his father, speak before the camera in a relaxed body posture; the state’s discourse of population and the popular idiom of the numbers game has made it possible for them to talk about the woman who was an integral part of their family for ten years, as well as the murdered daughters who had claims on their affections, in a dehumanizing and instrumentalized terminology of four numbers who should not become five and are now reduced to two.²⁰ Thus, male perpetrators argue that female fetus killing is a form of population control when it is actually gender discrimination.

The film uses montage to intercut Gopal’s statements with the filmmaker’s interviews with the medical establishment. Dutta’s montage shocks the viewer into realizing that the educated medical establishment echoes, endorses, and completely concurs with Gopal in rationalizing femicide through population theory. The cinematic text presents us with three characters who analyze the Lalli case through their professional vocabulary. The psychologist Indrani Guha uses the family-planning terminology to describe a mother’s desire for a male child as a societal “goal.” Ms. Guha’s analysis erases the social-familial violence on Lalli by describing her suicide/murder as the psychological effect of failing in a societal goal. These educated urban professionals are not impelled by the Lalli case and the growing statistics of femicide to review, reevaluate, or reflect on the imperialism and gender-bias in the discourse of population control, which they have imbibed from state propaganda.

The educated elite are no different from the marketing professionals who seek to popularize ultrasound technology as a boon for both the Indian couple and the nation. An advertisement in a national newspaper in the early 1980s openly sold the facilities of a private clinic for detecting female fetuses, “Amniocentesis and ante-natal sex determination has come to our rescue and can help in keeping some check over the accelerating population as well as give relief to the couples requiring a male child” (*Indian Express*, June 27, 1982). This advertisement was commissioned by the New Bhandari Hospital in the city of Amritsar, Punjab, and was widely criticized by feminist groups and the national press. The Bhandari Hospital gained national recognition in 1982 when a male fetus was mistakenly aborted by this antenatal sex determination

clinic. Note how the language of the advertisement couches the sale of a service to the client in terms of national goals (“keeping some check over the accelerating population”), and moreover aligns the national goal of reduced population growth with the patriarchal goal of male progeny (“give relief to the couples requiring a male child”). There is no perceived dissonance between the two goals: nation and patriarchy have become one, both are the beneficiaries of the genocide of women.

In Gopal’s account given below, we can gauge how Indian families respond to state propaganda and the media blitz; the former threatens them with poverty and the latter seductively promises a scientific solution to their problems:

In 1990 there was an advertisement in the newspaper for an Amrit Clinic in Azadpur which offered “ultrasound.” My wife said that she wanted to get an “ultrasound” done. I said there is no profit in such things, forget it. But she did not agree. She kept insisting. I said O.K. I accompanied her to the clinic. The clinic takes one thousand Rupees for an “ultrasound.” The first time they did the “ultrasound,” they said we have a “doubt,” it is not a “confirmed report.” We got the “testing” done a second time, they took another thousand Rupees. Then a third, again they took a thousand Rupees. Then after the fourth they said it is “definite” that it is a girl (words used in English are indicated in quotation marks).

Gopal’s words show that the money and family resources that can be spent on the birthing mother’s health and on the daughters is instead spent on the four ultrasound tests. Lalli is doubly the subject of science: as the reproductive female body she is controlled by science and subjected to intrusive technology; as a modern citizen Lalli comes to believe in the state and medical propaganda that omnipotent science has the answer to her problem of repeated pregnancies in the hope of a son. When the charlatans parading as bonafide medical professionals misdiagnose the ultrasound test Lalli is betrayed by her belief in the infallible god of science. We read a curious anomaly in the fact that for Lalli science enmeshes with woman-hating superstitions in labeling her unlucky (*abhaagin*) and accursed.

The film also introduces us to the radiologists Mr. and Mrs. Garg. Mrs. Garg takes the lead in the ensuing conversation and her views represent the typical response of the educated urban elite to the problem of modern femicide:

In our country there is an ongoing “controversy” that “female infanticide” is going on. In actuality “infanticide” happens to achieve “population control.” From the time that “MTP” (Medical Termination of Pregnancy) has been “legalized,” “feticide” happens in any case. Our society already gives more

importance to boys, families insist upon a son. Her mother-in-law, mother put “pressure,” her family, mother and mother-in-law put “pressure” that no there must be a son, a son must be born. Then they come to get an ultrasound in order to find out if it is a girl (breaks off). If it is a son they keep the pregnancy, if it is a daughter they (pause) “terminate” the pregnancy (words used in English are indicated in quotation marks).

The idiom of Mrs. Garg’s speech is typical of the urban educated Indian. Her switching between Hindi and English words and phrases indicate, in the context of the discussion, that she uses particular English words, phrases and medical vocabulary like “MTP,” “terminate” and “pressure” to distance herself from the violence she describes and keep the discussion at the level of clinical abstraction. Mrs. Garg makes an explicit causal connection between modern femicide and the drive for population control. What is troubling about her account is that not only does she accept without question the absolute good of population control, but she naturalizes infanticide as population control, implying that families kill off female children because they want to limit family size. Mrs. Garg speaks within masculinist protocols in the presence of her husband by espousing patriarchal woman-hating logic as common sense.

The film captures how patriarchal and Malthusian discourses from two distinct sites converge in blaming the victim: the psychological battery on Lalli is exemplified by her husband and father-in-law blaming her for the violence meted out to her; in Malthusian theory the poor are blamed for their poverty and poor women and children are told that their oppression is caused by themselves. The two voices dissenting from this pervasive belief within the film belong to the victim’s brother and the activist. Lalli’s brother repeatedly refers to the multiple deaths as the *Lalli-kand* or crime and insists that it is a crime of violence by Lalli’s married family. The activist Shyamkali challenges the very basis of population theory in her opening words to the victim’s female neighbors, “It is said that when a nation’s population increases the main responsibility and the chief burden (*mukhya zimmedari*) falls on women.”

In Manjira Dutta’s film we discover that all the characters in the film who are advocates of population theory also end up blaming the female victim for the violence perpetuated on her. Both the psychologist and radiologist insidiously blame the victim by characterizing “such women as Lalli” as ignorant women who commit femicide and suicide. Gopal is far more direct in blaming the victim:

My wife experienced mental “tension” that we already have four daughters, now this fifth daughter will arrive. Mentally she felt burdened. She began creating conflict at home. She then asked what about an abortion? Afterwards, when it was revealed that it was a boy, then I began to feel great sadness in

my heart. Mentally the “botheration” arose that things had reached such a pass that it was a matter of killing or being killed? When my wife got the news, her life received a blow that the very hope we were living for had been washed away. Blood began to boil . . .

In the above extract Gopal’s rhetoric and self-representation is of the loving, suffering, compliant and passive partner in the marriage who agrees to every unreasonable demand made by his wife to have four sex-determination tests and abortion. In Gopal’s rhetoric the dead wife is represented as aggressive, quarrelsome, hysterical, and the killer of his unborn son. Most significantly Gopal characterizes Lalli as desiring a son far more than himself.

A variation of this rhetoric of abuse is deployed by Gopal’s father: he represents himself as a loving and doting elder with a special affective bond with his dead daughter-in-law. Both men in Lalli’s married family blame her for the mistaken abortion. Both men also make it a point to mention to the filmmaker that they each had, on separate occasions, counseled Lalli against the sex determination tests and abortion. Their version of events is suspicious for the simple reason that in a middle-class Indian family major decisions about the woman’s body, especially decisions that involve an outlay of money, are made by the men of the household. The male representation of Lalli as a freely choosing subject is a patriarchal fiction.

To understand how the patriarchal logic of an untransformed feudalism enmeshed with deformed capitalism coalesces into the language of the people, we quote part of an extended speech made by Lalli’s father-in-law. In the extract below he explains the patriarchal basis of female infanticide and femicide:

In our country, our society and way of life (*mulk, samaj, logdari*) girls cannot do without brothers. Why can’t they live without brothers? Whose house will married girls go to for their natal home? Here is the family house. This house is the father’s and grandfather’s ancestral property (*jaidad*). Daughters mean the dispersion of property (*bat jaigi*). The house as symbol of our family name (*namonishan*) will perish. Daughters are another’s wealth (*beti paraya dhan*).

The language in the above speech is a perfect example of how two idioms blend inextricably in popular consciousness. For example, Mr. Goel enunciates the feudal axiom of patrilineal property. His use of folklore like daughters are another’s wealth, as well as his chosen example of a married daughter’s need for a natal home, encourage the film viewer to conclude that Mr. Goel articulates a purely traditional line of thought. However, underlying the feudal values there is also a modernist Malthusian idea, which he has imbibed from the

postcolonial nation's twenty-year propaganda. The Malthusian idea is that one claimant results in the consolidation of resources while more claimants result in the dispersal of resources, and furthermore the notion that women as daughters and wives are mere consumers of wealth whereas men are the producers of wealth. Thus, in the above speech the feudal and capitalist elements of violence on women are indistinguishable. Indeed social scientific population theory masquerades as the traditionalism of the family patriarch.

For theoretical and pedagogic clarity, the notion of deformed feudal patriarchies in modern India bears further explanation. Feudal patriarchies under colonialism and neocolonialism are deformed by the discourses of capitalism. The feudal impulse in modern femicide grows out of the feudal-patriarchal traditions of son-preference, patrilineal inheritance customs, property laws, and systems of upward mobility. These feudal features are deformed precisely because modernization under the aegis of colonialism wipes out the countervailing feudal traditions of matriarchies, heterogeneous family structures, and traditional support structures for women from the community and the woman's natal family. Moreover dynamic traditions of social protest in feudal India offered marginal groups, particularly women, avenues of resistance. However, the advance of capitalism in the peripheries robs women of all these traditional avenues.

Traditionally the patriarchal demand for sons has built-in checks and balances against excessive violence on women. Lalli's family can adopt a male child from the extended family or kin. Alternately the family can choose the *ghar jamai* form of daughter's marriage in which the son-in-law lives with his wife's family and performs all the duties and obligations of a son; it was the custom in many communities to invite the *ghar jamai* son-in-law to live with his bride's family at an early age in order that he may bond affectively with the family. In some cases a family without sons rears an orphan boy to fulfill the duties of a son. Among the poorer classes son-preference is modified by the attitude that children of both sexes are labor-power and therefore girls are productive members of the family.

The flexibility of gender roles was another traditional strategy of containment. For instance, in a family without male heirs the eldest daughter assumes the role of an unmarried householder; her earnings sustain the family; she treats her married sisters and their progeny as her own; she lives in the family home and binds the family into a cohesive social unit. A variation of this family structure can be found in many post-Independence traditional Indian families where the solution for the absence of sons is worked out by parents treating the daughter or daughters "like the sons" of the family, including the daughters as productive partners in major family decisions and instilling an indissoluble bond between the siblings. In some instances the family waits and chooses the daughter who seems most likely to benefit from

a masculinized child-rearing. These social stratagems do not demolish son preference, as many of us would like to see, but rather work around it; male privilege is sustained while building checks and balances to ensure that life-threatening violence is not meted out to daughters and mothers.

Why did these customary modes fail for Lalli? In the film Lalli's father-in-law suggests that the first of these strategies—adoption of a male child from the extended family—was contemplated. Part of the answer to the question posed above lies in the way the film constructs a portrait of the abuser, Lalli's husband. Gopal Goel is a chilling portrait of the male abuser. He is the urban postcolonial man who views his relations with women like a modern consumer, consequently he applies the consumerist logic to his wife's womb because he expects the best product of a son or sons and feels cheated if he receives damaged products of daughters. This abuser has never been opposed or challenged by the institutions, social forces, or laws in postcolonial society to rethink son-preference or question his male privilege. His forms of abuse derive from his self-confessed capitalist entrepreneurship; he rejects his father's solution of adopting a relative's child on the consumerist logic that he deserves a son with his own genetic makeup. Like a modern consumer Gopal Goel awards himself a new wife, Gopal speaks proudly to the filmmaker of his personal "choice" in his second wife and displays her before the camera. As an entrepreneur Gopal can preserve feudal norms of family property passing from father to son with the help of modern reproductive technologies. Patriarchal capitalism does not, in the majority of post-Independence Indian families, contradict feudal values and family structures. Contrary to the modernity myths, the scientific forces of modernization do not function as an opposing or countervailing force, instead violence on Indian women increases.

The film cannot give us direct access to the deceased Lalli's subjectivity, therefore we do not know how far the victim internalized the abuser's reasoning. Did she value herself only as a son-producing machine? In our reading of the film the silenced Lalli speaks most volubly through the way she assembles the tableau of herself and her two poisoned daughters. We name this death tableau Lalli's suicide note, not because we condone her act of taking life, but because we read Lalli's suicide note as writing-in-death that the living must decipher.

As feminists we read in Lalli's suicide note the impulse to succumb and the equally strong and contradictory impulse to resist. The elements of Lalli's resistance in her suicide note are not easy to read. Women's lives are lived under erasure, therefore the suicide note functions to register the fact that Lalli suffers unbearable psychological abuse from her married family. Lalli's death tableau of mother and daughters spells out the truth that female infanticide and femicide concerns women's survival in relation to each other. The negative side of the suicide note also needs interpretation. In killing two of her eldest daughters Lalli succumbs to the familial-social mode of treating the girl

child as excess expenditure, as disposable rubbish and as three female consumers of family wealth. The death tableau reinforces the patriarchal treatment of women as cheap, available, and replaceable.

Perhaps the most evocative shot in Manjira Dutta's film is the still of Lalli's surviving daughters framed by the doorway and staring at the street performance of a vendor and his monkeys. They look neglected and traumatized by the disappearance of their siblings and mother and the arrival of the stepmother. They are infanticide survivors. At one point in the film Lalli's brother says that if Lalli had her way she would have taken all four girls with her. These girls bear the indelible mark of their mother's suicide note. To a greater or lesser degree all the women of the community, including the new bride and Lalli's mother-in-law, are reminded by Lalli's suicide note that they are permitted to survive. The patriarchal productivity of femicide lies not in increasing the prosperity of the family but in subduing the women of the family with reminders of female casualties, thereby reproducing mechanisms within the family to discipline and punish the surviving women.

The postcolonial state colonizes Lalli's womb several times over. The state planners, family planning personnel, doctors, and advertisers put all the weight of state coercion and state propaganda to persuade as well as coerce Lalli into believing that her task is to magically produce a son within the two children family norm. State-organized population theory makes little or no attempt to address the patriarchal issues that Lalli deals with on a day-to-day basis, nor does the state address the very social violence it has created, namely how the small family norm intensifies violence on women. The small family norm enmeshes with son-preference to create multiple victims.²¹ In the film Lalli disappears within the population discourse and its variations. The overwhelming dominance of this discourse in the film prevents basic questions from being asked and answered about the crime like the victim's agency. Indeed population discourse speaks the victim.

A public debate and a dialogue needs to be opened up concerning how women can resist the burden of producing male children. In a society where son-preference and daughter discrimination is widely practiced, where state planners are intimately aware that most couples produce large families in order to have a son, the state family planning drive only succeeds in shaming women like Lalli Goel—to the shame of not having a son is added the shame of too many children.

Alternative Paradigms and Possible Solutions

Alternative paradigms for Indian women have necessarily to be located *outside* the capitalist patriarchal logic, because the logic of global capitalism only

works by distorting and deforming relations in societies at the periphery like India. Capitalist patriarchy in India devalues women as consumers and destroyers of family wealth and overvalues men as producers and conservers of family wealth. When the Malthusian discourse of few people/more resources is introduced into India by state planners, the scientism of population control transposes into woman control and woman killing.

The discourses that sustain modern femicide in postcolonial India are multiple and complex. The complexity of the issues around femicide derive from the history of this practice in the public sphere as well as the histories in the private-familial sphere. Public and private passions are provoked at the site of female fetus killing. Therefore the solutions to this complex network of violence against women must necessarily be varied, multifaceted, and address the violence against women at multiple levels.

The poor rural Usilampatti woman that we quote in the second epigraph is a woman without choice. Reproductive choice does not mean the same thing for women of all societies. Under the development paradigm Indian women of all classes become victim/consumers of new reproductive technologies, abort their female fetuses, and breed male children by design under the mistaken belief that they are achieving reproductive choice. In fact, they are assenting to, rather than resisting, the femicidal logic of devaluing women. Women without choices commit femicide for the purpose of population control. In order that women have a measure of choice, family planning in India must come to mean local consensual strategies for noninvasive, non-toxic, woman-oriented contraception. Family-planning programs must put more emphasis on maternal health so that the burden of family spacing and family size is not wrecked on women's bodies and women's psyches.

The destructive logic of modern femicide can be opposed and resisted by radically rethinking our basic assumptions about the relations between development and the environment *viz-à-viz* women. We have to make the choice between development and subsistence: in the development paradigm Third World poverty is often defined as the absence of consumer goods. In our view poverty has to be redefined in culture-specific terms. Further, in the context of Third World, poverty has to be rethought in terms of the absence of a life-sustaining and healthy mode of existence, not the absence of high levels of consumption and ownership. In the subsistence perspective poverty is characterized by the lack of clean air, water, forest, and land through the privatizing of natural resources, the destruction of forests, and the poisoning of land and water resources. By the same token familial and national prosperity, in the subsistence perspective, does not refer to the superabundance of consumer goods and sophisticated consumerism but instead signifies sustainable subsistence predicated on individual and community rights to clean air, water, forest, and land.

We assert that in a sexist patriarchal society the end of girl-child murder is possible only through the affirmation of women as producers, inheritors as well as custodians of ecotraditions, and practitioners of ecological conservation. The nexus between capitalism and patriarchy can and should be resisted by positing the value of women as producers in relation to the environment. The entire Malthusian discourse rests on the notion of the environment as limited resources that human beings plunder and do not regenerate. Throughout history it is women, peasants, and indigenous peoples who have conserved, regenerated, revitalized, and given back to the environment. The Bishnoi community in Rajasthan, led three hundred years ago by a woman Amrita Devi, gave up their lives to save the Khejri trees by clinging to them. The Khejri trees are sacred to the Bishnoi community and this traumatic event began a tradition of protecting animals, the environment, and tree conservation and planting, which continues today. The Bishnoi lifestyle is organized around their role as the protectors of the environment. While population policy makers indiscriminately characterize the rural poor as destroyers of the environment, a closer examination of rural communities reveals that the ecological balance is maintained through the discipline of regeneration traditionally practiced by Bishnoi women and men.

This is not an isolated example of the reciprocity that has traditionally existed between rural poor and indigenous communities and the environment. The two-decades-old Chipko movement in Garhwal is a movement in which principally women fought to preserve their ecological resources—land, water, forests, and hills—which constitute their livelihood and subsistence base. The term “Chipko” literally means embracing trees. Chipko women activists reject development in the form of quarrying of the hillsides and felling of the forest trees that destroys their environment. By refusing monetary compensation for the number of trees felled, Chipko women in effect disavow the capitalist patriarchal industrial system in favor of a subsistence lifestyle, and in so doing these women redefine the notion of what constitutes the good life. The good life for them involves a close reciprocal relationship with the environment where they are in charge of their freedom and choice and manage their environmental resources in accordance with ecologically sound and community based principles.

The anti-femicide affirmation of women as producers and life-sustaining conservationists requires a fundamental change of our world view. In representing and understanding femicide as a postcolonial crisis for Indian women, we have laid particular stress on the discursive aspect of violence on women because the feminist debate on the violence of killing and devaluing daughters has only just begun.