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# Norm, Margin and Counter-Power Migrant Hindu Women in Portugal

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**Abstract:** Migrant communities constitute privileged spaces for observing the processes of reproduction, adaptation, and transformation of cultural norms. In the case of the Hindu population residing in Portugal, principles associated with dharma, tradition, hierarchy, family, and gender differences continue to structure—albeit in varying ways—expectations regarding women's behaviour. These norms are embedded in power relations that span both the public and private spheres and which, in a migratory context, can take on particular significance as mechanisms for preserving identity and group cohesion.

This article analyses precisely those women who, due to various circumstances, depart from socially prescribed models and come to occupy marginal positions. Such transgression can take on varying degrees of intensity and trigger social control mechanisms ranging from criticism and gossip to exclusion and ostracism. However, the margin does not merely represent a loss of status or belonging; it can also constitute a space for resistance, agency, and the construction of alternative forms of women's power.

**Keywords:** Women, Hinduism, Exclusion, Social margin

## Introduction

Foucault (1975) conceptualises disciplinary power as anchored in a disciplinary discourse, the emergence of which—in the West—he traces back to the seventeenth century. However, discursive forms of a similar nature can be identified in Indian society: dharma, the orally transmitted secular tradition, moral codes associated with different social groups, and gender norms guide and discipline social agents. Inscribed and reinterpreted in sacred texts and civil codes, these discourses reflect power relations that define socially legitimate behaviours and contribute to the subordination of women.

Hindu disciplinary discourse operates in both the public and private spheres, as men and women internalise the cultural universe and the habitus that they reproduce in their daily practices. In a migration context, certain cultural traits may be accentuated as a defence mechanism against anomie (Merton, 1968). The relationship between social power and the system of rules (Burns and Flam, 2000) presupposes recognition and acceptance by the actors involved; however, not everyone is able or willing to conform to dominant codes, and such non-conformity entails social costs.

Although the *pativratya* ideology is largely outdated in urban India and among migrant populations, the normative system regarding women remains rigid in some sectors (Ahuja, Ram, 1993; Flood, Gavin, 2000). The tradition—even when adapted or reinterpreted—persists among a segment of the Hindu population residing in Portugal. Women who deviate from these models may become agents of deviance and face sanctions ranging from criticism and gossip to exclusion.

## Methodology

The research was based on a qualitative approach, which is particularly well-suited to understanding the experiences, representations, and strategies constructed by Hindu women in a migration context. Semi-structured interviews and life history interviews were conducted; additionally, the study involved an ethnographic exploration of areas with the highest concentrations of the Hindu population residing in Portugal (the vast majority of whom originate from the former Portuguese colony of Mozambique). Carried out in the Lisbon metropolitan area—where the largest number of Hindu residents live—the study sought to analyse processes of conformity to and deviation from the social and cultural norms governing women's behaviour, situating various trajectories between the reproduction of the established order and diverse forms of transgression, marginalisation, and resistance.

Twenty-five in-depth interviews and life history interviews were conducted with migrant Hindu women, prioritising an open, biographical approach (Poirier & Clapier, 1995), alongside 10 interviews with older men whose memories and knowledge provided insight into the condition of women as defined by social norms.

The interviewees reconstructed their life paths, family and marital experiences, community relationships, migration processes, and events they deemed significant. These interviews thus provided access not only to the

narrated facts but also to the meanings and interpretations the women themselves ascribed to them (Kaufman, 1996; Yow, 1994).

The empirical universe was constructed using snowball sampling, a method suited to a population structured by networks of kinship, friendship, and community sociability. For in-depth analysis, the most exemplary cases representing various positions between the norm and the margins were selected. This selection followed an analytical and interpretive logic rather than criteria of statistical representativeness, aiming to highlight varying degrees of conformity, transgression, exclusion, ostracism, negotiation, and resistance (Lahire, 2002). The empirical component was complemented by documentary and historical-contextual research, including press sources from the colonial period in Mozambique, statistics, and official documentation. Triangulating biographical narratives, documentation, and historical context made it possible to interpret individual paths as socially and historically situated trajectories, linking gender, migration, ethnic belonging, family, power relations, and social transformation (Denzin, 1970, 1997; Lahire, 2002).

## 1. Women's Agency and Power

Deviation from orthodoxy, in the sense attributed by Bourdieu (1972), challenges the boundaries of socially legitimate behaviour. For Durkheim (1971), however, deviance does not merely threaten order; it defines moral boundaries, reinforces solidarity, and can foster innovation. Pfohl (1994) likewise emphasises that sanctions communicate the limits of expected behaviour, yet overly rigid societies reduce their capacity for adaptation. Deviance can, therefore, contribute to the revision of rules in the face of new circumstances.

Thus, deviations can introduce innovation and open up spaces for social change within the women's world of "travelling Hinduism" (Bastos, 1990). Women who transgress the grammars structuring and regulating social interactions (Burns, Tom and Helena Flam, 2000) thereby contribute to the emergence of new forms of relationships.

A marginal position can result from social exclusion. A woman is not necessarily ignored by her peers, but she may be sidelined from social activities, stop receiving invitations to Satsang's, weddings, or other ceremonies, and see her participation in the public sphere curtailed. In more extreme situations, ostracism occurs: she becomes effectively ignored, shunned, and portrayed as a harmful or polluting presence. Williams (2005: 48) describes ostracism as an extreme form of dissociation, marked by the denial of social recognition and civility.

Paradoxically, a marginal position can generate counter-power. An excluded woman seeks solutions outside the confines of ethnic insularity, expands her friendship networks, and may influence other women to refuse arranged marriages, question problematic marital relationships, or make decisions that run counter to established codes. This capacity for agency is perceived as a threat by the women who act as guardians of the ethnic boundary—those who interpret and protect tradition against external influences (Lacoste-Dujardin, Camille, 1992).

Thus, a power relationship among women is observed, rather than merely a direct opposition between men and women. Although men participate in gossip and criticism, the most intense pressures are often exerted by women upon other women. As Magalhães (2002: 193) points out, the empowerment and power of some women may rest upon the oppression of others. Women's agency must, therefore, be understood in terms of the concrete margins of power available.

If, following Giddens (2000), we understand power as an integral part of the constitution of social practices, it is important to observe the ways in which women situated on the margins acquire the capacity for action. These include illness, denunciation, and trance. The latter constitutes a socially accepted temporary margin: women who receive *mataji*—the descent of the goddess—are not considered transgressors but are situated temporarily on the threshold between rule and disorder. During possession, the *bhuvi* (the woman undergoing possession) can speak, prophesy, offer counsel, and bestow blessings, thereby exercising a contextually legitimised power.

The margin must, therefore, be understood as a continuum. Some women remain close to the norm; others occupy intermediate positions, where criticism softens over time; others are enduringly labelled as outsiders. Acts of surveillance and sanction—often perpetuated by older women—contribute to maintaining the doxa, while the very existence of deviance reveals possibilities for transformation. Ávila, Patricia and Mariana Alves (1993)

Women living in situations of oppression within an asymmetrical social order can appropriate forms of resistance, albeit often at a high cost. Goffman (1988); Foucault (1975).

Pallavi is a case in point. Married through a family arrangement at an early age, she was subjected to intense pressure by a mother-in-law who abused her physically and psychologically, and by a husband many years her senior who ignored her. The possibility of separation was on her mind for years, yet she was held back by the fear of how her family and community would react.

> "Divorce happens now, but back then, there were no divorces. We had to suffer! [...] My parents said: 'My daughter, you are walking out that door and never coming back here. You might suffer, you might be miserable, but you suffer and you stay there!' [...] You are married, so you stay in your in-laws' and husband's house" [Pallavi, 1947].

Without formally ending the marriage, Pallavi unwittingly developed strategies that allowed her to give outward expression to her suffering. At one point, she fell ill and was admitted to the Júlio de Matos Hospital. Her failure to improve was reinterpreted within her social circle as a "spiritual ailment" and the "evil eye" *(jadu*), attributed to the envy of neighbours. This condition, validated by a *bhuvi*, granted her a unique status: that of a socially accepted form of deviance.

In this case, the illness served as a means of insubordination and a way to activate a form of power that Pallavi would hardly have exercised otherwise. In her own words: "Then I got sick, and now... I tell him whatever comes into my head. I accuse him! [...] I shout whatever I want, and he says nothing" [Pallavi, 1947]. Behaviour that would previously have been sanctioned becomes partially tolerated when associated with psychological frailty (Goffman, 1988).

Pallavi alternates between working as a pantry maid and periods of institutionalisation when her condition worsens. She maintains few friendships but retains the community's respect, and her family remains relatively shielded from stigmatisation. The illness thus grants her a temporary "right" to engage in marginal behaviours. Manju, by contrast, represents a visible and enduring transgression associated with a hypogamous marriage and divorce.

## 2. Ostracism

Within the normative framework analysed, divorce is portrayed as a serious disruption of lineage organisation and family expectations. The breaking of the marital alliance results in a loss of honour, though this manifests differently for the two sexes. Women are held especially responsible for domestic harmony and for preserving and transmitting tradition to their children; within this logic, divorce can be interpreted as a sign of female failure and a source of dishonour for the woman's family of origin.

For men, the loss of honour is linked to an inability to fulfil the socially expected masculine role. While a man is permitted to rebuild his marital life, a divorced woman is often expected to show dedication to her children, modesty, and a willingness to make sacrifices. Although divorces were infrequent within the group studied, this does not imply an absence of conflict or marital violence—issues often kept within the private sphere due to the fear of public exposure.

Manju was ostracised from her social circle, labelled, and stigmatised for having transgressed two rules considered fundamental: marrying outside her caste (hypogamy) and subsequently divorcing, only to later enter into a relationship with a man of a different religion. Hailing from a Hindu family of high caste status that was well-established within the migrant community, she attended a good school and associated closely with Portuguese girls—an experience that fostered a desire to forge a path different from the one traditionally expected of women in her caste. In her own words:

> I wanted to study and make something of myself. I wasn't your typical Indian girl; I had different ideas. I was liberal... I wanted to be a journalist. But my mother—who didn't know how to look after me—and my father—who was actually an open-minded man but heavily influenced by his family—disagreed. Lohanas can only work in trade, they said. So, I was supposed to be a merchant's wife [Manju, 1967].

After Mozambique's independence, Manju's father sent his children to Porbandar, Gujarat, so they could attend Indian schools and learn English and Hindi. After failing the language proficiency test, they returned to Mozambique in 1978; in 1980, the father decided to send his wife and children to Portugal. For Manju's parents, the choice between living in India or Portugal was an easy one. Her paternal great-grandfather had migrated to Mozambique in the late 19th century, and the entire family—while maintaining a strong Hindu identity—was closer to Portuguese standards of living than to Indian ones. About a year later, Manju's father and paternal uncles also left for Portugal, where they invested their savings in the traditional textile import trade. Meanwhile, Manju and her younger sister adopted a more Western style of dress and behaviour.

> When we arrived here, my father insisted that we update our wardrobe. The week after we arrived, we went to Rossio with my older brother to buy Western clothes. My father didn't want his daughters to be poorly dressed [Manju, 1967].

The "Hindu Community" association did not yet exist, so social gatherings took place in spaces made available by the local parish councils in their respective neighbourhoods. Parents sought to control the young people's relationships, avoiding the development of close intimacy with Portuguese people or members of other castes. Friendships largely mirrored the social patterns that had existed in Mozambique, characterised by contacts that were primarily circumstantial and sporadic.

Families tended to cluster in neighbourhoods where members of the same caste or related castes predominated, fostering relatively insular social circles.

The extended family structure, predominant in Mozambique, underwent some changes. Living space in Portugal was more limited and economic conditions were harsher, fostering a rise in the number of nuclear families. Even so, the need for in-group proximity led Hindu families to reorganise their domestic arrangements so they could stay close to one another: they would rent multiple apartments in the same building or share the same shack—a practice observed particularly among families belonging to lower castes and social classes. Alves, Mariana, Patricia Avila (1994)

Manju attended Hindu festivals and socialised with other young people in the community, while—in accordance with her family's wishes—maintaining a greater distance from the Portuguese population. Despite an unspoken yet subtly maintained separation between the castes from Diu and those from Gujarat, sporadic contact occurred during festive periods. It was in this context that Manju met Mayur.

The courtship was conducted in secret, in an attempt to avoid the watchful eyes of other community members, until the relationship became public and sparked a scandal. Mayur belonged to a caste with a much lower status than Manju's, which is why her parents firmly opposed the relationship. Mayur's mother also expressed disapproval—not only due to the disparity in caste status but also because of differences in dietary habits, social customs, and rituals: Manju was a strict vegetarian, whereas Mayur ate meat and fish.

The astrologer issued an unfavourable prediction, yet—defying her family's expectations—Manju decided to leave home and live with Mayur. The marriage lacked the usual solemnity; it was not recognised as a samskara and, consequently, was not accompanied by the expected ritual blessings. Manju's family was not present, either.

Manju tried to adapt to Mayur's caste customs. She began wearing a sari and attempted to conduct herself according to the expectations placed on women in that social milieu. Despite her efforts to adapt, nothing seemed to work. She sought to be submissive and learn from her mother-in-law—including how to prepare food—but the consumption of meat within that caste confronted her with a taboo central to her own upbringing. The domestic and ritual world she now inhabited was deeply alien to her; it was a world that had previously been portrayed to her as impure and inferior. These differences progressively drove the couple apart, until arguments escalated into acts of aggression. Separation and, subsequently, divorce followed, further fueling indignation within the small migrant community.

Until the 1950s, divorce was not permitted in India, except under the customs of certain castes where the dissolution of a marriage could occur upon payment of a sum (jhagra)—determined by caste elders—as was the case among the Kania of Diu (Dhruvahajan & Vanaga, 1989; Marriott & McKim, 1990; Mukherjee, 1993). When divorce was not an option, separation would occur—often with particularly harsh consequences for women, upon whom the blame for their husband's social humiliation fell. Manju would experience this rejection acutely within a relatively rigid community setting, as she said:

> I was rejected by everyone. By my family and the community. It's as if I were a woman of the streets. As if I had to sleep with men to survive. A divorced woman has no rights to anything.

Her husband sought custody of the child, relying on the patrilineal tradition whereby the children of a marriage belong to the father's lineage. Manju, however, rejected this rule and invoked Portuguese law, and the son remained with his mother. Even nearly sixteen years after the divorce, some women continued to refer to Mayur as Manju's "husband" and suggest she return to him. For these women, the marital bond remained symbolically indissoluble.

Faced with the difficulty of accepting difference—or the breaking of a bond where the violation is perceived as a threat to order—the social group imposes sanctions on the transgressors and labels them as marginal. From an interactionist perspective, it is not the breaking of the marital bond itself—as an intrinsic quality of the act—that defines deviance, but rather the application by others of rules and sanctions regarding that behaviour (Becker, 1985; 1990). When family norms and values are violated, the marriage is classified as a failure. Thus, the meaning the actors themselves attribute to the marital interaction also depends on social perception and the social reaction to a specific marital situation.

In this case, when one partner ceases to fulfil the obligations socially associated with a Hindu marriage, the bond is jeopardised. This threat affects more than just the couple, as marriage is understood as a collective matter involving various stakeholders who observe, interpret, and enforce social rules (Eschermann, 1989).

Manju became increasingly isolated, remaining in the home the couple had once shared—with unpaid rent and no means of support—under the constant scrutiny of neighbours who wavered between pity and disapproval. The community turned its back on her: they would walk past her as if she did not exist, symbolically reducing her to a presence devoid of social recognition. From her own social group, she received primarily contempt and silent ostracism.

Support came from an uncle who, like her father, refused to accept the state of abandonment in which Manju found herself—especially given that she had a child in her care. Manju began working for this uncle, who treated her like a daughter—thereby repaying the moral debt he felt toward her father, who had previously helped him establish his business in Portugal, in her own words :

> Imagine, my own mother suspected I was sleeping with my uncle. Everyone who helped me did so because of my father. I used to fry peanuts and sell them in cafés. When I walked in, the men would fall silent. Even so, they claimed I was leading a double life. They thought I was a fraud—that I could no longer be a Hindu woman, a woman of my caste [Manju, 1967].

No one wanted to remain close to the ostracised woman. People would neither speak to her on the street nor be seen in her company, for social information is also conveyed through visible relationships between individuals—ranging from mere circumstantial association to private moments of exchanging views and sharing daily life. As Goffman (1988) notes, "under certain circumstances, the social identity of those with whom an individual is accompanied can serve as a source of information regarding their own social identity" (Goffman, 1988: 58).

Hindu women avoided being seen in the company of divorced women due to the symbolic risk of contamination by a social identity considered tainted. Those on the margins can, through mere proximity, cast suspicion of marginality onto others as well. Stigma theory helps us understand this process of marginalisation, whereby the stigmatised individual is reduced to a devalued social category for failing to exhibit the characteristics deemed appropriate by the dominant group (Xiberrs & Martinez, 1993). Manju finds herself in this situation. Indeed, there is a family precedent for this experience: a paternal aunt had also divorced and had two children. About fifty years earlier, Ansa had lived through a similar situation. Rejected by her family, she saw her mother-in-law take over the upbringing of her children; growing up apart from their mother and receiving little attention from their father or the rest of the patrilineage, they eventually emigrated to England and gradually lost contact with their parents. For Manju, the memory of this aunt represents an extreme image of exclusion:

When I think of my aunt, I just want my son not to have to go through something like that [Manju, 1967].

Even in a society strongly oriented toward order and the fear of ritual impurity, alliances and forms of solidarity exist. Within the small Portuguese Hindu community, Manju found material and psychological support offered discreetly, so as to prevent social scrutiny and gossip from compromising those who helped her. Over time, Manju became part of a more private and invisible relational sphere, consisting of friends and protectors who, in turn, held domestic secrets that were never revealed to the outside world.

Virmati belongs to the same caste as Manju and frequently welcomes her into her home, yet—unlike Manju—she followed the socially expected dharma. A wife, mother of three, and homemaker devoted to Shiva, she shares her bitterness and a deep nostalgia for the youth she feels she lost upon marriage with a friend.Manju describes the situation of Virmati:

Her husband beats her! He seems like a good person, but when he comes home in a bad mood, she is the one who pays the price. And to think he is so devout. Plus, his family is always controlling her [Manju, 1967].

Virmati presents herself as a woman of calm, slow, and sweeping gestures, yet her gaze reveals an intense nostalgia. Non-verbal communication becomes particularly expressive in this case: even when her face remains impassive, her feelings shine through in her eyes.

It was an arranged marriage between families of the same caste and social class—an alliance considered particularly suitable among migrants who value young women from their homeland, preferably those with a higher education. As Virmati describes it:

> My father owned a taxi company—Virmati's face lit up for a moment—I used to ride a scooter and had obtained my license. I was familiar with my father's business; I might even have been

> capable of managing it. But after I got married, I never drove again, and I never went anywhere [Virmati, 1968].

Manju urges her to speak about herself, though Virmati remains reserved: "Tell me, tell me how Chetan treats you!" [Manju, 1967].

Virmati lowered her eyes and remained silent, wearing a distant expression. The conversation then shifted to religion—to her devotion to Krishna and Shiva and the daily pujas performed before breakfast. The more delicate, painful, and—for Virmati—seemingly unresolvable matters were tacitly dropped.

Manju is perceived as a dangerous woman. Her deviance and the stigma attached to her grant her a socially critical counter-power: the capacity to influence others (Broch-Due, Vigdis; Ingrid Rudie et al., 1993). This influence is exerted over younger women, encouraging them to take a stand against familial or marital submission, to speak out against mistreatment, and to reject forms of psychological violence. It is in this context that Manju describes the men of her community:

> "The men? They're a sham. None of them are vegetarians. They're just drunks. [...] and they cheat on their wives with Portuguese women. [...] What they want are those thoroughly modern women. And the women just want to keep up tradition. [...] Of course the men go elsewhere" [Manju, 1967].

The isolation and ostracism to which Manju was subjected contributed to a bitter attitude, but also to a desire to "liberate" other women who, like her, find themselves on the margins.

Bhanu is one such case. Originally from Bombay and a low-status caste, she came to Portugal to marry Yash, a man from Diu. Lacking family support in the country, she became part of her husband's household, which included two unmarried brothers and two unmarried sisters. According to her account, she was initially unaware of the gravity of the activities her sisters-in-law were involved in and the risk this situation would eventually pose to her.

When her eldest son was four years old, Yash ordered her to dress more provocatively, wearing colourful saris, makeup, and perfume. Bhanu interpreted this demand as an attempt to draw her into the same commercial sex work associated with her sisters-in-law. Terrified, she sought advice from her parents; although they lacked the means to pay for her return journey, they encouraged her to leave the household. Ashamed and afraid to reveal the secret to the community, she confided in Manju, who was familiar with Portuguese institutions and spoke the language fluently:

> "I went to the Santa Casa da Misericordia. I stayed there for a while. I started learning Portuguese, and they found me a job as a domestic worker. I took my children with me [...] Later, I received help from other women at the Saibaba [centre]" [Bhanu, 1978].

Bhanu rebuilt her life in Portugal and did not return to Bombay; she later converted to Islam. In the collected narratives, turning to Islam appears—in some life paths marked by conflict or marginalisation—as an alternative avenue for dignity and a sense of belonging. The absence of the caste system is cited as a particularly appealing feature, although this does not imply actual equality between men and women.

Manju also engaged with this religious realm, albeit under different circumstances. In popular Hinduism—the so-called "little tradition"—practised by segments of migrant populations, belief in sorcery and the evil eye can take on particular importance when facing problems perceived as insoluble (Bastos, Susana, 1993; Malheiros, 1996). Manju held her ex-husband responsible for her lack of prosperity, her social ostracism, and the state of despondency and depression she described. Feeling alienated from her own religious milieu, she turned to the mosque, sought counsel from the Moulana, underwent spiritual treatments, and used protective amulets. In her own words:

> Hindu magic is weak; it hardly ever works. When something serious is needed, people turn to Muslims. Dozens of Hindus go there. It's just that no one wants to admit it [Manju, 1967].

Contact with the Pakistani community expanded Manju's network of relationships and led to a romantic partnership with a Muslim man. This relationship caused further shock among some neighbours, for whom her partner's religious affiliation compounded the transgression previously attributed to Manju.

Over time, and faced with the persistence of behaviours deemed unconventional, the community came to tolerate the relationship. Although the normative expectation was for Manju to devote herself exclusively to the role of mother and lead a modest, secluded life, the presence of a male partner came to be viewed by some as preferable; it provided her with material support and placed her—at least partially—back under male supervision (Fuller, Christopher, 2004).

Even after a few months, when the social criticism began to subside and Manju tried to discreetly resume appearing in public spaces, she continued to turn to African healers, Portuguese fortune-tellers, and Hindu *bhuvis*, seeking to protect herself from the malevolence she attributed to her ex-husband.

Manju was convinced that Mayur had resorted to a spell intended to drive her away from her son, compromise her health and financial resources, and ultimately allow him to reclaim the house that had been left in her care. An African healer she consulted regularly reportedly charged over 2,500 euros for a talisman presented to her as particularly powerful—one that Manju began wearing constantly against her chest. She describes these consultations with emotion:

> I saw the demon I have inside me. It is coming out. I saw a whitish mist leaving through my head, and I spoke to the Guinean man about it. Do you know what he told me? If it were black or red, it would be much worse. I am getting better, I know [Manju, 1967].

Despite these measures, the symptoms Manju described persisted. Doubts regarding Hassan, her partner, and outbursts of anger directed at the neighbourhood women who had previously criticised her exacerbated her isolation. She would get into conflicts on the street and in shops, accusing them of unfairness. According to her account, she found some solace in the Sai Baba Satsang's held in the neighbourhood on Thursdays; however, in moments of intense anger, she would lose control, leaving those present in embarrassed silence.

Manju believed that Mayur knew every aspect of her life because the neighbourhood women passed information on to him, enabling him to control her and renew the alleged spells. She also suspected attempts to poison her during gatherings. At one point, she began claiming that she could hear Sai Baba and, through this, foresee events occurring in the neighbourhood.

For Manju, Sai Baba became a guru, a mentor, and a primary spiritual reference. Her religious fervor intensified progressively, coinciding with recurring conflicts with women from her street and other neighbourhoods. This process contributed to her estrangement from her few friends, her neighbours, and, ultimately, Hassan himself.

Social exclusion can lead an individual to become self-absorbed, focusing entirely on their own experience. Rejection affects cognitive processes and can impair the capacity for social self-regulation, thereby worsening maladaptation (Williams, 2005). This process may be accompanied by intense loneliness and an inability to belong to the collective "us," potentially contributing, in some cases, to psychological distress and the weakening of self-regulation mechanisms.

Manju thus occupies the position of an outsider within the small community of Hindu migrants to which she belongs, being perceived as unable to observe the socially expected standards of self-control. Her condition is marked by stigma. From this perspective, "normal" and "stigmatised" should not be understood as fixed categories of people, but rather as socially produced positions within interactional situations, contingent upon adherence to—or violation of—the norms governing social encounters.

The concept of the "margin," however, is relatively elastic, as it encompasses various types, forms, and degrees of marginalisation. Deviance may be explicit, leading to the transgressor's enduring inclusion in a devalued social category, or it may take subtle, invisible forms that remain shielded from stigmatisation until public exposure occurs. There are, therefore, other modalities of marginality that warrant analysis.

The transformation of marriage rules also demonstrates that normative boundaries are not static. Parry (1971; 1986) identifies a structural tension between hierarchy and equality among the Rajputs; among the Hindu migrants studied in Portuguese territory, social class proximity appears to be gaining weight relative to caste affiliation. Some recent inter-caste marriages—previously almost taboo—have been accepted because the young people involved possessed similar levels of education and income.

One interviewee summarised this shift by noting that there are now more inter-caste marriages and that such distinctions persist primarily in less urbanised settings [Devraj, 1950]. From Malheiros's (1996) perspective, marrying outside one's caste can still imply a loss of personal status, yet the trend toward hypogamous unions has become more visible among young people born in Portugal who share similar higher education backgrounds and economic standing.

Dumont (1997) highlights the disjunction between status and power within the caste system,a concept linked to the opposition between the pure and the impure. In the diaspora, however, status, wealth, and power

tend to become intertwined: leadership roles in religious and cultural associations, commercial acumen, and economic resources confer community recognition. In Mozambique, inter-caste social interaction varied by region; although endogamy guided marriage practices, families from different castes could coexist and cooperate in daily life.

## 3. Exclusion

Kasturi entered into a marriage that directly defied the norm of caste endogamy. In the small Indian community of Lourenço Marques during the 1960s, extended families, castes, and gotras were widely known, facilitating strict social control regarding caste purity. It was common for families from Diu and Gujarat to send their sons and daughters to India, seeking to ensure a formal education grounded in Hindu cultural customs.

Kasturi attended a prestigious school in Diu, where she remained until the age of eighteen. Upon returning to Lourenço Marques—and having reached an age considered suitable for marriage—she met Jemu. Their relationship was deemed unacceptable by the community and sparked strong disapproval. Bakul, who closely followed how the situation unfolded, recalls Jemu and Kasturi's circumstances, the community's displeasure, and the interplay between caste and social class. As Bakul recounted:

> The community in Mozambique was poor. There was always that sense of deference between the poor and the rich within that web of interests. When the Indians came to Portugal, the generation that took charge of the temple was younger—and different. What mattered, too, was how much money one had. Since Jemu was a man of limited means—he wasn't a Brahmin who owned a business, nor did he have much religious knowledge, having never studied it—he simply came from a family of priests [Bakul, 1945].

Jemu occasionally stood in for a more qualified Brahmin and served at a secondary temple on the outskirts of the city. Born in Mozambique and maintaining only sporadic contact with his parents' homeland, he seemed less bound by the centuries-old weight of caste tradition. His transgression, however, was deemed particularly serious because he had chosen as his wife a woman who was not only of a lower caste status but also of mixed Indian and African ancestry. This situation was familiar among coastal communities linked to Diu, where men would migrate to Africa and, years later, bring back children born to African women, integrating them according to patrilineal principles. Kasturi belonged to one such family, bearing a dual heritage that—while accepted within her own caste—was less readily acknowledged by groups from other regions or of higher status. Jemu broke the rule, and because his wife was of mixed race, society condemned him. There was revulsion. People would immediately say.

> "He is no longer pure." To remain a Brahmin, one must stay pure; one cannot mix with people who are... inferior. No one wanted anything to do with them anymore [Barti, 1931].

Among the Hindu migrant population in Mozambique, caste segmentation based on criteria of purity and impurity manifested itself primarily through the hierarchical distinction between Brahmins, jatis associated with Vaishyas, and jatis associated with Shudras. The classical division into varnas, however, played a relatively minor role in the migrants' everyday discourse, as they prioritised identification by jati. As Dumont observes, when someone is asked about their caste, the answer may refer to the caste, the sub-caste, or even the exogamous section to which they belong, since the term "caste" can operate at different levels of classification (Dumont, 1997: 113; Ketkar, 1909).

Status-related differences between castes in the diaspora became particularly evident in the case of Brahmins and, secondly, the Lohanas—identified as Vaishya jati—groups that sought to avoid situations considered polluting. Douglas (1991: 49) observes that male sexual purity can be ritually restored more easily than female purity. From this perspective, Jemu might have avoided some social criticism had the relationship not been formalised through marriage. As a sacrament, marriage directly compromised his position within the hierarchy of purity (Douglas, 1991: 149).

The power structure embedded in religious tradition, customs, and norms governing relations between the sexes and castes also manifests in dietary practices, which contribute to the reproduction of social stratification and the distribution of power. Brahmins adopted vegetarian practices and stricter fasting regimens, which were portrayed as superior to the meat-eating diets of other groups. Status-seeking emulation can thus be expressed through the adoption of vegetarianism, as well as through intensified prayer, asceticism, and rituals of purification (Chodorow, Nancy, 1974; Dhruvarajan, Vanaja, 1989; Desai, Neera; Usha Thakkar, 2001).

Kasturi, hailing from a caste described as "meat-eating," began strictly observing a vegetarian diet, seeking to live up to the model expected of a Brahmin's wife. However, this rise in status was not accompanied by economic advancement, and her position drew widespread criticism, relegating her to the margins (Sarkar, Tanika, 2001).

For the Hindu population studied, purity is closely linked to Brahmin lineage; transgressing this purity can entail—at least symbolically—exclusion from the caste (Smith, B.K. 1994). Jemu became an outcast—albeit without this being explicitly articulated—while Kasturi was cast as a transgressor, with the symbolic consequences of that transgression projected onto their offspring.

As Douglas notes, within this interpretive framework, caste membership is linked to the mother: "even if she has married a man of a higher caste, her children belong to the maternal caste" (Douglas, 1991: 149).

Jemu died young following a sudden illness. Kasturi was left with three young daughters and in a precarious economic situation. She embarked on a path marked by a persistent sense of victimisation and the perception that the community ignored her needs—a grievance she never forgave:

> They never helped me, and I don't understand why! My husband was a Brahmin. And he served in the Portuguese army. I never received anything—neither a pension from the Portuguese government nor help from the Indians in the community [Kasturi, 1946].

In the normative framework described here, a Brahmin's wife possesses certain ritual rights and can expect cooperation and support from the community. In Kasturi's case, however, the transgression attributed to the couple limited these expectations, exposing her above all to revulsion and criticism. The opinions gathered converge on this point:

If something happens to the Brahmin, the community has no obligation to support him or his family. In principle, they ought to have their own means of support [Parul, 1952].

You know, they were no longer well-regarded in that circle. Had he not died, he might well have been cast out for the simple reason that he had married that woman. His lineage ends there. He belongs to neither one side nor the other [Rani, 1949].

And even if there were boys, they would no longer belong to the lineage of priests. He no longer holds the status of a priest because of the mixing. Racial mixing—especially among Brahmins—is not accepted among us [Jigar, 1937].

Faced with economic hardship, Kasturi considered her eldest daughter's marriage as a way to reduce the family burden: "You need to leave school and get married! It is the only way you can help your family" [Kasturi, 1946].

Sita, aware of the family's reputation, wondered who would agree to marry her. Her future husband was found through the community's informal channels; he was looking to quickly finalise a marriage during a brief stay in Mozambique.

Sita married a man she barely knew at the age of seventeen, while she was still a student. She recalls feeling she had to accept the proposal so as not to remain "a burden" at home. She arrived in Portugal in 1993 and joined an extended family with different customs. The strategy of conformity she adopted within the marriage allowed her to gain some prestige as a wife and, later, to bring her mother and sisters to join her.

In Portugal, Kasturi did not find the institutional support she had expected. Although formally Portuguese—having been born in Diu prior to the independence of the Portuguese Indian territories—she had little information regarding her rights and administrative procedures. Her question—"I am Portuguese; if I am Portuguese, why am I treated this way?" [Kasturi, 1946]—encapsulates the distance she perceived between herself and the State. She moved frequently and relied on a modest income and the help of her daughters.

Her youngest daughters, Lali and Mohini, dropped out of school and worked in businesses owned by members of their own ethnic community. Within the community discourse, the transgression attributed to their parents was symbolically projected onto the daughters through a karmic interpretation of the family's trajectory. Lali became pregnant by a man who subsequently abandoned her. Out-of-wedlock motherhood placed her in a vulnerable position, as it defied expectations associated with female dharma, virginity, and family honour.

Social blame for the pregnancy was projected onto the mother and sisters. Mohini managed to marry with the families' approval—even though the marriage entailed considerable financial strain—but she, too, eventually separated. Both she and Lali later left for London. In these narratives, England emerges as an imagined space of prosperity, anonymity, and distance from critical scrutiny—a place where community oversight is less intense (Biardiau & Madelaine, 1972).

Inter-caste unions or relationships with non-Hindus continued to draw disapproval, although the reaction appeared to soften among younger generations. Arjun, a Brahmin originally from Mumbai who was initially

recognised as a ritual specialist in Portugal, gradually lost prestige and religious duties after entering into a relationship with a Portuguese woman who had converted to Hinduism. The couple moved to an area far removed from the main Indian communities, and Arjun shifted his focus primarily to yoga, Vedic astrology, and religious services for families less bound by orthodoxy.

These trajectories demonstrate that sanctions do not depend solely on the violation of a single, isolated rule. Caste, class, gender, family background, economic status, and the degree of visibility of the transgression all intersect to shape one's position on the margins. The same infraction can lead to permanent exclusion, gradual tolerance, or a form of peripheral integration, depending on the actors' positions and their ability to rebuild social networks (Burns & Flam, 2000).

## 4. Temporary Transgressions

The concept of the margin presupposes varying degrees of marginalisation. Some transgressions temporarily distance a woman from the norm without entailing complete or permanent exclusion. This is the case for Urmila, who was raised in a traditional extended family in Mozambique, where several generations shared the same household under the patriarch's authority.

However, her urban experience and love of learning fostered a different path. Upon finishing high school, Urmila proposed to her father that she pursue university studies and build a professional career—an uncommon choice for a Hindu woman at that time. Her father eventually agreed, and exposure to other social influences led her to question the caste system, norms regarding women, and other orthodox values.

Urmila entered into a relationship with a man of a different caste and social standing. "My father was willing to fund my studies to the end, but when he found out I was dating that young man, he cut me off completely. So I left home and went to live with him" [Urmila, 1952]. Her choice of partner ran counter to family approval, caste endogamy, and the growing expectation of educational parity between spouses. The interviewee herself summarises her position:

"I wanted to choose; I always wanted to choose. And I did choose... I was different, and I embraced that difference" [Urmila, 1952]. The conflict led to a temporary estrangement from her family and a rejection of certain aspects of tradition. Many years later, however, Urmila reconciled with both, demonstrating that a transgression initially met with sanction can lose its intensity and allow for a return to the normative centre.

## 5. Invisible Transgression

In Hinduism, the married woman may be symbolically associated with the Devi, with prosperity, well-being, and creativity, finding in motherhood one of the central expressions of this status. Conversely, widowhood was traditionally associated with inauspiciousness. Brahmanical tradition prescribed that a widow abandon her jewellery, wear white, and forgo the tilaka or chandalo—marks associated with the status of a married woman (Biardeau, Madelaine, 1981; Chodorow, Nancy, 1993).

In certain interpretations, the widow bore symbolic responsibility for her husband's death. Sati represented the most extreme historical expression of this sacrificial logic, linked to the woman's redemption and to concepts of purity and guilt. The text also notes that, despite formal prohibitions, isolated cases continued to be reported in rural contexts.

Widowhood can thus produce a form of "social death," especially when it occurs early and without male children, rendering the woman dependent on her husband's agnatic family. Among the diaspora women observed, however, this pattern is not uniform (Rayaprol, Aparna, 1997). Many older widows become matriarchs and exercise domestic authority; among younger widows, the wearing of white and other traditional prescriptions are less strictly observed (Flood, Galin, 2000; Douglas, Mary, 1990).

Marginalisation, therefore, depends less on widowhood itself than on family, economic, and relational circumstances. However, behaviours concealed beneath a publicly normative appearance can harbour a strong potential for exclusion should they come to light. Indira's case falls within this dimension.

Indira's case is particularly relevant in this regard. Widowed at a young age, she is described as a well-groomed woman with long, straight hair and a fair complexion. She possesses only a primary-level education (up to the fourth grade), as her parents did not invest in her further schooling. In Nacala, Mozambique—her birthplace—it was common for Hindu girls to study only enough to learn reading and writing, given that marriage and domestic duties were presented as their primary destiny. Extended schooling was, in that context, considered unnecessary.

Lacking other stable sources of income, Indira faces difficulties in finding employment, as many roles require minimum qualifications she does not possess. The need to earn a living led her to accept jobs in cleaning, restaurant kitchens, and as a hotel pantry worker. She also experienced prolonged periods of unemployment. At one point, she even supervised a cleaning team at a shopping mall—a better-paid position she was unable to regain after a trip to India.

Indira did not wish to marry and never showed particular interest in matrimony, repeatedly putting off the proposals that came to her family. Meanwhile, the years went by.

“I didn’t have the patience for dating. My parents sent me to India, but I didn’t want to get married in India either. In the end, I married a young man there whom my parents had chosen. I was already 26. When I returned from India, I was already pregnant” [Indira, 1970].

The marriage proved to be deeply problematic. In Indira’s view, the experience took on the form of a curse linked to the difficulty of accepting the marital role assigned to her. Her husband was an alcoholic, showed little interest in work, and was easily swayed by others. In her own anguished words:

"As soon as he arrived here, he would listen to people badmouthing me, and he would even beat me. He drank and didn't want to work. I was the one who went to work to support him and my son. I’d had enough! So, in 1995, I ran away and went to England with my son. [...] I can say he hurt me, but he is my son's father" [Indira, 1970].

Upon returning from England, Indira had to live in a shack she managed to rent near the homes of her parents and other members of her paternal family. In this setting, she feels protected: her family supports her and provides emotional backing as she raises her son, who was then nearing adolescence. She also receives help from a sister whose husband runs a small neighbourhood grocery store. Indira interprets her marital experience as a kind of bad karma—a series of unexpected events that she nonetheless claims to have withstood, emerging stronger and more confident as a woman.

"My mother-in-law was very mean to me. [...] But I never let myself be a doormat. [...] I told her: 'It can't be like this! If you insult me, I’ll insult you back. If you treat me badly, I’ll call the police...' And then they got scared and backed down" [Indira, 1970].

The traditional expectation of remaining a widow and sexually chaste does not align with Indira’s aspirations. She is open to remarrying but avoids receiving suitors where the neighbourhood can see, seeking to protect her reputation. The constant circulation of gossip makes one’s "name" a fundamental social asset: "I’ve had problems in the past; now I have to uphold my name" [Indira, 1970].

However, Indira maintains a clandestine relationship with a married man who has children; he visits her and provides financial support. In a neighbourhood characterised by the close proximity of homes and families, she has developed specific strategies for concealment. She deliberately shares various aspects of her daily life with neighbours and makes any approaches by other men public, thereby preventing ambiguity that could fuel rumours about her behaviour.

This conduct aligns with the concept of "invisible marginality" discussed by Barel and revisited by Xiberras (1982: 123). Transgression remains socially imperceptible as long as a public image of respectability is preserved. In Indira’s case, it is not merely a matter of protecting forbidden desires, but of concealing actual practices that, if revealed, could lead to social exclusion.

The interviewee herself acknowledges the fragility of this boundary: "There are things in my life that are a secret. No one—absolutely no one here—knows. Nor can they know. It would be my undoing" [Indira, 1970]. In this case, the marginalisation stems not from a sanction that has already been imposed, but from the constant risk of exposure and the need to carefully separate public and private life.

This risk became extreme when Indira became pregnant by the man with whom she was having a clandestine affair. Due to irregular menstruation, she claims she only realised she was pregnant at an advanced stage. Feeling unable to reveal the situation and not knowing where to turn, she sought medication to terminate the pregnancy far from her neighbourhood. While travelling by bus, she began to feel dizzy and experienced heavy bleeding.

The interviewee recounts refusing to go to the hospital for fear that her family and neighbours would discover the pregnancy. She waited until nightfall to return to the neighbourhood by taxi and locked herself in her home: "I only had time to throw myself onto the bed. I miscarried. Everything was covered in blood. I don't even know how I didn't die. [...] just imagine if people knew" [Indira, 1970].

Indira remained ill for several weeks without the neighbourhood knowing what had happened. Later, a doctor diagnosed her with a severe infection and prescribed antibiotics. She tried to hide the swelling and pain beneath her saris and punjabis. Months later, she found a job at a hotel—an experience she associates with greater economic independence and an improvement in her situation.

Dissatisfied with what she calls the "tradition of the elders," Indira avoids adhering to various moral codes, even though she seeks to appear to comply with them in public. She attaches no special importance to the purifying vrats or the satsangs attended by many women in the neighbourhood, and she desires greater freedom. The need to survive has led her to develop an adaptive capacity and a strategic ambivalence that she employs in her daily life.

Finally, a common denominator emerges among the cases analysed: the formation of small circles of friendship and trust. Manju, Bhanu, Indira, Urmila, Kasturi, and the latter’s daughters established—at different

times—relationships based on confidence or cooperation that allowed them to share hardships, seek support, or conceal behaviours that would otherwise be sanctioned. While marginality can produce isolation, it can also foster new networks of solidarity.

## Conclusion

An analysis of the trajectories presented shows that the norm and the margins do not constitute rigid poles, but rather a continuum of social positions. Women may move closer to or further away from culturally prescribed models at different times, through diverse forms of conformity, transgression, exclusion, negotiation, and resistance.

In the communities studied, dharma, family, caste hierarchy, and gender norms remain important reference points in women's lives; in a migration context, they can take on particular significance regarding the preservation of collective identity. Drawing on Foucault, power operates as a network of disciplinary practices internalised and reproduced by the actors themselves; Bourdieu's notion of habitus (1972, 1984) likewise allows us to understand the embodiment of expectations regarding marriage, motherhood, sexuality, honour, and respectability.

The trajectories analysed reveal, however, that women are not passive subjects. Illness can function as a socially tolerated margin; visible transgression can produce stigma and ostracism; breaking away from violent family situations can lead to seeking external support; some caste-related sanctions extend symbolically to one's descendants; other transgressions are temporary or remain invisible through reputation management. The margin can thus signify vulnerability but also generate agency.

Social control is not exercised exclusively by men. Women themselves participate in surveillance, gossip, exclusion, and the defence of tradition, occupying distinct positions of power (Hirst, Jacqueline Suthren and Lynn Thomas, 2004; Lacoste-Dujardin, Camille, 1992). Some act as guardians of the order; others expand the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. Paradoxically, exclusion can foster alternative networks and forms of counter-power, confirming the relevance of the relationship between structure and agency proposed by Giddens.

The migration experience does not eliminate tradition but creates conditions for its negotiation. The growing importance of education and class, inter-caste marriages, contact with external institutions, and the possibility of reconstructing life trajectories demonstrate that community boundaries are shifting. As Durkheim suggested, deviance simultaneously reveals the moral limits of the social order and creates conditions for change.

The margin is, therefore, not merely the place to which women who fail to conform to the norm are relegated; it is also a space from which the norm can be challenged and transformed. Between the reproduction of tradition and its rejection lies a field of negotiation where new forms of female identity, agency, and power are constructed. Given the qualitative nature of the research, these cases hold analytical and illustrative value; they do not claim to be statistically representative of all Hindu women living in Portugal.

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