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Letter from an Indian Mother to Her Daughter

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It was her doctoral dissertation and is still the best single authoritative work on Indian women. *Indian Women: From Purdah to Modernity*, edited by B. R. Nanda (Vikas Publishing House, Pvt. Ltd., 5 Ansari Road, New Delhi 110002), was published in 1976, following a series of lectures on women held under the auspices of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library during International Women's Year. Historical in approach, varied and lively in style, the essays focus on contemporary India.

**Programme of Women's Studies,**  
Indian Council of Social Science Research, IIPA Hostel Building, Indraprastha Estate, Ring Road, New Delhi 110002. Under the direction of Vina Mazumdar, who serves both as Secretary to the Advisory Committee on Women's Studies of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) and as its Chief Editor, the Programme on Women's Studies has grown out of the work of the 1971 governmental Committee on the Status of Women. The Programme "seeks to promote social science research to understand women's lives and problems and the manner in which they are being affected by the process of social change, economic modernization and population dynamics." It has three main objectives:

a. "to uncover significant trends in economic and social organization which affect women's position in the long run, with a view to rousing public consciousness and assisting in the formulation of appropriate policies for women's development and welfare;"

b. "to develop new perspectives in the social sciences, particularly relating to concepts like family, household, women's work, economic productivity, etc . . ;"

c. "to revive the debate on the women's question initiated during the struggle for freedom and social reconstruction."

The Programme "emphasizes research on women in the 'less visible' or under-privileged sections of Indian society in order to correct biases that have resulted from the concentration of past research on women in elite groups." Currently, priority areas include the following:

3. Variations and changes in family organization, division of roles, and training of children.
4. Evaluation of the impact of existing development programmes for women.
5. The origin and nature of the women's movement in India.

**Publications:**
- *Programme of Women's Studies*, 1977, 26 pp., pamphlet. Free. Includes description of Programme, list of publications planned, etc.

**Research Unit on Women's Studies,**  
S.N.D.T. Women's University, Patkar Hall Building, 6th Floor, 1 Nathibai Thackersey Road, Bombay 400 020. Begun in 1974, and headed by sociologist Neera Desai (recently in the U.S. to attend the Houston IWF Convention), the Research Unit's current research emphasis is in the area of elementary school curriculum. Studies of bias in textbooks are under way. In addition, staff member Maithreyi Krishna Raj has been planning a project called Teacher Orientation on Sexism that includes seminars and a slide show in Hindi about textbooks and how teachers deal with girls and boys in the classroom.

**Publications:**
- *A Select Bibliography on Women in India*, 130 pp., hard cover. $4.50, including postage. Includes books, articles, reports, theses published or completed before March 1975, on such subtopics as Women's Education, Legal Position, Historical Studies, Biographies, Women in Art, etc.


**Maithreyi Krishna Raj**

**Letter from an Indian Mother to Her Daughter**

At the recent Indian conference on Women and Development, the author of this letter, who is working on a doctorate in sociology, read a paper on "The Status of Women in Science." Currently, she is a staff member of the Research Unit on Women's Studies at the Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thack ersey Women's University in Bombay.  
S.N.D.T. Women's University was founded in 1916 and is the only university in India exclusively for women.

You are sixteen? twenty? or just ten? The years will soon pass and you will be a woman. What will you be like? Like me? my mother? grandmother? Some of you will be like us, but much of you my great-grandmother would not recognize.

These are times of change, of questioning, of uncertainty. Every mother wants to "protect" her daughter so that she may be ready when the time comes, but she rarely succeeds. Torn between the desire to "warn" and yet to retain the innocence of girlhood, she ends up by being harsh. Between the need to conform to social imperatives and her own desire to spare her daughter, she can find no solution. Let the dilemma end. Let mothers speak freely to their daughters.

I remember my mother. She was thin, worn out from work. At 32 she looked ancient. Her day began long before we were up and ended long after we were all in bed.
She was a frail figure, clouded by the swirling wood smoke of the kitchen fire that stung our eyes. She staggered under pots of water fetched from a well near or far. We saw her bent over endless household tasks. All the rituals were scrupulously kept, for she was "upper caste." The daily worship was never skipped. She ate after all the family had eaten—from the father-in-law down. She had no time to read a book, listen to music, or just relax. I never knew what she would have looked like with a smile, for all that we saw was layers of sorrow in those black eyes. In time the sorrow had turned to gentle resignation.

My grandmother was like her, too. But I recall the feeling in grandma's voice when she said to my cousin who had just gotten married, "Why this tearing hurry to get married? What is there in marriage? Babies!" Looking back, I understand. She had been married at the age of ten, had borne ten children, five of them girls, each of whom had to be married with a proper dowry to a suitable man "within the caste." Great-grandmother was still around when we went to school. A sprightly woman with bright eyes. How old was she? It was difficult to say, for she was "upper caste." The daily tasks. All the rituals were scrupulously kept, for she was "upper caste." The daily activities—every moment in the house, we did not know why. They just could not.

Today here I am. A college graduate, married, with children, and holding a job.

You, my daughter, do not know what caste is. You have not seen a young Hindu widow, clad in white. You have not seen your mother wasting away her youth in domestic slavery, frightened of a mother-in-law. Your mother does not get up and go to the kitchen if a male visitor comes. She talks with ease with her father-in-law sitting at the same dining table.

You will do all this and more. But is it all? Yes and no. What will you be inside? Life is not going to be easy for you—it will be harder for you than for me. True, you will engage in life outside the home; you will go to college, travel, meet men and women. Your domestic chores will be fewer. You do not know what caste is except as a label. You can marry whomever you choose. You will have a couple of children. You will earn your living. These are the things grandmother yearned for.