

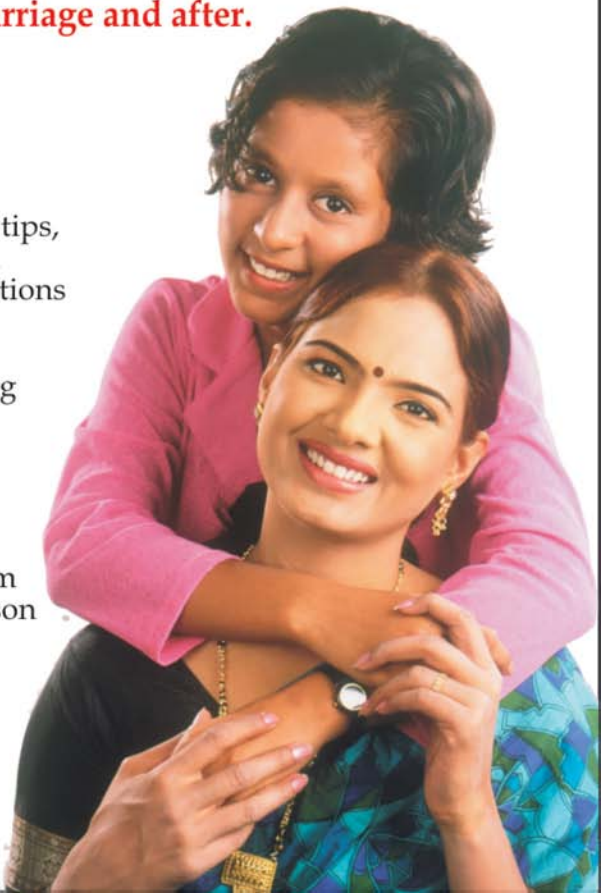
Rupa Chatterjee

Raising a Daughter

in 21st Century India

From cradle to marriage and after.

Scores of time-tested tips, sane suggestions and reliable recommendations on how to raise your daughter into a well-adjusted human being by balancing the contradictory pulls and pressures of traditional values and modern norms. Includes insights from experts and first-person experiences.



V&S PUBLISHERS

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in this 21st Century India

From Cradle to Marriage and After



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Dedicated to

*"My Mother, Gauri Banerji
My Daughters, Romira & Ronita
And
Grand daughter, Riya"*



Preface for the Revised Edition

Although some of what I wrote in the previous edition still holds true, the winds of change sweeping into our society have strengthened in the past six years and many new avenues and opportunities are opening up to our daughters, which were not there even six years ago. Along with economic liberalization, the spread of education and the growth of television, new doors of opportunity are available to our daughters. From one Kiran Bedi there are now hundreds of them in the police forces, army, navy and air force. A girl of Indian origin in the United States, Kalyani Chawla, was part of the space programme. Reality tv has crept into our drawing rooms and parents from small towns of India are allowing their young daughters to participate in song and dance competitions or beauty pageants, which would not have happened even five years ago. For many mothers, not only is the *ghongat* out, but even they are getting into jeans and skirts and thumbing their nose at convention. The divorce rate is up, careers are paramount and motherhood is taking a back seat in the present scheme of things. Changes are taking place very swiftly, but it is necessary to step back and take a look at what we are doing and what awaits us in the future. While society is changing, human nature and biology remains, to some extent, constant. The instinct to find a partner and nurture comes up as nature designed it to do.

Thus, the question arises is how much should we change as parents and as daughters to survive in the present scenario? If life is all about balance and juggling multiple roles and responsibilities, then my revised edition will try to update the reader on the new situations arising out of our changing society and how we can raise and help our daughters in the present day.

Rupa Chatterjee

January 2010

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Introduction

Until the last three decades of the 20th century, women throughout the world were placed in a special category – to be protected, cosseted, respected, revered, or discriminated against and exploited, as the situation warranted.

Till the mid-1960s, women all over the world were expected to fulfil their designated traditional roles in society which encompassed, as the Germans put it, “children, the kitchen and the church”. Although history is full of instances of learned women and powerful queens from Vedic India to Victorian England, women by and large played a secondary role in society. A woman’s ultimate aim was to have a ‘good’ marriage, as wealth, power and social prestige all emanated from the man and his status in society. The concept of a woman having her own identity and independent status simply did not exist.

After the First World War, when women were forced to help in the war effort and even take up jobs in factories, the Women’s Suffragette Movement in the United States and England sought to obtain the right to vote. Despite their image of being ‘advanced’ and ‘modern’, women in Western societies were as dominated upon as their sisters elsewhere. During the Middle Ages, though chivalry was the order of the day, knights going on Crusades bound their wives with a chastity belt. Even as men fought duels to maintain the honour of their ladies, clerics asked, “Do women have souls?”

Even today, in many so-called modern and civilised cultures there are separate norms for men and women. For example, even in 21st century Japan, a girl cannot ascend the throne. The

Japanese ruler, believed to be a direct descendant of the Sun God, can only be male. In many Western countries, men and women do not receive equal pay for equal work and in Switzerland, women had not received the right to vote until the early 1990s.

For many centuries, the pattern of women's lives remained the same. Education for them was not considered important. Beauty, docility, domestic skills, obedience and patience were necessary virtues that had to be cultivated. Divorce was virtually unheard of and strong social strictures ensured that marriage was a permanent bond.

Although the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s, along with the emancipating effect of the birth control pill, forced a radical change in Western societies, in other parts of the world the effect has not been so dramatic. Yes, women are more educated and seek to utilise their education to become professionals and financially independent, but the home and family are still given importance, particularly in Indian society. Since India moves in several centuries at the same time, there are still many in the remote areas who bring up the girl-child as had been done over the millennium, with few concessions to modernity.

But in general, as the Taliban experience in Afghanistan has proved, the clock cannot be turned back to the medieval ages – some concessions have to be made to modernity and the winds of change are seeping in, no matter how slowly.

In order to bring up one's daughter in 21st century India, it is necessary to do what Indian society is known for, which is to achieve a fusion between the best of tradition and modernity, so that our daughters can achieve a pivotal role in the future of both the country and our family system. Individuals cannot function in a vacuum, so it is essential that the girl-child be brought up in a way that combines the best from the past in order to fulfill the challenges of the unknown future, without compromising on one's values and traditions.

This book seeks to offer balanced guidelines on the best ways of bringing up a daughter in present-day India. Thus, a broad

gamut of topics have been touched upon. Sometimes the reader may find that the author is judgmental, at other times, liberal. This is because in today's fast-changing environment a rigid stance may be counterproductive, since girls are now being subjected to many influences that were not prevalent in an earlier era, such as excessive peer pressure, exposure to the media and the influence of the fashion industry.

Thus, it requires a great deal of maturity and tactful handling to exercise some influence over our children and to guide them in successfully tackling the multifarious roles that they face in the present world – as daughters, students, career women, wives, mothers and mothers-in-law. I do hope this book achieves that objective in some small measure.

Lastly, my special thanks to Mrs Tanushree Podder for her tips and suggestions and for contributing Chapter 11, Handling Puberty and its Problems.

Rupa Chatterjee

The Girl Child through the ages



In all traditional societies of the world, there were circumstances that favoured the birth of a male child, and India was no exception to this bias. While women in Vedic India had equal rights to education, the sanction to perform religious ceremonies and the freedom to select her husband at a *swayamvar*, there was a gradual deterioration in her position with the passage of time.

The situation reached its nadir between the 14th and 19th centuries, when child marriage, *sati* and *pardah* became the order of the day. Manu's dictat saw her position in society deteriorate further. The law giver Manu opined that from the cradle to the grave, a woman had to be under constant male supervision – at first that of her father, then her husband and finally, in old age, her son. Gradually, as her position in society declined, at home too, certain curbs were placed on her development.



The obsession to protect women stemmed from the frequency of foreign invasions and the abduction of women as part of the spoils of war during military campaigns. Many of the ostensibly restrictive measures stemmed from a desire to protect the girl-child from the horrors of rape and abduction indulged in by the

invading armies from Persia, Afghanistan and Mongolia. The evil practice of *sati* had its origins in this historical reality, in which women preferred to ritualistically immolate themselves (*Jauhar*), rather than be carried off as part of the harem of invading rulers. The story of Rani Padmini of Chittor and the desire of Alauddin Khilji to win her over is a case in point.

Hitherto, Indian kings had waged war according to certain humane rules and norms, as all of them believed that the law of the *Dharmasastras* to be sacrosanct. Regardless of the provocation, the shrine, the Brahmin and the cow were never to be touched. Since warfare was a special privilege of the martial class, harassment of the civilian population was regarded as a serious breach of the code of conduct. Kshatriyas respected women, hence their abduction and dishonour was not part of warfare.

Conversely, the wars in Central Asia were fierce struggles for survival, in which destroying the enemy and abducting their womenfolk were part of the scheme of things. Thus, when Mahmud of Ghazni's armies invaded India in 1000 AD, the burning, looting and massacre of civilians, along with the rape and abduction of women, was a culture shock to Indians. Kidnapping of women, forced marriages and concubinage then became prevalent, bringing to nought the code of chivalry and conduct prescribed by the kings of ancient India. In this battle of cultures, Indian society retreated within itself in order to protect its religion, culture and womenfolk from the barbaric onslaught.

Gradually the birth of a daughter came to be looked upon as unfortunate, as she was both a burden and a responsibility. In many parts of the country, a woman who repeatedly gave birth to daughters was despised or even discarded. Science had not progressed to the level it has today, in which it has been proved that the male bearing sperm is with the male. A daughter was regarded as *paraya dhan*, the wealth of her new family after marriage, who had to be protected at all costs, so that she could be handed over to her husband in a state of absolute purity. Purity and chastity became virtual obsessions. A girl's father could not breathe easily until he had sent off his daughter to her in-laws after