Mothering and Radical Selfcare: An Autoethnography of Participating in a Facebook Parenting Group

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> Caring for myself is not self-indulgence; it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political
> warfare. (Audre Lorde ([1988] 2017: 130)

ABSTRACT

The article documents the experiences of parenting of an urban Indian Hindu middle-class couple at the intersection of virtual and physical spaces and ideas. The experiences and ideas documented in this paper have co-evolved as the authors are parenting their four-year-old daughter and realised how their participation in a Facebook parenting group is influencing them as parents. The relational perspective in autoethnography is used to examine the mutual influences between the authors as partners, parents, and participants in the Facebook parenting group. This is done to understand how our participation in the Facebook parenting group mutually influenced our understanding of ideas of empowered mothering and self-care. The paper draws from Audre Lorde's idea of radical self-care to analyse the interactions on the online group on empowered mothering and self-care.

Keywords: mothering, motherhood, parenting, self-care, self-love, empowered mothering, online, Facebook, autoethnography, Indian, middle-class parents

INTRODUCTION

Smitha: Rajesh and I were doing our PhD together and were of the same age when we got married – that means, as per conventions, I was old, and he was the 'right age' to get married. My being old was directly co-related, with few years left for my capacity to reproduce 'without complications.' This 'without complications' is something that I constantly heard – this would be in the form of casual conversations, friendly advice, and inquiries by neighbours and 'community members.' I was also asked to visit a doctor to help me conceive. My partner was never privy to, or the recipient of, any advice to 'see a doctor'.

It seemed like a big responsibility, especially when we were completing our PhD and looking for a job. Rajesh was the first to get a job, and it came with exciting changes; one thing that increased was the push to have a baby because at least he has a faculty appointment now. In all of this, we were always unsure about having a child – will we be able to take care of a child? Are we in a financial position to take care of another human being? Is parenting something we want to do? These are constant discussions that we had as a couple. As an individual, I was unsure of my ability to be a 'good mother'.

I reached an age where I was considered a high-risk category to have a child. After a long wait, I got a teaching job at a university and came to know that I was pregnant. I had been waiting for a teaching job for a long time and was utterly perplexed about my situation. My workplace took me away from Rajesh, making it even more difficult. A new job, a new city, and the pregnancy created a turmoil of emotions. New support systems emerged – my mom came to stay with me and help with the pregnancy and in the form of a few new colleagues. I worked throughout my pregnancy and was able to handle all my

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responsibilities. Although I was constantly torn between whether I was doing enough at work and whether I was taking enough care of myself and the one I am responsible for.

> Anamika's[1] birth was through an emergency c-section, and she was admitted to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit for five days after birth. All of which gave me anxiety and resulted in spurts of emotional outbursts and crying. A deep sense of despair and guilt did not leave. What did I do wrong? I should have taken more care – that would have helped – were the questions that plagued me. During the maternity leave, I relied on the suggestions of my mother, mother-in-law, and sisters. Some aspects of these suggestions troubled me and were not in line with my beliefs or worldview. My anxieties about raising a child continued to increase. A month before my maternity leave was over, I got introduced to the online parenting group, Online Prenting Village (OPV), on Facebook.[2] The group was an instant source of comfort because women expressed similar anxieties and frustrations that I had felt as a mother. These 'commonalities of experiences' were important reasons for me to connect with the group. OPV became a vital space because I found posts and comments that reinforced my ideological stand as a woman and mother.

I sent an invite to Rajesh to join the group with three aims: first, it could help him to understand the context of my conversations about posts; second, it could help him to engage with critical issues that women and mothers face and third, it was also a safe space for parents/caretakers to discuss their problems.

Rajesh:

> Although I do not remember my feelings when I received the invitation link or when I filled up the mandatory questions for membership, deep inside, it was another effort on my part to participate in parenting, albeit remotely. OPV was an assuring space where I would be able to contribute to parenting. Our communication was mostly over phone calls and video calls over WhatsApp and Google Duo. When Smitha shared her concerns over issues such as Anamika not achieving her development goals in time, and other growth indicators, my first reaction was to check OPV for threads on similar topics or dig into the OPV archives to find out if members have shared anything related. The collective wisdom of the group was reassuring. I would call up Smitha to discuss what I had come across. This was also a way for us to normalise our experience with parenting Anamika in separate cities. Learning that people are trying/tried different options to address the problems reassured me that we are doing okay; it also helps us to make decisions about parenting. Secondly, OPV has encouraged me to be kind to myself as well as Smitha as parents

> At a personal level, I felt guilty of being away from Smitha and Anamika and for leaving Smitha alone to struggle with parenting. There was hardly any social pressure on me to take part in parenting; few friends, relatives, and colleagues sympathised with my condition of missing Anamika's growing up stage. Reading about experiences, questions, frustrations, and everyday challenges with mothering of women in the group and conversations with Smitha helped me to understand the struggles with mothering and the pressure of expectations that she faced. The constant emphasis on OPV as a supportive space for mothers expressing their frustration over their mothering efforts influenced the way I approached 'expectations' in mothering and parenting as well. On self-reflection, I realise that the suggestions in the OPV, such as 'take it easy,' 'distract the child,' lingers in my mind each time I am dealing with Anamika. This can be concerning gentle parenting – when I am struggling to understand her tantrums/behaviour or the worry about low weight gain of the child or the child showing lack of interest in listening to the online class. Most important, OPV has helped me to stop blaming Smitha or myself when it comes to decisions about Anamika

We are heterosexual partners and have been together for over a decade and married for ten years. We are both from middle-class Hindu families. We met each other when we were pursuing our doctoral research together. We were twenty-nine years old when we got married in 2012. We are parents to a four-year-old who was born to us after five years of our marriage. In this article, we discuss our observations and experiences of being part of an online parenting group on Facebook. The article is a collaborative autoethnography written to discuss the co-constructed narratives of parenting and radical self-care that emerged when we engaged with OPV. Autoethnographies use the personal experiences and narratives of the author/researcher and place them within a

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[1] Anamika is a pseudonym that we are using for our daughter in this article.
[2] We will give the Facebook group the pseudonym Online Parenting Village (OPV) in this article; this is done to maintain the anonymity of the group and its group members.

social context, and they focus on systematically analysing personal experiences to understand cultural experiences (Sparkes, 2000; Ellis, Adam and Bochner, 2011). The relational perspective in autoethnography is used in this article to examine the mutual influences and observations between us as partners, parents, and participants in the Facebook group. We do this to understand how our participation mutually influenced our understanding of ideas of empowered mothering and radical self-care.

PROCESS OF DEVELOPING A RELATIONAL NARRATIVE

It was a call for paper around self-care in 2021, for a conference where we started putting together our thoughts about the group in an organised manner. We made notes about our discussion and put together a framework. The ideas had developed organically over the period of our three years of being members of the group. We talked about the space the group gave us and what we observed. We had many questions about the method to talk about self-care and motherhood. 'Is it autoethnography if we write our observations about the group processes?' 'Is it autoethnography if we make observations and interpretations about the posts of the group and the notion of self-care that we adhere to and understand?' 'Are we speaking for the group when we are putting together our analysis?' The group does identify as a feminist group, but can our interpretation of the posts be based on the group's position, or should it be based on the individual who writes it? Are we interpreting for the individuals? These were the questions that we went back and forth on. The group is a relational space we shared as parents to Anamika and with the group. We were passive participants in the group, but the discussions provided solutions, a sense of 'we-ness', and a little push to stand up for our beliefs. We were encouraged to read and make sense of our ideas. We understand the group as a cultural space that portrays different self-care ideas. Our perspective and positionality helped us understand self-care within a particular theoretical perspective. We use this understanding to analyse self-care as discussed in the group. We use the concept of radical self-care as conceptualised by Audre Lorde ([1988] 2017). Radical Self-care is understood as self-preservation to ensure that women are talking about their needs. Self-esteem and self-love are essential to self-care. Self-care and self-love are also based on respect, love, care, dignity, rights, and justice. It is a public and political act to choose and change one's life (Lorde, 1988; hooks, 1952). The group for us was that shared space where people presented their negotiations, challenges and assertions about self-care, which went beyond individual methods or maternal functioning (Troy and Dalgas-Pelish, 2003; Lloyd, O'Brien, and Riot, 2016; Kim and Dee, 2017; Barkin *et al.*, 2010). We argue that self-love cannot exist in a vacuum and is interconnected with the institutional structure of women's lives. It is a radical act against the construct of the 'good mother' and the social expectations of patriarchal Motherhood and intensive mothering. Self-love is essential for women's selfhood and to understand mothering as empowering and not critical to a woman's life.

Smitha and Rajesh:

> The engagement/participation with the OPV gained importance in our lives through everyday conversations and discussions. Self-care emerged as one of the topics of interest because we constantly saw it discussed in the group. 'It is important to give oneself a break,' 'Self-care is important for mothers,' 'Don't be too hard on yourself' were the constant suggestions we saw in the group. But these suggestions were not merely an indication to 'take a small break' or 'treat oneself;' in fact, the focus was on the importance of self-care for the mother's well-being, the support system she required, as well as assertions the mother must make to ensure that she is able to emphasise her needs. Self-care, expressed, asserted, and impressed aspects of a mother's wellbeing, emerged as an essential theme in the group. As faculty engaging with gender issues, women's health, women's rights, and self-identified feminists, our discussions steered towards the political and personal space the group provides for participants as part of this group and what our participation in the group means to us.

In her seminal work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Adrienne Rich (1976) distinguishes the patriarchal institution of Motherhood and the experience of mothering. The hetero-normative patriarchal institution of Motherhood is male-defined and is infused with beliefs and expectations from mothering practices. This institutionalised Motherhood produces what Foucault (1979) refers to as 'discourses of knowledge,' and they consolidate in the discourses of the 'good mother.' The patriarchal construct of Motherhood is constantly employed to ensure that the public-private domain is separated, and the mother remains confined to the private domain (Aneja and Vaidya, 2016). The mothers also are responsible for continuing/passing on patriarchal values and beliefs to the next generation. The 'good mother' behaves in a way that is considered acceptable behaviour, constantly under self-surveillance and with a compulsion to reproduce appropriate behaviour. In this ideology, the role expectations from mothers are to ignore their needs and focus entirely on their children. The construction of

the 'good mother vs. bad mother' debate is inherent to this institutionalised Motherhood. It relies on the universality of mothering in the construction of the good mother (Glenn, 1994; Arendell, 1999; Collins, 1994; Hays, 1996; Tardy, 2000; Goodwin and Huppatz, 2010). Culturally sanctioned intensive mothering characterises patriarchal Motherhood, which views mothering as entirely child-centred, emotionally involving, and taking on the child's responsibility alone without a complaint (Hays, 1996; Hallstein, 2006).

Empowered mothering and Feminist mothering (Hays, 1996; O'Reilly, 2008) argue that mothering can be an empowering experience, and the embodied experience of the mother must be given importance. Empowered mothering understands mothering as female-defined. It lays emphasis on the autonomy/agency and independence of the women that is denied to them by institutional Motherhood (Hays, 1996; O'Reilly, 2008). Feminist mothering believes that mothers and children benefit and lead enriching lives if there is a focus on mothers' selfhood where they are meeting their own needs. It believes in shared parenting and equal responsibilities (Ruddick, 1985; Arendell, 2000; O'Reilly, 2008). Aneja and Vaidya (2016) through their work highlight the different motherhood ideologies that shape the construct of Motherhood in India. In the Indian context, they argue there is a confluence of different frameworks from being idealised to deified, commodified, and devalued. They identify motherhood as an ideological system and mothering as the lived experience of the woman who attempts to balance her everyday realities with cultural rhetorical expectations. Bagchi (2017) argues that feminists theorising of Motherhood in India struggles with the contradiction of the ideological glorification of Motherhood constantly and the powerlessness faced by mothers in their everyday lived reality. Maithreyi Krishnaraj (2010) has argued that the feminist efforts in India around motherhood has been to retrieve it as a source of emancipation by providing terms and conditions in the social structure which will make it a creative experience. She also states the importance of understanding mothering as an important nurturing experience for everyone including the father.

The emergence of online spaces for parents/mothers' collectives offers us an opportunity to look at mothering/parenting practice at the intersection of individual and collective experiences. Online groups have created a space for new environments where experiences of Motherhood and mothering are performed, articulated, and negotiated (Orton-Johnson, 2017). The Social Networking Site (SNS) Facebook is used by mothers widely to post photos, videos, and updates about their children (Morris, 2014). These groups also create a space for broader discussion and have shown to be a space in which dominant discourses of Motherhood are challenged, negotiated, and redefined (Orton-Johnson, 2017). Kate Orton-Johnson (2017) argues that online groups are cultural sites where the identities and roles of mothering are (re)constructed and re(produced) in socioeconomic, temporal, and technological contexts. An extensive childcare network increases psychological, social, and emotional wellbeing through social support. The online mothering groups work to protect the collective identity and group boundaries (Ley, 2007). Not feeling judged by other members helps develop a sense of connection and authenticity. Interaction in mothering groups goes beyond online group engagement to offline meetings or personal friendships created on social networking sites (Ley, 2011).

India has 658 million internet users in 2022 with a staggering 467 million who use social media. India also has one of the highest Facebook users in the world with 329.7 million users in early 2022. The advent of the smartphone and access to affordable internet services has seen an increase in the use of social media platforms in the country with Facebook leading the race (Kemp, 2022). Facebook as a platform provides a space for personal as well as community interactions. A simple Google search for online parenting groups in India will elucidate articles that are primarily about/for urban, middle-class women mostly living in nuclear families accessing/relying on/depending on groups and parenting apps to make big or small decisions for themselves and their children (Haider, 2017; Jain, 2018). The primary purpose of the groups is to share information, create support and provide a space for parent interactions.

OPV STRUCTURE AND COMMUNICATION

OPV consists of around 32K plus members [As of April 2020]. The first criterion for membership is that users should be a parent or expectant parent. The admin members will only admit a new user after they answer a few questions related to parenting. The group has a clear ideological stand and refers to itself as a feminist group. It identifies itself as a feminist group explicitly because it is a pro-choice group, believes in women supporting women, believes in equal roles/partnership for both parents in bringing up a child, believes in the rights of the women and is strictly against caste and religion-based comments.

It has moderators and administrators who go through the posts and comments. They are responsible for the approval of new members and ensuring that the posts and comments adhere to the group rules/policies. This gatekeeping ensures that in the group, important posts get attention. This also ensures that the posts/comments are in line with the basic ideological tenets of the group. This scrutiny is also essential to ensure that the group adheres to the Facebook community rules. OPV consists largely of members from India and Indians settled abroad. All of them have one common identity as parents. They represent a microcosm of a particular stratum of society

– educated, middle class, and predominantly urban. As a rule, the medium of language of the group is English – this has a strict adherence policy – the posts and discussions must be in English. Strict adherence to the English language is to avoid confusion resulting from the use of regional languages. Administrators insist members to provide the English translation of the content of posts or references made in regional languages. Strict adherence to English language reduces confusion, chaos, and regional sub-group discussions. However, this may restrain the engagement of non-English speaking members. The group has fewer men than women, and their participation in the group remains limited. The women are married, working, stay at home, working from home, divorced, separated, grandmothers, adoptive or single mothers, and living in joint families, extended or nuclear families.

Many members start their posts with the statement: 'I have decided to write this here because this group will not judge me'. This non-judgemental space becomes an essential aspect of engaging with the online group. This was one of the reasons we continued to stay and engage with the group more so passively than actively. Our passive participation here corresponded with our overall behaviour on social networking sites. Rajesh rarely posts on Facebook and occasionally posts photographs on Instagram. Smitha occasionally posts on Facebook and Instagram. We check our social media accounts multiple times a day, respond to friends' posts and follow news and entertainment feeds. We are both not active on social media, but OPV allows us a space where we can feel a sense of community and belongingness. Our participation in the group by commenting on posts and posting emoji reactions to other members' post, can be characterised as what Orton-Johnson (2016) refers to as 'active lurkers'. 'Active lurkers' comprise of members in the community who may not be sharing posts or participating in discussions but use the discussions in the group to address their own practices of mothering/parenting.

The group uses several strategies to ensure that there are different levels of engagement by the members. This includes daily posts, weekly posts, and special occasion posts, anonymous posts.

Daily posts include:

> **#Suggestions posts**: Members ask for suggestions over a range of everyday things ranging from opinions on products to reliable doctors, schools, places to visit and others. The mundane things that are part of the family get space in the group. At a practical level, this saves time, money and energy for the members. Further, the members who post place their trust in other members and look forward to the genuine opinions of the community members.

> **#Ventout posts:** Ventout posts are a prominent part of the group. They give a space for the members to talk about their everyday frustrations. The posts are mostly related to the frustrations with family members, children, neighbours, officials, and schools. The members write Ventout posts to get opinions regarding others' behaviour or suggestions about one's own response/ behaviour.

Smitha:

> One of these posts was about the constant expectations from mothers that they had to be thankful that they get maternity leave and all that 'free paid time.' The assumption that it was free time for me was frustrating, and that it is a generosity extended to me instead of a right constantly irked me. This post on OPV received a lot of support – 'sailing in the same boat' replies; suggestions included the answers that they had tried, by replying 'how is it free time when I do not even get sleep or a human being is latched on to me continuously, and it is tiring.' The replies also said that it is okay to reply even if it upsets the person in front as the mother's mental health and 'peace of mind' is essential. Posts and discussions that stood for women's rights and psychological wellbeing become a source of comfort and validation.

> **#Bragposts, #Happy posts and #Gratitude posts**: these include posts that the members are excited and happy about. These posts may consist of personal achievements or achievements of children. Gratitude posts express gratitude towards the group for their suggestions, creating a safe space and enabling mothers to talk freely without judgment.

> **Weekly posts:** Weekly posts include posts that are designated for a particular purpose, which includes participatory posts. The purpose of these posts is to 'have fun', 'let off steam' – this includes meme sharing, fun questions/activities – anything that the members can engage in and enjoy. The group rules discourage these posts daily because they believe that this will result in essential posts being ignored or overlooked.

> **Posts for specific purposes:** These posts include topics such as politics, job opportunities, and discussions related to current and other pressing issues. The group specifies that a single thread should

be maintained for contentious and debatable topics to ensure space for all posts and duplication of discussions does not happen.

Anonymous Posts: These posts are anonymous and help the members to share personal issues that they are not comfortable sharing in the open. The admin shares the posts. The author's identity is not revealed; this enables the members to share personal information that would cause them distress or dilemmas. These posts are accompanied by 'trigger warnings' such as #domestic violence, #mention of cancer, and any other issues which may be distressing to the other group members. These posts also include necessary preventive measures such as – reminding the members that the group is pro-choice and believes in women's rights and LGBTQ rights. They often have material/links/resources to help the member. These resources support the members to get help, read, and educate themselves. The members also are refreshingly supportive of each other.

Smitha and Rajesh:

In this article we have organised our thoughts on mothering/parenting, self-care and OPV, into categories. We are aware that categorisation may limit the in-depth exploration of the idea of self-care. Still, it gives us scope to explore self-care and mothering as represented in the group. For us, many of the categories are simply observations and analyses, while some categories influenced our own mothering/parenting practices.

Me-time

Many #ventout posts discuss the importance of personal time as a break from expected duties. These discussions explore the constraints faced by mothers in availing 'Me-time' for themselves. Mothers complain about the lack of support from partner and other family members. Mothers can employ strategies to have 'me-time.' Members post about their interests or creative endeavours. Discussions about just doing nothing and taking time off for oneself are also important threads of conversations. One woman in her post talked about not going away with her husband and children to his parent's house and staying home for a much-needed break. The comments section celebrated her decision to take time out and prioritise herself over society's expectations from a 'good' wife or 'good' mother. The celebration of the woman's decision to stay back and take a break resonates as a simple act of taking control over one's life. This is against the patriarchal expectations of the mothering self as bound to the duties of parenting.

Smitha and Rajesh:

The pandemic started when Anamika was 2 years old, and we got an opportunity to be together as we had online classes. Our experience of taking control over our life is more related to our persistent wish to attain a level of fitness. We wanted to do it together. Managing Anamika during the time came up as an issue. We decided to walk together taking Anamika along with us. Rajesh would make Anamika sit on the bicycle and push the bicycle along. We planned our workout timing in such a way that it would coincide with Anamika's screentime. However, this was not without conflicts. From multiple sources as well as OPV we have learned about the implications of screen time on children. We tried to rationalise our actions by accepting that some amount of screen time is inevitable and if that time could be used by us as workout time/us time that would be productive for us, and we would be able to spend quality time with Anamika.

There are #ventout posts about the partners not helping or expectations that the woman should do all the household work and manage the child singlehandedly. This has been for working as well as stay-at-home mothers. The comments agree that in a patriarchal society, it is expected that women will put others in the household before themselves and continue to do all the work no matter how tired or ill. The most common suggestion that comes up is 'leave the things undone, nothing catastrophic will happen if things don't get done', 'you deserve a break', 'husbands should also contribute, leave it to him, they are his children also', 'just leave and go to the spa or shopping'. The importance of 'me-time' or taking time out is constantly reinforced by people sharing ideas and personal experiences. Here, the suggestion of encouraging me-time does not remain limited to taking the occasional hour for oneself but focuses on the importance of equal parenting as a means of self-care.

'Dressing up' vs. 'Taking care'

'Dressing up' is another area of discussion in the group. By 'dressing up,' we mean the expectations that the women should be dressed well and look good even while managing work and children. A set of discussions have

talked about these unrealistic expectations placed on women. We argue that these expressions against the 'yummy mummy' (Littler, 2013) tag are a political stand and an essential step towards self-care.

Another set of posts asks for suggestions about products, regimes, and routines people follow to take care of themselves, and the difficulties women face in taking care of themselves. Here the posts and comments are encouraging – 'you will be able to maintain a routine if you try', 'start slowly' 'involve the partner so you can set up a routine.' Body positivity is encouraged by people sharing their photos and struggles of taking care with the message that women should feel beautiful about themselves.

It is essential to understand the differences between 'Dressing up' and 'Taking care'. 'Dressing up' is a societal expectation of looking presentable after handling the multiple responsibilities of children and family. 'Taking care' is feeling good about oneself by following a self-care routine and doing things that make one feel good about oneself. This requires the woman to take care of herself where the family members support the women. Stress due to the expectation of 'dressing up' and the difficulties in 'taking care' form an important part of the discussions.

Deconstructing 'the good daughter in-law/wife'

Societal and familial expectations from a 'good daughter in-law/wife' are important discussions on the site. The patriarchal expectations which become everyday stressors for women are discussed through #ventout post and #suggestion posts. Posts and discussions include financial issues faced by working mothers – expectations that women should spend their income for the family, let spouse or in-laws manage her salary, and have or not have a separate account. Topics such as rights of a stay-at-home mother over finances of the house and her right to personal and family spending. Issues such as the expectation of caregiving from women and her ability to make decisions about how to bring up children also came up for discussion. Many women express complete frustration over family's / spouses' expectations to be a 'supermom' or 'superwoman' without expecting anything in return. One woman had posted about her frustrations with her husband's complete disregard for her work as a stay-at-home mom and his refusal to share the financial details with her. Posts about the in-law's interference in personal lives or husband's reluctance to consult the partner and instead relying on his family to make decisions also occasionally surface in the group. The members also vent about other family members overindulging the child despite the mother's disapproval or that the mother is constantly criticised for her parenting methods. Many women who are living in joint families face challenges when it comes to making decisions about finances, raising their child and even basic decisions related to care of the child. Even women who were in nuclear families had parents and in-laws imposing parenting decisions on them. This was a matter of concern and was constantly discussed in the group. The posts end with 'what should I do,' 'how do I tackle this,' 'how do I say it,' and 'please help.' The responses range from being supportive- simple 'hugs,' 'facing a similar situation,' validating their frustrations, and offering support. Another set of reactions is encouragement and suggestions to be assertive, maintain a separate account, strongly take a stand against child-rearing practices that do not match the parent's or mother's choice. Here, mother's choice is not articulated as an individualistic decision, but it is a push against the patriarchal values that deem the mother incapable of making decisions about her child while expecting her to continuously incorporate the mothering practices of others even if she does not agree with it. The idea is that the mother, although struggling, knows best and has the right to bring up the child in the manner they deem appropriate. The rights of the stay-at-home mom are discussed at length in different posts – the role of caregiving should not be taken for granted, and the mother should be part of all decision-making, including financial decision-making in the house. Women should remain within the threshold of the house, not have opinions related to finances, take views of the elders for child-rearing, and hold the family together under all circumstances are some of the stereotypical notions questioned on these threads. The mother's selfhood is given importance, and the attempt is to deconstruct the notion of 'good mother,' 'good woman', and 'good wife.'

Smitha:

> It is my everyday routine to go through the comments and to look up suggestions that people must have got for similar queries that I had or issues that I was discussing with Rajesh. I remember that I was constantly tensed about whether Anamika was achieving her height-weight parameters. She was on the lower end of the spectrum, and I was frequently questioned about it – 'Don't you feed her well?', 'How come is she so small?' and 'Do you starve her?' I had a feeling that I was an incompetent mother and worried about her long-term health. I had constant discussions with my mother, who was helping me with Anamika, about every meal she had and worried that we were not feeding her enough. It had become a habit for us to recount what she had eaten throughout the day, and then discuss if it was enough.

> Rajesh was the one who pointed out that many parents were facing the same issues, and they had written about it in the group. He sent me the links to these discussion threads and told me to check responses

where people had said that 'why is the mother blamed for all the issues related to the children's diet?', 'if the child is achieving the milestones, then it is okay', 'people will say what they want and simply getting worked up about it is not good'. Rajesh quotes the same discussions even now, saying that it is not only us who are facing these issues but also others. 'Why do you get stressed over this? You are doing the best you can'. The online discussions and our conversations have helped me believe a lot more in myself and Anamika.

Laughter, Opinions, and Desires

Patriarchal structures have perpetuated notions of the 'good woman' who is submissive, represses her sexuality, does not express her desires, does not openly laugh, and prioritises family over work and ambition (Radhakrishnan,2009; Jha, 2018). This is reinforced by family members, community members, and popular media. In the popular media women tread a thin line between being *'sanskaari'* (cultured) *and 'unsanskaari'* (uncultured) and it is marked by her behaviour – the depiction of a carefree woman as laughing and talking loudly is equated with 'irresponsibility' while the 'responsible' wife and mother is silently busy taking care of the needs of her loved ones (Sengupta, Roy, and Purkayastha, 2019; Habib, 2017). Women, especially mothers who have opinions, laugh, and express desires, are judged for their morality and often shamed into behaving in the 'proper way'. In such a repressive culture, the online forum allows mothers to freely talk about their sexual desires, sex toys, share funny memes, and friendly banter about finding time to 'do it' with children around. The online spaces become the backstage (Tardy, 2000) for conversations considered *'unsanskaari'* for women and mothers. These posts are often seen on weekly posts or #suggestions posts, or #anonymous posts. The importance of having such a space for these discussions 'to maintain their sanity' is often echoed in the group. This online space provided women with opportunities to express themselves more freely than in real life. The focus is on their self-worth and the perceived self-esteem of women to be 'comfortable in their skin'. The online conversations on the site were often a counternarrative to the dominant regressive norms the members of the group experienced in real life.

Violence and Abuse

Self-care, self-love, and self-esteem are the most articulated themes in posts related to women facing violence or abuse of any form. The institution of marriage in India is interlinked with religion, caste, and sub caste where the women are brought up to have an arranged marriage that is fixed by their family. The patriarchal institution of marriage is imposed on many Indian women where the decisions on life choices are made by her family. After marriage, the role of her family in making decisions for her is taken over by the husband and his family. Reproduction, and maintaining the lineage of the family are considered the duties of the women along with passing on the patriarchal values to the children. Divorce or separation is considered as a deviation from the gender roles that a married women and mother are expected to play in family and society (Srinivasan and James, 2015). Divorce or separation has disproportionately affected women culturally, socially, and financially. Jacob and Chattopadhyay (2019) argue that women prefer informal spaces such as natal family, friends, and others over institutional mechanisms to talk about their problems. The online spaces are an informal space where women can seek advice on abuse and violence they are facing. Many women of OPV posting anonymously have called the group a support system. Online space becomes an outlet for women to express their thoughts, get advice or vent out about their situations. The idea constantly expressed is that the group is a support system, 'soul sisters' and 'first place to turn' to vent out. The group provides a space for women to discuss their situations without the fear of judgement. Most of the posts on violence and abuse are expressed in #anonymous post, #ventout post, or #suggestion post. The moderators do attempt to ensure non-judgmental comments toward the person expressing the distress. Resources to seek help for gender-based violence are immediately shared. The underlying idea is that staying in violent and abusive marriages negatively impacts the mental and physical health of women and children. There was a consensus among group members that mothers should not choose to be in abusive relationships for the sake of their children and many of the online comments reflected this belief. The group members were empathetic of the women's position and supportive of her decisions. This group's stand resonated with our ideological stand on gender-based violence and against the sacrosanct view of the institution of marriage that is dominantly prevalent.

Affirmations and Empowering Language

Smitha and Rajesh:

> It is a thin line we walk between taking care of her and helping her grow as an individual. Our reading and interactions with others taught us the importance of practising affirmations with Anamika and their significance to her development. But practising that in our own lives was something we did not consider important or necessary. Both of us have always been hesitant to talk positively of ourselves. We realise it is a learned behaviour from years of socialisation. The cultural messaging that care for oneself is

considered as selfish and self-indulgent was accepted and practiced. The group provides us with a space to discuss self-love and being kind to oneself. It became a way of supporting each other.

An important aspect of the online forum is the repeated self-affirmation and the deployment of empowering language. One of the posts ended a vent about taking equal responsibility in caregiving with the statement, 'is it too much to expect, or am I overthinking?' The mother received immediate responses from members that provided emotional support. Another set of discussions was about engendered language – terms such as 'over-thinking' or 'over-reacting' were associated with femininity. Hetero-patriarchal discourse uses self-defeating language to reinforce that woman are 'emotional beings' and cannot make rational decisions. The empowering language used instead on the site counters this gendered language that helps women assert and believe in themselves. The encouragement, support, and language deployed contribute to the resistance to the patriarchal construct of motherhood.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Smitha and Rajesh:

> Our experiences of parenting at the intersection of virtual and physical spaces and ideas were enabled by the autoethnographic method. The experiences and ideas we have documented in this paper has co-evolved as we progressed through parenting Anamika and as we realised how OPV is influencing us as parents. The decision to write about our experience with parenting in the context of OPV was to acknowledge the relevance and importance of digital spaces such as OPV in contemporary parenting. We have also documented how the ideological background of the group and interventions of the moderators have played an important role in moulding the character of the group. A unique contribution of this work is in documenting the experiences of two individuals who have different social roles and expectations as parents in conventional Indian society. Our experiences are also a representation of the urban middle-class young population who are forced to live separately from extended family networks due to professional demands and engage in parenting alone.

Smitha:

> Mothering is tiring, dirty, mentally, and physically draining, sleep-depriving, and an extremely anxiety-inducing experience, and it was okay to express the same as part of this group. OPV gave me a space to examine my thoughts as a mother and helped me in understanding the kind of mother I wanted to be.

> *They come through you but not from you,*
> *And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.*
> *You may give them your love but not your thoughts,*
> *For they have their own thoughts.*
> *You may house their bodies but not their souls,*
> *For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams. (Gibran, 1995)*

> These are one of my favourite lines 'On children' by Khalil Gibran (Gibran, 1995). These lines, for me, represent the space that needs to be there between motherhood and mothering. It is a space that understands the child is an independent human being, and the mother also needs to grow in her own space. My anxieties about motherhood came from the fear that independence may be buried under societal expectations and my own doubts about raising an independent human being. Self-care is this process to be independent. Rajesh understands the struggle when we talk about it and the online group supports and supplements these discussions and mothering practices.

Parenting is a journey we undertook reluctantly. Our anxieties, and insecurities, coupled with societal expectations of parenting were the reasons why we were reluctant to have a child. But as we go further in the journey, we realise that it is a process of learning and unlearning as a parent that makes this journey interesting and our understanding that we are only facilitating Anamika's journey as a person. Our experience and analysis as members of OPV show that online space is an important cultural space to understand and support mothering/parenting. Posts and the comments they receive reveal snippets of the lived realities that can sometimes deconstruct the patriarchal understanding of Motherhood. The 'gatekeeping features' with the involvement of the administrators, the underlying ideological stand of being a feminist group, and the expectations of adherence to the group policies of non-discrimination and non-judgemental attitude aid community building. It is argued that active participation in online groups gives a high sense of trust, emotional aid, sense of belonging, information,

reciprocity, and interpersonal ties (Miyata, 2002). The online group with its gatekeeping and enabling features foster an approach to mothering that encourages parents and particularly mothers to question some of the patriarchal underpinnings of mothering practices, especially when those traditional practices are perceived as restrictive or repressive to women.

The categories that emerged when discussing self-care as expressed and asserted in the group helped us understand the online group as a public and political space. Mothering as a political space is not a new idea. There has been scholarship around the social construction of Motherhood and the expectations of a 'good mother' as deeply oppressive and compromising women's autonomy. Empowered mothering, which emerged as a counternarrative in the online space, questions the biological essentialism in mothering – not all women must become mothers, and not all providing care work and nurturing are women. These ideas of empowered mothering are performed in OPV as a mothering/parenting group, and it provides a space for people to find like-minded people to come together and get support. OPV's ideological position of being a feminist mothering corresponded with our ideological worldview; these openly stated critical positions and the different features within the group helped us express ourselves offline even as we were being rather passive participants online. OPV provided us with a support mechanism in our parenting in which we navigated the difficulties of staying apart and having to counter dominant views of motherhood around us.

Radical self-care (Lorde, [1988] 2017) is understood as self-preservation to ensure that women are talking about their needs. It is an essential part of empowered mothering – which believes in the autonomy and independence of the mother and believes that being a mother is only one, albeit key, aspect of her life. OPV was the space for women to talk, vent, discuss and express themselves. The mother's selfhood is given importance and recognised in the attempt to deconstruct the notion of 'good mother', 'good woman', and 'good wife'. Interactions in OPV highlight the idea that mothering for some can be an empowering process.

We realise the need for further research to understand how engagement in such virtual communities intertwines with real-life experiences and can develop into empowered mothering practices for community participants. But for us, these expressions were a radical act against the construct of the 'good mother' and the social expectations of patriarchal motherhood and intensive mothering. The surreptitious support (Johnson, 2015) offered by OPV is essential for the members to be able talk about intimate/embarrassing/painful experiences without the fear of being judged. This idea is constantly expressed – that OPV is a support system, 'soul sisters' and 'first place to turn' to vent out without fear of judgement. OPV provides what Ley refers to as a social and therapeutic space (Ley, 2007). In the group, self-care is personal care, standing up for oneself, asserting one's rights, and safeguarding and believing in one's self-worth. Here self-care does not mean a 'break from mothering duties' or a 'few days off from office' or paid leave from office (possible in the formal sector only) but a change in the individual, community, and societal attitudes.

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