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## **RISK-TALK: THE POLITICS OF RISK AND ITS REPRESENTATION**

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The Politics of Risk Representation

In *Risk Society*, Ulrich Beck (1992) draws an alarming picture of the world: a world of new and intense risk arising from technological developments. He describes these dangers as global threats to life which none can escape and which, unless changes are made, will become increasingly hazardous in the future. The changes required are greater reflexivity and effective public participation in what Beck calls 'the auxiliary and alternative governments of techno-economic sub-politics - science and research' (Beck, 1992, p. 229). Beck argues for a politics based on reflexive accommodation between two opposing forms of knowledge, those of laboratory based science and experienced lay persons, in order to recognise and address dangers.

In the context of these global technical risks Beck predicts the rise of what he calls 'risk society' in which the key political issue is not the distribution of wealth but of risk. He argues that 'risk society' will be the inevitable outcome of the contradictions inherent in modernity due to technological developments, the meeting of basic material needs, ideologies of equality and individualism and the loss of faith in science. For Beck the contemporary concern with environmental and health risks amongst some sectors of the population in Europe and the United States is a new phenomenon which will become generalised throughout society. Indeed, Beck's work itself is an attempt to generalise this preoccupation for the language he selects is alarmist, referring to 'irreversible harm' (ibid, p. 23), 'apocalyptic catastrophes' (ibid, p. 60) and a future scenario in which society becomes habituated to birth defects (ibid, p. 83).

For Beck this preoccupation with environmental and health risks could not be expected to occur in what he calls 'scarcity society' because 'the distribution of socially produced wealth and related conflicts occupy the foreground so long as obvious material need, the 'dictatorship of scarcity', rules the thought and action of the people (as today in large parts of the so-called Third World)' (ibid, p. 20). Beck states 'On the international scale it is emphatically true that material misery and *blindness* to hazards coincide' (ibid, p. 41, emphasis added). He resurrects the stereotype that 'for these people ... chemical factories with their imposing pipes and tanks are symbols of success' (ibid, p. 42) and the death threat that they contain 'remains largely invisible' (ibid). However, it is evident that Third World peoples are not uniformly 'blind' to environmental and health hazards. Beck quotes a report in *Der Spiegel* on a steel and chemical town in Brazil where in the *favelas* corrugated roofs must be replaced each year because of acid rain, where locals call the rashes residents develop 'alligator skin' and where gas masks are sold in supermarkets. *Der Spiegel* indicates that the Brazilian military government (which invited polluting industries into Brazil) and the

industries themselves justify policy and practice in terms of local poverty. Yet Beck makes nothing of either the clear differentials of interest and power within Third World countries which this example suggests nor of the obvious awareness of health hazards any population buying gas masks in supermarkets would have. Explanations couched in terms of 'blindness to hazards' and industrial buildings being seen as 'imposing symbols of success' are not just inadequate but an offensive misrepresentation of Third World people of exactly the kind (and for the same purposes) of which Said (1978) and many others have complained.

For Beck, then, the significant difference between the West and the rest is the distribution of resources; having met its own material needs and found an acceptable level of distribution, western societies are in a position to focus on the environmental and health risks created by technology. Here we can see that the scale of Beck's work is too grand and his statements too sweeping; he generalises from his knowledge of Germany since the 1970s, is unreflexive about his own views of the West and the Third World and is inevitably caught out by history. *Risk Society*, for example, was first published in 1986 before the unification of Germany and the subsequent conflicts over resources and before the 'welfare experiment' was declared unsustainable in the West. Contrary to Beck, the salience of class position and conflicts over access to resources are not declining; rather the situation is becoming more polarised as debates on exclusion and the development of gated communities testify.

Illich (1971), Sahlins (1972), and others would consider Beck's view that there is an obvious relationship between material goods and the perception of scarcity or poverty naïve. For them the West is the epitome of 'scarcity society' since capitalist society is founded on the ethos that one's needs are infinite and never satisfied. With such an ethos the West will never be free of wants, will never overcome conflicts over the distribution of wealth and, if the meeting of material needs is the criterion for a focus on global hazards, will not be the prime candidate for safeguarding the global environment (as America's stance at the 1997 Kyoto Climate Summit testifies).(1)

### Nuclear Risk - a Discussion

Despite his passing acknowledgement that the rise of risk society is essentially a rise in the perception of technological risk Beck does not maintain a distinction between risks as hazards and the perception of risk. For Beck the epitome of modern technological risk is the nuclear threat; here the level of risk is incalculable, incomensurate, no one can be held individually responsible and those at risk include people not yet conceived. Even if we agree that nuclear technology poses a new hazard to the planet of the order Beck suggests, in the West its perception as such is recent and cannot be explained in terms of rising wealth or declining economic inequalities. A quick rummage in my own past as a lay historian of the nuclear threat produces a different picture. In the mid-1960s the first task of each day in my American fundamentalist Christian primary school was to memorise three verses of the New Testament so that when (not if) 'the Russians' (read Communists) invaded and burnt all the Bibles we, the pupils of Los Angeles' Golden West School, could reconstruct an underground Bible. During this period sirens would sound across the city at which the class would 'duck and cover', as required by America's policy of national readiness for Russian nuclear bombs. In our case we would duck under the desks, hands protecting our necks against falling glass, and await the nuclear bombs.

A decade later I was in England on a college trip being shown around Brighton police station. We were shown a bunker equipped with radio equipment, a few months' food and water stores and a shooting range. We heard of the arrangements for police personnel who had volunteered to leave their families for the bunker should Britain be attacked by Russian nuclear bombs. When leaving, gun mountings on the station's roof were pointed out to us. The guns were to hold back crowds clamouring to enter the bunker once nuclear war was declared. The police (and state?) were confident that after a few months it would be safe to resurface. A decade further on and I took a break from fieldwork in 1989 in a rundown South Indian beach resort, only to marvel at history's prank that, in the space of a few years, locates one-time arch enemies, in this case the passengers of two cruise ships, one Russian, one American, on the dance floor of a leading non-aligned country. By this time the nuclear threat was perceived as an environmental risk which for some none would survive but for others would be more in the order of John Wyndham's post-Apocalyptic vision depicted in *The Chrysalids*. A 1987 survey of public attitudes in Britain reflects these shifts in attitude to nuclear weapons. It found that 82% of people thought they would not survive a nuclear war between the superpowers while a quarter of those over 54 years old either thought they would or were not sure whether they would survive (Jones and Rees, 1990 p. 58).

What I am arguing is that Beck is missing the point; even the perception of the most modern and devastating of technological hazards is, as Monica Hunter-Wilson (1951) said about the content of witchcraft beliefs in relation to small-scale societies, the expression of society's nightmare. From the 1950s to the mid-1980s the communist threat was the West's central nightmare. Nuclear weapons, which for much of the time were not popularly thought of as qualitatively different from conventional bombs, were a vital deterrent. While nuclear weapons are now recognised as qualitatively different it is instructive to note that opposition to nuclear stockpiles dissipated once communist regimes collapsed in the USSR and Eastern Europe despite the continuing development, upgrading and deployment of nuclear arms.(2)

Clearly, then, the West cannot be described as having an 'objective' view of environmental hazards. Instead, at the end of the century, the West is undergoing millennial *angst*: uncertain about social and economic relations nationally and internationally as power becomes less localised, technological risk becomes the stand-in for distant, unaccountable, often unidentifiable, shifting 'centres' of power. In this context Dolly the cloned sheep, Chernobyl, Creutzfeldt Jakob's Disease and Thalidomide are metaphors for society's nightmare. It is not the West's comparative wealth that underlies the contemporary concern with technological risk amongst certain sectors of the population, rather it is its impotence. Having failed to realise the most recent incarnation of the 'white man's burden', global development, and unsure of their own social and economic future certain sections of the West's population now aspire to save the world from man-made risk.

### Risk and Blame

Following Mary Douglas (1992), I am arguing that risk-talk itself is political; it attributes blame by asserting moral positions and legitimates formal and informal disciplinary regimes. Thus risk-talk is best viewed as pointing to the fears and ethos

of society as well as the distribution and sources of power within society. Risk-talk needs to be contextualised and studied in fine detail, however, as Beck drew a distinction between the West and Third World countries I briefly compare Britain and India before turning to a consideration of the risk-talk prevalent in India and the low-income settlements of Chennai, formerly called Madras. A comparison of Britain and India at the end of the twentieth century does not reveal clear-cut economic and technological differences for India is highly industrialised, poses a threat to Britain's service sector, has nuclear power stations and nuclear arms, and, unlike Britain, has an independent capability to build and launch satellites. Awareness and protest against environmental and health hazards are equally sectoral, sporadic and inconsistent in Britain and India. Greenham Common is matched by opposition to the Narmada Dams Project in taking on hugely powerful forces. The long-standing Chipko movement's embracing of trees takes on, by similar methods, national and business interests as does the much younger anti-roads campaign in Britain. Similarly, workers' opposition to risk reductions that threaten their livelihoods is common to both countries.

The more obvious difference between the two countries is the way social risks, that is risks to one's social status, are increasingly reduced in Britain, providing more opportunity for individual choice and self-determination. Stigmas which attached to illegitimacy, divorce, co-habitation, unwed or lone mothers and sex-outside-marriage at the beginning of the twentieth century have by the end of the century reduced to such an extent that these statuses and activities are increasingly positive choices rather than the imposition of others or of circumstance. Part of this shift is related to welfare provision and better employment opportunities for women. Part is due to the shift in popular discourse from that of inherited personalities, which reflect on other family members, to personalities molded by individual experience. Although periodically lone mothers and broken families are singled out for blame by government this frequently backfires; it is refugees and migrants who are more commonly cited as the major source of social and economic ills.

For the majority of the population in India, on the other hand, divorce, desertion, co-habitation, unwed or lone mothers and sex-outside-marriage are rarely positive choices and illegitimacy is strongly stigmatised. The inadequacy of welfare provision and of female wages makes female-headed households an undesirable option. Additionally, socially unsanctioned behaviour implicates the whole family, on the basis of ideas about common substance (Inden and Nicholas, 1977; Daniel, 1987), poor training or the condoning of a selfish disregard for social values. Although recently the most highly charged risk-talk attributes risk and blame to communal and caste divisions, the every-day risk on which contemporary Indian society is predicated is the threat posed by women to the social order. Like the West's predilection towards affirming itself through stereotypes of other nations, India frequently resorts to the spectre of western liberalism which it blames for increases in illegitimacy, broken families, destitute women and the abandonment of the elderly in the West. Thus what constitutes risk and the attribution of blame is a social and political phenomenon which cannot be read off from economic development.

To support my argument that in contemporary India women are presented as the chief risk to the social order I briefly examine discourses on female sexuality and gender relations as revealed in the framing and interpreting of national legislation and in

Tamil ethnic politics. Despite the view that women are a major risk to society, in practice the meaning and implications of the concepts of risk and the associated notions of danger, courage, and boldness are context-dependent and contested. This is illustrated by a discussion of the strategies that women employ in Chennai's low-income settlements to evade these discourses without appearing to contravene them.

### Gender and Risk in India

In the popular Indian imagination women are characterised both negatively and positively. These characterisations inform legal and political discourse, media representations, popular theatre and ritual as well as every-day interaction. Positive images stress motherhood, purity, chastity, modesty, forbearance, obedience and *shakti* (a power common to gods and women). The 'good woman' is hard working, thrifty and restrained; she subordinates her needs to those of her family. Negative images present women as gullible, immodest, promiscuous, cunning, undisciplined, lazy, spendthrift and disloyal. Such women are portrayed as a danger to their husbands, their families and society for they drain the family's resources, spoil reputations and set individuals and families against each other. It is acknowledged that conforming to social roles requires the suppression of individual short-term desires for the longer term, more satisfying goals rooted in family welfare. This suppression is considered difficult and, left to their own devices, men, women and children will readily 'take the wrong path'. As Daniel puts it, '[E]vil and decadence are taken to be the normal and the expected, whereas goodness and virtue call for great effort to create and sustain' (1987, p. 203).

The main mechanism for suppressing men's short term desires is their concern for their own as well as their family's reputation. A key measure of masculinity is a man's efficacy in providing for and controlling his wife and children, that is 'keeping them on the right path'. However, it is not enough that a man fulfils his responsibilities; for his self-esteem and reputation he must be seen to fulfill them. It is thought that if men's efforts at family maintenance, their sense of responsibility and masculinity are undermined they will have no incentive to conform to social values. Thus social order is at risk when men do not adequately maintain the family and its boundaries. Yet their ability to do such is considered easily undermined by women who are in a position to dissipate family resources, fail to care for or instruct children, have extra-marital relations and disclose family secrets. Therefore, women (and children) must be controlled by husbands and fathers with the aid of society and the state. The maintenance of social order requires that women submit to their roles as dependent, chaste discreet wives, instructive mothers and reliable stewards in their husband's home. Women's submission to these roles is required not just to control women but to control men. Indeed, men and women strategically utilise these discourses to control each other and, in the case of women, to expand their own sphere of action.

While the risks and control of female sexuality has a long history in India there has been considerable variation in what is deemed to be unacceptable. This began to change in the nineteenth century when missionaries, colonial administrators and European travel writers denigrated what they saw as the degraded status of Hindu women, the incorporation of lust within marriage through polygamy and multiple unions and the barbaric practices of child marriage, female infanticide, widow

immolation and temple dancers (whom they saw as prostitutes) as well as what they considered obscene entertainments enjoyed throughout the social hierarchy (Nair, 1996; Banerjee, 1989). The emerging Indian intelligentsia's response was largely to admit the colonial critique of contemporaneous practices while denying they represented authentic ancient Hindu culture. Following European Orientalist scholars the intelligentsia examined ancient Sanskrit texts to uncover India's glorious past, pointing to the education of women and female chastity in the Vedic period (Chakravati, 1989).

Confrontation over defining and evaluating Hindu culture sharpened with the colonial assessment that barbaric practices made India unfit for self-government (ibid). Nationalists, who became increasingly involved in local and national government, moved to eradicate those practices considered inconsistent with a civilised society. They did this by undermining their material basis, by defining them as obscene and, frequently, their practitioners as prostitutes (Nair, 1996; Banerjee, 1989). In the process of regulating gender relations and introducing a prudish social attitude, prominent nationalists, who were overwhelmingly men, attempted to define women as naturally chaste and men as naturally promiscuous (Nair, 1996). This definition was challenged by female nationalists who argued that chastity was a national trait to which men must also conform (ibid).(3)

Recourse to ancient texts in order to fight contemporaneous political struggles is not confined to the colonial encounter. It is also common to the politics of the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu of which Chennai is the capital. The Tamil ethnic movement, known as the Dravidian movement, claimed to have a superior and more ancient language and culture than that of the Aryan-Brahminic culture of north India (Dirks, 1996). It promoted an ethnic identity which rejected Brahminic claims to cultural and ritual supremacy and opposed the dominance of north Indians and Hindi in colonial and post-colonial India. Once again morality, particularly the sexuality of women, became the yardstick by which one people, in this case the Tamils, claimed superiority over another culture, that of the Aryan-Brahminic culture of north India.

Tamil identity is founded on concepts and metaphors of female chastity (*karpu*) and motherhood (Lakshmi, 1990, Ramaswamy, 1992). It emphasises the centrality of motherhood and purity for women and the role of men as heroic protectors of both their mothers and all that is termed 'mother' - mother Tamil, mother country, mother community (*tai kulam*). Female purity and chastity is seen as having a spiritual power that demands justice and ensures victory and therefore is the object of veneration. Chaste mothers who are themselves descended from chaste mothers produce valorous men. Their wombs are described as the lairs of tigers and this imagery of the courageous Tamil son can be seen in classical Sangam poetry (100BC-250AD) (Hart III, 1973, p.240), twentieth century politics and the widely popular Tamil film industry (Lakshmi, 1995). A mother who is humiliated, insulted or violated sends her sons to do battle on her behalf (Lakshmi, 1990). Unchaste mothers, on the other hand, do not produce valorous sons nor can they lend the spiritual power of their chastity to ensure the success of their sons' efforts. Thus unchaste women are traitors to the culture and unrealised persons while the man who does not protect the mother and all that is termed mother is emasculated (ibid).

Thus Tamil ethnic discourse evaluates women in terms of their purity and chastity and locates them in a domestic, reproductive role, whereas a man's role is a public one which requires the overcoming of outside forces to protect and avenge the mother. The discourse does not provide men with an independent source of valour and success but predicates it on their mothers' purity and, by extension, the purity of all Tamil womanhood (the *tai kulam*).

In India discourses on female sexuality have been a critical tool for shaping, justifying and contesting social hierarchies at least since the nineteenth century. In post-colonial India it is one of the main (and public) means by which those of a higher caste and class justify their position in the social order. It is also central to the contestation of the social order by those lower down the hierarchy. While the politicisation of the sexual abuse of poor and low caste women by police, employers, landlords and others constitutes a challenge to their claim to moral superiority, cynicism towards claims of moral superiority by higher class and caste women is widespread.<sup>(4)</sup> Similarly, while women agree that external controls are necessary to ensure women's conformity to their social roles they deny that men alone have a sense of responsibility for the family or concern for the family's reputation. They claim these dispositions are more frequently the preserve of women for not only do they not indulge in the resource-dissipating and reputation-endangering practices to which men are prone (alcohol consumption, extra-marital relations and bigamy) but, unlike men, their resolve to forego short term individual desires does not break when their spouses fail to conform to social norms.

The view that women are a major threat to a peaceful and ordered society is clear from an analysis of national legislation and case law. The ghoul stalking this body of discourse is the sexually autonomous woman. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, legislators have stepped back from supporting women's economic rights in order to inhibit female sexual autonomy. Instead legislation frames women as properly located in the domestic sphere and dependent on men. Hence, the Minimum Wages Act (1948) ensured that women receive only two-thirds of what men receive for the same work. The much-vaunted Hindu Succession Act (1956) did little for women's right to inheritance or control of what they inherit (Agarwal, 1998). It was feared that should women have equal rights to inheritance they would refuse to marry. The Code of Criminal Procedure specifically predicates women's and girls' right to maintenance on their not taking control of their sexuality. Under the Code a woman's claim to her natal or marital family's resources only holds while she surrenders control of her sexuality to her father or husband. A woman has a right to maintenance even after divorce provided she has not refused to live with her husband without 'sufficient' cause (which does not include adultery), has not agreed to a separation, is not leading an 'immoral life' and has not remarried. Legally maintenance for Muslim women should come from their natal families. The reason for stipulating who is responsible for maintaining women is the fear that a woman without economic support will resort to prostitution which itself is considered a risk to the family and, hence, the social order.

In addition to inhibiting women's sexual autonomy through economic means the legal system defines women as the sexual property of men. The Law of Torts provides for the wrongs considered deserving of compensation by the judiciary. It allows for a father to sue the person who seduces his daughter and for a husband to sue the person

who deprives him of his wife's affection and society. Similarly the Indian Penal Code punishes a man who has sexual relations with a woman without her husband's consent and provides for the husband to register an official complaint against his adulterous wife. The Penal Code, however, expressly precludes a woman from registering an official complaint against her adulterous husband. The legal system is, as the Supreme Court held in relation to Section 498 of the Indian Penal Code, 'intended to protect the rights of the husband and not those of the wife' (quoted in Swaminathan, 1989, p. 134).

Consequently, Swaminathan has argued that

... rape, kidnapping and seduction have been made offences not to protect the person of the woman but to protect the rights of a man against violation by another man (Swaminathan, 1989, p. 134).

What we see here is that discourses on female sexuality and gender relations which took hold in the nineteenth century have continued to dominate legislation in the twentieth century. Not only does legal discourse depict women and girls as the property of men and as properly dependent on them but legislation specifically hinders women's economic independence. In basing women's claims to their family's economic resources in the transfer of their sexuality to men it defines the sexually autonomous woman as losing her rights and status - as having cut herself off from the family.

Thus legal discourse and the discourses utilised by those engaged in culturally-framed politics define the proper ordering of social relations between men and women and the ordering of society itself as rooted in female chastity, achievable only through men's control of women. After nearly two centuries it is commonplace to regard unfettered female sexuality as productive of the kind of society of which nightmares are made.

It would be a mistake to understand this simply in terms of patriarchal hegemony for two reasons. First, by putting men in charge of women, society (quite consciously) attempts to control men.<sup>(5)</sup> Second, as Raheja and Gold (1994) argue, it is important to recognise that this discourse is not the only discourse on female sexuality and gender relations. Rather it is the most powerful discourse underlying generalised conceptions of women and social relations and, therefore, one with which women must be seen to conform. While this discourse is difficult to contest when applied to the generality, women can and frequently do contest it when specifically applied to themselves (as will be seen below). Nor should it be understood that subscribing to the dominant discourse prevents women from having a more positive view of female sexuality and a more playful attitude to sex expressed through song (*ibid*), or from engaging in flirtations (Osella and Osella, 1998) or sexual joking between women of equal status.

#### Women and Risk in the Low-Income Settlements of Chennai

Discourses at both a national level and regional level position women and their sexuality as the major risk to society as well as their family's social standing. They present women as properly confined to the dependent, private, reproductive sphere

while the independent, public, productive sphere is reserved for men. The residents of the two low-income settlements I studied in Chennai between 1990 and 1992 subscribed to these discourses. The normal role for women is *vitle*, literally 'in the house', but is also used for 'in the family'. Women are presented and present themselves as naturally afraid, shy and ashamed to enter the public sphere: afraid to go out of the house, out of the family. Some describe themselves as ignorant, as not aware of what happens outside the home, as not knowing how to go about things or how to speak to people. Women are described as easily deceived: fooled by soft words, easily persuaded to give or loan money, easily overcharged. However, in response to family need men and women say that the latter are forced to overcome their inhibitions and inadequacies: for the sake of their families they must enter the public sphere as men do, with the courage (*thaiyaram*) to face the inevitable risks (*tunivu*) and difficulties (*kastham*). This is the discourse that enables women to move outside their accepted sphere of activity without posing a risk to their reputations; it allows them to expand their sphere of action by defining it as self-sacrifice. There is also a negative discourse: women who unnecessarily enter the labour market are selfishly bold/brazen (they have *timir*) for in flouting social mores they risk their family's social standing merely to fulfil individual desires (*aasai*), frequently assumed to be sexual desires.

Examining the key Tamil words used to refer to risk and risk-taking, we find, as in English, both a positive and negative view. *Tunivu*, in a positive sense, means not only the courage and confidence to take risks but that this risk-taking is based on sound knowledge. In practice *thaiyaram*, meaning courage and confidence, and *tunivu* are used interchangeably to convey this positive view of risk. *Tunivu* can also refer to risk-taking rooted in foolish stubbornness, temerity, audacity and, when used in relation to women, in insolence, immodesty and lack of sexual reticence. *Mosham* also carries the meaning of risk, but here the risk is one of treachery and deceit, of being exposed to danger, of taking the immoral path in life. *Abayam* refers to unforeseen danger or evil, accidents and deceptions. *Tuni*, the root common to the word for risk and the verbs to sunder, cut and sever or to be sundered, cut and severed points exactly to the consequences of not conforming to dominant values - the risk of being repudiated by family, friends, neighbours and caste.

If we look at the way these meanings are attributed to the sexes we find that women are seen as more of a risk to themselves, their family, caste and society than are men (see Table 1).

(insert Table 1 : Attribution of risk and blame and its consequences)

We can see from Table 1 that women outside the family are also considered a source of risk for they may lead men to neglect their responsibilities to their families, if not to desertion. Older women or women who have had previous sexual partners are not considered sexually attractive so their ability to draw men is attributed to the use of witchcraft. Girls and young women are considered easily misled by men's soft words. They are also particularly susceptible to supernatural forces which will lead them to reject their prescribed social roles by refusing to get married or to have sexual relations with their husbands (Nabokov, 1997), both of which pose risks to the future wellbeing of the women concerned and to their family's reputation. To maintain their social standing families are expected to distance themselves from those who flout

social values. In practice, women are more likely to be cut off than men and this is more likely to be a permanent break than it is for men. The economic and social constraints under which women live make it less feasible for women to dissociate themselves from those of whom they disapprove unless they do it in concert with the rest of the family.

Thus the discourse on women and risk as well as the attribution of blame prevalent in Chennai's low-income settlements is contradictory. The dominant theme is in keeping with the representation of female sexuality in legal and ethnic discourse as the major risk to society. The contingent theme based on necessity, reluctance and self-sacrifice potentially provides women with the means to escape their *vitle* condition without endangering their family's reputation.

### Negotiating Risk

While all Indian women must negotiate their way round dominant discourses on the risks of female sexuality and unconventional gender relations, the economic constraints under which poor women live inevitably drive them into direct confrontation with these discourses at some point in their lives. The women in the squatter settlement and municipal tenements studied were usually forced into working because their husband's incomes were insufficient or too irregular to meet household needs. This insufficiency and irregularity might be due to ill-health or old age but for many it was due to high levels of alcohol consumption. In other instances women worked because they were deserted or widowed or because their husbands could not afford to maintain the women and children of more than one union. Some women worked, not because their family was short of money but because their husbands refused to provide enough for the household budget. In these circumstances women must negotiate the values and categories on which the discourses discussed above are based; they must find some means of appearing to conform to dominant discourses while not doing so.

Before getting to this stage women try to goad their husbands into fulfilling their role as provider and protector. Threatening to take up work is one means. Another rather risky strategy is for a wife to claim to her husband that his reputation as a drunkard is encouraging even his own relatives to proposition her. The efficacy of these strategies tends to be short-lived but they do reveal that women utilise dominant discourses to make men live up to their prescribed gender role - to take responsibility for the family. At a later stage in the career of a drunkard dominant social values and gender stereotypes are turned against a woman.<sup>(6)</sup> Finding they can neither secure work nor loans men with serious drink problems force their wives to hand over money for alcohol. A man can do this in two ways: first, by saying that he is in too much pain to eat and if he was sick wouldn't she give him money for medicine and the second is by shouting abuse at her from the street or complaining about her to neighbouring families. Thus, in addition to playing on a wife's fear for her husband's health, men exploit women's concern for their family's social reputation (*maanam*). We can see here that while the dominant discourse ascribes the sense of family responsibility to men rather than to women a number of men are not only willing to pursue individual desires at the family's expense but recognise and exploit women's sense of responsibility for the family.

The decision to take up work is not lightly entered into even by women running households on very tight budgets. The main reason for their reluctance is that working poses a risk to women's reputation for chastity. In addition, they feel ill-prepared and powerless in their encounters with strangers. Initially the change of status from *vitle* woman to working woman feels humiliating and women are unsure of how they will be treated by strangers as well as how to respond to them. However, there is no lasting humiliation as long as women can convince others of the validity of their objectives. The necessity of convincing others that a woman only works to provide for her family, that she does it with great reluctance, is essential to protecting her reputation as a chaste woman. If, at any point in her working life, she fails to convince others they will interpret her actions as located solely in her desire for a *jolly* time.(7) This marks her as sexually unrestrained, brazen (having *timir*) and on the way to infidelity, if not already unfaithful.

Such a reputation not only shames the whole family, leaving them exposed to harassment and disrespect, but can have significant material consequences. Most commonly it decreases the likelihood of finding suitable spouses for sons and daughters. Being asked to leave private rented accommodation and having her business boycotted (unless she is a money lender on whom others depend) are not uncommon. Similar consequences affect the families of men with serious alcohol problems but because such families are widespread the consequences are less severe. It does mean, however, that families containing serious drinkers get trapped in a drinking network for, as one woman put it to me, 'Who but a drunkard would rent to another drunkard?' and only the families of drinkers will knowingly marry into a similar family.

The reluctance with which women enter the labour force can be seen from Shantamma's account. Shantamma is a thirty-eight year old woman of the Vanniar caste. As her own account of being forced to confront dominant discourses graphically sets out the dilemmas, experiences and strategies of most of the women in the settlements studied, I will recount it in full. In response to my asking why she started working Shantamma said:

Seventeen years ago my husband worked in a private company but lost his job when he got asthma. He didn't work for over two years. During this time my in-laws didn't respect me. I could see it from the way they looked at me and spoke to me. They thought I only visited them for money and they wouldn't speak to my children. I didn't work at this time because I was worried what people would say. I was worried they wouldn't accept me. For two years I worried and but I thought I wouldn't be doing a cheap job but doing an *idly* business [making steamed rice cakes] at home. But even this felt very demeaning. I told myself at least it's not stealing. My husband told me not to do the *idly* business. He said I knew nothing about it so I shouldn't do it. I persuaded him that it is the same as cooking for the family and that I could make a profit from it. As it didn't cost much to start the business he let me do it.

(How long have you been selling idlies?)

For fifteen years now. I've redeemed some of my pawned jewels, put my children through school and am paying off a loan for my daughter's marriage. I can pay for

anything the family needs through the *idly* business although I'm not making as much profit as I was before because the prices [for raw materials] have gone up.

(So it's made quite a difference for you?)

Yes. Earning money has given me a lot of confidence (*thaiyaram*) too. When I was married I never went out of the house for the first five or six years until my husband's elder brother's wife started taking me out. Even fifteen years ago I only went out to buy food locally. I didn't have the courage (*thaiyaram*) to go beyond the local area and I wouldn't speak to anybody who came to the house if my husband wasn't at home. I told them to come back later. Now I have the courage (*thaiyaram*) to cross town to go to the *sangham* [a women's organisation lending money to the poor] to get my loan and if people come to the house I have the courage (*thaiyaram*) to ask them who they are and what they want.

(Are things different at home? Do you take more decisions, for instance?)

No, it's just the same. I don't do anything against his wishes. I have to get his agreement.

(How does your family feel about you working?)

After coming up in life and educating my children my brothers respected me because they didn't educate their children and I managed it even though my husband was often out of work. Actually they showed me respect throughout. Even so I didn't go much to see them because people don't respect those who have no money. They didn't feel bad because I was working. They supported me. They said "You are only working at home and trying to improve your family".

Although not explicitly referring to dominant discourses on the risks of female sexuality and unconventional gender relations, Shantamma's account is framed against the expectation that everyone subscribes to them. Embedded in her account lie many of the strategies women use to appear to conform to the spirit of these dominant discourses while not entirely adhering to them in practice. Shantamma takes great pains to ensure I can have no doubt that she was forced into work for the sake of her family, that it does not reflect her own desires and that she has no underlying sexual agenda. The key points are that: she wrestled with her dilemma for a long time, she had a real need to work as they had sold or pawned their assets and they were not being adequately helped by others (in this case her husband's family). In addition, their *maanam* was going because their need for assistance made them unwelcome guests and their poverty was effectively cutting them off from their relatives.

Furthermore Shantamma stresses the propriety of her work by emphasising that it is undertaken at home, that she has her husband's consent and her brothers' approval, and that she continues to submit to her husband's wishes. The latter reflects one of the key objections to women working, that if women earn independent incomes they will become arrogant and disobey their husbands. Should a woman be defined as such her husband's reputation for having the upper hand in the family (on which his masculinity is based) and her reputation for submitting to the control of her sexuality

are at risk. This is also why Shantamma emphasises the necessity for her continuing to work by stressing the commonly accepted goals of educating children, securing good marriages and redeeming family assets. It would be unacceptable to suggest her objective is to enrich the family because such entrepreneurial activity is only legitimate in men.

### Juggling Risks

Thus in confronting dominant discourses on the risks of female sexuality and unconventional gender relations women living on low-incomes strive to dissociate themselves from negative traits often attributed to men and considered yet more immoral in women. They do so to avoid definitions of themselves and their motivations that would risk their exposure to the material sanctions and loss of *maanam* discussed above. In doing so women are playing off one risk against another.

While I have emphasised the risks women face in relation to their reputations outside the family the same concern for *maanam* poses risks to women and men which can create conflict within the family. Working women pose a risk to men's reputation as provider and one-who-is-not-cuckolded and hence to men's self-esteem. In this context men have four options: first, to shape definitions of themselves and their relationship by defining their wife's economic contribution as unremarkable and by setting constraints on her behaviour and activities, second by refusing to permit their wife to work and, should she not submit to this, by reducing or withdrawing financial support to the family or by taking the final option of rejecting her altogether. Thus in relation to the extra-household sphere women play off the material and social risks of poverty against the material and social risks of working, while in the domestic sphere the primary risk with which they juggle is the potential loss or reduction of their husband's contribution to the household budget.

This risk is exacerbated where a woman has herself chosen her husband or partner rather than submitting to a marriage arranged by her family. Such a woman is considered to have succumbed to lust and put the welfare of her family, including her siblings' and (future) children's marriage prospects at risk. As lust is considered to be short lived men engaged in such relationships feel more insecure about their wife working than do men in arranged marriages for she has already proven herself to be disloyal and sexually motivated. Consequently, they are far more likely to employ stratagems such as turning to drink, chasing other women, denying paternity of their children (thereby denying responsibility for their financial support) or threatening to leave in order to force their wives not to work or only to work with them. Thus men in love marriages are also playing off risks: in this case the risks to their *maanam* of having their reputedly sexually uncontrolled wife working as against the loss of *maanam* their own stratagems may engender.

All women driven initially by the need to raise family incomes but whose overall goal is family welfare risk not only the reduction of their husband's contribution to the household budget but also lowered social status (which itself can have economic implications) and, in more extreme cases, homelessness and the sexual harassment to which lone women are subjected. Women without the co-operation of their husbands,

fathers, brothers or, in the case of widowed or deserted women, adult sons are more likely to find these risks realised than do those with their support.

Underlying the risks women balance, then, is the dominance of discourses which posit female sexuality as a major risk to family and society. In this context women attempt to redefine their transgression of conventional gender roles by arguing that though they may be acting and interacting in ways similar to men they do so *through* the roles incumbent on them as women. That is, they are claiming the positive traits attributed to men of courage, confidence, ability and a sense of family responsibility. As Shantamma shows us, this is a source of great pride for women for they have gone beyond the timidity stereotypically attributed to them and faced the world with courage, confidence and ability. Whether we should see this as a real change brought about by working or merely a good front for assertiveness (though not for what is deemed disrespectful or arrogant) is not clear. Shantamma's story is typical of the experiences and strategies of women in the two low-income settlements studied in Chennai. Although by no means do all women work from home, all select and justify the work they do, the number of hours they put in and its location (all of which heavily determine income levels) as appropriate to a balance between their age and family's need (Vera-Sanso, 1995). At the time Shantamma started working she was only twenty-three and working from home was the appropriate setting; working in the street (with the associated risk of sexual encounters) would not have been.

Although dominant discourses on 'proper' gender relations and the risks of female sexuality form the sub-text of Shantamma's representations of herself and her motivations this does not mean that she or the other women living on low incomes accept these ideas any more than do women elsewhere in India. Shantamma does not think of herself as a risk to her family or society but this is the discursive context in which she must operate, a context which has real material effects.

Thus risk-talk is political and has been used to constrain women's economic and social position in India since the nineteenth century. Equally it has been used by Indian women for individual and larger political objectives although it rarely works as effectively for them as it does against them. This is because the economic, jural and discursive empowering of men in order to control women frequently enables the former to side-step women's strategies. This empowering, which is intended to control men by giving them responsibility for and power over women and children, in practice enables men to flout social norms more openly than can women.

### Conclusion

My main contention is that Beck does not question why some things or people become defined as risks and others not. Yet this is precisely our task. Beck is mistaken in attributing the West's (shifting) response to modern technological hazards to the overcoming of material needs. It is not technology itself which people worry about but how society is organised, what its impacts are on the individual, where power lies and how it is managed, as well as the impact of individuals on society. Hence the emphasis on communism rather than nuclear weapons and the dissipation of nuclear protest once communist regimes collapsed.

Amongst Indians the central risk perceived as such is not a consequence of the 'dictatorship of scarcity', as Beck rather glibly suggests, but a concern for social status

and maintaining social order. The latter is thought best achieved by establishing stable families in which men have the main resources, rights and responsibilities which must be protected from women except in circumstances that better serve the goal of maintaining stable families. And, indeed, engaging in discourses which argue in terms of maintaining social order is more likely to secure legal or policy changes that benefit women than arguing in terms of women's rights.

What we need to be examining is the way the concept of risk is imbricated in politics; the way dominant definitions of risk set moral codes which frame disciplinary regimes, constrain action and set the terms of debate in which people engage both to enforce and resist the impact of such definitions. Such an approach prevents us from assuming, rather than investigating, the impact of poverty on risk perception. It reveals that even for those living on very low incomes the primary concern may be risks to social status and to the security ordered social relations seem to offer. In Chennai's low-income settlements it is precisely through this lens that economic need is refracted.

Dominant perceptions of risk are collective nightmares. On the one hand they are rooted in a failure of the imagination, a failure to envisage alternatives. On the other they are rooted in an over-stimulated imagination which can see no boundaries to change. In both they reflect, and sometimes illuminate, the sources and centres of power and powerlessness.

## **Endnotes**

ENDNOTES for Penny Vera-Sanso's chapter: RISK-TALK

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(1) At Kyoto America refused to commit to stabilisation of domestic gas emissions and rejected a strong compliance regime for emission targets. Instead it demanded unlimited emissions trading, backdating of emissions quotas and no joint buyer/seller liability for fraudulent trading. These demands would allow America to buy other countries' emission quotas, as well as the estimated emissions Russia did not produce over the last decade (due to economic crisis) and would encourage fraudulent trading. If met America's demands would raise global emissions as well as increase its own emissions (Climate Action Network, 1997).

(2) In the opinion of the United Kingdom's Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) the declared nuclear powers have no intention of banning nuclear weapons despite their rhetoric to the contrary. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which only required the declared nuclear powers to start talking (within a period of twenty years) about the possibility of a global ban on nuclear weapons, was extended indefinitely in 1995 at their insistence. While obsolete weapons have been destroyed to much fanfare, the nuclear powers are updating their nuclear arms as well as

developing and building new ones such as the 'bunker busting bombs' designed to combat the kind of strategies Saddam Hussein employs. CND considers that the dissipation of popular opposition to the stockpiling of nuclear arms and the fragmentation of active resistance is directly connected to the fall of communism (personal communication, 1998).

(3) For more detailed accounts of regional and class-based variations in how women were re-imagined during the colonial period see Sangari and Vaid (1989).

(4) For a discussion of custodial rape cases see Nair (1996).

(5) An explicit expression of this is the belief that marriage is the best means of steering a wayward son back onto the 'right path'.

(6) The term drunkard is the one women use to describe husbands who drink heavily ('a full time drunkard'). It reflects the way the urban poor consume alcohol, solely to get drunk. No enjoyment is expected of the flavour: alcohol is downed in one go with eyes screwed up as though submitting to foul-tasting medicine.

(7) In Chennai English words are borrowed although the meaning may be altered. A *jolly* time or having one's *jollies* refers to the selfish pursuit of individual pleasure.

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