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THE CHANGING POSITION OF INDIAN WOMEN*

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In order to describe the position of women in India, a model of rural society showing how female roles and behaviour vary with land ownership and caste position is presented. This synchronic model is then viewed diachronically to reveal the degree of upward mobility before, during, and after British rule. Among Hindus this movement involved Sanskritisation and a corresponding change in the husband–wife relationship. More recently, urban migration, female political participation, education, careers, and the activities of social reformers have all helped the public acceptance of new roles for women. As yet, only a tiny minority of women have benefited from the changes that have occurred.

I

Anthropologists have long been interested in the study of the position of women in various parts of the world. Such interest has been both 'indirect' and 'direct'—I am aware that this distinction is not a clear-cut one but I think that it is helpful to make it. The 'indirect' interest came from armchair anthropologists who wanted to trace the evolution of marriage, family, and kinship by studying kinship terms and usages, from different countries, and in particular, from what are now referred to as the 'Third World' countries. As is well-known, this began in the latter half of the nineteenth century with the efforts of Morgan, McLennan, Maine and Bachofen.

The 'direct' interest came from individuals whose work as administrators, missionaries or anthropologists, brought them into contact with non-Western peoples, and who wrote accounts of the division of labour existing between the sexes, the rules of inheritance and succession, the nature and composition of the household etc., among the peoples they studied.

Ever since their discipline became established in the universities, anthropologists have regarded the study of the 'position of women' as one of their basic concerns. R. H. Lowie's *Primitive society*, published in 1920—which, incidentally, was the first anthropological book I came into contact with—included a chapter on 'The position of women' (186–204) which is still worth reading for its erudition, caution, scepticism about accepted ideas, and for certain basic distinctions which Lowie considered essential in order to discuss tangibly so broad and elusive, if not fuzzy, a theme. He made a few generalisations and then cited exceptions to them to show how it is necessary to guard against easy generalisation. Finally, he emphasised the difficulty of establishing causality when the events under consideration were numerous, and the relationship between them extremely complex.

When I state that anthropologists have long been interested in the study of the position of women I certainly do not mean that it has been confined to them. For it is well-known that psychologists, demographers and several others have shared

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their interest. However, since the end of the second world war there has been a rapidly increasing concern both with the role and position of women, and with bringing about greater equality between the sexes. Apart from social scientists, feminists have written copiously, and even passionately, on the subject, and of late there seems to be a welcome shift of interest among them from attacking the theory of the biological determinism of women to trying to understand the processes which have resulted in their widespread subjection. Ester Boserup's *Women's role in economic development* is a good example of this kind of effort and the book is a valuable contribution to both social anthropology and economics. But while I find Boserup's book stimulating I must confess to a certain sense of discomfort at her tendency to sweeping generalisation as, for instance, in her linking dowry in south Asia to the loss of women's agricultural role.[1] At the micro-level, facts are far more complicated in their inter-relationships than Boserup's work would lead one to imagine.

Anthropologists ought to welcome the new upsurge of interest in women: the knowledge and insights produced by the other disciplines might stimulate their work in new directions, and in turn, the information they have gathered over the decades, their concepts, and in particular, their techniques of fieldwork, might not only promote fruitful co-operation in the field of women's studies but lead to increased co-operation between the social sciences in other areas as well. An additional gain may be a sharpened awareness of the existence of an androcentric bias in social science research generally. But I think that it is naive to expect ethnocentrism (in studying other societies), class- or caste-centredness (in studying one's own society), and androcentrism (in studying both one's own and other societies) to disappear as a result of such awareness. What is at best likely to happen is a keener appreciation of the fact that the observer has his prejudices and preferences, not to mention values, and this may not only improve the quality of the data collected but make him less dogmatic about his conclusions. It may also lead to a realisation of the need to have the same social phenomena studied by men and women from different cultures, and from different class and ethnic backgrounds. A clash of multiple views and perspectives is not only healthy for the social sciences but for policy-making.

II

The subject of my lecture, 'The changing position of Indian women,' is vast, and of bewildering complexity. It has many facets, and generalisation is pretty nearly impossible because of the existence of considerable variation between regions, between rural and urban areas, between classes, and finally, between different religious, ethnic and caste groups. While in certain contexts the Indian sub-continent is a single cultural region, in many others it is heuristically more rewarding to look upon it as a congeries of micro-regions, differences between which are crucial. For instance, the huge, sprawling Hindi region in the north is backward, if indices such as female literacy and education, male-female ratio, age of marriage of girls, and female participation in economic activity, are taken into consideration. If female literacy alone is taken as an index, it is 53·90 per cent. in Kerala in the south-west, while it does not exceed 11 per cent. in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Bihar. In the country as a whole, only 18·66 per cent. of

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women are literate as against 39·5 per cent. for men, while in the rural areas female literacy is only 12·92 per cent.

Apart from differences in female literacy rates between regions, and between rural and urban areas, some institutions which affect intimately the lives of women are confined to certain groups inhabiting particular areas: for instance, polyandry continues to be practised by the Khasas of Jaunsar Bawar, and hypergamy by the Rajputs north of the Vindhyas, by the Khatris and Jats of the Punjab, and finally, by the Patidars and Anavil Brahmins of Gujarat. Matriliny obtains not only among the high caste Nayars and a few other groups in Kerala but also among the tribal Khasis, Garos and Panars in the north-eastern hill areas.

However, inter-regional and inter-group differences are not the only hazard. In a country such as India with a long and recorded history, the existence of a body of literature, sacred and secular, proves obtrusive especially as sanction for present conduct may be derived, directly or indirectly, by reference to ideals and rules which are believed to be expressed in it. This matter becomes all the more puzzling as most Western-educated people actually derive such ideals, norms and rules from their parents or grandparents, or from a priest who himself may be far from well-informed on what the scriptures say on any given matter. (However, when a matter is regarded as critical, a very learned pandit, or the head of a famed monastery may be approached for his opinion.) The important point to note, however, is that ideas and beliefs derived at best, second or third hand, from ancient literature influence ideals of conduct and behaviour. Since it is largely members of the Sanskritised high castes who are more influenced by this literature than the others, and since they are both visible and influential in modern India, their perceptions and ideas about how Indians behave and ought to behave, have obtained wide currency. The high castes suffer from a bibliocentric view of society even though very few of them have first-hand knowledge of the sacred literature.

The corpus of literature is, however, a heterogeneous one, and it abounds in inconsistent if not contrary ideas, rules, beliefs and practices. To cite an example: In the 1920's there was a debate between orthodox and reformist sections of Brahmins living in Mysore City. The former were of the view that it was sinful to keep a girl unmarried after she had reached puberty but the liberals did not frown on post-puberty marriages. (A distinction must be made here between marriage and consummation, the latter being marked by a separate ceremony, and arranged on an auspicious day after puberty.) Strange as it may seem to educated Indians today, it was an emotionally-charged debate: the liberals cited the authority of the Vedas in favour of their view, as against the orthodox faction's reliance on the law-books (dharmasāstras) which were much later than the Vedas, and inferior to them in religious authority.

It is not only that the sacred literature provided sanction for contrary norms and usages, but very rarely was an inconsistency perceivable even in the conceptualisation of so basic a relationship as that between husband and wife, and surprisingly, there was little awareness of the existence of such an inconsistency. I shall discuss this point later.

Lowie stresses the need to distinguish between law and fact, between theory and practice, and finally, between formal and informal relations (1920: 186–9). This set of distinctions is basic to my approach to the understanding of the position of

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women in different sections of Indian society. Until very recently, too much attention has been paid to the legal, theoretical and formal dimensions of women's position, and too little to actual relations between men and women, and their dynamics over a period of time. But concentration on the formal aspects was inevitable in the absence of intimate, first-hand studies of the part played by men and women in local communities, rural and urban. The need for micro-studies is also reinforced from another direction: the data obtained from different macro-surveys such as the Census, and the various rounds of the National Sample Survey, conflict with each other, and further, they do not provide a clue to the complex cultural and social processes which are operative at the village level, and to the linkages which exist between them. For instance, how do urbanisation and economic and social mobility affect those processes? How have the various programmes of rural change introduced by the government and by voluntary agencies affected the position of women at different economic and social levels? I propose to try and lay bare in this lecture a few of these processes and their linkages. I am aware that no accounts based on field-study exist of these processes, and if such studies had existed my task would have been much simpler and less hazardous but perhaps also less challenging.

In my discussion I shall be restricting myself to Hindus and shall mostly ignore the members of the other religions. Hindus are both numerous enough—453 million at the 1971 Census, and constituting 82·72 per cent. of the total population—and complex enough to be the subject of a single lecture.

III

Eighty per cent. of India's population is rural and an equal percentage of the female working force is engaged in agriculture. According to the 1971 census, there were 31 million women workers of whom 25 million were in agriculture, 2 million in the organised sector, and the remaining 4 million in non-agricultural occupations in the unorganised sector (Srinivas 1974: 170). These statistics are for the country as a whole and therefore conceal sharp regional disparities.

The above figures have been cited only to stress the essentially rural character of India; a character which, incidentally, is expected to survive into 2000 A.D. Since it was not practical to discuss rural women in India as a whole, I decided, after much cogitation and with some reluctance, to construct a model of rural society and then consider the role of women in each stratum of it. My model is necessarily an over-simplified one, and I have ignored not only the artisan, trading and servicing castes, but variations due to the operation of regional and other factors. I shall first treat the model as synchronic and then as diachronic.

From the point of agricultural activity, I shall distinguish four classes: 1) big landowners who supervise the work of cultivation carried out by servants and labourers but who themselves do not engage in manual work; 2) small landowners who personally cultivate their land but who need the services of labourers during transplantation, weeding and harvesting. They may also be working as tenants on small patches of land leased out from big landowners; 3) tenants who also hire themselves out to landowners for wages during the busy seasons; 4) and finally, landless labourers who subsist entirely on hiring themselves out as labourers on a

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daily or seasonal basis.[2] 1 and 4 are distinct categories while there may be different degrees of mix between 2 and 3 in different villages.

There is a clear and self-understood division of labour between the sexes among agriculturists and this includes both activities inside and outside the household. Each set of activities is seen as supportive of the other, and more significantly, agriculture is a familial activity: In other words, the cultivator must be either married himself, or work as part of his natal family. And where a family owns land, a son is needed to keep the farm cultivated and in the family's possession. The relation between a family and land is a vital one, for economic, political and status considerations, and it is projected into ritual and mystical dimensions. The point which I wish to emphasise here, however, is that since agriculture is a familial activity, it underscores the inter-dependence of the sexes and the means to such interdependence is marriage. In other words, agriculture implies marriage and a bachelor (or spinster) does not make sense in rural India except when he dons the ochre robes and becomes a sanyasi. A widower (or widow) remarries unless he is too old. I have heard a middle-aged widower tell me that he had to marry as he could not work on his farm without someone cooking for him.

Among all the classes described above, the wife cooks and serves food at least twice a day to all members of the household, and cooking in rural India often involves the processing of the grain grown or bought. This work the woman must do and extra-mural chores are always an addition. The feeding, disciplining and socialisation of young children are also her tasks unless she has a grown daughter who then plays the role of mother to her young brothers and sisters. Among landless labourers, during the transplanting season, which, incidentally, occurs during the heavy monsoon rains, women get up as early as 4 a.m., and cook the food before leaving the house. The evening meal is cooked after returning home, and the transplantation of rice seedlings is tough work, the women frequently having to stand in six inches or so of water, and bending and moving backwards as they transplant the seedlings. This has to be done for eight hours a day, and under pressure, as the bundles of seedlings pulled out from the nurseries need to be transplanted with minimum delay.

Weeding, like transplanting, is exclusively women's work, while harvesting involves a more complicated division of labour between the sexes. During the post-harvest season, landless labourers, both men and women, are employed by contractors on road and canal repair work, and occasionally also hired for special tasks by a rich patron.

The point which I wish to emphasise is that in both intra- and extra-mural work, whether agricultural or non-agricultural, there are clear and minute rules governing the division of labour between the sexes. Inside the house, for instance, oxen are invariably looked after by men or boys while fowls are cared for by women or girls. Either men or women may rear buffaloes or sheep, and the income from the sale of dairy products or sheep goes to the owner in each case.

There is a sense of mine and thine between husband and wife, and only during a real crisis may a husband utilise her money or pawn her jewellery. But he is obliged to return it as soon as conditions return to normal. In a great part of rural society, women stick up for their rights against their men, and public opinion supports them in this.[3]

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The idea is widespread that working for wages is a mark of low status, and landowners included in category (1) listed earlier, do not work for wages. This is true for both men and women. The women, in particular, find high status inconsistent with even extra-mural movement, with the result that upward mobility leads to their 'immurement.' The men, however, go to their fields but do not themselves do any manual work. They only supervise the work of their servants, labourers and tenants. In pre-independent India, there were a large number of 'absentee landowners' who lived in the cities and visited their villages only after harvest to collect their shares.

The objection to working for wages remains even at the second level of the hierarchy but it is circumvented by resorting to labour exchange. Thus two small landowners work on each other's land during the busy season, and in rural Mysore, this was referred to as *muyyi*. It was only at the lowest levels of the rural hierarchy that men and women worked for wages, and among landless labourers, that was indeed the sole source of income.

It is well-known that caste status varies inversely with participation in manual labour, and that there is an overlap between caste and land status though the degree of overlap varies from place to place.

> 'According to the Census of 1961, 42·9 per cent of women workers from Scheduled Castes were agricultural labourers. In the case of the Scheduled Tribes this figure was 21·23 per cent. Their representation in non-agricultural occupations was negligible. The number of Scheduled Caste women employed as agricultural labourers was over 9 lakhs in Andhra Pradesh, over 6 lakhs in Tamil Nadu and 7 lakhs in Uttar Pradesh' (Srinivas 1974: 168).

In other words, while at the bottom level of the rural hierarchy women do both intra-mural and extra-mural work, the latter being paid for while the former is not, immurement of women characterises the top level. I do not, however, wish to imply that the wives of big landowners are idle. Far from it. For, generally speaking, it is only among big landowners and the highly Sanskritised castes that joint or extended families occur, and the female heads of such families have considerable work and responsibility. They have to look after the cooking arrangements for a large number of adult men and women including servants, and the special needs of infants and sick and old members. They have to allocate domestic work among the different daughters-in-law and servants, look after the guests who usually drop in without notice, and attend to the family's many ritual and kinship obligations. They have to supervise the cleaning and processing of grain, and find time for making the elaborate pickles, curry powders, dried vegetables and *papads*. Additionally, many such women are engaged in some economic activity of their own. They may act as pawnbrokers to their needy neighbours and relatives, they may sell paddy on the sly, and they may be running a *chit* fund (monthly contributions of cash paid to a fund which the needy are allowed to collect at a discount). Women generally take the initiative in arranging the marriages of their offspring, and they either articulate their networks or put pressure on their husbands to find suitable spouses.

IV

I shall now consider the above model as a diachronic one. But before I do that, I should state that pre-British Indian society did permit a certain amount of mobility,

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and I have argued at length the case for this view in my book, *Social change in modern India* (1966). However, for the benefit of non-Indianists I shall briefly list the reasons for my view: 1) the pre-British political system was fluid, particularly at the lower levels, a fact which enabled leaders of the dominant peasant castes and others strategically positioned, to seize power locally during periods of crises at the higher levels; 2) marginal land was available for cultivation until the latter half of the nineteenth century; 3) and finally, membership of Bhakti sects, which contained a strong element of protest against Brahmin supremacy and ritualism, provided opportunities for members of the lower castes to move up. I would now like to add to the above two other sources of mobility; 4) the opportunities for trade commerce which existed in various parts of the country including Gujarat and Punjab, and south-eastern India and which were taken advantage of by certain trading castes such as Banias, Komati Shettis, and Chettiars, and 5) finally, success in obtaining jobs, however low, in pre-British bureaucracies. I am inclined to believe that the quantum of mobility in pre-British India was even greater than I had suspected earlier. This is nothing more than a hunch but it is interesting to note that several instances of what today appear to be caste names were originally only honorific titles assumed by certain groups. To cite but two instances, the richer landowning Kunbis transformed themselves into the Patidars of modern Gujarat, while in southwest Karnatak several Chetti groups and others succeeded in passing off for the dominant Coorgs. Most of the dominant castes of modern India seem to have started their career as tribes, and centuries later, the richer and more powerful sections of them laid claim to being Kshatriyas. Kshatriya and Vaishya, and to a less extent, even Brahmin, seem to have been positions which were achieved over a period of time by ambitious groups in different parts of India though when the caste system of any small region is viewed *at a single point of time*—and this is what is usually done by the synchronic analyst—it is seen as a series of hierarchically arranged hereditary groups which permit of no mobility to any individual or group. Hence the frequent and mistaken description of caste as a closed system of social stratification. The separation of history from sociology and anthropology in India has been disastrous for all three disciplines.

The establishment and consolidation of British rule brought in greater opportunities of mobility to the people, and while initially, the higher castes benefited from them far more than the others, at a later stage, the dominant peasant castes, minority groups and others, succeeded in obtaining access to political power and education, and entered the professions and the bureaucracy.

Independence brought in vastly-increased mobility opportunities to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and the other 'weaker sections of the society' as a result of the policy of 'protective discrimination' adopted by both the Central and State governments. Improved agricultural practices, of which the 'green revolution' is a part, and higher prices for agricultural produce, have both resulted in higher incomes for the upper layers of rural society and this in turn has generated new types of economic activity. Those sections of rural society which have prospered emulate the life-style of the urban middle classes who are largely recruited from the higher castes.

However, the possession of the secular elements of high status was by itself insufficient—it had to be legitimised, and legitimisation was a complex and long

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drawn-out process. This was where Sanskritisation was crucial. A mobile *jati*, or the mobile section of a *jati*, changed its occupation, diet, adopted the worship of one or other manifestation of a high Hindu god or his consort, emulated the Brahminical life-style, and even changed its caste name. A new origin myth was also invented.

The need for legitimisation of mobility through Sanskritisation and changed caste status was so compulsive that it was even felt by sectarian movements which were anti-Brahminical in origin, and rejected some elements of Vedic Hinduism. Such movements produced over a period of time mini-caste systems within themselves mirroring the caste system which they had previously rebelled against. To complete the irony, in their new guise, they became more effective agents of Sanskritisation than Brahmins.

To return to my main point: the greatly-increased opportunities for secular mobility available during British rule and in Independent India meant also considerable increase in the quantum of Sanskritisation. As more and more members of the 'lower' castes obtained access to education, jobs and power, they felt the need to tread the well-worn path to legitimising their newly-earned status.

Among the Muslims of India, a process which, in some of its effects at any rate, is similar to Sanskritisation has been reported by Mr Imtiaz Ahmed (1973: 175–9) and Mrs Zarina Bhatty. According to Mrs Bhatty,

> 'Muslim society in India is sharply divided into two sections: the Ashrafs and non-Ashrafs, of whom the latter constitute the bulk. The Ashrafs are the upper caste Muslims who claim foreign descent, and the non-Ashrafs, the lower-caste converts. The non-Ashrafs are either artisans or belong to other occupational castes and have not changed their original customs to any marked degree. They have, on the whole, a more liberal attitude towards their women, particularly in respect of work, and do not observe *purdah*. In matters of divorce and remarriage of widows too, they exhibit much less rigidity of attitude. But it is found that when a non-Ashraf family becomes economically better off, it starts looking up to the manners and morals of the Ashrafs with a view to emulating them, and in doing so puts its women in *purdah*, and withdraws them from participating in the family's economic life. This is a similar process to the one described by M. N. Srinivas as "Sanskritisation" among the Hindus. Thus the ideal of a good Muslim woman among the non-Ashrafs even today continues to be a woman who observes *purdah*, does not earn a living, enters into marriage arranged by her parents, lives within the four walls of the house and is submissive to her husband's will or pleasure' (1976: 110) (see also Singh 1973).

Converts to Christianity in many parts of India continue to retain their sense of belonging to particular castes long after conversion, and it ought not to be surprising if women from the higher 'castes' are immured in the same manner as their Hindu and Muslim sisters.

V

I shall now recapitulate the main points I have made. At the highest levels of the land hierarchy, both men and women are withdrawn from manual labour while at the lowest levels, both of them work for wages though far more in the irrigated areas of the south than in the north. The availability of vastly-increased opportunities for secular mobility to the 'lower' castes and classes results in the successful groups trying to legitimise their mobility by resorting to Sanskritisation. This

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alters the life-style of those who have 'arrived', and in particular, it has radical effects on the lives of women. It immures them and changes the character of the husband-wife relationship. Immurement is further compounded in the region north of the Vindhyas, thanks to the institution of the *purdah*. *Purdah* obtains among both high status Hindus and Muslims, with 72·6 per cent. of the women in Haryana, 62·18 per cent. in Rajasthan, and 60·7 per cent. in Delhi (Srinivas 1974: 61).

Sanskritisation leads to heightened sensitivity to ideas of purity and pollution, and to the performance of elaborate life-cycle, calendrical, and other ritual. Further, among high caste Hindus, women may be said to be the custodians of the purity of the house and its members, and of ritual. (Men may perform and pay for the ritual, but women are generally more concerned than men in its performance.) Their greater concern gives them considerable power as the material and spiritual welfare of the household is believed to depend on the meticulous observance of the purity-pollution rules, and the periodical performance of ritual. Women are important in all domestic ritual, and even when they do not actually participate in it they enable men to perform it by attending to such basic tasks as getting the house, clothes and utensils cleaned and purified, secure the many and diverse ingredients needed for the ritual, and finally, prepare the elaborate food. But there are many other and important rituals in which the husband and wife have to sit together with the priest, while a third type of ritual is almost exclusively feminine. In the last category may be included a part of the wedding ritual where no Sanskrit hymns and *mantras* are chanted, and where banter and abuse are exchanged between the women of the two kin-groups, the bride and groom appearing only as victims. Similarly, puberty ritual, which has now become extinct in urban areas, is the sole concern of women.

A considerable part of ritual has direct reference to the pursuit of secular ends, and to that extent, the performance of ritual only indicates practicality. Thus the annual propitiation of dead ancestors is not only intended to keep them well-fed and satisfied but is believed to ensure the welfare of the survivors. Similarly *vratas* (optional rituals performed, mostly by women, to gain specific secular and religious ends) are performed,[4] votive offerings promised to deities, and pilgrimages undertaken to great shrines, to obtain children, good health, long life and prosperity for members of the household, in particular, for the husband, father, or an ailing child. One of the secrets of the vitality of Hindu ritual is the manner in which it meshes in with the pursuit of material ends, and offers solace to secular failures. The popular myth of Hindu spirituality has concealed the fact that Hindu ritual and religion are closely linked to worldly interests.

Rituals have also secular dimensions as distinct from secular goals. They provide women with occasions for socialising with their peers and superiors, and for showing off the family's wealth, clothing and jewellery. During the last few decades in particular, the economic, political and status dimensions of ritual have become increasingly conspicuous, and the number of cars lined up outside a wedding house, and the VIPs who attended the wedding, provide the index to the household's standing in the local community.

Feminine preoccupation with ritual provides them with power over men. Since much of a women's ritual is concerned with the welfare of the household and its

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members, and the husband does not have the time for performing it, he is appreciative of the fact that his wife is looking after an important area of family life. The stresses and strains of modern living which include providing for education and careers for offspring, and arranging suitable matches for them, and anxieties about finance and health, draw both men and women to tradition and religion, particularly in their old age. Proximity to death generally makes both men and women more pious but in those rare cases where men display indifference, or seem to display indifference, their women can be trusted to make them toe the traditional line. I shall consider the consequences of this phenomenon later.

VI

I have stated earlier that there was a basic contradiction in Sanskritic Hinduism in the conceptualisation of the conjugal bond, *viz.*, one in which the wife is literally the moral and religious half of the husband, and another in which he is her superior. I shall consider the latter first. The husband was not only the wife's master but her deity. In his service was her salvation. He might be a wife-beater, drunkard, gambler and womaniser but her duty was to serve and obey him. Mythological characters such as Sita and Savitri were held up as ideals of devotion for the women of the Sanskritised, high castes.

Such a relationship was strikingly asymmetrical. The wife had to be a virgin before marriage, and chaste subsequently, she was not allowed to divorce her husband whatever the provocation, and if she was widowed, she could not remarry. She had to shed all the symbols of the happy and auspicious condition of her married state on the eleventh day of his death. Her head was shaved, she shed her blouse, and she became an inauspicious person for the rest of her life. But so much has been written about the plight of the Hindu widow that I shall not elaborate on it here except to point out that it was characteristic only of the highest and the most visible castes, and that as far as the bulk of the Hindus were concerned, the widow was entitled to remarry especially if she were young.

While 'virginity' in grooms and chastity in husbands were considered desirable if not necessary, lapses were condoned. A husband could divorce a wife for infidelity, incompatibility, or barrenness. He could even take a second wife though very few took advantage of the provision. (However, monogamy is binding under the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955.) A widower was expected to remarry, and in parts of south India, the dead wife's younger sister, if unmarried, was preferred for marriage.

But the existence of a gulf between the nature of the conjugal bond as conceived of in Sanskritic Hinduism and as it actually existed, to which I have referred earlier, does not mean that the ideals expressed in Sanskritic Hinduism were uninfluential. I have heard many orthodox Brahmin women in south India express their desire to die as *sumangalis*, while their husbands were still alive. I have also heard elderly women praise a relative or friend for total devotion to her husband even when the latter was an unworthy person. At the same time, paradoxical as it may seem, as a married couple got older, as a young wife matured into a mother and mother-in-law, the relationship between the husband and wife became increasingly egalitarian. In fact, if anything, the balance was tilted in favour

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of the wife, but this was concealed more or less effectively by symbols of wifely deference, and expressions of devotion to the lord and master. No important decision was taken, however, without the wife's consent if not permission, and frequently, the push to take a decision came from the wife. Husbands freely gave expression to the constraints imposed on them by their wives. Kinsfolk of the husband recognised the realities and either accepted them or limited their points of contact.

While total subordination of the wife to her husband was one aspect of Sanskritic Hinduism, the religious and moral partnership of the conjugal pair was another aspect. The husband was religiously incomplete without his wife, and most important rituals required their joint participation. The wife was referred to as a half-body (*ardhāngi*), and she got, as a matter of right, half the religious merit which the husband earned by his piety and devotion. Shiva was represented in one of his forms as *ardhanārīshwara*, half-man and half-woman.

Among the less Sanskritised 'low' castes, conjugal relations appear to be more perceptibly egalitarian than among the Sanskritised 'high' castes, and this is true of all the regions, including the Hindi-speaking areas. Among the 'low' castes, widows are permitted to remarry, and a wife is able to divorce her husband under certain circumstances. The elders of the kin on both the sides were brought in when a divorce case had to be adjudicated, and if they failed to bring about a reconciliation, a separation was brought about, and the jewellery, money and gifts given at marriage, returned to each party. Until at least the 1950's most divorces occurring in rural areas were customary ones, unknown to the law courts.

Indians generally tend to live in wide kin networks, though the character of the networks vary according to caste, class and rural-urban residence. These networks provide a sense of belonging, especially to the poor in urban areas who see the world outside them as alien, unhelpful if not hostile. But the networks also make demands on individuals, particularly on those who have jobs, and are in a position to help with money, advice, contacts and time. The poor and uneducated immigrants to urban areas are disaster-prone. They also seem to escape to some extent the norms and constraints of rural society with the result that the networks which provide a sense of belonging also become liabilities to the more able and mobile individuals.

Among the higher castes, a girl was trained to be a wife and daughter-in-law, and success or failure in both the roles reflected to the credit or discredit of her parents. But even among them, a girl whose marriage ended in disaster, had the right to return to her natal home. According to Dr Mary Chatterjee, marital failures do not seem to be infrequent among the educated women from the higher castes in Benares, and the wives whose marriages broke up returned to their natal families.[5]

VII

High status rural women offer, however, a sharp contrast to urban, educated women, a majority of whom hail from the higher castes. They are found employed as clerks, typists, receptionists, school teachers, nurses, doctors, social workers, academics, and as officials in the government and in the nationalised banks and the

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Life Insurance Corporation. But the number of women officials is still small compared with men. But one of the significant results of, for instance, success in the I.A.S. is the fact that young women get posted as Collectors at District Headquarters. (As Collectors, they may even have to order firing on riotous mobs.) Traditionally, the Collector was regarded as the lord of his district, and it is something of a cognitive revolution for villagers to find that they are being governed by a woman, and a young one at that. The significance of this fact has not been noticed by Indian social scientists.

In the cities, men and women are found working side by side in the same office, bank, firm or school. Men have accepted without protest women as their bosses in government offices, schools, colleges and universities. In a few cities in south India, there are banks which are entirely staffed by women, the only men being either messengers or watchmen. The career woman in India is very visible and it is significant that the society at large has quietly accepted women's assumption of new roles.

In a purely statistical sense, however, educated women are not significant. While 40 per cent. of urban women are literate, only 1 per cent. of them are either graduates or post-graduates. Of the 900,000 educated women in the country, 50 per cent. are primary school teachers, 15 per cent. secondary school teachers, 15 per cent. clerks and typists, while the balance comprises doctors, lawyers, college teachers, administrators, artists, etc. But however small the proportion of urban-educated women to high status rural women, the fact that the former have broken out of the 'status trap' of the latter, and have jobs that give them both regular incomes and social esteem (even from women), demands an explanation. They have made a successful transition from one structural and cognitive frame of reference to another. How did this happen? And the question that naturally arises is whether a period of stay in the 'status trap' is a condition precedent to women's assumption of new and extra-mural roles.

An essential pre-condition of women's (or for that matter, men's) breaking out of the 'status trap' is migration to urban areas, and the bigger and more cosmopolitan the urban area, the easier the transition. Very small towns, without any industry to support them, and culturally homogeneous, would perhaps present equally hostile environments for women wishing to break out of their domestic walls. Even in the big cities, areas inhabited largely by concentrations of kin-clusters from castes with a reputation for conservatism,are not congenial to women who wish to assume new roles. The inter-action between members living in such caste-based wards is intense, and departures from tradition generate gossip.

In other words, urbanisation is a condition precedent to the adoption of new patterns of behaviour, and this holds good for both men and women. I remember an elder of Rampura telling me, 'When a youth gets a B.A. it means that he is externed from the village.' In 1948, Rampura could only boast of having produced three graduates but none of them lived in the village. In those days, graduates wanted salaried jobs in the government, or entered the professions, for neither of which were there any opportunities in the village. But the situation has changed somewhat in the last twenty years or so: villages lying in irrigated areas or near townships, have each produced several graduates, and land reform legislation has forced owner-cultivators to remain on their land for fear of losing it to their

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tenants or servants. Also, the fact that agricultural products fetch higher prices has meant prosperity for rural landowners, and the provision of such facilities as schools, hospitals, drinking water and electricity have made villages more livable in than before. The improvement of communications combined with high urban rents have contributed to converting villages on the urban fringe into dormitories.

Education is becoming more popular among girls everywhere including villages but the drop-out rate for girls is higher than that for boys. Separate figures are not available for girl drop-outs in rural areas but even the national averages tell a depressing story: According to figures available for 1973–74, only three out of ten enrolled in Class I reached Class V, only one out of five moved from Class V to Class VIII, and finally, only one out of 12·5 girls passed the Secondary School Leaving Examination. In 1973–74, there were 900,000 girls in colleges, and ironic as it may seem, the proportion of girls to boys was higher in post-graduate classes. However, the ablest among the girls do very well in the examinations, it being usual to find at least a few girls in the first ten places in any university result sheet.

Urban residence is a necessary but not sufficient condition for escape from the 'status trap.' Education is also essential, and in India, female education has not only followed male education but an intimate link exists between female education, marriage and caste.

In this connexion, two considerations appear extremely relevant: 1) a girl ought not to be more highly educated than her husband, and 2) she should marry within her *jati*. The level of education which a girl receives is therefore directly related to the general level of male education in that particular *jati*. This is one, but only one, of the reasons for the high drop-out rate among girls.[6] Parents want their daughters to get only so much education as will give them the utmost advantage in the marriage market. Sometimes this means that girls have to be educated enough to have a job as, increasingly, young men from the middle classes prefer to marry such girls. The cost of urban living has made them realise that two incomes are better than one, and in the big cities it is not an unfamiliar sight to see a young man drop his pillion-riding wife at her bank or office before he drives to his own. But this occurs generally among the urban middle classes drawn from the higher castes.

The second requirement, that marriage has to occur within the *jati*, continues to be a strict one but needs to be hedged with two qualifications. *Jati* is a slippery entity, and the fact that in the past new *jatis* generally emerged by fissioning themselves off from old *jatis*, makes possible a referential stretch depending on contextual necessity. Thus in one context, a person may refer to the smallest *jati* to which he belongs, comprising the group with which he has the closest interaction including connubial relations, while in a political or economic context he may include that *jati* in a much wider one. Indeed, even for marriages, cognate *jatis* tend to get telescoped to form a single entity. Thus, some South Indian Brahmins nowadays express the view that they would be satisfied if their son (or daughter) married a girl (or boy) from any one of the many south Indian Brahmin *jatis*, and they regard themselves as progressives. It may be safely assumed that in such cases the parents are urban, educated, and belong to the middle classes. Class, education and life-style become increasingly significant within the reinterpreted *jati*.

To come back to women's education: the pressure to get women educated is

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part of the process of securing good husbands for them. Colleges and universities provide respectable waiting places for girls who wish to get married. As already mentioned, among the urban middle classes belonging to the higher castes, the possession of a basic degree is now regarded as essential for obtaining a 'good' groom. But as a girl gets more and more educated, her connubial circle narrows as there is an implicit rule which is only very rarely broken that the boy ought to be at least as highly educated as she is.[7] Even here, a male doctor prefers to marry a female doctor, a male academic his female counterpart, and a male I.A.S. official, a female I.A.S. official. This section of Indian society is miniscule in size but its life-style is envied and admired by the others.

Indian reformers have shown a concern with female education ever since the mid-nineteenth century (Basu 1976: 39). The reasons for the spread of female education probably varied from one region to another, but according to Dr Pradeep Sinha, a potent factor in the popularity of female education in Calcutta was the urge to prevent high caste widows from being recruited as prostitutes. The proportion of females to males in Calcutta was very low resulting in men resorting to prostitutes from the courtesan castes. As the demand was far greater than the supply, young widows from the high castes, 'helpless victims of family neglect and even torture, were an obvious recruiting ground' (Mazumdar 1976: 49). The awareness of the existence of a profound cultural gap between educated men and their uneducated wives and the need to bridge it in the interests of family solidarity, provided a powerful motive for female education. The reformers argued that 'education would not turn the women away from their traditional familial roles but improve their efficiency as wives and mothers, and strengthen the hold of traditional values on society, since women were far better carriers of these values' (Mazumdar 1976: 49).

Concern with improving the miserable plight of the widows, and the desire to bridge the gap between the educated husband and his ignorant wife were shared by reformers in many parts of the country. Girls from the upper castes were preponderant in the schools and colleges, and this continues to be the case even now to a large extent. Among the earliest beneficiaries of the new educational opportunities were widows and girls deserted by their husbands.

Since the beginning of this century, an increasing number of men from the higher castes sought English education to obtain jobs in the bureaucracy, and to enter the professions. Such men were in great demand as grooms, and over a period of time, this gave rise to the institution of dowry. Previously, paying sums of cash to obtain brides was prevalent all over south India (excluding Kerala) and Bengal.

Considerations of space prevent me from attempting an analysis of the institution of dowry and I shall rest content with stating that the pressure to pay dowry was compounded by the twin needs of having to get girls married before puberty, and to find grooms within the same *jati*. This triple imposition was, as could be expected, very hard on the parents of girls but its very unreasonableness resulted in some relaxation of the rules. The fact that parents had to accumulate enough cash to pay dowry, and to meet other wedding expenses meant that many girls who had reached puberty remained unmarried. Public opinion, which was at first critical of parents with 'grown daughters', gradually learnt to ignore the fact. Second,

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sub-caste barriers started falling one by one, the principle of 'horizontal stretch' coming into play, and providing a much larger recruiting ground for grooms while at the same time the illusion was maintained that there was no departure from tradition. Third, since girls could not be kept idle at home till they were married, they were sent to schools and colleges. The fact that they also met a new and growing demand for educated brides helped to spread education among girls.

Marriages involve the spending of unconscionable sums of money by the parents of brides and this is particularly true of the urban middle classes, and the traders and the richer peasantry. Dowry adds greatly to their burden, especially as the sums demanded have been steadily increasing, and the gadgets, vessels and furniture demanded as 'gifts', also cost much more than before. (Beginning with the upper levels of the society, dowry has now spread even to so lowly a group as sweepers in Calcutta.) The passing of The Prohibition of Dowry Act in 1961 has had no effect whatever in combating this evil. Only a powerful social movement among educated youth can have any impact on the problem. But all this should not blind one to the fact that dowry has helped to raise the age of marriage for girls and that it has helped to spread female education.

VIII

I shall now come to my last point *viz.*, the contribution which female participation in the freedom struggle has made to their emancipation. That such participation has been crucial can be conceded even by those who regard as an overstatement Dr Aparna Basu's view that, ' . . . it is doubtful if a century of preaching and social work would have brought about the same change in the position of Indian women as was achieved in the wake of two decades of political struggle in India' (1976: 38–9). In the second civil disobedience which Mahatma Gandhi launched in 1930, 'over 80,000 persons were arrested during the salt satyagraha of which more than 17,000 were women'. In addition, there was an association of women student terrorists in Calcutta with one hundred members. According to Dr Aparna Basu, the movement initially attracted women from the urban middle classes but as the nationalist movement gained in strength, industrial workers and 'certain sections of the peasantry' also participated in it.

An interesting and paradoxical factor in women being drawn into the independence movement was the nature of Gandhi's personality which inspired confidence not only in women but 'their guardians' *viz.*, fathers and husbands. The respect that Gandhi enjoyed among Indians as a saint, and the unique methods of struggle that he forged, persuaded men that they could allow their womenfolk to join his movement.

The gradual transfer of power from British to Indian hands gave women experience in participating in the democratic process, including becoming representatives of the people, and in holding office. 'The Government of India Act of 1935 extended the franchise to more than six million women, a great improvement on the figure of 315,000 under the Act of 1919.' 'In the 1937 elections, eight women were elected from "general" constituencies and forty-two from "reserved" constituencies. Six women became ministers when the provincial cabinets were formed.'

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It was only natural then that in Independent India women participated actively in all aspects of politics, and held political office. Apart from the fact that the country's highest political office has been held by a woman for nearly eleven years, there are two women chief ministers of States, women ministers in almost every State and Central government, and finally, there are several women M.P.'s and M.L.A.'s. But female participation at the higher levels of the political process seems to be confined to women from families with a political tradition except among the Scheduled Castes and Tribes who enjoy reservation in both State and Central legislatures. A proportion of the seats reserved for these two categories has gone to their women.

The relative ease with which Indian women have entered the professions and captured political power is an impressive fact of the modern world, though it is only a tiny urban minority largely hailing from the upper castes which has been the principal beneficiary of the new gains. Quite apart from the fact that Indian men have not opposed feminine emancipation, two little-noticed facts seem to be part of this process. Educated Indian women are able to hold demanding jobs, and be housewives and mothers at the same time thanks to the availability of servants, and to their ability to draw upon their wide kin-networks for help in crises. Thus a pregnant girl may go to her natal home for her confinement, or if that is difficult, her mother or a married sister might visit her and be with her till she is able to resume her normal life. It may surprise many to know that it is becoming common for Indian wives in the United States, Canada and Britain to get their mothers or sisters to visit them during their confinement.

But the crunch might come when, as is already happening in some cities, servants are not available, and a more remote possibility, when kinship networks become smaller, and kinship obligations decrease in intensity.[8] But what is impressive in the meanwhile is the successful blending of traditionalism and modernity in Indian social life and culture.[9] In fact, several traditional factors such as the desire of girls to be taught by women teachers, and of women patients to be treated by women doctors, have helped in popularising female education. Similarly, the horrors of upper caste widowhood and desertion by husbands, have also helped in the spread of education among women. On the other side, educated men and women do maintain links with their tradition, and even self-proclaimed rationalists perform obsequies and *shradhas* for their dead ancestors. Conformity as well as departure from tradition is contextual, and it is hard to see any patterns in either departures or conformities except to say that wedding, mortuary and *shradha* rituals are probably regarded as more binding than the others. Even the rationalisations for departures and conformities vary from one individual to another.

After making the point that it is extremely difficult to make general statements about Indian women because of regional, caste, class and other differences, I have tried to show how the upper castes have a bibliocentric view of Indian culture and society, including the place and role of women in it, and how that has acted as a barrier to the observation and interpretation of actual behaviour. This has been compounded by the heterogeneous character of the scriptures, their differential authority, and finally, inconsistencies which are to be found in the scriptures in the conceptualisation of certain basic roles and relationships, particularly the conjugal one.

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In order to describe the position of women in India, I began by creating a model of rural society and showed how female role and behaviour varied at different levels of land and caste hierarchy. I then viewed the model as a diachronic one in order to show how even traditionally the caste system permitted a certain amount of mobility, and how opportunities for mobility considerably increased during British rule and subsequently. Since Independence, opportunities for mobility have greatly increased for poor and low status Indians, in particular, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. In rural India, movement to the top layer of the rural hierarchy generally led to female 'immurement' among both Hindus, Muslims, and possibly also among Christians. Another consequence of upward mobility among Hindus was Sanskritisation which altered husband-wife relations. Whatever the legal and formal position of women in Hindu society, as a married couple got older, and a wife became a mother-in-law and grandmother, she became a force to reckon with in familial matters. Conjugal relations became egalitarian and this was more or less effectively concealed under well-developed symbols of wifely deference. Finally, migration to urban areas, female political participation, education, the activities of social reformers, and the inequities of dowry, all enabled women to make a relatively easy transition to new roles and responsibilities.

NOTES

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[1] 'In regions where women do most of the agricultural work, it is the bridegroom who must pay bridewealth, as already mentioned, but where women are less actively engaged in agriculture marriage payments come usually from the girl's family. In South and East Asia the connexion between the work of women and the direction of marriage payments is close and unmistakable' (Lowie 1920: 48).

[2] I am not discussing here the question of bonded labourers who are to be found in every part of India.

[3] A child is trained to be acquisitive, and this is perhaps much stronger among the richer sections of the peasantry.

[4] The Sri Vaishnava Brahmins of South India do not perform *vratas* as they were denounced as *kāmya* (unspiritual, worldly) by their founder, Rāmānuja, in the twelfth century A.D.

[5] Personal communication to the author.

[6] A girl may be withdrawn by her parents from school or college if the choice is between her or her brother's education even when she is the better student.

[7] It is not unlikely that many of the unemployed women graduates in the arts and sciences, constituting about 96% of the total women graduates, had discontinued higher studies in order not to decrease their chances of finding a suitable husband in their respective *jatis*.

[8] I am indebted to Dr Mary Chatterjee for bringing this point to my notice in a personal communication.

[9] However, this is not to be taken to mean that Indian women do not experience any conflict in combining traditional and modern roles. What is surprising is that considering the divergent nature of the demands made on them, the conflict is not more acute and widespread. Also, generally speaking, the conflicts are more serious in the first few years of married life.

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