WIEKE VAN DER VELDEN

Honour At Work

The Lives of Poor Thakur Women In Eastern UP

This examination of how the contradiction of being poor but high caste weighs especially heavily on women is based on the experience of living for one and a half years in two villages in eastern Uttar Pradesh while conducting a sociological study.

WHEN I enter the courtyard with some girls from the neighbourhood, there is no one to be seen. But the sound of grinding stones leads us into one of the three rooms facing the courtyard, where a daughter-in-law, her face veiled, is grinding maize. The girls tease her: "Why don't you show her your face?" After a while, they catch hold of her and lift the veil to give me a glimpse of her face. But she casts down her eyes.

In the kitchen, another daughter-in-law has just finished her meal and is preparing to start spinning cotton yarn. A modern spinning wheel is placed here. She too is veiled. The third daughter-in-law I don't see until later, when her mother-in-law, Geeta*, calls her out into the courtyard.

This is the house of a poor Thakur family in an eastern UP village. Though they have some land they are one of the poorer Thakur families in the village. Two of Geeta's sons have gone to Calcutta as migrant workers. One son has not been able to find a job, so he shares the responsibility for work on the land with Geeta.

Geeta tells me that she is the head of the household. They find it difficult to make both ends meet so the two daughters, who are in their early teens, and the daughters-in-law have taken to spinning at home. Together, they earn about Rs 200 a month and a quota of *khadi* cloth. "But", Geeta says, "it would be better to die of hunger than for us women to go and work outside the house."

During the harvest season in another village of east UP, I sit and talk with Asha, also a poor Thakurain. Her family has hardly any land left. Her husband works in Calcutta but is in failing health, so his remittances are small and irregular. Asha now lives in the village with her 14 year old son who attends a high school nearby. For several years, Asha had been taking in matchbox pasting work from a match factory near the village. In the last six months, she has also started going to the factory to work there, whenever work is available. She is paid at a piece-rate, and rarely earns more than Rs 70 a month. While we talk about her work and about work in general, she says: "Women should not work on the land." Yet, she has, just a few days before, been harvesting her own wheat crop. "Well, yes", she says, "but the consequence may be that guests from other villages will refuse to eat at my house now." Her honour is damaged. But she had little choice.

Both these are examples of poor but high caste women, trying to cope with the contradictory pres-sures of the need to earn, and of the need to guard family honour which demands that women 'should not work.' In this article, I want to take a further look at this dilemma.

Socioeconomic Background

Eastern UP is a rather backward area. Agriculture is the mainstay of the local economy. But practically all the families in the village where I stayed were also partially dependent on the remittances of migrant workers. Almost all the villagers are connected with agriculture in one way or another, as landowners or as workers.

Agriculture is not very modernised and is basically small scale. Where I stayed,

Women workers in a match factory, UP

most landholdings are small or medium sized, that is, under 10 acres. The few holdings of 30 to 65 acres were considered exceptionally large although this is not the case everywhere in eastern UP.

Some medium landholders give part of their land to small farmers on a sharecropping basis. The sharecropper provides most of the inputs such as seeds, implements and labour, and gets half of the produce, the other half going to the landowner. Other landholders work the land themselves, employing labourers for major operations like transplanting and harvesting. Small farmers usually cultivate their own land although a few give it out on a sharecropping basis, especially those who do not have enough labour power within the family. In addition, small farmers may take laad on a sharecropping basis.

Agricultural labourers are usually landless poor people belonging to lower castes. Most of them are hired on a daily basis, although in one area, a few are hired on a regular basis and in return given a small piece of land to cultivate foi themselves. Daily wages may be in kind or in cash. For most operations, men are paid Rs 8 to 12 plus a meal, and women Rs 5 to 8.

The cultural and political hierarchy in the region is basically expressed in terms of caste. The Thakurs and Bhumihars are politically dominant. Most of the biggest landowners belong to these two castes.

Though caste and class coincide to a large extent, leading one writer to coin the term 'Clast', I wish to differentiate between the two, especially as for this article I concentrate on those for whom caste and class identity are at odds.

Changing Norms

I would describe caste as a cultural and political category, class as economic. This means that norms of different groups differ by caste more than by class, even if those norms relate to an economic issue like work.

As a consequence, one might say that norms regarding work are related to the 'expected' class position of the members of a caste. Thus, Thakur norms are more appropriate for the landlord and Harijan norms more for agricultural labourers. However, the norms of the higher castes may be seen as ultimately also preferable for people of lower castes, especially when they aspire to achieve higher status.

This may be seen in the case of one backward caste family which has improved its economic status. The one adult man in the family is a health visitor for a district level programme and his earnings provide the largest part of the family income.

The family also has about two acres of land which they largely work themselves. The women of the household take their normal share in the fieldwork, alongwith the work in and around the house. When pressed for time, they hire additional agricultural labour from their own caste. Many women of this caste, apart from working on their own land, also help on the fields of others of their caste, more or less on an exchange basis. Within caste norms, there is no stigma attached to this.

But Gauri, the wife of the health worker, does not go to work on others' fields nor does she cut grass by the wayside or on common land since both these activities are despised by the higher castes and classes. Gauri has enough to do with the household work, the children and her share of work on her husband's family land. Yet, one evening, in a fight with a neighour who is away most of the year as a migrant worker and whose wife consequently has primary responsibility for work on the land, Gauri's husband claims: "My wife does not work"!!

Thus, the norm concerning the range of work appropriate for a woman has become more restrictive in this family than it is for the caste as a whole. The change is in line with upper caste norms which are restrictive with respect to women's work. A similar pattern is observable in the changing norms regarding manual labour.

The Thikurs, or Rajputs, whose traditional class position in the village was high, and who, earlier, were the major landholders thought that as landlord, or intermediaries of landlords, they should not engage in manual labour. They also considered it below their dignity to take up a job. Therefore, in some Thakur families, education was, for a long time, not valued highly, not even tor men. Women were not supposed to work for

Women engaged in harvesting, UP

pay, and their movements outside the house were severely restricted.

The norm that a Thakur should, not do manual labourer take up a job was very strong and its violation could lead to expulsion from the subcaste. If a particular Thakur ploughed his land himself, he damaged not only his own honour but also that of his community.

In one of the areas I studied, this norm held out for a long time. Families reacted to economic pre-ssure by selling their land. Gradually, however, the norm broke down, and today, every Thakur ploughs his own land. The norm now exists mainly in theory, as a statement of how things ought to be.

In the other region I studied, the poorest Thakurs, who did not Mve very large holdings to begin with, had little choice but to circumvent the norms. The land did not yield enough to live on, so considerable numbers of men went to the big cities in search of employment. Many worked as labourers, or as porters at Howrah railway station, hiding the actual nature of their work from those at home. Today, many of the descendants of those migrants have moved into better jobs. Many have joined the army or the police force and families give increased importance to advanced education for boys.

Norms Restricting Women

Older Thakur women may take on part of the supervision, especially where many of the labourers are women of lower castes. But generally, the norm that women should not work on the land still holds for Thakur women.

If a Thakur woman is seen working, her honour, that of her family and that of the whole community is said to be damaged. And, as women are seen as the repositories of honour, this norm seems to have a strong hold.

Therefore, when I initially asked Thakur women what work they did, the answer was: "Nothing". Reality turned out to be different. I had to begin taking into account the fact that I counted many more activities as work than village women generally did.

"Ghar ka kam kam nahiri" (House-work is not work) was a statement repeatedly made not only by men but also by women. Cooking, scrubbing utensils and looking after children — *"woh baithna hai"* (That's equivalent to sitting at home), several women told me.

Going a little further, women's tasks like making cowdung cakes and processing harvested grains and pulses are not seen as work either, especially when done by women of the household rather than by hired women labourers.

Winnowing in an upper caste house

Even work on the family land is not always regarded as "really work". This may hold true for men as well. A number of men, some Thakurs, some from backward castes, told me they had no work. By this, they meant that they had no paid employment. They worked on their land but they did not consider this work. Real work in their eyes was a paid job, preferably in government service, or in a factory or in business, for example, as a shopkeeper. Work in household industry, such as sari or carpet weaving, was less highly valued.

All these occupations were considered men's work. When women took up part of the work in household industry, for example, winding yarn on the spindles, that would rarely be seen as work.

Work Kept Invisible

What happens within the house, unseen by outsiders, is considered to remain within the family and thus does not harm the family honour. Since a large part of the daily activities of upper caste women takes plape within the house, where outsiders cannot freely enter, this work is, on the whole, acceptable. Yet, highly honour conscious families may try to hide from visiting outsiders even the work that women do in the courtyard.

Thus, Kanti, a teacher in a village school, told me how she once visited the home of a Thakur girl who was her pupil. As she approached the house, she heard the pounding sound of threshing from the courtyard. Just then the girl came up and took Kanti to a guestroom off the verandah where she asked her to sit and wait. The sounds of work stopped. Since no one appeared, Kanti decided to leave, and went to the house of another pupil, nearby. Soon, an aunt of the Thakur girl came, well dressed, to implore Kanti to visit their house now.

When Kanti told me the story, she added: "I would have been treated as an honoured guest then. But they did aot want me to see them, the women of the house, at work, or even in their daily clothes." It would have damaged the honour they tried to uphold. This may be a somewhat extreme example, but I too did have similar experiences.

Even when Thakur women admitted to doing multiple tasks at home, they continued to deny working on the land. But, in the course of time, I saw, or learned that quite a few women did work on the land which they were not supposed to do. But they did this work, as far as possible, at times when they were least likely to be seen. For instance, Asha harvested the major part of her wheat crop at night. This

might be sensible in the hot season if one had a work team, but is not quite safe if one is alone, particularly if one is a woman.

Before her marriage, Maya says, in times when her family faced great hardship, she would work along with her brothers on the land, wearing boys' clothes. From a distance, she would not be recognised as a girl. Thus, Asha and Maya took up work that was 'out of bounds' for women, but this was quietly accepted or, rather, ignored by other villagers.

Varying Patterns

It is worth noting that neither Maya nor Asha was a young daughter-in-law. The norm is not enforced equally strictly for all women. Asha is a middle aged woman, practically the head of her household. Maya was an unmarried daughter of the village when she undertook field work. For older women and young daughters, the norms are not as strict as they are for young daughters-in-law. In the first 10 to 15 years of her marriage, a Thakur woman can hardly move out of the house.

The strictness seems also to vary a bit from one village to the next. In the village where I stayed, Thakur girls and older women could move fairly freely in their village and its immediate surroundings. Certain agricultural activities were regularly taken up by them, especially watching the ripening crops, keeping birds away from the fields, and picking peas in the field as they ripened.

It seems to me that the extent to which Thakur woman work on the land has much to do with the extent to which they have gained mobility. Many women told me that only a generation ago, freedom to move was more restricted, even for older women. The increase in mobility is undoubtedly connected with changes in the economic position of their families, but may also in part be related to outside influences, especially increased social contact with the city and availability of education, for example, the establishment in the area of an intermediate college for girls.

Though most of the teachers come from outside the area, some staying in quarters nearby, some commuting, from the city, a few are local women, one a Thakur from a neighbouring village. It must be noted that these women are from well to do families in which none of the women does any work on the land. In the family of the Thakur teacher, all the work on the land is done by hired labour. Even the men of the family do no more than supervise.

A potter's wife kneading the clay

Teaching is about the only occupation which is regarded as respectable for women of the area. However, they are supposed to teach only in girls' schools, of which there are few. Only a few women from better off families take on this occupation. One reason is that it requires a higher education which few women have as yet been able to acquire. For poor Thakur women, teaching is not an available option.

Different Burdens

Coping with poverty is difficult enough. Women from lower castes work on the little land they have, and when that, plus the earnings of husbands and sons is not sufficient, they also take up agricultural labour in the peak seasons. But women from the lower castes only rarely take up the less remunerative work of spinning or piece-rate contract work for the match factory.

Lower caste women no doubt have a heavy workload but they do not have to worry much about how this affects their social status. In their castes, a much wider range of work is acceptable for women. It is sometimes argued this is one reason wliy the status of the backward castes is low. "These are lowly people. Their women go out and cut grass for fodder", I was repeatedly told by upper caste people.

But a woman from a poor Thakur family has the double burden of running the household, trying to make both ends meet with inadequate means, and, also, of guarding the honour of family and caste. When there is a healthy adult man at home, he is expected to do most of the agricultural work. But, even on a small farm, he would not be able to do all of this work on his own. Older women and girls may help with certain operations but for some others, such as transplanting and harvesting, labourers are likely to be hired, even if the family can ill afford this.

Rather than have women of tbe family work outside the house, they try to take in paid work that can be done at home. Men or children fetch the raw material from the contractor later deliver the processed goods and collect the pay. Thus, the women, including the daughters-in-law can earn even while observing the restrictions on their movement that go with their status as Thakurs.

Such work is very low paid but the families argue that the women and girls are earning an extra in their 'free time', although in fact they may put in a full workday of six to eight hours. This kind of work arrangement also often means that women have no control over their earnings, which are collected by others, and handed over to the head of the household.

Asha's Story

Asha's case illustrates the difficulties faced by a woman when she has to manage the land on her own, under the restrictions imposed by caste norms. For several years, Asha and her daughter Guddi had taken in work from the match factory. They had leased out their bit of land on a sharecropping basis.

Things became more difficult after Guddi was sent to her in-law's house. In order to give her a proper send off, Asha and her husband had to sell some of their land and also take a loan. Even though they took the loan from Thakurs in their own village, they had to pay the usual interest of four percent a month.

Asha now works at the match factory while also bringing work back to do at home. She also cultivates the little land left, though she has to hire a labourer for the ploughing.

During the harvest season, she cannot go to the match factory. There is too much to be done on the land, and she also has to keep an eye on the crops already harvested. She gets little help from her Thakur neighbours or from her brothers who live elsewhere.

Increasingly her social contacts are with women of an inter-mediate caste, who also work at the match factory. Yet, she does feel the pressure of her caste norms and outwardly endorses them even though she cannot follow them to the letter. The stress affects her health. She suffers regularly from palpitations and dizziness. She is also underfed. "But no one should know when one goes hungry", she maintains. Yet, she ensures that the appropriate gifts are sent to her daughter's in-laws, and makes an effort to pay for her son's school fee and books.

Her little house is in a sad condition. In one room, the roof leaks, but she cannot pay for the needed repairs.

Long Way To Go

It is March 8. A small rural women's group has organised a meeting. Women from several villages and from different classes and castes have gathered. During the meetings, songs are sung, mostly new women's songs and peasant and worker songs. The latter are integral to the work of the women's group which includes supporting agricultural labourers, of whom a large number are women, in their struggle for better, and equal, wages. The peasant and worker songs have the advantage of being in Bhojpuri, the local language, whereas most new women's songs are in Hindi.

But, while women from all groups sing along with the women's songs, Brahman and Thakur women are silent when peasant songs are sung. Women's unity—yes, but worker's unity and caste differences break in. There is still a long way to go.

(All photos by Wieke Van Der Velderi)

A Crime That Pays

EMBEZZLING money of a charity trust might have landed him in juite a bit of trouble. The trustees would have immediately summoned each other to dismiss him; other organisations and friends would have condemned and boycotted him. But, Vasant Nargolkar, the well known Sarvodaya leader, the oretician and head of the Adivasi Gram Seva Sangh in Kainad, Maharashtra had committed no such crime. He had only been discovered attempting to molest a 45 year old lecturer, who had gone to him for assistance and advice on her doctoral thesis.

What shocked Geeta more than Nargolkar's behaviour was the casual and uncaring attitude of the trustees,

Demonstrating to expose the Sarvodaya leader

Sarvodaya leaders and friends. At best, they advised her to forget the whole incident. But, for Geeta, the nightmare which began five months ago could hardly be wished away so easily.

Vasant Nargolkar, the 68 year old Sarvodaya social worker and his wife Kusumtai were old friends of the family. Geeta and her husband held him in great respect and supported his work amongst the tribals. She did not feel in the least hesitant to go to Kainad for Nargolkar's help and live at the small, isolated *ashram* with him, his wife and 14 tribal men and women. She thought it was concern when Nargolkar advised her to send her young daughter back to Bombay so that she could put in more work.

One night, on the pretext of looking for snakes, he came to her room late in the night, jumped at her from behind, embraced her and demanded that she sleep with him. Horrified, she ran to bis wife who calmly declined to interfere or help her. And there was no way of leaving the *ashram* till next morning. Paralysed with fear and disillusionment, Geeta bad to be escorted back to her home.

Back in Bombay, she began a four month campaign, with the help of her husband and a few sympathisers from the Sarvodaya, to bring Nairgolkar to book. She discovered that she was not the only woman to be assaulted. Several tribal women had been 'persuaded' to have sexual relations with him. One of them, it is reported, became deranged after delivering a baby. She died shortly afterwards.

Nargolkar, aided by iis wife, used to advertise the papers for secretaries, molest them and fire them every six months.

As more incidents were uncovered, Geeta was determined to expose this man. The trustees of the Sangh were aggrieved by his misconduct but took no action. A fact finding team of three Sarvodaya members was rudely turned away by Nargolkar. Eminent leaders commiserated, and advised discussion, persuasion, and a change from within. Finally Geeta took her complaint to the Forum Against Oppression of Women which organised a demonstration alongwith some sympathi-sers from the Sarvodaya and Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini.

On September 21, about 75 women and men gate crashed a trustees' meeting to acquaint them with the facts about Nargolkar's sordid 30 year old sexual career. They raised slogans, garlanded his picture with slippers, burnt some of his books and demanded that the trustees pass a resolution condemning Nargolkar, then dismiss him from the *ashram,* and constitute a fact finding team to gather evidence on all his misdeeds.

Nargolkar had been tipped off not to attend the meeting, so the Forum made an arduous trip to the jungles of Kainad to meet him. They were appalled to find him not only unrelenting but full of arrogance and bravado. "Don't look at my age", he is reported to have said. "I can mate with and satisfy all of you." And again: "What is wrong? I need it for creativity. People will remember me for my books and work and not these small incidents."

Repulsed by his misogyny, brazenness and self righteousness, the Forum painted him with black paint. All the while Kusumtai, his wife, the woman who bad gone on hunger strike when she had immediately after their marriage come to know of his sexual perversion, cradled and clung to him. "Leave him alone," she said. "Every human being has his limitations and this is my husband's. But I always saw to it that the women had birth control pills "

The press widely publicised this story. However, a centre spread article by a noted Sarvodayite in the popular Marathi daily *Loksatta* alleged that Geeta's loose morals and the Forum's naive and Communist tendencies were being used to split the Sarvodaya movement.

Journalist friends were determined to have the last word by not giving news space to women. The trustees who had once promised to remove Nargolkar from the secretariship of the Sangh, are trying to sidestep by making his wife the head of the ashram.

Nargolkar still lives in Kainad, occasionally travelling to conferences and meetings to expound the tenets of Gandhi and Jayprakash Narayan, or to pay homage to Vinobha Bhave at Paunar celebrations. And nowhere is he confronted or boycotted except by a very small minority. After all, it is being said, the man is a great and dynamic personality, and we have to overlook some small faults.

-Nandita Gandhi, Nandita Shah

Vulnerable Me

I walk the streets
head upright
eyes alive
and dancing
a tune on my lips
and think
Wow! This is life.
Who-a-a-ck
A hand comes down heavily
on my breasts.
In a moment
the culprit
has vanished
—and so has my confidence.

-Nishtha Desai