

### **Abstract**

In highly sex-differentiated societies, it is probable that the benefits of development may more easily bypass women than men. This research examines the social and cultural factors which economists tend to ignore in formulating their development models. The study of the social status of women is relevant not only as it leads to a fuller understanding of the needs of the local community but also as it is focused on socially and economically relevant planning and policy making. This case study of Palitpur village shows that, with development, women's social status has not improved and in some cases has even regressed. In fact, the status quo maintained in women's position in society vis-a-vis men's is positively related to higher income, increased agricultural productivity, and modernization.

### **About the Author**

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## **Changes in the Status of North Indian Women: A Case Study of Palitpur Village**

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Introduction

In highly sex-differentiated societies, the benefits of development often more easily bypass women than men. Recent studies on the relationships among development, women's work, and women's status have indeed revealed a negative impact on the lives of rural women (Tinker 1976; Boserup 1970). Although economic models of development do generate economic wealth, the benefits are not distributed equally between the women and men. One of the major reasons for this inequality is that the predominantly male policy-makers have continued to maintain the traditional status-quo of women in India. A deeper understanding of cultural factors and socialization patterns of the community is required to resolve this inequality. This research attempts to study the social and cultural factors ignored by economists in formulating their development models. The study focuses on the impact of agricultural development on the status of rural women in North India.

Setting and Methodology

Field research for this study was conducted in Palitpur<sup>1</sup> village in the Meerut district of Uttar Pradesh (North India) over a period of eight months from December 1983 to July 1984. The village was chosen for (a) its location, being the most agriculturally developed district in North India, (b) the sizeable number of women participating in agricultural activities, (c) manageable population size (for data collection by a single person) and (d) a good representation of caste, religion, and income. The criteria used to define development were mainly technological, such as improved methods of irrigation, introduction of high-yielding variety seeds, use of chemical fertilizers, technological training, and mechanization of farm equipment. By Indian standards Palitpur is highly developed agriculturally. The total land under cultivation, 2,588 bighas (517 acres),<sup>2</sup> is irrigated. Tubewell irrigation was introduced on a large scale in the mid-1960s when electricity was provided to the village. There are 52 tubewells serving as the main source of irrigation. Wheat and sugarcane are the major crops grown in the area. High-yield variety seeds and chemical fertilizers are used by all farmers. Located on the Delhi-Baghat highway, Palitpur benefits from its proximity to these cities in terms of the availability of markets. The government sugar mill in Baghat provides a ready outlet for the regular sale of sugarcane, now a major cash crop of the village.

Out of a total village population of 1513, the 551 adult males and 488 adult females yield a sex ratio of 113 males to 100 females. (Adult is defined as above 10 years of age.) The 251 male children and 224 female children yield a sex ratio of 112 male to 100 female children. Such sex ratios are characteristic of this region of North India. Of the 229 households in the village, the landowning caste of the Chauhans (92 households, second in the caste hierarchy to the Brahmans) is the dominant group. The next largest caste group is that of the Chamars (55 households). Muslims compose the third largest group (41 households), and the remaining households belong to Brahmans, Lohars, Nais and Bhangis.

In Hindu society, each person is believed to be born into a varna or caste group. The four caste categories are (a) Brahmans, the priestly caste, (b) Kshatriyas, the warrior caste, (c) Vaishyas, the trading caste, and (d) the Shudras, the menial labor caste. A fifth group of people are the "Untouchables," who are considered outside the caste system by the Hindus. They are latrine cleaners and carrion carriers, performing tasks which are considered polluting and unclean by caste Hindus. Within these basic caste groups exist many subcastes which vary from region to region in India. In Palitpur the Chauhans, a subcaste of the Kshatriyas, are mainly engaged in farming. The Nais caste, and the Bhangis belong to the Untouchable group. In India, the Shudra and Untouchable groups are now officially referred to as members of the Scheduled castes, a designation which therefore will be adopted for discussion purposes in this paper.

For an intensive study, 100 households were selected within the framework of equal representation of castes, land holdings, and type of families (nuclear and joint). An intergenerational analysis of women's attitudes and opinions was obtained by interviewing women in three age categories: 15 to 29 years (younger generation); 30 to 44 years (middle generation), and 45 years and above (older generation). Besides structured interviews with the aid of open-ended questionnaires, extended conversations with the young girls and older generation women were a source of further information. Some farmers, the block development officer, and villagers engaged in non-agricultural activities were also interviewed. Data thus obtained were augmented by direct observation. To study the impact of agricultural development on the social structure, particularly the relationship between economic development and women's status, data have been categorized by caste and religious groups. Three categories were established: the Brahmans and Chauhans comprise the higher caste; the Nais, Lohars, Chamars, and Bhangis comprise the Schedule caste; the Muslims, a category in themselves.

For the cut-off year to compare the pre-development and post-development eras, the year 1965 was selected because modern technologies, high-yield variety seeds, and chemical fertilizers were introduced around the same time.

#### Status of Women

Western feminists and anthropologists have adopted two basic approaches to study the status of women in society. While one states that the status of women is determined by physiological factors, the other states that economic factors are the paramount determinants.

Some Western authors (Hunt 1972; Freidl 1975; Brown 1970; Ortner 1974; Chodorow 1974) have attributed women's low status to distinctly female biological functions which preclude them certain roles that have become the prerogative of males. Physiological differences between men and women have had an important role in determining the division of labor and consequently the status of women in a number of societies. Women have been perceived as biologically inferior because of the greater physical strength of men. Their role in reproduction and child-bearing has also excluded them from certain occupations such as hunting and warfare. Unfortunately, these analyses address the question of status from a perspective which tends to focus solely on the primary natural function of women -- to bear and rear children.

Other authors who have used economic factors as determinants of women's status have tended to stress the importance of the contribution of productive activities in society to women's position. Some writers (Martin 1975; Sacks 1976; Reiter 1975; Sanday 1974) subscribing to economic variables claim relative equality between men and women in foraging societies, because women's gathering supplies a substantial proportion of the subsistence base. Some of the factors which contribute to the women's loss of status are the introduction of new technology in agriculture, the passing of property ownership rights into the hands of men, the formation of state societies, the subsequent exclusion of women from public production, and the division of labor by sex. These factors have resulted in men's control of strategic resources. These arguments tend to explain the low status of women and their relegation to domestic duties and peripheral production on the basis of their role being limited to the domestic sphere.

From the above account the "unicausal" explanations of the status of women become obvious. What has been noted so far is that many westerners view the status of women in primarily biological or economic terms, a view which eliminates a large proportion of women in the world whose social values are based on cultural and religious variables. Quinn points out that

it may be more accurate and more helpful to future research, to treat women's status as a composite of many different variables, often causally independent of one another. Thus in any given society, this status may be very "low" in some domains of behavior, approach equality with men's status in others, and even in some domains, surpass the status of men (1977:183).

In every country the social structure is shaped by historical, political, and economic conditions. Cultural norms and definitions of the status of women, therefore, differ from country to country and often from group to group within a particular country.

The concept of status in Indian society becomes particularly complex because of its religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity. Differences of perception of status of women which arise between women of different classes are further compounded by differences in social status due to the caste system. Additionally, one also has to distinguish between the status of women as portrayed in traditional myths and religion and as it exists in reality. These two perspectives of status differ considerably. As Beteille (1975) points out, the traditionalists tend to construct an idealized picture of women from classical myths and texts, and they find her position less satisfactory in present day than in the past. Modern feminists on the other hand perceive the traditional values as oppressive, and consider the changes (legal and social) in women's status since Independence to be progressive. The controversy between the traditionalists and modernists highlights the essential problem in addressing the concept of status, the many determinants in the definition of status. Overemphasis of one viewpoint has to either be justified or be guarded against.

In India the concept of status varies considerably among urban and rural women. While urban women tend to strive toward equality with men by adopting western values, rural women are still tradition and caste bound and aspire for a higher social status by emulating traditional role models. To a great

extent these women have based their behavior, beliefs, customs, and traditions on the goddess lore of India, possession of the virtues of goddesses, and traditional heroines affording them a sense of reflected glory. Such an ideal is Sita, the wife of the god-hero Rama, whose devotion and love for her husband under the most trying of circumstances is seen as an example of exemplary behavior.

Women accorded high respect as guardians of their family's izzat (honor) conform to the traditional image of obedient daughter-in-law, wife, and mother by looking after the household and showing respect to their elders and husband. Though these women worship the numerous Hindu goddesses and aspire toward social recognition for conforming to role models, reality does not meet their expectations.

On a day-to-day basis, women are neither idealized nor despised; they are treated as ordinary mortals. Indian men, aware of this, worship the goddesses to the extent of glorifying the concept of "ma" (motherhood), but they do not ascribe similar status to women. The distinction between goddesses and mortals is further accentuated through a review of the social and legal status ascribed to women throughout history.

Until forty years ago the legal status of Hindu women in India was based on laws dictated by the ancient Hindu lawgiver Manu (1st and 2nd centuries A.D.). Briefly, the essence of Manu's thesis was that women are supposed to continuously remain under some male authority, first under that of the father, then of the husband, and finally of the son. He prohibited widow remarriage, instituted childhood marriage for girls, established the concept of dowry, and disinherited women from their husband's and father's property. Though the Hindu Civil Code of 1956 has tried to eliminate many of these disabilities, the women's movement in India still has a long way to go to rid the society of its oppressive customs.

The belief, still prevalent, that the honor of men rests in the behavior and public image of their women causes direct control of men over women's sexual and marital norms. For example, a woman can bring devastating shame to her family by engaging in sexual activity with a man of another caste or community, though the man's amorous exploits are not seen as a slur on his family honor. Hence, marriage became a strict institution where women's individuality was completely controlled by the whim and fancy of her men. The act of marriage is not merely a legal contractual arrangement amongst Hindus; it is a sacramental act.

The status of Muslim women is no better than that of Hindu women. These women have to observe pardah, the veiling of the woman's face in the presence of men, every time they leave the house. This practice is observed to varying degrees by different classes in the community. Not only can Muslim men bring home four wives without have to annul any previous marriage but he can also divorce any wife by the simple pronouncement "I divorce you," three times in the presence of a witness; however a Muslim woman does not have the right to seek divorce. A Muslim man is not responsible to pay his divorced wife maintenance beyond a period of three months. Whatever chances a Muslim woman formerly had to go to courts to seek redress under these laws were recently extinguished by the Indian government under pressure from conservative Muslims.

The complex situation above warrants an emic view of status, that is, the view of the actors. A set of social norms were chosen as indicators of social status in rural society. They were selected because they reflect social values most cherished by women and perceived by them as the foundations not only for husband-wife relationships but also for their views on respectability. Questions based on these indicators elicited answers which highlighted some of the cultural factors presenting problems in the distribution, to the whole community, of the benefits of agricultural development. The indicators of social status selected for women in Palitpur are (a) concept of prestige and respectability within the household, (b) gender-based eating patterns, (c) the practice of purdah, (d) the freedom of mobility, and (e) the institution of dowry. This study evaluates the impact of agricultural development on the social status of women in Palitpur village, based on the above indicators.

### Social Status in Palitpur

#### Prestige and respect within the household

Whether economic development led to any improvement in women's social status is reflected in the Palitpur women's responses to status in terms of their definition of respectability. Their responses revealed a deep indoctrination of social norms by a society which primarily caters to men of upper castes and classes. These women nurture the same views of respectability today as they did prior to economic development. In fact, economic development among the lower castes seems to encourage their adoption of traditional values.

The data in Table 1 reflect women's perceptions of respectability as they vary by caste and age. After intensive interviewing, all answers pertaining to women's views of respectability were divided into eight broad categories. These categories were:

- a. being a pativrata wife (worship husband)
- b. running household economically
- c. giving birth to sons
- d. being hardworking
- e. not being quarrelsome
- f. not roaming aimlessly around the village and talking to non-family males
- g. achieving in education
- h. staying at home

Among the higher caste women, looking after in-laws and being a pativrata were the primary respectability virtues a woman should have. She should run the house efficiently and economically and not complain about being poor or not having enough to eat. A woman who gave birth to sons was also highly respected; in fact, for a new bride it was the birth of a son which finally led to total acceptance and therefore better treatment by the in-laws. A woman giving birth only to daughters was blamed for the "disaster" and had to suffer humiliation for the rest of her life. Hard work within the household was another criterion attributing respect to women; this was highly reflective of traditional values and did not come as a surprise from high caste older women. Such values have been handed down from generation to generation; however, the younger generation seemed to think differently.

The higher caste women belonging to the younger generation gave education and hard work higher priority than having sons. They perceived a modern opportunity to provide a better standard of living and were attracted to the idea that education could be a means of moving out of the village either through marriage or employment. Though these women voiced these views and were inclined towards higher education, they were rarely given the opportunity or permission to do so. Though agricultural development and increased incomes have led to more liberal attitudes among women in this age group, their lives are still controlled by the older generation, which force them to continue to maintain the status quo.

Women of the Scheduled castes viewed respectability in different terms. A "respectable" woman in their community was skilled and hardworking, both inside and outside the household, and ran the house economically. They thought well of a person who did not quarrel with her family and neighbors and who did not go around indiscreetly talking to non-family males in the village. Even though their values of hard work and economic independence are commensurate with western values of women's liberation and higher status, these views are not acceptable in the caste-ridden, closed social structure of the village.

A few Scheduled caste women who shared the higher caste notions of respectability, such as looking after the husband or giving birth to sons, were women whose husbands were employed in the city. They were attempting Sanskritization<sup>3</sup> (emulating the higher caste) and were unaware of the repressive nature of their model.

Among the middle and older generation Muslim women, respect was accorded to those who stayed at home, did not go out for wage labor, were not quarrelsome, and did not walk about the village socializing with non-family men. Running the house economically and without complaint were the other desirable virtues. In contrast, the younger generation among the Muslims differed in their assessment of respectability. They highly regarded a woman who ran a household frugally and looked after the family well. Not quarreling and not talking to non-family men were also considered desirable virtues. The purdah system required Muslim women to be confined to the house. Total seclusion of women was seen as a sign of high social status. But in actuality some women had to leave the house to fetch fodder or work at the brick kilns to make ends meet.

The notion of respectability has not changed much in Palitpur since the pre-development era. Women of the younger generation did aspire to change the concept of respectability but at this point seem to be victims of the wider social order. The fact that the richer Scheduled caste and Muslim women are adopting traditional values is a reflection of the adverse effects of economic development, and the deeply entrenched nature of the caste system.

#### Who eats first?

Women's subservience to men is expressed in different ways and most prominently observed during mealtimes. A very common practice among Hindu families is for women to eat after the men have eaten. In relatively rich families, the men not only eat before the women but also eat better food which may consist of milk products and fruits. Young children of both sexes are fed

at the same time as the men. The distinction between siblings arises when the girl enters her teens and becomes one of the "women"; then she eats after the men. Such "dutiful" acts are justified by the women themselves, because they consider men to be their providers and protectors, even when they themselves are wage earners sharing the economic burden of the household equally with their husbands.<sup>4</sup>

The data in Table 2 show that an overwhelming majority of higher caste women eat their meals after their husbands. The remaining who eat with their husbands are older women who are being accorded respect because of their age. Most of the women who ate after their husbands claimed they did it because it was customary and they had never given much thought to it. They had seen their mothers, and grandmothers serve food this way so were continuing the tradition. Another reason for serving food to their husbands was because they "respected" them. Since the husband was perceived as a superior and the wife was taught to regard him as her lord, no opportunity was spared in serving him. The married woman's life centers around the well-being of her husband for which she is totally responsible, though in most cases her welfare may not necessarily be the responsibility of her husband. The pattern of eating after their husbands is an age-old one in which women themselves take pride. With more money coming into the family, the quality of food eaten by men has definitely improved, though the same is not necessarily true for women.

Generally, three reasons were cited by women who served food to men first: (a) out of respect, (b) to honor the custom, and (c) to accommodate the men's work schedules. The data in Table 3 illustrate these responses coming primarily from higher caste women. Roughly half of the women of the Scheduled castes ate with their husbands. They believed that, since they also participated in daily wage labor along with their husbands, they saw no reason to give them preferential treatment; however, they felt that it was right for higher caste women to eat after their husbands, since those women were totally dependant on their husbands economically. Further questioning revealed an interesting contradiction in the perceptions of the Scheduled caste women. While they preferred their own freedom of movement and economic independence over the restrictive, discriminatory customs of the higher castes, they also seemed to envy the higher caste women for their caste and economic status. Still other women of the Scheduled caste explained that they served food to their husbands first and themselves ate later because the men had to leave for work early.

Though discriminatory customs of feeding men are also practiced by Muslims, the Palitpur community did not observe them. Only a minority of Muslim women said they ate after their husbands. Of these women some did so because their husbands went to work early and the others ate later out of respect for their men. Most of the latter were newly married girls; apparently this eating pattern does not persist very long into marriage.

Not only do women continue to "serve" the men, but also such customs are being reinforced through upward mobility of the Scheduled castes by emulating the behavior patterns of higher caste women. With more money coming into Schedule caste families, such repressive customs of discrimination are being adopted to acquire higher social status. Thus, though agricultural development was brought economic well-being to all households, women's social

status has not improved either within the household or within the community, nor are there signs of greater equality between the sexes.

### Practice of purdah

Observation of purdah, another expression of women's subservient status, is in its strictest form, the covering of the whole body and face in a cloak-like dress (burqa) whenever a woman moves out of the house or beyond their living quarters which are separate from the men. This form of observance is generally used by Muslim women. In Palitpur the purdah system still prevails, though in different forms depending on the community. Being largely an agricultural community, most of the women in Palitpur are involved in some agricultural activity where the burqa would be an inconvenience. Also, among the Palitpur Muslims the strictest form of purdah is not possible because their poverty level does not allow them to have living quarters separate from the men.

For the purpose of analysis three distinctions have been drawn up for purdah. Code 1 is assigned if a woman observes total purdah (covering of the face and the whole body when a woman moves out of the house). Code 2 refers to partial purdah or the symbolic veiling of the face in the presence of the father-in-law or older men, and Code 3 refers to the absence of any form of purdah inside or outside the house.

Table 4 indicates that all Hindu women of the older generation (higher and Scheduled castes) tend towards observing partial purdah. This is because an older woman is not likely to attract attention, and hence the family's honor is not at stake. These women are also physically too weak and old to do agricultural labor or to spend their time visiting neighbors. They help a little in housework, such as cutting vegetables and looking after small children. These old women carry news around and are privy to the village gossip. When they travel outside the village, they do not veil their faces, though they still cover their heads with the end of their sarees.

Younger generation Hindu women belonging to the village share some of these privileges. Unmarried girls whose maternal home is in Palitpur move about the village freely. Since exogamous marriages are customary, it is considered safe for an unmarried girl to move about the village without a ghunghat<sup>5</sup> (veil). But young brides in the younger generation who come from other villages observe ghunghat in the presence of older men of the family, and they do not venture out of the house except to do agricultural work.

The middle generation of higher caste women follow the same restrictions as newly married women. Whenever they leave for agricultural work they keep their faces totally covered with the end of their sarees till they reach the fields. Once there, they work with their faces unveiled. It is quite a common sight to see veiled women carrying to the fields packed lunches for their husbands on their heads. The sarees are thin enough for the women to see through clearly, while their faces are not visible to passersby.

The situation among the Scheduled caste women is somewhat similar to that of the higher caste older women -- but for different reasons. Scheduled caste women engage in wage labor and find it impractical to veil their faces. For this reason purdah is not regarded a criterion for "respectability."

Among the Muslims, partial purdah is observed most of the time. Except when travelling outside the village, all three generations of Muslim women are required to wear the burqa. At home they pull their saree or dupatta (long scarf) partially over their face in the presence of men older than their husband, but when they walk around the village they do not veil their faces.

Before the process of agricultural development started in Palitpur, the purdah system was more rigid. The older and middle generation Hindu women rarely moved out of their homes except when they were travelling outside the village. Similar was the case with Muslim women. Due to development, pucca<sup>6</sup> roads opened up avenues for highly paid jobs in neighboring towns and landless laborers were lured away. This forced the women in the household to leave their homes to indulge in agricultural labor and hence observe a lesser degree of purdah. Though the kind of purdah now observed in Palitpur is partial, mobility within and outside the village is very limited, restricted mainly to going out for economic activity. Again a definite pattern seems to emerge according to caste and age groups. The Scheduled caste appears to be the most mobile. Scheduled caste women have always engaged in agricultural and other forms of labor; hence, they have never practiced total purdah or have been confined to the house.

#### Women's freedom of movement

According to the data in Table 5, the higher caste women are the most conservative in terms of mobility. While most of the older and middle generation high caste women go to their farms to work, they are rarely seen walking around the village or shopping in the village market, as it is considered disrespectful for them to be seen in public. Some of the very old women who do move around the village rarely go to the marketplace. The marketplace is considered the most public of places, not only because men are there but also because different caste groups mingle there. Some of the older women admitted that since they were illiterate and sheltered, they would not be able to shop even if they were sent to the market.

The middle generation women in the high caste group were the most restricted in terms of mobility. Since all of them were married into families in Palitpur, they have to observe some sort of purdah at all times. They are not allowed to venture beyond the lane where they live, except when they have to go to work. The paths to their fields do not pass the houses of the Scheduled castes or the Muslims. Thus "purity" and "respect" are maintained.

Younger women from all caste groups and the Muslims have the freedom to move about at will, since they are considered the "daughters" of the village. Their mobility is somewhat restricted upon attaining puberty. Nearly half of them have gone out of the village to attend a fair or some entertainment. But at no time do these women leave the village alone; they are always accompanied by a male chaperon, usually a brother or a cousin. While attending high school or college in the nearby town, at least two or three girls travel together. The explanation on why a girl could not travel alone was that it has become increasingly unsafe for them to venture out alone because of the risk of sexual harassment. Most women are afraid of the local ruffians who make obscene remarks and passes at them, a phenomenon quite common in North India.

Half the women in all three age categories among the low castes move around freely. Since most of these women indulge in wage labor, they are already in contact with non-family males and therefore are not hesitant to move around the village or even to go out of the village. This freedom often leads to harassment from ruffians, but they consider it part of life. Also, higher caste men frequently sexually abuse the Scheduled caste women within the village itself -- a phenomenon common in most parts of rural India.

Though mobility for entertainment within the village and outside is limited, high caste women, according to Table 6, visit their maika (natal home) more often than the Schedule castes. More than half of the higher caste women visit their natal home at least once a year. Visits during festivals are the most preferred. Married women living in joint families stagger their visits, since all the women of the household cannot go to their maikas at the same time. It is common for young brides to visit their maikas yearly, but as household responsibilities increase and they start controlling the household, the frequency of their trips is reduced. The six higher caste women who did not visit their maika in four or more years were either old women without close relatives left in their natal village, or whose maikas were quite far from Palitpur.

Since Palitpur follows the Hindu custom of exogamous marriages, most alliances are with families from nearby districts. Every time they visit their maikas, they have to be chaperoned by a male family member. Usually it is a male member from her maika who comes to pick her up. Her in-laws consent has to be sought before she can visit her parents, and the duration of her stay is decided by her husband and in-laws. Often the girl requests her father to ask her husband for permission to stay longer in her maika, as she has more freedom there. A girl cannot return to her sasural (marital home) until her husband or a male from his family comes to escort her. There are instances when a husband who wanted to get rid of his wife did not bring her back from the maika at all. Any dowry demands persisting after marriage are used as a bargaining ploy to bring the wife back. So even when a woman travels from her sasural to maika and back, she is dependent on men, especially her husband and his family.

Among the Scheduled castes, visits to the maika were found to be less frequent, as indicated by Table 6. The most frequent visits were from new brides and women from well-to-do families. Most Scheduled caste women are, however, too poor to make the trip often. Since the majority of women in this category work for daily wages, frequent visits to the maika would entail a loss of income in addition to having to bear the expenses of the visit.

Poverty is frequently the main reason for the rarity of Muslim women's visits to their maika, with distance being an additional factor. In the community, most families are nuclear, with many children. Hence the expense to travel to the maika with children is very high. There are also some women for whom bride-price had been paid; since these girls have been "sold," they never return to their maikas to visit their parents.

Since high social value has traditionally been placed on women's modesty and servitude to men (also attributes of the high caste), an improvement in the economic status of Scheduled castes in an effort to raise status. With economic development, even the Scheduled caste rural women who had enjoyed

comparative freedom are being pushed back further to the confines of their homes. Obviously, this development has not benefited women, as mentioned earlier; fear of sexual harassment has become an increasingly discouraging factor in limiting women's travel.

### The institution of dowry

In India, giving material wealth (referred to as dowry) along with the bride in marriage is a customary practice among the higher caste Hindus, especially among the landed families. The bride's family gives the bride clothes and jewelry and also presents the groom's family with costly gifts, household goods, cash, and in some instances, property. Greater economic wealth has resulted in an increase in the amount of dowry among groups traditionally practicing it. Additionally, it has also adversely affected women's status through its institution in groups that formerly did not subscribe to it. The practice of dowry, now quite widespread in Palitpur, has become an expression of family economic wealth and thus a symbol of social status.

Historically, Chauhans (a sub-caste of the Rajput warrior caste from Rajasthan) did not give dowry, since they did not own land. When the Chauhans moved to Palitpur and acquired land, they still continued the tradition of marriage without dowry. But "modernization" caught up with them once agricultural development started in Palitpur about twenty years ago. Besides bringing in more money, development brought about more mobility for men and closer ties with the city. As aspirations grew, farmers now wanted to marry their daughters to educated Chauhans who lived in the city or villages bordering the city. They were taken to adopt the "city culture" (such as a change in dress and use of transistors and motorcycles) and started offering dowries to attract eligible men with urban backgrounds. The following example illustrates what dowry entails in a marriage involving well-to-do landed families.

While conducting fieldwork I attended the wedding of the Pradhan's (village headman) daughter. She was sixteen years old and one of the "highly" educated girls in the village, because she had studied until the eighth grade. Besides being the only daughter among six brothers, she was tall, fair, and pretty. Because of her qualifications and physical attributes, the consensus was that she should marry an educated man and live in a city. Her marriage was ultimately arranged to a boy who was the son of a rich landlord from a neighboring village and who was studying for a B.A. degree in a Delhi college. He was a much-sought-after groom who finally settled on the Pradhan's daughter primarily because her family was able to meet all his family's dowry demands.

During the engagement ceremony the girl's family gave the groom's family Rs. 20,000 (US\$2,000), several boxes of fruits and sweets, sacks of grain, and clothes for the groom and his extended family. In return, the bride was presented with a gold ring, a saree, and some cosmetics. At the time of marriage the dowry consisted of household goods, such as utensils, house furniture, electric ceiling fans, refrigerator, a television set, and a motorcycle, in addition to the same amount of cash, fruits, and grain given during the engagement ceremony. An amusing fact was that the village the bride was going to did not have electricity. The Pradhan also provided his

daughter with twenty-one sets of clothes and some jewelry. At a dinner reception, the Pradhan hosted two hundred guests (all males) who came with the groom. A rough estimate placed the total amount spent on the marriage at Rs. 100,000 (US\$10,000). This figure is overwhelming considering that it was paid by a family which could not "afford" higher education for their daughters and whose house had no sanitation facilities or electrical appliances (even though Palitpur has electricity).

These lavish customs are practiced by the dominant caste group which is emulated by the lower caste groups. As mentioned earlier, Chauhans are the land-owning caste in the village, but the amount of land owned varies from one Chauhan family to the other. This is also the case among Brahman families. Thus, the availability of wealth to give as dowry also varies, and in many cases it is very difficult for some families (even of the higher castes) to get their daughters married.

After conducting intensive interviews with women in Palitpur, a range of answers pertaining to questions on dowry was obtained. These answers varied by caste and age group.

According to Table 7, three-fourths of the older and middle generation high caste women claimed that the larger the dowry, the greater the social recognition. This was especially interesting, considering that most of these women were married without dowry. Though some of the middle generation high caste women felt that dowry was related to status, two-thirds of the women in the group which justified dowry claimed that a girl was treated better by her husband and in-laws if her family could give a big dowry. (These responses were recorded when the press in India was repeatedly reporting incidents of "bride-burning" and suicides by young brides as a result of dowry harassment?) But only one-third of the younger generation higher caste women supported dowry and they cited that the most important reason was to ensure good treatment by the husband and in-laws. The majority of the younger generation was opposed to it, because they considered dowry a social evil and found it humiliating to the girl's family. The unmarried women in this age group felt that demanding dowry reflected poorly on the man and that such persons were not worth considering for marriage.

A contrasting opinion was expressed by the Scheduled caste women of the older generation as most of them strongly opposed dowry and felt it was a vulgar display of wealth by the rich. Two dissenting women approved of the practice because they felt it enhanced their social status, as did half of the middle generation women who justified it. The women from the Scheduled caste who supported dowry belonged to relatively well-off families. In most cases, the men in their families were educated (at least up to high school) and had found employment in neighboring cities. The adoption of dowry by richer Scheduled caste women makes one wonder about the disapproval of the custom by the other families in the caste. It is possible that calling dowry an evil and an undesirable practice of the higher caste is a rationalization by poorer families who are unable to afford it. When a family acquires the means to support the custom, however, it becomes an indicator of social status. This explanation seems to be borne out by the opinions of the younger generation as well; most of them believed that giving dowry was justified and half of them claimed that it would elevate their status. Such status consciousness seems to have arisen with the recent economic development in Palitpur. The fact

that more Scheduled caste men are getting education and better employment is resulting in their upward mobility and it has as a consequence all of the symbolic trappings associated with the higher castes. Some of the Scheduled caste younger generation women who approved of dowry deemed it essential to living separately from their in-laws after marriage.

Traditionally, the scheduled castes did not practice dowry. Instead, the institution of bride-wealth was the custom then, where the groom's family usually gave the bride's family some gifts and cash at the time of marriage. This tradition died out many years ago when dowry became a status symbol and a reflection of economic wealth.

Among the Muslims of Palitpur, dowry is quite uncommon. Tables 7 and 8 show that except for an odd woman or two, Muslim women did not support dowry. The two women in the youngest generation who approve of dowry, and who are in households involved in business, do so for social status. Though some families have made tentative attempts to adopt this practice, it does not, by and large, play a role in arranging marriages, as dowry is prohibited in Islam. At the onset of Islam in Arabia, the prevalent practice was bridewealth. But this practice did not carry over to India. Nevertheless, there have been a few cases of bride price among the Muslims in Palitpur in which cash payments were made to the girl's family to "buy" her. In four cases, girls ranging between four to six years old were sold by their parents because of dire poverty. These girls severed all links with their maternal homes after getting married. In three instances girls in their early twenties were brought from Calcutta. Since it is unusual for families in Palitpur to travel a thousand miles away for marriage purposes, such alliances seemed intriguing; further questioning revealed that the husbands who had traveled to Calcutta were considered "bad characters" in Palitpur and hence would not have found brides around the village.

The introduction of dowry is the most noticeable outcome of economic development, not only in villages like Palitpur but also in urban centers. As has been discussed above, although this custom was unheard of in Palitpur a mere twenty years ago, it now has become a strong social practice.

#### Husband-wife relationship

Questions on husband-wife relationships elicited mixed responses. The majority of the older and middle generation higher caste women claimed they were treated well by their husbands. The remainder gave "O.K." treatment as their response. It was evident that the high caste older and middle generation women were reluctant to criticize their husbands. Fifty percent of them felt that, given a choice, they would prefer to be men in their next lives. They believed that men had the freedom to lead the kind of life they desired and that they did not suffer the abuse and ill treatment that married women faced from their husbands and mothers-in-law. In the younger generation half of the women claimed they were ill-treated by their husbands and agreed with the older generation that men had an advantageous position in society.

A similar opinion was expressed by the Scheduled caste and Muslim women. The younger generation was very emphatic about the unfairness of being denied the freedom men possessed.

Wife-beating was reported as a common phenomenon in all caste groups and among Muslims. Among the higher castes this was compounded by general neglect of the women on the part of their husbands. A large number of the physically abused women felt that they deserved their beatings and they assumed they had been at fault. Among the Scheduled castes and the Muslims, the main cause for beatings was a result of the drunken behavior of their husbands.

The above findings indicate that, with agricultural prosperity in Palitpur, traditional norms and customs are not only being maintained but also are being reinforced. Since it is evident that some of these customs are still oppressive toward women, the present models of development have not been adequate for bringing about social change.

### Conclusion

Beteille (1975) has observed that most Western scholars associate emancipation of women with the right to work. But there is also another side to the picture. In agrarian societies work is regarded more often as a hardship than as a privilege, because agricultural labor entails arduous physical work. In the rural areas of India a substantial number of women work in the fields as agricultural laborers. Jacobson (1977) has observed that these women work outside their homes out of economic necessity. The work is ill-paying and the women consider it demeaning, since they are pitied for their poverty and for their husbands' inability to provide for the family. Working women are also seen as being neglectful of their homes and families. It is therefore understandable that confinement to the house and devotion to the family are cultural values to which is attributed great importance by both men and women (Sharma 1980; Jeffery 1979).

Such values are reflected in some studies on displaced female labor which have noted that, when the male member of the household receives better wages due to agricultural development, he tends to withdraw his womenfolk from work outside the house (Epstein 1962, 1973; Sharma 1980). Generally the upper castes and the land-owning classes have a traditional division of labor in which women are responsible for housework while men labor in the fields. When upwardly mobile lower caste families withdraw their women from agricultural labor outside the house, it is for reasons of prestige, as it is an emulation of the higher castes. This tendency has been ascribed to the process of Sanskritization by which members of lower castes seek to raise their status in society by adopting the customs of the upper castes. Often, important changes occur in the position of women, particularly at the lower and middle levels of caste hierarchy. Women start observing customs of oppression such as purdah and eating after the men. The demands of dowry go up, the age at marriage tends to go down, and widow remarriages are prohibited. While family social status is enhanced when women are withdrawn from visible economic activities, there is ample evidence to suggest that women's status within the family unit declines because of a greater dependence on and subservience to the men in the household. Thus, attention to family social status often compromises the welfare of the women, as they lose their economic independence and adopt the customs of oppression.

The case study of Palitpur village is illustrative of the trends discussed above. Economic growth due to agricultural development is apparent in the village in the increased harvests, efficiently run brick kilns, use of

electricity, healthy and well-dressed men, and the appearance of television aerials. Even though the general economic wealth of the family and village has improved, women's opportunities have not changed much. Despite the increased workload and economic responsibilities for women, their contribution to the village economy has not been recognized.

Answers to questions pertaining to social indicators of status show differences in perception of social values between different age, caste, and religious categories. Responses of the older and middle generation upper caste women revealed deeply ingrained traditional values of husband-wife relationships and views of respectability. Exceptional deference to the male members of the family continues to be shown by eating after them. There is greater confinement to the house and restricted social mobility. They practice the institution of dowry as evidence of high social status.

In contrast, the younger generation women feel that dowry is an evil custom, and they strongly condemn the ill treatment they face from their husbands and in-laws. They gave high priority to education as a means by which they could achieve social recognition. In spite of their progressive views, their future is still controlled by the men and older women in the family who are obstacles to the fulfillment of their aspirations.

Scheduled caste women's views on respectability and social customs differ from those of the higher caste women. A hard working, skillful person is highly regarded in the community and considerable value is placed on economic independence. Most Scheduled caste women work outside the house for wages, do not practice purdah, and are very mobile. Dowry is considered demeaning and a vulgar display of wealth by the rich. However, with economic development and increased wealth, a new trend is emerging in this caste group. Wealthy Scheduled caste families are withdrawing their women from the labor force and confining them to the house. As a result, these women are adopting the upper caste traditions of purdah and dowry. This emulation of traditional values, though an attempt to gain social recognition, actually causes further oppression and undermines their status.

Not much change is apparent in the social status of Muslim women. Purdah, lack of mobility, and partial confinement to the house are still prevalent among them. Historically, Muslim men have always worked in the neighboring towns as daily wage laborers and have rarely engaged in agricultural work. Hence the new agricultural prosperity has not benefited Palitpur, because Muslim men have continued to work outside the village, thereby maintaining their isolation from the rest of the village.

With agricultural prosperity in Palitpur, traditional norms and customs are being not only maintained but also reinforced. Since it is evident that these customs are still oppressive toward women, the present economic models of development are clearly inadequate for bringing about social change in rural India, except for the obvious change in the aspirations of younger women of the village.

This case study of Palitpur clearly points out that economic prosperity, resulting from an increase in agricultural productivity due to modernization of the village, has not led to the improvement of women's social status in terms of emancipation, greater opportunities in work, or education. In fact,

in some instances a certain amount of regression has taken place. Intergenerational comparisons show that women have continued to be as subservient to men as their mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers were. Even though the assumption is that agricultural development and economic wealth is accompanied by a society which is less influenced by sex-differentiation, the case of Palitpur does not bear out this assumption.

The emic approach to the study of the status of women in Palitpur adopts the view that women's perception of their own status is a relevant criterion in gauging their socio-economic position in society. This study has formulated an operational definition of status (since it is such an ambiguous concept) and chosen indicators of status which are pertinent and meaningful to the social group being studied. This analysis also reflects the utility of the emic approach by highlighting that it is not accurate to use a universal or generalized definition of status for any group of women. A clear understanding of women's position in society is possible only when cultural, religious, class, and generational factors are taken into account.

Notes

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1. Palitpur is a pseudonym for the village where the fieldwork for this study was conducted.
2. One acre equals 16.5 bighas.
3. A process of emulation of Brahmanic customs by the lower castes in an attempt to raise their social status. For details see, Srinivas, N.M. "A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization." Far Eastern Quarterly, 15(4), 481-496, 1956.
4. This phenomenon is not confined to the village itself but is quite usual in cities also. In fact the whole family eating together is an influence of Westernization. It is commonly found in families which employ servants to cook and serve them.
5. Veiling the face by the end of the saree. This is the common form of veiling by Hindu women. Muslim women wear the burqa.
6. A tarred road. Most villages in India still have mud roads which are not usable by trucks or cars. The common mode of transport on these roads is bullock carts.
7. Over the last six or seven years numerous cases have been reported in the press about young women being not only ill-treated but sometimes even burned to death by their parents-in-laws if their demands for dowry are not met. In most cases, the new bride is doused with kerosene while in the kitchen and then set on fire. The case is then reported to the police as an accidental death.

Table 1  
Criteria for Women's Respectability

Castes	Higher			Scheduled			Muslims		
	0-29	30-44	45 & above	0-29	30-44	45 & above	0-29	30-44	45 & above
First	b	a	a	d	d	d	b	f	h
Second	a	b	b	b	b	b	a	e	b
Third	g	c	c	e	e	e	f	h	e
Fourth	d	d	d	f	f	f	e	b	f

key: a.being a pativrata wife (worship husband)  
 b.running household economically  
 c.giving birth to sons  
 d.being hardworking  
 e.not being quarrelsome  
 f.not roaming aimlessly around the village and talking to non-family males  
 g.achieving in education  
 h.staying at home

Table 2  
Does everyone eat together?

	Castes			
	Higher	Scheduled	Muslims	Total
Yes	8	13	21	42
No	47	12	5	64
Total	55	25	26	106

Table 3

Why do women serve food to men first?

	Castes			Total
	Higher	Scheduled	Muslims	
Out of respect	14	--	2	16
Because it is a custom	13	4	--	17
Because of his work schedule	10	8	3	21
Total	37	12	5	54

Table 4

Observance of Purdah

Caste groups	Age in years		
	0-29	30-44	45 & above
Higher	2.2	2.0	2.5
Scheduled	2.4	2.0	2.8
Muslims	2.0	2.0	2.0

(1 = total; 2 = partial; 3 = absence of purdah)

Table 5  
Women visiting the village market

Caste	Age in years						Total
	0-29		30-44		45 & above		
	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	
Higher	8	10	2	14	1	20	55
Scheduled	3	5	3	6	4	4	25
Muslims	2	8	1	5	--	10	26
Total	36		31		39		106

Table 6  
Women's visits to their maikas

Frequency of visits	Castes			Total
	Higher	Scheduled	Muslims	
Once a year	21	6	1	36
Once in 2 years	14	7	4	25
Once in 4 years	2	6	4	12
Never	2	1	6	9
Other	6	--	--	6
Total	55	25	26	106

Table 7  
Is dowry justified?

Caste	Age in years						Total
	15-29		30-44		45 & above		
	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	
Higher	6	12	12	4	15	6	55
Scheduled	6	2	4	5	2	6	25
Muslims	2	8	1	5	1	9	26
Total	36		31		39		106

Table 8  
If dowry is justified, why?

	Castes								
	Higher			Scheduled			Muslims		
	15-29	30-44	45 & above	15-29	30-44	45 & above	15-29	30-44	45 & above
To maintain family status	1	4	11	3	4	2	2	--	1
Girls are better treated	4	8	4	--	--	--	--	1	--
Can live separately from in-laws	1	--	--	3	--	--	--	--	--
Total	33			12			4		

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