

THE present study is an attempt to document some significant aspects of women's life within the families of agricultural labourers in a Punjab village. A basic assumption is that the lives of the people in a community cannot be correctly understood without finding out how both the labour contributions and the benefits of production are distributed among its members. Traditional economic indicators such as average household income, per capita income, and per capita food consumption, all fail to tell us who actually gets how much of what.

The family as a unit of economic and political organization has not been adequately looked at to explain :

1. how economic resources are distributed within the family and with what consequences;

2. which family members have acquired greater decision making powers over others;

3. who within the family makes how much contribution to family income;

4. what is the labour contribution of each family member; and

5. are the contributions of the family members commensurate with the benefits he or she derives from membership in it ?

The focus of the present enquiry is on the extent to which certain types of families may be so structured that they are less likely to meet the needs of female than of male members. Though the emphasis is on the conflicting interests within the family that are due to gender differences, the picture is invariably more complex in actual family situations. In certain ways, being a member of a family in most societies is the only source of support and protection available to most women, though in many other ways the family structure is also a key element in ensuring their unequal position in society. In trying to explore some aspects of the consequences of being a female in a rural Punjabi family, one fact that

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**We have deliberately preserved the anonymity of the village studied.** The photographs used with this article are from another village in Punjab.

# Family Life the Unequal Deal

## Women's Condition And Family Life Among Agricultural Labourers And Small Farmers In A Punjab Village

*Data collected by B. Horowitz*

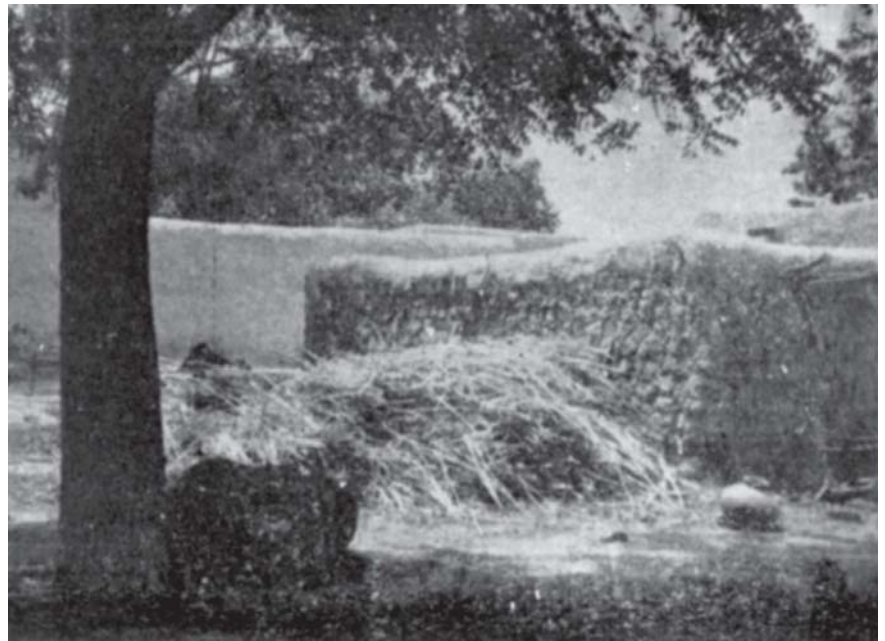
*Written by B. Horowitz and Madhu Kishwar*

stands out quite clearly is that old or young, daughter, mother or mother-in-law, healthy or sick, from a landlord's family or a landless labourer's, much of a woman's life pattern will be determined by her gender, primarily to her own disadvantage. In recent years, a recognition has begun to emerge of the existence of severe systematic discrimination against women throughout India, and especially in the northwest, where women's position tends to be relatively worse than in the south and in tribal areas.

### **The Power Of Rural India**

Any enquiry into the condition of women in Indian families requires that we focus our attention on rural India,

where about four out of every five people live, and where most of the urban population still has deep roots. Rural India still exercises a powerful influence over family life, even in urban centres, establishing the norms and expectations for individual functioning within the family structure. The two groups directly engaged in agriculture on the north Indian plains are peasant landowning cultivators and landless agricultural labour. In Punjab the peasant cultivators are overwhelmingly Jat Sikhs, indigenous landless agricultural labourers are largely from the scheduled castes. In many Sikh villages the main groups of landless labourers are known as Mazhbis, Ramdasias and Valmikis. In



this village almost all of them were Mazhabi Sikhs. The Jats are one of the most important of what can be called the middle peasant castes, those that have increasingly come to control political, economic and social life at the village level, and are now extending their influence at district, state, and, in recent years, even at the national level. In Punjab, the Jat landowners are almost all Sikhs. This religious difference distinguishes them from other Jat groups in the country in many important ways, because in the national political arena, they as Sikhs become a minority. However, in family organization and landholding patterns, they share many characteristics with other peasant cultivator groups.

The hegemonic influence of the middle peasant castes in rural north India has established their family patterns as the standard which most other groups seem to have adopted or are increasingly adopting. Some of the essential characteristics of family structure are: the lower participation rates of women agricultural field labour; restrictions on women's participation in decision making as well as on their movements outside the home, high value placed on sons and discrimination against daughters; burdensome dowry payments; land ownership passed on by one generation of landowners to the next; shift of women from parental homes to husbands' homes after marriage; accentuation of the subservient position of women as the sole toilers in all areas of domestic work, whose main purpose in life is to bear sons. Women are traditionally supposed to remain under some male authority throughout their lives, first that of the father, then that of the husband and his family, lastly that of the son. They are kept, as much as possible, isolated from outsiders, not just within the walls of the house but within the women's section of the household.

All these characteristics may seem obvious and universal for most of rural India, but it is important to understand that there been large sections of India's population which practised very different forms of family organization and

landholding patterns, for example, the tribal communities and many other groups in the south and north-east, especially the matrilineal groups. Over the years, the influence of these middle peasant cultivator groups seems to be taking such hold that their forms of landholding and family organization are increasingly adopted by most of these other groups and are becoming synonymous with the "Indian" family structure and social norms, especially as they apply to women.

Agricultural labourers in most of Punjab, under the hegemonic influence of the Jat landowners, with some modifications necessitated by their landlessness and dependence on wage-labour, try to follow similar patterns in their treatment of women within the family as that of the Jats. Thus, information about the position of women in these two types of families may give us some insights into many aspects of the condition of women in the overwhelming majority of families, especially in north India, but also in many other parts of the country, as the middle peasant castes are gaining increasing dominance all over rural India.

### **The Choice Of A Village**

Rural Punjab is of great importance for an understanding of the condition of women in India due to the advanced state of agriculture. It is important to find out how the economic developments resulting in increased income for many rural families has affected the relative position of women.

The village chosen for this survey has a number of characteristics that make it an appropriate choice for this exploratory effort:

1. The village is solidly set in the countryside, fairly distant from a major urban centre or rail junction.

2. It carries on an advanced form of high yielding agriculture that makes it not only representative, but also relatively prosperous. The main crops are wheat and cotton. The growing of cotton for the commercial market followed the introduction of canal irrigation during the British period. Thus this area was able to produce three crops

### **The Methods Used in The Study**

Rather than selecting a simple random sample of all households directly engaged in cultivation (land owners and agricultural labourers), we chose to select a more focused, stratified random sample consisting of:

a) a simple random sample of all agricultural labourer households in the village;

b) a random sample of those landowners with ten acres or less of land.

The main reason for our deciding to include smaller landowners rather than all landowners in the survey were that

1. this group is more representative of the bulk of small farmers of India who are the largest segment of the rural population;

2. we were interested in studying women who were more likely to be directly involved in field work. This was more likely to be the case among small peasant families than among big landowners;

3. the intensive nature of the observations and interviews and the time available, required us to restrict our focus, and collect data on a small sample of respondent households. Therefore, we feel it would be more useful to focus on smaller landowners and agricultural labourers. Including a heterogeneous land-holding group in such a small sample would make it difficult to draw sufficiently meaningful generalizations. The 21 families randomly selected for intensive study were drawn from two groups: a) 11 households from among all the agricultural labourers; b) 10 households from among all landholding cultivators with 10 acres or less.

Two randomly selected agricultural labourer households could not be included in the sample, the first because of the permanent labourer's feeling that his employer would not approve of his participation in the survey, the other because the head of the household was seriously ill and the family could not be disturbed. All other randomly selected households participated in the study. Two women interviewers who grew up in Punjab and speak fluent Punjabi carried out intensive observations and interviews of the 29 women in the 21 sample households, 15 of the women from the 10 landowner families and 14

a year much earlier than most other parts of the country. Unlike many other areas in Punjab, it still relies chiefly on canal irrigation. Tubewell irrigation is not as common as elsewhere because the subsoil water is very deep.

3. Land is in the hands of Jat Sikh peasants; no Jat in the village is a landless agricultural labourer. The agricultural labourers resident in the village are overwhelmingly Mazhabi Sikhs, with some sprinkling of other scheduled castes.

4. Cultivating peasants and agricultural labourers are the bulk of the village population; the other village families have a wide variety of occupations, mainly involved with providing services to the agriculturalists.

5. The population mainly consists of households who have resided in the village for generations. Migration into

or out of the village is of negligible dimensions.

6. Landholding size varies widely among the Jat landowning families, with the average holding being approximately 20 acres and the range of holdings going from two and a half to 80 acres.

7. Our complete census of the village population carried out in 1979 showed a sex ratio almost identical to that given in the 1981 census report for Punjab. For many decades, Punjab was the state with the lowest sex ratio in India. Now Uttar Pradesh has descended to an identical ratio of 886. (see footnote)

### **The Village Population**

As shown in Table 1, the village has a population of 2,561. There are approximately equal numbers of landholding cultivating peasants and landless agricultural labourers. Together, the two groups constitute 80 per cent of

the village's population. One out of every five villagers is not directly engaged in agriculture; most of the others work as carpenters, mechanics, shopkeepers, labourers, domestic servants and sweepers. The sex ratio for this group of the village population, 935, is identical with the All India sex ratio as reported in the 1981 census. Though, of course, the village population totals involved are too tiny to be significant, it is, nevertheless, an odd coincidence. The overall village sex ratio of 882 is quite close to the sex ratio of 886 reported for Punjab in the 1981 census. The sex ratios for Jats and agricultural labourers are very similar (see Table 1).

The average size of the landholding of Jat cultivating landowners is about 20 acres, with three out of 10 owning 10 acres or less (Table 2). There are very few absentee landowners in the village,

### **Methods Used...** *contd from p 3*

women from the 11 agricultural labourer families. Except from one woman from an agricultural labourer family, who could not be interviewed because she was deaf and could not respond to our questions, all the other 29 adult women in the households participated in the surveys.

The evening before the family was interviewed, a visit was made to their home requesting their cooperation. If they agreed to participate, early the next morning (usually between 4 and 5 am, since this was cotton picking season and most families had to leave very early for the fields), the survey team arrived, recorded the heights and weights of the family members and the woman interviewer gathered basic demographic data on the family. The interviewer stayed in the home during these early morning hours and recorded in detail the types and amounts of solid and liquid foods consumed by each family member, using carefully calibrated weight scales and volume measures. A systematic attempt was made to observe actual consumption of each family member as it took place and to rely as little as possible on the

respondent's recall. A record was also kept of what foods the family took to the fields for the afternoon meal. A careful accounting was requested of each person as to how food and liquids, including tea, were distributed during their work day in the fields, and also whether they were supplied with additional food by others, and who in the family consumed what amounts. Though the interviewers did accompany some of the families to the fields to observe the afternoon meal, it was usually noted down from the family's reports in the evening. The women interviewers returned to the home in the evening and observed the evening meal in the same manner as they had the morning meal, recording actual consumption of each family member as it occurred.

The interviewers also conducted extensive individual interviews with each adult woman in the house, married or widowed. In addition, a male interviewer questioned the male head of the household concerning income, assets, and other matters relevant to the household economy, including periods of employment.

Thus, the project produced the

following types of data :

1. identifying information such as age, family relationships, height and weight ;
2. food consumption data for each member of the family for that day ;
3. economic data such as current income, hours and terms of employment, ownership of livestock and machinery ;
4. intensive interviews with the adult women regarding such things as their parental home, their marriage arrangements, their childbearing experiences, their perception of their relationship with their husband and his family, decisionmaking in the family, gender preferences for children, and their overall feelings about their life since their marriage.

Some difficulty in presentation of the results arises from the need to report the findings sometimes using the household as a unit, resulting in a sample of 21 cases, and sometimes considering each interviewed woman as a unit in a sample of 29 cases. In a few other situations, other considerations require further modifications in defining the size of the sample under discussion. We have endeavoured to note each change in sample base as and when it occurs. □

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**The term Sex Ratio here refers to the number of women per 1000 men in the population. In most developed countries women outnumber men in the population. However, in countries like India, Bangladesh, Pakistan there is a big deficit of women in the total population.**



**Table 1. Village Demographic Information**

	<i>Number of Households</i>	<i>Percentage of Village Households</i>	<i>Average Number per Household</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>Total Population</i>	<i>Percentage of Total Population</i>	<i>Sex Ratio</i>
Cultivating Land-owning Peasants	164	38	6.2	546	478	1024	40	875
Agricultural Labourers	190	44	5.4	555	479	1034	40	863
Others	80	18	6.3	260	243	503	20	935
<b>Total</b>	<b>434</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>5.9</b>	<b>1,361</b>	<b>1,200</b>	<b>2,561</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>882</b>

and almost all agricultural work is carried out or directly supervised by landowners. The larger land tend to have larger families. There is a slightly greater deficit of females among the Jats with 10 acres or less, though, as already indicated, the difference between a sex ratio of 831 and a sex ratio of 889 in a population of this size is not statistically significant.

Nevertheless, it suggests there is a need for a systematic collection of data on the relationship between landholding size, caste sex ratio to see if the small landholders of the middle peasant castes in northwestern India have a consistently lower sex ratio than other strata in the population. The stratified random sample of landowners and agricultural labourers that participated in the surey comprises five per cent of the households. The average family size for the entire sample of households is approximately the same as that for the entire village( see Table 3)

**Work, Income, Indebtedness**

It was difficult to obtain accurate income and work data for these for the yearly agricultural cycle, whether due to their difficulties in recalling the full details of the year, hesitancy in discussing such information, or difficulties in calculating

uneven and complex expenditures both in cash and in kind. Jat landowners, in general, gave a rule of thumb estimate of Rs 500 per annum profit per acre as calculation of income minus expenses. Such an estimate was undoubtedly a gross underestimate of their income. Land prices, yield, expenditure on new housing and on productive inputs and machinery, and interest payments on loans that bankruptcy or sale of land would have to follow these landowners if the actual profit per acre were the claimed Rs 500.

As far as the agricultural labourers are concerned, the impression we got is that there were wide disparities of income among them, based mainly on the number of members old enough to gain substantial employment and the number of children, or aged and ill dependents. In addition, the relatively more prosperous agricultural labourer families had several members, invariably male, who were permanent labourers working for a landowner at a fixed annual wage, and receiving free meals and sometimes free lodging as well. Some families of this type, were able to earn, by their joint efforts, more than Rs 100 per week. However, other families were forced to live on incomes that they reported as less

than Re 1 per day per family member.

The extent to which the buffaloes and other livestock raised by most of the agricultural families contributed substantially to their welfare could not be fully clarified. This was so, because the agricultural labourer families often have an arrangement with the landlord whereby, in return for their looking after a particular buffalo from the time that it is a young calf, they acquire a share, frequently a half share, in that buffalo. This share is realized when the buffalo is full grown and can be sold. This provides some additional income to the agricultural labourer families but the amount of income is difficult to specify. This tending is usually done by women and children of the household though the income from it may not come into the hands of the women. The amount of dairy products the family could use for home consumption was also difficult to determine, though it was clearly some addition to the household's basic food supply.

Most of the agricultural families reported that in recent years they had been able to afford enough food to meet needs on a year-round basis. Some families with few working members and health problems reported going heavily

**Table 2. Jat Farmer Landholdings**

	<i>Number of Households</i>	<i>Percentage of Households</i>	<i>Average Landholding per Household</i>	<i>Average Number of Persons per Household</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>Population Total</i>	<i>Sex Ratio</i>
Ten acres or less	49	30	7.34	4.7	124	103	227	831
More than ten acres	115	70	25.01	6.9	422	375	797	889
<b>Total</b>	<b>164</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>19.98</b>	<b>6.2</b>				

**Table 3. Characteristics of Village Survey Sample**

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	<i>Number of Households</i>	<i>Average Number per Household</i>	<i>Average Landholding per Household</i>	<i>Percentage of Households in Sample</i>	<i>Number of Males</i>	<i>Number of Females</i>	<i>Total Number of Persons</i>	<i>Sex Ratio</i>	<i>Number of Women Interviewed</i>
Landowning Jat Cultivators with 10 acres or less	10	5.6	7.2	21	32	24	56	750	15
Landless agricultural Labourers	11	6.0	—	6	36	30	66	833	14
Sample Totals	21	5.8	—	—	68	54	122	794	29

into debt for basic food needs during periods when little or no work was available and then being forced to work at lower than the market rate to pay back the consumption loans to the landowners.

Livestock and machinery were owned chiefly by Jat families. Of the 10 Jat families, nine had a bullock cart, two owned a tractor, three had a share in a tubewell, most of them owned two bullocks, some owned one. All of them had one or more buffaloes. Among the agricultural labourer families, seven of them either owned a buffalo or had a share in a buffalo. Three had a cow. Three families owned goats.

A large agricultural labourer family reported that they were bound to a contractor. They sent most of the family, including some children, to Rajasthan, because they had taken an advance during the rainy season. Nobody gives an advance during the rainy season in their own village, they said, and so they took the advance from the Rajasthani contractor in August. The cotton crop in Rajasthan gets ready earlier so they had to leave the village for 15 days.

Indebtedness takes various forms. An agricultural labourer family had a cow which gave two kilos of milk every day. But they had to sell the milk instead of consuming it themselves because they owe some money to a shopkeeper, and repay the loan by giving him the milk. They normally borrow vegetables and dals from the neighbours. They have

very little milk in the evening, which is normally distributed to the husband and sons. The wife rarely gets it.

The same family borrowed Rs 6,000 to marry off one of their four sons, but have not taken a loan for urgently needed medical treatment. The woman of the house has been seriously ill for the last two years. Her breast is swollen and pus oozes out of it continuously. She also gets some sort of fits. But she has to continue working and has not received any medical treatment. Her husband is almost blind and cannot do any agricultural work.

The fact that young boys are considered for employment as permanent agricultural labourers and can thus

contribute significantly to the family's income while the girls, who cannot get this work, are restricted to housework and casual agricultural labour, makes the girls appear as a greater burden than the boys. These young boys working as permanent labourers frequently eat at the landlord's house. Their father usually picks up their wages. It appears, for the most part, that a minor son's wage as a permanent labourer is considered part of the family income under the control of the head of the household.

#### **Hand To Mouth Living**

Even though wide disparities in income level exist between agricultural labourers, and absolute hunger is not the main issue for most of them, the majority



**The Home of an Agricultural Labourer Family**

of them still live a hand to mouth existence. The food consumed in the village, even among the peasant cultivator families, is extremely simple, bare and monotonous. It consists chiefly of roti, dal, tea, some lassi or milk, with an occasional meagre helping of a vegetable such as a few small potatoes. This goes on without any variation day after day after day.

But for most of the agricultural labourers even this much is not provided year round. Many of the women



**Picking Up Left Over Wheat From A Harvested Field**

commented that they or their children do not have good health because most of their meals (especially the afternoon meal that they take to the fields) consists only of rotis and chillis. Others talked about not being able to afford to send their children to school, or to afford the bus fare for a visit to their parents who live within a short distance. Some even said that, though they wanted more children, they got sterilized because they didn't have the money to feed more children.

It was somewhat puzzling to us that, while in some families basic cereal food like rotis were left over and some were even fed to the buffaloes, in other families we did observe malnutrition and disease due to periods of hunger. This problem of hunger and malnutrition becomes severe during seasons when not enough work is available, especially for families with few working male

members, since employment opportunities for women agricultural labourers are extremely limited.

There were many indicators of the hand to mouth living that the interviewers observed among the agricultural labourer families. Most of them bought their rations not monthly or weekly but before every meal. In one household, the interviewer observed that the two cows that the family owned were both dry. They had to buy milk from outside. They did not use any ghee or butter. Every time they had to make some tea or cook food, the provisions were bought for that particular meal. Nothing was bought in a lump sum and stored. Even when buying non-perishable and routinely used foodstuffs such as dal, only that amount was bought which was needed for that particular meal. There are a few shops in the harijan community which cater to this kind of buying. They sell everything that the agricultural labourer families need for day-to-day living. The shops open at 5 am. when many of the labourer families get up and make their morning tea. However, the interviewer did observe that some other families were better off and could afford lump sum buying. In one particular family, the woman had not received her wages for the last seven days, yet they could still manage their food requirements. Yet another seemed to be sufficiently better off to buy wheat once in a year during the harvest season. They also bought ghee once every month. There is also a regular giving and taking of food loans between these families, helping each other tide over difficult days.

### **Excluded From Advantageous Employment**

Our data on all the various forms of agricultural employment available to women agricultural labourers is somewhat incomplete, being most accurate with regard to wage labour days in the field and less accurate as to income from such occupations as cotton gleaning and collecting fodder and fuel.

The most advantageous job available to agricultural labourers is that of being attached as a permanent labourer to a

particular landlord. The amount received by permanent labourers varies a great deal, depending in great part on the age, skill and strength of the labourer. In our sample the variation in cash wages ranged from Rs 1,360 to 2,500 a year. Most permanent workers report earning slightly less than Rs 2,000 a year. Payments in kind are also made. For example, a man who got Rs 1,980 a year got one meal a day for 135 days, three meals a day for another 30 days, and tea for a total of 270 days. Another permanent labourer got Rs 2,500 plus 4.8 quintal grain from the landlord.

Women are completely excluded from being employed as permanent labourers. Even among casual labourers, the women in our sample reported that they were able to obtain much less employment than the men. Cotton picking was the period of maximum female employment in field wage labour. They got employment somewhere within the range of 40-60 days in the season, and reported earning between Rs 300 and Rs 400. One 55 year old woman, who spent 13 and a half hours in the field in a day, earned only Rs 120 for the season. Most of the women only got a glass of tea a day apart from their cash wage while picking cotton; five also got a meal for the day.

Some women also manage some little bit of work during the wheat harvest. But



**Carrying Fodder For The Cattle**



no regular work for wages is available for any of them all the year round. Many of them end up doing jobs like tending the landlord's cattle, bringing fodder for the landlord's livestock and doing other odd jobs for the landlord's family, in order to help keep their own family going financially.

Even though regular wage employment is not available to these women the year round, many of them eke out a living for the family by taking the landlord's permission to gather from the



**Cutting Fodder: No Regular Wage Work Available**

fields what otherwise would go waste. This permission probably requires the family to perform some service for the landlord in return. The most common jobs are picking up left over wheat grain from the fields after the harvest has been taken away, taking out left over cotton from what has been dumped as fodder, cutting and selling grass as fodder. This means working for much longer hours in miserable jobs for a meagre living. But, however peripheral this may seem to the total economy, the income that these women get from these little jobs constitutes an important part of the family income and helps to keep the family afloat.

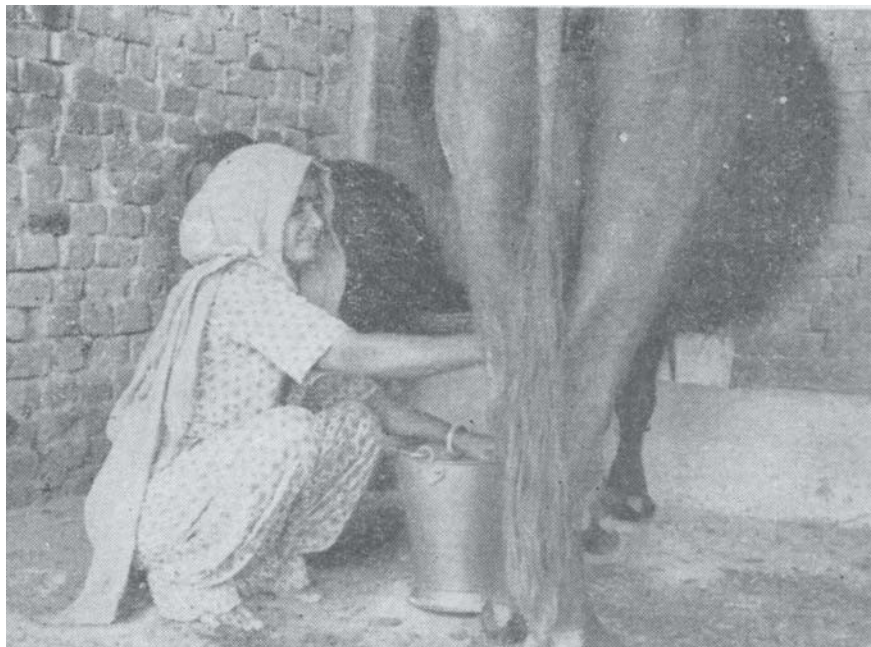
These are the facts the interviewer gathered about the life of a 45 year old woman agricultural labourer. Her husband is a drunkard and earns very little (about Rs 415 in cash a year). She has three daughters, one of them is married. One son is studying in class eight. This woman's earnings are the mainstay of the family. She said they have to live a hard life all through the year. She only gets work in the fields for two months. The rest of the year she goes around trying to get whatever odd jobs are available, sometimes cutting grass and selling it, sometimes grazing other people's cattle. In the rainy season, when no work is possible, they borrow money from the landlords and later work for them during the cotton season. This is not very profitable, because if the cotton crop is not good they do not earn enough during the season to pay off the loans they took earlier. At the same time they are bound to work for those landlords, as they had given them the loans when they needed them. They are not free to work on other people's land until they pay off these loans. On the evening of the interview, she told the interviewer that she could collect very little cotton that day, as it was not fully grown. But she was not able to work in a better field because she had borrowed

money from the landlord whose field she was now working. Not much more could be observed and discussed because the woman left for the field very early in the morning and came back very late, and was too tired to talk more.

The greater prosperity and increasing agricultural production and activity in the village does not seem to have increased women's employment opportunities for wage labour in the fields. Other information available indicates shrinking employment opportunities in Punjab in agricultural labour for women. More work is clearly needed to understand what effect the more intensive agriculture now practised in Punjab has on women's employment.

### **How Food Gets Divided In The Family**

The amount of food taken in the family by males as compared to females has rarely been studied. The food consumption survey was carried out during one of the periods of heaviest field labour, the cotton picking season. This is the time when most women are much more involved in field labour than at other times, combining the field labour with domestic work in a working day that lasts more than 15 hours. Despite the heavy energy expenditure required for such activities, the women's average



**Tending The Cattle—Mostly A Woman's Work**

consumption was 2,169 calories, approximately two thirds of the 3,112 calories consumed by the men. During this period, among both small Jat landowners and agricultural labourers, the men consume about 1,000 calories per day more than the women. A comparison of the caloric consumption of Jats with agricultural labourers indicates they are at approximately the same level (Table 4).

Though the minimum quantity of food required for healthy functioning is still in dispute, the average caloric consumption of these women would certainly be considered very low by most nutrition experts, especially when we take into account the long hours they work at home every day and/or in the fields. Unfortunately, the survey did not collect information on women's food consumption at other times of the year, when energy expenditure would usually be somewhat less, but food consumed might also be less, especially in the agricultural labourer households, because their income would be smaller.

### Women Much Thinner Than Men

Table 4, giving average age, weight, height and calorie consumption for the sample of 29 women and their husbands shows :

1. Men weigh 8.4 kilos more than women do.
2. Jat women weigh about as much as male agricultural labourers.
3. Though Jat women weigh over six kilos more than agricultural labourer women, their height is approximately the same.
4. Jat men weigh approximately ten

kilos more than agricultural labourer men.

5. Women are smaller by 11 centimetres as compared to men.

Weight differences between Jats and agricultural labourers are far more pronounced than the differences in height. However, the weight differences between Jat men and male agricultural labourers is about 10 kilos, a substantial amount, while the height differences between them, about four centimetres, is relatively minimal. The far greater weight difference in comparison to the relatively slight height difference suggests that food allocation and consumption rather than genetic factors are likely to be major causes of the different body builds of the two groups.

To take the most extreme comparison among the groups, the average woman agricultural labourer weighs about 16.5 kilos less than Jat men, while being about 14 centimetres shorter (Table 4). One of the lasting impressions we got after staying in the village for a few days was that Sikh Jats and agricultural labourers look distinctly different. The former are much more heavily built, healthier looking and appear less worn down. Such characteristics are often believed to be the result of genetic differences between the so-called "higher" and "lower" caste groups. However, the height and weight data from our small sample suggest that much of this difference in weight is not genetically determined, but is more likely to be due to agricultural labourers not getting adequate food consistently throughout their lives on a year round basis.

However, while this effect of impoverishment is often acknowledged

in the case of different caste and class groups, its effects on women are seldom recognized, especially considering that they have to perform an additional very hazardous and energy-consuming task, that of childbearing and nursing. The data from our study showing men consuming far more food than women as well as the much lower body weight of the women, points to the need for much more systematic work on this question, which affects the health and survival chances of women. Since the women in the better-off Sikh Jat families and the poorer agricultural labourer households, both consumed only two thirds of the amounts of calories that the men consumed, further studies may establish that the male-female disparity may not primarily be related to poverty and scarcity of food, as is often assumed.

### Women Eat Last And Least

Our survey results confirmed the general impression that in most Indian families women eat the least and the last. Among the Jats, 12 out of 14 women who answered the question about the eating order in the family said they ate last, after everyone else had eaten. Two women from the same household (daughter and mother-in-law), in answer to this question both said: "Whoever comes first can eat first." It is difficult to determine whether they were referring to the eating order between the two of them or they were talking about an order which includes the other members of the family, as well.

Among the agricultural labourer households all the 13 women who answered this question indicated they eat last. The women interviewers

**Table 4 Average (X) Age, Height and Caloric Intake a Day of Women Jat Small Landholders and Women Agricultural Labourers And Their Husbands**

	Age		Height (M.)		Weight (Kg.)		Calories Per Day	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Jat Small Landowners	41.5 (13)	36.5 (15)	172 (14)	159 (15)	62.3 (14)	52.5 (15)	3,102 (13)	2,165 (14)*
Agricultural Labourers	38.8 (12)	37.9 (14)	167.8 (12)	158.1 (14)	52.4 (12)	45.9 (14)	3,122 (12)	2,173 (14)
Total	43.2 (25)	37.2 (29)	170.1 (26)	158.6 (29)	57.7 (26)	49.3 (29)	3,112 (25)	2,169 (28)

\* One of two Jat women in one household was away for most of the day until evening. We were therefore not able to calculate her caloric intake but were able to obtain data on her age, height and weight.

Figures in parentheses are the number of persons in the sample on which the average ( $\bar{X}$ ) values are calculated.



confirmed in their observations of the family meals that women usually eat last.

### **Childbearing—No Rest, No Extra Food, No Special Care**

Nutritionists and public health experts generally agree that pregnant and lactating women need special care and have additional food requirements. Overwhelmingly, these women reported no relief from their arduous work during pregnancy, nor were they given any additional food or special care.

12 of the 15 Jat women interviewed said they had no relief during their pregnancy. They seem to have continued working till the last day. One of them, in fact, said she had to do more work. Two of the women said they were given no relief even though they were very ill during their pregnancy. However, there was one woman who did get some relief. She was so ill she could not work. Another woman said she only got relief when she went to her mother's house for delivery. Only two Jat women out of 15 said they were able to engage some help in the last couple of months of their pregnancy. After childbirth, the time they took to return to their fullfledged work routine ranged from eight days to one and a half to two months.

In the case of agricultural labourers, all the 13 women who answered this question said they never got any relief from work during their pregnancy. In fact, they added that they continued working till the last day. Some even added, till the last minute. The rest period after delivery for agricultural labourer women in our sample ranged from three days to one month. When an agricultural labourer woman was asked about whether she rested after delivery, she got really excited and replied that sometimes they cannot afford to rest even for one day. She quoted some cases where the women gave birth at night and went to the fields for cotton picking the next morning.

Most of the women delivered their children with the help of village midwives and female relatives. The village "doctor" was called in a few cases when the delivery was an especially difficult one.



**Carrying Food to The Fields For Men of The Household**

As far as the interviewers could gather, a doctor's coming only meant that he came and gave a vitamin or painkiller injection and went away. One Jat woman said that she was taken to a hospital and stayed there for 15 days.

As for special nourishment and diet during pregnancy and nursing, almost all of them report that they got no special food. 12 out of 14 Jat women who replied to this question said they got nothing extra. Some of them said the idea never occurred to anyone to do so, others that no one bothered. When they did report some extras, these were very modest. One woman said that since she was very undernourished during her first pregnancy, she took some apples and bananas during the second. Another Jat woman reported having gotten extra ghee and milk; one woman didn't answer the question. 13 out of 14 agricultural labourer women also said that they got nothing extra. Some of them felt the family could not afford it. Only one agricultural labourer woman reported receiving some extra food—a coconut, rice and milk preparation.

### **Higher Death Rate Among Girls**

The 29 women reported that 32 of their children had died during childhood. 19 of these were girls. We realize that the sample size for this study was too small

to come to any conclusion about the higher female child mortality rate. However, a few careful studies report a similar higher death rate for girls in comparison to boys. Some of these studies also show that male children are more likely to receive medical care than female children. Girls are also likely to be discriminated against in food allocation, and suffer other forms of neglect, as indicated in one of the literature.\* Though available evidence is fragmentary as yet, it is vitally important that further studies be done to establish if various forms of female neglect, such as less medical care, result in higher death rates for female children.

### **Desperate Desire For Boys**

The preference for boys over girls was overwhelming. Among the Jat women, 14 out of 15 categorically stated that they preferred a boy. Even the one woman who did not herself show a categorical preference for a boy said that her father-in-law felt very bad because her first child was a girl. She herself felt that one daughter is needed because, "daughters are more affectionate and will share mother's good and bad times." Though two other women also mentioned that daughters provide support to their mothers, sharing their problems and being a helping hand in domestic work, they still did not want any daughters. This perhaps tells us as much about these women's perception of their own lives as burdensome, as it does about the kind of discriminatory treatment that baby girls are likely to receive when born so unwelcome. Nine out of 15 Jat women mentioned dowry as a reason for not wanting to give birth to daughters. They said dowry makes them a big burden for the family, frequently forcing them to incur heavy debts.

Two women who each had given birth to two sons got sterilized because neither they themselves nor their families wanted a daughter. One of them said she had eight sisters and had suffered very much as a result, so she "never wanted a girl."

Five women said they were

disappointed and sad when their daughter was born, while most others said that girls are unwanted because they are a burden. One of these five said her own mother had died within days after the birth of her fifth daughter because her husband had remarked "with a heavy heart that it was a girl again." She felt, very bad about this and never wanted a daughter herself. One woman who had one living daughter and was seven months' pregnant said she wanted her coming child to be a son. Her second born child was a daughter who choked to death when she was six months old. She misses her because her second daughter was more beautiful but she feels two daughters are not needed. Her husband told the interviewer that his wife does not like the first daughter. She wanted her first born to be a son.

Another woman who felt very disappointed that her first born was a girl, now seven years old, felt very concerned that there was no sign of a male issue. She said the major problem of her life was that she did not have a son. In a clear instance of male preference, one family of Jats gave the name "Binder" a boy's name, to their daughter, because someone told them that they got sons after bearing one daughter and naming her "Binder." The lady thought this name may bring her a son. She is desperate to have a son and is miserable at having only daughters. She said the saddest day in her life was when she gave birth to a dead son.

Among the agricultural labourers, nine out of 14 women stated a clear preference for male children. Not one of them said she would prefer a girl. One woman said the family did not see any difference between a girl and a boy. Another woman said she welcomed the birth of her first daughter because her first child from her first husband had died in an accident. She said she is fond of her daughter, but dotes on her son. In another interview, the woman said that since her daughter was born after she had two sons, everyone was equally happy.

On the whole, even when women

agricultural labourers showed a preference for boys, their reactions to the birth of daughters were not as adverse as it was among Jat women, especially if the girl was not a first born. Among the reasons given for son preference was that "boys will bring income and may bring a change in life." Also, "when girls are tortured by in-laws, this becomes an added anxiety for parents." But many of those women who



**Little Girls Trained Early to be Little Mothers**

said no one in the family wanted daughters, did say that daughters are helpful, not only in assisting her mother in her work, but also by sharing her problems.

### **The Dread Of Having Daughters**

In one case, the woman was asked to get sterilized after she gave birth to two sons, but she insisted she wanted a daughter before she had the operation. Now she has had the daughter but has not yet gotten sterilized as she cannot yet find a sufficient period of time to get the operation and the rest time that must follow it. However, even this woman would not have wanted her first born to have been a girl. Her first two children were twins, a girl and a boy. The boy survived but the daughter died on the

first night. The reason she gave for this death was "negligence." It is not clear to whom she ascribed the negligence. A 27 year old agricultural labourer woman said she wanted a daughter, which is why she did not get operated on after the birth of her three sons. She felt the brothers needed a sister and the mother needed a daughter to share her worries and happiness, and help her in domestic work. Interestingly, both these agricultural labourer women who were desirous of having a daughter seemed to be relatively better treated in their marriage and reported far fewer restrictions on their lives.

Another woman, whose four baby girls had died due to lack of food, fever and "shrinking", said she did not weep when her daughters died but felt upset when one of her sons died. Another woman, whose baby daughter died after "she got bitten by something" said she did not feel sorrow when she lost her daughter, though she wasn't unhappy at the birth of her eldest girl, because by then she had lost two children.

The fact that the ability or inability to produce sons has important repercussions for the woman's life was confirmed by another set of answers given by the women when asked what the things were that made them most happy since their marriage. Seven out of 15 Jat women mentioned the birth of sons. Five out of 14 agricultural labourer women also mentioned the birth of their sons as something that made them most happy. Not one of the 29 women mentioned the birth of a girl as one of their most happy events since their marriage.

The answers of these women show that this negative attitude towards having daughters contradicts the powerful myth that mothers are the ones who hate daughters most. Most of these women did clearly admit that personally daughters would be good for them, be more emotionally supportive and help them more than the sons. What makes them dread the prospect of daughters is:

1. Their own life as a woman and very often what they saw of their mothers'

lives as women gives them an aversion to producing another sufferer like them.

2. Their own life is made more miserable and downgraded in the family every time a daughter is born to them or they fail to produce a son.

3. Many of them do not see their daughters having any better chance in life.

4. As distinct from the mother's own interest, the family as an economic unit sees these daughters as a burden on account of dowry and limited employment opportunity for women.

### At The Spinning Wheel

The results of this survey, as well as data gathered through other research done on this subject, do indicate that son preference is more pronounced among the propertied rural landholding middle peasant castes, even though the phenomenon is almost equally strong among agricultural labourers. While we cannot make further generalizations on the basis of the data gathered by this study, other studies in this area do indicate there is support for the hypothesis that this strong preference for boys often leads to a relative neglect of girls, sometimes in ways which could have an effect on their chances of survival. In her dissertation "Sexual Discrimination And Population Dynamics in India", Barbara Miller summarizes much of this literature.

### Marriage Costs

Among the Jat families in our sample, cash expenditure on marriage has been rising over the decades. In 1919 it was Rs 500 while in 1970 the highest expenditure reported was Rs 22,000. Most of the women got 15 to 25 dresses for themselves and some clothes for their husband and other members of the in-laws' family. Household items such as trunks, beddings, tables and almirahs were common. Two of the women were married to their elder sister's husband after their sister's death, so that less dowry would have to be given.

Among the agricultural labourers we interviewed, one woman reported that, since her family was even poorer than her husband's, the husband's family paid

for the marriage celebration expenses. She was married at the age of 15 to an alcoholic and opium user, a son in the poorest family in the village. The agricultural labourer women received much less gold than the Jat women; six of them got between half and five tolas; the rest got no gold whatsoever. Seven out of the 15 Jat women received some gold, ranging from half to 25 tolas. The expenditure on the marriage celebration among agricultural labourer women ranged from Rs 200 in 1909 to Rs 6,000 in 1968. These women also received personal clothing and some household goods. In the most lavish gift-giving among the agricultural labourer families, a radio, a watch, a sewing machine, a big trunk, five winter beds, two chairs, one cot and 16 utensils were received.

The women agricultural labourers told one of our interviewers that the custom of spending more money on marriages was growing among them. They told her that sometimes the expenses reach as high as Rs 10,000. This money is borrowed from the landlords, and then the family often has to spend years working for that landlord to pay back the loan. All this makes the birth of a daughter an unwelcome event. Some women even said that the dowry system has led to girls committing suicide when they realize that their parents have to

suffer so much to marry them off. This happens more among the educated girls, who begin to feel that their very existence is a crime.

Usually the expenditure on dowry is far less in a particular form of marriage called "*chaddar dalna*" whereby the younger sister of the dead woman is given to the widower husband in a second marriage. This is fairly prevalent in rural Punjab. (See, for example, Rajinder Singh Bedi's "*Ek Chaddar Maili Si*")

### Women's Long Working Day

Women's activities were centred on a continuous round of domestic and/or field labour. Their working day was much longer than that of the men of the household. The survey was carried out during cotton picking season, a time when most women from both agricultural labourer and Jat landowning households were heavily involved in field labour. Among the 13 agricultural labourer women who went to the fields to pick cotton (only one 80 year old blind agricultural labourer woman did not go), the average length of the workday reported by these women was 15.5 hours every day.

On an average, they spent almost six hours a day on domestic work. Typically, they got up at 4 or 5 am., did cooking, cleaning and other household work until



At The Spinning Wheel



about 8 am., reached the fields by 9 am. and picked cotton till about 6 pm. In the evening, they returned home between 6 and 7 pm., and then spent the next few hours till 9 or 10 pm. doing housework. The average 10 hour workday in the fields includes time that they took in going to and coming back from the field. Though it is likely that women agricultural labourers' work day remains very long even when they do not go to the fields, the information we gathered was insufficiently detailed to demonstrate this.

### **Increasing Production But Few Jobs For Women**

However, it is clear that these agricultural labourer women are available for work whenever employment is available. This is true even for older women who are not in a good state of health. Even a 55 year old woman in rather poor health had to continue to work in the fields. She reported working 16 hours per day, 13 of them in the fields, and three and a half doing domestic work. But work in the fields is not available for much of the year, even though these women and their families need the income that comes from the women's work. The women got 40 to 60 days of work per year in the fields during the cotton picking season. This is the main period when women agricultural labourers obtain the bulk of their employment. A few of the women are also able to get some days' work during wheat harvesting. Otherwise, a number of these women try to do whatever small jobs they can obtain, such as gleaning the cotton by hand, grazing and tending their cattle, collecting fodder and grass, collecting fuel. Weeding, which is often a woman's job in some other parts of India, seems to be done by male labourers in this village. On the whole, the amount of work available to female agricultural labourers is very little as compared to that available to the men.

Of the 14 Jat women, 10 went to the fields for an average of almost nine hours a day. (8.7 hours) The total work day for these ten women came to over 15 hours, which includes 6.5 hours of housework.

Even on non field work days, information for 13 of the 14 women indicates that they work almost 15 hours a day (14.8 hours). An important difference observed between the households of the Jats and of the agricultural labourers was that the male members of the agricultural labourer families seem to help the women much more with domestic tasks, as compared to Jat men. For example, our interviewer observed one male agricultural labourer, who had been operated on recently for some stomach problem and was homebound. He was unable to take up any hard work but he looked after the



**The Kitchen In An Agricultural Labourer Household**

buffalo, helped in domestic work also, sometimes in cooking and other *kucha* jobs like making chutney.

When another male member of the same family came back home earlier than his wife, he started making the fire and cooked dal, took out the flour for chapatis, and did odd jobs in the kitchen. The wife came and made chapatis and they had their meals one after the other. In another agricultural labourer family, the interviewer observed the sons of the family helping the mother. They made chilli sauce, served the food and handled the youngest child. In another labourer's family, even when the man kept shouting and scolding the wife, he helped in the

kitchen and held the grandchild. However, a young son of 15 who was in eighth class was not helping at all rather dictating and demanding, more in the tradition of Jat households.

In another house the eldest boys helped the mother in domestic work. The daughter was too little to help. The son cleaned the house, kept the fire in the kitchen, kept the water warm when mother came back in the evening. He helped in the shopping. The younger son helped her in taking care of the youngest child and playing with her so that the mother could do cotton picking easily.

### **The Loss Of Parental Support**

Except for the time spent on going to and from the field, women spend almost all their time in the family compound. The pressure of work, both at home and in the fields, gives them very little time to go anywhere. Questions regarding visits to their parental home brought this aspect out very clearly. For example, all of the 15 Jat women interviewed said they would like to visit their parental homes more often. But each of them also said they could not visit as often as they liked, because of the pressure of domestic work and other family responsibilities. Two of the women gave an added reason: they could not afford the bus fare. Six of them said they could get to their mother's house two or three times a year. Of these six, one woman's mother lived only 20 minutes' distance away from her house. Three of the six had parental homes at about two hours' distance. Only one of the women came from about as far as a day's journey by bus. Two women said they visited about ten times a year; one had her parental home only five minutes' distance by bus, and the other's was only a half hour away. Both of them would have preferred to visit their parental home even more often.

One woman said she went only when necessary. Even during the first years of her marriage, she went a maximum of once a year, and never stayed overnight. One woman had stopped visiting after her mother had died some years ago. A woman who lived only an hour away

from her parents said she went every two years. Another one said she went once in three years though the parents' house was only four hours away. Even a woman whose parents lived ten minutes away by bus could not visit them more than four or five times a year. Among the agricultural labourer women, 12 out of the 14 women said they would like to visit their parental home more often. Six of the women could go about once a year. These women's parents were not far away. The journey ranges from a half hour to half a day. Two women visited less than once a year. One of them had parents living two hours away and the other's were six hours away. A recently married 17 year old woman said she could not visit her parents as often as she desired because her in-laws did not allow her to travel on her own. The parents have to go and bring her home each time. So she visits them about three times a year. Among the reasons given for not being able to do so, eight of them mentioned domestic work and/or field labour. Going on a visit would mean losing wages. One woman said the economic condition of her family, and the fact that she had no clothes for such visits, inhibited her from going. She had not been to her parents for the last three years. Another woman mentioned quarrels in her in-laws' place as the reason for not being able to visit as much as she would like to. Another said that her brothers were not bothered, and another one talked about quarrels with her parents' family as the reason for not going there more often.

It is not too far-fetched to conclude that this pressure to loosen ties with the parental home has the effect of denying these women crucial emotional and other support in their day-to-day lives and makes them much more vulnerable. In such a situation, it is very unlikely that anyone would intervene on their behalf if they are being ill-treated. Therefore, apart from other things, the patrilocal family (that is, one in which the wife has to move into husband's family, village or house) seems to play an important role in making it easier to oppress women.



**The Kitchen and Compound in a Jat Household**

### **Restricted To Family Compound**

In general, these women seem to live a very closed-in existence. Almost all of their time which is not spent in agricultural field work is spent within the family compound. And there are restrictions even within the four walls. For example, in one Jat home there is a room near the entrance for the males and the male guests. Women go to give tea or eatables but are not supposed to stand or sit with them. The woman must remain in the inner courtyard of the house near the kitchen. She is allowed to meet male guests but not to sit with them or talk to them. The women always have to keep their heads covered.

Women rarely go out. Even visiting each other in the village is an uncommon practice. Some of the reasons mentioned by these women for living such a closed-in existence and not visiting each other throw interesting light on the general atmosphere of the village. A 45 year old Jat woman said: "Our social life is made very difficult because of these drunkards. We can't step out in the evening." Two other women, who are sisters married to two brothers, said they could go out only where and when their husbands permit. They could only meet people who were on good terms with the husband. A 70 year old Jat woman remarked sadly that there are people who still believe that a girl should not step out of the house until she is married. She also said that "for the last six or seven years a tradition had developed that girls or boys don't visit their friends because every time it happens, somehow a quarrel

will erupt. Earlier, people used to visit each other but due to opium and drinking, the village has developed a tradition that everyone avoids visiting anyone in the village."

Another Jat woman, 25 years old, told the interviewer about various restrictions that women have about going to other people's houses in the village. She herself only went out to pick cotton. She felt bad that she was uneducated. Otherwise, she said, she would leave domestic life, work outside, and be independent.

A 26 year old woman complained that while her husband spent a great deal of time with others, she was not allowed to talk to anyone except the neighbours. And this is how a 45 year old Jat woman described her situation: "My husband makes all the decisions because he is the 'master.' I never go out except when my husband asks me to. I cannot go out without his permission." Even at her age, she was still kept under severe restrictions. This began at the age of 10. Now she says she has stopped thinking about it, though at one time it used to make her feel bad. Two other women said they were much happier picking cotton than staying at home. That is the only time they get to go out.

Among the agricultural labourers, the situation is somewhat different. Two of them reported living under relatively fewer restrictions. One woman, aged 45, said she had no restrictions, but the village had no tradition of women visiting other women. Moreover, there was no time for all this, since life was too full of problems to think of such things (four of these women's children had died, mostly due to malnutrition).

Another woman, who otherwise seemed to have a far more cooperative husband, when asked about restrictions, gave the following answer: "I do everything according to my husband's wishes." And this is how a 50 year old agricultural labourer woman described her life: "I have to do everything under the instructions and orders of my husband. I have lived a slave's life right from childhood." She sounded very

bitter about it and said: "Whatever be my husband—old, sick, almost blind, good for nothing, earns little, even then he behaves like a lord. I have to listen to him and do everything as he wishes." A 55 year old agricultural labourer woman told the interviewer that her husband takes her pay directly from the landlord. She can't go anywhere without his permission. He behaves like a master. When she was eight years old, a number of restrictions were imposed on her, followed by many more restrictions imposed after marriage. Her husband did not even allow the daughters to go to the fields alone. Therefore, it was impossible to think of going to other places. A 20 year old said: "The question of other social restrictions does not arise because I am being beaten up by everyone all the time, by my mother-in-law, husband, and sister-in-law's husband." In this situation, she hasn't got the courage to imagine going out anywhere or doing anything according to her own wishes.

Only two women among the agricultural labourers said they had no restrictions. One of them even said she is free to talk and spend time according to her own wishes, she goes wherever she likes and is not forbidden from talking to this or that person, or forced to wear a dupatta. One of the interviewers noted her impression as being that among the agricultural labourer families, women reported less about restrictions as compared to women of cultivator families. This was especially true for traditions like keeping the head covered, not visiting other people's houses, not having the freedom to sit with male guests in the outside room, and so on.

After talking to all these women, both Jat and agricultural labourers, the interviewers gathered the impression that it was very hard for these women to grasp the whole idea of restrictions or the lack of them, as we had posed the question. Their lives seem so overburdened with work that keeps them bound to the house that the idea of use of leisure time outside the house seems remote. Moreover, the atmosphere of

increasing insecurity in the village acts as a major reason for women's hesitation to step out of the house. It seems that with increasing prosperity in the village in recent years, the men, especially the Jats, are drinking liquor more heavily, and there is more violence in the village as a result, especially at night. In recent years this restriction seems to have acquired the force of tradition, so that the question can no more be seen as one of this or that family imposing an individual set of restrictions, because in such an atmosphere very little variation seems possible. The result of all this is that an informal sort of curfew has come to be imposed upon women. Most of the women said that they cannot step out of the house because of drunkards in the village.

### **Men Make Major Decisions**

Decision making is another area in which the answers of the 29 women interviewed revealed the relative powerlessness of women both inside and outside the house. We asked the women a series of questions about which members of the family decide :

- (a) how money earned by family members will be spent;
- (b) how many years the children will go to school;
- (c) when the children will get married, and to whom;
- (d) at what age to look for work for the children;
- (e) whether or not the woman will be available for paid work outside the family;
- (f) how many children they will try to have; and
- (g) who does the shopping for any costly things the family buys?

Not a single woman, either among the Jats or the agricultural labourers, said that she could decide on her own whether or not she will be available for work outside the home. 10 out of 15 Jat women said their husband decided, three mentioned their sons as deciding, and one woman mentioned her brother-in-law. One woman did not answer the question.

Similarly, 11 out of 14 agricultural labourer women also answered that their husbands made the decision on this

matter; one woman said her father-in-law, mother-in-law and husband together would decide. Only two women said she and her husband would decide together. This seems to indicate the powerlessness of women in taking one of the most basic decisions of their own life. It is often believed that participation of women in paid employment necessarily results in increased independence and active participation in family decision making. However, the answers of these women suggest that it is important to find out why the paid employment of some of these women seems to have such a minimal effect on their status in the family.

In some other family decision making areas, the agricultural labourer women seemed to have a relatively greater say in decisions as compared to Jat women. For example, six out of 14 agricultural labourer women said husband and wife jointly decided expenditures in the family, while seven of them said the husband was the sole deciding person. In comparison, not a single Jat woman mentioned joint decisions in this area. In all cases, it was either the husband or the son or a brother-in-law who decided family expenditure.

Similarly, on the question of who decides about how many years the children will go to school, only four out of the 14 agricultural labourer women reported the husband making the decision by himself, while seven (half of them) said they made the decision jointly with their husband. In comparison only five out of 15 Jat women said it would be a joint decision. For all other Jat women, either husband or son took such decisions.

Among Jat families, it was only in the decision about how many children to have that the women participated in some measure. About half of them said both would decide, while five reported that their husbands alone would decide. Only one Jat woman said she herself would decide. Among the agricultural labourer women more than half (8 out of 14) reported joint decisions. For the rest, it was the husbands who decided.

Another area of relatively greater



joint decision making was children's marriages. Six Jat women and nine agricultural labourer women reported deciding together with their husbands. For all the other women it was again the husband or some other male family member who made the decision.

However, it was significant that, in decisions regarding costly things that the family buys, the women, Jat or agricultural labourer, had little or no say. In all the Jat families it was either the husband or some other male member who took such decisions. These were not even joint decisions. In agricultural labourer families only two women mentioned joint decisions. In all other cases, the men decided alone. This was another indicator that the greater participation of women agricultural labourers in paid employment did not necessarily result in much more of a say for them in crucial family decision making, as compared to the Jat women.

The women's answers regarding decision making are contrary to some of the prevalent myths about women dominating household decision making while men dominate social and economic life outside the family. Young or old, mothers or grandmothers, most women in our sample (even the 55 year old) seemed to be powerless, not just in influencing major family decisions, but also regarding basic decisions crucial to their own lives.

### **How Many Women Are Beaten**

Though it was hard to estimate the prevalence of wife beating with any accuracy, even the number of instances women did report to us show it to be an important factor in the lives of many village women. The interviewers got the impression that beatings were under-reported. For example, one woman reluctantly admitted being beaten, but refused to say any more since she felt that such a discussion would be an insult to her husband. Nevertheless, three out of 14 agricultural labourers admitted to having been beaten. In one case, the woman was beaten by her sister-in-law's husband with a stick. She was injured and had to be treated by a doctor. She also reports that her mother-in-law beats

her with a broom, her father-in-law beats her as and when he likes, and her husband beats her with whatever comes to hand. She says they want to get rid of her. Another woman was beaten because she went to her parents' house without taking permission. The comment of a young 27 year old agricultural labourer woman was even more revealing. She said she felt very lucky that she did not get beating or abuses from her husband, implying thereby that such behaviour was to be expected of most husbands, and you could escape it only by good luck.

Only one of the Jat women acknowledged having been beaten. She said her husband beats her when he gets drunk, which is sometimes every second day. She said she can do nothing to stop his beatings. She sometimes quarrels with him about it, but it is of no use. She has to learn to live with it. She regrets that the children learn the wrong things from watching it. In the case of another Jat family, villagers who knew them were certain that the husband beat his wife regularly, though the woman herself did not indicate this.

### **Men's Heavy Drinking— Consequences For Women**

The Jat women reported that the men in six of the 10 households were heavy drinkers. In one of the six families, all three adult men were drunkards and opium addicts. One Jat woman told the interviewer that her husband kept a big pitcher of country liquor in the house, and he drank every day. Sometimes, he started drinking at 7 am. As a result, she could not relax in the house or eat properly. She wanted dowry and liquor to be banned in the country. Since the major portion of their family income was spent by the husband on his drinking, she was unable even to get medical care when she needed it. She was seven months' pregnant, and said she could not afford the special food she required. The family was heavily in debt on account of the husband's drinking.

Six out of 11 agricultural labourer households have men who drink, three of them heavily, in one case, both father and son also take Rs 4 to 5 worth of

opium per day. Thus, almost half the households in the sample have men who drink heavily, and some also use opium.

While interviewing a Jat woman, one of the interviewers reported that some of the neighbouring women joined in the conversation, and told her how the men drink a lot, sometimes two bottles, sometimes three a day. Normally, they drink till they get dead drunk, she was told. When the interviewer asked them if women were beaten by their husbands, they said it was a routine thing. Most of them said women get beatings when their husbands get drunk. These women reported that most of the men drink in the evening, though a small percentage of the men also drink in the day, and some take opium. Few women take opium in this village. They further stated that during the wheat harvest opium is distributed to the women labourers in order to get them to work harder. Opium, they claimed, was a normally accepted thing in the village. But the women are ordinarily not supposed to take drinks or opium. Usually, the men consume *jarda* and *bhang* as well. The interviewer was told that, in extreme cases, some men's expenditure on opium goes to as much as Rs 15 a day.

Most women expressed helplessness about the drinking problem. A woman from a Jat cultivator family narrated how she made various efforts to get her husband to stop drinking. She took him to a guru and for two years the drinking stopped. But all this effort was useless because one of his relatives helped him start all over again. Now she only pleads with him to drink at home because when he drinks with friends outside he consumes much more. As a result of this drinking, the husband is unable to look after cultivation. So she had to compel their son to leave school and take to cultivation.

Another 45 year old woman from a cultivator family seemed even more worried about her future because of her husband's drinking habits and resultant bad health. She was married at the age of 27 because her parents could not

afford much of a dowry for her. This man was much older. This was his second marriage. She spoke worriedly about her future, concerned lest her husband die due to his drinking and bad health. She felt the social and economic life of a widow is very difficult: "If the woman dies, the man won't be affected because he still has his share of land. Society makes a woman's life very difficult after her husband's death. Her income stops and land is given away on *theka*".

### **Serious Illness Among Women**

Eight of the 15 Jat women indicated they were in poor health. All eight seemed to be suffering from fairly serious health problems. One woman had recently undergone an operation for abdominal pain. She couldn't specify the type of illness. A 23 year old woman with a three month old baby that she was breastfeeding had been ill since her delivery. She complained of pain and swelling in the breast and found it painful to feed the child, but was getting no treatment. Another one talked about her "blood turning into water" about six years ago, and was being treated by a village "doctor." Yet another one was suffering from a serious mental illness. She suffered from fits and lockjaw since the birth of her third child. Her daughters looked sickly too — one of them had her whole body full of boils.

Among the agricultural labourer women, six of the 14 were either suffering from or had had a serious illness. In addition, one woman was blind and one mentally deranged. We do not have an answer to the health question from four of the agricultural labourer women. Of those still ailing, one had a serious skin disease all over her body which was not improving. She also had a wounded foot and had difficulty in walking. Yet she continued going for field work. A 50 year old woman had been seriously ill for the last two years without any proper treatment. Her breasts were swollen, and pus oozed out of them continuously. She also got some kind of fits. Another woman developed an infection after having a sterilization operation, and it developed into a

serious illness. On the whole, most agricultural labourer women looked overworked and tired, according to the interviewers.

### **What Makes A Woman Happy?**

When asked about the two or three things that made them most happy since their marriage, the most frequent response given by these women was the birth of a son. The birth of a son was mentioned in 12 out of the 15 cases where the woman mentioned anything at all. Two other women mentioned the birth of children, not specifying the sex in their response. Almost half the women (13) did not report even one thing that made them happy since their marriage. It is not clear what some of these women meant when they gave no response to the question. It may be that such a sweeping question made no sense to them. A few of these 13 women, however, gave some possible explanation of their lack of response. One said: "No one can be happy after marriage, at in-laws' place." Another said nothing made her happy before or after her marriage.

It is significant that husbands were never mentioned in response to this question, except negatively by one woman. She said the thing that made her most happy since her marriage was the point in time when her husband stopped harassing her for not having brought him enough dowry.

A good harvest, a brother's marriage, the woman's parents building a house— one of them even said any kind of birth "even if the buffalo gives birth"—all these were given by the women as reasons for feeling happy. But there was not a single case where a woman mentioned anything to do with her husband as one of the things making her happy.

### **Slaves Of Slaves**

The perception of many of these women about their own lives ranged from grim fatalism to acute dissatisfaction. While some of them said their own lives were no different from their mothers', and some did not expect anything better to occur in their daughters' lives, others were very

articulate about what kind of change they wanted. Among the most politically conscious was a 35 year old woman who wanted a socialistic system, and wanted dowry to be abolished. She said she wanted revolution even if it meant she would have to work harder in her old age. She wanted some time of her own, which she said, she could not get from her husband in this system. The fact of her belonging to a small landholding family did not seem to her to be of much use to her: "We are the slaves of slaves, Agricultural labourer men help Jat men in the fields, but for Jat women it only means more work. We have to cook more food and feed the labourers as well." Thus, when they hired labour in the fields, this increased the work burden of Jat women. She said: "Women should also have fixed hours of work. We too must have a rest period."

Many other women spoke against the tradition of marrying girls so young, so that they could enjoy neither their childhood nor their youth. "While they are very young, they bear children and are forced to live a life full of responsibilities." A woman in her thirties said: "I wish I knew what it was like to feel young and carefree." She was in favour of contraception but did not want women to be operated for it. She said: "Instead of women, men should be operated because women suffer more pain and men enjoy life. Therefore, the process should be reversed so as to relieve the pain and torture of women." She wished she had been a little educated, so that she could have left her domestic life, and worked outside and been independent. She talked very proudly of her sister-in-law's daughter, who is studying in prep class and does not allow her parents to marry her off. She felt thrilled that a woman could do such a thing. For herself, she even felt irked that she has to cover her head because of social pressure. She said even ten year old girls couldn't jump around and were made to cover their heads and asked not to interfere in others' talk.

But another woman from a cultivator

family did not see education by itself help change women's lives. She felt that "higher education is of no use because the girls have to do the same dirty job of carrying dung on their heads, work like cattle in the fields, take care of the buffaloes, do the domestic work and produce children."

### To Sum Up

It is important to remember, when describing the condition of women in Punjab, that we are observing the relatively most prosperous rural economy in India. Both the peasant cultivator and the agricultural labourer here are better off than their counterparts in most other areas. And yet most of them live in poverty, and many of the agricultural labourers remain heavily indebted to the landlords. But the poverty is clearly more severe for the women of the family.

What we have tried to assemble is a coherent picture of some of those aspects of these women's lives which, even though sometime, assumed to be common knowledge, are not often recognized as having potentially disastrous effects on their lives and chances of survival. The picture that emerges from this study of agricultural labourer women and Jat women from small landholding families, details the types of powerlessness and forms of discrimination that the present family structure imposes on them.

Women eat much less than men, and they eat last in the family. While they are somewhat shorter than the men, they are a great deal thinner, pointing to a possible discrimination in the allocation of food within the family or in the way the food is divided up within the family. Employment opportunities for them in the midst of increasing agricultural production continue to be severely limited, instead of expanding; when they get work it is on far more disadvantageous terms than for men. Furthermore, the women are not even to decide for themselves where, when and with whom they can seek paid employment. Even when they work for wages, hardly any of them seem to have much of a say in how the bulk of the family's income will be spent and are not allowed to participate in other important

areas of family decision making. Some of them reported being subjected to severe physical violence in the family. Their lives are hedged in by crippling restrictions. The women work much longer hours than the men, and yet they are considered a liability, a burden. In most families, the major justification of their existence is their ability to produce the requisite number of sons. Even in middle age most of them seem as powerless as they were as young daughters-in-law or daughters.

It is no wonder then, that most of them do not wish to have a daughter, not only because daughters' births affect their own status in the family adversely, but also because, among other things, dowry and lack of paid employment for women makes them appear as liabilities. The women agricultural labourers seem to be almost as powerless as the Jat women in most of these areas we have investigated. However, even though they are confined to more and more marginal jobs in the rural economy, the fact of paid employment gives them relatively greater say in family affairs and they live under relatively fewer restrictions.

At the same time, what we also see is a great similarity in the way their family structure imposes certain forms of subjugation and social norms on women in both Jat and agricultural labourer households. One of the reasons may be the influence of the ideology and family structure of the dominant peasant cultivator caste groups on agricultural labourer families. Frequently, where the dominant and the dominated groups co-exist in close proximity, the latter may see the behaviour patterns of the dominant group as a norm and begin to adopt it, even at times when their economic situation is not suitable for practising such behaviour.

The women from both these groups put in 15 to 16 hours of arduous work a day. But they receive less than adequate nourishment and care. This seems to have a rather disastrous effect on their health, especially during periods of pregnancy and breastfeeding. It is ironic that their much glorified role as producers of sons does not even get them some minimal measure of work relief and extra diet and care during their childbearing

period. Consequently, most of them seemed in poor health, some of them even seriously sick. Yet their need for medical care goes largely unattended.

It is reasonable to expect that these forms of discrimination and neglect are likely to result in a much higher mortality rate among women. In our study, we could not collect adequate data about whether discrimination and neglect exists to the same extent for baby girls. If this is so, the consequences for them are likely to be even more grave. A few studies that have been done in South Asia on the subject suggest a much higher mortality rate among baby girls. Much more systematic work needs to be done to confirm whether this in fact is a widespread phenomenon, and if so, what are the reasons behind it. Such studies may provide important insights into a rather disturbing reality, the huge deficit of females in the country's population. According to the 1981 census there are 22.9 million fewer females than males in the total population. It is important to uncover the factors that result in the loss of these millions of women, and the extent to which the family's neglect of its female members contributes to this appalling situation. □

### References

- \*1. See *Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, 1975*.
- \*2. See V.M. Dandekar: "On Measurement of Undernutrition" in *Economic And Political Weekly*, Feb. 6. 1982.
- \*3. See Stan D'Souza and Lincoln Chen: "Sex Differentials in Mortality In Rural Bangladesh" *Population and Development Review*, 1980, No. 6, page 268 and John B. Wyan and J.E. Gordon: *The Khanna Study'. Population Problem In Rural Punjab*, Cambridge. Harvard University Press, 1971.
- \*4. Refer *Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India* especially the chapter on Demographic Perspective.
- \*5. Barbara Miller: "Sexual Discrimination And Population Dynamics In Rural India". Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Syracuse University, 1978.