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LETTERS



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**SUBSAHARAN AFRICA**

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# A Village Journey

## Part I

**VARANASI, India** December 1996

By Pramila Jayapal

"Villages are man's oldest and most durable social institution," wrote ICWA Member and MacArthur Prize Fellow Richard Critchfield in his 1981 book, *Villages*. In the 15 years since Critchfield wrote his book, changes in agriculture, in age-old living systems, in thinking, in technology have swept through villages. Some changes planted themselves in the fertile soil of small communities and flowered, challenging all the old weeds of tradition and crowding them out. "There is no space for tradition and modernity," they seemed to be saying. Others passed through like a tornado, creating temporary havoc but allowing village culture eventually to settle back into a semblance of what it was — changed but with fundamentals still in tact.

Today, over 70 percent of Indians still live in villages; yet we rarely receive information about this huge majority of the population, their lives, their thinking. Some months back, the popular *India Today* magazine published an issue with a cover story called "What Indians Think." The magazine claimed to have conducted the most comprehensive survey ever, that would for the first time provide a true representation of the average Indian's thinking on a variety of social and political issues. When I read the survey results, I found the relatively "modern" nature of responses surprising. Was this really what the common Indian thought? What had I missed? How was it possible that these views were so different from what I had seen and heard in my travels through the country? Then I read the fine print. The questionnaire had been administered only in India's large cities. *India Today*'s editors had given a small disclaimer — without apology — that they had been unable to interview villagers. So, 30 percent of India's population were made to represent the average Indian. Unfair, to say the least; and untrue to what India is and who comprises it.

"A villager who goes to the city travels through both space and time," says Critchfield in another part of *Villages*. The reverse, too, is true, as I have personally experienced every time I go to a village. In cities, I — like the editors of *India Today* — get lulled into thinking that urban life is representative of Indian life. I enter a village — no, even just leave a city — and realize instantly that cities represent one limit of the continuum of change taking place in India. Villages, depending on how close or far they are from cities, dot that same continuum, showing in slow-motion the progression, the road of change.

This and the following article, PJ-19, describe a recent village journey I took. I have tried, in these two articles, to describe the variety of social issues that present themselves in villages, from the political, to economic, to social. Although I focus on my visit to one particular village, my observations and thoughts are culled from several short visits to different villages across India. The discussions of caste and its social implications, political reservation policies and their impact, and finally, the changes in thinking from generation to generation, are only glimpses into complex, enormous issues. I have tried only to stroke out with a

broad brush issues that I find wholly relevant and under-discussed in today's discourses about modern India. In a sense, these two articles are a small-scale attempt to bring together many of the social issues that bind together Indian life today both in cities and villages. In villages, these issues are sometimes as noticeable as the bright yellow flowering mustard plants that dot the countryside, but sometimes as subtle as the tiny sprouts that get lost in the dark brown soil; in cities, though perhaps not as visible, they continue to assert a crucial role.

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Our sea-green 1987 Matador mini-bus rattled its way through the spewing, sputtering life of Varanasi to the relative calm of the Buddhist enclave, Sarnath, and on to the Gorakhpur National Highway. The "highway," a two-lane road, wound through agricultural fields, village bazaars selling fresh produce, small towns, periodic tea stalls and roadside *dhabas*—wooden shacks that displayed large steel containers of vegetables, dal and rice on rickety tables. We stopped and ate at one of these *dhabas*, mixing their potato and cauliflower concoction with home-made *rotis* stuffed with ground, roasted lentils.

We had started our journey from Varanasi at 1:30 in the afternoon. Our 145-kilometer trip would take us to the village of Kamalsagar, deep in the interior of Uttar Pradesh state (U.P.), almost at the border of Bihar. My hosts, Vidhu Chatturvedi and his mother,* belong to Kamalsagar and were returning to settle a dispute about their village lands.

When I had asked Vidhu for more details on the dispute, he had sighed. "It's so complicated, I don't even know how to start. We have had land in the village since it was first settled. However, for the last several decades, no one from the family has lived there. We know that our land is being encroached upon by some of our relatives who hold neighboring pieces of land, but we have never done anything about it. Now, a road is to be built between our land and the next piece of land. The place where it is to be built belongs officially to the village itself. However, our relative took over not only that land but also a good part of our land. He has taken away the original land markings that show our boundaries, and has told the contractor that the road should be built in our fields. This will mean a big loss of even more land for us. Even though the whole village knows what is happening, this man will not budge. He has bribed the contractor to do what he says. If we don't go back now and settle this, we will certainly lose our land forever."

"And this is a relative of yours?" I asked, surprised. "Yes, almost all of the village is related to us in some way," replied Vidhu. Kamalsagar, he explained, was settled sometime in the late 1300s, before the time of Babar, by the Brahmin community of Mishras who lived across from the open fields that would later become the village. The Mishras, although Brahmins, were not *purohits* (priests) and could not officiate their own religious ceremonies. To solve the problem, they brought a group of *purohit* Chaubey Brahmins to the area, donated land, and settled them there. This settlement came to be known as Kamalsagar.

The Chaubey Brahmins, in turn, needed people of a lower caste to do their domestic and agricultural labor, so they brought in a few Harijan families. Today, Kamalsagar still consists essentially of Chaubey Brahmins (like the Chatturvedis) and Harijans, with a few smatterings of other backward castes, like Yadavs. Yadavs, as in other villages, have benefited greatly from recent caste politics, particularly political concessions toward Other Backward Castes (OBCs). Today, it is a Yadav lawyer who owns the most land in Kamalsagar, and who was Headman of the local village council for the last five years.

## CASTE AND PURITY

To understand village life in India and in U.P. in particular, one must have some basic knowledge of caste structure and politics. Caste politics run rampant in U.P., a state that continues to see the formation of unlikely political coalitions, put together not out of ideological agreement but in order only to garner sufficient votes for a majority. The politics around non-upper castes and, in particular, the distinction and friction among various backward castes — a term that, in itself, creates confusion — make for an explosive situation in the state. Today, approximately 42 percent of U.P.'s population are from Backward Castes.

Briefly, the Hindu caste system comprises of four *varnas*, or levels: Brahmins (the priests), Kshatriyas (the warriors), Vaishyas (the tradespeople or merchants) and Shudras (the laborers). Untouchables, or Harijans as they were later re-named by Mahatma Gandhi, fall below even these four *varnas*. Within each *varna*, there are several *jatis* or sub-castes, which vary from region to region.

The terms Backward Castes (BCs), Other Backward Castes (OBCs), and Scheduled Castes (SCs) are used frequently in political jargon to discuss reservation quotas. However, the terms create substantial confusion even among many Indians today. According to scholar Meenakshi Jain,[1] much of the confusion arose during the British rule. The term Backward Caste (also Depressed Caste) originally meant Harijans. The British, however, began to refer to Shudras — whom they hired as laborers

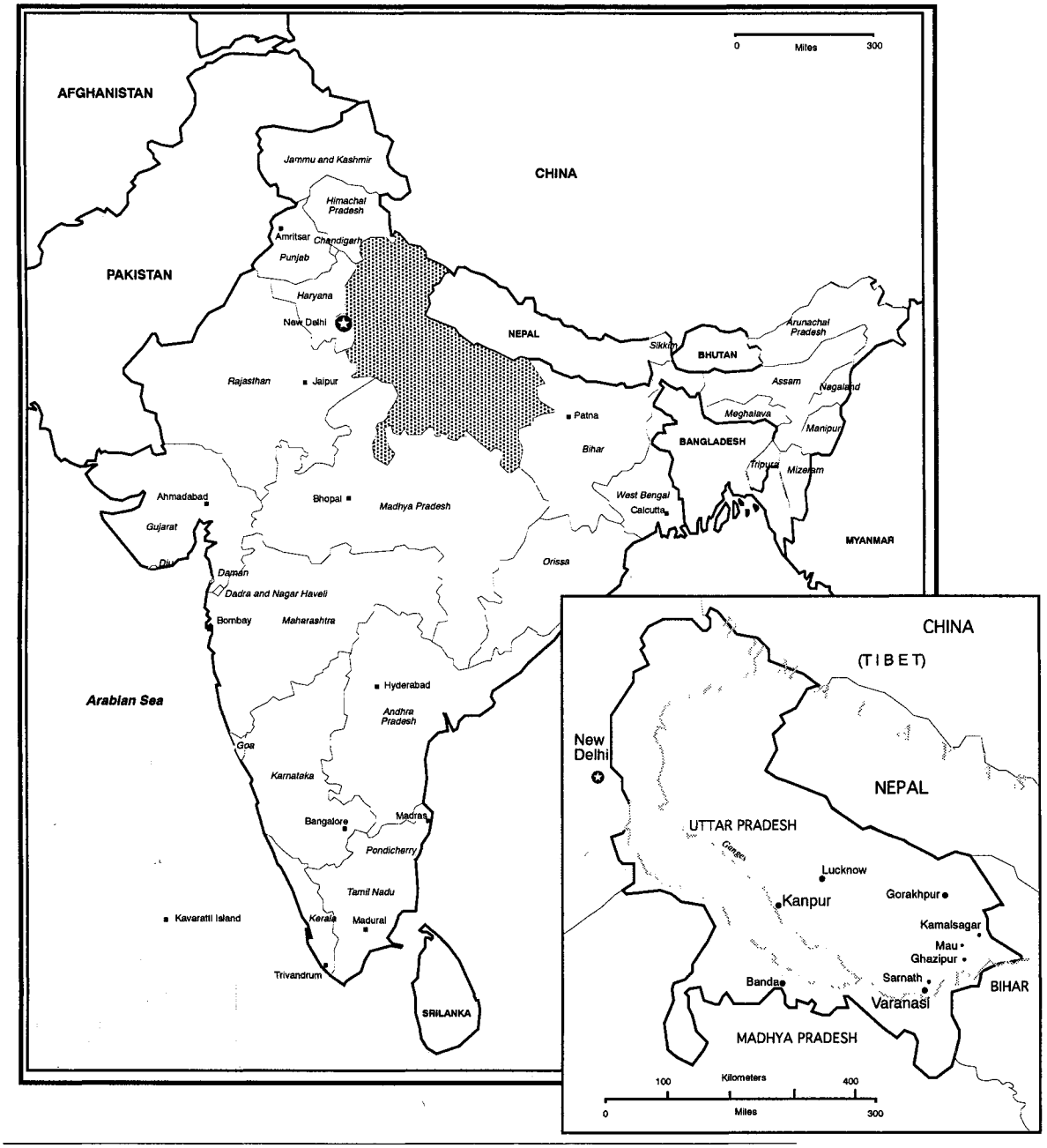
*My sincere thanks to the Chatturvedis for sharing Kamalsagar with me, and to Vidhu Chatturvedi for his assistance in translation.

1. Meenakshi Jain, "Backward Castes and Social Change in U.P. and Bihar," in *Caste: The 20th Century Avatar*, ed. M.N. Srinivasan (1996).

— as "backward," meaning that they were largely uneducated and "socially ignorant." Shudras thus began to be included by many people into the category of Backward Castes. Post-Independence, even the Backward Classes[2] Commission used the term for castes whose "ritual rank and occupational status was above the Untouchables but in the lower reaches of the caste order of traditional society." This definition allows for inclusion of a wide range of castes, some significantly better off than others. In fact, Jain makes a critical division of Shudras between upper Shudra castes (such as Jats, Yadavs, Kurmis) and lower Shudra castes.

Today, Shudras are included as part of Other Backward Castes, while Harijans remain as part of Backward or Scheduled Castes. Interestingly, many members of OBCs have risen to be some of the most prosperous villagers. Nehru and the Congress Party's post-Independence land-reform legislation played a big role in this change in status. Previous *zamindars*, or landowners, found themselves dispossessed of substantial amounts of land. Upper Shudra castes profited most from *zamindar* dispossession.

The rise of these Upper Shudra castes politically, economically and socially in U.P. is well-documented. For example, four principal OBCs (Yadavs, Kurmis, Lodhas and Gujars) now control 20 percent of the land in U.P., even though they constitute only 15 percent of the state's population. According to Jain, "few groups in independent India have




2. Backward Classes and Backward Castes are terms that are now used interchangeably.

made progress on a scale comparable to [some of these backward castes.] At least since the 1960s...the upper sections of the backward castes have been key players in the politics of northern India." These Upper Shudra castes, ironically, have been as reluctant as the upper-caste Brahmins or Kshyatrias before them to share their newly acquired power with their lower Shudra caste brethren, much less with Harijans.

**CONTROVERSY AROUND RESERVATIONS: CASTE AND GENDER**

"The Prime Minister's proposal to extend the policy of caste-based reservations to the private sector has caused grave concern not only to the business community but also — to the extent that such promises tend to set off waves of competitive populism — among the public at large. At a recent [Harijan] rally in the capital, Deve Gowda also vowed to disregard the 50 per cent cap placed by the Supreme Court on the quantum of seats in educational institutions and jobs in government and public sector units that can be reserved..." ("Competitive Populism," *India Today*, December 15, 1996)

"The present system of equating the lower segments of society with the upper classes through the arbitrary system of reservations is redundant considering that those days are long past when people were denied opportunities merely by virtue of their caste. Without improving the standard of education, it is unjust to hand out largesse to the Backward Classes when deserving candidates with better credentials fail to secure jobs." ("Questioning Reservations," letter to the editor, *India Today*, January 15, 1997)

Harijans, although slowly gaining political power, continue to face both subtle and tangible social discrimination. According to M.N. Srinivas, one of India's most eminent sociologists, "concepts of purity and impurity have been seen as central to caste...in indicating the rank of a jati." Harijans or Untouchables (reminiscent to some degree of blacks in America pre-civil rights), for example, were not allowed to draw water from an upper-caste person's well, to share the same utensils or even to allow their shadows to cross that of an upper caste member. In many temples, untouchables were prohibited from entering. Traditionally, untouchables performed those tasks seen as polluting or dirty, such as cleaning toilets or sweeping streets. As recently as two generations ago, such strict lines were drawn. My grandmother has told me stories about how their untouchable servants would ring a bell to indicate that they had left the boundaries of the house, and that it was "safe" for my grandmother's family to come outside.

Today, although the situation is changing, it is far from blotted out. I still remember the disapproval on my Mussourie landlady's face when she told me in a hushed tone that my house-cleaner was a Harijan. She was without a cleaning woman, and I had innocently suggested that she use mine for a few days. "I cannot possibly do that," she said shocked. "She cannot enter our house as a Harijan." It was only one of many reminders that caste is far from dead.

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The sun was sinking lower into the horizon and lay regally behind us, in the curve of the river Ganges. The Gorakhpur Highway closely followed the Ganges, and the fields next to the road were fertile. Lower-lying fields, however, had flooded and the water lay dirty brown in pools. Alongside the road, dung cakes were laid out to dry; dried cakes had been stacked on their sides in pyramids, waiting to be used as fuel. Against the shacks, bundles of straw stood tall against the mud walls. The only noise I could hear came from our noisy Matador diesel engine.

I saw a sign announcing our entry into the town of Ghazipur. Ghazipur, I had heard and was reminded again by Vidhu, was notorious for its mafia population. In its fields were not just wheat and vegetables, but also precious opium, grown mainly for export across the borders into Nepal, up to the Golden Triangle, or out to other foreign countries. The town did not look particularly dangerous to me, with its rather ordinary tea stalls and crowded main bazaar street, but Vidhu warned me that looks were deceiving. Fierce criminals could take refuge here without fear of being caught, he said; this was *their* turf.

As we neared Mau district, the next big industrial town about 45 kilometers from Kamalsagar, dark was falling. It had taken us six long hours to travel the 100 kilometers from Varanasi, and we still had at least an hour and a half journey left from Mau. Vidhu and his mother worried aloud that it would be difficult to reach the village so late. "No-one lives in the house," Mrs. Chatturvedi explained, "so it will be dusty and dirty. In the village, everyone goes to sleep by 8 p.m. Although there is electricity now, we don't know if it will be on or if there is oil to run the oil lamps. And God knows how many rats and cats will be there! We used to store all our grain there, but we have stopped because the rats eat through everything. We even had to get rid of the refrigerator we kept there, because they gnawed their way through the pipes! We store all our things in big bundles which we hang from the ceiling so they cannot get them. What to do?"

Just then, the smell of diesel fumes wafted up to our noses. Vidhu cursed. "Is that from the car?" It was. The oil pipe had sprung a leak, and while we were moving, was dripping copious amounts of diesel. We made a spur of the moment decision to halt a night in Mau, and the next morning, get the pipe fixed en route to the village. We stopped to ask two men for a hotel in town, and

through waves of alcohol breath, they gave us directions to the Madhav Hotel. We found the hotel off the main road and down through a muddy narrow side street. It looked pleasant from the outside, made of red brick and lit up against the dark night. Not cheap, though, even for the small town of Mau. For Rs. 250 (Rs. 50 extra for the third person), we got an unventilated, cramped room with attached "commode-style" (Western) toilet.

We tried, unsuccessfully, to sleep. Mau seemed to be full of drunkards that night (Vidhu's theory was that the new industrialization of the city had played a big role in generating cash that people chose to spend on liquor), the vast majority of whom appeared to be staying with us at the Madhav Hotel. Vidhu woke up twice to tell our drunken neighbor to turn down the volume on his television, only to be assured that the volume seemed to be going up "on its own!" I drifted in and out of sleep, pulling my sleeping bag high over my head to prevent the blood-thirsty mosquitoes from landing on me. I dreamed fitfully about the peaceful village we would be going to, and longed for morning.

It came eventually. We loaded ourselves back into the van with hopes of reaching Kamalsagar soon. First, we had to stop at a string of auto-mechanic shops en route, each one with their own specialty: brakes, engine, tires, and so on. We finally found a man who agreed to fix our oil pipe. Some untangling of wires here, cutting of the pipe there, then 10 rupees into the oil-smeared hand of the mechanic, and we were on our way.

## THE POLITICAL SCENE

Vidhu and his mother were noticeably happier as they got closer to home, pointing out various landmarks to me. "This is Kalpnath Rai's territory. He is this area's M.P. (Minister of Parliament) — totally corrupt but much loved around here. As long as he is running, no one else will ever beat him," Vidhu told me. "Isn't he the one who was involved in the sugar scandal recently?" I asked. Vidhu replied affirmatively. Kalpnath Rai, first the Power Minister and then the Food Minister, was expelled from the Congress Party last month in the wave of ministerial "house-cleaning" that followed the *hawala* scandal, when tens of ministers and high-ranking officials (including former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao) were charged, indicted or accused of large-scale corruption. Interestingly, Rai was eventually charged *not* for the sugar scam, but for his alleged role in sheltering arms dealers at his government guest house.

The revelations about Rai's role in these various scandals appeared to have little effect on his popularity. He won the last election from jail (against another opponent who was also in jail for corruption). "People know he is corrupt," Vidhu said, "but he has done alot for the area. Before Kalpnath Rai, this place had nothing. You see yourself, it is so far in the interior. There were no roads, no facilities, no electricity. Even before he was elected M.P., he had tried to bring about changes to the area. The town of Mau is completely his creation. Before, it was just a village. He has turned it into an industrial center, built proper roads and industrial complexes, brought employment and business where it never existed before. In his post as Power Minister, Kalpnath brought the most change to this area. His nickname used to be "32 KVA Rai" because he was always initiating some new power plant in the district. Today, we have so much power, we don't know what to do with it. People have become so used to power, they don't even want to buy matches anymore—they just light their fires from the heaters!"

I had noticed the power plants along the way. I had also seen, in the 30-kilometer distance we had traveled, more new overpasses than I had seen in all of India. These "flyovers" (in British jargon) were also courtesy of Kalpnath. The region's low-lying land meant that the roads flooded easily and often became impassable. Shortly after becoming Minister, Kalpnath had built these efficient, modern flyovers.

According to Vidhu, even Kalpnath's critics were forced to praise him in low tones, because he had been able to do the "un-doable." When he was Food Minister, for example, he set up numerous sugar projects in the area. The new contracts stipulated that mill owners would agree—for the first time—to pay farmers for the sugar cane they brought to the mills. Previously, owners would refuse to give farmers any payment, knowing that eventually the farmers would have to either dump or burn their excess sugar cane. Even today, farmers constitute a loyal support base for Kalpnath.

People's gratitude for what Kalpnath has done for the area has wiped out negative feelings about his involvement in various scandals. "I think people feel he *had* to become corrupt to be as effective as he was in bringing change to the area," mused Vidhu to me. "They feel, in some way, that had he not been corrupt and accumulated so much money to contribute to Narasimha Rao's Congress Party, he would not have been given so many favors by Rao. They both sympathize with him for having to play in the system, and admire him for doing so well at it."

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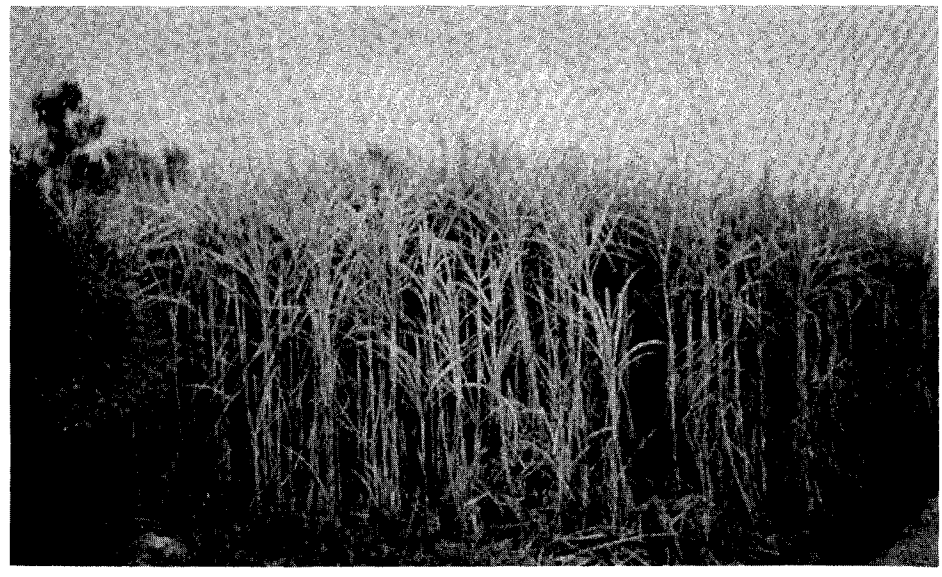
Sugarcane stalks waved in the wind around us. From sugarcane, villagers made *gur*, a dark brown sugar-like molasses. The sweet smell of *gur* permeated the smoky air around us. It was toward the end of the sugarcane harvest; much of it had already been cut down. In the plots that remained, the fast-drying leaves drooped toward the brown earth.

Everywhere people seemed busy. Men and women together shook wheat from old, worn *dhotis* to separate the grain from the chaff. On metal drums, they thrashed the wheat and then shredded the remains to feed to the



*Sugarcane stalks, ready to be harvested*

cattle. Several sugar-cane crusher machines whirred noisily, chewing the sugar cane stalks and extracting a cloudy yellow liquid. In the fields, children ran freely through the freshly plowed dirt, while their mothers bent over, sowing seeds. Men pushed their buffalo- and cow-drawn plows through the fields, creating huge ovals in the square patches of land. On the roads next to us, horse-drawn carts jingled their way along, sometimes coming face to face with their modern relative: the red, new, shiny tractors decorated in gold and silver tinsel, carrying crops, supplies and passengers.

I had now seen the fields of India in all their seasons: first, in the heat of the summer when I traveled south from Lucknow to Banda district along the Uttar Pradesh - Madhya Pradesh border. Then the fields were bone dry, not a flowering shrub nor a blade of grass to be seen. The land thirsted for water and seemed harsh and unforgiving. Then came the monsoons, when even in the deserts of Rajasthan, the land turned a verdant green. Everything was alive and fruitful. To the outsider, it was unthinkable that production would not continue for ever, that this bounty was limited. With harvesting, came a sense of richness. Villagers enjoyed festivals, marriages and the fruits of their hard labor, putting aside thoughts of uncertainty about the future. Now there was plenty for all. Finally, it was back to readying the fields again, stripping, plowing and replanting. The fields were turning to brown again—not the desperate brown of summer, but rather the hopeful brown of fruits to come. Time had come full circle.

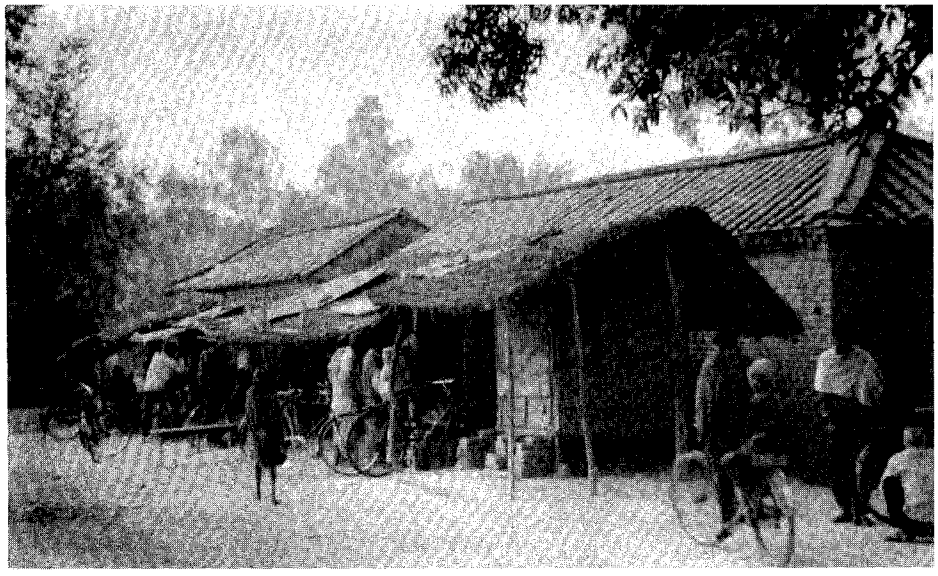
With the notion of seasons passing, I felt a strong sense of the impermanence of time. I saw clearly how a villager's closeness to the earth keeps him grounded in an understanding of what is beyond man. It may be certain that one has to plant seeds to attempt to reap a harvest, but it is not certain that those seeds will flower.

*Newly plowed fields*

*A couple works harvesting vegetables*

*Mustard trees, a common sight*

*Shredded fodder formed into blocks for feeding cattle*



*The main strip in Kamalsagar*

One bad monsoon, one natural disaster can take away any certainty that might have existed. "Man proposes, God disposes," as the old saying goes. Here, more than anywhere, I saw how city-dwellers like myself have little contact or reminder about how small man is in the entirety of the universe; we fool ourselves into thinking that so much in our lives is permanent and controllable. Villagers know better than this.

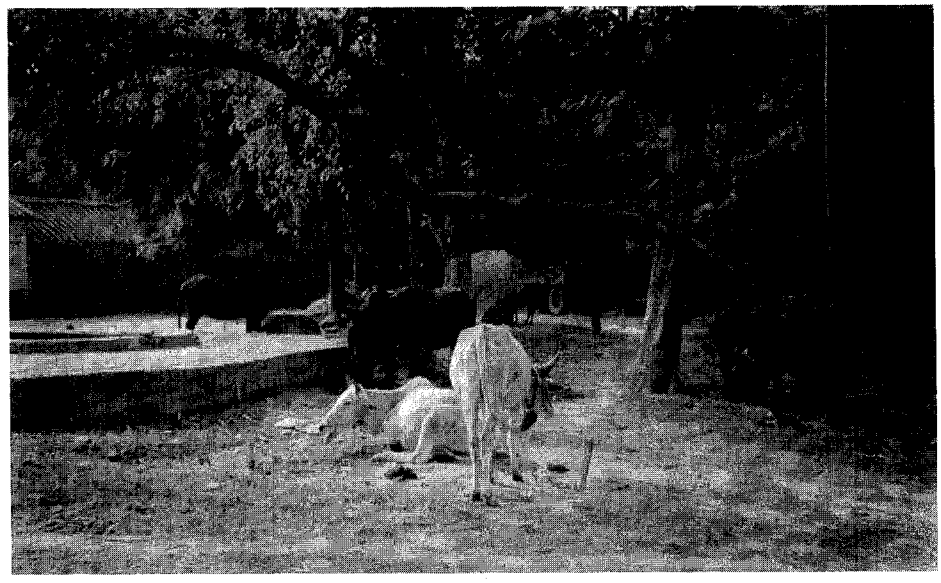
ENTERING KAMALSAGAR

Kamalsagar is set directly off a road, with no signboard to announce its existence. Vidhu's property directly borders the road. Bordering a road, be it a main thoroughfare or a rural side road, contributes to appreciating land values. In addition, people consider it desirable to build their houses as close as possible to the road. Hence, driving along Indian roads, one almost always sees houses built so that they practically kiss the huge lorries that trundle by.

The "main strip" in Kamalsagar is right on the main road, and stretches only about 50 yards. It houses the *patshallah* (school), a small *chai* (tea) shop which serves as the local gathering place, and a few assorted provision stores. Across from the *chai* shop stands a now-defunct ayurvedic hospital, set up by Vidhu's grandfather, a famous figure in his own right as I was to learn. In front of the hospital site stands a small stone plaque in his honor.

We turned off onto a dirt road that eased itself through a clearing of bamboo trees, cut in such a way to form a long 100-foot arched "driveway" covered with

*A plaque in honor of Swami Satyanand Chaubey, known for his work with upliftment of Harijans. Swami's name is at the top of the plaque. The writing at the bottom of the plaque, in letters almost as big, says, "[Accomplished] through Jai Ram Yadav" (the Panchayat Headman)*



*The open ground in front of the Chatturvedi's house, where cattle often graze*

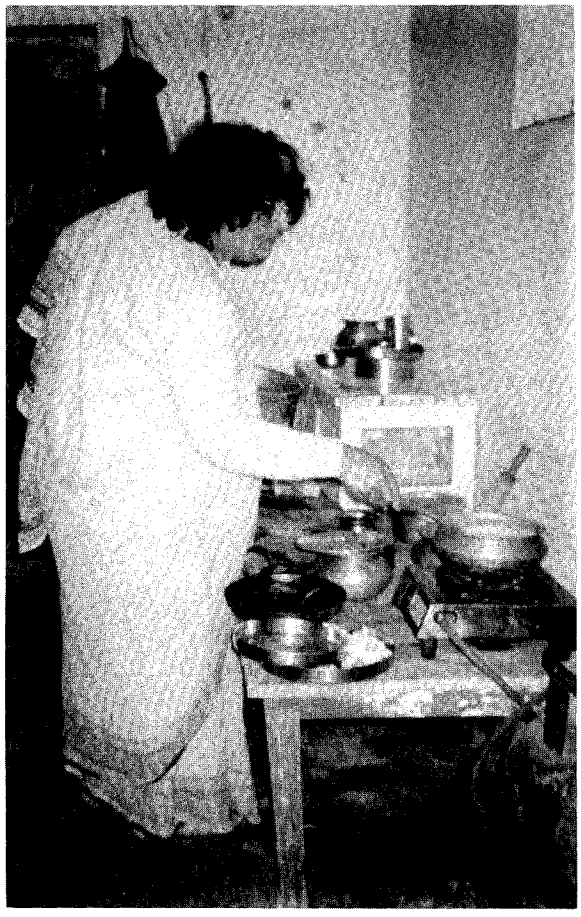
drooping bamboo branches. As we clattered down the driveway, people ran outside to see who had come. We parked in front of a compound that had various houses and buildings scattered across it. Across the way, I saw a big wooden doorway, which turned out to be the entrance to Vidhu's house.

"Is this all your land?" I asked Vidhu, gesturing around the car. "Actually, yes," he replied. "But, over the years, the people around us (all our relatives, in some sense or the other) have encroached on it and built their own structures. We do not say anything; after all, we do not live here. But still, that is why no one complains when we park here in front of this person's house. They know it is really our land."

Accompanied by a number of nameless people, we made our way to the house. A boy unlocked the padlock and chain on top of the big wooden door, and let us into a courtyard shaded on the right by a huge still-flowering rose-hips tree. In its branches, I could see large bee hives. The left wall of the courtyard was mud, and served also as the side wall of the next-door neighbor's house. The wall was in its original state: mud topped with starting-to-rot but beautifully carved wooden beams that sat beneath a wavy red-tiled roof. At the far right of the courtyard was a concrete area with a fairly new-looking hand pump. Just beyond, another old wooden door led into the house's inner courtyard.

Walking into this courtyard, I felt I had gone back in time. Cool inside, yet sunny; tiny narrow garden patches along the sides that sprouted tall rose vines with full, ready to burst, ruby red roses; an area, that even in its

*The front courtyard of the Chatturvedi's house*



*Mrs. Chatturvedi cooking in her makeshift indoor kitchen*

current state of desertedness, conjured up memories of families and children playing, of peace and simplicity. It was completely different from my grandparents' house in Madras, but nostalgia knows no geographic limits. The aura of peace here was the same as what I remembered from my childhood.

The Chatturvedi's house itself was *kacca*, a mud-structure with a tiled roof. (Houses built of concrete are termed *pukka*.) The ground floor consisted of one big room, where the three of us would sleep, an adjoining smaller room off one side used mainly for storage, and another smaller room that opened both onto the front covered verandah and onto a small back courtyard and garden. This room was used as a kitchen, although there was also a small mud, fire-lit *chula* (stove) in a small area off the front courtyard. "Usually, we cook all our food on the mud *chula* with a fire," Vidhu said, pointing to a huge tangled pile of firewood sticks next to the mud *chula*. "This time, though, it would have been difficult for my mother to manage on that *chula* alone so we have brought a gas cylinder and single gas burner." There were also two rooms with rusty grilled windows on the side of the front courtyard. This space was converted some years back into rooms for storing grains and crops, but now lay empty since no one lived in the house permanently.

One side of the back courtyard housed a simple enclosed mud pit latrine. On the other side of the courtyard was another small enclosure with a deep-well motor pump that was not, at the time, working. The house also had an upstairs reached by stairs off the front courtyard. There were two small rooms that opened out onto a terrace. From here, I could look down into the neighboring courtyards, across the sea of red-tiled roofs, and beyond to the green and brown fields of Kamalsagar.

From this perspective, Kamalsagar looked not much different than it probably had decades ago. The land stretched out to meet the sky, hazy from the dust of village fires. The bright yellow of flowering mustard trees provided splashes of color amid freshly plowed brown fields. The small mud paths that divided the fields made the land into a small maze, where one could wander around surrounded only by nature. A bird's-eye view, however, is as limited as it is broad. Now it was time to explore Kamalsagar from below.

***To Be Continued...In Part II (PJ-19):***

Harijans and Brahmins; Reservations and Social Change; and Villages, Villagers and Their Futures

# Index to ICWA Letters by Pramila Jayapal



*Entries refer to ICWA Letter (PJ-16, 17, etc), with Letter number given before for each entry*