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A Village Journey

Part II

VARANASI, India

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By Pramila Jayapal

The Harijans of Kamalsagar

It had been six months since anyone from the Chaturvedi's family had been back to Kamalsagar. Layers of dust coated the tables and chairs, and cobwebs hung from the corners of the room.

Leading the cleaning brigade were Baijnath and his wife, Baijnath-Bhu. (When I asked Vidhu in surprise if this was really her name, he laughed. "No, it is just the way that wives are addressed in the village. Sometimes, if a man is considered hen-pecked by his wife, people will tease him calling him the Bhu of his wife.") Baijnath and Baijnath-Bhu had worked with the Chaturvedis for over 12 years, tending their fields and doing domestic work. They were Harijans.

The Chaturvedi family's relationship with Harijans was legendary in the village. As far back as Vidhu's infamous grandfather, Swami Satyanand Chaubey, the family had maintained progressive attitudes towards Harijans. Swami Satyanand was a rare combination: a politically-active *sanyasi*.¹ He had, as Vidhu put it — "experimented" with many social issues, the main one being the upliftment of Harijans. He managed to have land donated through charity (*dhun*) to the Harijans, so that they could settle themselves in Kamalsagar. In the Harijan *basti* (area), Swami built a huge concrete deep well, providing Harijans with easy access to a precious commodity that they are often denied. In the face of resistance from other Brahmin families in Kamalsagar, Swami systematically broke all the rules that existed around the concept of "caste pollution." In Swami's house, Harijans ate from the family's own dishes, came within scandalously close distances of Brahmins, sometimes even touching them. Swami spent most of his time in a small town about 40 km north of Mau, where he had established a Harijan ashram, or retreat. Because of Swami's involvement with Harijans, the Kamalsagar Harijans were said to "belong" to him.

Vidhu's parents had also taken an active interest in Harijan matters. During our visit, numerous Harijans came to pay their respects to Mrs. Chaturvedi and seek her advice. Just recently, a Harijan man had been killed by a bus leaving children and the rest of his family behind. Representatives of the family came to visit, and Mrs. Chaturvedi gave them information on how to file insurance claims and receive compensation for the death.

The Chaturvedis' attitude toward Harijans, to this day, remains a source of unspoken disapproval for many of their neighbors. I noticed that many people who came to visit did not drink tea from the Chaturvedi's cups. Vidhu told me later this was because they knew Harijans drank and ate from the same vessels. Where Vidhu and his mother always treated Baijnath and his wife with respect,

1. A *sanyasi* is someone who has renounced the world, the fourth stage of life in the traditional Hindu cycle.

and even considered them (referring to them often this way) as the managers of their land, I noticed how others treated them with a tangible air of condescension.

One night, a Brahmin visitor — a little drunk — pe-remptorily ordered Baijnath to make tea and then refused to take the tea cup from his hand, telling him to put it on the chair. Old habits die hard, I thought. Alcohol perhaps loosened the chains of “proper behavior” (or its village form of political correctness) enough to bring back true attitudes toward Harijans. I mentioned the incident to Vidhu later, and he shrugged his shoulders. “Yes, it’s still that way. At least he agreed to drink tea from the cup which had been touched by Baijnath. That, for him, is a big thing.”

Had the situation changed for the Harijans over the years? Had “modernization” improved discriminatory attitudes of upper-castes or the condition of Harijans? Pappu, one of Vidhu’s cousins from next door, felt that the answer was yes. Before, he said, Harijans were at the mercy of the Brahmins. In a pitifully low economic and social condition, they had to do whatever was asked of them. Today, with the changing status of lower castes and a simultaneous improvement of their general economic condition (particularly the Kamalsagar Harijans), Harijans — to Pappu, at least — seemed to be calling the shots. Today, most refuse to do domestic labor. For agricultural labor, they decide for whom they will and will not work.

In Kamalsagar, unlike many other villages across India, Harijans still work largely on a system of labor-for-crops. In the olden days, workers could take whatever they could carry themselves. Today, agreements are more structured. Most Kamalsagar Harijans will not work for less than half of the harvest reaped in those fields they tend. Sometimes, to provide motivation, the deals are more lucrative. A landowner might agree to keep some minimum amount of the harvest for himself, giving anything over and above this to his workers. Vidhu and his mother were even more generous, taking only what they needed for their own consumption and giving the rest to Baijnath and Baijnath-Bhu.

CASTE AND THE JAJMANI SYSTEM

The system of labor-for-crops in its original format is often referred to as the *jajmani* system. Interestingly, it is often used as an example of both the stability of the old caste system, and its exploitative and stagnant nature. Under the *jajmani* system, lower castes supplied services or goods to higher castes in return for an annual wage paid in kind.² The relationship extended back several generations, and was part of a wider “patron-client” relationship. According to scholar G.K. Karanth, the “service specialist had a right to demand work from the patron, be paid for it, [and] (ideally) exclude competi-

tion from others. [Service specialists] also had duties in the patron’s household on ritual occasions such as weddings and funerals.” In other words, lower-caste members had the benefit of stable relationships that protected them from exploitation, gave them economic “backers” in times of crisis, and even made them part of the patron’s family. Others have added to this argument that the *jajmani* system provided a clearer sense of identity regarding one’s role in life. Occupations were fixed, and it was certain that a son would perform the same tasks as his father for the same patron. With the decline of the *jajmani* system and the dissociation of castes and traditional occupations, specialist castes have been forced to train themselves for unfamiliar work with strangers. This new competitive environment is particularly difficult for lower, uneducated castes.

On the other side, scholars claim that the *jajmani* system was nothing more than institutionalized oppression, a system that took advantage of lower castes, ensured they were perpetually kept “in their place,” created a dependence on upper castes that was convenient for these castes to maintain their power, and prevented any mobility among castes and occupations. With the breakdown of the *jajmani* system came an opportunity for the service castes to bargain for more equitable wages, to escape the grip of exploitative land-owners, to seek new, greener pastures.

Whether or not to follow the *jajmani* system is not, for most lower-caste villagers, a choice any longer. It has largely disappeared from rural India, at least in its original form. Modified versions do exist, such as the labor-for-crops exchange that operates in Kamalsagar. However, the wider implications of the traditional system — such as links between a client and patron, or assurance of lack of competition — no longer remain. For the most part, today’s generation of upper and lower castes know only of the old *jajmani* system from their grandfathers and great-grandfathers. It is a thing of the past, and therefore, beyond relevance for most.

Some of the improvements in Harijan status that Pappu spoke of were visible. Of the approximately 18 Harijan families that live in Kamalsagar, about four or five had managed to purchase agricultural land from Brahmins who had come under hard economic times or decided to move to the cities.

The Harijan *basti*, like Harijan *bastis* in villages across India, is situated an appropriate distance from upper-caste lands. It is a clean, pleasant settlement, contained largely within an original acre or so of donated land. Some Harijans, like Baijnath and his family of seven children who did better for themselves, built their house outside, but next to, the original *basti*. The houses in the *basti* are clustered together around central shared facilities like the

2. G.K. Karanth, “Caste in Contemporary Rural India,” p. 90-92.

well-kept concrete deep well, a hay-shredder and a communal fisheries pond. The families tend to have large numbers of children, who run around in thin clothes in spite of the cold winter weather. The houses are, without a doubt, smaller and built lower to the ground than the Brahmin houses. Yet the difference in houses seemed much less vast than the perceived and existing differences in social status of the two castes.

As we walked through the *basti*, we were greeted gaily. One forthright old woman came out and began ribbing Vidhu about his lack of attention to Harijan matters. "Your grandfather has done so much for us, and you are doing nothing," she said in a mock-reproachful tone. "See, our houses are falling apart. What are you doing about it?" Vidhu replied in a similar semi-serious tone that his house, too, was falling apart and he was unable to do anything about *that* — what could he then do for them? As we walked away, I wondered aloud whether this kind of joking made Vidhu feel bad, given his grandfather's legacy and attachment to the village. "No,"

he replied. "I know they say it in a well-meaning way. And actually, they are right. We should be doing more, but it is difficult since we don't live here. Even our own lands are suffering because of this."

RESERVATIONS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

One of the more tangible changes that has come about in terms of changing social power of lower castes (at least, on the surface) is in the reservation of village panchayat (village council) seats for Harijans. A certain number of panchayat seats are now reserved for Harijans. On top of this, separate reservation quotas exist for women.

This year, in the panchayat area to which Kamalsagar belongs, the seat for Gram Pradhan (the panchayat head) is a "double-reservation" seat, meaning it is reserved for an individual who is both a Harijan and a woman. For the past five years, a wealthy Yadav lawyer from Kamalsagar had been Pradhan. Baijnath Bhu stood for election for Pradhan, but lost to another Harijan woman



from a neighboring village. She had, however, been elected as a member of the Gram Sabha, or general panchayat body.

One morning, as Baijnath-Bhu sat washing the dishes in the courtyard, I asked her if she thought reservations for Harijans were a good idea. Predictably, her response was yes. However, as our conversation progressed, it became increasingly clear that there were no well-thought-out reasons behind her answer. She ran for Pradhan, she said, because Jai Ram, the former Yadav Pradhan, had encouraged her to run. "He got all my votes for me, arranged for everything, and dealt with all the politics," she said proudly. She neither harbored resentment against upper castes for holding political power for so long, nor felt that they had not answered the needs of lower castes. She did not seem to have in mind specific actions she wanted to take that would be directed to the welfare of Harijans. As it turned out, she did not even know what the term "reservation" meant, or why it existed. She seemed, to all intents and purposes, to be merely a mouthpiece for Jai Ram.

Crudely put, Baijnath-Bhu also saw being Pradhan as an opportunity to make some money on the side ("*upar ka paisa*" or "money from above" as it is said obliquely in Hindi). I could not really blame her; what she knew of politics was that people made money from it. The villagers, more than others perhaps, knew the realities of development schemes meant for villagers that ended up with large portions of allocated funds siphoned off to the politicians and every other level in between. Jai Ram, with



Baijnath-Bhu

his huge concrete house and substantial lands, was one of the richest men in the village. Hearsay had it that not all of his wealth came from his legal practice.

My conversation with Baijnath-Bhu depressed me at the beginning. When asked what she could do for Harijans as a member of the Gram Sabha, she shrugged her shoulders and said "nothing." Then why is reservation for Harijans in these bodies a good thing, I pressed? She covered her mouth with her threadbare sari, and did not respond.

About that time, a teenage youth came with a stack of invitation cards. There was to be a panchayat meeting soon, and he was delivering notices to panchayat members. Baijnath-Bhu's name on the invitation was incorrect. Someone had written Lakshmi instead of Parvati, perhaps not surprising given that most people called her Baijnath-Bhu, not Parvati. The teenager was reluctant to give the notice to Baijnath-Bhu herself; he wanted to give it to her husband instead. In the teenager's mind, Baijnath was the real Panchayat member, the one who reads and writes, the one who calls the shots and make the decisions.

THE PANCHAYATI RAJ ACT

The issue of reservations for women in political parties is highly controversial. As a follow-up to the Panchayati Raj Act of 1989, which reserved 33 percent of village level panchayat seats for women, the newly installed central United Front Government promised — and is now dragging their feet — to pass new legislation that would also require one-third representation for women in State Assemblies and Parliament. However, OBCs and BCs, who feel resentful that reservations for women are being given separate status from caste-wide reservations, are protesting loudly. Interestingly, not even all women's groups agree on the effectiveness of reservations for women at the highest political levels. Many feel that reservation at this level is a farce. Madhu Kishwar, a well-known feminist and the editor of the respected *Manushi* magazine, has eloquently pointed out that if women were trained and empowered to be part of the political process at the lower levels, then natural, qualified women leaders would emerge at national levels without reservations. These women would have much more credibility in this environment than those selected as a result of reservations.

In contrast, almost all women's groups hail the 1989 parliamentary Panchayat Raj Act (passed subsequently and separately by individual states) as a positive step. Starting with political empowerment at the local panchayat level makes sense, they say. They argue that that stage of women as proxies for their male counterparts, though obviously not desirable, is an inevitable first step in a long process of change.

Outside women's groups, however, many continue to doubt that women will ever be anything other than

CONTROVERSY AROUND RESERVATIONS: CASTE AND GENDER

"There is the apprehension that the one million representatives of women who would be elected to the Panchayats will not all be capable of fulfilling their responsibilities. Besides they may be proxies for men, who may manipulate them behind the scenes...but that would only be a passing phase. Women will soon emerge as real representatives of the people..." ("Women in Panchayats: The Path Ahead," from a speech given by Usha Narayanan at the inauguration of the National Workshop on Training Women in Panchayats, New Delhi, October 31, 1996)

"Although the media has [sic] focused a lot on gender politics, pointing to the glaring discrepancy in the way political parties have paid lip-service to the need for gender equality and in the same breath turned a blind eye to the issue when it came to the disbursal of tickets for the general elections, the parties themselves seem least concerned over the issue. Most women parliamentarians and activists...have held women themselves responsible for their low representation in Parliament...Ordinary middle-class women, when they are looking for a career or job would hardly look at politics as an ideal choice given the highly "unideal" rules of the political game...Progress for women or any marginalized section of society has to be ensured on all fronts. Unless we are equals under the law, which means a citizen can take recourse to legal action if his or her rights are tampered with, a few measures here and there prove to be ineffective. What we require as we stand on the threshold of the 21st century is large-scale positive discrimination in favour of women." ("Gender Politics," by C. Jayanthi, *The Pioneer*, April 24, 1996)

mouthpieces for their husbands or other male sponsors. Efforts by various governmental and non-governmental organizations to train rural women panchayat members in their responsibilities and the political process itself have been slow in taking off, and need to be repeated over a long period of time to have any substantial effect.

Given the persistence of gender divisions that place men in charge of politics and finance, and women with the house and family, it is not surprising that many rural women like Baijnath-Bhu have not made the transition in thinking of themselves as independent voices. States like Gujarat and Maharashtra, where women have traditionally played a greater role in politics and small-scale industry (i.e. financial matters), tend to have a better success rate with true participation of women in political bodies. Similarly, high literacy levels positively correlate with women's political participation. In Kerala and Tamil Nadu, which both boast high women's literacy rates, true participation of women is not rare. In U.P., however, where fewer than 20 percent of women are literate and fewer still have ever participated in politics, the political awakening of women remains at a pre-nascent stage.

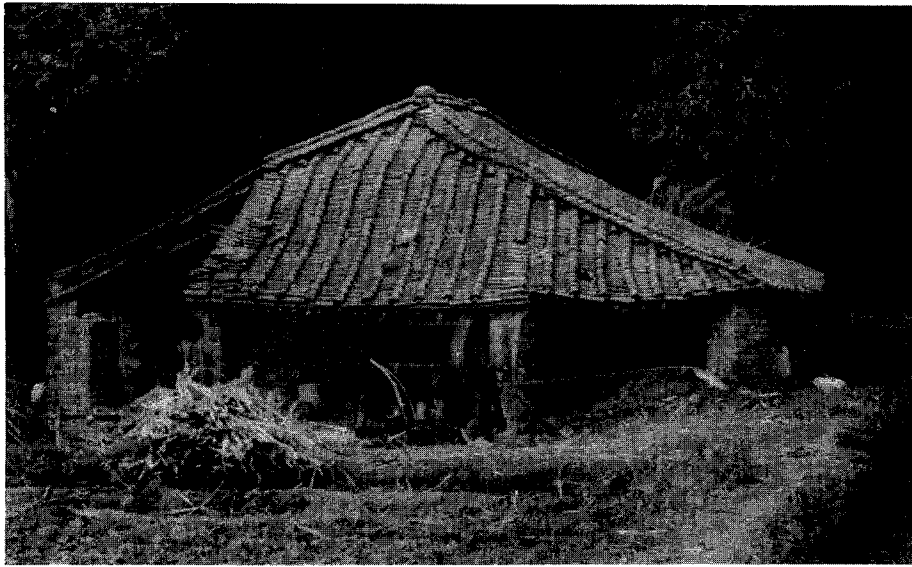
One organization in Varanasi, which conducts training of women panchayat members, documented comments made by women who felt that they neither

understood the political process nor were able to become truly involved in it. Corruption, for example, was entirely foreign to many of the women. They viewed the process of providing what were considered "financial necessities" to those higher up in the system (usually men) distasteful; and yet, if they fought against such practices, found they were alienated, threatened, and worst of all, ineffective in accomplishing anything for their constituencies. Left out of the political process for centuries, they were largely ignorant of and overwhelmed by the requirements of the process, and of the rights and responsibilities of being panchayat members. Many women, faced with an overwhelming sense of inadequacy, were perfectly content to relinquish their political voice to their husbands or other male members of the family. Men often attended panchayat meetings and cast votes in the names of their wives. Even if women were present, they rarely spoke their opinions.

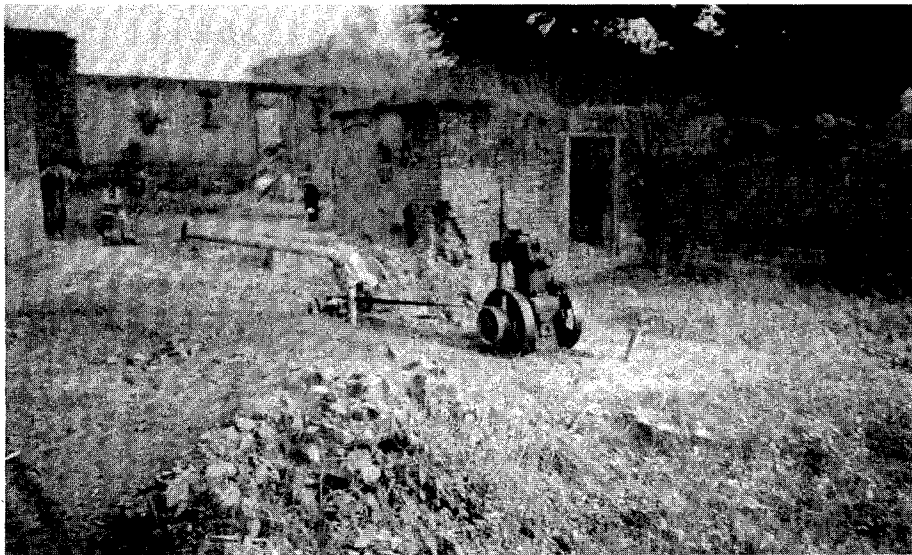
Baijnath-Bhu, that day, in her bright yellow polyester blouse and blue-and-white worn sari, seemed to be affirming once again all the arguments for why panchayat reservation for women (much less for Harijan women) would never work. But, as we talked more, I saw a different picture emerge. Clearly a woman of will power and intelligence, she began to sound like an example of exactly those women who the process can and will eventually empower. As she slowly told us of her recent accomplishments as a Gram Sabha member, we also realized that part of her earlier rather helpless-sounding words were just modesty. Not used to talking about her accomplishments, she may have just been underplaying her achievements. Now, she began telling us about how she had stood up to the contractor who had taken a bribe to build the road on Vidhu's land (he did later come back and the road was built, but still the power that the interaction had given Baijnath-Bhu was evident). She seemed to intuitively understand her own deficiencies. "I will learn," she finally said emphatically. Just by watching Baijnath and being involved in the meetings, she said, she was beginning to learn. And Baijnath, perhaps unlike other husbands, was open to teaching her and answering her questions.

Through my conversation with Baijnath-Bhu, I saw the possibilities of reservations for women. Although a long road, once women started becoming involved in the process, there would be some who — like Baijnath-Bhu — would eventually be able to use the opportunity to become truly involved in reality, not just in name. And, in time, perhaps this could lead to a whole new set of women who were ready to move up the political ladder in higher positions.

It still remained clear to me, however, that even at this level, reservation alone was not enough. It had to go hand-in-hand with other social commitments for improving the status of women, and a simultaneous training of men to accept women in new roles. Still, it was a tool, one that could produce results in combination with



Technologies like the diesel-operated water pump have improved irrigation and yields, but also contributed to rising costs of agriculture and declining profitability



other social strategies for change.

THE KAMALSAGAR BRAHMINS

What of the Brahmins in Kamalsagar? Being at the top of the caste ladder did not ensure happiness or even economic prosperity, I found. Brahmins, although they held land, were not agriculturists. In olden days they hired lower-caste people to do their work. Today, the rising cost of labor and new independence of Harijans has forced many Brahmins to begin farming their own fields. This (for Brahmins especially, but more and more an issue regardless of caste) is a task that has neither status nor profitability. The lure of the cities, of blue-collar jobs, of "service" work (meaning working for a company) shines bright. Agriculture seems most undesirable to many men of the younger generation.

Add to this the true decline in profitability of farm-

ing. Costs of agricultural inputs — labor, fertilizer, machinery, seeds — are rising. On the other hand, average land holdings per family are declining as land is divided more and more among siblings that choose to farm separately rather than jointly. Sadly, in Kamalsagar as in other villages across India, people are deciding that agriculture is no longer a viable means of making a living.

The actual decline in agricultural profitability is not the only reason that many villagers — particularly those of higher castes — feel agriculture is no longer enough. Along with the idea that tending the fields is somehow inferior work, people's "needs" have increased. Whether it is the need to get a diesel-operated pump for agriculture, a car or motorcycle for transport, or a television, today's generation seems to need more than the previous generation. The oldest man in the village, now over 102, muttered to us in a quivery voice about days past when people used to walk for hours, even days, to reach

somewhere. He spoke, as if detailing history, about the changes that had come about in technology (such as irrigation devices), technology that cost significantly more to install or purchase but rarely produced sufficient increased yields to offset the increased costs. Even today's generation admitted freely that their needs — spurred on by exposure to television and easier access to urban areas and consumer goods — are greater than those of their forefathers.

If a family has girls to marry off, then its monetary needs are even greater. Dowry today no longer means just the mother's few gold ornaments. It includes ever-growing requirements for material objects: televisions, radios, motorcycles, furniture, even just hard cash. Driving down the roads, I often saw jeeps loaded with all these things. "Dehez," Vidhu said to me the first time we saw one: dowry, being transported from girl's family to the in-laws. After that, I noticed these laden trucks quite often, early December being an auspicious time for weddings.

In Kamalsagar, unlike other villages I have visited, men were generally less educated than women. Many of the men, although it was not immediately obvious in conversation, had not even studied up to high school. Only a handful had studied further. In contrast, the Kamalsagar girls were studying, had passed, or were proposing to pass a Bachelor's degree exam. Some were teachers, some had taken technical training. Although this did not necessarily mean that they would continue to work after marriage, or that marriage was given any less priority, the girls were a sight for sore eyes: well-dressed, intelligent, even feisty. They shone much more brightly than the Kamalsagar men.

Across India today, young men of high castes struggle to carve their place in society. Kamalsagar is no exception. Coming from Brahmin priestly families, many of

the young men seem to be living according to a system that no longer exists, a system where priests did not enter the formal education system but were accorded tremendous respect for their religious caste status. However, these men have not been trained as priests, nor have they been given the tools to find new careers. One of the few college-going youths in the village put it to me this way: "Many people here still do not see education as necessary. Then it becomes even harder, because without education, they cannot get good jobs. Doing agricultural work is considered beneath us. In the end, they end up in the cities doing lowly work which they would be embarrassed to do in their own villages. They may become truck drivers, even. It is difficult being a Brahmin," he concluded wryly.

The Kamalsagar men I got to know relatively well were all intelligent, clearly came from good backgrounds. Yet they seemed frustrated with their lives. Few of them actually worked in the fields. Arvind, a cousin who came over regularly every evening, was a good example. Asking us if we wanted to play cards one evening, he plaintively said to me, "There is nothing to do here. We constantly have to find things to pass time." Arvind — handsome, quite articulate, father of two — had not gone to college, did not seem to work in the fields or be particularly interested in agriculture. He spent his time, it seemed, roaming around. At night, he would while away hours in Vidhu's house, discussing politics or the latest village gossip. Recently, he had completed a course in auto mechanics from a local vocational college. He had yet to find a job.

Pappu, Vidhu's cousin, told me that he very much wanted to move to the city. "But," he said, "I would need to earn at least Rs. 3,000 per month (about U.S.\$90). I know I can live much better on less money here in the village, but there is no opportunity here." Pappu exemplified the pull and conflict between tra-



The oldest man in the village — 102 years

dition and modernity. The village, for Pappu and his friends, was stable, boring and status quo; the city was glamour, opportunity and hope.

I began to see in the daily evening chats, which I had first viewed as an expression of the camaraderie of village life, the boredom that people felt. Without real activities to keep them busy, discussions about village politics were often gossipy and stinging. Vidhu's land controversy and the so-called "feud" between his family and the relative who had encroached on their land, occupied everyone's mind. There was little else to think of. Everywhere Vidhu and I walked, Vidhu would have to answer questions about the dispute, the future strategy, as well as listening to each individual's opinion of what should or should not be done.

I also sensed a large degree of hypocrisy around the issue of Brahminical "purity." Brahmin men, though reluctant to allow Harijans to enter their houses or drink from their cups, were perfectly content to have Harijan women satisfy their sexual cravings. Affairs between Harijan women and Brahmin men were a well-established fact in Kamalsagar. I immediately assumed this was exploitation of Harijan women, but Vidhu disagreed. He quoted several instances of Harijan women offering themselves to Brahmin men quite happily, and of the lack of ill-feeling that accompanied these sexual exploits. Perhaps it was not tangible exploitation, I continued to think, but a mechanism of trying to attain power by usually powerless women — a more intangible form of exploitation or, at the very least, an expression of a desire to release oppression, to be in control.

Similarly, Vidhu had told me that many of the Brahmins secretly and openly consume copious amounts of alcohol. Perhaps with the slow rhythm of life in the village, this was almost inevitable. One or two even justified their drinking by saying their wives liked them a little drunk. As for food, within the houses, women prepared only pure vegetarian food. For the most part, Brahmin women have stayed pure vegetarians. The men, however, once a week partake in "*bahar ka khanna*" — literally, "outside food." The figurative meaning became clear to me only after an amusing incident.

One night, Arvind came over and told us he was going for *bahar ka khanna* that night. Vidhu started teasing him, saying, "We know what that means!" I assumed he meant perhaps a night on the town of drinking, since Vidhu had recently mentioned this popular activity to me. "Would you like to join?" Vidhu asked me. I laughed. "I don't know if I'm up for it," I said, still thinking that this was some kind of a drinking party, and dreading having to drink the local strong brew. "Well, just try and see," Vidhu urged. I agreed. When it was time to go, I asked Arvind what was so special about *bahar ka khanna*. He lowered his voice, and said "*Aj, machli hai.*" Machli! Fish! I stopped in my tracks in surprise. So this was what outside food meant! Not drinking, but preparing non-

vegetarian food that their wives would not prepare in the house. I confirmed this with Vidhu and we had a good laugh. Both he and I were vegetarians, but he had not known that I was and so had agreed to go thinking that I might enjoy it. Poor Arvind — we canceled on him, and he seemed more than slightly disappointed as he disappeared into the dark night to join the rest of his male friends in the *bahar ka khanna*.

VILLAGES, VILLAGERS AND THEIR FUTURES

By the year 2000, according to the United Nations report on *An Urbanizing World: Global Report on Human Settlements 1996*, almost 50 percent of the world's total population will be living in towns and cities. Over the next four years, people will be migrating to urban areas in hordes, running from their villages toward a brighter sun. Many of those will survive life feeding only on their hopes and dreams, not on the real stuff — home-grown rice, dal and vegetables — but once gone, few will ever return, no matter how bad the situation may get in the cities. Loss of face? Continual hoping that things will get better? Seeing another's child, the next-door neighbor in your slum, find himself a job — be it as rickshaw-puller or grocery-store clerk — that allows him to move "up"? That seems to be what life is about these days, moving up. Up where? Who knows? Is it really up, or is it just up when the world has been turned upside-down, which is what happens when tradition and modernity conflict? In the words of journalist Jonah Blank, are villagers begin to trade "stagnation and peace of mind for opportunity and frustration"?

The UN report extols the virtue of urban areas for their role in the arts, scientific and technologic innovation and culture and education. But it also warns that urban centers consume natural resources at an alarming rate. One of the greatest needs, then, if one is to ensure that growing urban centers don't eat up the world's resources, is to "de-link high standards of living from high levels of resource use and waste generation." Is this possible? It seems to me that high levels of resource use and waste generation are the pillars upon which modern, technological society is based — at least at present. The countries of the world that have moved *away* from a village-based society to an urban-based society are, the report points out, are generally the ones with the most rapid economic growth and the most economic power. They are also the ones with the highest rates of consumption.

I suggest that this is partly because of the re-definition of community that occurs in the cities. Individual survival overrides community sharing; responsibility for the community belongs to some anonymous centralized body like the city government; people no longer know, much less are related to, their neighbors. This attitude is easily visible in India's cities: people do their utmost to keep their own quarters clean, but dump their garbage just outside their gates. Even a villager who comes to a

city changes: he may throw his cigarette wrapper on the road instead of burning it, thinking that it is only a tiny part of the mounds of already-existing garbage. And as long as poor people live in slums outside one's working and living radius, they can be forgotten.

Some months back, my husband and I were invited to a conference in Delhi put on by a leading management-consulting firm. The theme was "Building a New Vision for India," and the participants were supposed to represent the diversity of India's population. Perhaps the consulting firm did not know many rural people to invite; perhaps the poorer portion of the population that was invited felt uncomfortable attending a conference in the air-conditioned comfort of a five-star luxury hotel; or perhaps the organizers had just decided that these kinds of people would not really enjoy the high-flying conversation, good food and freezing-cold air-conditioning. Whatever the reasons, a few of us (equally urban) found ourselves in the ironic position of trying to raise issues of poverty, rural life and other social issues that we felt applied to the majority of Indians who were not represented that day. In the end, tired and not wanting to sound self-righteous, we listened while our table members talked about how we Indians are so inefficient, we must *do* something about the power outages. Here we are, having to buy expensive generators (which, by the way, pollute the thick Delhi air even more with noise, heat and exhaust fumes) so that we can run the air-conditioners in our houses. Me, me, me, that conference seemed to say. It's all about me and what will make my life easier.

With the modernization of villages, these attitudes are also seeping into villages. Take, for example, the issue of electricity in Kamalsagar. Thanks to Minister Kalpnath, houses pay only Rs.40 (U.S.\$1.20) per month to get a legal electrical connection, no matter how much electricity they use. As a result, I noticed that houses, shops and schools keep their lights on all day and all night, regardless of whether anyone is there. They have no connection with where the electricity comes from, how it's produced, how much of the earth's resources are taken when it is used. All they know is that they pay Rs. 40/month no matter what they use — so why not? If, instead, they had to build fires with wood that they chopped themselves, they would make certain to use minimal amounts of wood so that they would not have to keep chopping down trees — either because they understand (as do most tribal and rural people) that they are using a valuable resource, or, at the very least, because they would want to minimize their own work. It would be beyond imagination to keep a fire going if one will not be there to enjoy its warmth or to cook over its blaze.

In cities, it seems that almost everything has its equivalent of a big distant power plant with a flat fee. City dwellers do not know the source of the amenities with which they are provided. They only know it is the anonymous city government's job to take care of every-

thing; they have little sense of responsibility and therefore little guilt for their inaction or contributions to urban disrepair. Particularly after the rigid confines of village societal structure, the anonymity and lack of responsibility can be freeing — dangerously so.

When I arrived in Kamalsagar, I noticed how quiet the nights were. We would sit in darkness and *feel* night as it descended on us. There were no loud harsh sounds of generators, ever-present in cities. Even though I got varying accounts of how many households had televisions — some said four or five, others said at least half — I did not hear televisions or radios blasting. No sounds of automobiles or rickshaws, just the quiet sounds of nature, perhaps a rat as it nosed around the kitchen, a dog as it searched through the piles of garbage for scraps of food, children playing, or hushed voices in conversation. The village woke early in the morning and by 8:00 P.M., it seemed, everyone was in bed.

"In cities, you are surrounded by artificial things," said Arvind one night. "Here, we only have natural things." True, for the most part. People kept warm with wood fires; cooked on *chulas* (mud pits fueled with burning sticks from the fields), picked fresh vegetables out of their fields, grew their own wheat and made their own sweet, thick molasses syrup from burnt sugar-cane residue. The famous anthropologist, Robert Redfield, defined it this way: "[The peasant has] an intense attachment to native soil; a reverent disposition toward habitat and ancestral ways; a restraint on individual self-seeking in favor of family and community..." Another anthropologist, Walter Lippman, called the city an "acid that dissolves the piety" of a villager and his knowledge that he is "obviously part of a scheme that is greater than himself, subject to elements that transcend his powers and surpass his understanding. Without piety, without a patriotism of family and place, without an almost plant-like implication in unchangeable surroundings, there can be no disposition to believe in an external order of things."

Walking through the fields again reminded me of the simplicity of life. They were set apart from houses or other structures, and formed their own peaceful world. The narrow mud paths divided the land into elegant, geometric designs. I could see around me the various stages of life: newly sprouted, half-bloomed, fully ripe, and recently harvested. A few flowering mustard fields resonated their brilliant yellow for miles; purple eggplants peeped out from among tall leafy stalks. Women sowed seeds, men plowed the fields in rhythm with the earth, the sky, the world.

It felt like a long journey from Varanasi, longer from the even bigger cities of India, and worlds apart from the life I know in urban America. I thought often, during my short stay in the village, of Mahatma Gandhi's words about the need for man to strive to fulfill his needs but not his greed; the world has enough resources for the former, but not for the latter. Even though things were

changing, villagers still seemed — not always of their own choice — much closer to only their needs.

The Late Richard Critchfield and Robert Redfield, two great authorities on village life, culled from their experiences of villages around the world the notion of a universal village culture. What I was observing about the *rhythm* of life, the closeness to the *real* versus the artificial, was similar to what I have seen in other villages across India, Thailand, Africa and Indonesia. In all these villages, there is a connection and reverence not only for nature and God, but a certain groundedness in family and relationships. People come together often, visiting, talking, establishing contact that disallows isolation of individual from his/her community. Grandparents, parents, siblings and relatives carry children and take responsibility for issues that urbanites would shun as being “not my concern.” Everyone is ready without a trace of resentment to do tasks that, in urban areas or in the West, would be seen as obligations or an invasion on personal time.

I am not trying to romanticize village life. I am wont to do that, I confess. The grass is greener on the other side, or in Hindi, *Dur ke dol souhavane hote hai*, “the sound of faraway drums are more pleasant.” I have noticed that many of my Indian friends in Varanasi talk nostalgically about village life and how they dream someday of going back, settling back into their village homes, eating vegetables from their own fields. “How lovely that would be, so much more affordable, so much more peaceful. Life is too hectic here in the cities, no time for anything, you know?” Most of them, I know, will never move. There is too much one gets accustomed to in the cities, and stable and peaceful gets old fast.

The slow-paced rhythm of villages, and the lack of activities once agricultural work is over, also leads to an excessive interest in other people’s lives, an over-analysis and tendency to judge people, a somewhat insular focus on the here and now — the latter as destructive as it can be productive. Life is changing so rapidly that it is impossible for villagers not to see the changes and compare their own lives to these new, puzzling, fascinating possibilities that never existed for their forefathers. And perhaps they know better than any others that life does constantly change, be it in the strength of a monsoon from one year to the next, the social structure of caste that forces a Brahmin to confront the fact that he may be forced to do

something that has traditionally been below his dignity just in order to survive, or access to brightly painted television pictures of life in far-away places like America.

Kamalsagar, in many ways, has been spared so far. Being in the interior, it has yet to experience many of the changes that have occurred in villages closer to urban areas. So far, much of the development that has reached Kamalsagar has been productive. The new roads serve people well in keeping family ties intact even if family members leave the village. Emigration to cities — though starting — is yet to destroy the village as it has other villages. Diesel pumps and electricity help irrigate fields and increase yields without changing entire schedules and lifestyles. (I wondered often if the lack of obsession with television is a key factor in Kamalsagar’s success in preserving so much of its village culture.)

Still, even here, I sensed discontent, a struggle to reconcile old and new, to make sense of a world that no longer consisted of just what was in one’s immediate surroundings but also of what was possible farther away. Stability was becoming confining, family connections burdensome, tradition almost meaningless. Critchfield, in his dynamic conclusion to *Villagers* (the sequel to *Villages*, written 15 years later; he suffered his fatal stroke in Washington two days before a scheduled talk to ICWA about the book), argues strongly for the need to preserve village culture. He poignantly asks, “Our lives are becoming a cacophony of ten thousand noises, and amidst these noises, what do we have for the inner ethical guidance religion once supplied?” It is debatable whether it is religion or tradition (perhaps Critchfield would not even have distinguished between the two) that provided the guidance that seemed to keep villagers so happy relative to their urban counterparts. But either way, there is no question that villagers today, as I saw in Kamalsagar, are beginning to question their rural existence, to wonder if there is more to life than sowing seeds and waiting for rain, to want to shake off the shackles of tradition, certainty, family responsibility and run bare-footed and free, like children, toward an urban paradise. This, too, is a process of change that has become inevitable. Perhaps they will find paradise in the cities; perhaps they will return home and, discontent there, dream up another paradise; or perhaps they will realize they had paradise once and gave it up. □

Index to ICWA Letters by Pramila Jayapal

- A**
- agriculture 19.6
 America, comparison with 17.2, 17.3
An Urbanizing World: Global Report on Human Settlements 1996 19.8
 ashram 19.1
- B**
- Backward Castes (BCs) 18.2, 19.4
 Backward Classes Commission 18.3
 Baijnath 19.1
 Baijnath-Bhu 19.1
 Benares. *See* Varanasi
basti 19.1
 BC. *See* Backward Castes
 beetle 17.2
 Blank, Jonah 19.8
 Brahmin(s) 18.2, 19.8
 Brahmins in Kamalsagar 19.6
- C**
- caste. *See* Brahmin, Gujar, Harijan, Jat, Kshatriya, Kurmi, Lodha, Purohit, Shudra, Untouchable, Vaishya, Yadav, Zamindar
 (and alcohol) 19.8
 (and food) 19.8
 (and sex) 19.8
 structure and politics 18.2
 system 18.2, 19.2
 Caste in Contemporary Rural India 19.2
chai 18.8
 Chaturvedi 19.1
 Chaturvedi, Vidhu 18.2
 Chaubey Brahmins 18.2
chula(s) 18.10, 19.9
 cities 17.4
 colleges and universities
 Benares Hindu University 17.2
 Medical School 17.2
 Congress Party 18.3
 Critchfield, Richard 18.1, 19.10
- D**
- Dehez* 19.7
 Depressed Caste. *See* Backward Castes (BCs)
 development 17.4
dhaba(s) 18.2
dhun 19.1
 dowry 19.7
 dung cakes 18.4
- E**
- education
 for women; for men 19.7
 electricity 19.9
 environment 17.1
- F**
- family 17.3
- G**
- Gandhi, Mahatma 18.2, 19.9
 "Gender Politics" 19.5
 Ghazipur 18.4
 Gorakhpur National Highway 18.2
 Gram Pradhan 19.3
 Gujar(s) 18.3
gur 18.5
- H**
- Harijan(s) 18.2, 18.4, 19.1
hawala scandal 18.5
- I**
- India Today* 18.1, 18.4
- J**
- Jain, Meenakshi 18.2, 18.3
 Jajmani System 19.2
 Jat(s) 18.3
 Jayanthi, C. 19.5
- K**
- kacca* 18.10
 Kamalsagar 18.2, 19.1
 Karanth, G.K. 19.2
 Kishwar, Madhu 19.4
 Kshatriya(s) 18.2, 18.4
 Kurmi(s) 18.3
- L**
- land ownership 18.2
 land-reform 18.3
 Lippman, Walter 19.9
 Lodha(s) 18.3
- M**
- Manushi* 19.4
 Mau 18.4
Mishras 18.2
 monsoons 18.6
- N**
- Narayanan, Usha 19.5
 Nehru 18.3
- O**
- OBCs. *See* Other Backward Castes (OBCs)
 opium 18.4
 Other Backward Castes (OBCs) 18.2, 19.4
- P**
- paan. *See* beetle
panchayat 19.3
 Panchayati Raj Act of 1989 19.4
 patshallah 18.8
 population 17.4, 18.1, 19.8
 priests 19.7 *See also* purohit
pukka 18.10
purohit(s) 18.2
- R**
- radio 17.3
 Rai, Kalpnath 18.5
 Rajasthan 18.6
 Rao, Narasimha 18.5
 Redfield, Robert 19.9
 rickshaws 17.1
 rivers
 Ganga (Ganges) 17.1, 17.4
- S**
- sanyasi* 19.1
 Sarnath 18.2
 Scheduled Castes (SCs) 18.2
Shudra(s) 18.2
 snake-charmer 17.3
 Srinivas, M.N. 18.4
 states (India)
 Gujarat 19.5
 Kerala 19.5
 Maharashtra 19.5
 Tamil Nadu 19.5
 Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) 18.2, 19.5
 sugar 18.5
 Swami Satyanand Chaubey 19.1
 system of labor-for-crops 19.2
- T**
- Taj Mahal 17.3
The Pioneer 19.5
- U**
- U.P. (Uttar Pradesh). *See* States (India)
 United Front Government 19.4
 Untouchable(s) 18.4. *See also* Harijans
- V**
- Vaishya(s) 18.2
 Varanasi (Benares) 18.2
Villages 18.1
 villages 17.4
- W**
- wheat 18.5
 "Women in Panchayats: The Path Ahead" 19.5
- Y**
- Yadav(s) 18.2, 18.3
- Z**
- zamindars* 18.3

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