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Delhi's Margins (SAMAJ-EASAS)

Radhika Govinda

'First Our Fields, Now Our Women': Gender Politics in Delhi's Urban Villages in Transition

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Radhika Govinda

'First Our Fields, Now Our Women': Gender Politics in Delhi's Urban Villages in Transition

- 1 In some of the earliest and most influential writing on cities, the village and the city, or the 'rural' and the 'urban', have been understood as being on the two ends of the historical continuum (see, for instance, Wirth 1964).¹ Mainstream Western theorizations on modernity and development have since then perpetuated the rather simplistic notion that what is urban is modern and what is rural is traditional (Robinson 2006). This is premised on the argument that cities represent an advance on life, a certain progress from primitive societies (Rostow 1960). Western Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution have been central to such an understanding of progress. These theorizations have been challenged from various perspectives (Appadurai 1996, Benjamin 1999, Escobar 1995, Goankar 2001, Hodgson 2001). While it is not my intent to rehearse these perspectives, I would like to draw attention to two broad lines of critique that emerge from them and are of relevance here: one, arguing for alternative/multiple/gendered understandings and experiences of urban modernity and development beyond the Western canon; and the other, urging us to see how urban and rural are bound together and how modern and traditional can be simultaneously present in cities. It is in the context of these debates on village and city, rural and urban, and traditional and modern that the study of urban villages as a phenomenon becomes particularly interesting.
- 2 An urban village is typically identified as 'a village in the city' (Murray 2004). Sociologists, human geographers and urban historians, among others, have shown a keen interest in understanding this phenomenon in different parts of the world (Bell & Jayne 2004, Chapman, Dutt & Bradnock 1999). Indeed, Delhi and other metropolises like New York, London, and Shanghai are in a process of constant transformation and renewal, and urban villages can be found in each of these (Thrift 2000). But urban villages are not cut from the same cloth everywhere. If there are planned and institutionally developed urban villages, created either through the enhancement of historically distinctive areas, or for developing previously economically, culturally or spatially ambiguous areas, there are also urban villages that have come up in a rather haphazard manner. While some urban villages can be found in the heart of the city, others lie at its periphery (Bell & Jayne 2004). Given the diversity of urban villages, it is crucial to examine them in their contextual specificity.
- 3 Many of Delhi's urban villages are a result of 'village engulfing', which was written into the 1961 Delhi Master Plan that aimed at defining urban policy for Delhi. If there were 47 urban villages then, there are about 135 today (Government of Delhi 2006). What is interesting is that the village inhabitants did not move from their rural environs; it is the city that came to them. The Delhi Development Authority (DDA), responsible for executing the Master Plan, had annexed agricultural land, and surrounding residential spaces of villages too had been absorbed over a period of time into the urban agglomeration. The village residents were exempt from building bye-laws and government permission to undertake construction on existing buildings. It is not surprising, then, that these villages grew in the haphazard manner that they did. Not only has the village landscape changed, but the inhabitants' sources of livelihood and lifestyle too have changed. They have mostly abandoned agricultural work, and taken to earning their income from renting housing for living or commercial purposes, or having set up small-scale businesses locally or seeking formal/informal employment in the city (Khanna 2009). Numerous migrants seeking low rental housing, and/or jobs in commercial/industrial units set up in the village have also joined the ranks of the village inhabitants. The changes that have come about have not been without churnings in the village ambience and daily chores, kinship and family ties, and crises of identity (Mehra 2005). The handful of studies on Delhi's urban villages examine urban development policies and plans, the implications of migration

and urbanization on village life, and the changing patterns in demography, occupation and land-use (Bentinck 2000, Dupont 2001, Majumdar & Majumdar 1978, Mehra 2005, Soni 2000, Tyagi 1982). A focus on the village inhabitants' lived experiences, especially from a gender analytical lens, is largely absent.

4 With a view to addressing this gap in the literature, this paper adopts an intersectional approach to look closely at gender politics in Delhi's urban villages in transition. According to this approach, 'gender' is understood as being 'not a sole defining quality but one that exists along with other constituents of identity that intersect with it' (Sunder Rajan 2003: 13). Taking my cue from intersectional theorist Kathy Davis, I use the approach to lay bare 'the interactions between gender... and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power' (2008: 68). Specifically, I focus on how age, caste and religion as other constituents of identity intersect with gender, by exploring the ways in which different generations of men and women have experienced the shift from peasant subsistence economy to capitalist urban economy, the implications this has had for gender relations and family dynamics, and whether the shift has transformed the relations of men and women of dominant castes with those of other (lower) castes and communities inhabiting the village.

5 The paper is primarily based on an ethnography of an urban village in present-day South Delhi. The ethnographic method enables us to carefully examine the life-worlds of the urban villagers, thick with specific experiences, practices, memories and aspirations. It helps us to make sense of 'urban' and 'rural', 'modern' and 'traditional' as 'everyday terms' employed by the urban villagers themselves (Jeffery & Heath 2010). It allows us to explore the ambiguities, contestations, and transformations that are part of the processes of modernity and development as lived experiences, as processes of 'being, becoming, and transforming' (Finn 1988). I am fully aware that there are socio-economic, demographic and spatial differences among Delhi's urban villages, so my aim here is not to offer a definitive account of these villages, but to tease out trends that could be explored through future research on gender politics in these villages in transition.

6 A few words about the urban village under study: Shahpur Jat. The village takes its name from the dominant community here—the Jats. The Jats are an agrarian, middle-ranking caste which takes immense pride in its 'rural' identity and 'masculine' strength. The Jats in Shahpur Jat mostly belong to the Panwar clan, who are said to have originated from the northern Indian state of Haryana. Their most significant 'other' in the village are the Jatavs. Jatavs are a low-ranking caste of agricultural labourers. But farming is no longer the way of life in this village. The DDA acquired Shahpur Jat's agricultural land in the 1960s in the name of 'urban development'. The land was then returned on lease to the villagers, who continued to till it until the 1980s when the DDA finally began constructing the Asiad Village (MARG 1998) ahead of the 9th Asian Games, which took place in India in 1982. But as a result, 900 Jat families lost their fields (Rao 1981). They were of course paid compensation. While some families were able to invest this amount by purchasing gold or land in far off places, for others it simply ran out as they used it for daily expenses. Lacking in educational qualifications and skills other than those required in farming, many of them turned to selling, renting or leasing out portions of their residential property. Present-day Shahpur Jat is surrounded by posh colonies: Andrewsganj to the north, Malviya Nagar to the south, and Panchsheel Park and Hauz Khas to the west. As a result, the demand for real-estate and rental accommodation in the village has increased. A visit to Shahpur Jat today would reveal numerous designer boutiques, book shops, NGO offices, beauty parlours and restaurants. The influx of migrants is rapidly increasing. They mostly live and work in spaces rented out by Jats and Jatavs. Of the 650 households in the village, practically every household owns a TV, a cooking gas connection, a mobile phone, and a scooter or a motorcycle and often also a car. The village can now boast of three government schools, one private school, eleven health clinics and three parks. The nearest metro station is less than one kilometer away. In 1960, when the land was first acquired, there were none of these.

7 The ethnographic narrative in the paper draws specifically on 50 semi-structured interviews and two group discussions, conducted in the first phase of the study from January to July 2012. Consistent with the intersectional approach outlined above, men and women from three different generations were included among the informants. The women can be loosely identified as young women, mostly daughters of the village, middle-aged women, mostly daughters-in-law, and older married or widowed women. While members from both the dominant and lower castes were interviewed, the paper focuses particularly on Jats as they continue to dominate village life socially and politically. I do not use 'class' as a category of analysis. I found that there was a considerable overlap between caste and class backgrounds of the urban villagers; Jats are the dominant community in the village in both caste and class terms. Also, caste emerged as the more commonly used referent by the informants. Migrants living in the village have not yet been interviewed and their voices are therefore absent in the paper.

Gyms, ganja, and gambling: unravelling men and masculinities

8 In a society where male dominance is established by men being typically associated with public, productive spheres, with paid work outside the home, the sale of agricultural land and the renting out of space has challenged the sense of masculinity and dominance of a majority of the village's male inhabitants—an outcome that the urban development planners and the DDA clearly did not foresee, and that these male inhabitants are perhaps not able to fully comprehend. Raewyn Connell's (2005) concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' and the web of concepts related to it help shed light on how this crisis of masculinity is actually experienced differently by men of different castes and different generations in the village. Connell (2005) defines 'hegemonic masculinity' as that form of masculinity which is culturally dominant in a given setting. Although not totally dominant, it is the one which is most visible, and other forms of masculinity, often 'subordinate', exist alongside it. In erstwhile Shahpur Jat, hegemonic masculinity had been typically located in Jat men working in their own fields. Jatav men, who had mostly worked as landless labourers on the Jats' fields, had displayed subordinate masculinities in relation to the landowning Jat men. Even though Jat men continue to dominate the social and political scene, farming no longer being the way of life has unsettled the everyday performance of these hierarchal masculinities. In present day Shahpur Jat, there is barely any scope for interaction among Jat and Jatav men on a daily basis. Many Jat men have found this change difficult to cope with.

9 An intersectional approach leads us to probe how different generations of these Jat men have experienced this crisis differently. Young Jat men can be seen strutting around in Nike and Reebok T-shirts, tight enough to reveal their big biceps, mobile phones in hand, with loud techno and trance music blaring from their swanky cars. Roaming around the village on motorcycles, teasing girls is their favourite pastime. According to one 16-year-old Jat boy, 'Eve-teasing girls, using abusive language (*gaali bakna*) and indulging in hooliganism (*gundagardi*)—this is Jat culture!' Access to educational opportunities may have significantly improved in comparison to the 1960s when the DDA first acquired the land and when the nearest school was seven kilometers away, but with cash flowing in from rent earned by their families, these young men feel no pressing need to pursue higher education or skilled work. Several informants from the older generation expressed concern about the deteriorating village ambience (*mahaul*). A frequent refrain of theirs was, 'These boys have gone out of control (*Ladke haath se nikal gaye hain*)'. They claimed that a number of young Jat men are into drugs (*charas and ganja*) and late night adventures with women from Delhi's red light areas. These nefarious activities are said to go on into the wee hours of the morning in the local parks.

10 In 1981, Amiya Rao had observed young men sitting in groups, playing cards at 10 a.m. in Shahpur Jat. 'Why cards in the morning?' 'What else can we do? The land is gone, the compensation has not yet been paid; there is no money, no job' (1981: 1682). These men are in their forties and fifties today. The compensation was eventually paid for the land that the DDA acquired, and there is money that they now earn from rent, but still no job! One can still

find these men smoking hookah and playing cards in the parks by 10 a.m. as Rao had done all those years ago. They prefer to spend their evenings drinking alcohol with their male friends rather than spending time at home. Alcoholism is rampant among this generation of Jat men. According to some of our female Jat informants, gambling and alcoholism were not and are not common practices among the older generation of Jat men, who had tilled the land. This older generation of men now comprises the 'elderly' or the 'aged' (*bade buzurg*), many of whom are fully or partly dependent on other, younger members of their family. With the sale of their land and the shift to rent, the authority they wielded within the household has been greatly reduced. They express nostalgia for the 'olden days' when, they claim, Shahpur Jat was a self-contained village.

- 11 With the sale of agricultural land, different generations of Jat men have had to find alternative ways of holding onto, if not reconstituting, the ways of being a man, a manly man. The alcohol, the drugs, the eve-teasing, the gambling, the gyms, the guns, and the hookah—all symbols of a hegemonic masculinity—can be read as being instances of this. Even though across the generations these men are no longer involved in productive spheres, in paid work outside the home, they have not withdrawn into private spaces, into the so-called women's spaces. Through the acts of eve-teasing, body-building, smoking, drinking, drug-abuse and gambling performed in public spaces, such as the village by-lanes, the gyms and the local parks, these men demonstrate their masculinity under the surveillance of other male peers from the community, in what may be described as 'homosocial enactment' (Kimmel 2006). In this sense, masculinity is established not simply in relation to femininity but also in relation to the evaluation of male peers and male authority.

Debunking the myth of the Shehri Jat/Dehati Jatni

- 12 In the days when the Jats still owned and worked on their own land, Jat women were said to have been actively involved in agricultural production—in threshing and winnowing, collecting fodder, caring for the cattle, processing cow dung, and fetching water. They were never seen without their veil. When in the fields, the veil was adjusted so that their face and head were wrapped, leaving their eyes unveiled. The practice of veiling (*purdah*) imposed social distance and regulated their behaviour towards those who controlled economic resources, wielded power and made decisions inside and outside the house, especially senior males and some senior females. So while the women were men's full working partners in the fields, they were not free of patriarchal control. The veiled woman, with the attendant ideology of plain living and austere eating, was, in fact, considered the sole custodian of Jats' 'rural' (*dehati*) way of life. Originally having migrated from Haryana, the Jats of Shahpur Jat claimed that they derived their ideology of plain living and austere eating from the Haryanvi Jats. The peasant subsistence economy and the arid climate of the region had come to be reflected in the simple food habits, dressing and living standards of the Haryanvi Jats, and the responsibility of maintaining these habits and standards supposedly rested with the Jat women of Shahpur Jat.
- 13 The shift from the peasant subsistence economy has, no doubt, brought about changes in the lives of women. Both Prem Chowdhry (1993), writing about Jat women in rural villages of Haryana, and Sunil K. Khanna (2001), reflecting on Jat women in urban villages of Delhi, argue that these changes have been purely negative. Khanna, in fact, claims that the women have remained 'rural' whereas the men have become 'urban'. It may indeed be true that men now own and drive cars whereas women can barely step out of their homes alone, and that boys are sent to English-medium private schools in the city whereas girls are sent to the government school in the village. But does this really mean that Jat men have become 'urban' and Jat women have remained 'rural'? I argue that there are elements of mythmaking in the way the 'rural' is evoked, and especially in the way Jat women are constructed as the sole custodians of Jats' 'rural' way of life. I take my cue here from the critics of mainstream Western theorists of modernity and development, especially Walter Benjamin (1999) who insists on the co-presence of the urban and the rural, the modern and the traditional. In fact, for Benjamin, tradition is born in the time of modernity; the past is mobilized in the present to figure and

hold at bay qualities that are unsettling for people in the here and now. The Jats' evocation of their 'rural' past and their emphasis on maintaining their 'rural' way of life, need to be read in this vein.

- 14 Further, I draw on Nira Yuval-Davis's (1997) work to support my line of argumentation. She writes that women are expected to be the biological and cultural reproducers of any community. The male members of the community are self-appointed providers and border guards—tasks symbolically linked with codes of hegemonic masculinity. They are expected to provide for the material needs of their family and guard the community against all influences that challenge the norm of women being biological and cultural bearers. This norm is maintained, among other things, through cultural codes of style of dress and behaviour. Examined from a gender analytical lens, it is then clear why it is the veiled Jat woman who is expected to embody and reproduce the 'rural' way of life. A more nuanced picture—than men having become 'urban' and women having remained 'rural'—emerges if we examine generation-wise the changes that Jat women have experienced.

Raising educated brides/aspiring career women?

- 15 19-year-old Sonal of Shahpur Jat wants to become an IAS officer (civil servant). 'It is important to work. So one can become independent,' she remarks. She aspires to move out of the village. 'The village ambience (mahaul) is bad. There's too much noise (shor) and too many fights,' she adds. Everyone is always telling her off for the clothes—jeans and T-shirt—she wears. The boys do not have any such restrictions (*rok tok*). She considers that if her family were to live outside, she would have a better chance in life: she could study well, get married to the person of her choice and continue working after marriage. What she feels most disgruntled about is the fact that wherever she and her girlfriends go, they must go chaperoned by a male member of their family. Naman, a 20-year-old boy whom we interviewed had dropped out of school at an early age, and now spent his time roaming around the village with his friends on a motorcycle. He had declared with immense pride that he had never let his elder sister Akhila, who is 23 years of age, go anywhere alone. To quote him, 'My sister has never gone anywhere alone. From 7th till 12th Class, during her college days, when she was pursuing her MBA and even now when she is working (job par), I drop her and bring her back'. Naman and Akhila's mother, Amrita Panwar, had added with equal pride, 'He [Naman] often says that he left his studies to look after his sister' (*Yeh toh kehta hi hai ki behen ke peeche maine apni padhai chhod di*).
- 16 In the past, it would have been highly unlikely for girls like Akhila to complete their schooling, let alone to pursue higher studies or to take up a job thereafter. Adolescence would have marked the end of their education, if they received one at all. But 'these days', affirms Amrita Panwar, 'all our girls go [to school]... Without education it is not possible to manage anymore'. Indeed, Jat girls today are being educated, but in a number of cases their families invest in girls' education with a view to present them in the future as suitable brides, who will be able to assist in their children's education and to look after the home and the hearth smoothly. It is considered that educated daughters are likely to find educated grooms from well-to-do families, and therefore have a higher chance of enjoying a more financially secure future and better quality of life. A recent study by Nitya Rao (2009) suggests that investment in education from this perspective is in fact a growing trend in rural India. That these girls could pursue a career after their studies and make a mark for themselves is, however, not a consideration in most Jat homes. In the context of Shahpur Jat, the economic affluence of the Jat community is cited as a reason for the girls to stay at home even after pursuing higher studies. 'These girls are all from well-to-do homes (khat peete gharon se), none of them [the households] lack (kami) in any manner. What is the need for girls to work then?' asserts Akhila's father, 45-year-old Rajdeep Panwar, who doesn't approve of his daughter going to work.
- 17 Having had the opportunity to step outside the village boundary to pursue higher studies and, in Akhila's case, take up a job, the girls have been exposed to an alternative way of life. Their plans and aspirations do not match those that their elders have for them. Our interaction with adolescent girls and boys revealed that the girls are far more interested in pursuing higher

studies in comparison to the boys who are satisfied with the cash flowing in from the rent earned by their families. Like Sonal, several of the girls we interviewed seem to be aspiring to pursue not only higher education, but also a career. Their career aspirations are perceived as a threat to hegemonic masculinity, which (as discussed in an earlier section) has already taken a beating with the men no longer 'working' to provide for their family. By wearing cosmetics and 'modern' clothes—not the traditional long shirt (*kameez*), skirt (*lehenga*) and scarf (*odhni*) and not even the more recent long shirt, pants (*salwar*) and scarf borrowed from Punjabis—the young women are making it amply clear that they have not remained 'rural' in their tastes. By choosing their own partners, as some of them have done, they are also challenging conventional codes of marriage—in this case hypergamy and exogamy—and signalling that they are in full control of their sexuality. This is an obvious threat to the preservation and continuity of the community and to hegemonic masculinity that is intrinsically entangled with it.

The village dons, the others and 'inter-caste' marriages

18 In desperate attempts to recover—and in the process reconstitute—their hegemonic masculine pride, the men are imposing restrictions on women's mobility. Young Jat men like Naman chaperoning female family members, especially young women, is as much a manifestation of their attempts to re-assert their dominance and to reconstitute their masculinity (such that it conforms to hegemonic masculine ideals) as their roaming through the village by-lanes on motorcycles, eve-teasing young women. Honour killings in Delhi's urban villages too can be read in such a light. 'A man is 'dishonoured' and feminized as 'weak' when his daughter [or sister] elopes or is 'stolen' by another man' (Chowdhry 2005: 5193). Physical violence is a manifestation of hegemonic masculinity and the 'dishonoured' man resorting to it is his attempt to recover his masculine pride. That both older and younger men from the dominant community want to be seen exercising it, as much against women as against other men, is evident in the way in which they come together in caste panchayats (*khap*) in Delhi's urban villages, inflicting the death penalty on 'errant couples', compelling them to divorce, humiliating the male partner, that is, the 'other' man, in public by blackening his face, making him ride a donkey, or beating him up with shoes (Gahlot 2010). This 'other' man in question is often a lower caste insider, in other words a Jatav man, or an 'outsider', either a migrant or a non-resident tenant.

19 As stated earlier, with the sale of agricultural land, the Jats and the Jatavs no longer interact with each other on a daily basis in the way that they had previously. In the past, land ownership was an important reason for the Jats' dominance, and this dominance often got played out in gendered ways. Jat male landlords sexually exploiting Jatav female agricultural labourers was not an unusual happening. With the sale of land this no longer happens, but Jats' dominance has not disappeared. To quote a male Jatav informant in his late twenties, 'Between them and us, the difference is of sky and earth (*un me aur hum me, zameen aasman ka fark hai*). We won't even speak in front of them. If perchance we speak, understand that we'll be beaten up (*agar bol gaye to samajho pit gaye*)'. What the Jatavs also more subtly suggest is that Jat dominance is being reconstituted. Today, the reason for their dominance is their ownership of property, the rent they earn and their ability to manipulate the urban development machinery to suit their interests. A female Jatav respondent in her early twenties observes, 'All the boundaries are intact in the village. The Jats have more space so they get more rent. They are moneyed. They suppress the SCs [Scheduled Castes]. They distribute alcohol for votes at the time of elections. They bribe the police personnel. The Jats manage to appropriate others' property. Jat teachers practice discrimination against Jatav students in school... The Jats, they pose as 'dons' (*Jat log woh don bante hain*)!' Hence, it is not unusual for runaway marriages between Jats and lower caste Jatavs to be made a pretext for settling wider caste issues. This serves to challenge what has commonly been suggested about caste in urban India. Scholars like Ashis Nandy (2001) have claimed that urbanization provides opportunities for upward social and occupational mobility as a result of which caste-based distinctions are less visible in Indian cities. I argue that whilst urbanization affords anonymity and mobility to a range

of castes, caste-based practices remain salient to segregation and to practices of distinction, discrimination and even domination in Shahpur Jat and other such places.

20 When it comes to the 'outsiders', the Jats have a strange relationship with them. They welcome them, giving them space to rent for commercial and residential purposes. Shahpur Jat has non-residential tenants who have opened boutiques, restaurants, NGO offices, small-scale workshops and shops. Its residential tenants consist of migrants predominantly from the North East, Bihar and West Bengal. With rent having replaced farming as a way of life, these 'outsiders' are their biggest source of income. For them, the Jats have renovated their buildings, giving these an 'urban', 'modern' appeal. But they also perceive these 'outsiders' as being a threat to the 'rural' culture. If, in the past, Jat women, especially girls, were not allowed to go outside the village alone, they are increasingly being chaperoned as soon as they step out of their homes because the village now has 'urban', 'untrustworthy' 'outsiders'. A constant refrain among our Jat informants was that they first lost their fields and now they are losing their girls. Ever since the influx of these 'outsiders', the number of 'inter-caste marriages' has gone up in the community. Curiously, by 'inter-caste marriages' the informants meant both inter-caste and inter-religious marriages. To quote a middle-aged female Jat informant, 'Usually, marital alliances are forged within one's own caste, and most definitely not with Muslims (*aur Musalmanon mein to bilkul nahin karte*). But in the last few years, the cases of inter-caste marriage have gone up'. Alliances between male (Muslim) outsiders and native Jat women are regarded as violating the 'traditional' marriage norms. When asked about their position on honour killings, several of the informants observed that though such extreme violence should be avoided, the 'errant' females need to be made aware of the dishonour they bring to the community. Hegemonic masculinity in the context of Delhi's urban villages is in this sense as much about insider-outsider and religious politics as it is about gender and caste inequalities. When it comes to 'outsiders', the Jats selectively conduct and construct themselves in 'urban' and 'rural' ways, on the one hand projecting themselves as 'urban' and 'modern' by renovating their buildings to suit 'urban' aesthetics, and on the other hand opposing inter-caste and inter-religious marriages in the name of upholding their 'rural' roots and 'traditional' culture.

The price of being a woman

21 While every generation of Jat women living in the village has had to pay the price for having been born female, the price paid by those who had come to Shahpur Jat as brides in the 1980s is perhaps the highest. As newly married women, they were responsible for looking after the household chores. They would have had an opportunity to work in the fields only after a few years of marriage, in most cases after having given birth to a child or two. But with the loss of the lands, these women never had that opportunity. Unlike their daughters, who had the opportunity to step out of their homes to attend school and college, even if chaperoned, these women remained confined to their homes. Jat men's attempts at recovering—and in the process reconstituting—their hegemonic masculine pride, meant that these women were excluded from all income-generating activities undertaken by the members of the household, thereby marginalizing their position in it. But their exclusion was justified under the guise of maintaining high family status, community prestige and purity from the 'impure' 'urban' context. These women are now middle-aged and complain of a life of monotony.

22 This generation of women seems to have unquestioningly internalized a number of patriarchal customs, of which veiling is one. To quote one of my middle-aged female Jat informants, Sheela, 'One should not roam around unveiled (*ughade se*), one should at least maintain eye modesty (*ankh ki sharm*) outside and in front of elders'. Another practice that this generation of women appears to have quietly borne is domestic violence. As discussed earlier in the paper, alcohol abuse is common among their male counterparts. Men consuming alcohol and beating up their wives is yet another instance of their trying to reconstitute ways of being a manly man. To quote Sheela, 'The incidence of domestic violence (*maarna peetna*) after alcohol consumption is higher among the Jats. Sitting doing nothing (*khali baithe baithe*), money is coming in, and with rise in the money coming in, these vices too have risen'. Yet another

practice that Sheela’s generation of women has acquiesced to is that of son preference and daughter disfavour. The women discussed this in a very matter-of-fact manner. ‘One must have at least one son’ (*Ek ladka toh hona hi chahiye*), they said. Some revealed that they had not been allowed to and others claimed that they had chosen not to undergo the ‘operation’ (*i.e.*, sterilisation) until they had had a son. Their ideal family size was four: ‘We two, our two’ (*hum do, humare do*), they said, reproducing the national family planning slogan. It was not possible to gauge whether female infanticide too had been practised as a means to reduce the number of daughters in the family. But they did show an awareness of contraceptives and of prenatal sex-determination technologies.

- 23 In the case of the younger generations of women, it was evident that they were attempting to resist, subvert and challenge codes on mobility, honour and sexuality. But this was not so evident among the middle-aged women. Nonetheless, in the past few years, the veil has risen a little higher and some women now only cover their heads and not their faces. The joint family setup is gradually being replaced by nuclear families. While this is not unique to the urban village context, some interesting insights emerge when we examine how this converges with other changes in the village and the implications these have on the aspirations of different generations of Jat women. For some of Shahpur Jat’s middle-aged women, the rise of nuclear families has meant a certain release from the control of the generation before them. They relish the fact that they can now spend money on clothes, cosmetics and jewellery, and lead a ‘city’ life. One informant insisted she had friends ‘only outside the village’. To quote Ratna, Sheela’s co-sister:

I am very happy since my parents-in-law have left. Now, I go to the malls to shop without a care (*araam se*), I watch TV, I meet up with my friends from outside the village. My mother-in-law did not approve of unnecessary roaming around (*fizul ka ghoomna phirna*)... As such my parents-in-law were both very nice and never said anything to me. I myself felt that I should maintain eye modesty (*ankh ki sharm*) in their presence.... But who would like to live like a village bumpkin (*dehati*) nowadays! When my mother-in-law was around, she would keep the rent with her, and one needed to ask her for money. Now, we get the rent and spend it the way we want to. Finally, I can fulfil my interest (*shaukh poora karna*) in jewellery.

- 24 What emerges rather poignantly here is the manner in which their espousing an ‘urban’ way of life (equated with autonomy, comfort and consumption) in contradistinction to the ‘rural’ way of life (equated with seclusion and austerity) is used to refer to their relative release from patriarchal control.

Taking the veil off codes on mobility, honour and sexuality

- 25 Fully or partly dependent on other, younger family members today, ‘elderly’ women lament the loss of agricultural land, this land having become a symbol of a bygone era when those their age would have still wielded authority in the family. It is not surprising, then, that their attempts at wresting some power for themselves are justified in the name of maintaining the ‘rural’ heritage of their community and are channelled primarily through their daughters-in-law and grand-daughters (their own daughters having left the village after marriage). They decry the ‘corrupting’ influence of popular media and ‘mall culture’ (a term they themselves use) on the conduct (*chaal chalan*) of the younger generations of women. According to them, the ‘city air’ (*shehr ki hawa*) is a real threat to the community’s ‘traditions’ (*paramparayein*).
- 26 This older generation of Jat women speaks vehemently in favour of the seclusion of married women. A married woman who does not follow the custom of veiling is called nude (*nangi*), shameless (*basharm*), and even loose (*awara*). Women from the older generation are vocal in condemning any lapse in the custom of veiling. To quote Geeta Panwar, an informant from this generation:

‘Nowadays, daughters-in-law come out with naked head (*nange sir*) [i.e. unveiled] in the village in front of the elders. No one says anything to their face but amongst

themselves they obviously talk. It is okay to be 'modern' up to a point but who would approve if you wore jeans and roamed around showing your chest (*chhati dikhate phirna*) [again, unveiled] like that!'

- 27 What becomes clear is that the veil is not simply intended to cover the women's face and head but also their breasts. Geeta Panwar's passing judgement on the non-observance of the custom of veiling, especially the allusion to untamed sexuality in her remark, reaffirms the patriarchal ideology of seclusion-cum-control. The importance of her remark on the daughters-in-law being 'modern' becomes evident when read in conjunction with what she and other women from her generation have to say about the daughters of the village, especially with respect to their mobility. To quote Charu Panwar, a female Jat informant from this generation, 'We have women doctors and teachers in the house. We are for education but we can't let go of our culture. If we want to live in the village, we cannot let our girls go out alone. They must be chaperoned at all times...' Geeta Panwar takes a more conservative position:

That she gallivant, spend her earnings here and there, eat out, go to movie theatres, roam around with some unrelated man [*gair mard*]... instead it is better that the woman remains inside the home. Womankind [*aurat zat*] is such that if anyone looks at her in the wrong way, thinks about her in the wrong way, it can create problems... But the girls of today (*aaj ki ladkiyan*) are very hi-fi. Where do they have time for respecting their elders! They should at least cover their heads [*sir par parda kare*] before stepping out. But they have no such shame [*sharm*]!

- 28 For the older generation of women, being 'modern' is synonymous with being 'urban', with women being educated, wearing Western clothes, going out unveiled and without a chaperone, eating out and going to movie theatres, and roaming around with unrelated men, in other words, dating men. Once again, the 'urban'/rural', 'modern'/traditional' dichotomies are brought to bear on women as a way of controlling their sexuality and ensuring the maintenance of the honour of the community. The use of an intersectional approach reveals that notwithstanding the gender identity that senior females share in common with junior females, like male members of the community, they too present themselves as self-appointed border guards of the community and attempt to control the sexuality of junior females. The older generation of Jat women has a vested interest in ensuring that the patriarchal ideology of seclusion-cum-control thrives. Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of 'patriarchal bargain' helps us shed light on why this is the case. Kandiyoti argues that patriarchy presents women with distinct 'rules of the game', and calls for different strategies with varying potential for maximizing their power position in the face of oppression. The patriarchal bargain is an individual strategy certain women employ to manipulate the oppressive system to their least disadvantage. The senior females in the Jat community actively collude in the reproduction of women's subordination by enforcing 'the rules of the game', in this case the patriarchal ideology of seclusion-cum-control, as it is from this that, like male members of the community, they too derive their sense of status and authority. The non-observance of the customs of veiling and seclusion would negatively affect their position in the family hierarchy. Aligning themselves in this way with male members is the patriarchal bargain that they make so as to wrest for themselves some power and influence. They have already paid the price of being a woman as somebody's daughter and somebody else's daughter-in-law, and it is their turn now to make good of the price they have paid.

Conclusion

- 29 As Delhi hurries on to become a World Class city, and as the cityscape continues to be transformed in the name of 'development', it is wise to remember those who have remained either forgotten by or at the margins of most development plans, but whose lives have been forever changed by them. Delhi's urban villagers are one such people. Focusing on the gender politics of development by employing an intersectional approach what might otherwise be invisible. In this paper, I have sought to demonstrate how the shift from a peasant subsistence economy to a capitalist urban economy has had specific implications for gender

relations and dynamics between different communities, how the intersection of caste and gender norms influences male and female bodies' negotiation of urban village spaces, and how development, marginalization and resistance are far from gender neutral in such spaces. The DDA's acquisition of agricultural land in the name of 'urban development' has had several perverse effects on gender politics and community dynamics in the village. The gendered ways in which the acquisition might affect the village inhabitants not having been one of DDA's concerns has meant that male members of the dominant Jat community in Shahpur Jat continue to grapple with a crisis of masculinity triggered by the loss of agricultural land. In a society where hegemonic masculinity is located in men who are typically associated with public, productive spheres, with paid work outside the home, the Jat men losing the fields they owned and worked on, and rent replacing farming as a way of life has meant that the mechanism through which they fulfilled their role as bread earners for their families, and in doing so conformed to hegemonic masculine ideals, is no longer available to them.

30 Different generations of Jat men have found different ways of holding on to, if not reconstituting, the ways of being a man, a manly man, to adjust to the shift from the peasant subsistence economy they had known to an urban capitalist one. The younger generation of men no longer feel the pressure to pursue higher studies, and are content with the cash flowing in from the rent earned by their families. With their hanging around in the village by-lanes during the day, the incidence of eve-teasing is said to have gone up. By night, they take to local parks where they partake in other illicit acts. Among the middle generation of men, gambling, alcoholism and wife-beating have increased. The older generation of men continue to hold on the hookah. The different generations of men come together in the name of community honour, colluding to advocate, if not commit, violence against lower caste and migrant males seen as being illegitimately involved with women from their community. The hookah, the alcohol, the drugs, the gambling, the guns, the eve-teasing, the wife-beating, and the honour killings can all be read as manifestations of attempts that the Jat men of Shahpur Jat are making to recover hegemonic masculinity. These attempts are as much about caste dominance and insider-outsider politics as they are about maintaining gender asymmetries.

31 Chowdhry's (1993) and Khanna's (2001) assertions about women having experienced the shift from the peasant subsistence economy to an urban capitalist one in purely negative terms are unconvincing. A more complex, intersectional understanding of the changing political economy of Delhi's urban villages and its implications emerges when we examine generation-wise how men and women negotiate everyday life in such transitional spaces. My findings from Shahpur Jat suggest that patriarchal codes of mobility, honour and sexuality have not disappeared, but have undergone transformation. The veil has not vanished but has risen higher, with some women now only covering their heads and not their faces. Girls, though always chaperoned by male family members, are being sent to school and college. Parents may be investing in their education with the view that they can make educated wives and homemakers someday, but the girls have aspirations of their own about both career and marriage. Simplistic assertions about the men of Delhi's urban villages having turned 'urban' while the women have remained 'rural' are also problematic. My findings suggest that the Jats, both men and women, selectively employ the terms 'urban' and 'rural', and also 'modern' and 'traditional'—at times projecting their lifestyle as being 'urban' and 'modern' and at other times exalting the virtues of the 'rural' and 'traditional' way of life—in the service of patriarchy, justifying son preference and daughter neglect, restrictions on women's mobility, veiling and seclusion, domestic violence and abuse as they attempt to make sense of and adjust to changes taking place in their own lives and surroundings.

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Notes

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Abstract

This paper is about gender politics in Delhi's urban villages in transition. It explores the gender differentiated ways in which men and women of Delhi's urban villages have experienced the shift from peasant subsistence economy to capitalist urban economy, the implications this has had for gender relations and family dynamics and whether the shift has transformed the relations of men and women of dominant castes with those of other (lower) castes and communities inhabiting the villages. It argues that patriarchal codes of mobility, honour and sexuality, though far from disappearing, are changing. Men and women seem to be strategically employing the tropes of 'urban'/'rural', 'modern'/'traditional' to justify

their attempts at wresting some power for themselves as they attempt to reconstitute their masculinities and femininities in these urban villages in transition. The paper is primarily based on an ongoing gendered ethnography of one such urban village in present-day South Delhi.

Index terms

Keywords : urban villages, Delhi, gender politics, development, dominant caste, jats.