



## Woman vs Woman

### Charlotte Wiser's *Srimati*

A Glimpse of Gender and Caste Relations  
in a North Indian Village in the 1920s

○ Susan S. Wadley

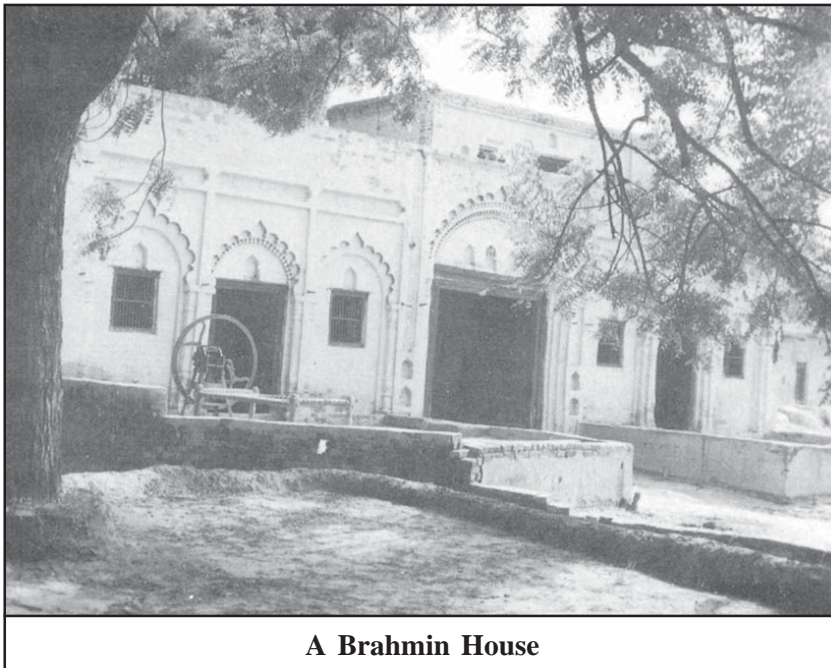
In a poignant retelling of an event recounted to her by a young Brahmin woman from the village known as Karimpur, Charlotte Wiser, an American missionary and student of Indian social life, captures much of the essence of caste and gender relations in rural Uttar Pradesh (then United Provinces) in the 1920s.

As Charlotte affirms in a letter about this narrative written in 1980, "It sounds over-done (all the usual flourishes). But it actually happened."! She remembers having written it when it occurred-in the 1920s-and identifies clearly the house involved, commenting further on her continuing dislike for the Brahmin husband of her young friend. She adds that the only fictitious touch is the woman's name, for a married woman never uses nor is addressed by her maiden name:

This moving and evocative

narrative, telling about the abuse of women, both high and low, and the manipulation by men of the rules of pollution and purity as well as economics, will surprise no one who knows Karimpur, whether as visitor or "reader" of the many pieces written about it.<sup>3</sup> Capturing deeplyrooted ideals of proper females, kinship roles, and caste divisions, it is a compelling snapshot of north Indian village life in the 1920s.<sup>4</sup> As a story of the times, and as one that resonates even today in many rural as well as urban communities in parts of the world where men remain

economically and socially dominant and women are unable to unite because of their economic and social positions, I present it here.<sup>5</sup> But first some background. In 1916, the American missionary Charlotte Viall joined her fiance William Wiser at Allahabad, where he was hoping to teach in an agricultural college under the auspices of the



A Brahmin House

American Presbyterian Mission. 6 Educated at the University of Chicago and married in India in 1916, the young couple soon shifted to Cawnpore (Kanpur) where they worked in public health and adult education programmes. In the early 1920s, the Mission asked William to



**The house of a poor villager**

investigate failing cooperatives in Mainpuri district in western Uttar Pradesh. This project convinced the Wisers that missionaries could not function merely on a visitation basis, and that they needed to live in villages and participate in everyday life. So in 1925, with the consent of the Presbyterian Mission, the Wisers family (there were now two sons, a third was born before their village stay ended five years later) began a five-year study of a village in Mainpuri district.<sup>7</sup> In Karimpur, the pseudonym given to the village, William and Charlotte and their sons set up camp every dry season in a village orchard and eventually became two of the best known interpreters of Indian rural life, from the 1930s through today.

Their book *Behind Mud Walls*, revised and updated several times by Charlotte with an additional chapter by me, remains in print today, having sold over 50,000 copies. William's MA paper in rural sociology at Cornell University, *The Hindu Jajmani System*, became one of the most influential writings on the social organization of Indian village life and remains a required reading for most advanced students even today. It also spawned a variety of attempts to redefine and reconceptualise caste relationships in rural India, both north and south. Although seldom read, they also wrote theses for advanced degrees—William received a doctorate in rural sociology and Charlotte did her MA in nutrition from Cornell University. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, near the end of her life, Charlotte wrote yet another volume on Karimpur, *Four Families of Karimpur*, a book which examines four families of varying social rank as they lived through the social changes wrought by the Green Revolution and the political, economic restructuring following India's Independence.

Karimpur, the village about which they wrote, has social characteristics that may have warped their and other westerners' views of Indian society for some generations to come. With about 700 people in the 1920s, the village was economically, politically and ritually dominated by a Brahmin caste group (Kanauji or

Kanya Kubja Brahmins). According to the village-origin myth, one Khan Bahadur fought a battle in Karimpur during Moghul times and gave the village that he won to a family of Brahmins. The descendants of two of those men form the Brahmin community today, besides the husbands of some daughters who migrated in. One small group of Brahmins are descendants of the revenue collector appointed to the village in the 1800s. In the 1920s, the Brahmin families owned over 80 per cent of the village land and were the principal *jajmans* for about 20 other castes residing there. Only in the early 1990s such Brahmin dominance waned sufficiently for a non-Brahmin to be elected village headman.

To do their work of learning about village life in Karimpur, the Wisers clearly had to have the support of the Brahmin community (see *Behind Mud Walls* for their story of making friends), and it was a Brahmin landlord who let them set up their tents in his orchard. (Later they built a house on yet another Brahmin's land, intending to retire there.) It is clear from reading their books that their primary connections with the rural community were through and with the Brahmins, giving their writings a peculiarly Brahmin-bias, a form of caste racism.<sup>8</sup> The only Christians in the community were untouchable sweepers, but in none of Wisers' writings do we hear much about them, or their subjugation and oppression.

Untouchability remains firmly entrenched in Karimpur: For example, even today no Sweeper-children are allowed in the village school, although the children of Leatherworkers and midwives are clean enough to attend the school. Brahmins will neither take food nor water from an untouchable, and when a Sweeper would come to my door seeking medicines

that I distributed free (I too lived in the house the Wisers built on that Brahmin land), I had to toss the lotions, salves or pills into their laps, never touching them. (I broke these rules only in the untouchable sections of the village and out of .the sight of the high castes.)

In Karimpur of the 1920s, the women led very restricted lives. Young married women almost never left their husbands houses. Their mothers-in-law represented the family at any women's function. They were veiled before all men senior to their husbands and were forbidden to talk to strangers, before elders, or even to their husbands in the presence of their parents. Their mothers-in-law enforced these rules to maintain family honour and caste status. Women, with their restricted mobility and access to information, were usually more conservative about social interactions and religious rules than were their husbands. They were taught that being a good wife was their only realistic goal. This meant total obedience to the husband and mother-in-law and other elders. In Srimati, the woman cites Sita, Savitri and Damayanti as true proper wives who obeyed their husbands whatever the circumstances. As one Brahmin man, in his teens in the 1920s, put it when I asked him about controlling women, "Control (said in English). They don't have much knowledge. How is the lion locked in a cage? It lacks reason. Man protects her from everything." (From Wadley 1994, p 37.) This same man also believed that women, because they were born with eight demerits (including uselessness, fickleness, guile and cruelty) were more susceptible to errors of action. His example is pertinent to the following story: suppose a Sweeper comes to someone's house for a feast and his hand accidentally touches one of the householders. The man or woman touched won't become a Sweeper, but a woman would be more polluted, more affected by the touch than a man because she is by nature more susceptible to the results of any wrongdoing. His interpretation thus reinforces the domination of and restrictions on high caste women.

Low caste women face different problems. They are doubly subordinated-by caste, by economic options and by gender. With the Brahmin6 owning more than 80 per cent of the land, the low castes in Karimpur, especially the untouchables, were landless. Their survival depended upon

work, either through the jajmani system or as day labourers, and on loans from the land owners. While the low caste woman has had more freedom of movement, her work as a Watercarrier or Sweeper or midwife demanding that she move about the village, makes her more vulnerable to the sexual demands of economically dominant men. Although I never heard Srimati's story myself, I did know other low caste women who were harassed, raped or had lovers (I use this term advisedly: I don't know what these women thought of their lovers), who were often high caste men, their landlords.

Relations .between men and women, women and women, and Brahmin and Sweeper form the crux of the story of Srimati. I find the story compelling, capturing as it does the relations between husband and wife, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, master and servant, mistress and servant. I am intrigued, given Charlotte's affirmation of the truth of this story, with Srimati's acceptance of her husband having an affair with an untouchable, Randevi. She seems open to the idea of his having a Watercarrier lover. Her overt condoning of a double standard for men and women seems remarkable, although again I know of Brahmin families where the husband's lover is accepted into the family, at least at some level. Finally, as further confirmation of the truth of this story, in her letter to Smalley, Charlotte comments on the "children there (in the Sweeper colony) with skin fairer than their relatives".

What is compelling about this story, however, is the combined force of economic realities and cultural practices that renders the two younger women helpless. Moreover, it highlights the gulf between the two women, both victims of the same male but never able to join together, given the cultural constraints in which they find themselves. Both women are vaguely aware of the force of cultural and economic rules that engulf them, though each is in such a different position that she cannot envision the dilemmas of the other. Srimati speaks of the disgrace facing her if banished from her husband's house and of the need to emulate those women who devoted themselves to obedience to and worship of their husbands.

Randevi seeks annulment of her father's loan and is told very clearly that she is his until her beauty disappears. Yet Srimati can only hate the vile untouchable and Randevi can only laugh at the deluded Brahmin wife.



**An elderly Brahmin Woman**

# The Story of Srimati

Under the high, sagging, mudplastered arch I passed, into the spacious, dilapidated courtyard once the resting place of a rani's 10 guard, on through an empty cattle room to the second mudwalled enclosure littered with fodder and stacks of cowdung cakes, around a sharp bend and along a tunnel passage, and finally into the high walled courtyard where Krishna kept his wife. He was as careful of his wife as of his rupees. Everyone in the village knew that Krishna buried his rupees, and everyone whispered that he would kill the man who looked on his wife.

The courtyard was deserted. A crow flapped to the top of a wall and perched there, waiting. In the middle of the court was a rope bed covered with a coarse sheet and spread with drying grain. In one corner a circle of rough stones marked the well. Beside it the mud floor was strewn with brass lotas (pot) and trays gleaming in the hot morning sun. From an inner room came the rhythmic hum of a grinding stone. "Srimati", I called, softly. To step into the courtyard uninvited would be presuming. I wanted to enter, but at Srimati's invitation, not that of Krishna's blind mother. She was too much like the crow that cocked its head and waited for the moment to swoop.

The hum of stone upon stone ceased, and Srimati came hurrying through the doorway, her headscarf thrown back. Krishna had reason to be jealous of her. Among the women of the village coarsened by labour in withering sun and parching wind, she was a dainty bit of aristocracy. She was small, but she had poise that added to her height. Her eyes were large, her nose narrow, and her

lips formed a delicate Rama's bow. Hers was a Brahmin beauty, the product of generations of selection. She was sixteen, five years Krishna's wife.

"Why have you stayed away from me so long, friend of my heart?" Her voice was severe, but her eyes were gentle. She drew a low square rope stool into the shadow of a wall. And pushing me gently down on it, seated herself on the ground at my feet. You have been many times to the Tailors next door and to the Shepherds beyond our walls, and to all the neighbours round. But you have slighted me. Smallpox and pneumonia are both bad this spring. I have only had time to go where I was specially needed. Suffering is all around you, but you are tucked away in here, safe from it all. How does a proper purdahnashin (woman in seclusion) like you know where I have been?

She laughed, but her laugh was unpleasant, not Srimati's usual cluck and low chuckle. "My lord thinks he can keep me here in



ignorance. He forgets that there are stairs, and walls. Have you forgotten the morning we spent on the roof while he was in the city?" I remember well, the precipitous stairs of black earth worn off at the edges, and the passage so narrow that one had almost to move sideways.

I remembered too our talk, up there among the treetops. It was the subject always dear to village women. to talk of marriage and babies. Srimati had been proud of her marriage, infinitely satisfied.

"How I praised my husband that day. I thought him perfect, didn't I? A model Brahmin and husband." She began turning one of her silver toe rings. I was mystified. I had always come to Srimati for laughter. Here were tears.

"He is a deceitful man, dearest friend. But that is nothing." She rested her arm on my knees and pressed her forehead against it. "He is defiled." She pronounced it as though it were a death sentence.

She drew suddenly away. "And I, his wife, am defiling you. Forgive me, helper of the poor, my thoughtlessness." She touched the earth at my feet.

"Srimati," I rebuked her. "You talk of defiling? Have I not held every outcaste baby in this village? Don't be absurd."

She looked up at me appraisingly, as though at a stranger. "You do go to them, don't you? And still you expect to go to paradise? But you always bathe afterwards. You promised me you would. Even so if I ever saw you touching one of them, I don't believe I could let you come near me. But what am I saying? I used to be so sure. I, a twice-born, certain of salvation, as far as a woman can. And I clung to my master. He, the perfect Brahmin, wise

in the knowledge of the holy books, honouring his ancestors, repeating his prayers. I thought that he would dwell with the saints, and that I should be his hand-maiden. But now? Why aren't you a Pundit to tell me what will become of us? I don't matter. It is for him I weep, and for this life, hidden in my womb, his son. I hadn't told you, had I?" She was fumbling with her heavy silver anklets. "I had been waiting to tell you when the time of the five month ceremonies arrived. I was so very proud. But now..." Her sigh ended in a sob.

I stroked her smooth black hair, in silence. Without looking up she spoke, in her old cheery tone. "If you find any, please pick them out. You must bring me more oil. They have been a nuisance lately." Her chuckle was a relief.

"Where is Krishna's mother? Might she not hear?" I asked.

"Oh she? The old tyrant is preparing his food. She doesn't allow me to go near it now. Thinks me not pure enough. If she only knew what her perfect son has done to himself and us, it would kill her. She has spent the morning bathing and draping herself for cooking. Nothing could tear her from her sanctified fireplace now." She wiped her eyes with a corner of her full skirt, gathered a few grains of rice from the ground, and picked at the husks. Her head was once more against my knee. I searched diligently, and waited.

For a long time I suspected something. The Watercarrier women who came to help me husk and grind kept hinting that my lord had a tad-love. But it was not my affair. I did all that I could as his wife.

If he Wanted more that was his choice. I thought the girl must be one of them. You know my lord's great grandfather, the queen's



representative, brought those families in and wore the wall on their side low. He liked their pretty daughters. I think all of the men since have liked the girls over the wall. You have seen them. Are they prettier than me?

I could honestly assure her that I knew no one in the village prettier than her.

"I was too proud to ask who the girl was, at the time, and only laughed as though I knew the secret. Then one day Randeви came."

"Randeви?" I asked.

"Yes, our Sweeper girl. Dirty, defiling outcaste. Born in filth, living in filth, scattering filth." "Don't say that Srimati. She's a nice girl. Besides, just now..." But she was too full of her own troubles to listen.

"Oh, you don't know her or her people not as we Hindus do. They are made of vileness. Have you ever seen a Hindu touch one of them wittingly? Never. Have you not seen our little children cringe from them? They feel the uncleanness, the little children do. The air around an outcaste is polluted. And their touch unspeakable." She shuddered. And I knew the feelings

of her kind, well enough, to realize that she was not acting.

"And what do you think this wily Randeви did? She scrapes up my toilet space every day with her filthy fingers. And once a week she comes in here to clean the drain. At such times she is supposed not to touch anything but the drain. But as she went out on that awful day, she deliberately brushed her skirt against me. I screamed. All my life such a thing had never happened. I told her to go and never come back. She laughed in my face. I threatened her said that my lord would drive her and her family from the village.

Again she laughed. "Krishna? He. wouldn't touch me." I shouldn't have stooped to wrangle with her, but I did. I said that of course my master would not touch her. He was a pure Brahmin. And then she laughed. "Oh, is he?" she shouted.

"And out rushed my lord's mother, all trembling in excitement. I would have lied to her, but that girl's laugh told her everything she wanted to know. When I confessed that Randeви had touched me, she scrambled as fast as she could along the wall to the other end of the courtyard and told me not to move. We waited then for my master to come, I in shame and fury and she in a frenzy. She screamed at me without stopping. The Watercarrier and Tailor women climbed on their roofs to look down. Men were by the big gate listening, and sneering I suppose. They need not have come so near. My lord heard her, over the well in the grove, and came roaring at everyone to get home. I kept close to the wall when he came in, to spare him the shame that was mine.

"Then in the midst of her railing, my lord's mother heard his voice. From screaming she rose to shrieking, "Don't go near her. Unclean. Unclean. Unclean."

"Sounds like a leper," I remarked.

“A leper? Oh much worse. A leper can only harm your body. But the touch of an outcaste stains your very soul. You must be born a Brahmin to understand.” She spoke with the wisdom of the centuries, as to a small child.

“My heart was pounding with shame and fear,” she went on. “Would my lord drive me out to go to my father’s home in disgrace, or perhaps to go to live with the outcastes and their swine. I thought I could not bear to be driven away. I loved him, you know how I loved him. Would he beat me? I had heard him beat men till they begged for mercy. But only once had he ever struck me. That was long ago, when I was a naughty child. I stood with my face covered, waiting for him to speak. The clamour outside was not so loud as that within my heart. His mother was still shrieking. She really knew little of what had happened, but she made up a long story. She blamed me of course. Said I had been careless and touched the girl’s scarf as though I would not rather die than do such a thing. But I was not free to speak not in her presence.

“My lord finally told her to hush. And then after a terrible pause he spoke to me in such a hard menacing voice, like the sound of his chopper when he cuts up the grain stalks at night. It was worse than a beating. He told me to bathe, to burn the polluted garments I wore, and he would send for Ganges water for my purification. I must not touch his clothing or his food. His mother would take care of him. I must cook and eat my bread in a separate room, and perform penance.

“How his mother gloated. She has always been jealous of me. I thought I could not bear it, but there was nothing to be done. I couldn’t



escape from my body, much less from my soul. I must suffer their shame.

“Oh, comforter of the sick, can you imagine the cruelty of it being pushed away from your beloved master, while someone else fawns over him and whispers in his ear. Before, at night he would come to me and we would laugh over the tales she had told him about me. But now he never spoke to me nor approached me. If only I could explain. If only he would give me permission to speak. It was hard to believe he could be so cold. But I was sure his wrath would be righteous. Everything about him seemed to be righteous to me then.

“At last it was over and the blessed day came. I thought it blessed when my penances were finished and I was released. I was happy, full of excitement. I thought he knew and that he felt as I did. He was restless, eager to get away from his evening meal and his mother’s gossip. I bathed. And because she could not see me, I put on my festival skirt and scarf. I waited. He did not come. I was too happy to sit quietly. I slipped out of the courtyard and

through the passage. Then I grew bold. Why not go to his room in the second court, where he always sits with his accounts and his prayers. I had never dared go so far before. I was trembling. If he were chanting some verse from the holy books, would he ignore me? I went very cautiously and looked in at the little window, you know the small one beside his door. One bit of the lattice was torn loose.” She covered her face with her hands.

“Oh that I could have died in that moment. I must have fainted. But suddenly I was listening to his voice, smooth and sleek as a snake. He was murmuring coaxing, loathsome words to her, Randevi, the outcaste. He held her close to him. O the vileness of its slime against his Brahmin breast. I stuffed my scarf border, I forgot it was my best, into my mouth, to keep from screaming. And I watched. You will think that I should have gone away. But I couldn’t move. I watched them. I don’t know how long. It was so hideous that it hardened all my senses. Then I suddenly realized that I was I, and not supposed to be there. I truly had not thought of myself as spying until then. O, I can’t explain. I was mad with the horror of it, and yet I saw everything as though I were another.

“Very cautiously, like a thief, I crept away. I had not reached the door to the passage when my lord’s door was flung open and he stepped out. I slipped behind a pile of fodder. He looked all around suspiciously. ‘I thought I heard a sound,’ he said in a low slippery voice. It was the sound of a jealous woman’s anklets.

“I scarcely breathed. When he had peered around on either side of his door, he motioned for her. I was still excited enough to be bold, and I watched him draw her out and hold her. I wanted to rush at her and tear

her hair. But what do you suppose? She was whimpering. She did not look triumphant as she should, after a Brahmin's touch. He had lifted her to paradise for an hour, from the mire of her degraded state. And she showed no gratitude. She whined at him, something about her having now paid her father's debt in full. She held a paper before his eyes and begged him to sign it. He laughed, a coarse laugh, like that he uses when he is bargaining with someone over his sugarcane. He took the paper, rolled it and tucked it into her tight yellow vestee. 'I'll sign that when I am through with you,' he said. She threw herself at his feet where she should have been all the while and cried, 'Oh, Krishna, you have said that so often. Can't you give me some hope, set some time?' He laughed again. 'Silly girl. I give you the same answer. When your prettiness vanishes, then and not until then will I be through with you.'

"He raised her up, and tilted her chin so that her face was just beneath his: 'And remember, no more pranks with my fussy, suspicious Srimati.' Think of it.

"He spoke my name, and so lightly. I had never dreamed of using his, and thought he would be even more careful. He had pretended to cherish me so. They laughed together over my penances, and my lord said slyly, 'I have her so busy thinking about her own sins that she has no time to search for mine.' Then he lifted her high in his arms, beside a break in the wall and told her to run along home before her husband missed her. She went, still giggling. I heard her anklets jangle as she dropped on the other side.

"Then we were alone together, my lord and I, and yet how far apart. An hour before I would have flown to him and touched his ankles. But now, I loathed him. The feet whose dust I would have called blessed, were now too filthy to be trod upon. The arms I had longed to feel about me had become offensive as though he had smeared them with scum from a village sewer. I did not move. He stood in the light of his doorway, smiling as though he enjoyed being vile he who had rebuked and abandoned me for one flick of an outcaste's skirt. He went into the outer court and I heard him testing the bolt of the gate. Then I fled. I was terrified lest he suddenly remember that this was my day of release and come. But he had other thoughts.

"During the days that followed I begged the gods to let me die. And you thought me safe from suffering. He must have known that my exile was ended, but he went on pretending to spurn me, every glance a reproach. I feigned humility while I despised his every breath. I spent the lonely hours searching for

light. No one to help or advise me. I thought of Sita, beautiful ideal of every Hindu girl, true to her Rama even though he stooped to doubt her faithfulness. Savitri, following the soul of her dear lord, until it was released to her by Yama, the God of death. Damayanti, loyal to her husband, even after he deserted her without food or clothing, in the forest. All, all faithful. But none put to so great a test as I. But I have found the light. There is only one path to follow."

I could guess what her way would be. Her whole body expressed renunciation. After a pause she went on.

"Tonight he will come and I will suffer him to touch me. The embrace that was once my pride will be my torment. But to whatever hell he goes, there must I go, in silence. The world that honours Sita can never know my sacrifice. If it did, it might approve, but would loathe me." She twisted her toe rings for sometime in silence. When she spoke again her voice was weary, forlorn.

"How much easier it would be if he were dead and I might fling myself on his burning pyre. In that there would be glory. But in this shame, disgrace, damnation."

All my efforts to lighten the seriousness of her attitude, she set aside with, "You cannot understand." And later, "My only hope is our son if it be a son. Surely he will rise from the depths if the gods grant him a son. He may forget his duty to his fathers and be reckless of his own fate. On me he would not, aste a pang. I am a woman. But could he be so base as to foredoom his son?"

"There is one other chance." She looked up for



the first time during the painful recital. Her eyes were defiant. "I know you will tell me it is wrong. But no one can stop me. I pray to the gods every hour that they will spoil Randevi's pretty face, before my baby is born. I would have done it with my own hands. But he, suspicious in his guilt has dismissed her and placed her sister in my service. I no longer see her. But I feel her loathsome presence whenever my lord enters the court. And every night my body burns with shame at the thought that he may be fondling her. I have not had the courage to go to his room again."

Then I told her what I had tried to tell her earlier. "If I believed in our gods as much as I do in germs, Srimati, I would tell you that your prayers are answered. When Randevi left you she worked for Ram Lal's family. They had smallpox, and now she has it badly. I was with her last night." As I spoke, her body slowly relaxed. The dull look of despair gave place to the light of hope, more beautiful than her old proud assurance. She grasped my hand and looked deep into my eyes to make sure that I was not making light of her trouble. Then she dropped her head on my knee and sobbed.

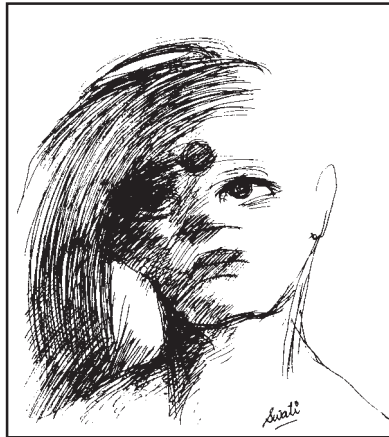
"Saved. O my twice-born son, you are saved. Saved," I heard her murmur.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> In a letter to Smalley, dated November 24, 1980, also in the Yale Divinity School Archives. This letter describes Srimati's husband in terms that may cause pain to his descendants. I have altered his name and made minor changes to geographic markers to further mask the household involved.

<sup>2</sup> I have translated the names of all castes but the Brahmin and identified them as caste markers by capitalizing them.

<sup>3</sup> See Charlotte V Wiser, 1929. *A Hindu Village Home in North India*. *International Review of Missions*, July.



London; 1936 *The Foods of a Hindu Village in North India*. (Allahabad: Superintendent, Printing and Stationary, United Provinces); 1978 *Four Families of Karimpur*. (Foreign and Comparative Studies Program, South Asian Series no. 3, Syracuse University) and, 1980, *Time Perspectives in Village India*. In P. Reining and B. Lenkerd, eds, *Village Viability in Contemporary Society*. (AAS Selected Symposium 34. Boulder: Westview Press.)

For William's writings, see Wiser, William H. 1933. *Social Institutions of a Hindu Village in North India*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Cornell University); 1958 *The Hindu Jajmani System*. (Lucknow: Lucknow Publishing House).

Their joint widely read book is Wiser, William H. and Charlotte V., with S. Wadley. 1989. *Behind Mud Walls*. (Berkeley: University of California Press. Those who seek additional information on Karimpur should see Susan S. Wadley, 1994, *Struggling With Destiny in Karimpur, 1925-1984* (Berkeley: University of California Press; reprinted 1996, New Delhi: Sage Publications).

<sup>4</sup> I am most reminded of the stories in Kalpana Bardhan's collection, *Women, Outcastes and Rebels* (Berkeley: University of California Press)

<sup>5</sup> Charlotte and William Wiser's paper are archived at the Yale Divinity School. The original is typed on long sheets of oddly sized paper. In her letter to Smalley, Charlotte notes that she recognizes the typewriter as one used in their village research in the 1920s. And indeed the typeface matches that of the translations of oral traditions that were my original reason for visiting the Yale library.

<sup>6</sup> The extension program at the Agricultural Institute in Allahabad where William hoped to teach did not yet exist when he arrived there in 1915. So the

American Presbyterian Mission appointed him treasurer of Ewing Christian College while Charlotte taught Indian rural economics at the Agricultural Institute.

<sup>7</sup> The details of the Wiser's early years' are taken from Jessica Roberts, *Women's Work in India During the Women's Foreign Mission Movement: A Comparative Study of Charlotte Viall Wiser and Rachel Johnson* (MA Paper, Dept. of Anthropology, Syracuse University, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> I hope to explicate this pattern in a later paper.

<sup>9</sup> My sense is that this thread of caste racism as understood by the early 20th century American-cum-British view of India is running through this narration. This view was influenced by elite Indian views on their own society. This racist attitude seems to evaluate the high castes as essentially good and the low as essentially bad (despite the predominance of low castes among the Christian converts) in both moral and physical character. Charlotte speaks, for example, of the centuries of breeding that made Srimati's beauty what it was. Despite its power as a story, Srimati also seems to capture clearly Charlotte's peculiar missionary slant on rural North Indian social structure. Charlotte does, in fact, provide us with the clues to a subaltern, understanding of the story, an understanding that would resonate more clearly with her supposed Christian-cum-missionary background were it not for the final paragraphs. Though the story is true, her compassion for the pox-marked untouchable never quite emerges.

<sup>10</sup> From the letter to Smalley, we learn that he received his land from the British, had worked for them, so it would seem that the rani here is Queen Victoria!

<sup>11</sup> Watercarriers were a "clean" caste in Karimpur and the women served as household help to the rich Brahmin land owning families. In addition to carrying water, they could grind grain or spices, wash pots, make the dough for bread, or sweep the courtyards.

<sup>12</sup> "Srimati": Charlotte Wiser's *Conception of Gender Relations and Caste*. □

**The photographs accompanying this article are by Susan S. Wadley. They are in no way connected either to the village or the people described in the above story though they are from a village of that region**