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The Madhopur woman who said: "When a woman has work, the need for babies disappears"

I HAD the privilege of living for three periods of altogether about nine months among a group of adivasis in south Gujarat. To protect my informants from the attentions of the caste Hindu landlords, I shall call the village Madhopur, and the people among whom I lived, the Madhujan. During my first visit to the village, in 1976, I was with my husband, an Indian social worker, studying the impact of "development" work carried out by a group at Madhopur.

At the request of some of the Madhujan, both of us returned to the village in 1977 and worked for six months as change agents. We were trying to instil confidence among the landless people, the marginal and small farmers, so that they could, on their own, carry out development projects involving their community. In this we succeeded, and the workers we trained are now training adivasi women workers in another part of Gujarat. One part of the confidence building work we did was a house to house survey of all the landless, marginal and small farmer households. I shall draw on the survey results for this paper.

In 1980, my husband and I returned to

Madhopur to see our friends, evaluate our earlier work and follow up certain points of information.

The Impact Of The Outside World

During my first visit to the village, I was told that the *chhapania* or 1956 famine and the years of scarcity which affected south Gujarat between 1899 and 1908 was the most important period in the history of the Madhujan. It was at that time that most of the resources of the tribals passed into the hands of outsiders, low caste Hindus, whose grandsons are the present big landowners in the village. I learned that there had been sporadic attempts since 1927 by a group of Gandhian social

workers to do development work at Madhopur, but the control of resources had remained firmly in the hands of the landlords.

During our first visit, I also learned that the village had been influenced in a number of ways by mainstream caste Hindu culture. Some Madhujan, most of them men, have been educated in Gandhian or government institutions and a group of elite Madhujan, most of them primary school teachers, has been created.

Caste Hindu practices such as worshipping in a private Vaishnavite temple, vegetarianism, teetotalism and the wearing of clothes like those worn by many other Gujaratis have spread into Madhopur. Some adivasi women even wear the caste Hindu "round" sari; they usually do this when they are working at an occupation which gives them status, or for a celebration.

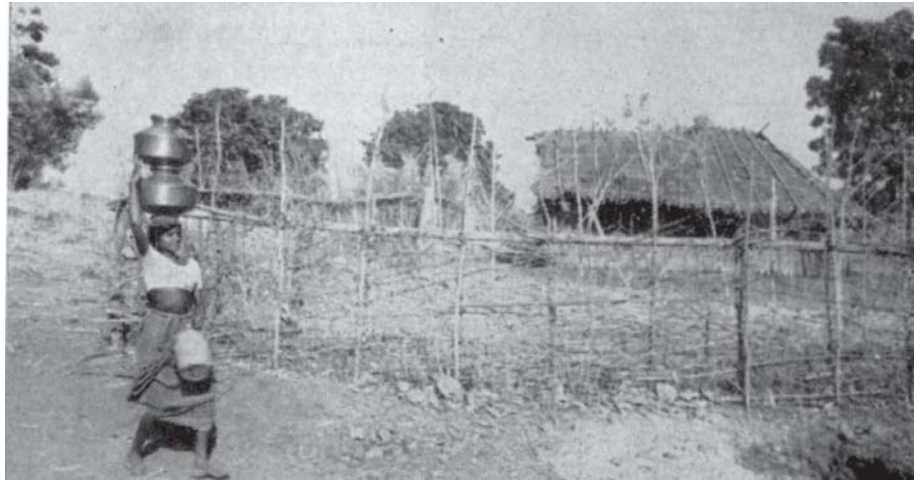
During the first long talk I had with Madhujan women, in 1976, I asked several of them what they thought of the tendency to adopt caste Hindu customs. These women did not like the development:

"*Khandad* (having a husband who lives in the home of the wife) is a very good system", they said. "Second marriages and divorces are easy in our community. That is a good thing." Many subsequent experiences at Madhopur showed me why these women had reason to dislike Hindu customs and to prefer their own.

Ursula Sharma in "Women, Work and Property in Northwest India" referring to studies done in Punjab and Himachal Pradesh, (See **Manushi** No. 17) has described the position of caste Hindu women in those areas. I am going to put the situation of Madhujan women (as I observed it) alongside what Ursula Sharma has described.

Land Control

In a rural community, who controls the land is the most important issue. In 1980, my interpreter, while chatting to a neighbour of ours enquired of her: "Why are you so thin? You've got a nice husband and three lovely kids. You should be able to put on some weight."



Fetching water*

The unfortunate neighbour replied: "You can't even get divorced if you haven't got land."

Her livelihood was the piece of land belonging to her husband's family, which she cultivated for food while he earned a small cash income. Her own family was landless, her sister was divorced and living in their natal home, so there was probably already pressure on living space. The poorer the family, the greater the problem is likely to be. The consequence is that a woman from a landpoor household will find it difficult to move back to her natal home and may be forced to stay with an unwilling or even a violent husband.

The Madhujan are patrilineal but not always patrilocal. A man normally inherits from his father. After marriage, a couple may live with the man's parents or in his parents' home village, but alternatively, a bride may stay in her own home or village, bringing her husband to live with her. Such a man is known as a *khandad*. A daughter may inherit land if there is no son.

At the time of our 1978 survey, there were 141 households with less than five acres of land or none at all, and among these, 28 households were headed by a woman.

In addition, there were 20 women who were either married or separated, living in their natal homes, who were not heads of

household. Usually land is the decisive issue which determines whether the bride or the groom moves house. Perhaps that is why there were only two *khandads* among the landless households.

I asked the head of the Madhujan *panch* or council if the women had a right to land. "In a patrilocal or virilocal marriage, when the bride comes to live in the man's father's house or the man's house, she is not usually given a share in the land belonging to her new family. If she is from a rich family, she won't need land. A poor woman must receive a share of the family property from her parents. If she marries into a rich family, her husband will inherit land and she will get status."

Almost all the women who were heads of households and owned land did so as widows. Some of them had capable adult sons working on the land. Only one household with land was headed by a wife. Her husband came from a landless family.

I noticed that in many Madhujan households, when the man has a cash income, the woman manages the land. One woman said she had agreed to give up her job as a teacher when her in-laws agreed to hand over some of their land to her and her husband. He continued to teach and

*This and the next two pictures are not from Madhopur but from another tribal village in Dang, south Gujarat.

she looked after the land, supervising labourers during peak seasons.

Otherwise, if the man does not have a cash income, husband and wife work together on the family land. In some families, where the men had cash incomes that were not dependent on working fixed hours, such as being a *sarpanch*, the men would go to the fields when they felt it was necessary, but the women worked there regularly.

Women, in the communities that Ursula Sharma studied, always left the natal village when they got married. Describing their relation to property, she wrote, "In relation to property, women are defined as dependent because they have access only to the most important forms of wealth producing property through their relations with men. Women in these communities are largely excluded from the possession and control of land."

It is unusual for a caste Hindu woman in northwest India to own the means of living. But when my interpreter and I met a Madhujan neighbour with a buffalo, she told us: "This buffalo is mine. I got a loan from the State Bank." The owner was a member of the milk cooperative started for adivasis by an adivasi man in the village. Right from the start, in 1976, there have been women members of the cooperative, and in 1980, when I last visited the Madhujan, nearly a third of its members were women.

Marriage Payments

The official view, given by the head of the adivasi *panch* at Madhopur, is this: "Traditionally marriages were arranged. Falling in love was not common in the past. Now perhaps one percent of marriages are love marriages. Sometimes, young couples do elope."

My own adopted mother told me: "In the old days, the boy's education and landholding were what mattered, when you were thinking of marrying your daughter. Nowadays, the young people have to like each other. We wouldn't send more than one daughter far away from home."

I asked the village midwives if young

Madhujan have premarital sex. They answered: "Many do. Few get pregnant. If the woman gets pregnant, usually the couple marry." Another view was: "Arranged marriages are usual but there will be no objection to a love marriage if both partners are Madhujan. Usually, if the girl leaves the village to get married, it is a love marriage."

Madhujan may marry cousins; a woman may marry her father's sister's son or her mother's brother's son. One woman, who had chosen her husband, said: "I met my husband because I came to see

is a man or a woman.

More Women Than Men

Ever since the first Indian census, over 100 years ago, the low ratio of females to males has attracted interest and concern. In Gujarat, according to the 1981 census, there were 942 females to every 1,000 males. But at Madhopur, in 1978, among the landless households and small and marginal farmers, there were 413 females to 397 males (a ratio of 1,061 to 1,000). This low number of men was not due to outmigration.

The life periods that are most critical



Carrying firewood

relatives who live in this village." If a bride comes to live in her husband's home, the husband's family pay about Rs 30 to her family.

"I don't understand why the bridegroom's family gets only Rs 15.25 in a *khandad* marriage," I said to the chairman of the adivasi *panch*. "It is a better investment to be a *khandad* than to be a bride, for a *khandad* will probably receive some land from his wife's family", he answered.

This form of marriage payment may be called bridewealth or bridegroom wealth. It is a form of compensation given to the family which loses an earning and economically active member, whether this

for females are the first five years of life, and the childbearing years from 15 to 44. At Madhopur, in 1978, there were only 31 girls aged under 5, whereas there were 47 boys. However, there were 191 females and 180 males in the most fertile years.

The average number of children per mother in the Madhujan households we surveyed in 1978, was two or three only. Seven women in the group had more than five children, and all these women lived in households owning land.

I talked to one young Madhujan woman who had been sterilised after she had two sons, but no daughters. "Nowadays, people go straight to be sterilised after they have had two children,"

she said. "When a woman has work, the need for babies disappears."

I told the midwives at Madhopur that in some Indian communities, the midwife is paid less if the baby is a girl than if it is a boy. They were incredulous. My impression is that families would prefer to have at least one son. "We want a boy and would go to two or three children to have one", said one young woman, but families probably stay fairly small because there is the option for girls to inherit land, and girls are expected to work. The pay for farm labourers was the same for men and women in this community, at about Rs 3.00 a day in the late 1970s. As a result of the work of the milk cooperative, the pay for labourers has since gone up.

Friends in the village told me that they had been sterilised: "Our children's survival chances are fairly good. Now we have enough food to fill our bellies. In the previous generation, there was more risk to the children."

Nowadays the government family planning services are popular, but there was a traditional method of contraception, whereby a palm root was put temporarily in the woman's vagina.

The doctor at the local primary health centre told us that, among the adivasis, it is normally the men who are sterilised whereas among the caste Hindus in the same area, it is always the women. This suggests to me that the Madhujan women have more power in their households.

Modernisation— Women Lose Out

In the world outside Madhopur, it is the men who have white collar jobs* and, according to the 1978 survey, 96 Madhujan men but only one woman had such employment.

It is true that we know of two young Madhujan women in the village who have received training, one as a teacher and one as a clerk.

They now live and work outside

*By this term I mean all paid jobs except for those of farm labourers and spinners.

Madhopur. One of these women sends money home to her relatives.

But I suspect that women are, on the whole, losing out to men, as their education and training are regarded as less important than men's. For example, one woman with education up to class 12 did unpaid housework at Madhopur; and another young woman had been recalled from the university to work on the family land.

In the stratified random sample my husband carried out in all sections of the Madhujan community in 1975, as well as in the house to house survey we did in 1978, we found that women in a given family tended to do work of lower status than their menfolk.

The women provide the main farm labouring force. More farm labourers were women than men (174 as compared to 109 in 1978). They worked a total of more days than men (15,045 as compared to the men's 12,063) but worked on an average fewer days per year than the men (86 as compared to 110).

I strongly suspect that families in Madhopur "keep in" with the landlords who took their land at the time of the *chhapania* famine by having the young women work for that particular landlord family.

But, as a result, women will probably suffer more when male migrant labourers and machines come to do the work the farm labourers used to do on the landlords' land. This process was already apparent when we were in the village. In any case: "Girls will get the best education that their parents can offer, but they will get married anyway", was the standard answer when I asked about the Madhujan girls' chances of education.

So, in this community, marriage is regarded as a woman's most important job, even though there is no strong pressure for women to marry and a very few do not. Probably, land is the crucial factor here too, determining whether a girl will get a good education or not.

Some women at least were not equal in authority to their men in the Madhujan community, as a result of the men's cash

income. I asked the *sarpanch's* wife how she and the wives of other village leaders felt about their husbands' frequently visiting us. "We'd like to come too", she said, "But women can't say these things to their husbands. Husbands can pay other people to do their farm work. We can't do this. We're helpless because we can't earn."

"If the husband doesn't have a cash income, the wife has to go to work as a farm labourer. The housework is there for her to do anyway", said one woman. I lived for six weeks in one adivasi home and observed many others during my visits to the village. I thought that roles within the home were fairly flexible as between men and women. Men can and do look after small children, for example. Of the 107 people who said they looked after children in the 1978 survey, five were men.

Our own host helped cook, sewed on his buttons, and looked after his own clothes. His daughter milked the cattle when he was not at home. All household members were expected to wash their own underclothes and do their own washing up after meals.

But girls worked much longer hours than boys and their tasks were more clearly defined than their brothers'.

Family Relations

The relationship between a Madhujan husband and wife is regarded as important and may take precedence over a man's loyalty to his parents.

The chairman of the adivasi *panch* said: "If a woman doesn't get on with her mother-in-law, the husband and wife discuss together about living separately so as to preserve their relationship."

A neighbour of ours said: "I live with my husband separately under the same roof as my father-in-law. My husband and I separated because of quarrels with my mother-in-law." There were seven divorced men and women in the group we surveyed in 1978. My interpreter heard someone say: "Wow! She's gone home with Rs 350!" and the chairman of the adivasi *panch* told us the story. "Her husband took little notice of her. She got fed up. She used to go home

often to her parents, and she didn't work properly. Last week she brought her own *panch* to settle the matter, because she very much wanted to get married to someone else." The Rs 350 was for loss of prospects in her marital home. Apparently, the sum was regarded as rather small, and was reduced because she was partly to blame. Usually the person who is to blame for the divorce pays Rs 900. Poorer people pay less.

A landless divorcee who said the payment was only Rs 25 to Rs 30, told us: "Both partners go together to the community leaders and say they require a divorce. Usually, the children go to the father's house, and a son has the right to his father's land, if there is any, after the divorce." Usually the father has to maintain small children who remain in the care of his ex-wife.

Violence And Coercion

In many parts of India, high caste landowners take advantage of peasant girls who are forced through poverty to work for them. Since the girls have to seek work from these men, they often cannot but accept unwelcome sexual advances as a necessary evil. In occasional cases, the husband may even be aware of the extramarital relationship.

A powerful landlord living near Madhopur had an affair with an adivasi woman. She got pregnant. According to friends of ours, the landlord caused her to have an abortion when she was six months' pregnant and she died having the abortion in his house. To "settle the matter", the landlord is said to have bought eight acres of land from another of his caste for Rs 15,000 and given it to the father of the dead woman.

Ironically, the land which had been seized from our adivasi informants during or just after the 1956 famine, did not morally belong to the landlord anyway. Moreover, the bereaved father could not pay the bribe that the village revenue clerk demanded before he registered the land transfer, so that in 1976, when we heard the story, the property was still in the name of the landlord who sold it.



A woman working while the two men of the family sit around, dead drunk

Adivasi women at Madhopur would not agree with the statement that Ursula Sharma says is made in her research area: "A good woman is one who stays near her home." Madhujan women may travel alone on buses and they move around freely in groups in the dark. My interpreter and I were, however, warned: "You're just two women. You should be careful walking through the fields after dark", when we felt so safe that we forgot normal female precautions about walking in open country after dusk.

Gales of laughter were the answer when I asked: "Do your husbands hit you?" In between the gusts, the women said: "Yes, sometimes, when the men are drunk." But I saw the women as assertive, not as helpless victims.

It seems probable that adivasi women at Madhopur are relatively safer from marital violence than some other women in India. But they are still vulnerable to the advances of men from the landlord community who control most of the resources in the neighbourhoods.

Numerous changes have already taken place at Madhopur that are likely to limit the options of the women, and widen those of the men. In terms of sexual politics, in the home as in economic life, Madhujan men will probably gain more power at the expense of women. This may eventually undermine their present rather equal relationship, and possibly lead to the manipulative practices that tend to come about when there are gross differences in power between people. □

The Made Wolf And Other Wolves

Have you come alone all this way, so late at night?"

"Yes, I have. It was already dark when I started out."

"But don't you know there is a mad wolf roaming around these days?"

"Yes, I know that there is a mad wolf around which kills men and eats them, Is that right?" the young woman said.

"Then how is it you went out alone.

Weren't you afraid?" asked the man, wide eyed with surprise.

"Why should I be afraid? At least, the fear of this one wolf keeps the other wolves at bay so I do not meet them in the dard. And I can manage to be alert enough to avoid this one wolf." So saying, she looked at the man who stood absolutely silent.

—S.L. Bisht

(translated from Hindi)