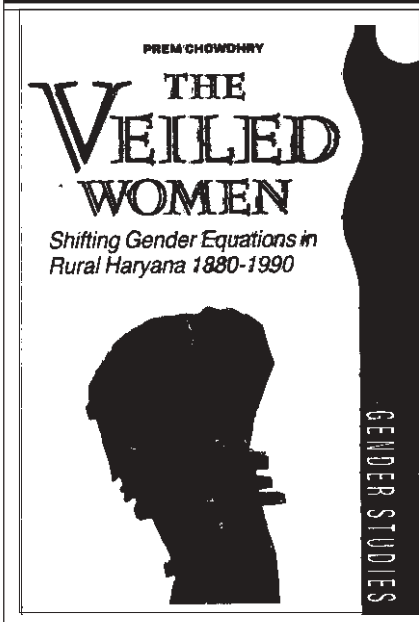

BOOK REVIEW

The Veiled Women

Shifting Gender Equations in Rural Haryana

Prem Chowdhry

Oxford University Press, Delhi

1994. pp 461. Price: Rs 475

Review : R. Sudershan

PREM Chowdhry's highly informative and well-written book is also a good example of unpretentious social science. Her training as a historian may account for the stress on detail, and avoidance of the temptation to overlay her narrative with theoretical digressions. This point has to be noted at the outset because many social scientists are prone to making law-like generalisations on the basis of a presumed power of prediction and explanation.

The conclusions that flow from much of social science research interestingly share some key characteristics with proverbs which are a premodern variant of our more "scientific" way of encapsulating knowledge and experience. Proverbs are typically stated in the form of generic sentences and share with social science conclusions the inapplicability of universal quantifiers.

I find Chowdhry's extensive reliance on proverbs and folk songs particularly telling in making the case for her thesis on the persistence of patriarchy. Conditioned as we are to make law-like generalisations, we might expect that in a region where the Green Revolution has wrought a major transformation in the economic base there should also be significant changes in social relations.

Chowdhry shows how intuitive expectations about "progress" with respect to the situation of women in the context of economic prosperity are similarly belied by reality. Her book provides a vivid account of how little has changed in the situation of women despite unprecedented increase in real incomes and prosperity in Haryana.

Haryana has a per capita income that is 50 per cent more than the national average. The share of agriculture in the state's gross domestic product declined from 64 per cent in 1970-71 to 40 per cent in 1990. The incidence of poverty also declined from 60 per cent to less than 15 per cent over the same period. But with only 865 females per 1,000 males, Haryana has the worst sex-ratio in the country, a very important indicator of the situation of women. Female child mortality is significantly higher than male child mortality in the state. Economic prosperity has not been translated into improvement in human development in general, and women, in particular.

Chowdhry's explanation for this state of affairs is based on the persistence of patriarchy, taking on different *avatars* adapted to changes in the economic base of Jat peasant society. Her thesis is that patriarchy as ideology and culture is responsible for preventing a positive transformation in the situation of women.

This book is the result of her archival research, commencing with the colonial period, from 1880 when Haryana was part of the undivided Punjab. She continued with itinerant fieldwork from 1985-90. Chowdhry provides a close examination of the ways in which post-independence legislation, inspired by a Constitution committed to equality, has been subverted in practice. The most interesting feature of the method of analysis in the book is the extensive documentation of the oral tradition of Haryana, translated not literally but with a sensitive emphasis on mood and import. The sayings and proverbs which are aptly and generously provided throughout the book capture something that is authentic in their life

experience.

I entirely agree with Chowdhry when she says that her oral sources "determine people's perception of reality and social life as it has been personally experienced or continues to be experienced" (p.11). But given my view that much of the knowledge contained in the social sciences has about the same degree of generalisability as proverbs and folklore for all practical purposes, I would be less apologetic than Chowdhry in relying upon oral sources.

The point of quoting these sayings is to produce an account of society and life that is authentic from the point of view of those who live that life. There is no laboured attempt at discovering layers of reality assumed to lie under what one can perceive in a straightforward way by seeing, listening, and talking to people, and reading contemporary material. A wealth of detail written in "thick description," as opposed to abstract formulations, makes this book very accessible to the reader.

The lucid interpretations that are offered on the basis of this material should provoke experts and scholars into lively debate. The peasant culture of Haryana has distinctive features compared to other parts of India. As Chowdhry observes, in this culture "different and contradictory norms" coexist. Thus, widow remarriage, in favour of which so much reformist energies have been spent, turns out to be "a repressive custom in the female consciousness and life experience" in Haryana.

Leviratic unions were customary among the Jats, and these were formalised with no religious ceremony and little ritual. Known as the *karewa*, this form of marriage typically was with the husband's younger brother, but other male relatives of the deceased husband are also considered

eligible to enter into such a union. The consequence of readily recognising *karewa*, even in cases where, at best, cohabitation may be presumed, served to deny widowed women a limited right of inheritance of property in land.

British administrators, experienced in the deployment of a variety of techniques to hold down the countryside, encouraged widow remarriage to preempt widows from exercising control over their share of the property, or seeking the partition of their husbands' share of the joint family estate on the grounds that maintenance from the husband's family was inadequate. These widows were given short shrift by officials ready to recognise *karewa* remarriage at the behest of the kin groups of deceased husbands. It was hard for the women to establish that levirate had been forced upon them. According to Chowdhry the colonial administration feared that if widows acquired control over land it would antagonise peasant men who were recruits to the army and enabled the government to retain their hold over the countryside. Patriarchal interests and colonial motives coincided.

Chowdhry illustrates certain forms of resistance resorted to by women subjected to the injustice of their husband's family depriving them of even minimal rights. By voluntarily acceding to the opprobrium of unchastity *(badchalni)* and the notoriety of bearing illegitimate children, some widows sought to retain their hold on their share of their deceased husband's property in land. Explaining this behaviour, Chowdhry points out: " Pressurised both by the demands of patriarchy as well as the state judicial and administrative apparatus to cohabit forcibly, the self-assertion of widows recorded by the British clearly emerges as a form of protest against the already married status of the man and the extreme reluctance to become a co-wife. 'Unchastity' therefore obviously had a different meaning for women than the patriarchal construction."

The second half of Chowdhry's book deals with the post-independence phase and the situation of rural women in the context of the vast transformation brought about by the Green Revolution which converted Haryana (and Punjab) from a subsistence pastoral economy into the grain basket of the country. Chowdhry notes that capital-intensive agriculture was concentrated in those parts of the state which had access to irrigation, and its benefits were biased in favour of the rich peasantry. She traces the effects of this differential impact on rural women from different castes and classes within Haryana, where according to a popular saying "the dialect changes every twelve miles, and the water every four."

In those parts of the state, especially the region contiguous with Rajasthan, women remain an economic asset, providing labour power needed in a subsistence economy. And in regions where the Green Revolution took hold, women

find that their workload has been "recast, not reduced." While there is evidence that female agricultural labour has been withdrawn in the rich regions, agricultural processing work and additional cooking burdens have fallen upon women. Chowdhry honestly admits that this is an impressionistic conclusion because there is little data to establish what percentage of the labour of female family members has been withdrawn from active agricultural work.

The burden of animal husbandry work falls on women regardless of caste and class barriers. But the White Revolution in dairying has had the "severely adverse effect of eroding a woman's value in terms of her economic contribution ... due to a shift away from the traditional primacy of women in the processing aspect of dairying".

In the form of capitalisation that is under way in Haryana, men tend to work on their own land and send the women out as wage labour. Chowdhry describes well how the "green revolution, instead of breaking down caste norms has not only adopted them but has also reinforced classes within castes and differing statuses within the hierarchies, between men and women and has actually pitted the scheduled caste women against other caste women. What emerges is a peculiar reinforced mix of patriarchy, caste and class" (p180).

Wage rates for females in Haryana as elsewhere in the country are lower than those paid to men although the difference has narrowed. Owing to the popular conceptions about "women's work" and the absence of female in-migration similar to male in-migration into the state, real wage rates for women have increased. However, women remain ideologically conditioned to believing that there is justice in lower wage rates for them because a man's work is more productive, and women's earnings are merely supplementary to those of men even if it is the woman who provides the greatest support to the family.

The ideological view of women's work as primarily a moral duty and not an economic necessity has reinforced traditional devaluation of the worth of education for women. Chowdhry offers an interesting contrast between the success of the Arya Samaj in the education of women in the trading and mercantile community of Punjab and the failure in the peasant community of Haryana. Drawing upon the "pioneering work on the Kanya Mahavidyalaya of Jalandhar" by Madhu Kishwar, Chowdhry notes in Haryana the traditional practices of widow remarriage, family labour on the farm, and the absence of a Christian threat to religion and culture. All these factors meant that there were no takers for the Arya Samaj educational reforms in the state.

In 1981 only 15.37 per cent of rural females were listed as literate, and 43.44 per cent of rural males. Moreover, on the basis of a 1978 study, Chowdhry reports that there was a 58.85 per cent difference between female literacy among landowners and landless.

With respect to differences in intra-household consumption, Chowdhry refers to the popular belief that "in matters of food, a woman is generally considered to be a thief" (p.225), implying an internalised view that a woman has really no "entitlement" to food. On the basis of her conversations with men and women, she comes to the conclusion that "ideological and cultural norms have turned women into implicit accomplices to their inequality by making them accept this marginal allocation and even justify it" (p.232). Likewise, women tend to accept their illnesses as normal, and believe that some indulgence towards their nutritional requirements may be expected only during pregnancy and beyond, provided the child born is a son.

Rich peasants in Haryana can now afford to have a *pucca* house furnished with chairs, tables, radio and such appurtenances of modernity all placed in the *baithak* which Chowdhry calls a "symbol of masculinity". Patriarchal Haryana has managed to reinforce the traditional outlook of women seeing their brothers as their protectors ("no friend like a brother, no foe like a brother") to get them to give up their share of inheritance which modern legislation confers on them. Moreover, Chowdhry states that women have accepted dowry as a substitute for property to which they have legal claim, and now regard the dowry as their due. She notes that in their minds "the contradiction between inheritance as a matter of right, and dowry as a matter of goodwill or faith of the father and/or brothers, along with the dictates of the market and male considerations of their 'status', does not exist" (p.337).

Having made this observation, Chowdhry too quickly dismisses Madhu Kishwar's argument that reformist energies should be focussed on securing women their right to inheritance rather than on abolishing the custom of dowry, lest women get the worst of both worlds. If indeed women have internalised the idea that the dowry is their due, then one enters into very difficult areas of real interests and false consciousness in adopting a reformist stance of knowing better than the women themselves what is in their interest. There is a shade of the old "reform versus revolution" argument in the claim that if women opted for dowry in the

interests of some security (not available to them from the state and its pathological legal system) then they are likely to postpone the revolutionary dawn when inheritance rights will triumph over patriarchal power.

This last point brings me to the weakness in the book. Although I have noted that its avoidance of theorising is a positive feature, the rich material assembled in the book clearly cries out for an exposition of the difficult concept of "false consciousness" and a restatement of the famous relationship between the economic base and ideological superstructure. Instead of taking on this admittedly difficult task of interpreting her findings in Haryana in the context of insights from social theory, Chowdhry has taken the easier option of focussing on the *ghunghat* worn by Haryana women (72.61 percent of them, according to the 1974 Report on the Status of Women, cited by Chowdhry).

While it is true that the *ghunghat* as a symbol of social etiquette effectively restricts women in their encounters with senior males in public spaces like the *panchayat* forums, it is somewhat simplistic to conclude such a rich and complex account with the observation that the "removal of this *ghunghat* as a symbol may perhaps constitute the first truly revolutionary step for women."

The problem with the conclusion of this very good book is that it does the core argument an injustice. I can imagine urban women (urban is pejorative in Haryana) fired by an emancipatory mission rushing off to persuade Haryanvi women to throw off their *ghunghat* as a revolutionary, albeit symbolic, gesture. Alas, the subordination of women cannot be overcome by grand gestures. At best such attempts can only offend the "victims" themselves, both by causing offence to their own sensibility and by getting them into trouble with their far less sensitive men.

The book is really about the most insidious face of power which is manifested when the victim is put in a situation where she can only think of her oppressor as a benefactor. But there is ambivalence (a frequently used word in the book) about the kind of explanation that the Haryana story provides for the perpetuation of the *ghungat* when so much else has changed. Perhaps my dissatisfaction about the explanatory appeal of this book, distinct from its superb descriptive content, might be because I think *ghungat* seems to have unduly distracted the author. One would like to understand the interplay between cultural ideology and material interests which serve to perpetuate patriarchy even in communities where no *ghungat* exists. ❐