Shahri Jat and Dehati Jatni: the Indian peasant community in transition

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ABSTRACT  This paper seeks to understand the gender-specific consequences of the Shahargaon Jat community’s increasing urban contact with New Delhi. It examines the consequences of a quick assimilation of Jat men into income-generating activities in the urban market and a corresponding loss of Jat women’s economic roles, leading to their further seclusion and marginalization within the household and community. By providing a historically contextualized account of shifts in gender identity and relations in Shahargaon, the paper considers the ways in which the newly constructed urban patriarchal gender ideology and its asymmetric power relations reinforce gender disparity and marginalize women in an urbanizing community. The Shahargaon Jat community’s particular historical and patriarchal context, kinship and marriage rules, and the present state of urbanization constitutes an example of the overall failure of urban exposure to improve economic participation and the overall quality of life for women in urbanizing communities in north India. It appears that the community’s economic well-being has not worked in tandem with the women’s social well-being in Shahargaon, in the sense that the Jat patriarchal system and its rules have largely remained unaltered despite exposure to the urban environment of New Delhi. Instead, Shahargaon’s increasing urban context has intensified patriarchal control and the corresponding marginalization of Jat women. The Shahargaon case may illustrate a widespread pattern of the increasing gender asymmetry in several other urbanizing village communities in north India.

My third extended ethnographic fieldwork in Shahargaon, an urbanizing Jat village located on the outskirts of New Delhi, focused on how gender relations have been affected by its increasing contact with and dependence on the capital city of India. During an interview, Kaushalya (a Jat woman in her mid-fifties) described the increasing gender asymmetry in urbanizing Shahargaon:

Shahargaon is now an affluent village and its families are rich. But money has made us more rural than before when we were poor. Shahargaon men now own and drive cars, but
women cannot leave their homes alone and girls cannot study beyond the village school. Boys attend English-medium private schools in New Delhi, but girls go to Hindi-medium government schools. Shahargaon men have become urban, but women of this village have remained rural. We are still a rural people (dehati) living in a city (shahr).

Kaushalya’s comments suggest that in urbanizing Shahargaon there appears to be an emergent trend of increasing gender asymmetry, resulting in a relative disadvantage for Jat women. Furthermore, her comments effectively reinforce the notion that the so-called benefits of urbanization do not necessarily accrue equally to both men and women in a community.

In this paper, I analyze the gender-specific consequences of the Shahargaon Jat community’s increasing urban contact with New Delhi. I examine the consequences of a quick assimilation of Jat men into income-generating activities in the urban market and a corresponding loss of Jat women’s economic roles leading to their further seclusion and marginalization within the household and community. Because gender identity and ideology are historical and cultural constructs, I first provide a historically contextualized account of changes in Shahargaon Jat women’s status, identity, and participation in economic activities. I argue that the newly constructed urban patriarchal gender ideology and its asymmetric power relations reinforce gender disparity and marginalize women in an urbanizing community. Through this discussion, I intend to contribute to the ongoing debate on the changing patterns of gender identity and relations in urbanizing peasant communities in north India.

Several ethnographic studies in India have examined Hindu women’s marginal status under systems of patriarchy and the impact of social and economic changes on their lives.\(^4\) Studies on women and social change in South Asia have identified the multiplicity of forces, including urban contact, education, and occupation, shaping women’s identity in communities that follow relatively strict rules of patriarchy.\(^5\) Researchers have pointed out that urbanization does not necessarily improve women’s status and that the patriarchal bias inherent in the state conceptions of social change is primarily responsible for the socio-economic vulnerability of Indian women. They strongly contend that research in this area must go beyond the narrowly defined notion that increased urban contact would eventually alleviate problems faced by women, and focus on the ways in which hierarchical gender relations influence education and employment opportunities for women inside and outside the home.

Although there appears to be general consensus among researchers that the socio-economic vulnerability of women is rooted in the dominant social and state ideology of patriarchy, and is further exacerbated by women’s asymmetric participation in the development process, recent ethnographic research on women’s changing lives tends to problematize the notion that women’s position is universally subordinate to men under systems of patriarchy and that women’s subordinate status summarily reduces their access to power and authority.\(^6\) Instead of presenting Indian women’s lives under patriarchy as one of unmitigated exploitation and subjugation, recent ethnographic research emphasizes the
ways in which women operate to gain control, advantage, and authority within their immediate structures of patriarchy.\textsuperscript{7}

Characterization[s] of South Asian women as repressed and submissive are … half-truths in the sense that, at times, submission and silence may be conscious strategies of self-representation deployed when it is expedient to do so, before particular audiences and in particular contexts.\textsuperscript{8}

Research on the changing lives of South Asian women describes the particular patriarchal and historical contexts as central to understanding and describing women’s lives, identity, and gender relations. It points to the need for more research to understand women’s changing roles and gender relations in historically situated and culturally contextualized situations from an informed theoretical perspective that examines the issue beyond the monolithic tradition–modern dichotomy. By examining shifts in gender ideology and relations in the context of Shahargaon’s historical circumstances and its present state of urban contact with New Delhi, this paper comments on the impact of urbanization on gender relations and women’s lives in a community that has recently undergone a shift from a peasant subsistence economy to a capitalist-urban economy.

**Shahargaon: ethnography of a peasant village settlement**

Presently a part of urban New Delhi, Shahargaon was established approximately 250 years ago by four Jat brothers from Bari Bahu, a rural village in the neighboring state of Haryana. The Shahargaon Jats belong to the Malik clan (\textit{gotra}) and claim descent from the Shigotri lineage of the Haryana Jats. Among the Jats of Delhi, Shahargaon is referred to as a ‘single clan village’ (\textit{sagota gaon}) or as ‘a village of Maliks’ (\textit{Malikon ka gaon}). Shigotri Jat communities in Haryana have traditionally occupied a higher economic, ritual, and numerical status than other social groups in the region.\textsuperscript{9} According to Sohanlal (the village council chief in his late seventies), the Malik Jat families who founded Shahargaon experienced severe economic hardship because they had less land than most Jat families in their parental village in Haryana. Every harvest season, they were forced to travel long distances to sell their surplus crops in the urban markets of Delhi. Shahargaon was located along their trade route to Delhi, approximately 2 days travels from their home village in Haryana. When a wealthy Muslim landlord offered to sell the Shahargaon area to the Jat brothers, they saw an opportunity to obtain greater landholding and improve their economic status. Because the land area of Shahargaon was located between Haryana and the trading center of Mehrauli in Delhi, the Malik brothers could maintain their agricultural way of life while taking advantage of the trading opportunities made possible by the strategic location of the new village.

The four Malik Jat brothers brought their families and some additional service caste families from Haryana and settled in Shahargaon, but their hopes of a better life were not immediately realized. The rocky terrain and high elevation of the village area made water a scarce resource. In the early settlement period,
agriculture in Shahargaon was labor intensive and irrigation was difficult. A good harvest in Shahargaon was a rare event, and families in the early settlement period suffered constant food scarcity and barely met their subsistence needs. In addition to scarce resources, Shahargaon Jats faced the threat of political domination by the numerous surrounding non-Malik Jat village communities. These communities threatened the survival of the struggling settlement through direct physical violence, encroachment on landholding, and competition in marketing. The surrounding Jat groups were not acceptable to the Shahargaon Jats in forming marriage alliances, and the threat of a forced marriage or capture of Shahargaon daughters by members of the surrounding communities reinforced the traditional son preference and seclusion of women in order to ensure protection against violence and the survival of the community.

Gender relations, identity, and roles during the early settlement period

Postcolonial researchers have convincingly demonstrated that economic factors and men’s rights of ownership and decision-making are central to explanations of son preference and daughter neglect among the north Indian peasant communities. Sons are needed for farming the land and to maintain control over the local land boundaries. They not only inherit the family name and property, but also tend to stay with the family after marriage and provide economic security and support to the aging parents. Expectations of virginity and rules of hypergamy and exogamy render daughters as social and economic burdens on their natal families and restrict their economic and social contribution to their natal household. Characteristic to Haryana Jats, the Shahargaon Jat community shows historical patterns of son preference and discrimination against daughters. During the early settlement period, Jat men in Shahargaon represented the economic and social prestige of a family, but women presented a serious responsibility for the family. Shahargaon Jat women were commoditized primarily because of their values as laborers and reproducers, and a result of customs associated with brideprice and dowry characteristics of the patrilineal Jat peasant community of Haryana. The small size of the settlement population and the poor land quality made labor a crucial resource problem in Shahargaon. To eke an existence out of the land, Jat families employed labor-intensive agricultural methods that demanded a large family and, in particular, as many sons as possible. Notwithstanding the threat of violence from the neighboring Jat communities in Delhi, Shahargaon Jat women regularly worked as agricultural laborers during the early settlement period. In the Haryana region, Jat women have traditionally worked in the fields. Colonial administrators have described a Jat woman (Jatni) as an economic treasure for her active participation in agricultural activities. Although Jat women were never allowed to work outside the village, they were actively involved in agricultural production within the village, both in the field and in post-harvesting activities. Women performed almost all the work associated with threshing and winnowing, collecting fodder, caring for cattle, and processing cow dung into fuel cakes.
To meet labor demands in the household and agricultural fields, Shahargaon Jat women would have closely-spaced pregnancies while continuing to participate in agricultural activities. There was no attempt to limit family size; however, elders report that in order to maximize the number of sons, female infanticide was occasionally practiced as a means of reducing the number of daughters in a family. A generalized disfavor of daughters in terms of a reduced allocation of household resources coupled with high expectation for labor were some of the common forms of daughter neglect among Shahargaon Jats. Daughter disfavor was often rationalized by the argument that ‘raising a daughter is equivalent to caring for a tree that will bear fruits for someone else’ and ‘a daughter is like a bottomless well in which one should not throw a lot because it cannot be extracted later’. Daughters in Shahargaon were considered a risk to the social honor of the family while they remained in the natal home. Furthermore, the labor of daughters was not considered a permanent asset in their natal households and, although valued on a temporary basis, their labor contributions were not perceived as equal to the material and social investment that a family would make in raising a daughter.

Unreliable agricultural yields, poverty, distance from traditional marital villages in Haryana, and the practice of village and regional exogamy among Shahargaon Jats made it difficult to forge marital alliances during the early settlement period. Haryana Jats traditionally practice clan, village, and regional exogamy in arranging marital alliances. Ideally, clan exogamy should be maintained for the father, mother, paternal grandmother, and maternal grandmother. Residence after marriage is patrilocal and the inheritance of property is patrilineal. Although the ideal marital alliance for Shahargaon Jats after migration continued to be with their traditional marital villages in Haryana, most Jat families from prosperous villages in Haryana would not establish marital alliances with Shahargaon families. Jats from prosperous villages in Haryana often labeled Shahargaon Jats as ‘hilly’ (pahari) Jats, and joked about their poverty and low social status. The village was derogatorily called a ‘hilly village’ (pahari gaon) and its women as ‘hilly Jat women’ (pahari jatni or paharo), who could be easily persuaded or purchased for marriage for a ‘bullock cart of hay’ (bhuse ka thela).

The term pahari, in addition to describing the hilly terrain in Shahargaon, also invokes a set of ideas and beliefs generally associated with those north Indian communities that do not follow the upper-caste prescriptive codes for establishing marital alliances. In general, pahari communities exhibit certain distinctive social characteristics such as, polyandry, levirate, divorce by mutual consent, remarriage of widows and divorcees, and the toleration of intercaste marriages. Since these social practices are generally considered unusual and objectionable by other north Indian Hindu communities, it is a real slur to identify a plains community, such as Shahargaon, as pahari, and to perceive its women as paharo. Recalling the hardships faced by Shahargaon Jats during the early settlement period, Dalbir Singh, a middle-aged Jat shopkeeper, narrated the following story that eloquently describes the discriminatory and
mocking attitude of Haryana Jats toward the poor and struggling Shahargaon Jat community:

Once a Shahargaon Jat visited his distant wealthy relative in Haryana. The host family offered him cane sugar juice. The guest liked the drink and since he had never tasted the cane sugar juice he kept asking for more. Upon his return to Shahargaon he boasted about his experience of drinking the sweet cane sugar juice. His friends requested him to let them taste his sweet spit, but he refused the offer. Instead, he decided to spit in the village well so that the entire Shahargaon community could taste and enjoy the sweetness of the cane sugar juice.\textsuperscript{13}

Since social status among Haryana Jats is primarily determined on the basis of the ownership of agricultural land and the economic status of the family, the poor and struggling Shahargaon Jat community ranked low according to the aforementioned criteria and, therefore, could not establish extensive marital ties with wealthy Jat families in Haryana. Traditionally, Haryana Jats offered brideprice to obtain brides from poor families and provided dowry to ensure a hypergamous alliance for their daughters.

The important role played by women in the economy also led to wide acceptance of the prevalent custom of sale and purchase of brides among the economically distressed peasantry. In the nineteenth century, except among a few better-off families, this custom was observed to have been universal not only among the Jats but also among the agricultural and the lower castes.\textsuperscript{14}

During the early settlement period, Shahargaon Jats were unable to pay dowry and were forced to accept brideprice for their daughters. Furthermore, the unavailability of Jat brides from Haryana and the cost of brideprice occasionally led to the practice of fraternal polyandry in the early settlement period in Shahargaon. Shahargaon elders recounted several instances of marriage by capture and marriages with non-Jat women in the village. Shahargaon Jats also practiced levirate and widow remarriage to protect lineage ownership over land and to exploit the productive and reproductive roles of women. Characteristic of Haryana Jats, the Shahargaon Jat community describes levirate marriages as ‘wearing bangles’ \textit{(chura pahenana)}, representing social consent for cohabitation between a widow and her brother-in-law.\textsuperscript{15}

Although Shahargaon Jats did occasionally accept brides from non-Jat groups and were flexible in traditional marriage rules, Jat daughters were always married back into the Haryana Jat community. Because the Shahargaon Jat community was poorer than their Haryana home communities, most Shahargaon families could not achieve the ideal of hypergamy by providing an adequate dowry and were forced to accept brideprice from the wealthier Jat families in Haryana. Delayed marriages were common for Shahargaon Jat daughters. Jat elders recounted that there were several unmarried young women in the village. Many families could not meet the dowry demands for a hypergamous alliance and refused the dishonor of accepting brideprice. These families faced social condemnation for being ‘greedy’ by ‘keeping unmarried older daughters at home’ and exploiting them as agricultural and domestic laborers. I was told that
much intravillage conflict arose as a result of sexual indiscretions and that unmarried daughters occasionally resorted to suicide.

This description constitutes a historical context-driven account of gender identity, roles, and relations in Shahargaon before it became a part of the ‘urban agglomeration’ of New Delhi. In 1972, the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) acquired the agricultural land of Shahargaon as a part of the urban expansion of New Delhi. Shahargaon Jat families were paid compensation money equivalent to the value of their land as assessed jointly by the DDA and the Office of the Land Commissioner of New Delhi. Consequently, agricultural activities sharply declined in Shahargaon with a corresponding increase in the number of Shahargaon residents seeking employment in New Delhi or initiating small-scale businesses. During the 1980s, a large DDA residential colony and two shopping centers were established on Shahargaon’s agricultural land. In recent years, real-estate values in the village and its adjoining areas have considerably increased, and many Jat families have taken advantage of the growing real estate market by selling and renting portions of their residential property. These changes have quickly transformed Shahargaon from an isolated and impoverished village into a region of intense commercial activity and a strategic area of economic growth.

**Urbanizing Shahargaon: neither city nor village**

In 1999, Shahargaon appeared more like a residential neighborhood in New Delhi than a village, and its residents looked and behaved more like urban Delhites. The ongoing construction of new houses, shops, and the addition of new rooms and floors to the old village homes has given Shahargaon the appearance of a hodge-podge agglomeration of buildings. The unplanned vertical and horizontal expansion of houses for living space and commerce has made the village lanes even narrower and darker than before. Young Jat men wear shoes imitating Nike or Adidas and dressed in T-shirts with imprints of Michael Jordan and other American sports celebrities. They compare the features of their cellular phones and CD players in a bragging tone, and responded to my questions posed in Hindi in a manner that involved an intentional use of the English language.

With the expansion of the Delhi metropolis area and the establishment of a middle-to-upper-income residential colony around the village, Shahargaon is no longer a self-contained rural village. Shahargaon’s area adjacent to one of the major city highways has become a place of intensive commercial activity with several bustling marketing and business centers. In the urban market surrounding the village, Shahargaon Jats have successfully created and expanded small businesses of wholesale and retail trading, construction contracting, and real estate. The surrounding DDA residential colony provides a rich clientele for small-scale commercial opportunities in Shahargaon, and the everyday interaction superimposes an urban context on the rural identity of the village. Furthermore, Shahargaon has been the target zone of economic restructuring and
Table 1. Shahargaon’s population and families in 1999 (grouped by jati)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jati (traditional occupation)</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Number of families</th>
<th>Average family size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Highest</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahman (priests)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mid to high</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jat (agriculturalists)</td>
<td>831</td>
<td>463</td>
<td>368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mid</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumhar (potters)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nai (barbers)</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lowest</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chamar (leatherworkers)</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhangi (sweepers)</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>1187</td>
<td>661</td>
<td>526</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jatis are arranged in terms of villagers’ perception of hierarchy in Shahargaon.

Urbanization during the past two decades, which have brought increased education and health care opportunities to the village.

Economic status of Jat households in urbanizing Shahargaon

According to my 1999 household survey, Shahargaon’s total population is 1187 (203 households) and Jats form the largest social group (70%) in Shahargaon (see Table 1). All Shahargaon Jat families can afford to feed and clothe their members, live in houses built with brick and cement, and have electricity and water connections. To assess the economic status of Jat households, I used information pertaining to household composition, land ownership, household occupation and income, education, and household appliances. In particular, I used business activities along with residential and/or commercial property ownership, education status and occupation of the family members, and household assets to determine the economic rank for each Jat household in the village. For Shahargaon, the acquisition of agricultural land by the state made land ownership an unreliable criterion to assess economic status. However, retrospective information on land ownership did provide a general idea about the change in economic status among Shahargaon Jats.

Based on the aforementioned characteristics, Jat households can be categories in the following three economic groups:

- Group A includes ‘affluent’ households (49.3%) in the village who were successfully able to invest the compensation money given by the Delhi Development Authority into a business activity like opening a small-scale industry or a shop. Before land acquisition, the bigger family units of these
households owned large pieces of agricultural land and received substantial sums of compensation money. These households have more than one source of income, and men are employed either in the military or other government services. Most members, including women and children, are formally educated. In particular, sons study in expensive private English-medium schools, but daughters are likely continue their education at less expensive Hindi-medium schools. Two women belonging to different households in this group are employed as school teachers. Members in this economic group have a good knowledge about the available health-care services and can afford private health care. Most households own a television set, a cooking gas connection, a car, scooter or motorcycle, and other electric appliances. These households could also be categorized as belonging to the Upper Income Group (annual income above Rs. 100,000 or more).

- Group B comprises households (35.2%) who could not successfully invest the compensation money and have rented a small portion of their residential property to entrepreneurs for commercial purpose. In some households, men hold low-paying jobs as drivers or security guards. A few members are educated while women, in general, have not studied beyond the primary-school level. Both sons and daughters study at less expensive Hindi-medium schools. In some households, however, sons study in private English-medium schools. In most cases, government-sponsored health care is utilized and private health care is sought only in case of an emergency. Most households own a television set, a cooking gas connection, and a bicycle. These houses could be categorized as belonging to the Middle Income Group (annual income greater than Rs. 40,000 but less than Rs. 90,000).

- Group C constitutes families (15.5%) who could not successfully invest the compensation money and have houses located in the interior of the village, which are, therefore, of little commercial value. These families are living in a state described to me as ‘hand-to-mouth’ by a Jat informant. Most families in this group do not have any source of regular income, and men work either as part-time laborers or on small contract jobs related to construction business. A few men also work as real-estate brokers and sometimes are able to earn extra income. Both men and women are informally educated, usually up to the primary level, and children are sent to the village school. Health care is limited to that provided by the government health agencies. Most families in this group do not have cooking gas connections and cannot afford vehicles or luxury household items such as television sets. These households could be categorized as belonging to the Lower Income Group (annual income less than Rs. 40,000).

Shahri Jat and Dehati Jatni: changing gender identity in urbanizing Shahargaon

The shift from agriculture to urban economy demands that Shahargaon Jats redefine their identity from that of a rural (dehati) Jat peasant to that of an
affluent and urbanized (shahri) resident of New Delhi. Shahargaon Jats effectively use their recently improved economic status as a new status-enhancing symbol in order to align themselves with the educated, affluent, and ‘modern’ society of New Delhi. Shahargaon Jats interact with people from the residential colony on a daily basis—people who are labeled by Jats as ‘urban’ (shahri). Everyday interaction in Shahargaon is indicative of the ways in which its residents attempt to show-off: by using English words in casual conversation; by seeking treatment from an expensive allopathic specialist; and by sending sons to private English-medium schools in the neighborhood. A majority of industrious Jat families in Shahargaon that have more successfully utilized the DDA compensation money, by investing in businesses and real-estate schemes, demonstrate a greater degree of acculturation to urban society. However, less successful Jat families tend to exaggerate their agricultural identity and idealize cultural practices associated with traditional agricultural Jat identity as a means of maintaining community boundaries between the Jat population and the surrounding multiethnic urban population. According to a Jat shopkeeper in Shahargaon:

Shahargaon is not a village anymore. It is a city or at least a part of New Delhi. Of course, our quality of life has improved. We have cars, television sets, and everything else, but our village has not become an attractive place to live. Instead, it has turned into a congested inner city ghetto. We now have serious problems of alcoholism, gambling, social conflict and disobedience among children. Men are busy earning money. They prefer to spend their evenings with friends drinking alcohol and gambling rather than spend time at home. Children are not interesting in studying. They disobey their elders all the time. This village and its people have become blind followers of the modern people of New Delhi.

Notwithstanding the level of acculturation to the urban New Delhi, the majority of Shahargaon Jats express a sense of nostalgia for a rather idealized version of their life in rural and insular Shahargaon. At times, they tend to idealize images of community harmony and the simplicity of life in rural Shahargaon as compared with the conflict ridden and complicated life in urbanizing Shahargaon. Although they do not dispute the fact that the standard of living in Shahargaon has generally improved, they also recognize that the urban exposure has created new needs for consumer goods and other items, which the household cannot produce itself and must obtain with cash. They feel that a regular cash income has become necessary for every household, thus orienting Shahargaon Jat men toward leaving the village and seeking reliable employment opportunities and/or businesses in the urban market of New Delhi.

Everyday life and economy in Shahargaon are now inextricably connected with those of the surrounding communities in New Delhi. The sudden shift from agricultural subsistence to urban economy has forced the Shahargaon Jat peasant into an urban economic system for which they were least prepared. Entrepreneurial opportunities have expanded, but only for Jat men. Jat women are denied direct access to the urban New Delhi because of the fear of ‘outside influences and a corrupt and dangerous urban world’. In the rapidly changing social and
economic milieu of Shahargaon, Jat women have become more restricted to the household than they were when the community had an agricultural base and way of life. Although the interrelation between men and women in matters concerning mutual and family support was unbalanced even during the agricultural period, recent changes in their village have increased considerably gender asymmetry within the Jat household. Jat women are not allowed to work outside the home primarily because the surrounding urban community is perceived as threatening to women and girls in the village, and the urban men are regarded as ‘untrustworthy outsiders.’ Furthermore, restricting women’s participation in economic activities has become a matter of prestige and a marker of upward mobility in Shahargaon. Based on a similar observation in Karimpur, Susan Wadley argues that, ‘since a family’s status is in part measured by the behavior of its women, purdah restrictions are imposed if a family gains in economic status and seeks a higher social status’. 19

Shahargaon Jat men feel that, by allowing women to work outside the village, they are not only risking women’s safety, but also compromising their reputation as ‘peasant Jats from Haryana’ (Haryanavi Jat). The Shahargaon Jat families that allowed women to manage shops during the early transition period were negatively labeled as those that ‘make their women work’ (aurto se dhanda karwate hain). The term dhanda (literally, work), when used in this context, labels a working woman as a prostitute. Furthermore, the Jat husband who listens to his wife and consults her in economic matters is labeled ‘wife’s servant’ (lugai ka naukar). Instead, it is expected that ‘the husband will not take any advice from his wife on money matters’. Jat women have been summarily excluded from all income-generating activities, which further marginalizes their status and decision-making power within the household. They are not allowed to leave the village area without being accompanied by a male family member, thus further reducing their chances of adapting to the urban environment of New Delhi. Jat women feel that the increased restriction on their mobility has made them dependent on men. They often complain about the life of boredom involving the repetitive everyday domestic chores and little mobility outside of the confines of their homes and village.

Son preference and daughter neglect in Shahargaon

Although a shift in the economic and occupational base of Shahargaon Jats has occurred and the village is no longer an economically and politically self-contained unit, son preference and daughter disfavor appear to be intensifying rather than decreasing in urbanizing Shahargaon. Sons are continued to be viewed as economic and political assets, adding to the strength and prestige of the family, but daughters are perceived as an economic and moral burden. Now Jat parents rely upon their sons to manage businesses and real-estate schemes and to negotiate their relationships with the surrounding urban society. Although Shahargaon Jats are under no threat of physical violence from surrounding communities and subsistence is no longer labor intensive, a Jat family with no
Table 2. Survey of Jat women aged under 45 between 1989 and 1994

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of women</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Number of abortions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did not utilise prenatal sex determination facilities</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>71.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did utilise prenatal sex determination facilities</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not have sex-selective abortions</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>52.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did have sex-selective abortions</td>
<td>17*</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aged 30–45, had one abortion</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aged under 30, had one abortion</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>64.7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aged under 30, had two abortions</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aged under 20, had three abortions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This number represents 13.4% of the total number of 127 women surveyed.


sons is still perceived as economically and politically weak in the village. Shahargaon’s increased urban contact with New Delhi has also facilitated access to a wide range of health-care facilities and reproductive technology. In particular, prenatal sex determination technology (ultrasonography and amniocentesis) and abortion facilities have become readily available to the urbanizing Shahargaon Jat community in the past few years.20 These facilities, coupled with widely available family planning services, have provided Shahargaon Jat couples with a reliable means for reducing family size and limiting the number of daughters per family. Shahargaon Jats are maintaining a low fertility rate by using contraceptives and achieving the desired family composition by aborting female fetuses.

In a survey of 127 Jat women younger than 45 years old, 17 (13.4%) had undergone sex-selective abortions between 1989 and 1994; two women in the 30–45 age category, and 15 women in the under 30 age category. Three of the 15 women in the under 30 category had two sex-selective abortions, while one had three sex-selective abortions. In all, 36 women (28.3%) had utilized prenatal sex determination facilities to know the sex of the fetus, and 22 fetuses identified as female were aborted between 1989 and 1994 (see Table 2). The majority of Jat parents (68%) expressed desire for a small family size, and considered two sons and a daughter to be the ideal family composition.21 It is important to note that, despite considerable improvements in economic and educational status brought about by urbanization, the use of reproductive technology for prenatal sex determination followed by sex-selective abortion of female fetuses suggests that son preference and daughter disfavor continue to exist in the Shahargaon Jat community.
Closely related to the increased urban exposure is an increase in the number of literate men and women in the village. This increase is in part due to the availability of new education opportunities in the surrounding urban residential colony. Before Shahargaon’s assimilation into the urban environment of New Delhi, the village had only one primary school. The nearest secondary school was located in Mehrauli, roughly 5 km from the village. Only a few Jat boys attended the secondary school in Mehrauli and Jat girls were not permitted to continue their education beyond the primary-level school in the village. After the completion of the DDA housing project, three English-medium secondary schools and several preparatory and middle schools have opened in the area. According to my 1999 household survey, 67% of Jat men as compared with 53% of the women are literate. Seventeen percent of the under-15 girls as compared with 42% of the boys in the same age group are studying beyond the village school.

For a majority of Jat daughters, adolescence invariably marks the end of their education. Rarely are they allowed to study beyond the eight levels available at the village school, primarily because most Jat parents are concerned about raising and educating daughters in a ‘corrupt and dangerous’ urban environment. A major parental concern is the fear of a daughter’s emerging sexuality and of any dishonor that a sexual indiscretion could bring to the family. In addition, many Jat parents feel that it is difficult to find a suitable match in rural Haryana for an educated Jat girl. Only seven Jat families have daughters that have completed high school. Although most Jat parents would like their sons to have formal education in English-medium schools, questions concerning a daughter’s education beyond the village school did invoke some complex responses. The majority of Jat parents did not see any benefit in educating their daughters beyond the village school. They felt that the learning experience of a daughter should be limited to a level that prepares her to assist in her children’s education and to write letters to natal family members, and at the same time does not allow her to form opinions of her own. These emergent trends and explanations against daughter’s education echo the characteristics of the rural agricultural Jat community in Haryana that places less value on women’s education and perceives that education:

... can destroy the concept of agricultural work as a moral duty, as well as women’s so-called inborn affinity for agricultural work. The rural regions see the young and educated males who are increasingly reluctant to perform any menial work. Educated females are considered to have the same attitude. This is one of the reasons why education for women is universally decried in rural areas.

Jat daughters are expected to be raised conservatively in order to be married back into the rural Jat families in Haryana. Jat parents feel that daughters must be raised in a manner that will allow them to adjust well into the agricultural lifestyle of rural Jat families. An educated (pari likhi) woman is perceived as having the ability to form her own opinion and a potential source of divisiveness in the family. Such a woman is considered unsuitable for marriage into a peasant
Jat family in Haryana. In spite of the majority view in the village, a number of Jat parents feel that educated daughters are likely to marry educated men and will enjoy some degree of economic independence and security. In recent years, several Jat families have expressed disagreement with the present state of women’s education in the village. In the rapidly changing socio-economic context of Shahargaon, some Jat parents are beginning to look for educated brides, and relate mother’s education with improvements in the survival and well-being of her children.

Notwithstanding the recent changes in Shahargaon, wealthier Haryana Jat families continue to be the most favored marital ties for Shahargaon Jats. Unlike the discrimination and rejection of Shahargaon Jats by Haryana Jats during the early settlement period, land-holding Jat families in Haryana are now aggressively seeking alliances with Shahargaon Jat families. Improved economic status and Shahargaon’s location in the capital city of India have made Shahargaon Jats favorable for establishing marital and business alliances. The Shahargaon Jat family can now provide substantial dowry for the daughter’s marriage with a suitable groom from a landholding wealthier Haryana family. Although Shahargaon Jat parents no longer perceive their daughters as a potential source of humiliation or a marker of low socio-economic status, the anxiety over maintaining a daughter’s seclusion in an urban environment has created a new set of reasons for the continuing daughter disfavor in the village.

Members of the affluent Shahargaon Jat families continue to maintain strong ties and find spouses for themselves and their children in rural Haryana. Their financial resources and urban residence make it possible for them to maintain mutually beneficial ties and keep up personal and social relations with their home villages. There is little doubt that Shahargaon Jats are among the most rapidly assimilating groups into the urban world of New Delhi, but they are most likely to maintain marital and economic relations with their home community in rural Haryana. Shahargaon Jats exemplify a community that is not bounded by geographical space because, primarily through its women, it consistently attempts to maintain marital and economic network ties with rural Jat communities in Haryana. These relations allow for regional integration and extending community network as well as serve to maintain and reinforce the rural peasant identity in the urban context of Shahargaon.

**Conclusion**

Numerous studies suggest that women’s economic roles have not improved relative to that of men in urbanizing communities in north India, primarily because of an uncontested application of the western models and masculine ideology of development. As a result, women’s opportunities and involvement in income-generating activities have tended to lag behind those of men. In Shahargaon, much like in other urbanizing north Indian communities, historically constructed and culturally sanctioned gender asymmetry has placed severe constraints upon the activities and roles of women, excluding them from public
venues and places through *purdah* restrictions and prohibiting women from participating in income-generating activities.\(^{24}\) Contrary to the notion that urbanization and improved class status will eventually improve women’s lifestyle by reducing *purdah* restrictions and seclusion,\(^{25}\) Jat women’s roles in urbanizing Shahargaon have become more marginalized than when the community had an agricultural way of life. Although increased contact with urban New Delhi has led to economic prosperity in the village, Jat women’s status and their contributions continue to be devalued, perhaps as a demonstration of the tendency for ideological change in gender relations to lag behind economic change. The new urban-capitalist economy in Shahargaon has reinforced the traditional patriarchal ideologies, allowing Jat men’s control over resources as well as access to economic and educational opportunities. Recent changes in the village have not been favorable for Shahargaon Jat women because they have been denied access to the urban sector and have been marginalized in terms of their economic roles in the community. In Shahargaon, like in other peasant communities responding to the shift from agriculture to urban economy, women’s economic roles as agricultural laborers have been replaced by roles within the household, and they are increasingly perceived as carriers of traditions and as a means of maintaining customs and practices associated with the community’s agrarian past. The uneven level of economic participation and rates of acculturation to the urban environment have led to the emergence of an economically marginalized and spatially segregated gendered underclass in Shahargaon.

Among Shahargaon Jats, attempts toward maintaining traditions and practices associated with their agricultural past reflect processes of boundary maintenance between rural Shahargaon and its urban context. The rural Jat identity embraces the traditional peasant *Haryanavi* identity, whereas the urban context demands a *shahri* individual devoid of rural (*dehati*) mannerisms. As the *Haryanavi* peasant Jat identity is compromised by processes of urbanization and acculturation, the burden of maintaining an agricultural ethos gets embedded in women’s roles. Shahargaon wives are chosen from Haryana because they are seen as representing an agricultural way of life and as the means of bringing that tradition into the Jat community. In order to be married back into the Haryana rural Jat community, Shahargaon daughters must be raised conservatively and should be protected from the dangerous and corrupt urban environment of New Delhi. By imposing restrictions on women’s mobility and participation in income-generating activities in the village, Shahargaon Jats are attempting to maintain a high social status with respect to the rural Jat families in Haryana. Furthermore, by reinforcing women’s seclusion, the Shahargaon Jat community assures its ‘purity’ from the ‘impure’ urban context. As the Shahargaon Jat community experiences the process of assimilation into the metropolis of New Delhi, there is a corresponding effort in the community to redefine its ‘peasant identity’ by invoking traditions associated with their peasant lifestyle and by reinforcing women’s traditional roles in the village. Shahargaon’s urban surroundings are considered by some as a threat to the traditional Jat identity. Therefore, a reinforcement of the peasant identity invokes a sense of unity among Shahargaon
Jats. The gendered peasant identity among Shahargaon Jats does not simply represent a nostalgic attachment to their peasant heritage. Instead, it has emerged as a means of protecting, maintaining, and enhancing the social status of the community. By invoking traditions associated with the peasant agricultural past and by forging marital relations with Jat families in rural Haryana, the urbanizing Shahargaon Jat community is in the process of establishing social, political, and material support network ties with the larger Jat community in the region.

The Shahargaon Jat community’s particular historical and patriarchal context, kinship and marriage rules, and the present state of urbanization constitute an example of the overall failure of urban exposure to improve economic participation and the overall quality of life for women in urbanizing communities in north India. It appears that the community’s economic well-being has not worked in tandem with the women’s social well-being in Shahargaon, in the sense that the Jat patriarchal system and its rules have largely remained unaltered despite exposure to the urban environment of New Delhi. Indeed, Shahargaon’s increasing urban context has intensified patriarchal control and the corresponding marginalization of Jat women. The Shahargaon case may illustrate a widespread pattern of the increasing gender asymmetry in several other urbanizing village communities in north India. It reinforces the urgent need to recognize the masculine bias, and to conceptually and substantively modify and engender the state-sponsored programs and policies of development, urbanization, and social change in India.

Notes and references

1. This paper is based on ethnographic research conducted by the author in 1999 as part of the larger study in an urbanizing village in north India. The research was funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (Grant # 6460).

2. Shahargaon (a pseudonym meaning ‘city-village’) is a small, urbanizing Jat village established by Haryana Jat migrants during the early eighteenth century in the south of New Delhi. The pseudonym ‘Shahargaon’ aptly describes the dual nature of everyday life in the village. Located amidst high-rise, residential and commercial buildings, Shahargaon has become a part of the expanding metropolis of New Delhi in the past two decades. Shahargaon is dominated by Jats—historically described as a dominant land-owning community in north India. Although there is a sizable body of anthropological literature documenting processes of culture change in India, there exists little ethnographic information on the impact of urbanization brought about by capitalist expansion and technological innovation among the agricultural Jats of north India.

3. The Arabic equivalent of Jat is zutt, a generic term used for ‘men from India’. Ibettson describes Jats as belonging to the Indo-Scythian descent group and as the ‘revenue-payer par excellence who is sturdy and independent’. In the writings of many British officers and missionaries, Jats have been described as constituting a ‘bold peasantry with pride accustomed to guide the plough and wield the sword with equal readiness and success—second to no other Indian race in hard work or courage’. The Jats constitute 5% of New Delhi’s population. According to a recent report published in The Hindustan Times (18 October 1999), the Delhi Commission for Other Backward Classes (OBC) has recommended that Jats living in New Delhi be included in the OBC list as they constitute an economically backward caste. This recommendation is based on a survey of social status, economic conditions and level of education among Jats living in New Delhi, which suggests that the poor social, economic, and educational status of the Jats warrants their inclusion in the OBC list. See S. Westphal-Hellbusch and H. Westphal, The Jat of Pakistan (Berlin: Duncker and Humbolt, 1964); D. Ibettson, Punjab Castes (Lahore: India Press, 1916) p 102; and Kalka R. Qanungo, History of Jats: Contributions to the History of Northern India (New Delhi: Surajmal Memorial Education Society, 1925) p 1.


12. Berreman (Ref 11) provides a detailed description of *pahari* communities in North India.

13. Sugar cane is a profitable cash crop usually grown in the fertile Indo-Gangetic plains of North India. In Haryana, Jats are primary sugar cane producers and are economically better off than other communities that do not produce this crop. Since the domestic production and consumption of cane sugar juice is considered a symbol of high social and economic status among Jats, the inability of the Shahargaon Jats to grow sugar cane further reinforced their lower status than that of the Haryana Jats.


15. Among Shahargaon Jats, levirate usually involved the ritual of ‘placing glass bangles on the widow’s wrist’ by her prospective husband before a gathering of relatives and friends. Agarwal suggests that ‘levirate was considered a valid but inferior form of marriage, and did not involve a religious ceremony, which Hindu women could not customarily undergo twice’. See Agarwal, *op cit*, Ref 9, p 202.

16. The term Delhite (literally, residents of Delhi) commonly refers to urbanized residents of New Delhi.


18. The term household refers to a kin group in which members contribute both socially and economically toward its maintenance. Among Shahargaon Jats, the household often includes more than one nuclear family unit.


21. Refer to Khanna (*ibid*) for a detailed account on the incidence of prenatal sex-selective abortion and female feticide among Shahargaon Jats.


24. Wadley, *op cit*, Ref 6, p 93.