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IMAGES AND IMAGE MAKERS

Some Insights from Work with Working Women

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Some Insights from Work with Working Women

What really is a woman's self image? Who are her image makers? When similar questions were posed about the identity of the Indian woman or in the context of my own work, about the identity of the working woman, I felt equally helpless. These, no doubt, are basic questions. How does a researcher like myself get to know about the identity or self image of the persons one works with? I must confess I had not even thought of these questions, not to speak of canvassing them, directly or indirectly with my respondents, however basic they are. I was concerned about, or involved in, concrete situations of the lives I was wanting to study and understand. All the same, if my participation in the seminar has to be useful in some way to those here who would be out in the field in a very short time exploring basic questions, I should share with you my experiences in the field and the insights of some relevance, I can offer on the basis of my field work.

I have divided the paper into three parts. In the first section, I draw upon my field experience to make a few general observations about

the conduct of field work in order for it to be rewarding. In the second section of the paper, I highlight what appears to me important concerns of the working woman in low-income occupations. In the third section, I have attempted to give my understanding of the working women's own perceptions on the basis of my observations of the lives of the women I have been studying. I end up the paper with a few concluding observations of general nature.

I

The field situation

First of all, however relevant or legitimate our questions may appear to us at the project design level, they take on an entirely different dimension at the field level. Some questions are too abstract to be even translated or verbalised in a form to be understood properly by the respondent. In any case, the respondent must be able to relate herself to the question before she is in a position to answer it adequately. A response to a half-digested question is worse than no response because it can lead one to unwarranted inferences. It cannot be over-emphasised why it is important for an interviewer to get proper answers to her questions.

A major problem, I faced at the start of my field work, arose when practically every one of my respondents would ask me two very pertinent questions: (1) How am I going to benefit by answering your questions? (2) Why is it important for you to understand my problems, if nothing is going to come of it? I had to tell them in all honesty that there was very little that they would gain by answering my queries, but that I would gain considerably from understanding their situations. Frankly, this is easily said than done. For your respondents to understand and appreciate this can sometimes take a lot of patience. But it is a barrier that you must cross in order for you to make any headway in your work. Then, and then only, will you be able to depend on honest serious response to your questions.

Then there was another problem, particularly with the case study method. While one has to narrow down and only choose a few households for intensive study, the ones you did not visit must not be made to feel that they did not matter much in your work, for they do matter very much not only because the alienation of the neighbours might well alienate your direct respondent but also because to understand the neighbourhood of your respondent you may have to rely on the neighbours for information of direct relevance to your work.

Also, one has to be prepared to encounter any kind of reception when you first enter a respondent's house. In my case, where I have been mostly working with women workers from the lowest income strata of our society, I had to be prepared to face any kind of situation from total acceptance to total indifference, or rejection. Even on subsequent

occasions, i.e., after you have broken the ice, one has to be prepared for any situation. You cannot quite fix an appointment and ask your respondent to be free for you at such and such a time. Moreover, the moment you go to a house, your presence itself may attract so much attention in the neighbourhood, that you could have some ten to twenty persons, children, women and men (in that order, in terms of numbers) following you. In such a situation, how do you ask any personal questions? Privacy of conversation is unheard of in these houses, even otherwise. And still, there are many matters, people even in the poorest of houses, will not like to discuss except in utmost confidence. We have to remember as researchers that whatever be the class differences among our respondents, the interviewer is always an intruder prying into the private lives of people. While the rich are scared that you may get to know more of their affluence than they want, the poor are embarrassed that you may expose their poverty.

How does one gain an entry point?

When one wants to study a particular household or group of households, it would be worthwhile spending a few days trying to know socially a few of the people in the group. One has to decide whether to make an entry from the top or bottom. Most people find it easier to enter from the top. However, I wanted to gain access from lower ends. Let me illustrate. When I was interested in studying a woman working as construction labourer, I tried to get to know various people who were in some way involved in construction. It is through them that I came upon the particular construction worker I ultimately chose for

my in-depth investigations. Likewise, when I was studying a squatter settlement outside Trivandrum city, I tried first to recruit a helper from the settlement itself. She could serve as an informant as well as a contact point. I could also check with her the information divulged to me by my respondents. Far more important, it was for me to understand through this helper the currents and cross-currents in the settlement. In the three fishing villages where I have recently worked and in the coir and construction industry where I worked earlier for profiles of working women, I had people from the same community helping me in my work. After all, what we are interested in is not mechanical accuracy, but contextual relevance. Who else can provide this except persons from within the same context?

Structuring of interviews

I do not know if I am making a new point, but I ought to share with you my experience on structured interviewing. In my field work, I found it impossible to conduct a structured interview however much I would have liked to go on with it. The respondent is seldom on the same wave length as the interviewer. Therefore, a question that seems logically to follow to an interviewer from an earlier question may appear most odd to the respondent. I would rather be led by the respondent's inclinations than my own. After all, you can always restructure the material you collect according to your logic. But while interviewing, let the wind blow freely. When I interviewed my respondents, their neighbours, relatives or friends, I had to constantly remind myself not to let the logic of my scheme of research

get the better of me. There is, no doubt, a risk in this method of unstructured interviewing of wasting one's time, but in my experience the time thus spent is very worthwhile. In the end, one gets answers to all the questions one wishes to raise and quite satisfactorily. Structured interviews, on the other hand, run the risk of scaring away the respondents. If and when the respondent cannot quite find an answer to a formal question, it may give her a sense of inadequacy and in the process of hiding that, the interviewer may end up getting wrong answers.

Importance of casting one's net wide

I would like also to emphasise that one cannot study a respondent in isolation. One must observe her in her total environment. To give a concrete example, in order to get a complete picture of the construction worker, I had to observe her in her family setting, at her work with her friends, and in the community in addition to studying her individual day to day house-keeping and other activities. Thus, one has to cast one's net wide around the respondent and her total environment in order to understand and relate her and her behaviour pattern. My conversations with the women workers I have studied acquired a fuller meaning for me only when I had observed each in her total environment.

does one accomplish the above? I went to the various work places to observe the construction worker at work along with her female and male colleagues. This gave her a clear idea of how she dressed to

to her work place, with whom she socialised, from whom she took orders, and what sort of psychic and physical problems she faced at the work situation. I would also accompany her when she went shopping to get an idea of where she would shop, how she shopped, for how much and from whom. I could thus watch her interaction with others. Often there was no need to ask questions. It was enough to observe. When I was studying the agricultural labourer, I found that she had problem buying on credit. So I went to meet the shopkeeper with whom she had regular dealings to find out what went wrong. Virtually, an interviewer shadows her respondent during all her activities. At the same time she must not intrude on her activities. This approach of casting one's net wide is what I found most useful in my field work. It helped me also gain some insights into the psyche of my respondents.

II



SOME EMPIRICAL OBSERVATIONS

On the basis of the work I have done with working women from various low-income occupations, I shall now try to share with you the insights I have gained on important issues of relevance to us in this seminar. I shall deal with these issues under three major headings: (A) Problems in a family; (B) Problems in work; and (C) Problems in the community. While discussing these issues, I shall draw principally

upon illustrations from the five biographies I have written of such women in my Profiles in Female Poverty. All the five women I studied had husbands who were engaged in casual wage labour. The agricultural labourer is married to a man who is a truck loader and the brick worker's husband was a boatman but he has been without work for several years now. The construction worker's husband also worked on construction sites as an unskilled hand but she has been deserted for some years now. The woman coir worker is married to an agricultural labourer and the fish vendor's husband has been a coolie fisherman, i.e., one who does not have a boat of his own, but is not working any more because of ill health. In taking to work outside the house these women have been able to reduce the number of days the household goes without any income altogether. Though the five women studied by me are engaged in different occupations, the type of work open to them is unskilled, unremunerative and exhausting.

A: Problems in the family:

(i) Marital Instability

As I go back over my case studies, it is clear to me that the basic economic problem of sheer survival and day to day existence is the most pressing issue, women from the strata, I have studied, face. Indeed, the women I studied took to work invariably because either their husbands had intermittent incomes or they were not there to support them. If they were not dead, they had deserted the wife and children. And, still to say so would be telling the most obvious.

Given the basic economic problem, one of the most difficult and spreading problem women from low-income households seem to face is that of being a single parent, in effect if not also in letter. On the emotional side, many working mothers are burdened with the dual responsibility of caring for the children, both physically and emotionally, single-handedly. One often came across women deserted, divorced or separated, by their men, even when the marriage had properly been solemnised. Where alliances are of the common law type, desertions seem to be still more common. With the menace of dowry entering even low income groups, more and more girls from these households enter into common law alliances. This further aggravates the situation and introduces greater instability in turn. In common law type of alliances, the relationships tend to be fragile and women have to take care of responsibilities even earlier than is the case of regularly married women. All the three daughters of the brick worker I studied, and also her grand daughters have entered into common law type of alliances in recent years. The son of the agricultural labourer I have studied has also brought in a common law wife. I have watched a number of these alliances break. In cases where the first marriage was a formal one but it failed, which often seems to happen after two or three children, the subsequent alliances are common law relationships entered by both men and women. In my more recent work with fisherwomen from Araya Hindu and Latin Catholic households, I have noticed that marriages tend to be far more stable among the Latin Catholics, than among the Hindus of comparable economic class.

(ii) Commitment to the Family

In three out of five families studied, the working woman is now the principal earner. The construction worker has been deserted by her husband for several years now. Her grown up son, who has had eight years of schooling, has still to get settled down to work. Her daughter, in her early teens, has yet to start going out to work. The brick worker's husband has retired from his work as a boatman. Her grown up sons and daughters are married and living separately with their own families. The grown up unmarried daughter earns her own keep and also saves a little for her marriage. The fish vendor's husband has not gone out fishing because of ill health but at least two out of her five sons might soon start earning their keep. Her eldest ^{son,} who has been to school, however, proved a liability because he would not dirty his hands and clothes doing fishing or any other manual work. The other two sons are too young to take to work. While the grown up married daughter is looking after her own family, the girl still in her early teens is occupied full time doing the household chores when the mother is out vending fish. So for these three families, existence itself will be problematic if our principal respondent were not working. They are the mainstay of their families. In the other two families, i.e., of the agricultural labourer and the coir worker, the husbands are fully involved in work and are contributing to the upkeep of the family.

If one were to judge the commitment of these women to the family by the proportion of their wage or daily earnings which they take back home and compared it with what their husbands contributed when they

were earning and living with them, women's commitment is clearly stronger than men's. Women invariably brought back home a greater proportion of their wage than their men.

Still another way of judging the commitment would be the readiness to take up any job. Thus while women were prepared to take up any job when there was no work available in their own occupation, men generally tended to stick to their own occupation. While the agricultural labourer took up jobs in construction and brick making, her husband would only do loading and unloading of trucks.

In the sense of attachment to the children also, the women's commitment is stronger than men's. In the few cases of desertion I came across in the course of these studies men have almost always moved out leaving the children to the care of the mother.

(iii) Managing the Household

Regardless of whether the working woman herself heads the household or not, she has to shoulder the responsibility of not only providing the household with wherewithal but also doing practically unaided the household chores. In practically all the households I studied, not only do working women have to do full time paid work outside the house, but also they attend to the daily chores of the house like cooking, cleaning and taking care of children. Where they have girls, they withdraw them from school to help with chores at home. Only the coir worker did not withdraw her two girls from school.

(iv) Aspirations for the children's marriage

Apart from the basic problem of feeding and clothing children, one thing that came out repeatedly was the tremendous concern of parents, particularly mothers, to shelter their children as far as possible from the bad influences of the environment in which they were living and growing up. Whatever else this concern might be said to reflect, it appears to me that it was, to a very large extent, conditioned both by the experience these women have themselves undergone as also by the experience of their neighbours, relatives or friends. They did not approve of the slum culture, and its various manifestations, even though they were forced to be part of their culture.

The construction worker, I studied, went to great lengths to confine her teenage daughter within the four walls of their hut. She would not let the daughter take up work outside because of the fact that she would come in contact with men. Nor would she allow the girl to move about freely in the neighbourhood. She was very concerned that her daughter should not come in contact with undesirable young men of the settlement because she was afraid that one of the boys would entice her into a common law type of relationship and spoil her chances for a proper marriage. She wanted the daughter to get properly married, even though such marriage meant now-a-days an arranged dowry marriage, costing Rs.10,000 just as a stable job for her son meant greasing the palm of the union boss to more or less the same tune. Stable marriage for the girl and stable job for the boy came out as her main concerns and both meant exchange of large sums of money ^{to earn} much beyond her husbands

capacity.

Those who have read my profile of the woman construction worker will recall that she came from a weaving family. For her, taking to construction work was itself possible a come down. It is quite possible to argue, therefore, that her aspirations and concerns for her daughter are not quite the same as they would be for other women construction workers.

This brings me to the agricultural labourer I studied. In several ways, the agricultural labourer was the opposite of the construction worker I studied. The construction worker was always complaining about things whereas the agricultural labourer was an embodiment of happy resignation of things. While the construction worker was aggressively protective of her children, particularly girls, the agricultural labourer gave no such indication in her day to day concerns. Still, the agricultural labourer turned out to be in a greater hurry to get her under-age daughter married. The moment they found out a "suitable" boy for her, the girl was married off even though it meant promising dowry beyond their means. After the marriage, quarrels over non-fulfilment of the dowry promise seem to have driven the girl to actual suicide. My profile of the agricultural labourer does not mention either the marriage or the suicide. Both happened after I had written out my story. Again, even though the brick worker has allowed her daughters to enter into common law type alliances, she makes no secret that she just accepted things and events as they came by because what she considered proper was simply beyond her reach.

She felt hers was a hopeless case. But her aspirations for her children were no different than those of the more articulate construction worker. After all, the brick worker's second son went in for a dowry marriage with the full approval of his mother and father.

But is the image they all seem to have of a proper marriage close to reality? The construction worker who, as I said before, was most articulate on the subject of her daughter's marriage, thought she herself had ^{herself had} a rather unhappy experience in the so-called proper marriage. Her husband ultimately walked out on her because the full amount promised as dowry at the time of her marriage had not been paid. Here, one has possibly to make a relative evaluation in that while proper marriages may end up in failure, the chances of failure are felt to be even greater for common law types of alliances.

What is evident here is that women persist in maintaining full-fledged allegiance to conventional norms though they may not be in a position to adhere to it satisfactorily. The attachment to the idea that life long marriage is the only desirable way of living comes out rather sharply. Furthermore, it would appear that this attachment to the ideal was actuated not by the ambition to do as people of better socio-economic status but to gain approval within their own group. Since they live in more or less homogenous groups belonging to the same socio-economic class, they appear to be more concerned with getting the approval of their own group rather than of the larger society. The agricultural worker wanted to show the construction worker that she too

conformed to the same values of a proper marriage for her daughter. It is only the brick worker who, knowing that she could not live upto it, had to develop other psychological references to be able to cope with the existing conditions.

B: Problems in Work

Before we talk about the kind of problems they face in the work situation, we must remember that work itself creates problems for most women in this category. To many women from these households freedom means release from outside work, taking care of their own homes and having more time to spend with their children.

For those who are driven to work, for one reason or another, the problems are many. Among these, the most important seem to be:

- (i) arduous nature of work itself,
- (ii) lack of regularity,
- (iii) relegation to the lowest rung of hierarchy, and
- (iv) shortness of working life.

(i) Arduous nature of Work

In most occupations, where women workers are employed, the nature of work open to them is messy and strenuous. In construction, we all know that they are involved in earth work, or headload transportation of heavy granite stones, bricks, concrete or cement bags. Though the risk of accident is there, little protection is assured. The construction worker I studied had at least two serious accidents within a short span of four years. The work of the brick worker is equally strenuous

and messy. Carting 40 or 50 kilos of clay or burned bricks over her head and negotiating rough terrain or congested roads, is no easy job. In agriculture it, meant standing in slush for hours on end, when the agricultural worker was engaged in transplanting or weeding. The same kind of marshy surroundings form the environment for coin worker. The bare-foot fish vendor had to walk long distances with water dripping all over her from the fish basket she carried over her head. The brick worker, once when she was in a reflective mood declared "what use are our heads for, except carting loads".

(ii) Job Irregularity

Though work is so hard and messy for women, it is still not easy for them to get job easily. Even when they get a job, it is not available on a regular basis, either because work itself is of a seasonal nature as is the case with agricultural operations or it changes its location from time to time as is the case in construction where when work site changes availability/another work site is uncertain. My construction worker has to keep in the good books of more than one Mistri so that when she loses job with one, she can go to the other. Gaining entry to a work site is always a problem. Still, when the monsoon is on, there is little work. Worse it is when there is a slump in industry. In recent years work availability has depended on the availability of cement. When the industry itself is in doldrums all workers are in difficulty. But in my studies, I found that women are at a particular disadvantage. They are always marginal in the industry. They are thrown out first and taken on last. Male prejudice

seems to surface the moment the going becomes hard.

(iii) Permanently lowly

Doesn't matter what job women of the occupational groups I have studied hold, they seem to be stuck to the same type of work for all their working lives. There exists just no avenue of making a better grade. This is true in agriculture, construction, coir, brick-making and fish vending. Men can look forward to becoming masons one day; I have never come across a woman mason in my whole life. My construction worker is one of the most intelligent and perceptive women I have met, but she has remained a lowly unskilled worker all adult life. When she was a child, she worked on looms for a pittance, but then things went sour and that world was closed to her. When she became an adult, she started work as a construction worker and she continues to be the same after 20-25 years.

(iv) Short Working Life

Not only does childhood last for a very short span of life for these women who are compelled to take up work but also their working life does not last long. In order to do hard work day in and day out on meagre existence, one does not remain physically fit, for many years, it appears. Old age descends on them pretty early. Women workers can get jobs in construction only between 20 and 40; after 40 it all depends on how well preserved a woman is considered to be by the Ministry or Construction contractor who takes her on. The same is possibly true for men also, but what is interesting is that when men cannot find work any longer they

seem easily to become dependants of their wives. On the other hand, when women cannot find one work, they must go and look for another, doesn't matter how lowly the other job is because she has to bring up her family or at least maintain herself. She cannot in turn go and join her husband, for some reason that option is only open to men. The brick worker I have studied has a husband who retired as a boatman at 40-45 and all he has been doing for the past 10 years or so is to tend a goat or two, take care of the toddlers for their daughters and neighbours when he is generally around. His contribution to the family income is nil. The brick worker continues to work and look after him. Here, to project the image in her neighbourhood that it is a stable family with the man in the house is important for her. She is prepared to make all possible sacrifices towards that end even if it means maintaining him at her cost.

C: Problems in the Community

Women who work outside their homes have a low status in their own eyes and in the eyes of the community in which they live. The woman who works is at the bottom of the heap. Work itself is hard and unsatisfying. Also, work, particularly when it has to be done in the company of men, is quite demeaning for women. In construction, for instance, since there are always more women looking for work than can be employed, the fortunate ones expose themselves to accusation of immoral relationships. Usually women accuse women. Also, men they are working with take it for granted that these women can be had,

If still women go for construction work, it is because circumstances compel them. Though the community in which the women live recognises that due to economic pressures they have to take to work outside the house and that too in the company of men other than their own kith and kin, this is at the same time considered as a departure from the conventional standards of behaviour which obtain for women and is therefore considered a negative aspect of such women. Their interaction with other men at work site exposes them to risks, suspicions and loose talk. Their so-called economic independence is, therefore, a matter neither for community aplomb, nor of self-satisfaction. Is it any wonder that these women do not look forward to their daughters taking to work outside the house? Though the fact that a woman is not working in effect would result in losing her confidence, freedom and say in the household matters but she gains the acceptance from the community because of the fact that she is married to a man who can afford to keep her at home, seems to more than compensate.

IV

What is my understanding of the working women's own perception? Usually, these women are so involved in coping with day to day existence they seldom have a free moment to think, look back or forth and find out or explain what keeps them at their level of existence. Their problems of the moment take up all their free time. In my field

experience I found that the reason they are unable to answer what we consider as major questions of cause and effect is that they have never applied their minds to such questions. When we raise with them such questions directly they are surprised at our lack of understanding. This does not mean, however, that we cannot draw inferences from the host of information that we collected otherwise. The important thing then is to be clear about what we are looking for.

Fatalism or rationalisation?

The brick worker who was somewhat more articulate than others, said to me once: "Ampa, look at my fate, every single day I have to sweat to earn my livelihood. I don't know where the next day's bread will come from. This is my punishment. How else can you explain it?" She did not blame the society for condemning her to such existence nor the family which forced her to go out to earn a livelihood nor even the industry which squeezed out all that she had to offer, giving her virtually nothing in return. Not that she could not conceive of a condition which is better, but she ~~knows~~ she would not realize it. Knowing that she was helpless she had to condition herself and adapt to the realities of the situation.

While the construction worker sees her problems in terms largely of an irresponsible husband and an unhelpful family, the low caste agricultural labourer blames nobody, not even for the death of her youthful daughter. The Latin Catholic fish vendor does not have the strength even to ask her grown up eldest son to go out and work so that with her husband totally unsuited for work there can be some

addition to the family income. So long as I have some strength in me, I shall keep the fire burning in my kitchen. What happens thereafter, I just do not know".

Only the coir worker who was bent on seeing her daughters through school felt, that the society, the State in particular, was totally unhelpful to those who want to help themselves. But she had participated in the coir workers' struggle against mechanisation of coir defibring a struggle that was not so altogether unsuccessful, though a life or two were lost in the course of the struggle.

Could we say that barring the coir worker the others were being fatalistic? I am not sure. All the five, including the coir worker, having taken to work outside the house are clearly attempting to improve their situation to the extent their circumstances permit them. So then acceptance of fate cannot be considered passive. Also, the fact that they contribute to the maintenance of their family, inadequate though it may be even from their own angle, must be giving them some sense of satisfaction. The fact that even the fish vendor, who is otherwise altogether overwhelmed by her adverse situation, plans "to keep the fire burning" in her kitchen shows that she does not consider herself altogether helpless. The same is true of the ageing brick worker. At the same time they seem to have a fairly realistic assessment of what lies outside of their reach. The brick worker knows very well that neither she nor her daughters would graduate to moulding of bricks. That is a man's job. Even the coir worker seems to realise that the prevailing division of roles between men and women

is difficult to undo. But given the constraints, they are all endeavouring to do something about their respective situation. So they cannot be dismissed as fatalists. Realists, yes.

Religiosity

Except for the coir worker, in all the cases I have so far studied, my respondents have been intensely religious. Even the coir worker cannot be described as irreligious though she does display a mind of her own. In the fishing villages, where I have lately been working with Hindu and Christian households, the most important or the best spot in the house is reserved as a prayer room. Prayers are offered regularly both morning and evening and vows and pilgrimages undertaken without exception.

Even though the brick worker I studied could not afford the expense, she had no courage to stop her teenage son to take part in a temple celebration because she was afraid that things would become even more difficult for her if the gods got estranged. At least in a hard and difficult world, religion appears, rightly or wrongly, to give these women some solace and comfort. Why does a poor person not rebel against religion? This question has yet to be answered adequately. But one does not have to go all the way with Marx to recognize that it serves to provide a sort of psychological prop in having to face up to adverse economic circumstances day after day. At the same time, one must guard against overstating the influence or the hold of religion. All my respondents were, as I said intensely religious,

but that did not stop them from doing things, which they knew were disapproved of by their religion. The fisherwoman went ahead and got her daughter married even though the Parish priest would not solemnize it. Her husband underwent vasectomy. The construction worker underwent sterilisation and so did the daughters of the brick worker when they felt that having more children would only add to their daily problem of existence. They did not wait for religious approval. The two important things in their decision to get sterilized were firstly that sterilization was considered safe and secondly that further addition to family size was not considered necessary. Religion did not promote the idea of family planning but it did not come in its way either. If in spite of all their efforts they fail in their lives, which is often the case, religion is a way of coming to terms with the stark realities of life. It is a way out to keep one's sanity.

Changing aspirations

Since most of the poor women live in a sort of homogenous neighbourhood they are surrounded by people in similar economic circumstances. When I have spoken of community in this paper, I have used the word in this narrow sense. They want, first and foremost, to get, and keep the approval and respect from their immediate neighbourhood rather than the larger society. Their positive and negative image makers come first from there and only then from elsewhere. But that does not mean that things were static because communities, in the narrow sense used here, are constantly changing their visions. Let me relate a little story which seems to have some bearing on these

questions. Quite recently, I asked the construction worker, the most intelligent of all my respondents, if she could point out to me one family that she would want to be like or emulate. She replied to me thus: "In my neighbourhood there is, as you know, a family with two sons in the Gulf; they are carpenters and they live well. But what is the use of my wanting to be like them? I cannot afford all the expense I need to incur to send my son to the Gulf." Evidently she has built aspirations and these aspirations have undergone change. Earlier, when she sent her son to learn car driving, she hoped to have him fixed in a regular job requiring skill. Later when that did not seem to work, she decided to look for a job for her son in a local factory, even though the sums needed were beyond the immediate reach. Now, she has heard of the Gulf, though she is not sure that the possibility is realisable. There is clearly a certain dynamics of formation and change in aspirations.

Concluding Observations

I never raised with my respondents questions aimed, directly or indirectly, at ascertaining their self image and their image makers. Still, I cannot say that, on the basis of the information I gathered on the persons I studied in depth, certain judgements cannot be formed on these matters. I have spoken of the ideals that they aspire for. What they are looking for is stability in their marital lives, a sense of security in their economic incomes and respectability in their community. Women I have studied are no where within reach

of these ideals. All the same, one can form a judgement of the sort of ideal they seem to be working for, each in her own way. The fact that in actual life husbands tend to desert women in their most critical periods does not prevent women from yearning for a stable marriage. One reason for the preference for a properly solemnized marriage over a common law type of alliance for their daughters is altogether actuated by the single-minded pursuit of the ideal of stability in marriage. Having a man around the house, even if he is not working, lends the household a sense of security and respectability in the community.

When we come to the question of work, while the ideal remains to be one of not working outside the house, particularly when it means working with men, but if working cannot be avoided because of the pressures of the economic situation, then the ideal which working women

like to strive for is to have regular steady jobs for themselves. If they cannot hope to have steady jobs bringing regular income, at least their menfolk should try for them. In fact, the idea of a steady, regular job for their menfolk is something that all women look for regardless of whether or not women themselves are forced out of the house of work. What could lend a greater sense of economic security and stability than a regular steady job? But it is for their men that women seem to seek the advancement of this ideal first and foremost. Rightly or wrongly, even women who have not been well served by their men do not seem to strike another path, they often attribute their marital instability to the lack of steady jobs and regular incomes of their men.

Just as the ideals need not be permanent, so also the self-image, because the latter is largely an assessment of one self in relation to the ideal. If a success in one's march towards one's ideal means an advance for one's self image, a failure should have the opposite effect. Also, if ideals are advancing faster than one's abilities to attain them self-image should suffer in the process. Unfortunately, with the generally regressive bias of what little economic progress the country has achieved since Independence, the poor have had more failures than successes, and poor women have had the worst of it all. So the self image of the poor women in India may well be at its lowest ever.

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