

“THE DAUGHTERS-IN-LAW HAVE BECOME THE MOTHERS-IN-LAW”:

How New Forms of Capital Create Class Differences Within North-Indian Households

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The article explores how larger socio-economic transformations affect authority structures in rural households in the Indian Himalayan state of Uttarakhand, focusing particularly on women. It is based on 23 months of ethnographic fieldworks in 2002–3 and 2008–11. I argue that new forms of economic, cultural and social capital available to young women and men work together to create differences in terms of class within multi-generational households in such a way that some younger women may gain a stronger position in their marital home than women had before. While others have studied changes in women’s position as a result of their education—a new and valued form of cultural capital—this article sees women’s position also in connection with their husbands’ status and larger socio-economic changes. These remote communities are today woven into national and global job and commodity markets. While married women remain subsistence farmers in their husbands’ village, men often migrate, in search of waged work. Men who succeed professionally can marry more attractive wives, and a girl’s education contributes highly to her attractiveness. Such women obtain authority not only based on their education, but also on their connection to respected husbands, as the couple may realise new capital possibilities unavailable to other household members.

Keywords: : India, economic change, gender, household, education, class

During fieldworks in the Chamoli and Rudraprayag districts in the Uttarakhand Himalayas, I was often told, by men and older women alike, that “today the daughters-in-law have become the mothers-in-law.” Younger women, however, did not express this inversion of authority in relationships between older and younger generations of housewives within households. Marriages are arranged, and upon marriage, young women have to adjust to the style and demands of the elders in a new family, as they are incorporated into the until-then unknown house and village of their husband. There they typically live in extended households with their mother-in-law and father-in-law, their husband, his brothers and their wives, and any unmarried youths of their husband’s lineage. This has widely been described as a vulnerable social position for wives (Jacobson & Wadley 1999; Lamb, 2000; Nordfeldt 2006; Polit, 2006).

In their natal village, girls today both study and participate in farming. Changes in young women’s confidence, as suggested in the previous quotation, may in part be contributed to their new educational status. Education may help secure girls a good marriage, preferably to an employed husband as an educated wife is seen as an asset for future offspring. A village woman claimed: “I gave one daughter a lot of dowry, and the other less. (...) The one who had less education had to be given a larger dowry.” Their final level of education in part depends on access to secondary and tertiary schools in their vicinity (Forerer, 2012). While the older mothers-in-law married in their early teens, without having set foot in a school, today’s brides in the area I studied, which had been served by roads and buses for a couple of decades, are in their late teens to late twenties and have often completed year 10, high school, or even college. Their increased maturity and their education make them confident at the age of marriage, in contrast to when their uneducated mothers-in-law married. This corresponds well to theories and studies which find that education strengthens women’s capacities as social participants (e.g. Kabeer 1999,

Sen 2000). While changes in women’s situations can and have been studied as an effect of their own status, such as their education and employment (Gjøstein, 2014; Vandsemb, 2014) and new technologies (Tenhunen, 2014; Winther, 2014) I believe that important insights into changes in women’s situations in North-Indian households are gained when looking at the husband-wife dyad and taking larger socio-economic transformations into account. A new capitalist economy, along with a parallel revolution in education, is slowly affecting relationships between the women in rural households through micro-processes which are less well known than processes of household change in urban settings (e.g. Donner, 2005). Husband-wife couples are, as I will show, able to increase social, cultural and economic capital vis-à-vis the other members of the household, and there may thus emerge a class difference within the household itself. In the next section, I will explain how I see this as being connected to global trends, and follow with an outline of the organisation of rural households. I shall then show, using an elaborated example, how women’s education and husbands’ careers can work together to alter structures of female authority. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of class as a relatively new factor in structuring households.

Life and work at the fringe of global change

Globalisation refers to the widening, deepening and speeding up of global interconnectedness (Balachandran & Subrahmanyam, 2005), characterised by disembedding, standardisation and acceleration (Eriksen, 2007). Points of reference vary with some referring globally to the period after the Cold War, or locally to the simultaneous economic liberalisation during the 1990s in India, and others refer to these processes in terms of centuries (Balachandran et al., 2005; Eriksen, 2007). Global interconnectedness is unevenly distributed (Assayag & Fuller, 2005), and this article explores globalisation at its fringes, the effects of the commodification of

food and other market goods in local communities where a need for money as a standardised, universal means of payment has risen. The green revolution in 1960–70s India that involved scientists, engineers, funding and policy ideas from Mexico, USA, and India (Kingsbury, 2009) was a global project that affected life in the Himalayan hills. It created a food surplus and a food market in the region - first through the Public Distribution System (PDS) for subsidised food (Banik, 2000) and later through an increasing number of rural private stores. Another effect of food surplus, when combined with storage facilities and distribution chains is that it enables urbanisation, since the labour force that was previously tied up in farming can move to urban centres where new types of jobs can thus be developed. Policies of education in post-independence India, which create the basis for a workforce for the future economy, are also part of a global trend of standardising knowledge production and certification, and connect to a global development agenda (UN, 2016). The economic liberalisation of the 1990s has accelerated the process of commodity demand (Wilhite, 2014) and created new jobs, while work migration to (and new commodity access in) the Persian Gulf and other places around the world provides entirely new opportunities to Uttarakhand youths. Even though a small percentage of youth from the area I have studied migrated to serve mainly in the army, as private cooks, or in similar menial jobs in the last century, the trend has exploded in the last few decades, leaving few young men behind today.

Married women's economic activities today represent a continuation of the past. Women's hard work in the forests and farms remains an important component in local identity (Dyson, 2010; Gururani, 2002; Nordfeldt, 2006). Women are, at the same time, also responsible for cleaning, cooking and nurturing children. In the region I studied, a majority of men were farmers alongside their wives 50–60 years ago as well. At that time, the men were in charge of construction and repairs, ploughing, assisting in some agricultural chores and cattle

grazing (Sax, 1991). Though there has been regional variation in the number of men migrants, in my focus village only a couple of handfuls of men of the current grandparents' generation had migrated. Among these, most served as soldiers in the army, at least one was a school teacher, three were chefs and two were government clerks. Today, all men are expected to earn money, which for the most part necessitates migration (Strand, 2003). In around 200 households, only a few handfuls of men under the age of 40 live permanently in the village. For reasons such as talent, personal contacts, job scarcity, diversification of career-investment in siblings, or the wish to keep at least one man close to home some of the time, young men of the same household end up with more varied life trajectories than those of their fathers and grandfathers a generation or two ago.

Authority Structures within the Household

In kinship terms, women who are married to one of several brothers are ranked according to the age, and thus seniority, of their husband. Young women are directly supervised by their mother-in-law. She decides the division of chores and controls what to cook and when to eat. Mothers-in-law used to carry the key to household granaries around their necks. Older men talked about this as a symbol of their power. However, granaries do not hold the same position today: though the yields from the land are scarce, the PDS and local stores provide additional basic food, and therefore diminish the necessity for severe rationing. Control over and distribution of food remains nevertheless an indicator of power. In the example that follows, one of the daughters-in-law controls everyday food choices, and it is telling of the distribution of authority.

In 2008–9, the housewives of this anonymised household, Parvati (55yrs), Sakuntala (30yrs) and Rekha (25yrs), performed parallel and complementary tasks, which all served to uphold the day to day needs of the family. Tasks were distributed

according to kinship status, but were affected by what I understand as their class rank. Thus, as I will show, Parvati, the mother-in-law, who has the highest-ranking kinship status, would tiptoe around her eldest daughter-in-law, Sakuntala, who wielded substantial authority as the wife of the main provider for the household, and she was also well-connected and educated.

Precarious Balance of Authority and Work

Parvati, the mother-in-law

Parvati was married to Ragvir Singh, a farmer. She was petite, with dark hair, shining brown eyes and a warm smile. Like other older women, she was the regular babysitter during daytime and performed various chores near the house. Parvati seemed to be in perpetual movement, from one corner of the courtyard to the other, inside and out again, upstairs and down, to the cowsheds and back. She showed with her eyes that she was concerned about what her daughter-in-law would say if she took a break. A few times she expressed sadness that her daughters-in-law had failed to call her in for a meal and had eaten without her.

Parvati had been married in her early teens, and had never been to school. One brother had a factory job. She had one daughter, who was married and had moved to her in-laws' village, and four sons. Parvati's relationship with her husband Ragvir was strained. She explained how his failings affected her position in the family:

There are two sons yet to be married, but he does not care. My older son fulfils all the responsibilities. He even found the husband for his older sister. His father does not have any worries in the world. (...) When my own husband does not look out for me, then what can I say to my son and daughter-in-law? I do so much work, yet my daughters-in-law do not

care for me. I have to listen to them! (...) The younger one even answers back at me. (Parvati, transcription from a recorded conversation)

Parvati had had a strict mother-in-law who made her work hard and never gave her enough food. Today, she should have been the woman with power to decide over work and food, like other mothers-in-law. Instead her youngest daughter-in-law dared to talk back, and she herself seldom went into the kitchen to eat before her daughters-in-law called for her (food is served according to seniority). She relates this squarely to her husband's lack of support, and more importantly, to his lack of practical contributions to the household having tacitly left all responsibilities to the eldest son. While the husband-wife relationship could have evolved in a similar way within the old economic system, in the past sons rarely took such radically different avenues, and daughters-in-law were less assertive. As it was, the eldest daughter-in-law, Sakuntala, wielded a different authority.

Sakuntala, the eldest daughter-in-law

Sakuntala was married to the eldest son, Harpal (35). She was strong and well-built, she had a calm heartfelt laughter and a motherly authority. She was quick to invite people to sit down and share a cup of tea and a story.

During the months I lived in her village, Sakuntala mostly stayed near the house looking after her and her sister-in-law's children, preparing the midday meal, cleaning, going to the cowshed and sharing other chores with her mother-in-law. In the evening, she helped her younger sister-in-law with cooking or looking after children in the kitchen. Importantly, she often decided what and when to eat; a neighbour confided that she suspected that Sankuntala sometimes skimmed off the cream when she brought milk from the cowshed to the kitchen.

Sakuntala married in her early twenties after finishing two years at college through remote cor-

respondence. Her father had been a bank clerk. Her brothers were well-educated and held coveted government jobs. Her family owned enough land to sustain themselves in her natal village.

Sakuntala's bond with her husband was strong. Harpal was well-educated. Thanks to their combined connections, he had landed a government school job in the region. The position was well-paid (his salary rose from 12000 to 19000 rupees [160-250 euros] during my stay), and provided security and high social status. Harpal was the family's main custodian. He represented the family in weddings and funerals, he planned and oversaw maintenance, he helped his brothers find jobs and suitable wives, and he generally did whatever was needed.

Being the eldest daughter-in-law grants some privilege. Having a good education and coming from a rich, respected family grants additional privilege. Being the wife of the main caretaker, and having a good relationship with him brings enormous advantage. Both her younger sister-in-law, Rekha, and her mother-in-law treated Sakuntala with respect, lest she complain about them to her husband. To Sakuntala however, the position came with responsibility. On one rare occasion she was upset, and complained: "They all think they are the hardest workers. But the hardest job is done by the one who has to look after it all! Lifting a stone may tire your body, but thinking for everyone, that wears you out - that's a real job!"

Rekha, the younger daughter-in-law

Rekha was married to the second eldest son, Rajpal (32). She was small, but strong, and while Rekha had a temper, she was mostly cheerful, always ready to crack a joke and have a laugh, even after a long day's work.

Though she was pregnant during my main stay, Rekha did all the heaviest and dirtiest chores, and took them up again a few weeks after giving birth. Rekha spent long days working in the fields or in the forest gathering wood and cattle fodder. She

made the first cup of tea for everyone in the morning. She prepared unleavened bread (roti) and most of the vegetables, over open fire, morning and evening, and did the dishes after most meals. Sakuntala and Rekha usually ate together in the kitchen, mostly with the mother-in-law, or after calling for her. If Rekha thought that she was the hardest worker of the women, she never told me so. Rekha had a good relationship with Sakuntala, they spent evenings in the kitchen chatting and laughing. It was only after the two younger brothers of the family got married that she ever expressed to me, during a shorter visit, frustration over the amount of work she did.

She married in her early twenties, after taking the exam for the first year of college. Her natal family did not own much land, and could not survive on farming alone, but her father had been a soldier, so they could rely on a small pension. One brother was in the army, and the other worked in a factory on the plains.

Rajpal, her husband, had abandoned school after 10th grade and worked as a kitchen aid in Bombay, which was a typical job avenue for younger men in this area. He had come home for a month or two every year since they married, and he had high respect for his wife and the work she contributed. Though he earned a fair wage, 6000-7000 rupees, most of which he sent to his brother every month, he took no part in planning for the larger family, but left that to his elder brother, whom he respected immensely.

Incorporating new women to the household ... and splitting up

The family, and the group of women, had been in a state of balanced cooperation during the months of my core fieldwork. They were all working towards the marriages of the two youngest brothers, Devpal (30) and Mukesh (28). Devpal had quit school after 10th grade and worked on a three-year contract in the Persian Gulf, where he, along with many other young men from the area, worked in a restaurant,

earning 20–30000 rupees a month. Devpal married an attractive, high school-educated woman who quickly adjusted to the household.

Mukesh, the youngest brother, held a college degree but was unable to find a job, and ended up dependant on his eldest brother to provide contractual work for him. It was harder to find a bride for Mukesh. Harpal was adamant that the prospective wife be well-educated in order to be an asset for the next generation. However, not many people were willing to marry a well-educated daughter to an unemployed man. When they finally did manage to find a bride that Harpal deemed 'talented', Mukesh did not dare to voice that he had some concerns about their compatability. He depended on his eldest brother for everything. The marriage is an unhappy match.

The compliant cooperation in the household fell apart after Mukesh was married. In less than three years after the last marriage, the household split up. Mukesh is still dependent on his eldest brother, so they have stayed together, but Devpal and Rajpal each set up separate households with their wives and children. The responsibility to care for the old mother and father is divided between the sons' new households.

As I have shown, the men of this family have separate careers. The capitalist market system allows for more independence than the earlier subsistence farming. Such a split of households, a short time after the last sibling had been married, is common today. Earlier, food scarcity and agricultural needs would have required more cooperation. Though most households in the past also split, it often happened later, ideally after the father passed away. An old woman from the same village expressed a common opinion: "For 26 years, we sisters-in-law lived together. The daughters-in-law in today's world refuse to stay in a joint family for even a day."

Such a split enables younger women to run their own household at the expense of mothers-in-law, who are dethroned. The responsibility to take

care of the older parents is then usually divided between the new households. An older woman may continue to care for small children while at the same time being pushed into the life stage of "old age" (Lamb, 2000) earlier nowadays than in the past when she could retain matronage for a longer period of her life.

Class within Households

In anthropology, households have been studied as central, self-contained units of production and reproduction, undifferentiated when it comes to economic status. I have shown above that differentiation related to kinship, age and gender are complemented by elements of class understood in terms of differentiated access to economic, social and cultural capital – three forms of capital that can be accumulated over time and that mutually support each other (Bourdieu, 1986). Economic capital entails access to material goods, social capital relates to access to formal and informal social networks, and education is, Bourdieu holds, a central component of cultural capital. Though this may not be true for every society, it holds true in Uttarakhand, where education not only grants access to a broader variety of prestigious jobs but is also an exchangeable asset for women on the marriage market. A well-educated daughter could marry a husband with a better-paid job and needs less of a dowry.

The class element stems both from women's backgrounds and their husbands' contribution relative to the other men of the household. In my example, the oldest adult son and his wife were well-educated; he had used networking and his education to find a good job, and could further marry a girl who was educated, rich and well-connected. They were able to use their advantages to attain new ones. It was the social capital, i.e. the network gained via his education and her family, which had helped him secure his current job in a local, government school. His economic advantage and his network made him useful and important to his brothers. This provided him and his wife with a central position in the

household, where the other members did not have comparable access to all three forms of capital.

It is noteworthy that the kinship element often reinforces the class element. The eldest brother is often afforded better education opportunities. He and his wife rank highest in kinship terms within their generation. This position represents an attractive prospect for a girl on the marriage market; therefore an older brother can often marry a more accomplished wife. Traditional expectations often make him take on more responsibilities for the whole family. But this is not always the case; I have seen families where a younger housewife has a stronger voice because her husband is the main caretaker of his generation. In the example above, it was the old parents who had lost their voice vis-à-vis the younger generation.

Conclusions

Though these remote villages are still home to subsistence farmers, global trends are slowly transforming daily life. The green revolution, urbanisation, PDS, village shops, job opportunities and education all contribute to speeding up transformations and reforming internal relations in Uttarakhand households. While a father may be next to illiterate, a son may be a government school teacher in a nearby village, another may migrate to Dubai and earn a substantial salary, though gain less prestige and control, while a third son may 'fail' both academically and financially. Their ability to marry attractive wives differs, and their ways part.

While education was important for the relative position of the women of the household amongst themselves, I have also argued that their relationship with their husbands and the husband's relative contribution to the household are central factors in modifying the women's position. Hence, even if Sakuntala and Rekha had similar education levels, Rekha's control over work division in the household was minimal, not only because she was lower in kinship terms, but also because her husband contributed less to the household and partly depended on

Harpal to find employment. Furthermore, her family was not rich or well-connected like Sakuntala's. In brief, many factors contributed to her lack of control over food and work decisions.

Parvati's relative lack of authority and control was more surprising, given that she was not yet old and was the senior woman of the household in kinship terms. Her husband did not support her, but it was his disengagement in caring for the family as a whole that constituted her main explanation. In a situation where their son had entered another level of achievement and their daughter-in-law was educated and confident, Parvati's lack of authority was deepened compared to what it would have been in the past economic system. The threat of a household split provided a further weakening of her authority and influence. During my main fieldwork, the family was still living under one roof. Parvati could still partly tell the younger housewife what to do, but her lack of control over food gave evidence of how, to an extent, the "daughter-in-law has become the mother-in-law".

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