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**WHEN DID YOU LAST SEE YOUR MOTHER?  
ASPECTS OF FEMALE AUTONOMY  
IN RURAL NORTH INDIA**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Our recent research aims to understand childbearing in rural North India as a socially organised phenomenon. In looking for sources of variation in women's childbearing experiences, we focussed particularly on the implications of aspects of women's status and one general concern was with the material consequences for women of kinship structures - for example in terms of the support a woman receives around the time of childbirth, or the extent of collaboration among women more generally. Thus, a woman's ability to affect the number and timing of her pregnancies was an ancillary concern as we were more interested in what happens to pregnant and recently delivered women. Partly this was dictated by our own theoretical interests (most broadly understood as unpicking relationships between "production" and "reproduction") but in addition, our respondents expressed a horror of compulsory sterilisation, and fertility control was a very touchy subject.

Our approach to kinship reflects our dissatisfaction with traditional anthropological accounts, in which kinship algebra and discussions of abstract structures are dominant and the consequences for the actors involved are largely ignored. An additional influence was Patricia Jeffery's earlier research amongst Muslim women in Delhi (Jeffery 1979). These women favour marriages with known kin within their village, (forbidden for Hindus in North India) and are explicit that such marriages give them a better position in their marital households, in part

because their natal households are still able to support them. As a result, for our recent research we deliberately chose a site where we could study the impact of women's autonomy on her childbearing behaviour amongst Hindu and Muslim populations in the same locality in North India.

There are, of course, several indicators of female autonomy which have been used successfully for various purposes, often to help explain fertility differentials. Some - such as female education, or access to employment outside the home - are well established, and can be regarded either as independent sources of female autonomy, or as consequences of structures which grant more autonomy. In this paper we will not be discussing these variables: virtually none of the women we shall describe has had any education, very few work regularly outside the home except for their own households, none of them is in regular 'employment', and none of them owns productive property. Therefore, in looking for sources of women's autonomy - and variation in it - we have to focus on other issues. Here we will concentrate on how aspects of kinship, economic position and microdemographic situation impinge on the nature and frequency of a woman's contacts with her natal family and how, if at all, such contacts have a bearing on female autonomy and fertility behaviour.

The basic assumptions here are as follows. In North India (as in many other parts of the world) it is taken for granted that for almost every woman her relationship with her mother is primal, with strong emotional ties. Therefore, given a choice, a woman would choose to see her mother often; her failure to do so indicates barriers to her freedom of movement. The frequency of a woman's contacts with her natal kin may have a relationship to fertility behaviour, not directly (though this is a possibility we shall explore briefly) but indirectly, because a woman who does not see her natal kin frequently or for long periods is also likely to encounter barriers to her ability to

control her own fertility. A paper published after we left the field operates on a similar basis by comparing regions of India in terms of the impact of different marriage practices on "women's ability to manipulate their personal environment, to obtain information, and to use it in making decisions about their private concerns and those of their intimates" (Dyson and Moore, 1983:45). It also suggests that "cultural practices - such as those of the North Indian system - that tend to constrain or erode the personal links between a married woman and her natal kin directly diminish the woman's autonomy." (ibid:46).

Our data were collected during 1982-3 using a range of methods. We carried out intensive fieldwork in two adjacent villages, one Muslim (population 350) and one Hindu and Harijan (population 650) three miles from the district town of Bijnor, in Western Uttar Pradesh. We lived on the edge of the Hindu village for over a year, participating in the villagers' everyday lives. Our main work consisted of focussed discussions with 41 couples (selected to be representative of the pregnant and recently delivered women) in which we covered the woman's most recent pregnancy, her maternity history, and her patterns of social support and visiting, and, from the man, detailed crop decision-making, labour use, land-ownership and debt and credit relationships were covered. We also conducted a survey of 301 women who had recently given birth, drawn from 11 randomly selected villages in two Community Development Blocks adjacent to Bijnor town. We feel most confident about the quality of our fieldwork data, and this paper is largely based on material collected in the base villages.

Bijnor District is on the east bank of the Ganges, and is bordered to the north by the foothills of the Himalayas. It is a flat, fertile area, irrigated by monsoon rains and now increasingly by tubewells, but not by canal. The major subsistence crops are wheat and rice, with sugar-cane the dominant cash-crop for over a century. The rural population is

roughly 30% Muslim, 70% Hindu, with the proportion of Muslims in the towns higher than this. It is a relatively affluent area, sharing in the general progress of Western U.P., not as marked as that of Haryana and Punjab further to the West. There is little immigration from other parts of North India, and the seasonal emigration of men has now declined as more employment opportunities have arisen within the district.

#### KINSHIP ORGANISATION AND FEMALE AUTONOMY IN INDIA

By kinship organisation, we mean, for instance, marriage rules (proscriptions and prescriptions); residence patterns and household composition; inheritance rights, marriage prestations and property ownership; relationships between the "givers" and the "takers" of brides and between a woman and her natal and affinal kin. In India a woman generally moves away from her natal kin on marriage and usually lives with her husband and his kin, and this has many implications for a woman's position throughout her life.

Dyson and Moore usefully outline differences in kinship organisation between north and south India. In the north, women normally do not inherit property (particularly land); they generally marry distantly, geographically and genealogically; support in old age is expected from adult sons, not daughters, and sons are greatly preferred over daughters; patterns of cooperation among men typically involve brothers, rather than men related by marriage; the provision of dowries for girls preoccupies their parents; the new bride is considered a threat to the unity of her husband's family and she is under the tutelage of his older female kin; bride "givers" are socially inferior to bride "takers"; and women's sexuality is controlled through *purdah* practices, the general segregation of the sexes also entailing conjugal reserve. By contrast, in south India, women are often married to "known persons in familiar households near

to their natal home" (ibid.:45) and the married daughter may help her parents if need be; women may inherit property and marriage expenses are more equally shared between the groom's and the bride's kin; bride "givers" and "takers" are more equal in status; women's movements are less controlled, and once married, they maintain more contact with their natal kin and are less subject to control by female in-laws.

Dyson and Moore argue that in agrarian societies, access to scarce social resources is largely through kinship ties, the very nature of which may limit women's ability to exploit their kin networks. They suggest that female autonomy is enhanced by: freedom of movement and association of females; post-marital residence patterns and behavioural norms which do not rupture or constrain women's contacts with their natal kin; access to property (whether inherited or not) by women; and some independent control over their sexuality. Thus Dyson and Moore suggest that female autonomy is greater in south India, and that this is significant for the demographic experiences of the two parts of the country. They outline two regional demographic regimes: the rates of fertility and infant and child mortality are higher in the north than in the south, and the sex ratio is more adverse (fewer women per 1000 men) in the north, and these regimes are consistent with the different kinship patterns they summarise.

That, then, is a very schematic outline of Dyson and Moore's argument. A couple of connected points form the backbone of our discussion. Firstly, what does affect a woman's ability to maintain contact with her natal kin? Dyson and Moore's inter-regional comparisons of marriage distance presume that cultural systems which support close marriage will also tend to enhance women's contacts with her natal kin. But we want to ask whether this assumption is justified, by comparing groups within one locality but with different marriage distances. Secondly, does this reformulation of women's autonomy, which seems to work for

regional comparison, allow us to explain differences in fertility behaviour at the individual level?

Our argument begins with a more detailed consideration of north Indian kinship organisation, which forms a common backdrop for all the women we talked to. We then turn to aspects of women's positions which differentiate them: firstly the spatial and social patterning of marriages amongst the Hindus and the Muslims; and then differences which are not ethnically specific, such as the economic position of the household and its microdemographic structure. Our particular focus is on women's freedom of movement and ability to maintain contacts with their natal kin as indicators of their autonomy; and we are ignoring most lifecycle changes by concentrating on women in their reproductive years. Finally we will discuss the extent to which these aspects of a woman's autonomy seem to relate (or not) to fertility behaviour.

#### **NORTH INDIAN KINSHIP ORGANISATION**

In many respects, the kinship practices of our Bijnor Hindus and Muslims alike are largely consistent with Dyson and Moore's picture of north Indian kinship. Here, using material from our base villages, we shall only flesh out their chilling comment that women in this kind of structural position are "left socially almost powerless" (ibid.:46).

Our informants commonly contrast life in their natal village (**mainka** or **piheer**) with that in their affinal one (**sasural**). Their natal village is portrayed as the place where they are loved, where they work or not as they feel inclined and yet **koi kuch nahin kehta** (no one nags me), where they experience warm and supportive relationships with other women. The atmosphere in the affinal village is a stark comparison: it is not expected to be congenial. A woman who does not work - even because she is ill -

will be criticised by other women and even beaten by her husband, for there she has *zimmidari* (responsibility). Supportive relationships with other women are unlikely to develop, and veiling and avoidance practices make such relationships with men even more unlikely.

In rural Bijnor, women normally maintain only rather fleeting and fragile contacts with their natal kin (especially female kin) once they are married. Older women and husbands play a direct part in governing and limiting women's mobility. A woman has to negotiate her visits to her natal village. She cannot claim them as of right (except possibly when a relative has died, or if she has a wedding or festival to attend, or she is "called" when her brother's wife gives birth). The young bride is no free agent and our informants know that they need permission from their affines before they leave the village. (A Muslim woman said she once visited her parents briefly without her husband's permission and he beat her up when she returned: she did not repeat the exercise.)

A woman's affines often resist long visits by her to her natal village, because she should do the work for which she is responsible, or find a replacement. Women's work is very time-consuming (16 hours a day is not untypical for young women) and it mainly consists of numerous essential daily tasks, plus others which are seasonal in character. The separation between households leaves a woman with no easy way to find a replacement for herself: as we discuss further below, only households related through men can provide her with a substitute, and such an arrangement is not easy to make. Thus visits to her natal village are hard to arrange, particularly if her husband will suffer from *roti ki pareshaani* (worries about getting his food cooked) while she is away. In addition, a woman rarely goes to her natal village unless escorted by a man from her affinal village (generally her husband or one of his brothers or his father) or unless collected by a natal kinsman (generally a brother). Her

visits necessitate not only permission but also a man with time on his hands.

Visits received from a woman's natal kin highlight clearly the erosion of her ties, especially those with her mother and sisters. "Guesting" (mehmaani) is an activity through which men maintain links between affinally related households. Visits to a woman by her male kinsmen are also influenced by hypergamy: generally, those who have "given a daughter" should receive nothing from their daughter's in-laws, for example in the way of food, without making at least a nominal payment for it, and the "shame" experienced by a woman's father means that he normally leaves his sons to visit their married sisters. Since men may visit their wives' parents, often not taking their wives with them, a married woman's contacts with her female kin are often mediated by her brothers or her husband. Thus the transfer of "news" is constrained, for sexual topics are definitely not public subjects talked about in mixed company. It is highly unlikely that brothers serve as routes of communication in this regard for their sisters, and a woman's husband is hardly likely to convey his wife's complaints about her marital position to her parents! The dependence of a woman on a visit from her own kin is dramatically expressed in the case of one woman from our Hindu base village, whose marriage was going disastrously wrong - she was being badly beaten and mistreated - yet she could do nothing about this until the next time her brother happened to call.

Very few women have ever been visited in their affinal village by their mother or their older sisters (who are considered like the mother). Indeed, generally, married sisters do not visit one another's affinal villages, and it is also considered unrespectable for unmarried girls past puberty to go visiting. A woman usually only makes direct contact with her mother and sisters when she herself visits her natal village. Married sisters often meet only after several years have elapsed, unless they chance to visit their parents at the same time, or

have been called to attend some family function. Clearly, this is not the firmest of foundations for a supportive sisterhood.

Broadly speaking, then, the married woman is subject to controls over her work and mobility in her husband's village. Her daily responsibility for work and the need to obtain permission to visit her natal kin mean that she is effectively rooted in what is, after all, *apna ghar* (her own home). Visits from her natal village rarely involve her female kin, and, in sum, Muslim and Hindu women alike are substantially cut off, especially from their female natal kin.

### MARRIAGE DISTANCE

This common "encapsulation" in a woman's affinal village is, perhaps, all the more surprising because marriage arrangements for the Hindus and the Muslims are quite dramatically different. Much of the literature discussing these differences focuses on different marriage rules, in which Hindus generally operate a system of close-kin and village exogamy, whereas Muslims permit intra-village marriages and prohibit a much smaller set of kin. In fact, among our informants close-kin marriage for Muslims is not common, and intra-village marriages are not much more frequent. However, for some of the Muslim caste-like groups, what does emerge is that marriages are arranged within small clusters of villages, whereas almost all Hindu marriages are arranged at much greater distances.

On the face of it, "marriage distance" is a straightforward and easily quantifiable variable. We asked women where they were born and located the village on a 1:50,000 scale map. But, if measuring distances as the crow flies is appropriate for short distances easily covered by foot, over longer distances the availability of transport and direction or even existence of roads or paths are important considerations. Questions of time

also arise, as does control over resources generally unavailable to daughters-in-law, for women require a male driver, or a chaperon who pays their fare. We therefore tabulated "marriage distances" by distinguishing between the distance a woman can walk in a round trip to her natal village in a day (under 5 kms.), a longer distance which will certainly require transport (over 10 kms.), and an intermediate category. Even these distinctions are not clear-cut: the distance a woman can walk in a day, for instance, may depend on the season, and on how many small children she must take with her.

Table 1 summarises our data from both the survey and the base village "daughters-in-law". The overall picture clearly indicates that wealthy Muslims (especially those from the "higher" caste-like groups) generally marry closer than poorer ones. Hindus (including Harijans) marry more distantly, with very little variation in average marriage distance by caste or by economic indicators such as land ownership.

Most of the marriages took place within Bijnor district, despite the fact that these villages are quite close to the district boundary - here the River Ganges. Thus our material demonstrates intra-district variations whereas Dyson and Moore depend on district-level estimates derived from the 1961 Census. These were turned into estimates of marriage distance (Sopher and Libbee, 1975; Libbee, 1980) using complex, and ultimately unrealistic assumptions. Moreover, no data are available by religion - a major weakness when religion is clearly crucial in this respect.

However, geographical and social distances are not necessarily equivalent. What are the implications of different marriage distances for women's contacts with their natal kin? Some contrasts do emerge between our Hindu and Muslim informants and women themselves argue that marriage distance has effects on women. The woman married close to her natal village is considered

less cut off from her natal kin, by Hindus and Muslims alike. Being married close to the natal village means that news of "dying-living" (marney-jeeney) and "sadness-happiness" (dukh-sukh) can reach a married woman within hours. The density of marriage links facilitates this. Muslim women see this as an advantage of being married nearby, while Hindu women often lament being married so far from their natal village, for babies can be born, or people can be ill or die and they do not hear about it immediately.

TABLE 2

MEAN NUMBER OF WEEKS SPENT IN NATAL VILLAGE IN PREVIOUS YEAR BY MARRIAGE DISTANCE AND RELIGIOUS GROUP

MARRIAGE DISTANCE	RELIGIOUS GROUP						ALL
	Landed Muslim	Service Muslim	Landed Hindu	Service Hindu	Other Hindu	Harijan	
< 5 kms.	3.0	2.0	6.9	5.7	-	2.0	4.3
5 < 10 kms.	3.4	-	3.9	4.0	2.5	1.5	3.1
> 10 kms	4.9	4.0	4.1	3.4	3.9	2.5	3.7
TOTAL	4.3	3.4	4.3	3.6	3.6	2.3	3.7

Notes: This table excludes 35 women, predominantly Muslims married less than 5 kms. distant from their natal homes, who say that they "come and go" repeatedly; and a further 12 for whom we do not have marriage distance data.

Visiting patterns are also somewhat different. Table 2 summarises the answers to our survey question asking how long a woman spent in her natal village in the previous year. It does not record the number of visits, merely their total length, and the reference year is likely to be unusual since pregnant women rarely visit their natal homes, but recently delivered women are

Two test cases point up some of these issues. The first is marriage within the village, the *gaon-ki-gaon* marriage, which is relevant only for Muslims. The responses of our Muslim informants to questions about marriage distance indicate considerable parallels in our Hindu and Muslim informants' thinking about marriage and the proper position of the married woman. The Muslim women all stress some benefits of being married close to their natal village, but what is very striking is how opposed many are to marriages in which the partners are from the same village. Their reasoning sheds further light on the operation of married women's networks and our informants' judgements and assumptions about them.

Firstly, the Muslim women are clearly thinking within a framework which distinguishes between the harsh affinal home and the congenial natal home. They cite examples of women married within their natal village who cannot successfully obtain a respite by retreating to their natal household. The mother-in-law can easily call her daughter-in-law back herself if an extra hand is suddenly needed. Arranging marriages a little distantly can protect the married woman somewhat from intrusions by her affinal kin. Further, *izzat* (honour) cannot properly be kept if a woman is married so close to her natal kin. A woman in her natal village does not normally veil herself, but she should do so in the presence of her husband's elder male relatives (his father, older brothers and agnatic cousins for instance). How can this distinction be maintained when her natal and affinal village are the same? What should she do if she meets her father-in-law while she is visiting her natal kin? Similarly, how can she observe proper *sharm* (shame) before her natal kin when she is pregnant, for she will confront them at every turn, and be unable to conceal her condition? Moreover, how can her parents be protected from learning of her marital problems or difficulties with her mother-in-law? News travels fast within the village and they would soon hear all her woes. But they should not meddle

in her life, so their proximity is no protection for her, and it is better that she is married at some distance, so that they are not needlessly grieved.

The second test case, pointing a useful contrast, is that of a woman who has married a man from elsewhere and then returned with him to her natal village. This is rare - there were only two such men (known as *ghar jamai*) in each of our base villages - and most families will do their best to avoid the situation arising. The *ghar jamai* tends to be in a weak position, and is sometimes the butt of ridicule. However, more importantly for his wife, she can live in her natal village and (unlike the *gaon-ki-gaon* married women) avoid the norms of deference and constraint which restrict her in her affinal village. This gives her much more freedom of movement: there is no-one in the village whom she cannot meet openly, and her mother-in-law is unlikely to have come with her. She has very free access to her own mother while she is alive, and she has more chance to meet her sisters.

The positions of married women living in their natal village, then, exposes the problem of concentrating on marriage distance - in the spatial sense - alone. A case study will illuminate the limited access to their natal kin of women married even as close as an adjacent village. Shamima is a Muslim woman married into our Muslim base village from a village about 2km. distant. She has three young children, one born during our fieldwork. She is also the only adult woman in a landed, livestock-owning household. Her brother visits her occasionally, but she had not been to her natal village for two years, because of the burden of work for which she is solely responsible. Her mother-in-law and the two women married to her husband's brothers all live in separate hearths.

Kinship structures are thus not the only factors which effectively erode a married woman's contacts with her natal kin, whatever her "marriage distance". In addition, a woman's ability

to maintain contact with her natal kin can be seriously limited by aspects of the economic position of her affinal household, and by its demographic structure, and it is to these two issues which we will now turn.

## ECONOMIC VARIABLES

Women's workloads are not identical. While all our informants cook, clean and deal with the needs of small children, class variations generate major differences in the work for which women are "responsible". However, women with more responsibilities get no more credit for the work they do than other women. Those whose work includes processing agricultural products do not get control over any of the produce nor the cash from items which are marketed. As other writers on women's status in North India (notably Sharma, 1981) have pointed out, class differences in women's work are not reflected in differential economic power. Because women never own productive resources, they cannot achieve a material improvement in their autonomy. In this section we therefore focus on the impact of class differences on a woman's contacts with her natal kin.

The terms on which a household has access to productive land are the major determinants of life chances in this part of India. But the consequences for women of different land-holding patterns are by no means straightforward. For example, even the poorest women in our base villages and our survey are very unlikely to be regularly earning - in cash or kind - outside the home. Of course, the poorest households of all (usually made up of the old, or female-headed) were by definition excluded from our concerns. But in addition, unmarried girls and women past childbearing tend, in all classes, to be the most likely to work outside the home. Only a few women take in "home-work" such as cotton spinning or basket making. Thus, the workloads of the poorer women tend to be lighter than those of their more affluent

neighbours, with animals to service, crops to clean and store, or (more rarely) work to do in the family fields. On the other hand, the women of the households of the largest landholders have domestic assistance, sometimes regular, sometimes only seasonal, and oversee men employees who process crops.

The ownership of animals has daily effects on a household's workload. Only those owning or sharecropping land own draught animals, but milk animals and goats are owned by some landless families. In general, female animals are more likely to be a woman's responsibility, for she may milk them, water them, clean them and play a part in collecting and preparing fodder (though these tasks cannot unequivocally be regarded as "women's work"). In addition, during the dry seasons, women with cattle may spend 2-3 hours every day collecting the dung and mixing it with straw to make dung cakes (oopley) which they stack to dry in the sun for use as a cooking fuel: this is one of the few tasks never done by men. During the monsoon the dung is tipped into a midden for later use (by the men) as fertiliser. Sometimes, a woman is the only person able to milk a particular animal or available to deal with the dung. Thus different claims on women are generated: those in the middle of the class hierarchy are most likely to be seen as indispensable, not only to the daily reproduction of the household but also to the maintenance of livestock.

Moreover, some women's 'indispensability' waxes and wanes according to seasonal demands, as with the processing of crops. Even so, they never experience the almost total freedom from responsibilities which some men claim at seasonal troughs in labour demand, because women always retain a daily residue of essential household servicing. Women's workloads, then, are affected in quite complex ways by class differences and by seasonal factors. Negotiating an absence from the affinal village, therefore, poses different problems for different women and even for one woman throughout the agricultural cycle.

Finally, class differences also affect a woman's visits to her natal kin more directly. While the major dowry payments are given at the marriage ceremony and the first cohabitation (gauna), a daughter's marriage entails a lifetime's commitment to gift-giving. In rural Bijnor, the married woman who visits her natal kin returns to her husband's home with grain, flour, dal, gur (un-refined sugar) and clothing for herself, her husband, children and other affinal kin. (In urban areas such 'gifts' are often expected to include expensive consumer durables and are connected with the harassment of brides which sometimes results in 'bride burning' - the so-called dowry deaths.) For example, at the time of childbirth - among Muslims and Hindus alike - people expect the baby's father's sister to be 'called' from her affinal village to lend a hand, and to receive an honorarium. (For more details see Jeffery, Jeffery and Lyon, 1984a.) Some informants give the expense of providing this payment as a reason for not calling the baby's father's sister. Our survey data indicate that there is a strong relationship between landlessness and not calling back the baby's father's sister, especially for Muslims. Issues of gift-giving, then, do seem to inhibit poorer people from "calling" back their married daughters for visits, though a woman who goes to "meet" her parents is not expected to return with gifts.

#### **MICRODEMOGRAPHIC VARIATION**

Finally we want to consider the impact of the demographic composition of a woman's household and to bring in a dynamic element, by addressing aspects of life-cycle changes, in particular the presence or absence of a mother-in-law, and the number, sex and age of a woman's children. We have already suggested that a woman can only visit her kin if she can find a substitute to do her work for her: we now want to consider who may or may not be a substitute, and what else affects the likelihood of a substitute coming forward.

The first constraint is that a woman's own natal kin will never take over her work in her affinal home when she is absent. The issue almost never arises. As we have seen above, a woman is rarely visited by a kinswoman, so it would be difficult to make the arrangement. But a test is provided by cases where two married sisters are living in the same village. This is not common, but in the few cases we observed we would say that the contacts which they are able to maintain depends most on the "closeness" of their husbands. A woman in her sasural (affinal village) is not free to move around, because of the combination of her work in the sasural chula (or affinal hearth) and notions of sharm (shame) and purdah (seclusion). They are not completely immobilised, but they do not have the time to dally with anyone, even a sister. For sisters married in the same havelli (cluster of agnatically related hearths) a different point needs to be made. Informants are often against such a marriage, saying that the love which there was before tends to be killed off by the structural pressures which result in competition among in-married women. In general, then, even sisters living in the same village will not help each other in their work, nor substitute when one wants to go home.

A woman's mother-in-law is her most likely substitute. She may live in the woman's chula, in the chula of one of the woman's husband's brothers, or in a separate chula, or she may be dead. A woman generally starts her married life by joining the hearth of her mother-in-law, and she is thus freer to visit her own kin than at any later stage. Indeed, the expectation that she will spend much of the first year or so in her natal village probably inhibits the establishment of a separate chula for her. However, the woman in the same hearth as her mother-in-law cannot be assumed to benefit compared with the woman who is alone. The mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law are not equals. One woman, for instance, considers that her husband does not beat her because his mother is no longer alive and able to incite him to violence. Several informants comment on the mother-in-law's power

to control the diet of her pregnant daughter-in-law. And, rather more prosaically, they note the mother-in-law's role in controlling the work loads and mobility of her daughters-in-law. In addition, quarreling among women is often given, by women themselves, as the reason for the separation of hearths. Where such acrimonious splits occur, it is difficult if not impossible for a woman to call on her husband's brothers' wives or mother when she needs help. Thus the woman who is the only adult woman in her chula is solely responsible for all the work, while the woman living with her mother-in-law finds that "it does not look nice for a daughter-in-law to rest while her mother-in-law works".

A woman's only other source of assistance is the availability of any other women from related households: certainly, no-one from an unrelated household will offer any help. But because women regard their own responsibilities as going no further than their 'own' chula, the only help a woman can realistically ask for is from her mother-in-law, a daughter of her husband's brothers, or her husband's unmarried sister. The help of a husband's married sister is less common: she may come at the time of childbirth, if she is "called" by her brother to help his wife (see above), but this does not give a woman any freedom to visit her own kin, since childbirth is a shameful event in which her own parents have no place. We have one example - recounted with amusement - of a husband's married sister being able to help her newly delivered brother's wife because her own husband's sister had replaced her. In one further case, two sisters, married into the same havelli, take turns to go to their natal home to help their brother's wife cope with their blind mother - and this does permit the brother's wife to visit her natal home in consequence - but this too is noted for its rarity.

The final source of potential help is from a woman's husband's brother's wife, in the few cases where they are still

operating a joint hearth. In general, the arrival of a new bride soon leads to the establishment of a new hearth by any daughter-in-law still living with her husband's parents, so households with two brothers still living together are uncommon (though the brothers may still work the land and own livestock jointly). The maintenance of such a joint hearth probably does indicate that the younger married women co-operate well together, so a woman in this fortunate position may well be able to visit her natal kin more regularly than most.

The other demographic factor affecting a woman's ability to move is the stage in her own maternity career. Table 3 shows how the amount of time spent in a woman's natal home varies with age. In the early years of her marriage she may spend more of her time with her mother than with her mother-in-law. A few years later she may find that the demands of her children make either leaving them behind or taking them with her equally daunting prospects. Towards the end of her childbearing, a woman with a responsible daughter may be freer to travel, though by then the attractions of her natal village may be much reduced by the death of her parents (and any impact on her fertility is likely to be small).

**TABLE 3**  
**TIME SPENT IN NATAL VILLAGE IN LAST YEAR BY AGE**

AGE	None	Under 1 month	1 but under 2 months	Over 2 Months	'Come and Go' (N)	Total (N)
15-24	6.6	56.6	12.3	12.2	12.3	100 (106)
25-34	9.7	60.4	9.7	8.4	11.7	100 (154)
35-44	9.8	65.9	4.9	9.8	9.8	100 (41)
<b>ALL AGES</b>	<b>8.6</b>	<b>59.8</b>	<b>10.0</b>	<b>9.9</b>	<b>11.6</b>	<b>100 (301)</b>

Source: Survey data

## FEMALE AUTONOMY AND FERTILITY BEHAVIOUR

We should not expect dramatic departures from the overall north Indian pattern of high fertility to emerge. Married women in Bijnor - whether married close to their natal village or not - are in substantially similar positions in their relative powerlessness in their affinal village. Nonetheless, there are a few pointers which might suggest that a woman's access to her natal kin might affect her fertility directly. To begin with, a woman "staying" in her natal village is sexually unavailable to her husband. Since post-partum sexual abstinence is in practice no more (and often less) than 40 days, a woman's visits to her natal kin might provide the longest gaps in sexual activity a woman experiences - and this might have some impact on overall fertility. Also, some women used their visits to their natal villages for contraceptive purposes without the knowledge of their husbands. This deception is difficult to investigate, but we know of one Hindu woman who had an abortion and an I.U.D. fitted in her natal village; a Muslim woman who had an abortion; and another Muslim who took local medicines to lengthen the period between her pregnancies.

Unfortunately, our material on fertility is not ideal. Our survey sample frame was designed to give us a random sample of women who had recently delivered a baby, not a random sample of ever-married women. Further, we almost certainly under-recorded infant and child deaths so our material on current family size is much better than that for children ever born. Using current family size we can certainly show differences by age, social class, religion and caste comparable to those shown by other studies in north India, ignoring education solely because so very few of the sample reported any formal education.

Thus, Table 4 shows that current family size is highest for landless "service-caste" Muslims. Next come landless Muslims from "landed" castes and then Muslims who own land, whether from a

landed or a service caste. Hindus and Harijans have the smallest current family size, with very little variation by caste or landholding. Another way of showing the fertility differentials is to look at the ages at which women are giving birth. There are far more Muslim women in their late 30's and early 40's still having babies than there are Hindus or Harijans. In a context where contraception for spacing is rarely used, this is another indicator of higher fertility. Since most data on mortality for this part of India suggest that Muslims have higher death rates for infants and children, (and this is supported by our mortality data) these differentials are likely to understate the differentials in children ever born. In general, then, our data suggest the same kinds of religious fertility differentials depicted for U.P. by the 1978 Survey on Infant and Child Mortality (Registrar-General of India, 1983) in which Muslim rural standardised general marital fertility rates were 17% above those of Hindus.

TABLE 4  
CURRENT FAMILY SIZE BY RELIGION AND LANDHOLDING

	'LANDED' MUSLIM	'SERVICE' MUSLIM	BRAHMAN	'LANDED' HINDU	'SERVICE' HINDU	HARIJAN
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LANDHOLDING

NONE

Mean	3.47	4.32	3.14	3.00	3.00	2.93
S.D.	(1.85)	(1.92)	(1.57)	(1.73)	(1.93)	(1.62)
(N)	34	19	7	5	16	30

LANDED

Mean	3.22	3.57	2.57	2.95	3.00	3.00
S.D.	(2.14)	(2.15)	(0.53)	(1.66)	(1.92)	(1.58)
(N)	36	7	7	93	26	21

ALL

Mean	3.34	4.12	2.86	2.95	3.00	2.96
S.D.	(1.99)	(1.97)	(1.17)	(1.65)	(1.90)	(1.59)
(N)	70	26	14	98	42	51

Other indicators of the demographic differences between the two populations support this conclusion. In the two development blocks from which our sample population was drawn, the overall proportion of Muslims is about 30%, yet they provide less than 5% of the family planning clientele, both for terminal sterilisations and for birth-spacing methods. The Muslims in our survey sample were more likely than the Hindus to say that it would be 'God's will', or up to their husband, how many children they had. On both counts, then, Muslim women seem less likely to have taken "modern" fertility control decisions or to feel themselves in control of their fertility. We cannot explore any further here the well-worn arguments about the reasons for the higher fertility of Muslims.

If we now bring marriage distance into the analysis of fertility differentials, different patterns emerge for different groups, though they are not all statistically significant. Table 5 shows that Muslims married closely, whether landed-caste or service-caste, have virtually the same mean current family size as those married distantly. In other words, marriage distance amongst Muslims seems to have no explanatory power.

Amongst the Hindus, the landed-caste women married less than 10 kms from their natal village have smaller current family sizes than those married more distantly; whereas for service-caste Hindus and Harijans the reverse is the case: those married closely have larger current family sizes than those married more distantly. Therefore, amongst Hindus, the relationship between marriage distance and fertility seems to differ by caste-group.

## CONCLUSION

In the context of rural Bijnor, indicators of differential autonomy of women are elusive. Many of the variables we have discussed do not cohere such that a woman ranks consistently high or low in access to her natal kin; and each woman's access varies not only according to life-cycle changes but also seasonally or for more random reasons (e.g. the birth and death of animals). Macro-level data used to explain broad regional differences in kinship practices and demographic behaviour in India do not seem to work well in the explanation of intra-regional variations. For example, the notion of "marriage distance" is clearly problematic and even our admittedly simple measure exposes far more complexities than the data used by Dyson and Moore. Moreover, the social distinction between a woman's natal village and her affinal village largely outweighs the potential for greater contact with her natal kin that geographical proximity might provide. But the more subtle indicators of a woman's potential for support gained through her access to her natal kin seem unlikely to offer much to analyses of fertility differentials, however important they may be to women in other respects.

## NOTES

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TABLE 1  
MARRIAGE DISTANCE BY CASTE, LANDHOLDING AND RELGION : SURVEY  
AND BASE VILLAGES

PERCENTAGES

CASTE	MARRIAGE DISTANCES								(N)
	< 5 kms		5 < 10kms				> 10 kms		
	SV	BV	SV	BV	SV	BV	SV	BV	
LANDLESS HINDUS									
LANDED	20	0	0	0	80	100	(5)	(7)	
SERVICE	6	10	0	0	85	90	(16)	(10)	
HARIJAN	3	100	16	0	70	0	(30)	(2)	
OTHER	0	100	14	0	85	0	(7)	(4)	
TOTAL	5	30	10	0	85	70	(58)	(23)	
LANDOWNING HINDUS									
LANDED	10	0	12	0	78	100	(90)	(8)	
SERVICE	8	2	4	6	90	92	(25)	(50)	
HARIJAN	8	9	4	9	78	82	(21)	(45)	
OTHER	0	25	40	0	60	75	(7)	(4)	
TOTAL	9	6	11	6	80	88	(143)	(107)	
LANDLESS MUSLIMS									
LANDED	42	25	21	25	36	50	(33)	(4)	
SERVICE	31	0	0	0	69	100	(13)	(12)	
TOTAL	39	6	15	6	46	88	(46)	(16)	
LANDOWNING MUSLIMS									
LANDED	58	55	6	20	36	24	(36)	(49)	
SERVICE	33	17	0	42	66	42	(6)	(12)	
TOTAL	55	47	5	25	40	28	(42)	(61)	

Notes: SV= Survey Villages and covers only women who had given birth during a defined year (1.7.81-30.6.82). BV= Base villages and covers all married women resident in the village.

Hindu castes are divided as follows: Landed castes include Jat, Rajput; Service castes are miscellaneous groups who are not traditional landholders, such as Sahnis and Dhimars; Harijan includes all ex-Untouchable castes; and Other includes Brahman and Nepali. For the Muslim caste-like groups, Sheikhs and Rangars are the main Landed castes, with Julahas, Telis etc in the Service caste category.