



WOMEN'S SECLUSION AND MEN'S HONOR

*Sex Roles in North India,
Bangladesh, and Pakistan*

DAVID G. MANDELBAUM

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Men's Honor*

SEX ROLES IN NORTH INDIA,

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FOREWORD

David G. Mandelbaum, First American Anthropologist of India

GERALD D. BERREMAN

A year after receiving his Ph.D. in anthropology at Yale University in 1937-38, with a dissertation on the Plains Cree Indians of North America (1940), David G. Mandelbaum became the first American anthropologist to undertake academic field research in India. Born in Chicago in 1911, he received his undergraduate education at Northwestern University. His first faculty position, at the University of Minnesota (1938-46), was interrupted during World War II by some three years of U. S. governmental and military service, including two years as a military officer in Burma and India. In 1946 he was appointed to the faculty of the Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley. There he pursued a distinguished career in research, teaching, and administration, in the course of which he served a term as Chair of his department. He also was instrumental in founding the Center for South and Southeast Asia Studies, whose Chair he was from 1965 to 1968. After his retirement in 1978, he was active as Professor Emeritus, pursuing his research

and writing until his death in April 1987, at the age of 75, almost exactly fifty years after embarking on his research in India.

The earliest publications based on that pioneering research were "Polyandry in Kota Society" (1938); "Agricultural Ceremonies among Three Tribes of Travancore" (1939a); and "The Jewish Way of Life in Cochin" (1939b). The topics of these three papers anticipated interests that would remain prominent in his India research throughout his life. South Indian tribal peoples, especially the Kota, the Toda, and their neighbors in the Nilgiri Hills, continued to engage his scholarly attention, as did the Jews of India. However, his vision of South Asia, in general, and India, in particular, was never that narrowly focused. It soon broadened to encompass a wide-ranging, comparative, and integrative approach to the anthropology of the subcontinent. This took him into studies of religion and ritual (especially funerary rites), of family and gender, of caste and kinship, of development and change, of population and fertility, and of the overall patterning and functioning of Indian society and culture. This breadth of scholarship is best reflected in his unprecedentedly comprehensive two-volume work, *Society in India* (1970). His more specific South Asian interests have been exhibited in *Human Fertility in India: Social Components and Policy Perspectives* (1974), and his many journal articles, book chapters, and book reviews.

Two other of Professor Mandelbaum's long-term South Asia interests deserve special mention. He had an abiding concern with life history as a method of anthropological research and exposition, an interest he applied to the life of Mohandas Gandhi, the outcome of which was his well-known article, "The Study of Life History: Gandhi" (1973). In addition, he collected information from and about the Toda for many years, with the intention of writing a definitive book as sequel and update to W. H. R. Rivers's classic, *The Todas* (1906). His findings were published in 1980 in an article entitled "*The Todas in Time Perspective*."

David Mandelbaum's monumental contributions to sociology and anthropology were, of course, by no means limited to South

Asia. He is perhaps most widely known to non-South Asianists for his classic edited volume of the work of his great teacher, *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir* (Sapir 1949), a book which reflects also his own lifelong interest in the study of culture and personality. His first book, *The Plains Cree* (1940; 1979), the research and writing of which preceded his India experience, is a standard ethnographic source for North Americanists. *Soldier Groups and Negro Soldiers* (1952), together with two articles on "Psychiatry in Military Society" (1955a; 1955b), derive from his World War II research. The former constituted not only a contribution to the social psychology of the military, but to the elimination of racial segregation in the U. S. military services and ultimately to the Supreme Court decisions outlawing such segregation in American society at large. He had also a persistent commitment to understanding the social and cultural aspects of alcohol consumption, reflected in several articles of which the broadest in scope is "Alcohol and Culture" (1965). Late in his life he pondered in print the implications, dangers, and remedies of nuclear weapons in two articles on "Anthropology for the Nuclear Age" (1984a; 1984b). Finally, American anthropologists, students and teachers alike, owe him a debt of gratitude for his concern with quality and method in anthropological education or, as he called it in the title of the introductory essay in his co-edited book on the subject, "The Transmission of Anthropological Culture" (1963a: 1-21). That unique book was entitled *The Teaching of Anthropology* (1963a); its companion volume was *Resources for the Teaching of Anthropology* (1963b), both co-edited with Gabriel W. Lasker and Ethel M. Albert.

David Mandelbaum's humanistic concern with social issues as appropriate topics for anthropological inquiry and analysis is evident, I think, from even this brief exposition of his writings.

Among many honors, awards, and fellowships, the most recent and clearly one of his most cherished was the *festschrift* in his honor presented to him at the Plenary Session of the 31st Annual Meeting of the Kroeber Anthropological Society in March 1987, just over a month before his death. Entitled *Dimensions of Ex-*

perience, *Essays in Honor of David G. Mandelbaum*, it is edited by Paul Hockings (1987) and contains essays by thirty-three colleagues and former students.

The present volume adds another substantial contribution to this record of scholarship in both South Asian anthropology and anthropology in general—unhappily and unfortunately, his final one. The book speaks for itself, and his own Preface and Introduction need no amplification. I will simply point out that his numerous publications on the family in South Asia, including especially Part II, “Family and Kinship Relations,” in volume one of *Society in India* (1970:31–158), and specifically chapter 5 therein, “Family Roles: Girl and Woman” (ibid., 82–94), include earlier treatments of some of the issues addressed in detail in this book. Like *Society in India*, this is not the result of a focused field project, but of a lifetime’s observation of Indian culture and society and inquiry into that society’s components, patterning, and dynamics. For fifty years David Mandelbaum researched, analyzed, taught, and thought on the lifeways of the peoples of India and South Asia. The institution which intrigued him above all, it seems, was the family as the fundamental social unit; the relationship of women and men therein was a recurring theme in his work. Although—or perhaps *because*—his own research was primarily in southern India, where seclusion of women and its relevance to the honor of men are less at issue than in the north, he was challenged to understand these prominent and problematic features of family, kin, and gender relations in North India and adjacent Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Other scholars of South Asia have observed and written about many of these same phenomena, of course, for they are readily evident in the social and cultural landscape. But this book is unique in the ethnic and regional scope of the data upon which the observations and analyses are based, in the time span over which those observations were made, and in the breadth of knowledge of sociological, anthropological, and South Asian literature by which they are informed. It is as a result of the regional scope, time depth,

and scholarly breadth which Professor Mandelbaum brought to his research—the total scholarly context within which his consideration of women and men in northern South Asia is situated—that this book makes an unparalleled contribution.

P R E F A C E

After the appearance of his 1905 book on the proper conduct of Muslim women, Indian Muslim teacher Thānawī was urged to write a companion volume for the guidance of men. He demurred, saying that, apart from some details, the book for women could also serve for men (Metcalf 1980: 107). Thānawī's comment has wider applicability. A reasonably full account of the social roles and behavior of women in any society implies a great deal, if it does not specifically detail much, about the demeanor of men. A similar account of the approved roles and actual behavior of men necessarily tells about their relations to women, and by implication, about women's roles.

This study considers the traditional social roles of women and of men, and the relations between them, in northern regions of the South Asian subcontinent. We examine ramifications, effects, variations of these basic patterns of gender roles and relations, cultural affinities to and differences from other world areas, and note ongoing changes in them.

What men traditionally require of women in these regions is closely linked to what men expect and require of one another. Women are not expected to require much of men, at least not directly, openly, publicly. This determinedly masculine emphasis is among the more intense expressions of a theme that is very common across the world's cultures. That traditional theme is being challenged in South Asia as in much of the rest of the world. The omnibus term "tradition" is here used to mean those behavior patterns and value choices that contemporary generations regard as part of their social and personal heritage, which, in respect to gender, many peoples of these regions cherish and which a growing number want to change.

The anthropological data base from which the generalizations in this work are drawn is far better than it was before women scien-

tists and scholars came to do studies of women's roles, views, and participations. This data base is still in early stages but seems sufficient now for some preliminary formulations. Some of the relevant historical, demographic, economic, and political sources have been used but this study takes an anthropological rather than a historical, economic, or political approach. The efforts of the burgeoning feminist movements are not here discussed in any detail.

I thank Mohammed and Reshma Yunus for their assistance on Muslim practices. Anita Weiss, Barbara Metcalf, and three anonymous readers made helpful suggestions. Kenneth Logan generously aided with bibliographic references and called my attention to Carol Sakala's comprehensive bibliography on women of South Asia (1980). While this work was in progress, problems with my health and eyesight intervened. The participation of Ruth Mandelbaum made the completion of this book possible. In other writings I have recorded my appreciation and thanks for her sustained help. There is added and special reason to do so in this instance.

D.G.M.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

PURDAH OBSERVED

Jawaharlal Nehru once told how surprised he had been by the response of Indian women in 1930 to Gandhi's call for the Civil Disobedience Movement. "I think that the most important and significant feature of that movement was the tremendous part that the women of India took in it. It was astounding" (Norman 1965: 412-13).

He succinctly stated his views on the status of Indian women in a speech he gave in 1949. "I am quite convinced that in India today progress can be and should be measured by the progress of the women of India" (ibid., II, 508). In ascribing such importance to women's status and conduct, Nehru was in agreement with traditionalist Indian Muslims and Hindus. Though they might disagree with every other aspect of Nehru's ideas about women, most of them would concur that the status of women is of great concern to each man and to all of society.

Nehru's astonishment at the staunch uprising of many women at Gandhi's call is more akin to the surprise expressed by Western observers when they find that demure and self-effacing Indian women may, in certain life situations and at certain historical junctures, take decisive action with spirit and determination. Indian men are usually not quite so surprised on such occasions.

Nehru was speaking of all of India. Our inquiry here is primarily

concerned with the people of the north of the subcontinent among whom the separation between women and men tends to be more marked than it is among those in other parts of South Asia.

Women veil and seclude themselves before men through the large part of South Asia that includes Pakistan, northern India through Uttar Pradesh, and Bangladesh. They do so before certain kinds of men and not before others, in given social situations and not in others, and as one expression of a more general mode of conduct in which a woman's behavior directly affects the personal and family honor of the men closest to her. These men believe their honor and the linked demeanor of the women to be of central importance in their lives.

The most common term for these practices is *purdah* ("curtain," *pardā* in Hindi and Urdu). The term has been used narrowly, for specific traits of physical covering and spatial enclosure, but we here take the broader usage, which also includes the beliefs and values about the behavior of women, the restrictions on their movements outside the household and the requirements for their respectful and deferential demeanor within the home. *Purdah* is maintained by most peoples in regions of the northern tier of the subcontinent, the basins of the Indus and Ganges rivers. Among them, *purdah* is a constant element of everyday life; it symbolizes some fundamental values; it influences other parts of their cultures; it has important consequences for personality, economy, and society. A sketch of so important a feature in the lives of so large a part of the world's population must necessarily be done in broad strokes, emphasizing the general similarities rather than the myriad differences in detail.

These regions are here called the *purdah* regions. While there is much social and cultural difference between, say, Hindu or Sikh Punjabis and Muslim Bangladeshis, and the staple crop is wheat for the former and rice for the latter, it is useful to refer to both as being among the peoples of the *purdah* regions. The term *purdah* zone is similarly used here to include those regions of the northern parts of the subcontinent (except for Bihar and West Bengal) where *purdah* practices are taken to be central elements of social life.

There is no abrupt shift from a purdah to a non-purdah region, but rather a gradual transition through the intervening regions to the quite different gender relations of South India.

A family can properly practice purdah, as propriety is defined in its locality, only if its members can afford to do so. Those who must worry about their daily food (a large part of the population of the purdah zone) cannot support the full seclusion of women. But those of the poor who prosper commonly adopt more stringent seclusion.

In addition to this basic difference by economic class, purdah is carried on in two principal versions, one Hindu (and Sikh), the other Muslim. We first examine the elements common to both, then consider the differences between them. The common features, including factors of personality and socialization, are then reviewed in the broadest perspectives of time and space, in terms of cultural evolution and world area comparisons. The area of particular relevance, the Middle East (including North Africa), is given separate review.

Traditional purdah concepts and customs are still maintained among most peoples of the northern subcontinent. But these ideas and practices are everywhere being challenged by people's experiencing of modern influences. We will make some assessment of the contested and evolving responses, especially in urban and educated families, where the changes are most pronounced.

Veiling by women is so frequent, commonplace, and reflexive an action that it is scarcely noticed among these peoples unless it is not promptly and properly forthcoming. But when an English anthropologist, Ursula M. Sharma, came to study the people of a village in Himachal Pradesh, the practice struck her as "most alien and curious." She writes, "I found it disturbing when an informal conversation with a group of women was interrupted and my companions would veil themselves and become silent and restrained as an older man passed by the courtyard where we were sitting" (1978:218).