

# **SOCIAL ECONOMICS, POLICY AND DEVELOPMENT**

**Working Paper No. 53**

**Gender Issues in Rural Eastern India  
Revealed by Field Interviews:  
Tribal and Non-Tribal Responses**

**by**

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and  
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**Clem Tisdell<sup>†</sup>**

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# **Gender Issues in Rural Eastern India Revealed by Field Interviews: Tribal and Non-Tribal Responses**

## **ABSTRACT**

Reports responses to interviews conducted in three rural villages in Eastern India in January 2000 as well as replies to questions asked at a forest meeting in West Bengal of groups/persons interested in rural women and development. The questions were designed to provide information on gender-bias and possible reasons for it, especially any economic reasons. These interviews supplemented detailed questionnaires directed to wives in these villages. Interviews were conducted with Kondhs in a village (Badala) west of Dashapalla in Orissa, with Santals in an all Santal village, (Bandhgora) in the Midnapore region of West Bengal and with Santals and scheduled caste Hindus in a mixed village, (Sadanandapur) in the same region. The results highlight significant differences between tribal people and scheduled caste Hindus in the status accorded to females. Differences in the entitlements of males and females emerge. While the two tribal groups interviewed both display male dominance, it is less marked amongst tribals than amongst non-tribals. In those tribal groups considered here, a bride-price is normally paid whereas in non-tribal Hindu families a 'groom price' is paid. This contributes to a significant difference in attitudes to female children on the part of tribals and non-tribals. Entitlements, as suggested by Sen's theory, are shown to be gender-relevant. In addition, it is found that economic theories of the family (especially those that rely on game theory and allow for threats) help to explain the results observed. Community-wide social discrimination is also considered as an additional factor in gender and ethnic prejudice.

**Keywords:** Economic discrimination, education, female status, gender, health, Hinduism, India, Kondhs, Santals, social discrimination, theories of the family.

**JEL Codes:** D1, J12, J15, J16, Z13.

# **Gender Issues in Rural Eastern India Revealed by Field Interviews: Tribal and Non-Tribal Responses**

## **1. Introduction**

The status of females and the degree to which they are empowered within families (whether they be wives, widows or female children) is a major welfare issue in many countries, including India. This article considers the status of females within families in rural eastern India as revealed by interviews conducted in rural areas of West Bengal and Orissa. Furthermore, it highlights the factors that seem to determine the status of females in the villages visited and relates these to economic theories of the family. Many economists believe that economic considerations play a central role in determining the relative status and power of individuals in a family, including that of its female members.

This article is organized in six sections and is based on field notes taken during interviews in rural areas in West Bengal and Orissa. Section 1 reports on interviews in the Kondh portion of a village (Badala) in western Orissa, and Sections 3 and 4 provide notes on interviews in two villages in the Midnapore region of West Bengal. These are respectively Bandhgora, which consists entirely of Santals and Sadanandapur, which consists of a mixture of Santals and members of the Scheduled Caste. Section 5 provides a summary of discussions with groups (interested in the advancement of rural women) present at a meeting held in Dukee Forest, West Bengal; a meeting that was organized by Dr. K.C. Roy. Section 6 provides concluding observations.

The procedure adopted was for Clem Tisdell to ask questions in English with the translations being made by Dr. Roy. Tisdell jotted down notes and wrote the first draft of this record, which was then checked and added to by Roy where necessary. In Orissa, we were assisted by Dr. Acharya and in West Bengal by Mr. Susanta. The authors had completed in 1999 detailed gender-related surveys for four villages in West Bengal, two of which were visited in January, 2000. These visits enabled a number of responses received in the earlier questionnaires to be clarified and extra information to be gathered.

It should be noted that the interview procedure used in the surveys in 2000 were relatively informal and not based on structured questionnaires and random sampling. Although such a procedure may not satisfy scientific purists, such an approach can provide valuable insights into sociological issues which may not be revealed by more formal survey techniques. Most sociologists do not reject such procedures but, of course, care should be taken in drawing general conclusions from such informal approaches. They are very useful for supplementing results obtained from formal surveys. Let us now consider the results from the interviews conducted at four different locations.

## **2. A Visit to The Kondh Section of Badala Village West of Dashapalla, Orissa, 10 January, 2000**

### **2.1 *Background***

This village (Badala) is located on the Bhubaneswar to Phulbani road west of Dashapalla and is approximately 120 kilometres from Bhubaneswar or 70 kilometres from Phulbani, the district headquarters of the Kandhamal district. It consists of a Kondh part and a scheduled caste portion and is in the foothills of the Khandana Hills.

The state of Orissa has 62 distinct tribal groups and tribals which constitute about a quarter of its population. The Kondhs (also called Kandha) are the best known of these tribal groups. They had human sacrificial ceremonies in earlier times but these were suppressed by the British. Today animals are sacrificed instead of humans in these ceremonies. Other major tribes include the Juangs, Santals, Parajas, Godabas, Koyas and Bondas.

Orissa has a much higher female-male ratio than West Bengal (one of its neighbouring states). Therefore, it may provide some contrasts to West Bengal in relation to attitudes to females. On this Orissa journey, the authors were accompanied by Dr. P.K. Acharya, Reader in Social Anthropology of the Nabakrushna Chowdhury Centre of Development Studies, Bhubaneswar. He has completed considerable research on the Kondhs and explained that the Kondhs here had migrated from the Phulbani area some time back to establish this village. Interviews began with male elders and some young men, including

some from the scheduled caste section of the village. These were undertaken while visiting the Kondh section of the village. Time did not permit a visit to the scheduled caste section of the village.

## ***2.2 Financial Assistance and Developments on Sal Plate Production Said to Improve the Status of Village Women***

The men were excited about developments in *sal* leaf plate-production in the village. They claimed that this had improved the economic and social position of women. Funds for these developments were provided by the Union Government of India from its program for the development of children and rural women, that is the Program for Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA)<sup>1</sup>.

This funding was provided to a women's cooperative established by several villages and was intended as 'seed' money. The cooperative had used the funds to buy pedal-operated sewing machines and was in the process of constructing a godown (store) to serve all the villages. This particular village has been selected for the godown because it is located on the main road. The godown is of substantial size and was being constructed as a permanent building. It may be used for other purposes as well. Sewing machines were provided to individual women to sew *sal* plates.

*Sal* leaf plates are extensively used in India as disposable plates at picnics, parties, festivals, social gatherings, wedding receptions and for take-away food. *Sal* leaves are collected from the forest, partially dried, graded and then initially pinned together. In this village, bamboo splinters are used for this purpose. They may be sold at this stage but if sewn together have a higher value.

The plates in this village had in the past been sold to middlemen. The price received was believed by the villagers to be unreasonably low. More recently they have had an opportunity to sell these plates to a NGO (believed to be an 'umbrella' Indian NGO) at a fixed price considered to be reasonable. However, there was some concern that this NGO had not purchased plates recently so stock is accumulating in the village. It seems that the NGO can only buy a limited amount of plates at its fixed price.

The sewing of the leaves and grading is done at the individual cottages. Elders pointed out that this has the advantage that mothers can mind their own children and do not need to rely on older children for child-minding.

Many other items are collected by villagers for selling, as well as for their own consumption. For example, tamarind is sold. This is used in some Indian recipes and a powder is produced from it which is used by Indians as a skin whitener and softener. It is traditionally used by Hindu marriage celebrants.

### ***2.3 Visual Observations in Badala Village***

The houses in the Kondh section are constructed of thatch and daub and were well maintained and clean. The outside walls are decorated with white emblems. The floor of a narrow front verandah is grey and provides access to different rooms. There are few rooms – often only two or three and one serves as a combined storeroom and shrine. In this village, the Kondhs had displayed images of Hindu gods on the walls of their storeroom. The goddess Lakshmi is one of their favourites. They have been considerably influenced by Hinduism and Hindu culture but not completely, as will become clear later. On one day of each month, they pray for a successful rice harvest.

Villagers depend on a combination of forest non-timber products, food from agriculture (especially rice) used for subsistence. But some other crops are grown such as mustard and sesame, in part for cash. Buffaloes were much in evidence and the village had cows. However, the cows were in the forest during our visit along with a few goats and tropical sheep. These are tended by a particular Hindu caste specializing in cow-herding. However, according to Acharya, the Kondhs do not consume milk products. Presumably, they keep the cattle as a store of value and/or sell or exchange milk-products. The cow-herders are entitled to some milk (and possibly to other entitlements) from the livestock in their care. The livestock are kept in fenced enclosures near the houses of their owners at night. These contain some fruit trees e.g. papaya and are lightly trellised. Various edible vine crops climb on the trellises, for example, cucurbits, such as squash and melons.

The Kondhs have some Australoid features. These include broad noses and a ridge on their forebrow. But they do not have thick lips. Tattooing was common and different clan members could in the past be identified by their tattoos. One grandmother was seen with such tattoos. However, the practice of tattooing in this village has been discontinued.

#### **2.4 Governance**

The question was raised about forms of local governance and whether women are represented on local governing bodies. Those present pointed out that it is now a requirement of the Union Government that the Anchul Panchayat (representing several villages) has women as one third of its members. This is satisfied in their case. Nevertheless, in Kondh society, women were not traditionally involved in politics. The Kondh group here has its own village council but in accordance with its tradition, it has no female members. Nevertheless, the Kondhs have female representatives on the Anchul Panchayat and females are clearly active in managing their cooperative.

#### **2.5 Family Entitlements and the Status of Women**

##### *Rights to control the expenditure of cash*

Kondh wives appear to have significant control over the expenditure of cash if they earn it. At least, this was claimed by a mother of three school-age children interviewed. She is involved in the cooperative and has a sewing machine at her house for *sal* plate production. The cooperative arrangement has been of great financial benefit to her and her family. Some of the money she earns is used for herself, her mother and her children with a portion being made available to her husband. In addition, she pointed out that she has been able to open a savings account with the Bank of India in a nearby village.

She believes that the project for *sal* plate production has improved her status. In response to the question about her husband's attitude to her having some financial independence in this way, she said she had never asked him. However, she suggested that the fact that her husband had brought us to meet her and discuss the project with her meant that she was supportive of it. Nevertheless, it is not certain how representative this household is. Because there were no male sons in this family, her husband joined this household. In

such situations, which are more the exception than the rule, females may retain greater family power.

#### *Education and child care*

This mother made it quite clear that she put great stress on education. She does not plan to differentiate between her children according to their gender in their access to education. She plans to give them education according to their ability to take advantage of it. She herself had benefitted from adult education. It had, for example, assisted here with knowledge about family planning. She does not plan to have more children because she wants to provide better care for her existing children.

#### *Dowry*

In the case of many tribals the groom's family provides commodities to the bride's family, the reverse of the normal Indo-Aryan situation. This has been the practice amongst the Kondhs. But in this village, the Gram Sabha (council) of the Kondhs has decided that no exchange between families is required on the occasion of a marriage. However, a small prescribed payment is to be made to the council for registering the marriage and to assist it in performing a role in marriage guidance. While a bride price is usually paid by tribals, Acharya pointed out that some tribals who have improved their socio-economic position now adopt the Hindu practice of asking for a 'groom-price'.

#### *Divorce*

The males interviewed said that divorce was unusual in this village. The main grounds for divorce is the wife being barren. Divorce must be agreed to by the Gram Sabha. Even if woman is barren, she can still refuse to divorce. The younger members of the male group said however that a doctor should be consulted to find out which party is infertile.

#### *Domicile*

The normal practice is for the bride to join the groom's household after marriage.

### *Female children*

According to the elders interviewed, female children are not considered by the Kondhs to be a burden. Rather they are believed to be an asset. Attitudes towards females are relatively positive.

### *Widows and rights of inheritance*

Inheritance is patrilineal. A widow does not inherit her husband's property but there is a social obligation for the sons to support their mother. The family also has a social obligation to support any of its handicapped members. The village Sabha attempts to enforce such obligations by applying social pressure where there appears to be failure. The villagers did not believe that the social status and welfare of women is reduced by their inability to inherit property.

## **2.6 Some General Comments**

Dr. Acharya mentioned that the Kondhs often suffer from protein deficiency because they do not consume much animal protein (for example, milk products are not consumed) and they do not eat pulses to any great extent. Also vitamin A deficiency is common among them since few green leafy vegetables are eaten by the Kondhs. This is a particular problem during pregnancy. Food taboos during pregnancy further add to nutritional deficiency at this crucial time.

The incidence of malaria amongst the Kondhs is high and it is often difficult to alter their existing habits in order to lower this incidence. For example, it was reported that one NGO promoted the use of medicated mosquito nets as a malaria-prevention method amongst the Kondhs. They were used for this purpose for a short period only and then used as fishing nets!

Kondhs often have totems or sacred species of animals or plants. They will not harm these and often try to assist them. According to Dr. Acharya, effective social change amongst the tribals requires account to be taken of their beliefs and motivations.

Villagers expressed their dissatisfaction with the prices paid to them for the produce they sell. From a marketing point of view, however, they suffer because of their remoteness from the main markets. Transport costs are a major cost in marketing their produce. Since tribals are often located in peripheral economic areas, their ability to take advantage of market systems is limited. Furthermore, their experience with such systems is little developed.

They face the further constraint that the local market for any educational skills acquired by them is limited. Any who display outstanding educational ability and make significant progress in their education would have to leave their locality to take advantage of it, probably never to return permanently to their own village or local area. To some extent, this acts as a 'brain-drain'. Education often becomes a vehicle for both social and geographic mobility, especially in an increasingly market-oriented world. As a result tribal villages (and rural villages generally) are likely to undergo increasing transformation as economic change proceeds and in the long-term, as urbanization accelerates many villages will no longer be sustainable in India.

### **3. Visit to Bandhgora Village, West Bengal, Saturday 15 January, 2000 – An All Santal Village Reached Via Chandrakona Road**

#### ***3.1 Background and Economic Conditions***

At this time of the year, the local Santals worship the forest gods. Many Santals have been influenced by Hinduism and these gods are in fact, Hindu gods. On Saturday, the goddess (Itu) was worshipped and on Sunday the God (Boram) was to be worshipped. Statues of the gods are paraded in the streets accompanied by singing, dancing and drums. Much rice wine is drunk on this occasion. Many of the worshippers accompanying the procession go into a trance, as we witnessed. The religion of the Santals, Sari has undergone considerable transformation as a result of Hindu influence.

Bandhgora is reached near a forest located several kilometres from Chandrakona Road. Most houses of the village are of thatch and daub, and this village, consisting of 30-40

houses, has few assets. There are only two radios for the whole village and villagers own little land, have few possessions, and no electricity.

Various questions were put to a meeting of villagers. In response to these questions, they responded as follows:

Economic conditions of the people are bad. They have little income. Nevertheless, they believe that their economic position had improved somewhat in recent years. They were about 5% better off than say ten years ago according to a spokesman for them.

In response to a question as to how they could improve their economic situation especially regarding women, they suggested they needed machines to assist in the production of *sal* leaf plates. There are two options:

- A sewing machine to stitch leaves
- A machine to compress *sal* leaves and attach these to plastic intersheets.

The latter production method is preferred.

No sewing machines were evident in the village. The villagers, who demonstrated their production of *sal* dishes and bowls, complained of the low price paid to them for these. They have no finance to buy the above-mentioned machines. The DWCRA scheme was not operating here. They had not heard of it. So they could not get funds through it in contrast with the situation of the Kondh village near Dashapalla which we visited in Orissa. In fact, it was learnt later that the Government of West Bengal had not instituted the DWCRA scheme.

### **3.2 Forests**

While they have lost no agricultural land in recent years (of which they have little), they have lost forest resources and forest land. They are heavily dependent on the forest for their livelihood. They collect many items from the forest – leaves, dates, fungi, a type of wild potato, herbs and medicinal products. The main reason for loss of their forest land is due to its illegal conversion to agricultural use. Their complaints about this appear to

have no effect on the authorities. While there is a local Forest Committee to advise the West Bengal Forestry Department on issues involving the local forest, the villagers believed it to be ineffective. This village has members on the Forest Committee of which three are females. They form part of a larger body.

It was also stated that felling of forests for timber often adversely affects the supply of non-timber products which are so important for the livelihood of this group. The West Bengal Forest Department appears to manage its forest principally to supply timber with little account being taken of the supply of non-timber products.

### **3.3 Governance**

Bandhgora has a village council. In accordance with tradition, it consists of elderly males of the village. As for the Anchul Panchayat, this village currently has no representative on it. A quota of places exist for scheduled castes and tribals on the Panchayat. These are all filled at present by scheduled castes.

A spokesperson suggested that even if this Santal village had representatives on the Anchul Panchayat, they would carry little weight. They cannot be effective because they are outnumbered and out-manuevered by higher caste representatives<sup>2</sup>.

### **3.4 The Status of Females and their Rights**

In response to the question, why are boys preferred to girls as children, it was said boys carry on the family name. But this reason may be a surrogate for other factors.

Women own no land in this Santal village. The question came up of whether having ownership or access to land is important. Access to land is clearly important for livelihood and status of individuals in this village. Sometimes, males prevent females from using land resources to which they would normally be entitled.

However, females retain significant bargaining power throughout their lives. For example, if there are a number of sons, a widow decides which one will support her and

inherit the family property. If she is dissatisfied with his level of support, she may transfer the right to another son. Thus, in her threat power could be considerable if she had more than one son.

Divorce is possible and seems to be a real option. The village Sabah (council) decides on whether a divorce will be granted. Grounds include:

- incompatibility – failure to get along
- woman joins another man

The rules appear less stringent than amongst the Kondh.

There are two types of marriage in this village – love-marriage and arranged marriage. The wishes of those wanting a love marriage are usually respected. Most of those present said they preferred an arranged marriage. The parents may tell a son that it is time he was married. They hire the services of a matchmaker who finds three potential brides and arranges for the son to meet with them and make a choice.

A payment is made to the bridal family by the groom. It usually consists of

- a new set of clothes (sarees) for the bride's mother and for her grandmothers, and
- a cash payment to the bride's father. The Sabah has set this at a minimum of 7 rupees. A higher payment may be made but the sum paid must be in multiples of three e.g. 21, 63.
- A cow goes to a brother of the groom and the bride's family decides which brother that will be.

In the event of divorce, payment for bride is not returned to the groom by the bride's family. But if wife joins a new man, then he must pay similar amounts to the above to the bride's family. Clearly, the woman has some threat power in this community.

### **3.5 Education**

Boys usually have more access to education than girls. If a choice must be made, more education is given to a boy than to a girl because it is claimed that the boy carries on the

family name and stays with the family. The girl will join another family after marriage so the investment is lost to her own family.

Villagers said that schooling is costly from their point of view. It involves the cost of clothing for the children, books for writing and pens. Furthermore, teaching is poor and private tuition is needed to obtain an effective education. At their primary school according to the villager, the teacher sleeps and does not keep regular hours. Moreover, the primary school is three kilometres away and the children must walk through a forest and cross a river to get there. It is, therefore, very difficult for the village children to obtain adequate education.

Some education is recognized as essential for the future of their children. A spokesman said village income from forest products will end or become insignificant in the future. Therefore, their children will be forced to stand on their own feet by making use of their education. It was said that today education is needed to carry on most business and other activities. They would be happy for their children to have any paid job.

They think there is little prospect of their children getting a government job even with significant education because of discrimination. One village member has a job as a forest guard with the West Bengal Forestry Department, but he was reported to spend most of his income on alcohol. One of the more educated young members of this village had tried to obtain a job in the public service. He was told that he satisfied all the criteria but that a substantial bribe was required (to secure the job) which he could not afford. It seems that bribes are often required for allocation of such jobs. Nevertheless, some Santals do get government positions, e.g. in the police force, the army and on the railways.

### **3.6 Finance**

The villagers were asked had they ever approached a bank for finance. They responded that they were unable to obtain loans because of a lack of collateral. They are only able to get the loan subsidy. Even without collateral, a loan would only be possible if they have the guarantee of the Anchul Panchayat. But the Anchul Panchayat refuses to act as a

guarantor. These Santal tribals claim that rich non-tribals get loans which they do not repay and still may be supported by the Panchayat for further loans. These villagers believe that a bias is present in relation to access to bank finance.

### **3.7 Concluding Comment**

Bandhgora is a relatively poor Santal village more dependent on forest resources and livestock for its subsistence than on agriculture. Economic deprivation extends both to males and females. Nevertheless, in many respects the social status of females in this village is superior to that of the Santal females at Sadanandapur (a second Santal village that was surveyed) where incomes and village assets are greater than at Bandhgora. In this case, an inverse relationship exists between the socio-economic position of Santal females and the income and wealth of the villages concerned. Also the Santals in Sadanandapur have experienced greater influence from Hinduism on their customs than those at Bandhgora.

## **4. Interviews at Sadanandapur Village, West Bengal on Sunday 16 January, 2000**

### **4.1 Background**

Interviews were conducted with Purnima Mundy<sup>3</sup> a Santal woman, a member of the Gram Sabha and a former member of the Anchul Panchayat and with a representative of the scheduled caste. Sadanandapur village consists of 31 households of which 12-15 are Santal households. The remainder belong to the scheduled caste. The two groups are integrated to some extent. For example, both groups have members on the Gram Saba and on village committees. However, intermarriage is not common – it only occurs in the case of ‘love marriages’.

Sadanandapur is located to the west of the Chandrakana to Midnapore Road. The turn-off to Sadanandapur occurs significantly south of Salbani.

Purnima Mundy was interviewed first. She said that economic conditions in the village are much better than in the ‘old days’, especially for those with agricultural land. This is due to agricultural advances mostly, e.g. multiple cropping. Those without agricultural

land have also benefitted from extra employment. She considered income from agriculture and from forest products to be of about equal importance for this community. The forest is especially important during lean times. This includes the agricultural off-season (the dry season) when there is not much cropping. At that time, both males and females go to the forest to collect non-timber products. Females make use of the forest throughout the year.

#### **4.2 Forest-Political Factors**

This area has a Forest Committee consisting of 9 persons. They are as follows:

- District Forest Officer
- Beat (Forest) Officer
- Chief of the Anchul Panchayat
- Representatives from each of the villages covered by the forest (6)

The committee used to be large (consisting of 15 persons) but has been reduced in size so as to be less unwieldy. Purnima Mundy used to be a member but presently there are no female members on the Forest Committee. She claims to have had some impact on the policy for the management of the forest when she was a member. She was able to promote a tree-planting programme and to get effective protection of trees. She believes that since she has left, tree conservation has suffered.

While males did not tell her how to vote, they were resentful of her presence on the Committee, and she said she was often abused. Because Purnima was a widow, she had to ask permission of her father to attend and risked punishment if she did not conform. Although she has children, she appears to have been widowed early in life, so she is under her father's 'care'. She mentioned that because of male attitudes, it is difficult for females to get involved in politics in India.

She pointed out that there has been an alarming loss of forest land due to encroachment by agriculture and illegal felling of trees. This is because not all members of the Forest

Committee are interested in conserving trees. Some are quite happy to take bribes in order to turn a blind eye to illegal forest clearing.

In response to a question as to whether or not villagers have made any complaints about loss of forest land, she said 'Yes'. But the consequence was not satisfactory: All six villages in the area were fined 50 rupees each for encroachment, so the guilty parties suffered little and 'innocent' villagers had to pay as well. She believes little can be done to prevent encroachment at present.

### **4.3 Governance**

The one-third female membership rule applies to the Anchul Panchayat in West Bengal. Although Panchayat members are sympathetic to female membership, it is difficult to change the attitudes of elders. Females must get permission of male elders to attend. Nevertheless, the one-third female composition on the local Anchul Panchayat is currently fulfilled in this locality. In this village, the Gram Sabha has female members. Female membership is usual in this village, and presumably in this area. It contrasts with the situation at Bandhgora and in many Santal villages.

There is a village Women's Committee. Its functions include:

- To maintain the general welfare of village females and to try to protect women against family abuse, e.g. mistreatment of wives by husbands beating them.
- Follow party directions, that is of the Communist Party of India (CPI), in collecting funds, including funds to assist female representatives to attend meetings.
- Decide on the female representatives for various committees.

The Women's Committee is not directly involved in health matters but provides some back-up assistance to the midwife from the nearby Government health clinic.

While higher castes may have more influence on the Anchul Panchayat than others, Purnima believes that decisions of the local Finance Committee are more important. Each village has one representative on this Committee. Its allocation of funds is determined to

a large extent on principles set down by the West Bengal Government. So this group of Santals in Sadanandapur seems to feel less deprived of political influence than those at Bandhgora.

#### ***4.4 Gender Issues and Threat Power***

In the combined survey responses, a preference was expressed for boys rather than girls as children. Purnima responded that she had no real preference. She suggested that this response would be more likely for scheduled castes than Santals. This is because the bride's parents must pay a substantial sum in the way of settlement of the marriage. The position is reversed for the Santals.

As for widows, they do not normally inherit property. However, sometimes a father will purchase property in a daughter's name and Purnima's father has done this for her. Otherwise, the property is equally divided amongst the sons. Each is obligated to take care of the widow (their mother). She shares her time between the sons. In the case of failure of the sons to take care of their mother, she can take possession of one-third of the land and hire labour to work it. The practicality of this is, however, uncertain. The sons may, for example, obstruct access of their mother and her hired labour to the land.

In the case of ownership of land in a women's own right, the problem of female ownership is less acute in principal. Legally property (land) may be bequeathed to a daughter. But since the daughter joins another family, the sons may appropriate the land and deny the daughter access to it.

Regarding marriage, until recently all marriages were arranged but love-marriages occur now. Arranged marriages predominate and are preferred. Mostly brides and bridegrooms come from different villages. For Santals, a bride price is required. In this village it is as follows: The groom's family must

- Provide sarees for the bride's mother and her grandmothers
- 50 rupees for the bride's father
- Two calves (one female and one male) for the bride's brother or family.

Divorce is extremely rare. One reason is that in the event of a divorce the bride's family must repay the bride price. Divorce can be sanctioned by the Gram Sabha but the Gram Sabha will try to prevent divorce. This means that divorce is more difficult in Sadanandapur than in the Bandhgora Santal village. So the women's threat power is reduced. Grounds for divorce are few. The Santals in Sadanandapur seem to have been influenced considerably by Hindu custom in relation to divorce and widowship.

#### **4.5 Education**

The primary school is relatively close to this village. It is within five minutes walking distance. The villagers consider the teacher (who is new) to be reasonably conscientious. Education is believed by the villagers to be important for most economic activities today, even for farming. They mentioned, for example, that they must be in a position to read instructions, e.g. relating to the use of pesticides. However, they are under no illusion that more education results in paid employment in government service or elsewhere. Discrimination remains a problem.

Purnima has completed secondary school but could not get a government job. She wanted to be a schoolteacher. Less qualified non-Santals got the jobs, according to her. Although a bribe was not asked for, she felt that this may have been expected or would have helped. More importantly, the right connections are required and Santals have few such connections, especially Santal females.

The cost of sending children to school is considered to be high. Costs include clothing, writing pads, pencils and chalk etc. Also some private tutoring is needed because the student-teacher ratio is very high. Villagers agreed with the view expressed by a Kondh mother that it is important to limit family size to improve the quality of the care of their children. They are familiar with birth control.

#### **4.6 Economic Improvement and Finance**

Villagers stated that machines of various kinds could do much to improve their economic welfare. A machine to press *sal* leaves into a plastic backing was mentioned as desirable.

However, villagers say they need guidance in selecting projects especially about market prospects for the produce.

Concerning bank finance, the villagers have not taken bank loans. Those with land for collateral do not want to risk it because drought is always a possibility. Those without land or collateral cannot get bank loans. The DWCRA scheme is not available in this village. Although DWCRA is a 'Centre' scheme, it may have restricted coverage and requires state cooperation.

#### ***4.7 Interview with a Schedule Caste Representative in Sadanandapur***

A member of the scheduled caste answered some questions about Hindu customs in Sadanandapur village and the following indicate his responses:

- In contrast to a Santal marriage, the bride's parents must make a payment to the bridegroom's family in the case of a Hindu marriage, the amount to be paid is subject to bargaining but payment can be a substantial financial burden on the bride's family. All Hindu marriages are arranged. Usually, the bride and bridegroom are from different villages.
- Usually divorce is not allowed and the Gram Sabha will try to prevent and settle a marriage dispute. In general, the wife's only recourse is to go to the court. This is not an easy process and can be expensive. The position of widows is similar to that described by the Santal respondent.

#### ***4.8 Pregnant Women***

In response to the question of whether there were restrictions on the food which pregnant females could eat, villagers said no and that in principle pregnant women should be given food preference to ensure a more robust baby. But the practice may differ from the ideal. Typically men eat first and their left-overs are given to the women. The women share these with their children. They may go without food to make more food available to their children.

#### **4.9 Concluding Comments**

The Santals in Sadanandapur appear to have been significantly influenced by Hindu culture, more so than in Bandhgora. This appears to have weakened the threat power of Santal wives and widows in this village. While the Santal society has always been paternalistic, this paternalism has been reinforced by Hinduism and males have become more dominating in Santal families. This reinforces the point of Sahu<sup>4</sup> about the cultural influence of Hinduism on various Santal communities.

### **5. Results of Interviews at a Gathering in Dukee Forest in the South of West Bengal.**

#### **5.1 Background**

A meeting in the forest at Dukee (near Chandrakora Road village) of individuals and groups interested in the development of rural women took place on Thursday, 17 January, 2000. This meeting of about 60 persons was organized by Dr. K.C. Roy. It included teachers, doctors, Santals from Bandhgora, representatives of a Santal welfare organization and others. Questions were asked by Clem Tisdell and as required, the translation was done by Dr. K.C. Roy with Clem Tisdell making notes on the responses.

#### **5.2 Interview with Teachers from a Midnapore Secondary Girls School Catering for Santals, Scheduled Castes etc. about the Education of Santals.**

The costs of school attendance are a problem for many families. These costs tend to result in reduced family size. This is as would be expected on the basis of Becker's theory<sup>5</sup>.

It was said that Santals normally perform academically less well than higher caste Hindus and even the scheduled castes. This is attributed to the following:

- Many Santal parents are illiterate. They cannot give educational guidance to their children.
- Often Santal children do not do their homework.
- Many Santals cannot afford private tutoring.

Up to grade 5 the academic performance of Santals is claimed to be about equal to that of others but they fall behind academically after that. Nevertheless, a few Santal children have an excellent academic performance but unfortunately they face discrimination in the job market. This was said to be definitely so in relation to private employment. There are reserved quotas in Central Government and in the West Bengal Government for employment of scheduled castes and tribals. This assists their employment. However, this positive discrimination does not give Santals complete protection. Scheduled castes may get preference in employment to scheduled tribals in the quota and may have greater means to pay for employment. The reserved employment quota for scheduled castes and tribals is a combined one. Since demand for positions exceeds supply, bribes are usual. The quota system is far from adequate as a means of ensuring positive discrimination in favour of tribals. The West Bengal Government has a rule that 1 in 12 teachers should be from scheduled castes or tribes. The complete quota is filled at the Salboni Girl's High School by tribals, but a vacancy exists currently.

In response to being asked whether the poor performance of Santals at school was related to the Indian-Bengali-based curriculum and cultural influence, the respondents replied 'Maybe'.

### ***5.3 Views of a Santal Welfare Organization about the Education of Santals***

Santal representatives of a tribal welfare organization (founded in 1999) said that their main aim is to provide primary education to Santals in their own villages using Santal teachers. Santals have very few such schools. At present, these approved schools follow the educational curriculum of the Government of West Bengal. However, they provide additional training in Santal culture, language and literature which Santal children would not get at a normal Bengali school. Motivation of the students is said to be high and their attendance rates are high. There is Santal community support for these schools. They must charge fees and they obtain donations from some businessmen. There is also some assistance from the West Bengal Education Department with finance.

This Santal welfare group sees education as an important means for the advancement of Santal women and for Santals generally. They are also interested in development projects that might assist Santal villagers. Basically, they have embarked on a self-help programme.

It was said to be quite common for Santal villages to be located a considerable distance away from the nearest primary school, as is the case at Bandhgora village. For many Santals this has made access to education difficult.

Concerning adult education in this region, it is reported that there is now very little of it due to corruption. Adult education is arranged by the Anchul Panchayat which also arranges for the lecturer. False attendance sheets have been signed in the past and the money used for different purposes by some Panchayats.

#### **5.4 *The Status of Women and Health Aspects***

*General comments given about the status of women in their family*

Both Santal society and Hindu society are relatively male dominated. Any cash earned by the women is given to the eldest male in the household who controls its expenditure.

Santal women (and to some extent children) take care of all the animals. Children are usually sent to the forest to collect supplementary food for the family animals. Even with small animals, any cash earned from sales is given to the males. This differs from the observation of Sahu in Bihar where he found that females could retain income from sale of small animals<sup>6</sup>. Any income earned by females is generally spent on their family. They earn income from sale of milk, eggs, chickens, making paper packets from newspaper, making *sal* leaf plates and bowls and rice liquor.

Divorce is quite common in Santal communities according to the Santals present. It has a dual aspect. The members of the Santal welfare association say it is usually males who request a divorce, and mostly the women do not want it. Bride price is as a rule not repaid in the event of divorce.

Education was seen by the representatives of the tribal welfare association as the best way to advance women because it helps to break down restrictive customs. Santal women have more freedom to work than Hindu women but have no more control over cash income than their Bengali counterparts.

*Doctors views about the health of women in the local area*

Doctors present said that malnutrition is slightly more common amongst females than males. Males have preferred access to health services according to the doctors present. Physical abuse of wives occurs. It appears to be more frequent in schedule caste and tribal households than in those of higher castes. Often the physical abuse of wives occurs when males are under the influence of alcohol. Drunkenness is a problem amongst the scheduled castes and tribes. It occurs with greater relative frequency amongst the Santals than the scheduled castes for cultural reasons, according to those present. Santals often begin drinking from a young age. Most Santal villages do not try to control alcohol intake. Bandhgora is unusual in that it has a drinking club which endeavours to limit the consumption of liquor.

The doctors were asked the following question was asked: “Concerning pregnant females; are there any customs or beliefs that influence their food habits?” It was said ‘Yes’. For instance, eggs are considered traditionally be undesirable. Many pregnant women eat less to have a smaller child and an easier birth. Also, the fact that it is customary for the men to eat first and limit the females and children to leftovers can have an adverse consequence for the diet of females.

The main cause of morbidity locally was said to be the high prevalence of tuberculosis (TB) and respiratory diseases, and gastric. TB is usually not treated but children are immunized against it. The incidence of malaria is not considered to be high.

**5.5 Local Development Issues**

No government schemes exist locally to assist women financially with development projects. These women need machines, the Santals present said, to produce *sal* plates and

bowls more efficiently. It was suggested that the future market for *sal* leaf plates and bowls is uncertain.

The Santal male representative of the Santal welfare organization responded that the Santals were used to living with economic insecurity. They have no secure economic alternatives they know of. They would be happy to try better alternatives if they were available. They need guidance and assistance in that regard, the Santal representative said.

### **5.6 *The Practice of Sari Religion by the Santals***

Many Santals combine elements of Hinduism and the Sari religion. Santals participate in Hindu festivals in their area and the Hindus join in many of the Sari festivals. Representatives of the Santal welfare association said this was a part of living together. Dr. Archarya of the NKC Development Centre in Orissa said, (on an earlier occasion) that such sharing is common between tribals and non-tribals in Orissa. In Orissa, there is even one festival that cannot be performed unless both Hindus and Khonds participate.

## **6. Discussion and Conclusion from the Interviews**

Two basic approaches to the analysis of the family and gender-relationships within the family have been adopted by economists. One is the unitary theory of the family<sup>7</sup>. This assumes that a family has a single utility or single preference function that governs its choices or acts as if this is the case. This function may, however, have very different bases. It may, for example, be the preference function of the paternalistic dominating head of the household, and this may or may not incorporate elements of altruism. Or, in theory, it could be a result of unanimity between family members about what they want for their family. Thus, the use of such a theory could be compatible with a wide range of types of preference functions with very different consequences for the welfare of individual family members and these consequences may vary depending on their gender.

A more complex economic theory of the family is that conflict can arise amongst family members and that models based on game theory<sup>8</sup> and its extensions<sup>9</sup> are more

appropriate for modeling choices within a family. Therefore, in this approach one must consider the scope of cooperation and conflict within a family and mechanisms for resolving conflict including the relative threat power of individual family members<sup>10</sup>. The resource endowments and entitlements of individual family members and their scope to inflict economic damage on other family members play important roles in determining the relative threat power of individuals within their family. The bargaining power and relative status of a family member tends to rise as their (economic) threat power increases relative to that of other family members. Thus in families where wives and females have little threat power relative to males, their bargaining position is weaker and their status within the family tends to be low.

To some extent, the unitary theory of the family can be seen as a special case of game theoretical approaches to the economic analyses of the family. Both can be used to better understand social relationships within families. Both these economic theories of the family were kept in mind by us when our interviews were conducted in Eastern India.

In general, the unitary theory of the family seem to be justified as far as preference for the gender of children is concerned. Mostly boys are said to be preferred to girls. Boys were given preference to girls in access to education and health services (human capital formation) by all the groups interviewed, except the Kondhs, who only rarely discriminate between their children in this way. Such discrimination seems to be a reflection of the differences in the economic benefit to the family of investing in the future of their children according to their gender. Economic conditions associated with marriage also have important consequences for the empowerment of women. The investment in a son benefits his family but a girl will join another family after marriage and so most of the benefits of investment in her are lost to another family. Economic consequences can be a significant influence of the social status of females in a family and a source of discrimination against females.

Where a dowry must be paid to marry a woman, as in Hindu families, the economic disbenefit of a daughter is even greater, and is higher the larger is the required dowry payment. There was clear evidence of this from the interviews conducted at

Sadanandapur village. The respondents made it clear that the scheduled caste Hindus in the village have a stronger preference for male children compared to the Santals.

The payment of a bride-price does not necessarily imply that females in such a community have a higher intrinsic value than males. They may have a lower socio-economic position than males because the payment of a bride-price may be taken to be equivalent to the sale of a commodity. 'Commodification' of women may be signaled by such exchange. Thus **both** payment of a dowry or a bride-price could be regarded as degrading to women because both treat women as a commodity to be exchanged. The status of wives depends heavily on conditions applying to them after their marriage.

In that respect the current customs of the Santal group in Sadanandapur village have diverged considerably from those in the Santal village of Bandhgora. The former has been much influenced by Hindu marriage customs whereas the latter appear to retain traditional Santal customs to a much greater extent. Divorce is very rare in Sadanandapur probably because the bride's family must return the bride-price if a divorce occurs. This is similar to the situation in many Melanesian societies (located in the South Pacific, for example, in New Guinea) where it is believed to contribute to the abuse of wives by their husbands. In situations where the bride-price must be returned if divorce occurs, a wife is unlikely to have the support of her blood family if difficulties arise in her marriage. The fact too that a divorced or separated daughter is returned to her family (who must then help to take care of her) probably makes her blood family more reluctant to support her in a dispute within her marriage. Both the custom of a bride's family returning the bride-price and of the former wife returning to her family after divorce weakens the bargaining position of wives within their family and may add to their possible abuse by their husbands and the family into which they marry.

Compared to Sadanandapur, divorce is much easier to obtain in Bandhgora where the bride-price is not returned and, therefore, is lost by the husband. Thus, the wife has greater threat power in Bandhgora than in Sadanandapur. Furthermore, widows have much more threat power in Bandhgora than in Sadanandapur. This is because they retain significant control over property until their death in Bandhgora but not in Sadanandapur.

In Sadanandapur, the status of wives and widows in the scheduled caste community is similar to that for the Santals there. The main difference is that in Hindu families the groom's family has entitlement to an endowment not the bride's. Hindu family customs restrict female entitlements and where Santals have adopted these, their females become more restricted than in the past thereby lowering their socio-economic status within their family. This accords with the general observations made by Sahu<sup>11</sup> about the impact of Hindu culture on the Santals and supports the views of Sen<sup>12</sup> about the social importance of entitlements generally.

From these interviews, it can be ascertained that several Santal villages are in different stages of integration with Hindu society. Consequently, there is significant variation in the beliefs held and customs adopted by Santals in different villages.

Concerning the Kondhs, in the Badala village studied in Orissa, they have been influenced by Hinduism, have adopted several Hindu deities and are especially devoted to Lakshmi. Their position appears somewhat intermediate to that of the Santals of Bandhgora and Sadanandapur as far as wives and widows are concerned. Divorce is easier than in Sadanandapur but not commonly allowed. Husbands or wives can start divorce proceedings but the wife has a right to refuse a divorce. Widows seem to be well protected because their protection can be enforced by the village council. Bride prices need no longer be paid because the village council regards it as optional. It is common for a marriage of the Kondhs in this village to involve no payment but the scheduled castes in the village keep to the Hindu custom of paying a dowry. The Kondhs have a more favourable attitude to daughters than the Hindus, possibly because the dowry payments are absent.

In Hindu households, male dominance is pervasive, especially in rural villages. Permission must be obtained from the senior male in a household for a woman to attend to business outside the home or to be involved in political meetings and so on.

In general, there is evidence from the interviews that female children are much more welcome in the homes of the tribal groups interviewed than in those of scheduled caste

Hindus. There is less discrimination against daughters in tribal households. Nevertheless, there is still some favouritism shown towards sons in relation to education and other investments contributing to the formation of human resource capital in tribal households. Most parents appear to adopt this attitude on the basis that a daughter will go to another family after marriage but sons will remain within their own family and contribute to the welfare of their parents.

These conclusions accord with the general observations of Murthi, Guio and Drèze (1998, p.385)<sup>13</sup> who report on the basis of 1981 India data on child mortality as follows:

“A higher proportion of scheduled tribes in the population reduces the extent of anti-female bias in child survival, and this effect is statistically significant. It is interesting that this variable has a significant effect even after controlling for females labour-force participation which is generally higher among scheduled tribes than in the population as a whole. This suggests that tribal societies have other features that enhance the relative survival chances of female children. Examples of possibly relevant features are kinship systems and property rights”.

Interviews with teachers from a Midnapore secondary school revealed that significant social discrimination against Santals occurs in the local region. This was in fact due to a cultural bias on the part of Hindu Bengalis as much as statistical discrimination<sup>14</sup>. The teachers pointed out that on average, the academic performance of Santals at their school was below that of non-Santals but that there were also some academically outstanding Santal students at their school. These outstanding students, it was believed, would suffer in obtaining jobs because of cultural bias and as a result of potential employers judging **all** Santals by what they think to be their average performance. It is very difficult for groups discriminated against in this way to escape from their social disadvantage. This type of discrimination discourages socially disadvantaged groups from trying to perform well and consequently reinforces their social disadvantage. Females can also suffer in a similar way when they are subject to the same type of social prejudices. These types of social prejudice are socially and economically destructive because they destroy the

motivation of those subject to these prejudices to do well. A vicious cycle of social deprivation emerges which both has its origin in lack of entitlement and results in further loss of entitlement of those adversely affected.

From the analysis of the information obtained from our rural interviews, it can be concluded that economic theories of the family help to explain the status of females (wives, widows and daughters) within families. Game-like theories that take into account the relative threat power of individual family members seem to be especially useful for this purpose. However, families do not exist in social isolation. The status of a family and its individual members is influenced by the social environment in which it is embedded. Social discrimination against family members may be based on their gender, ethnicity, caste, religion and so on. The economics of discrimination can throw some light on these issues and their consequences but, as yet, does not provide a complete analysis of the matters involved. To provide more in depth analysis, it is necessary to study the institutional context in which such discrimination occurs and the way in which it has evolved. This means that not only economic aspects but also historical and political issues need to be examined<sup>15</sup>.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The following information was provided by Dr. P.K. Acharya about the DWCRA scheme in Badala and the DWCRA scheme generally. The scheme which had led the women of Badala village to form a group for income generation and health care was “DWCRA”. A brief idea on the scheme is given below.

1. DWCRA – A Milestone:

Most of the development programmes for rural women focus on subsidiary occupations, which generate regular income through gainful employment. One such programme (DWCRA) e.g. Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas. During the IX Plan almost all state governments are implementing DWCRA activities in remote areas. It has been widely recognised that unless the potentialities of women are properly developed no social transformation and economics development is possible. The objectives of the DWCRA scheme is to improve economics health, education and social status of rural women by providing them assistance an generating employment opportunities to earn their livelihood.

2. Specific Objectives of DWCRA:

- 
- a. Improving the existing economic activities of women by generating employment opportunities and also improve the equality of life for rural women and their children.
  - b. Providing supportive services to enable the rural women to improve their economic conditions through their skills and locally available resources
  - c. Providing suitable marketing facilities and empowering the rural women to take collective decisions in popularizing their finished products in the market.
  - d. Providing suitable training in productive skills for the DWCRA beneficiaries.
  - e. Providing suitable training in productive skills for the DWCRA beneficiaries.
3. Criteria for Formation of DWCRA Groups:
- a. Only one woman, usually the young one in the family, will be included in a group.
  - b. The upper age limit is 45 years.
  - c. The women forming a group have to be engaged in a homogenous activity or Scheme.
  - d. Not more than two groups have to be formed in a village.
4. Fund Provisions:
- There is a provision of Rs.15,000/- for each group. This amount is divided into two parts: (a) Rs.10,000/- to be used for generating group activities, and (b)Rs.5,000/- for organising child care activities while the mothers are at work. The amount of Rs.10,000/- will be deposited in the joint account which is the revolving fund from which the individual members are given small loans according to their requirement. The fund will be released according to the requirement. The fund will be released according to the requirement of the selected scheme, viz., vegetable selling Rs.250/-; for purchase of sheep or lambs Rs.800/- to Rs.1000/-. According to the guidelines of the Scheme, each and every member has to maintain individual Cash book, Bank Pass Book for Personal Savings Account, Minutes Book, Resolution Register and Basic Information Register.
- <sup>2</sup> The question of one-third females representation on the Panchayat was not pursued given the absence of any representatives from the village.
- <sup>3</sup> Purnima is the widow of a former railway employee. She returned to her father after her husband's death when she was relatively young. She traveled with her husband and did not join his family. Her father has obtained some property in her name.
- <sup>4</sup> C. Sahu (1966) *The Santal Women: A Social Profile*, Sanup and Sons, New Delhi.
- <sup>5</sup> Becker, G. (1981) *A Treatise on the Family*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA. See also Clem Tisdell, Kartik Roy and Anand Ghose (2000) "Sen's Theory of Entitlement: An Assessment with Indian Illustrations", *Social Economics, Policy and Development, Working Paper No.2*, Department of Economics, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, 4072.
- <sup>6</sup> Sahu, *Op. cit.*
- <sup>7</sup> This was proposed by Becker, *Op. cit.*

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- <sup>8</sup> The application of game theory to economic and social situations was pioneered by J. von Neumann and O. Morganstern (1944). *The Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J.
- <sup>9</sup> Nash was influential in extending game theory to take account of threat behaviors. See J.F.Nash (1950) 'The Bargaining Problem', *Econometrica*, 18, 128-140. For further discussion see, for example, C.Tisdell (1996) *Bounded Rationality and Economic Evolution*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, UK and Brookfield, VT, USA.
- <sup>10</sup> For a review of threat theories of the socio-economic status of females see, for example, Tisdell *et al.*, *Op. cit.*
- <sup>11</sup> Sahu, *Op. cit.*
- <sup>12</sup> A.K. Sen (1981) *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- <sup>13</sup> M.Murthi, A. Guio and J. Drèze (1998) "Mortality, Fertility and Gender Bias in India: A District Level Analysis". Pp. 357-406 in J. Drèze and A. Sen (eds) *Indian Economics Development: Selected Regional Perspectives*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- <sup>14</sup> Some aspects of social discrimination are discussed in G.S. Becker (1951) *The Economics of Discrimination*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, from a economics point of view.
- <sup>15</sup> Several of the contributions in C. Tisdell, editor, (2007) *Poverty, Poverty Alleviation and Social Disadvantage*, Serials Publications, New Delhi, provide institutional background on social disadvantage in India. Additional views are considered in C.A. Tisdell, (1999) "Discrimination and changes in the Status of Women with Economic Development: General Views and Theories". Pp. 25-36 in K.C. Roy, C.A. Tisdell and H.C. Blomquist (1999), *Economic Development and Women in the World Community*, Praeger Westport, CT, USA and London.

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