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the Status and Wellbeing of Indian Rural Wives**

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ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON THE STATUS AND WELLBEING OF INDIAN RURAL WIVES

Abstract

Examines the status and well being of wives in rural India using results from interviews. Surveys were conducted in three villages in the southwest of West Bengal and in three villages in the west of Orissa. The survey in West Bengal contained a large proportion of Santal tribals and the Oriyan survey was dominated by Kondh tribals. The relationships between variables representing economic, social and cultural factors are compared with 'dependent' variables representing the status of wives within their family and their wellbeing. Wellbeing is indicated by whether the basic needs of wives for food and medical care are met. Status of wives is indicated by their 'control' over family resources, whether or not they are restricted in joining social groups and in working outside their home, and the extent of their involvement in family decision-making. Cultural factors are found to be the dominant influence on the status of wives. Family income and other economic factors are found to be associated cross sectionally with greater restrictions on wives within their family. Nevertheless, the higher in the economic status of the household, the more likely are the basic needs of wives to be met.

ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON THE STATUS AND WELLBEING OF INDIAN RURAL WIVES

1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been considerable interest worldwide in matters involving gender inequality and the question of how the status of females is likely to alter with economic development (see for example, Tisdell, 1996). Much attention has been given to the status of females in developing areas such as in India, China and Africa.

The extent of this global interest in gender inequality is reflected in the inclusion by UNDP of gender-related measures of attributes of development in its range of development indicators. These macro-measures are GDI (the Gender-Related Development Index) and GEM (the Gender Empowerment Index). GDI is essentially designed to take into account inequality in the access of males and females to resources as a result of differences in their social entitlements. It is intended to take into account operationally features of resource entitlements (Anand and Sen, 1995) as highlighted in the theory of A. Sen (1981). It is based on national aggregates and averages or macro-variables. Variables included in GDI are gender inequality in income, educational attainment and life expectancy based on averages. Similarly, GEM is based on national or regional participation rates of females in leading executive and political positions in industry and government. Its main shortcomings are that it (a) it does not measure how influential females are in such positions and (b) it does not take account of the extent which wives (and females generally) are empowered within their family (see, for example, Tisdell, Roy and Ghosh, 2002).

Lack of attention to disaggregated data and absence of sociological surveys limits the value of many of UNDP's development indices, but without making them completely useless. They need to be supplemented by micro-type surveys of households of the type favoured, for example, by Boserup (1970).

This article contributes to such supplementation by reporting and interpreting the result from a survey of wives in 210 rural households in Eastern India. This sample consisted of 107 households in West Bengal and 103 in Orissa.

The purpose of the surveys was to see how various indicators of the wellbeing of rural wives and their empowerment within their family is related to selected economic, social and cultural factors. As explained in the next section, the former are considered as dependent variables and the latter are treated as independent variables.

The article is set out as follows. First, the methodology is outlined. Then the results are presented and interpreted for each of the dependent variables, followed by a summary table of the results. Subsequently, the overall results are considered and final conclusions drawn.

2. Methodology

In 2000, three rural villages were surveyed in the West Midnapore area of West Bengal, and in 2001, three rural villages near Phulbani in western Orissa were surveyed. Wives from 107 households responded in West Bengal, and from 103 households in Orissa.

Surveys were by direct interview in Bengali and Oriyan respectively using structured questionnaires. Most households in each village were included in the survey but in the Kaladi village (Orissa) only two hamlets amounting to about two-thirds of the village households was included. Those in the most distant hamlet from the road were not interviewed because of the difficulty of access by the interviewers.

There were a high proportion of tribals in the sample. In the Bengal sample somewhat more than half were Santals, the remainder being Bengali Hindus. Previous analysis revealed considerable cultural convergence in values in this sample from West Bengal, the degree of convergence being greatest for Santals converted to Hinduism and slightly less for Santals continuing to follow their Sari religion. While some differences in values are observed between Santals and non-tribals in this area, they are not marked.

The sample from Orissa consisted mainly of tribal Kondhs. It included only a few Oriyan Hindus, called in this area Dombs. So this Oriyan sample is dominated by Khondhs and some convergence in values of local Dombs to those of the Kondhs also occurs. All respondents in this Oriyan sample were Hindus since the Kondhs no longer follow their original religion.

In relation to the dependent variables, information was obtained by asking wives questions about (1) their access to food and to medical care; (2) their empowerment in their family as

measured by their stated involvement in family decisions; (3) their 'control' over resources as indicated by their stated ownership of land and control over cash in their family; and (4) whether or not they are allowed to join social groups outside their home and work outside their home for cash.

The survey enabled information to be collected about the following variables and these are treated as dependent variables:

1. Tribal or non-tribal
2. State – in West Bengal or in Oriyan sample
3. Comparative economic status in their community as perceived by the respondent
4. Percentage contribution of the wife to the total cash income of the family
5. Respondent's level of education
6. Extent of contact of respondents with her family
7. Whether or not the responding wife says that divorce is a common practice within her community
8. Whether or not the respondent is participating in women's self-help groups

It might be noted in advance that the tribal/non-tribal distinction may have a limited degree of relevance in this analysis, given the high degree of convergence of Santal values towards those of local Hindu Bengalis. At the same time, the Oriyan sample is dominated by Kondh tribals. So it is evident that the main cultural difference exists between the Kondh-dominated Oriyan sample and the sample from West Bengal.

Respondents were asked if they felt that their family fell in the top one-third, middle-third or bottom one-third as for its economic situation is concerned. The statements by respondents provide a proxy for the relative economic status of the families interviewed within their communities.

Level of education is based upon the level of education of the responding wife. Levels were divided into three categories: (1) no education; (2) up to primary level and (3) secondary level education.

The stated degree of contact of responding wives with their family was also included as an independent variable. This was to test whether more frequent and close contact with her

family tended to empower a wife within her household. Dyson and Moore (1983) for example, suggest that lower levels of apparent discrimination against wives in south India compared to north India might be due to closer contacts between families in the south.

Divorce is a controversial matter, especially in Indian rural communities. The easier it is for a wife to obtain a divorce, the greater may be her bargaining power within her household. This would be potentially relevant to her status and economic payoff in her family according to bargaining theories of the household (Alderman, et al, 1995). Although we were reluctant to ask direct questions about divorce, an indirect question was asked about whether it was (in the respondent's view) common in her community. Possibly those who said 'Yes' did not consider it a remote possibility.

The final relevant questions asked were about whether the responding wife is restricted in joining social groups outside the home, and in working outside the home to earn cash income.

The relationships between the dependent and the independent variables were investigated by means of the analysis of the variance (ANOVA). Let us consider the results.

3. The Results – Observed Relationships and their Analysis

The results are reported now in detail, grouping together closely related independent variables in turn in twos.

Fulfilment of basic needs: access of wives to food and medical care

Access to food and medical care are basic needs but it is known that in some Indian families, males have higher priority of access to these items than females (Tisdell, 2000; Tisdell and Roy, 2002).

The question was asked to a responding wife of whether she goes without food to make more available for her husband and children. The results are reported in Table 1. It can be seen that a higher proportion of non-tribal women (61 per cent) in this sample than tribal wives (46 per cent) go without food to make food to make more available for their husbands and children. The difference is statistically significant at the 5 per cent level. The difference, however, is primarily due to the Khond-group in the sample, rather than a highly significant difference between Santals and non-Santals in the West Bengal sample. This is underlined

by comparing the results for the West Bengal sample and that from Orissa. The difference between these results is statistically significant at the one per cent level. While 73 per cent of wives in West Bengal reported this behaviour, only 35 per cent of wives did so in Orissa.

Table 1
Proportions of Respondents Responding ‘Yes’ to Dependent (Basic Needs) Variables
by Categories of Independent Variables

Dependent Variables of Wife →	Wife goes without food to make more for husband and children		Wife does not get medical care in her need	
Independent Variables ↓	Proportion	No of cases	Proportion	No of cases
Tribal/non tribal				
Non-tribal	0.61*	64	0.64**	77
Tribal	0.46	115	0.44	125
Total respondents	0.51	179	0.52	201
State				
West Bengal	0.73**	75	0.63**	95
Orissa	0.35	104	0.41	106
Total respondents	0.51	179	0.52	201
Perceived Economic Status				
Lower one-third	0.79**	89	0.76**	106
The middle	0.24	72	0.22	78
Top one-third	0.29	17	0.31	16
Total respondents	0.52	178	0.51	200
Share of wife’s income in total cash income of the family				
Upto 50 %	0.49	151	0.52	163
More than 50%	0.65	23	0.47	32
Total respondents	0.51	174	0.51	195
Education of respondents				
No education	0.45	106	0.50	117
Upto primary level	0.63	51	0.59	59
Secondary level	0.53	17	0.33	18
Total respondents	0.51	174	0.51	194
Respondent’s contact with her family				
Frequent and close	0.52	59	0.52	61
Moderate	0.51	83	0.50	97
Infrequent	0.52	25	0.50	30
Non-existent	0.50	10	0.60	10
Total respondents	0.51	177	0.51	198
Divorce is common in the community				
Responding ‘Yes’	0.55	45	0.55	51
Responding ‘No’	0.43	116	0.48	130
Total respondents	0.47	161	0.50	181
Participation in women’s self-help groups				
Responding ‘Yes’	0.34**	73	0.38**	83
Responding ‘No’	0.63	102	0.61	114
Total respondents	0.51	175	0.51	197

* The difference in proportions between the categories is significant at 5 per cent level

** The difference in proportions between the categories significant at 1 per cent level.

Perceived economic status of her household was a highly significant determinant of whether a wife reported self-sacrifice of food intake. As might be expected, wives whose economic status placed their household in the lower one-third of their community were much more likely (a probability of 0.79) to report this self-sacrifice, and this result is statistically significant of the one per cent level.

No significant relationships are observed in relation to the share of the wife's contribution to the total cash income of the family, the wife's level of education, and the extent of her contact with her family. Similarly, responses regarding divorce were not statistically significant. However, if wives participated in self-help groups they were less likely to go without food and the result is statistically significant at the one per cent level. There are several possible explanations. It may be that women from families of higher economic states tend to be involved in such groups or that wives belonging to these groups may be more assertive within their families. These aspects require further investigation.

The same types of relationships exist for access of wives to medical care as were observed for their access to food. However, in this case the degree of statistical significance of the difference between tribals and non-tribals rises to one per cent. Tribal wives are much more likely to obtain medical care when needed than non-tribal wives. The change in statistical significance arises because a statistically significant difference is present for the Santals as well as the Khonds.

We can conclude that wives who are tribal rather than non-tribal, are in the Oriyan rather than the West Bengal sample, are not in the lower economic stratum of their community and participate in women's self-help groups are less likely to go without food to make food available for their husband and children or to be deprived of medical care than other wives. The converse also applies.

The economic stratum in which their family is located is clearly a major influence on whether wives experience deprivation of food and medical care, even though it is not the sole influence. Deprivation of wives in relation to food and medical care is more common in poor families than amongst those wives belonging to the middle and higher groups in terms of economic status. This suggests that the lot of poor wives could be improved with sufficient growth in the levels of income of their families.

Control over resources within the family

It is sometimes believed that members of the family who control resources have greater empowerment in the family. Two indicators of possible control of a wife over resources within the family were considered. This is whether the wife owns at least a piece of land and whether or not she claimed to have some control over cash within her family. It should be noted, however, that title of a wife to land does not mean that she has effective control over it (see Agarwala, 1994).

The results are shown in Table 3. It can be seen that few women (23 per cent) claimed ownership of any land and that this was confined to West Bengal. Furthermore, land ownership is much more frequent amongst non-tribal wives than tribals. Most land ownership is confined to women in the upper economic stratum. All of these results are statistically significant. A high proportion of wives who owned land contributed more than 50 per cent of cash income to their family, claimed that divorce was a common practice in their community but did not participate very frequently in women's self-help groups.

Table 2
Proportions of Respondents Responding 'Yes' to Dependent (Entitlement) Variables
by Categories of Independent Variables

Dependent Variables of Wife →	Owns at least a piece of land		Has control over cash	
Independent Variables ↓	Proportion	No of cases	Proportion	No of cases
Tribal/non tribal				
Non-tribal	0.33**	78	0.52*	65
Tribal	0.17	143	0.68	133
Total respondents	0.23	221	0.63	198
State				
West Bengal	0.43**	117	0.46**	92
Orissa	0.00	104	0.78	106
Total respondents	0.23	221	0.63	198
Perceived Economic Status				
Lower one-third	0.18*	113	0.64	99
The middle	0.19	86	0.67	80
Top one-third	0.67	21	0.39	18
Total respondents	0.23	220	0.63	197
Share of wife's income in total cash income of the family				
Upto 50 %	0.18**	178	0.67	165
More than 50%	0.43	37	0.48	27
Total respondents	0.23	215	0.64	192
Education of respondents				
No education	0.20	125	0.69	119
Upto primary level	0.26	66	0.57	56
Secondary level	0.14	22	0.44	16
Total respondents	0.21	213	0.63	191
Respondent's contact with her family				
Frequent and close	0.32	66	0.56	57
Moderate	0.19	106	0.64	96
Infrequent	0.17	35	0.67	30
Non-existent	0.00	9	1.00	10
Total respondents	0.22	216	0.64	193
Divorce proceeding by a wife is a common practice in the community				
Responding 'Yes'	0.41**	64	0.45**	49
Responding 'No'	0.11	135	0.70	129
Total respondents	0.21	199	0.63	178
Participation in women's self-help groups				
Responding 'Yes'	0.08**	86	0.67	79
Responding 'No'	0.31	130	0.60	115
Total respondents	0.22	216	0.63	194

* The difference in proportions between the categories is significant at 5 per cent level.

** The difference in proportions between the categories significant at 1 per cent level.

Stated control of a wife over some cash within her family may be a better indicator of the empowerment of the wife within her family than land ownership in India. From Table 2, it can be seen that wives in the tribal sample more frequently have control over cash than wives in the non-tribal sample. The difference is statistically significant at the five per cent level. The difference is even statistically more significant (one per cent level) as between the West

Bengal and Oriyan sample, with wives much more likely to have control over some cash in the latter case.

All other independent variables, except responses to the divorce question are not statistically significant. These include the perceived economic status of the family, the proportionate contribution of the wife to the total cash income of her family and the wife's level of education. In fact the relationships, although not statistically significant, are inverse ones and at odds with what some economists (for example, Agnihotri et al., 1998) believe the situation to be. This suggests that in these rural Indian communities, economic type factors and education have little impact on whether the wife has control over cash in her family. Cultural factors seem to be much more important.

Involvement of wives in decision-making within their family

Two questions were asked to responding wives to determine the extent of their involvement in family decision-making. Wives were asked whether they are involved in decisions about the future of their children, and whether they are involved in general family decision-making. The results are reported in Table 3.

Table 3

Proportions of Respondents Responding 'Yes' to Dependent Variables (Measuring Involvement of Wives In Family Decisions) by Categories of Independent Variables.

Dependent Variables →	Involved in decision about future of her children		Involved in family's decision making	
	Independent Variables ↓	Proportion	No of cases	Proportion
Tribal/non tribal				
Non-tribal	0.71*	73	0.81	68
Tribal	0.83	135	0.84	128
Total respondents	0.79	208	0.83	196
State				
West Bengal	0.63**	109	0.63**	91
Orissa	0.96	99	1.00	105
Total respondents	0.79	208	0.83	196
Perceived Economic Status				
Lower one-third	0.76	103	0.84	97
The middle	0.81	83	0.79	83
Top one-third	0.86	21	0.87	15
Total respondents	0.79	207	0.82	195
Share of wife's income in total cash income of the family				
Upto 50 %	0.81*	172	0.85**	170
More than 50%	0.61	31	0.62	21
Total respondents	0.78	203	0.82	191
Education of respondents				
No education	0.90**	117	0.90*	108
Upto primary level	0.63	63	0.75	61
Secondary level	0.67	21	0.77	22
Total respondents	0.79	201	0.84	191
Respondent's contact with her family				
Frequent and close	0.79*	63	0.84	57
Moderate	0.83	105	0.80	94
Infrequent	0.59	27	0.81	31
Non-existent	1.00	9	1.00	10
Total respondents	0.79	204	0.82	192
Divorce proceeding by a wife is a common practice in the community				
Responding 'Yes'	0.59**	61	0.55**	49
Responding 'No'	0.91	127	0.94	127
Total respondents	0.81	188	0.83	176
Participation in women's self-help groups				
Responding 'Yes'	0.91**	80	0.92**	78
Responding 'No'	0.71	123	0.77	114
Total respondents	0.79	203	0.83	192

* The difference in proportions between the categories is significant at 5 per cent level.

** The difference in proportions between the categories significant at 1per cent level.

NA: Not applicable

It can be seen that if the samples are combined, tribal wives tend to have a higher probability of being involved in decisions about the future of their children than non-tribals but no significant difference exists for involvement in general family decision-making.

However, the really significant difference is between the sample from West Bengal and that from Orissa. Those in the West Bengal sample, including Santal wives, are much less likely to be involved in decisions about the future of their children and in general family decision-making than their counterparts in Orissa who are primarily Kondh tribals. This influence appears to be mainly cultural. The perceived economic status of the family has no significant influence.

There are also some other influences that might not have been predicted. Those wives who contribute less to the cash income of the family, and have no education are more likely to be involved in such decision-making than others. Education and income contribution do not appear to empower women in this context.

Furthermore, close and frequent contact or a moderate contact of a wife with her family does not result in her being more involved in decisions about the future of her children. In fact, it has the opposite effect. This may be because family contacts result in social norms being upheld by family members.

For those wives who stated that divorce proceedings are common in their community, the probability of their being involved in the type of family decisions listed in Table 3 were lower. The relationships are statistically highly significant. It may be that wives who are unhappy about being locked out of family decision-making think more frequently of the possibility of divorce.

Those wives who participate in women's self-help groups are more likely than others to be involved in the types of family decisions mentioned in Table 3. This may be because they are more assertive.

Limitations on wives joining social groups and on their working outside their home for cash

Wives who are not allowed to join social groups or work outside their home for cash are limited in their empowerment. Responding wives were asked whether they are restricted in joining or forming groups and whether or not their husband does not restrict their opportunities to work outside the home for cash. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4
Proportions of Respondents Responding 'Yes' to Dependent (Social Involvement)
Variables by Categories of Independent Variables

Dependent Variables of Wife →		Restriction in formation of group		Husband does not restrict to work outside for cash	
Independent Variables		Proportion	No of cases	Proportion	No of cases
Tribal/non tribal ↓					
Non-tribal		0.30**	63	0.57*	74
Tribal		0.52	89	0.42	136
Total respondents		0.43	152	0.47	210
State					
West Bengal		0.51**	109	0.40*	107
Orissa		0.21	43	0.54	103
Total respondents		0.43	152	0.47	210
Perceived Economic Status					
Lower one-third		0.38*	84	0.59**	107
The middle		0.39	48	0.35	85
Top one-third		0.68	19	0.33	18
Total respondents		0.42	151	0.47	210
Share of wife's income in total cash income of the family					
Up to 50 %		0.41	119	0.51*	172
More than 50%		0.50	30	0.31	32
Total respondents		0.43	149	0.47	204
Education of respondents					
No education		0.39	77	0.52	119
Up to primary level		0.47	55	0.36	63
Secondary level		0.61	13	0.43	21
Non tribal Hindus		0.44	145	0.46	203
Respondent's contact with her family					
Frequent and close		0.60*	48	0.36	63
Moderate		0.33	69	0.49	99
Infrequent		0.36	28	0.59	34
Non-existent		0.25	4	0.44	9
Total respondents		0.42	149	0.47	205
Divorce proceeding by a wife is a common practice in the community					
Responding 'Yes'		0.48	63	0.39	61
Responding 'No'		0.37	68	0.53	128
Total respondents		0.42	131	0.49	189
Participation in women's self-help groups					
Responding 'Yes'		NA	NA	0.37*	80
Responding 'No'		NA	NA	0.53	125
Total respondents		NA	NA	0.47	205

* The difference in proportions between the categories is significant at 5 per cent level.

** The difference in proportions between the categories significant at 1 per cent level.

NA: Not applicable

These results indicate that social restrictions on tribal wives are significantly less frequent than restrictions on non-tribal wives and that less restriction is evident in the Oriyan sample than the West Bengali sample. Interestingly wives in the lower economic stratum are significantly less restricted in social possibilities than those in the middle and upper economic strata. As far as working outside the home for cash is concerned, the reason why women in

the lower economic stratum are less restricted in working outside the home for cash may mainly be because of an economic necessity. With rising income, the results suggest that wives are less likely to work outside the home for cash. The influence is probably cultural.

It may also be noted that those women who earn less than 50 per cent of cash income in the family are less likely to be restricted in working outside the home for cash compared to those who contribute more than 50 per cent of the family's cash income. Furthermore, women who suggest that divorce is common in their community are more likely to be restricted in working outside for cash than those who do not say this. It may be that respondents who said divorce is common are dissatisfied with their situation in their family.

4. Overall Summary of Results

Table 5 provides a summary of results in terms of the statistical significance or otherwise of the influence of the independent variables on the dependent variables considered in this analysis. It can be seen that the tribal and non-tribal is statistically significant for every dependent variable but one. However, the most significant independent variable in every case is whether the sample is from West Bengal or consists of the Khond-dominated sample from Orissa. The two samples represent a major cultural difference and suggest that culture is the major influence on the status of wives within their family.

Table 5

Summary Table Of Factors Influencing The Wellbeing And Status Of Wives Within Their Family

Dependent Variables → Independent Variables ↓	<i>Fulfilment of basic needs</i>		<i>Control over resources</i>		<i>Involvement in decision-making</i>		<i>Restriction imposed in wives activities</i>	
	Wife goes without food to make more for husband and children	Wife does not get medical care in need	Owens at least a piece of land	Has control over cash	Involved in decision about future of her children	Involved in family's decision making	Restriction in formation of group	Husband does not restrict to work outside for cash
Tribal/Non Tribal	*Non Tribal	**Non Tribal	**Non Tribal	*Tribal	*Tribal	Not Significant	**Tribal	*Non Tribal
State	**West Bengal	**West Bengal	**West Bengal	**Orissa	**Orissa	**Orissa	**West Bengal	*Orissa
Perceived Economic Status	**Lower one third	** Lower one third	*Top one third	Not Significant	Not Significant	Not Significant	*Top one third	**Lower one third
Share of wife's income	Not Significant	Not Significant	*More than 50 percent	Not Significant	*Upto 50 percent	**Upto 50 percent	Not Significant	*Upto 50 percent
Education of respondents	Not Significant	Not Significant	Not Significant	Not Significant	**No education (lowest for those with primary level)	*No education (lowest for those with primary level)	Not Significant	Not Significant
Respondents contact with her family	Not Significant	Not Significant	Not Significant	Not Significant	*Non existent (highest for those with infrequent contact)	Not Significant	*Frequent and close contact (highest for those with non existent contact)	Not Significant
Divorce by women is common in the community	Not Significant	Not Significant	**For those saying it is not common	**For those saying it is not common	**For those saying it is not common	**For those saying it is not common	Not Significant	Not Significant
Participation in women's group	**For those in groups	**For those in groups	*For those not in group	Not Significant	**For those in group	**For those in group	Not Applicable	*For those not in group

Note: *Indicates significant at 5 percent level. ** Indicates significant at 1 per cent level. The category with highest proportion has been mentioned in corresponding cell. For example, in the cell corresponding to Tribal/Non-tribal there appears *Non-tribal. That means Non tribal category has highest proportion and the difference in proportions between tribal and non tribal category is significant at 5 percent level.

The next two independent variables in column one can be regarded as economic ones. As is to be expected the basic needs of wives are less likely to be met if they belong to a poor family. However, such women are less restricted in working for cash outside the home and are less restricted in joining social groups than those in the wealthier households. An increase share of a wife's contribution to the cash income of her family does not appear to empower her within her family. In fact, in cases where a statistically significant relationship exists it is the opposite to what many expect (see Agnihotri et al., 1998).

In most cases, the level of education of wives has no significant influence on their empowerment in their family, except in the case of their involvement in family decision-making. Here once again an 'unexpected' result emerges. Wives with no education are more likely than others to be involved in decisions about the future of their children and in family decision-making generally.

The extent of a wife's contact with her family is not a statistically significant variable in most cases. Furthermore, such social contact tends to increase the extent of restriction on the involvement of wives in social groups and their involvement in decisions about the future of their children.

Whether or not a wife says divorce is common in her community is only significant for half of the dependent variables. Where it is significant, it suggests that wives are dissatisfied with their lot. Those wives who say it is uncommon are more likely to own land, have some control over cash and be involved in family decision-making than those wives who say it is common.

Participation of wives in self-help groups seems to have varied consequences. Such wives are more likely to have their basic needs met than others and to be involved in family decision-making. On the other hand, they are more likely to be restricted in working outside the home than others and less likely to own land.

5. Further Discussion and Conclusions

This cross-sectional study from rural Eastern India indicates that cultural rather than economic factors play the greatest role in influencing the status of wives within their family. Also within the type of cultural contexts considered, economic improvement of a family does

not appear on the whole to empower wives within families although it increases the probability of their basic needs being met. Furthermore, wives who contribute more to the cash income of their family are less likely to be empowered within their family than those who contribute less. This is the opposite to what might be expected from theories of Agnihotri et al. (1998) and further supports the observations made by Tisdell, Roy and Regmi (2001) on the basis of data from West Bengal.

It is, however, possible that a general increase in incomes in Indian rural society and a rise in the incidence of wives working for cash could with the passage of time change cultural values. It is impossible to test for such dynamic change using cross-sectional analysis. Nevertheless, such cultural change is likely to be slow.

It is often mentioned that the status within the family of tribal women in India is on the whole higher than for non-tribal. While this may be so, the situation varies considerably between tribal groups. For example, while wives in the Santal tribal group in the sample from West Bengal are more likely to have access to medical care when needed than non-tribals in most other respects, Santal values seem similar to those of Hindu non-tribal Bengalis. Wives are definitely much less empowered within Santal families in the West Bengal sample than wives in the Khond-dominated sample from West Bengal.

Education of wives in this cross sectional study does not appear to empower wives within their families. In fact, wives with no education are more likely to be involved in family decision-making than those who have education. Does education in this context tend to reinforce social compliance?

While the frequency and closeness of contact of a wife with her family is not significant influence on most dependent variables in this analysis, in those cases where it is of significance, it tends to reinforce social conformity by wives. This may be because members of a wife's family may not want to be burdened by difficulties that may arise if a wife tries to act very independently of her husband.

Whether or not a wife states that divorce is common in her community is significant for half of the dependent variables in this analysis. It seems that wives who are involved in family decision-making, have some control over family resources are less likely to say this. Thus

the statement could be an indicator of the degree of dissatisfaction that a wife feels about her lot within her family.

Those participating in women's self-help groups are more likely to have their basic needs met than others. However, it is unclear whether the relationship is a causal one. It is possible, for example, that only those wives who have their basic needs met are likely to join such groups. Nevertheless, those in such groups are more likely to be involved in family decision-making than those who do not belong to such groups, even though husbands are more likely to restrict them in working outside the home for cash income.

The results suggest that considerable care is needed in theorising about the impact of economic variables on the status and wellbeing of wives within their families because these are very sensitive to prevailing cultural values within the societies or communities to which wives belong. In particular, current western values should not be projected onto communities in developing countries. The results also indicate that while economic development in India resulting in increased incomes of families is likely to lead increasingly to the basic needs of wives being met, it may not result in their increased empowerment in their family, at least in the short to medium term, because social and cultural values usually change slowly. But the situation is complex. For example, in some contexts, if increased income is obtained by means of greater cash income at the expense of subsistence income, the basic needs of wives and children maybe less likely to be met and the status of wives in their family can fall. This appears to be very likely in a number of sub-Saharan African contexts (Boserup, 1970; Kiriti and Tisdell, 2003) and would also arise in the short-to-medium-term in some contexts in India.

To conclude: while economic growth and development in the long-term may make it more likely that the basic needs of wives will be met and their status within their family will improve, these results are by no means assured in the short-to-medium-term. This is because the results are shaped by the prevailing cultural values in the societies or communities in which the economic change occurs.

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