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ECONOMIC THEORIES OF THE FAMILY AND DISCRIMINATION IN A SOCIAL CONTEXT: ENTITLEMENTS OF KONDH TRIBAL FEMALES IN INDIA

ABSTRACT

Economic theories of the family and gender discrimination within the family are examined in the context of Kondh dominated tribal villages in rural western Orissa, India, drawing on results from a survey of 106 wives. The survey involved direct interviews using a structured questionnaire. This article examines the relevance of economic unitary and bargaining theories of the family in this social context, drawing on background literature. Using the survey results, socioeconomic influences on the status of wives within their families are analysed and the entitlements of female and male children are compared and analysed. Because of cultural embedding, it is suggested that the relevance of economic theories of the family depend significantly on cultural context. In many cases, it seems that poverty has a negative influence on the social empowerment of females but it is not the only influence nor always a sufficient condition for discrimination against females.

Keywords: Economic theories of family, gender inequality, human capital, poverty, resource endowments.

ECONOMIC THEORIES OF THE FAMILY AND DISCRIMINATION IN A SOCIAL CONTEXT: ENTITLEMENTS OF KONDH TRIBAL FEMALES IN INDIA

1. Introduction

Resource endowments, and social entitlements to use these, are major factors influencing the economic wellbeing of individuals (Sen, 1981) and their ability to develop their innate abilities and so add to their stock of human capital (Tisdell, 2001). In turn, the latter can have important consequences for the state of the environment and for the sustainability of development (Tisdell, 2001). However, the effective resource endowments and entitlements of individuals within families depends largely on the processes of intra-family decision-making or governance. To a considerable extent, these seem to be a product of the total social and cultural context in which the family is embedded (cf. Cain, 1982; Cain et al., 1979).

Traditionally, economists have ignored the role of the family in economic decision-making and no standard microeconomic textbooks deals with this matter. Nevertheless in the last decades of the 20th century several economic theories of the family were developed. The two main types are unitary theories and bargaining theories. Becker (1981) was the first to develop the unitary theory of the family. It assumes that family decisions are made in accordance with a single utility function that is to be maximised. There is, however argument about how that utility function is to be derived. Possibilities include a team situation in which family members have common goals, or one in which the dominant family member e.g. dominant male, imposes his/her preferences. Dependent children play no direct role in the determination of the 'family's' utility function but their future e.g. access to education, is heavily influenced by it.

Bargaining theories of the family arose from criticism of the unitary model Bargaining theorists argue that there may be no utility function that determines the decisions of the family but rather decisions in the family depend upon the relative bargaining strength of family members (Schultz, 1990; Alderman et al., 1990; Haddad et al., 1997). In turn, following leads from game theory (e.g. Nash, 1950), many bargaining theorists argue that an improved understanding of family decisions about resource-use and entitlements can be obtained by considering the relative threat power of individual family members. This implies that progress in explaining the nature of family decisions and the comparative entitlements of

an individual in the family can be made by identifying factors that add to the relative threat power of individuals within the family. For example, the threat power of a wife in a family might be increased if she gains the ability to own productive property, such as land, in her own right, or is able to earn an independent income or can obtain a divorce with a settlement likely to give her a substantial amount of her family's resources.

Nevertheless, considerable caution is required in applying such theories because the extent of their relevance depends on the whole socio-cultural context in which the family is embedded (cf. Cain, 1982; Cain et al., 1979). This implies, for example, that social changes that empower wives in one society fail to do so in another, and indeed could even disempower them (cf. Tisdell, Roy and Regmi, 2001). This is especially likely when the social changes are partial rather than wide and pervasive.

This article examines the resource endowments and entitlements of individuals in families in Kondh-dominated tribal villages in the Phulbani District in western Orissa drawing on the results of a structured field survey of wives in a sample of such villages. It pays particular attention to the status of wives and of female children compared to male children. It considers whether provision of various 'entitlements' or changes in the 'rights' of wives are likely to increase their threat power within the family and help empower them. In doing so, it investigates the extent to which the empirical results support existing economic theories of the family and identifies some important qualifications to these. This article also provides valuable primary data about socioeconomic conditions in these tribal villages in India.

This article is developed by first providing background information about the groups (tribal and non-tribal) surveyed, the study area and the nature of the survey. The information from the survey about the resource endowments of wives and their families is reported. Following this, survey results for the entitlements of wives are outlined and their implications for the empowerment of wives are discussed in the light of existing theories. Next, survey data about children are presented and are analysed in relation to existing theories about desired size of family and its gender composition, the work-contribution of children and the entitlements of children depending on their gender. Finally, a concluding assessment is provided.

2. Background Information about the Groups Surveyed, the Study Area and the Nature of the Survey

The population of the scheduled tribes of India is considerable and exceeds 67 million or 8% of India's population (1991 *Census of India*). Tribals are believed to display less discrimination towards females than non-tribals (cf. Agnihotri et al., 1998). This is partly reflected in the higher female-male ratios for scheduled tribes as a whole compared to the remainder of India's population. Nevertheless, most scheduled tribes are patriarchal, but not all. The Kondh scheduled tribe group surveyed for this study is patriarchal.

A survey was undertaken in three rural settlements (villages) in 2000 in the Phulbani District in Orissa, India, of wives in 106 households to gather information about gender status, including entitlements of wives and of female children relative to male children using a structured questionnaire, the English version of which is given as Appendix B in Tisdell et al., 2002. Mrs Arati Nanda conducted the survey with the help of assistants by direct interview. Due to the fact that she, and some of her assistants, contracted malaria, a less extensive survey was completed than originally planned.

The Phulbani District, sometimes known as the Khandarmal District, is located about 200 kilometres due west of Bhubaneswar, capital of Orissa state. It is a forested plateau region and is relatively dry and hilly.

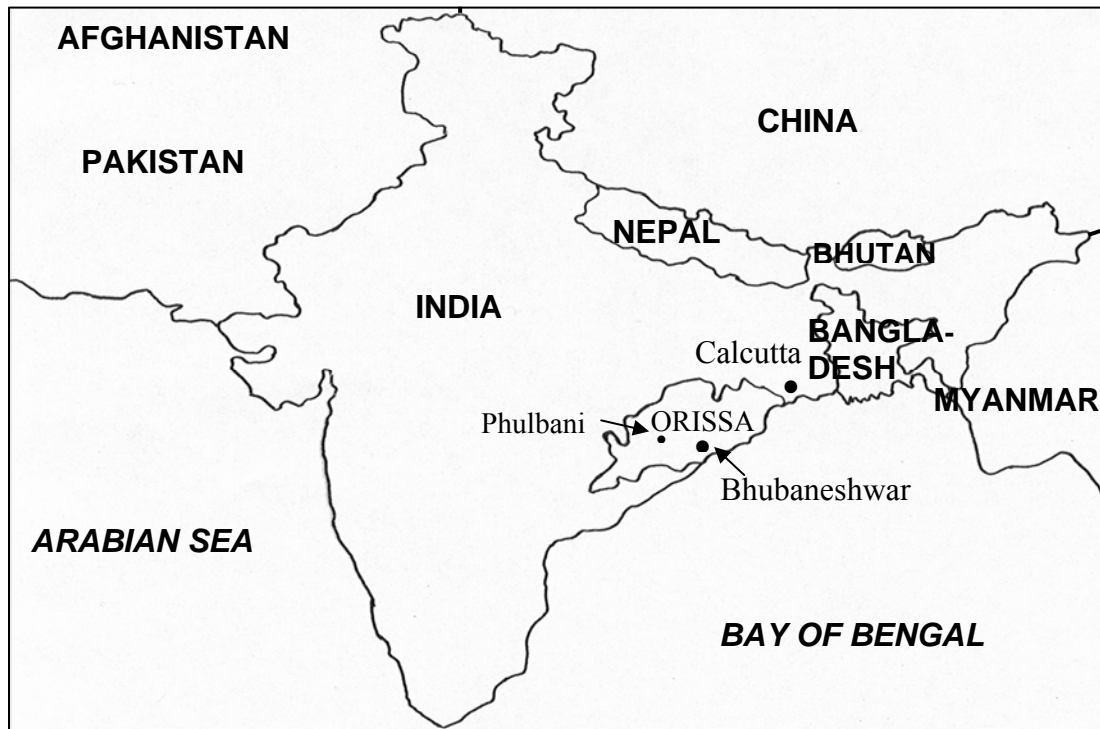
It is also a tribal dominated region. At the 1991 Census, 51.5 percent of its population belonged to scheduled tribes. Also, 18.21 percent of its population belonged to scheduled castes. The literacy rate is low. In 1991, it was 37.23 percent and only 19.82 percent for females. The literacy rate for scheduled tribes was only 17.49 percent (compared to 34.51 percent for scheduled Hindu caste members) indicating that literacy is least high among members of scheduled tribes.

Main amenities are generally lacking in this district. For instance, only 38 percent of its villages are electrified compared to 68 percent in Orissa as a whole. Agriculture is the main occupation. Farms are small with 80 percent being less than 2 hectares in size. Incomes are low and the district is considered to be economically poor. The Kondhs and other villagers also collect products from the forests and graze animals in the forests. Forest use adds significantly to their income.

Only Kondhs (a scheduled tribe) and scheduled Hindu caste members live in the rural hamlets sampled. No members of the general Hindu castes are present. The subgroup of Kondhs living in the study area are Desai Kondhs. Their mother tongue is Kui, a Dravidian language, but Kondhs in the study area also speak or understand Oriya.

The scheduled caste members intermingled with the Kondhs are called Panos or Dombs. They are often servants to the Kondhs and are usually landless and poor. In the Kondh-dominated villages, the Dombs have a lower social status than the Kondhs. The origin of the Panos or Dombs is unclear. They too are highly dependent on non-timber forest products for their livelihood. In relation to female entitlements and status, considerable social convergence exists between the Kondhs and the Dombs as indicated by chi-square tests of our survey results (Tisdell et al., 2002).

The settlements surveyed are located not far west of the main road at a distance of about 5 kilometres south of Phulbani town (see Map 1). They are relatively close to one another and are Pitabari hamlet, Bandhasahi hamlet and Kaladi village. Interviews were with wives and a total of 106 wives from different households were interviewed. The distribution of respondents between the settlements and according to whether they are Kondhs or belong to the scheduled caste, as reported by Arati Nanda, is set out in Table 1. One hamlet contained no members of the scheduled caste but the others did contain such members.



Map 1 Generalised map of India showing the state of Orissa and Phulbani, the major town near which the surveys were conducted. Border between Afghanistan and Pakistan is not shown.

Table 1
Distribution of responding wives by settlement and whether Kondh or a scheduled caste member

Settlement	Kondh	Scheduled Caste	Total
Pitabari hamlet ^(a)	15	0	15
Bandhasahi hamlet ^(b)	10	10	20
Kaladi revenue village ^(c)	54	17	71
TOTAL	79	27	106

Notes: (a) All households covered.

(b) All settlements on eastern side of hill covered. Those on the western side were not because they were considered too difficult to access because several interviewers contracted malaria.

(c) Three hamlets fully covered in this village.

3. Resource Endowments of Wives and Their Families and Economic Status

The survey sought information on the following general matters:

1. Socioeconomic attributes of respondents and their families.
2. Property rights
3. Assets and income
4. Economic conditions and survival strategy
5. Formal credit, production and marketing
6. Social dynamics
7. Education
8. Children's affairs – treatment of female and male children
9. Status of wives

However, information on all of these aspects is not reported here.

Most of the wives interviewed considered their families to be very poor, as is suggested by their self-assessment of the economic status of their family, compared to other families in their village. Respondents were asked if they thought that their family in terms of its economic situation is in the top one-third, the middle one-third or the lower one-third in their village. The results are reported in Table 2. Results are biased towards the lower income categories reflecting the fact that most respondents considered their families to be poor generally. At the 5% level, no significant difference exists between the responses of the scheduled tribe and the scheduled caste. However, a slightly higher proportion of the Dombs placed their family in the lower income category. These results are consistent with both groups of respondents being poor on the whole, with some indication that Dombs (SC) are somewhat poorer than the Kondhs (ST). Observe that self-assessment does not yield 33 percent in each group as it technically should. Yet the results are indicative.

Table 2
Self-assessment by respondents of their family economic status in the village compared to other families – Distribution of responses by frequency and relative frequency, in percentage^(a)

Response	All Frequency and relative frequency	ST Frequency and relative frequency	SC Frequency and relative frequency	Difference in relative frequency (ST-SC)	Significance
Top one third	2 (4)	1 (2)	1 (4)	(-2)	Cri =(5.99)
Middle one third	49 (46)	39 (49)	10 (37)	(+12)	C=(1.67)
Lower one third	55 (52)	39 (49)	16 (59)	(-10)	Do not reject
Total response	106 (100)	79 (100)	27 (100)		

^(a) Relative frequency in parentheses.

Note: Self-assessment does not yield 33% in each group.

None of the wives reported any ownership of land. Ninety three percent of respondent said that fundamental land ownership rights are held by males and the remainder did not answer the relevant question.

In general, it was found that Dombs have fewer assets than Kondhs. They were also more likely to have insufficient income to provide two meals a day throughout the year, although the responses were not significantly different at the 5% level using the chi-squared test. The pervading poverty of these villagers is underlined by the fact that nearly half of the families surveyed are unable to supply two meals a day throughout the year. The results are reported in Table 3. Of those unable to provide two meals a day throughout the year, more than half (55%) stated that it was frequent. According to the chi-squared test, a significant difference occurred – Kondhs who were unable to provide two meals a day throughout the year were more likely to report that this was frequent compared to Dombs.

Table 3
Income sufficient for two meals a day throughout the year – Distribution of responses

Response	All Frequency and relative frequency	ST Frequency and relative frequency	SC Frequency and relative frequency	Difference in relative frequency (ST-SC)	Significance
Yes	59 (56)	47 (59)	12 (44)	(+15)	Cri -(3.84)
No	47 (46)	32 (41)	15 (56)	(-15)	C= (1.84)
No answer	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	(-0)	Do not reject
Total response	106 (100)	79 (100)	27 (100)		

Table 4
For families unable to provide two meals a day throughout the year, is it frequent? –
Distribution of responses

Response	All Frequency and relative frequency	ST Frequency and relative frequency	SC Frequency and relative frequency	Difference in relative frequency (ST-SC)	Significance
Yes	26 (55)	21 (65)	5 (33.3)	(32.3)	Cri -(3.84)
No	21 (45)	11 (35)	10 (66.6)	(-31.6)	C= (4.31)
Total response	47 (100)	32 (100)	15 (100)		Reject

The wives interviewed had little or not formal education. Out of the 79 scheduled tribal wives, 60 (76%) had not formal education, and the remaining 19 had education varying from completion of class 1 to class 12. In comparison, 17 of the 27 (56%) scheduled caste wives interviewed had not education and the rest had education varying from completion of class 1 to class 11. While the Domb wives had more formal education on the whole than the Kondh wives, the level of education of all these wives as a group was very low, even by Indian standards.

Most of the Kondh wives with no education (52) mentioned poverty and cost of education as major contributors to their lack of education. Another six mentioned that girls spend time on household chores to help their family and are going to get married anyway, so education is not important for them. Of those Dombs who gave reasons why they had no formal education, 11 said it was because girls spend time on household chores to help the family and they are going to get married anyway, in which case they'll leave the family. This suggests that educating daughters is not an attractive investment for their parents and would accord with the type of predictions expected from Gary Becker's theory (Becker, 1981). Poverty was only mentioned as a reason by one Domb wife.

It was found that over 40 percent of families rely mostly on the food they grow or collect as a source of food for household consumption, with the proportion being slightly higher for Kondhs than Dombs. Subsistence activities are very important for these villagers as a whole. For the whole group, it was most common (the mode) for the wife to provide for about 30% of the food requirements of the family with the husband supplying the remainder. However, for the Dombs the wife most frequently supplied one half of the food requirements of her family by collecting and growing food. Virtually all respondents agreed that the home garden is an important or very important source of food for their family.

In relation to provision of cash income for their families, the most frequent contribution was found to be about 30 percent provided by the wife and 70 percent by the husband, and this was true for both Kondhs and Dombs.

It emerges that both wives and husbands make a substantial contribution to the subsistence and cash income of their families. Wives reported that they earn money income by working in the rice fields of others during the planting and harvesting season (30 Kondhs and 13 Dombs mentioned this); making baskets and other products from sal leaves collected in the forest and selling these in the market (47 Kondhs and 8 Dombs), selling firewood (6 Kondhs) and other activities such as stone crushing (4 Kondhs and 4 Dombs). We observe that the likelihood of wives working in the fields of others for cash is much higher for Dombs than for Kondhs. This may be because Dombs have less availability of land. There is, however, no indication that Domb wives achieve greater empowerment within their family than Kondh wives as a result of being more likely to be employed by others for cash. At least, this seems so from the result of the chi-squared tests reported in Tisdell et al. (2002). This accords with a similar finding of Tisdell, Roy and Regmi (2001) for Santal tribals and Hindu Bengali wives in the Midnapore District of West Bengal. It implies that in these rural social contexts, wives are not empowered within their family by working for others for cash income. It, therefore, throws doubt on the view that the prevalence of women working outside the home for cash income is a reliable indicator of their family empowerment within their families. Thus, the views of Anand and Sen (1995) and Agnihotri et al. (1988) in this regard must be treated cautiously (cf. Tisdell, Roy and Ghose, 2001). Whether or not women are empowered by working outside their home for income depends on the surrounding social context. In some rural social situations, such activity does not increase their bargaining power within their families. Their husbands often appropriate any cash income earned by wives and control its expenditure, and may even increasingly restrict the social interactions of a wife if she is working (cf. Tisdell, Roy and Regmi, 2001). Social and cultural factors, therefore, sometimes limit the application of economic theories of the family.

4. Entitlements of Wives, Social Contacts and Bargaining Theories

While bargaining theories have been proposed by several Western economists (Schultz, 1990; Alderman et al, 1995; Haddad et al., 1997) as a useful basis for predicting economic and other benefits to individuals within a family, they appear to be subject to important limitations

in some social contexts in India because of processes of acculturation. Such processes may lead to acceptance of inequalities within the family and an unwillingness to use (or even recognize) bargaining power, when it actually exists. Furthermore, bargaining power obtained from a threat strategy varies according to the total social context in which it exists. Results from our Orissa survey underline these points.

All respondents reported that males are their household heads, except in two cases where widows are the heads. All wives stated that they required the permission of their family head (a male, where there is a male family member) to be involved in social groups or to perform tasks outdoors.

All 106 respondents agreed that the following are the reasons why it is important for the wife to have the permission of the family head for involvement in social groups:

- (a) “In all important activities, it is important to have the support of the family head.
- (b) The head of the family remains the chief decision-maker.”

The last statement, especially, indicates acceptance of traditional cultural values. Nevertheless, two-thirds of the women were involved in social groups or attempts to form social groups and a third were not so involved. The groups most commonly mentioned were women’s groups, such as *Nari Sangh* and *Mahila Samiti*, Domb wives were less likely to be involved in such activities than Kondhs and the difference was statistically significant at the 5 percent level using the chi-squared test. This difference may reflect the lower social status of the Doms in these communities and therefore, less social involvement by them.

In relation to outside activities, all respondents argued that females require the permission of the family head to engage in outdoor activities. These include normal family chores such as gathering forest products, catching fish or fetching water as well as less regular activities such as selling the family’s produce, buying goods and outdoor recreation.

In response to the question: “Do you feel that the restrictions imposed on your freedom of movement and to make decisions on important issues is a gender restriction i.e. because you are a female?”, all 106 respondents answered ‘No’. Their responses suggest that strong acculturation is present. Furthermore, all 106 respondents accepted the following statements (a) and (b) and 104 accepted statement (c) as reasons why they do not consider

such conventions a gender restriction, and this further emphasizes the overwhelming significance of acculturation of wives (cultural embedding) in this rural context:

- “ (a) My empowerment contributes to total family empowerment, hence total family consent and support are necessary.
- (b) Requirement to obtain consent of head/elders is a part of traditional culture and custom.
- (c) It is not gender restriction, as it is done out of affection and concern for welfare.”

When asked if they felt that restrictions on their freedom of action should be removed, the overwhelming proportion of wives, 89% (94) said ‘No’, 10% (11) said ‘Yes’ and one wife did not respond. Thus most wives accept restrictions on their freedom of action, mostly imposed by males. This further underlines the significance of acculturation processes.

Within rural Indian families, women are often deprived of medical attention when they need it with preference given to males. In a response to a question about this matter, 45% of wives reported going without medicine or medical attention when they needed it, with the proportion being higher from Dombs than Kondhs but not significantly so. The main reason given was lack of money. Furthermore, almost one-third of the wives interviewed reported going without food to make it available to their husband or children. This may not be purely self-deprivation but may partly be a consequence of custom.

From the responses received, it seems that work and leisure patterns of both wives and husbands are similar. They usually spend 6-8 hours sleeping daily, 2-3 hours in leisure activities, such as chatting with neighbours and in the case of men, also singing and dancing. The remaining time is allocated to work. Hence the average workloads in these communities of males and females do not seem to be unequal.

The majority of wives (56%) stated that their husbands would be pleased if they could work outside their house and earn cash income, but 39 percent said they would not be and 5 percent did not respond. The proportion of husbands in favour of such work for the wife was higher for Dombs than Kondhs, but not statistically significant at the 5 percent level. For wives where their husband would be pleased for them to earn cash income, the main problem seemed to be to find job openings because the local economy is one with surplus labour. Note

that for a woman to work outside her home, permission is required from the head of the household. It is not an automatic entitlement.

Respondents were asked whether their husband, the wife (herself) or both jointly controlled the spending of cash in their family. Most (81%) said it is controlled jointly, 15 percent reported that it is controlled by the husbands and 4 percent stated that it is controlled by the wife but these respondents were widows. If any bias, therefore, exists, it is in favour of the husband. In the case of joint decisions the relative influence of the husband and wife is unknown but it is likely that the husband's impact is greatest. As is clear from an earlier question, the wife must have the permission of the head of the household to buy goods.

In relation to the bargaining position of the wife within her family, three factors were considered:

- (a) the wife's ability to inherit property;
- (b) her ability to sue for divorce and obtain a settlement in her favour; and
- (c) the ability of her blood kin to support her in any bargaining situation.

All respondents stated that a wife does not inherit land or other economic resources in their communities. On the death of her husband the family's property is inherited by the sons, with the largest share going to the eldest son. Daughters inherit nothing. Thus, females are effectively excluded from all inheritance of property. This seriously undermines the intra-family bargaining position in relation to males.

While women have the legal right of divorce and to start proceedings, there is strong customary opposition to it. Often consent of the husband is required, by custom, for a wife to sue for divorce. But since in the settlement, the wife obtains none of her family's property, the cost to the wife is high. Therefore, using Nash's indicator of threat power (Nash, 1950), divorce possibilities gives the wife virtually not threat power in relation to her husband. It does little to raise a wife's economic status and entitlements in this context. Both lack of bargaining power by wives, as suggested by bargaining theories, and social and cultural embedding contribute to this outcome.

Dyson and Moore (1981) argue that where a wife has close contact with her blood family after marriage, this raises her economic status and bargaining power within her family and

may improve the status of females generally. They explain the higher female-male ratios in southern India compared to northern India in terms of differences in patterns of family contact and family associations. Much closer contact is maintained between the wife's kin and her new family in southern India than in the north. Indeed, since it is quite common for close cousins to marry in the south, their two families are often closely related and well known to each other.

As for the Kondh-dominated villages surveyed by us, a wife invariably comes from another village, generally within 25 miles of the husband's village. All wives live in their husband's village normally in the house of the husband's parents. Such a situation is mostly unfavourable to the wife in bargaining with her husband. Sixty percent of respondents reported that the husband's family had more influence on their decision than the wife's family, 34 percent said the influence is equal and six percent did not answer. While forty percent of wives said that their blood family could help them financially and morally in times of difficulty, 60 percent said that their family as not in a position to provide any financial help. This indicates that the poverty of a wife's parents is likely to reduce her bargaining power within a family because her family is not able to provide material support for their daughter in times of difficulty. Indeed, parents of daughters in a poverty-stricken situation may try to sustain an unsatisfactory marriage situation of their daughter because they fear that she may become an economic burden on them if she separates from her husband or divorces him. Thus, poverty itself can be a major factor contributing to the inferior bargaining position of wives in a family. It can, in some circumstances, contribute to continuing discrimination against wives and females generally.

Wives were asked whether important decision about the future of their children are made by their husbands, themselves or jointly. Eighty five percent (90) said jointly. The husband made the decision alone in few cases, the wife in one case and eleven wives did not respond. Thus considerable sharing of decisions by husbands and wives in this regard occurs. Nevertheless, it is still possible that the husband's views carry the greatest weight in the final decisions about the future of children in the family.

Now let us consider specific issues involving children, including any differences in the treatment of boys and girls within the family.

5. Matters Involving Children, their Gender Status and Entitlements

The average number of children for family in the sample was low being 1.94 for Kondhs and 1.88 for Dombs. In response to the question what is the ideal number of children for family, the majority of the respondents suggested two. Both Kondhs and Dombs preferred small families. The distribution of responses as shown in Table 5.

Table 5
Ideal number of children according to SC & ST wives – Distribution of responses

Response	All Frequency and relative frequency	ST Frequency and relative frequency	SC Frequency and relative frequency	Difference in relative frequency (ST-SC)	Significance
49 (46)	35 (44)	14 (51)	(-7)		
8 (8)	3 (4)	5 (19)	(-15)		Cri -(9.48)
36 (34)	31(39)	5(19)	(+20)		
7 (7)	4 (5)	3 (11)	(-6)		C= (11.73)
6 (5)	6 (8)	0 (0)	(8)		Reject
106(100)	79 (100)	27 (100)			

Wives were asked their reason for their chosen ideal number of children. All stated that a small family is easily manageable in terms of care, education, food and clothing.

Note that the average size of families and views about ideal size indicate that population growth of this group is around zero, and that the size of the family is a rational choice. In the latter respect, the outcome differs from the theory of Malthus. The results appear to support Beckers' theory indirectly. It seems likely that since this is a labour surplus community, the demand for children as a source of labour is low, and the probability of survival of a male child able to assist his parents in old age or sickness, is higher when the smaller the size of the family.

Wives were asked whether they prefer more sons than daughters, more daughters than sons or an equal number of sons or daughters. Most preferred (see Table 6) an equal number of boys and girls but more than one third preferred more boys than girls. Those who prefer sons gave as a reason that daughters will eventually get married and go away from the family. Thus they are not considered by these villagers to be an attractive long-term investment. Their preferences would seem to accord with Becker's theory and human capital theory generally (Becker, 1981).

Table 6
Preference for sons or daughters in family composition for SC & ST wives –
Distribution of responses

Response	All Frequency and relative frequency	ST Frequency and relative frequency	SC Frequency and relative frequency	Difference in relative frequency (ST-SC)	Significance
More sons preferred	38 (36)	29 (37)	9 (33)	(+4)	
More daughters preferred	1 (1)	1 (1)	0 (0)	(+1)	Cri -(7.81)
Equal number of sons or daughters preferred	66 (62)	48(61)	18(67)	(-6)	
No answer	6 (5)	1 (1)	0 (0)	(+1)	C=(0.86)
Total response	106 (100)	79 (100)	27 (100)		Do not reject

It is, of course, possible to desire more boys than girls in a family but not to discriminate between them once they are born. Several questions were asked to learn about the possibility of discrimination between children according to their gender.

In relation to whether school age daughters go to school less frequently than school age sons, the majority of those who answered said 'No' but the non-response rate was 58%. There was not clear evidence that daughters were more likely to be kept home from school more frequently than sons, nor was there any clear evidence that they are more likely to be kept home from school to help with family chores. In relation to whether or not children help with family work, the non-response rate to this question was also high. Of those that responded, just over a half said that their children help with family work and just under a half said that they did not. The results are presented in Table 7. On the whole, it seems that children in this community may not be an important labour resource, and this could be because it is a labour-surplus community. On the other hand, the non-responses could be by respondents who might have been worried to admit that they use child labour.

Table 7**Children help with family work – Distribution of responses**

Response	All Frequency and relative frequency	ST Frequency and relative frequency	SC Frequency and relative frequency	Difference in relative frequency (ST-SC)	Significance
Yes	30 (28)	16(20)	14(52)	(-32)	Cri=(5.99)
No	29 (27)	25 (32)	4 (15)	(+17)	C= (10.17)
No answer	47 (45)	38 (48)	9 (33)	(+15)	Reject
Total response	106 (100)	79 (100)	27 (100)		

While most respondents said that they planned to give an equal amount of education to their sons and daughters, those who showed a preference, expressed it on the whole, in favour of sons. There were, however, 29 non-responses but in some of these cases the question would not have been applicable. The results are presented in Table 8. The results suggest less discrimination in access of daughters to education than that experienced by their mothers.

Table 8**Education plan for children according to their gender – Distribution of responses**

Response	All Frequency and relative frequency	ST Frequency and relative frequency	SC Frequency and relative frequency	Difference in relative frequency (ST-SC)	Significance
More education to son	19 (18)	16 (20)	3 (11)	(+9)	
More education to daughter	2 (2)	2(3)	0(0)	(+3)	Cri=(7.81)
Equal education to son and daughter	56 (53)	37 (47)	19 (70)	(-23)	C= (4.76)
No answer	29 (27)	24 (30)	5 (19)	(+11)	Do not reject
Total response	106 (100)	79 (100)	27 (100)		

Respondents were requested to rank the degree of importance of education for their children. The choice of rankings were 'Very important', 'Important', 'Moderately important' and 'Not important'. Six did not respond but the remainder ranked it as important or very important. The wives in these communities put a high value on education of their children.

In times of food scarcity, preference is sometimes shown by Indian rural families in giving food to boys rather than girls (Konar, 2001; Tisdell, 2000). In this community, however, such discrimination is rare, as can be seen from Table 9, and appears to be absent in the case of access to medical treatment, as can be seen from Table 10. Unequal access of females and males to medical attention occurs in many Indian's rural communities (Agnihotri et al., 1998). These practices seem to have an economic basis because a son is viewed as a long-term investment but a daughter is not because she will go to another family on marriage. Thus, the benefit of investing in the human capital of a daughter is seen as largely external to her family. Consequently, this type of externality can result in a socially inferior economic allocation of investment (in the Kaldor-Hicks sense) in human capital formation with daughters being relatively deprived of such capital. However, cultural factors seem to mediate this aspect in the Kondh-dominated villages surveyed by us. There is much stronger discrimination in favour of boys against girls in this respect in villages in West Midnapore occupied by Santal tribals and/or Hindu Bengalis (Tisdell, 2000).

Table 9
Gender Preference in allocating food to children according to gender in times of scarcity – Distribution of responses

Response	All Frequency and relative frequency	ST Frequency and relative frequency	SC Frequency and relative frequency	Difference in relative frequency (ST-SC)	Significance
Preference to sons during food shortage	1 (1)	1 (1)	0 (0)	(+1)	
Preference to daughters during food shortage	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	(0)	Cri=(3.84)
Sons and daughters treated equally	84 (79)	59 (75)	25 (93)	(-18)	C= (0.026)
No answer	21 (20)	19 (24)	2 (7)	(+17)	Do not reject
Total response	106 (100)	79 (100)	27 (100)		

Table 10
Gender preference in access to medical treatment of children – SC & ST
– Distribution of responses

Response	All Frequency and relative frequency	ST Frequency and relative frequency	SC Frequency and relative frequency	Difference in relative frequency (ST-SC)	Significance
Preference to sons for medical treatment	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	(0)	
Preference to daughters for medical treatment	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	(0)	Cri=(3.84)
Sons and daughters treated equally	80 (75)	60 (76)	20 (74)	(-2)	C= (0.038)
No answer	26 (25)	19 (24)	7 (26)	(+2)	Do not reject
Total response	106 (100)	79 (100)	27 (100)		

Most wives said that the ideal age for marriage of a daughter is 18-20 years and for sons 25 years. However, three stated 30 years as the ideal age for marriage of son and one suggested 22 years. All agreed that later marriage of sons should not be a problem. On the other hand, the vast majority of respondents (almost 90%) said that a late marriage of daughters creates a problem because a social stigma is attached to it. Only 11 percent of the respondents said that the late marriage of a daughter does not create a problem. “If she earns [an economic consideration], she can stay at home until a suitable match is found” was the typical answer in those cases. Nevertheless, on the whole, there is pressure on daughters to marry at a relatively early age but not sons. In this respect gender discrimination is present.

While gender discrimination, as far as children are concerned, does not seem to be nearly as strong in these Kondh dominated villages as in many other rural villages in northern India, it is not entirely absent. When it occurs, it is unfavourable to daughters. It seems probably that daughters are experiencing less discrimination than their mothers did as children and that they are likely to obtain more education than their mothers. This is a hopeful sign.

6. Concluding Assessment

It is important to relate economic theories of the family and discrimination to their social context. This article has done this by drawing on results from a survey of wives in Kondh dominated rural villages in western Orissa. The families in this tribal region are on the whole poor and their level of education and literacy is low.

Cultural factors or embedding were found to have an important influence on the empowerment of wives. It is clear from these results that the applicability of bargaining theories of the family depend on the cultural context in which they are applied. For example, the cultural context effects wives' perceptions of available threat strategies and their likelihood of using these. Furthermore, the degree of threat posed by any particular strategy depends up on the whole set or package of available threat strategies. In other words, the availability of a single threat strategy is likely to have greater effect in a bargaining situation when it can be combined with other threat strategies. The whole, in this case, is greater than the sum of the individual parts. Because the threat strategies available to Indian rural wives are very limited compared to Western wives, they have little bargaining power within their family.

Indian wives often lack bargaining power because they do not have property rights and do not inherit productive resources. Furthermore, it is difficult for them to obtain a divorce and more importantly, in any settlement they obtain no property and in northern Indian, a wife's blood family has little or not influence on her family's decisions. As a result of her poverty, a wife is often trapped in an unsatisfactory marriage relationship and her blood family is usually unable (and often unwilling) to assist her because of its poverty. Thus, poverty contributes to gender discrimination in such cases. A process of mutual causation is present. This combined with the fact that institutional changes on wide rather than a partial scale accompanied by change in community attitudes are needed to empower females means that the process of improving the social status of females in rural India is likely to be slow and difficult. But positive action by the Indian Government can help. In this regard, its law that at least one-third of all representatives on local government bodies be women is a step forward.

Although poverty often contributes to the inability of wives to pursue their social and other entitlements, it would be misleading to attribute discrimination against females purely to poverty or low incomes. Matriarchal tribal societies do exist in Northeast India e.g. the Khasias, and the tribals involved have relatively low incomes. However, their cultural context is different to that of the Kondh dominated villages considered her. Women own and inherit productive resources and wealth in such societies and this presumably adds significantly to their bargaining power. In fact, female bias is present in entitlements. The eldest daughter usually inherits the property of her family, for example.

Furthermore, rising incomes do not necessarily improve the status of females in all cultural situations. In India, as a whole, per capita incomes rose in the 20th century but female-male ratios (FMRs) declined until 1971 and since then have been relatively stationary at around 930 females per one thousand males, according to the Census of India reports (cf. Konar, 2001, p.26). There was a slight rise in India's FMR from 927 to 933 in 2001 but this is probably largely due to rising life expectancy in India. This tends to increase the proportion of females in the older age group in a total population (Konar, 2001). These aggregate figures however, mask an alarming trend. The FMR for children of six years and under actually fell in India from 945 in 1991 to 927 in 2001 (Konar, 2001, p.29). This indicates that death of female children by abortion, infanticide and neglect has actually increased at a time when India's per capita income has continued to rise. In fact, it seems that females may have been disadvantaged by India's economic growth in terms of their chances (prior or after birth) of surviving to six years of age. Despite attempts by the Indian Government to stamp out foeticide of females on the basis of pre-birth determination of the sex of the unborn, this practice is said to be still widespread (cf. Konar, 2001).

The above case study indicates that bargaining theories provide some useful insights into the status of wives. But, like all game-type theories, they must be related to the whole social and cultural context in which social interactions take place. Bargaining theories need to be applied cautiously because of the importance of cultural embedding and the complex social context involved. They are, at best, only partially able to explain social relationships in the family, entitlements and endowments. The same is true of unitary theories of the family and human capital theory when applied to the family. The latter often help to explain differences in the desired boy-girl ratio in the family and the entitlements provided to children according to their gender. Nevertheless, these theories are mediated by cultural and non-economic considerations. For instance, there is less discrimination against female children in the Kondh dominated villages considered in this survey than in villages in West Midnapore containing Santal tribals and Hindu Begalis (see Tisdell, 2000) even though the economic conditions and general social circumstances of the two sets of villages are similar.

The process of uplifting the economic and social status of females and of empowering women in classical patriarchal societies, such as principally occur in India, is likely to be a slow one. No single policy change, such as the Indian Government's law to ensure at least one-third representation of women in local government bodies (*panchayats*), will achieve it

but all such measures help. In the long-term, improvements in the status of females in India that ensure their adequate access to human capital and resource endowments can do much to improve human dignity and contribute positively to sustainable development (cf. Tisdell, 2001). It is a long-term goal worth pursuing, and needs to be tackled on a broad front.

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