

SOCIAL ECONOMICS, POLICY AND DEVELOPMENT

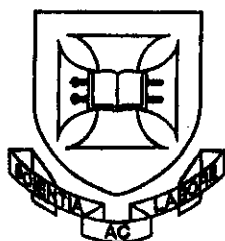
Working Paper No. 6

**The Socio-Economics of Gender Issues in Rural India:
Results of Interviews in Three Villages and a
Forest Meeting in Eastern India***

by

Clem Tisdell and Kartik C. Roy

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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 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 are intended to supplement detailed questionnaires directed to wives in these villages. Interviews were conducted with Kondhs and scheduled caste villagers in a village (Badala) west of Dashapalla in Orissa, with Santals in all Santal villages, 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 and scheduled caste Hindus in the villager 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 results in significant differences in attitude to female children on the part of tribals and non-tribals. Entitlements, as suggested by Sen's theory, are shown to be gender-relevant.

PART I

INTRODUCTION

These field notes are organised in six parts. Part II reports on interviews in the Kondh section of a village (Badala) in western Orissa, and Parts III and IV 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. Part V provides a summary of discussions with groups interested in the advancement of rural women. These groups attended a meeting in Dukee forest, a meeting that was organised by Dr K.C. Roy. Part VI provides some concluding observations.

The procedure adopted was for Clem Tisdell to ask questions in English with 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. Dr Roy organised the field trips. In Orissa, we were assisted by Dr Acharya and in West Bengal by Mr Susanta.

Detailed gender-related surveys were completed in 1999 for four villages in West Bengal in 1999, two of which were visited on this occasion. These visits enabled a number of responses received in the questionnaires to be clarified. Similar survey forms will be used in a selection of villages in Orissa in 2000 to gather information about gender-bias there. The results of these interviews reported here and completed in January 2000, will assist with an interpretation of the survey results.

PART II

VISIT TO KONDH SECTION OF BADALA VILLAGE WEST OF DASHAPALLA,

ORISSA, 10 JANUARY 2000

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 and a scheduled caste section and is in the foothills of the Khandana Hills. It is planned to include this village in our survey of villages in Orissa dealing with the socio-economic status of asset-poor rural women.

The state of Orissa has 62 district tribal groups and tribals which constitute about a quarter of its population. The Kondhs (also called Kandha) may be the best known of these tribal groups. They had human sacrificial ceremonies 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.

2. Financial Assistance and Developments in 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)¹.

This funding has been provided to a women's co-operative established by several villages and is intended as 'seed' money. The cooperative has used the funds to buy pedal-operated sewing machines and is in the process of constructing a godown (store) which will 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 is being constructed as a permanent building. It may be used for other purposes as well. Sewing machines have been 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. 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. It is used in some Indian recipes. Also 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.

3. Visual Observations in This 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. One day each month worship for a successful rice harvest is practiced.

Villagers depend on a combination of forest non-timber produces, agriculture and especially rice production used for subsistence. But some other crops were grown such as mustard and sesame possibly in part for cash. Buffaloes were much in evidence and the village has cows. However the cows were at the forest during our visit with a few goats/tropical sheep. These are tended by a special Hindu caste specialising 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 from these. 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 eg 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. Different clan members could in the past be identified by their tattoos. One grandmother was seen with such tattoos. The practice of tattooing in this village has been discontinued.

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 Anchal Panchayat (representing several villages) has women as

one-third of its members. This is satisfied in their case. In Kondh society, women were not traditionally involved in politics.

The Kondh group here has its own village council but in accordance with tradition, it has no female members. Nevertheless, the Kondhs have female representatives on the Anchul Panchayat and females are clearly active in managing their co-operative.

5. Family Entitlements and the Status of Women

Rights to control the expenditure of cash

It seems that Kondh wives have significant control over the expenditure of cash which they earn. At least, this was so for a mother of three school-age children interviewed. She is involved in the co-operative and has a sewing machine at her house for *sal* plate production.

The co-operative 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 some 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 this project 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 he was most 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 benefited 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 a 'groom-price'.

Divorce

The males interviewed said that divorce was unusual in this village. The main grounds for divorce is 'barrenness'. Divorce must be agreed to by the Gram Sabha. Even if a 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 will attempt to enforce by social pressure such obligations 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.

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 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 existing habits. The use of mosquito nets was mentioned. One NGO promoted the use of medicated mosquito nets as a malaria-prevention method amongst the Kondhs. They were used as these for a short period only and then used them as fishing nets!

The tribals often have totems or sacred species of animals or plants. These they will not harm and they 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 that they receive for the produce they sell. From a marketing point of view, however, they suffer from remoteness from 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 may be limited. They face the further constraint that the local market for any educational skills acquired is limited. Any who might 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 urbanisation accelerates many villages will no longer be sustainable in India.

PART III

VISIT TO BANDHGORA VILLAGE, SATURDAY 15 JANUARY –

AN ALL SANTAL VILLAGE REACHED VIA CHANDRAKONA ROAD

1. Background and Economic Condition

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. Some displays were seen. 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. This village, probably of 30-40 houses, has few assets. There are only 2 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:

Economics 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* leave plates. There are two options:

- 1) A sewing machine to stitch leaves
- 2) 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 has not instituted the DWCRA scheme.

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 loss of 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 W. Bengal Forestry Department on issues involving the local forest, villagers believed it to be ineffectual. This village has members on the Forest Committee of which three are females. They form part of a larger body.

It was also agreed that felling of forests for timber often adversely affected the supply of non-timber products so important to this group. The W. 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. 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 casts and tribals on the Panchayat. These are all filled at present by scheduled castes.

A spokesperson suggested that even when this Santal village has representatives, they carry little weight. They cannot be effective because they are outnumbered and maneuvered by higher caste representatives².

4. The Status of Females and Rights

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

Women own no land. The question came up whether ownership or access to land is most important. Access is clearly important – sometimes males prevent females from using land resources.

There is some evidence that 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 relation to bargaining theory, her threat power is considerable.

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

- a) incompatibility – failure to get along
- b) woman joins another man

The rules appear less stringent than amongst the Kondh.

There are two types of marriage – 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 consists of

- 1) a new set of clothes (sarees) for the bride's mother and for her grandmothers, and
- 2) a cash payment to the bride's father. The sabah has set this at a minimum of 7 rupees.

Higher payment may be made but in sums in progression by three times e.g. 21, 63.

- 3) A cow goes to brother – the bride's family decides which brother.

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.

5. Education

The reason, it is said, why if a choice must be made, more education is given to a boy than a girl is that the boy carries on the family name and stays with the family. The girl will go to join another family after marriage so the investment in her is lost to her own family.

Schooling is said to be costly from their point of view. It involves the cost of clothing, writing books and pens and for effectiveness, private tuition is needed. At their primary school, the teacher sleeps and does not keep regular hours. Moreover, the primary school is three kilometres away and the children must walk through the forest and cross a river to get there.

Some education is recognized as essential for the future of their children. A spokesman said income from forest products will end or become insignificant in the future. Therefore, their children will be forced to stand on their own feet using education or alternatives.

It was suggested that some education might not result in a better job. The following was the response: Today education is needed to carry on most business and other activities. They would be happy for their children to have any paid job. For instance, a shop would be good.

They think there is little prospect of their getting a government job even with significant education because of discrimination. One village member has a job as a forest guard with the W. Bengal Forestry Department. It is reported that he is inclined to spend most of his income on alcohol.

One of the more educated young members of this village had also tried to get a job in the public service. He was told that he satisfied all the criteria but a substantial bribe payment 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 positions e.g. in the police force, the army and on the railways.

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 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. A bias is (therefore) believed to be present in relation to access to finance.

7. Concluding Comment

This is a relatively poor Santal village more dependent on forest resources and livestock for its subsistence than agriculture. It experienced a relatively deprived economic state. 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 where incomes and village assets are greater than at Bandghora. 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.

PART IV

Interviews at SADANANDAPUR Village on Sunday 16 January 2000

Interviews were with Purnima Mundy, a Santal woman, a member of the Gram Sabha and a former member of the Anchul Panchayat and with a representative of the Schedule caste.

1. Background

This village 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 belong to the Gram Saba and to village committees. However, intermarriage is not common – it only occurs in the case of ‘love marriages’.

Sandanandapur is located to the west of the Chandrakana to Midnapore Road. The turn-off to Sandanandapur 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 benefited 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 agriculture off-season (the dry season) when there is not so much cropping. At that time, both males and females go the forest. Females make use of the forest throughout the year.

2. Forest-Political Factors

There is a Forest Committee. It consists of 9 persons. They are as follows

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

The committee used to be large – 15 - 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. She was often abused. She had to ask permission of her father to attend and risked punishment if she did not conform [Purnima is a widow. Although she has children she appears to have been widowed early. So she is under her father's 'care'. He is relatively well off]. Because of male attitudes, it is difficult for females to get involved in politics in India.

There has been an alarming loss of forest land due to encroachment by agriculture and illegal felling of trees is occurring. 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 were fined 50 rupees each so the guilty parties suffered little and 'innocent' villagers had to pay as well. There appears to be little that can be done to prevent encroachment at present.

3. Governance

The one-third female membership rule applies to the Anchul Panchayat in W. 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 filled.

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 also 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 by 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 females 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. The village plays not direct role in educational matters.

While higher castes may have more influence on the Anchal Panchayat, 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 W. Bengal Government. So this group of Santals seem to feel less deprived than those at Bandhgora.

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. It was 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. 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 hired labour to work it. The practicality of this is, however, uncertain. The sons may, for example, obstruct access.

In the case of ownership of land in a woman's own right, the problem of female ownership is less acute in principle. This property may be bequeathed to a daughter³. But since the daughter joins another family, the sons may appropriate the land and deny the daughter access to it.

Regarding marriage, until recent times all marriages were arranged but love-marriages occur now. Arranged marriages predominate and are preferred.

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 females and one male) for the bride's brother or family

Mostly brides and bridegrooms come from different villages.

Divorce is extremely rare. One reason is that in the event of a divorce the bride's family must repay the bride price. It can be sanctioned by the Gram Sabha but the Gram Sabha will try to prevent divorce.

This means that divorce is more difficult than in the Bandhgora Santal village. So the women's threat power is reduced. Grounds for divorce are few. The Santals here seem to have been influenced considerably by Hindu custom in relation to divorce and widowship.

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 case 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 care of the children. They are familiar with birth control.

6. Economic Improvement and Finance

Machines of various kinds could do much to improve the economic welfare of this village. A machine to press *sal* leaves into 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, they have not taken bank loans. Those with land for collateral do not want to risk it. Drought is always a possibility. Those without land or collateral cannot get bank loans.

The DOCRW scheme is not available here. Although it is a 'Centre' scheme, it may have restricted coverage and possibly requires state cooperation.

7. Interview With Schedule Caste Representative

Marriage: In contrast to Santal marriage, the bride's parents must make a payment to the bridegroom's family. It is a matter of bargaining as to the amount paid but it can be a substantial burden.

All Hindu marriages are arranged. Usually, the bride and bridegroom are from different villages.

Divorce: Usually is not allowed. 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.

Widows: Their position is similar to that described by the Santal respondent.

8. Pregnant Women

In response to the question of whether there were restrictions on the food which pregnant females could eat, villagers suggested no and that in principle pregnant women should be given food preference to ensure a more robust baby.

But 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.

9. Concluding Comments

The Santals in this village appear to have been significantly influenced by Hindu culture. This appears to have weakened the threat power of Santal wives and widows. While the Santal society has always been paternalistic this paternalism has been reinforced by Hinduism and males have become more dominating in the family. This reinforces the point of Sahu⁴ about the cultural influence of Hinduism on various Santal communities.

PART V

Forest Meeting at Dukee (near Chandrakora Road village) of Individuals and Groups Interested in Development of Rural Women – Thursday, 17 January

1. Background

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 where necessary (mostly) the translation was done by Dr K. C. Roy with Clem Tisdell making notes on the responses.

2. Interview with Teachers at a Midnapore Secondary Girls School Catering for Santals, Scheduled Castes etc.

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 Theory⁵]

Generally Santals perform academically less well than higher caste Hindus and even the scheduled castes. This attributed to the following:

- 1) Many Santal parents are illiterate. They cannot give guidance to their children
- 2) Often the children do not do their homework
- 3) Many Santals cannot afford private tutoring

Usually up to grade 5 academic performance of Santals is claimed to be equal to that of others but they fall behind academically after that.

Nevertheless, a few have an excellent academic performance but they face discrimination in the job market. This is definitely so in relation to private employment. There are reserved quotas in Central Government and in the W. 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 positive discrimination in favour of tribals.

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

Santal representatives of a tribal welfare organization (founded 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 W. Bengal. However, they provide additional training in Santal culture, language and literature which they would not get at a normal Bengali school. Motivation of the students is said to be high and attendance rates are high. There is community support for these schools. They must charge fees and they obtain donations from some businessmen. There is also some assistance from the W. 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 is 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 area, 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.

3. Women's Situation and Health Aspects

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 animals. Even with small animals, any cash earned from *sales* is given to the males. This differs from the observations of Saha in Bihar where he found that females could retain income from *sale* of small animals.

Divorce is quite common in Santal communities according to the Santals present. It has a dual aspect. The Santal welfare association says 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.

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.

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

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 drinking club. This endeavours to limit the consumption of liquor.

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 is a high prevalence of TB and respiratory diseases, and gastric. TB is usually not treated but children are immunised against it. The incidence of malaria is not considered to be high.

4. Development Issues

No government schemes exist locally to assist women financially with development projects. These women need machines, the Santals 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 had not alternatives they know of. They would be happy to try better alternatives if they were available. They need guidance and assistance in that regard.

5. Practice of Sari Religion

Many Santals combine elements of Hinduism and Sari religion. The Santals join in many 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. There is, in Orissa, one festival that cannot be performed unless both of these groups are involved.

PART VI

General Observation from Interviews Concerning Gender Matters

In general, the unitary theory of the family seems to be supported as far as children are concerned. Mostly boys are preferred to girls and preferred in relation to human capital formation. This is mainly because the investment in a son benefits his family but a girl will join another family after marriage and so most of the benefits of this investment are lost to another family.

Where a dowry must be paid to marry a girl, as in Hindu families, the disbenefit of a daughter is even greater. It is higher the larger the dowry payment. There was clear evidence of this from the interviews at Sadanandapur village. The respondents made it quite clear that the scheduled caste Hindus in the villages have a stronger preference for male children compared to the Santals.

The payment of a bride-price does not necessarily imply that in such a community females, especially women have a higher intrinsic value. They can easily have a lower socio-economic position as such because it may be taken to be equivalent to the *sale* of a commodity. 'Commodification' may be signaled. Much depends on subsequent conditions applying after 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 significantly influenced by Hindu marriage customs whereas the latter appears to remain more in

accordance with traditional Santal customs. Divorce is extremely rare in Sadanandapur because in the event of the bride's family must return the bride price. This seems to be also so in many Melanesian countries. In this case, the bride is unlikely to have the support of her family. Also, she will be returned to her family which will have to support her which may be resented by her blood family.

Divorce is much easier to obtain in Bandhgora and the bride price is not returned but 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.

Then position of wives and widows in the scheduled caste community is similar to that for the Santals there. The main difference is that 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 appear to have become more restricted than in the past thereby lowering their socio-economic status. This supports the general observations made by Sahu⁶ about the impact of Hindu culture on the Santals and supports the views of Sen⁸ about the importance of entitlements generally.

It seems that different Santal villages are indifferent stages of integration or conformity with Hindu society. Existing customs of the Santals are by no means uniform.

Concerning the Kondhs, in the village studied in Orissa, they had been influenced by Hinduism and have adopted several Hindu deities. They are especially devoted to Lakshmi. Their position appeared 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. Husband or wife can start proceedings. The wife has a right to refuse divorce. Widows do seem well protected - their protection depends on the village council. Bride price need no longer be paid. 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. It seems that the Kondhs have a

more favourable attitude to daughters than the Hindus, possibly because 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 contributors to 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 and contribute to the welfare of their parents.

These results are in accordance with the general observations of Murthi, Guio and Drèze (1998, p.385)⁹ 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.”

ENDNOTES

¹ 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 developmental 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 and 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 homogeneous activity or Scheme.
- d. Not more than two groups have to be formed in a village.
- e. The amount saved by each group member has to be deposited in the joint account.

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.1,000/-. 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.

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- ² The question of one-third females representation on the Panchayat was not pursued given the absence of any representatives from the village.
- ³ 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 travelled with her husband and did not join his family. Her father has obtained some property in her name.
- ⁴ C. Sahu (1966) *The Santal Women: A Social Profile*, Sanup and Sons, New Delhi.
- ⁵ 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.
- ⁶ Sahu (*op. cit*)
- ⁷ For a review of treat theories of the socio-economic status of females see Tisdell *et al.* (*op. cit*)
- ⁸ A. K. Sen (1981) *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- ⁹ 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 Economic Development: Selected Regional Perspectives*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

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