

Gender disparity in Socio-Demographic variables among the Tribals of Eastern India: a case study of the Santals

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Abstract

This paper gives a glimpse of the possible gender disparities that can be intimidated through various socio-demographic variables that exist among the tribals of eastern India by gaining insights from the Santals of Jharkhand, India. Data was collected from 1000 ever married women of the Santals, the largest tribal group of eastern India. The data analysis was based on data collected directly from the field using interview schedule and conclusions are based on qualitative analysis.

Gender disparities are evaluated through indicators like age and sex composition, sex ratio, education, occupation, domestic violence, attitude towards female child, decision making, age at marriage and the overall status of women. Women's work and work experience differs significantly from those of men whilst women are totally excluded from industrial work in some areas. In others, they are segregated by occupations; their average earnings being well below those of men in most forms of employment. Owing to the burden and responsibilities of a woman on the domestic front, they get less time to learn skills and work experience or get educated than men. Hence, the sexual division of labour is a matter of rational choice by the families as part of the household work strategy. Violence faced by women on the domestic front instills a continued sense of insecurity in them keeping them bound to the home, economically exploited and socially depressed.

Keywords: Gender disparity; socio-demographic variables; Santals; tribal women; eastern India

Introduction

Gender and health are related through multiple pathways. Gender roles and norms and the gender based division of labour interact with education, employment status, income, culture, household position, age, and physical and social environments. "Women have the right to enjoy the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.

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The enjoyment of this right is vital to their life and well-being and their ability to participate in all areas of public and private life; women's health involves their emotional, social and physical well-being and is determined by the social, political and economic context of their lives, as well as by biology" (Beijing Declaration, 1995).

The concept of women's empowerment was introduced at the International Women's Conference in Nairobi in 1985 where Empowerment was stated to be 'a distribution of social power and centre of resources in favour of women'.

In different parts of Asia, availability of wage work for women increases the returns from daughters and leading to delayed marriage (Greenhalgh, 1985 and Wolf, 1994).

National Family Health Survey III (2006) documented that even among recent younger cohorts of women aged 18–29, 52% of the women were married by age 18 years in Uttar Pradesh; corresponding proportions were 25% in Tamil Nadu and 17% in Kerala (International Institute for Population Sciences and Macro International 2007). This regional diversity in marriage is accompanied by well-recognized regional diversity in different dimensions of gender allowing for an opportunity to examine the ways in which the gendered context might be linked to age at marriage (Dyson and Moore, 1983).

A number of studies have also suggested that the ability to make decisions regarding a variety of household choices is an important part of women's empowerment (Bloom, Wypij, and Das Gupta 2001; Jejeebhoy and Sathar 2001; Kishor 2000; Morgan et al. 2002). This includes such decisions as purchasing expensive goods, children's healthcare, and marriage decisions.

Around the world, violence and discrimination against women and girls violates their human rights and severely compromises young people's sexual and reproductive health.

UNFPA estimates that 5,000 women worldwide are burnt to death in murders disguised as 'kitchen accidents' each year because their dowry was considered insufficient (Viachova and Biason, 2010).

Some researchers have found evidence suggesting that domestic violence is mutual, with men and women engaging in approximately equal levels of domestic violence, often with both partners in the same relationship attacking one another (Desmarais, Gibas, & Nicholls, 2009; Straus, 2006; Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, & Saltzman, 2007). Other researchers have argued either that their data is mistaken, based on faulty measurements, or does not take the context of violence into perspective (e.g., Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 1992; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).

Education occupies the core of all development indexes for measuring societal growth. In India, even after 64 years of independence, 68% (census, 2011) of girls are still illiterate. Discrimination against women and extreme patriarchy has robbed them with justice and equality which only

education and enlightenment can secure; society's history of denying opportunities for women to seek knowledge has obstructed their path to empowerment (Banerjee, 2010).

The status of any social group is determined by its levels of health-nutrition, literacy, education and standard of living. The tribal women, like any other social groups in India, are more illiterate than men. The low educational status is reflected in their lower literacy rate, lower enrolment rate and their presence in the school (Bhasin, 2007).

There are only a few studies on the status of tribal women in India (K. Mann, 1987; J.P. Singh, N.N. Vyas & R.S. Mann, 1988; A. Chauhan, 1990). The problems of tribal women differ from a particular area to another area owing to their geographical location, historical background and the processes of social change (A. Chauhan, 1990).

There is a greater need for undertaking a region-specific study of the status and role of tribal women which alone can throw up data that will make planning for their welfare more meaningful and effective (K.S.Singh, 1988). A tribal woman occupies an important place in the socio-economic structure of her society. The Dhebar Commission Report (1961) mentions that the tribal women is not drudge or a beast of burden, she is found to be exercising a relatively free and firm hand in all aspects related to her social life unlike in non-tribal societies.

The status of tribal women in Indian patrilineal societies has been observed to be somewhat better than that of rural non-tribal women, for instance, their social status is slightly better than the latter as they have a significant role in the tribal economy, however, analysis of the various indicators like political organization, religion, ritual practices, etc. among the different tribes of India, reveals a distinct disparity between tribal women and tribal men. Chauhan (1990) remarked that the status of tribal women has worsened as a result of the impact of social change which has affected the social structure of tribal society.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to know the gender disparities that may or may not exist in terms of education, occupation, age at marriage, decision making and domestic violence among the Santals of Eastern India.

Data and Methods

Eastern India comprises the states of West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar and Jharkhand and eight other north eastern states. The diversity of Eastern India is evident from its population structure social settings and of course the cultures of the people inhabiting this region. Each state is vastly and distinctly different from each other, with novelty in the spheres of cuisine, costume, values, norms, habits and lifestyles, but they have commonness in certain spheres such as kinship and marriage rules, devolution of property, patrilineality and male dominance.

Jharkhand shares its borders with Bihar to the north, Uttar Pradesh and Chattisgarh to the west, Orissa to the south and West Bengal to the east.

The Santals are the third largest tribal community of India after the Gonds and the Bhills respectively, with a population over 4.26 million. They are distributed in the east Indian states of Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, and Tripura. The Santali language is part of the Austro-Asiatic family, distantly related to Vietnamese and Khmer. A few of the Indian anthropologists also believe that humans first came to India about 65000-55000 years ago. Historians believe that they were the ancestors of the most tribal communities residing in the eastern part of India (excluding hilly portions). The Santals are the largest community in eastern India, so an insight into their culture is expected to fairly represent the cultures of other tribal groups in eastern India. Hence, the case study.

The present study was conducted among the Santals of the State Jharkhand, India. Demographic interview schedule containing both open ended and close ended questions on personal identification details, age and sex, education, occupation, attitudes, decision making, domestic violence and marital history was used. Data was collected from 1000 ever married women who are in reproductive age (15-49 years) from seven different Santal villages and door to door data was collected using systematic random sampling. Data were cross checked by using secondary information for validation and conclusions were reached analytically. Simple statistical tools were used in the present study.

Results

Age and sex composition

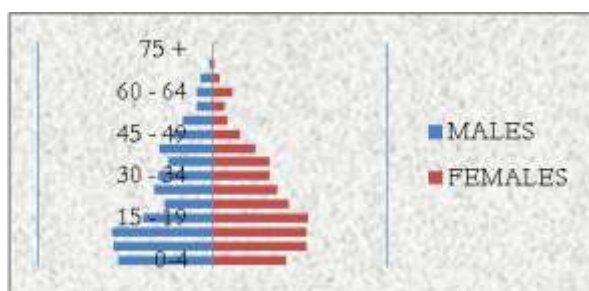


Fig. 1 Population pyramids of the Santals of eastern India

A significant observation in the pyramid is that males are much lesser than females in the age group of 20-24 years. A probable reason could be that males of this age group generally migrate out of their villages in search of jobs in nearby villages or towns as there is lack of job opportunity in their vicinity. It may be said that as education level increases among the Santals there are greater

attraction for better job opportunities outside. From ages 55 years and above there is an irregularity in the male-female proportion. However, males are found to have longer life span as compared to their female counterparts. In the present study, the pyramid has a broad base with tapering apex representing young and youthful population with high fertility, typical of developing countries. In the age group of 0-14 years, there is much greater number of males than females. This hints some kind of male preference in the society. It is observed that in the age group of 15-39 years females exceed males in all the cohorts but the males exceed females in age groups 40-59 years suggesting temporary migration of males in search of employment or for acquiring higher education. This gives an indication of higher female mortality in these age cohorts. It is also observed that from age group 65 years onwards males outnumbered females suggesting higher life expectancy among them.

Sex ratio

Table 1 Sex Ratio of the Santals of Jharkhand in comparison to Jharkhand State and India

Population	Sex ratio per 1000 males	Reference
Present Study	944	PS
Jharkhand	947	Census(2011)
Rural Jharkhand	960	Census(2011)
India	940	Census(2011)
Rural India	947	Census(2011)

Sex ratio is one of the most significant socio demographic indicators that help in estimating the nature of population structure often apprehending gender biasness. In India Sex Ratio has declined regularly since independence. Nevertheless, Census of India 2011 has shown some improvement in the sex ratio in the last 20 years, i.e. from 927 in 1991 to 940 in 2011. The state of Kerala has the highest sex ratio (1058) in India while Haryana has the lowest sex ratio of 861 females per 1000 males.

The sex ratio in India has been generally adverse to women. Female sex ratio in rural India (947) is increased by one per cent from 2001 to 2011.

The sex ratio of Santals of Jharkhand are better placed than India with respect to sex ratio but are lesser as compared to Jharkhand, rural Jharkhand and rural India. Gender biasness particularly male preference cannot be ruled out in the present study. Sons are considered an 'asset', as he can

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Tota	N	747	1062	1809	1059	854	249	115	41	11	5	3	2337
l	%	41.29	58.70	43.63	45.31	36.54	10.65	4.92	1.75	0.47	0.21	0.12	56.36

Eliminating gender differences in access to education and educational attainment are key elements on the path to attaining gender equality and reducing the disempowerment of women.

In the present study, 43.63% of the Santals are illiterates in which female illiteracy (58.70%) is higher than males (4.29%). A probable reason for low literacy may be the lack of educational facilities in the vicinity. It is observed that males outnumber females in primary, secondary and higher secondary educational levels. In the age group of 15-19 years, the number of females with primary education is higher than males but at the secondary and higher secondary levels, the female literacy substantially decreased which might be due to adolescent girls' drop out of schools owing to pressure from families regarding household chores and marriage. About 90% of all the female literates in the reproductive ages (15-49 years) have education only up to primary level. From 50 years onwards the total level of literacy sharply decreased with the increase in age indicating that education was not given priority in the past. It is seen that the younger generation does feel the need to acquire education as they are becoming aware of its advantage not only in employment but also in giving them a sense of security in social life as well as from being cheated at the hands of the money lenders or traders who do not give fair returns.

Occupation

Table 3 Occupation wise distribution of ego and husband among the Santals

Occupation	Husband	%	Ego	%
Govt. employee	41	4.25	14	1.4
Private employee	109	11.30	0	0
Business	54	5.60	2	0.2
Daily wager	326	33.81	57	5.7
Housewife	0	0	600	60
Cultivator/ Farmer	431	44.70	327	32.7
Total	961	100	1000	100

The employment figures show that 44.7% husbands are engaged in agriculture and farming followed by daily wage earners (33.8%) who do not own a land of their own and get paid on a daily basis of ₹100 per day by working at construction sectors or in lands owned by affluent people. About 11.3% are employed in private companies while only 4.25% are in government jobs and a few are self employed in petty jobs in the villages. Among womenfolk, 60% of the workforces are housewives though their contribution to agriculture is immense for self subsistence and every housewife is associated with some form of agricultural activities in their day to day lives thus accounting for unpaid labour. During the agricultural sowing and harvesting season those women who are engaged in cultivation (32.7%) are engaged as farm labourers at a meagre wage of `25 per day or paddy of lesser value. In other times they collect minor forest produce, such as *sal* leaves, wood, *mabna* and other seasonal fruits. Most cultivators sell their agricultural produce in the local markets. Entrepreneurship among women (0.2%) is very negligible as compared to the men (5.60%). It may be inferred that women are expected to stay in the house and look after children and the domestic chores besides assisting their husbands in agricultural activities and animal husbandry, while men are expected to earn a living.

Age at marriage

Table 4 Age cohort wise distribution of Santal males and females with respect to age at marriage

Age group	Male	%	Female	%
15-19	18	1.8	801	80.1
20-24	487	48.7	192	19.2
25-29	410	41.0	6	0.6
30-34	82	8.2	1	0.1
35-39	3	0.3	0	0
Total	1000	100	1000	100

Mean age at marriage of males= 24 ± 0.82

Mean age at marriage of females= 18 ± 0.035

The present study shows the mean age at marriage for men is $24 \pm$ years and that of women is $18 \pm$ years. 99.3% of all Santal women are married by the age of 24 years while 91.5% of all their men are married by the age of 29 years. It has been found that many women (241) were married before the age of 18 years and as many as 39 men were married before the age of 21 years which is below the prescribed age of marriage by the government of India (The Hindu marriage act, 1955).

Attitude towards daughter's education among Santals

Table 5 Attitude towards female education among the Santals

Education disparity among sons and daughters			Send children to school				Sons & daughters study from same school									
Total	School goes	%	Total	School goes	%	Yes	%	No	%	Total	Yes	%	No	%	Total	
sons (5-14 years)			daughters (5-14 years)													
649	484	74.57	577	427	74.0	581	99.65	2	0.34	*583	580	99.48	3	0.51	*583	

Some cultural practices may influence the balance between males and females in a given society or community. Historically there have been cultures that valued males more than females and thus practiced some degree of female infanticide. Both India and China are examples of major cultures that have practiced female infanticide (Diaz, 1988; Gangrade, 1988; Tandon and Sharma, 2006). Indian society being a patrilineal one places a heavy emphasis on the importance of having a son for various social, economic and religious reasons.

Among the Santals it is seen that they do not have any gender differences. By seeing the percentages of sons (74.57%) and daughters (74.0%) who go to school, we can say that almost all of them consider it important for both boys and girls to receive education, clearly showing that they make no distinction between sons and daughters in terms of education. Among the respondents, 99.65% of them send their children to school. For some of the respondents showed that education was not the sole purpose of sending their children to schools but it was the facility of the midday meals that attracted many to send their children to school. 99.48% of the respondents sent their children to the same school irrespective of gender biasness but also may be due to the reason that there is no availability of schools in the villages. However, in many families the birth of a male child is observed after a series of daughters thus indicating that there may be some kind of male preference among the Santals in the present study.

Decision Making

Table 6(a) Status of ego in the joint family set up among the Santals

Decision matters	Husband	%	Ego	%	In laws	%	Mutual (husband + wife)	%	Total
Family matters	15	3.32	9	1.99	25	5.54	62	13.74	111
Children + healthcare	10	2.21	3	0.66	12	2.66	158	35.03	183
Financial matters	52	11.52	-	-	90	19.95	15	3.32	157
Total	77	17.07	12	2.66	127	28.15	235	52.10	451

Table 6 (b) Status of ego in the nuclear family set up among the Santals

Decision matters	Husband	%	Ego	%	Mutual (husband + wife)	%	Total
Family matters	51	9.28	4	0.72	140	25.50	195
Children + healthcare	35	6.37	5	0.91	163	29.69	203
Financial matters	81	14.75	1	0.18	69	12.56	151
Total	167	30.41	10	1.82	372	67.75	549

The present data on decision making includes three broad categories of decision matters namely family matters, children and healthcare and financial matters. It is observed that women have the

power of decision making in case of household expenditure, celebrations at home and the like but in case of financial matters they are generally not involved. In joint family set up, 52.10% of all decisions are arrived mutually. In-laws have larger influence as 28.15% of all decisions are taken by them; 17.07% of the families have husbands as the decision makers, and only 2.66% of the decisions are left for the wife. In nuclear families, 67.75 % decisions are taken mutually by husbands and wives, 30.41% by husbands alone and only 1.82% by egos. In joint families, the in-laws have greater influence in family and financial matters while in nuclear families, the husband is the sole authority in financial matters. However, one common observation among Santals is that wives have equal participation in decision making in matters relating to the welfare of the couple and their children. It is also noticed that though women had the right to decide every matter in their households they chose not to take part in many of the decisions but rather become obliged to their husbands and relatives. Such submissive attitudes of women have its roots to their conservative cultural values.

Domestic Violence against Women

Table 7 Prevalence of domestic violence among the Santals

Physical abuse			Verbal abuse			Children abused			Sexual abuse		
No.	%	Total	No.	%	Total	No.	%	Total	No.	%	Total
12	1.2	1000	34	3.4	1000	2	0.2	1000	2	0.2	1000

In the present study, there have been reports of physical, verbal and sexual abuses by husband on their wives (table 7). The major reason for such abuses is alcoholism which takes a toll on women's lives and bear tortures at the expense of their husbands. There have also been reports in some cases where the husbands are beaten back by their wives and also abused verbally as the womenfolk are also influenced by alcoholism. Domestic violence against women among Santals is neither reported nor do any women seek help from anyone in case of any violence faced.

Children of some families were also beaten up when the father returns home drunk. Among the reported abuses in the present study, verbal abuse was seen to be the maximum (3.4%) followed by physical (1.2%) and sexual abuse (0.2%).

Discussion and Conclusion

Gender inequality is a strong determinant of social, mental and physical health. The measurement of women's status is recognized to be a highly complex issue. Yet whether assessed in terms of health, education or employment, equities by gender is prevalent in the Indian subcontinent. Due to the difficulty in measuring all aspects of women's status female education is considered to be the best indicator of women's status (Dyson and Moore, 1983).

Under Santal customary law, a woman is not entitled to inherit property of her husband. If her husband died without a male heir other surviving relatives inherit the property. However, the prevalent practice for a childless couple is to adopt a son who inherits the property but it is confined to male children only. Women of the Santal aboriginal tribes have played a very productive role in the revitalization of civil society. However, in the name of tradition, society has consistently avoided handing over governance to them. Women are the socio-economic and cultural support structures of the family unit as well as society as a whole, but traditional societal structures have kept women from participating in civic governance. Prior to the British, the aboriginal society was based on equality between men and women. History is witness that in 1855 - 56 during the Santal uprising, hundreds of nameless Santal women played critical roles alongside the rebellion leaders. Women of the Santal aboriginal tribes have played a very productive role in the revitalization of civil society. But tribal women continually suffer to come at par with men. Moreover, parliamentary politics also rejected the idea of one-third rule by women. On the other hand the *Panchayati* law of 2001, which reserves one-third of the local government's leadership posts for women, has advanced the cause of empowering women, while the position of the village chief has been reserved for women in 60 out of the 179 *Panchayats* in some blocks of the District. This will provide a new impetus to the leadership aspirations of women. The Santal society is patriarchal but women play a very important role for the social fabrication. Although she occupies a different position but she is said to have right with obligation according to customs and traditions. The religion of Santal is men's religion. Women are not allowed to be present at the sacrifices except when they are offered in the house of the ancestors and the family gods. Now the civil condition of the Santal Women has also been undergoing changes along with the impact of modernism. Santal Women are gaining their new identity in the field of science, education, art and culture. In the present study, gender disparity is evident in age and sex structure, education, occupation, marriage norms and social attitudes. Prevalence of domestic violence, particularly against women is a major ailment of the society hampering the overall status of women.

Women are vulnerable to different forms of violence over their life cycle. Battering coerced pregnancy and mass rape in conflict situations are dangers to women and their unborn children. Female infanticide, differential access to food and medical care, discrimination against girls in

nurturing and care, and the inability of girls to attend school have been documented in the part. Courtship violence and workplace violence, high rates of intimate partner violence, dowry abuse, honor killing, psychological abuse, sexual abuse at the workplace and other forms of sexual harassment affect the health of women, which is not uncommon to Indian tribal women.

The patriarchal structure of a society can also be the single most important factor skewing the sex ratio in favor of males by the burden of raising a dowry for a daughter's marriage (NFHS Report 2008). This is also true in the case of Santals of Jharkhand.

Education must be used as an agent of basic changes in the status of women as it is a public domain and must be a right entitled by the state including the principles of equality and non discrimination visualizing the development of women for a better future.

Fostering legitimacy and gender equity among Santal women in particular and tribals of eastern India in general through women empowerment and emancipation would facilitate country's progress.

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