

# Present perception on gender related issues in tribal mothers of sub-urban region, West Bengal



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** In India, tribal communities and women remain marginalized and continue to suffer discrimination. The right to achieve gender justice is a cumbersome task. The perception on gender issues varies person to person. **Aims and Objectives:** This study is designed to find out the perception on the gender related issues, presence of gender bias and the associated factors among the reproductive tribal mothers. **Materials and Methods:** Research was carried in a tribal community under the service jurisdiction of the community medicine department. A cross sectional survey using pre designed proforma was used in reproductive age group mothers. Information on various aspects was collected by direct interview with mothers. Data was analysed with licensed statistical software. Mean, standard deviation, proportion, chi square value and P value was determined as per objectives. **Results:** A total of 110 mothers participated. The mean age was 28.18 years. Majority of mothers were between 26-36 years. Rate of illiteracy was 19.1%. Two child norms were practiced by most of the families (91). Thirty two mothers reported abortion. Self-desire was the main reason. One in every three practiced contraception. Gender bias towards boy child was reflected by responses on the desire for future child, giving playtime, mixing with others, sharing household work, providing pocket money, sharing of and allowing night job. Pre natal sex determination was still preferred by one third mothers. One breather was that majority (84.7%) were consulted in family matters. Age group, occupation and abortion history showed association with gender preference. **Conclusion:** Present study showed prevailing gender discrimination in modern India. Enactment of laws through stringent monitoring and government's positive attitude may make the situation favourable.

**Key words:** Gender bias, Perception, Tribal mothers, Reproductive, Marginalised

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## INTRODUCTION

India, since inception, is struggling with gender related issues like discrimination, inequality, prediction. The right to achieve gender justice is a cumbersome task in India. Till date, a girl child is considered as huge burden to their parents, families and also to the society. The perception of unwanted entity is the grass root of all the issues. The origin lies in the male dominance. A woman still needs the shoulder of man and also a family. The problems have been started even before birth. The brutality of the globe has been established by the gruesome evils of female

feticide and infanticide. The Indian constitution has the provision for equal rights and also privileges for both sexes. In spite of the rules, the majority of women are not so lucky to enjoy the rights and opportunities guaranteed to them. In India, the Government initiatives languish due to poor implementation. Tribal communities, women remain marginalized and continue to suffer discrimination because of government failure.<sup>1</sup> In India, family still follows patriarchal structure promoting man's supremacy and women subjugation. It is proved by statistics concerning girl child that is reflected by preference for a son runs across all social variants. The tribal women constitute nearly

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half of the total population. They determine the family economy and administration in a broader way. Various studies report higher illiteracy, lower school enrolment and life span, higher fertility rate in tribal women compared to the national average. The tribal women too preferred son but do not in favour of female infanticide or sex determination tests. The inheritance law is different. Girls have the freedom to take part in social events and there is no dowry.<sup>2</sup> As per National Family Health Survey-4 (2015-16), the current sex ratio in urban area is 956 in comparison to 1009 in rural area.<sup>3</sup> Gender bias is strikingly apparent in educational access, employment avenues and representation in the field of politics.<sup>4</sup> For the year 2014, in respect of Gender inequality index, India ranked 130 out of 155 countries, way behind Bangladesh and Pakistan that rank 111 and 121 respectively, according to data in the United National Development Programme's latest Human Development Report 2015.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes the families are biased towards the girl child too. Parents are the decision makers so parental attitude and motivation acts as a driving force in combating the economic and other constraints. Since mothers spend maximum time with their children so they have the biggest influence on the education as well as character formation. The perception on gender related issues among mothers of tribal community is still under dark. Therefore, this study was attempted with a heartiest effort to find out the concept on the gender related issues, presence of gender bias and the associated factors among the tribal mothers.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Kalyani is an important town and sub divisional head quarter of Nadia district, West Bengal. It was named by Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, Ex Chief Minister of West Bengal and act as an alternative to the city of Kolkata, from which it is about 50 km away. There are 20 wards with a total population of 100,575 of which 50,727 are males while 49,848 are females as per census, 2011. Sex Ratio is 983 against state average of 950. The town is predominantly occupied with scheduled caste (45.02%) while scheduled tribes constitute 3.19% of total population.<sup>6,7</sup> The present descriptive, epidemiological study with a cross sectional design was conducted in the tribal predominant ward no.17 of Kalyani Municipality of Nadia district West Bengal. All the tribal mothers of reproductive age group, 15-45 years were considered as study subjects. Complete enumeration was done. The inclusion criterion was selected before preparation of the proforma. Only the mothers with one living children were chosen as participants. The respondents were informed about the nature, objectives and rationality of the study and afterwards the informed consent was obtained before data collection. All these

activities were started after the study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee. After obtaining ethical clearance, the proforma was pre tested on ten mothers complying with inclusion criteria. After minor modification, final proforma was obtained. This tribal community people were mainly Santals residing in this locality for more than last 30 years. The people were well conversant in Bengali but their mother tongue was Alchiki. An Outpatient department was running weekly in the local club for providing health service to the people of this community as well as to neighbourhood. A local female resident of tribal community worked as social worker and helped in the research. Complete enumeration of the household was done during the time of survey. Data was collected for a period of two months, July and August last year spending 2 hrs in morning. Weekends were utilized for the purpose. Effort was made for finding the absentees during daytime by visiting again in afternoon on Sunday. The final number of respondents was 110. All the information was obtained by direct interview method. After data was gathered, it was entered after coding into the licensed statistical software. The process of analysis and report writing took one month.

### Ethics

The present study proposal was first presented before scientific review committee of the institution. After getting approval from the governing body, as per their directive, the modified research was again sent to Institutional ethics committee. The committee gave the permission to conduct the study.

### Statistics

Results was analyzed using statistical software (licensed SPSS 22.0). Some of the responses were recoded and analyzed. For descriptive statistics, mean, median, range, standard deviation, proportion was used. Confidence interval, Odds ratio, Yates corrected chi square value was calculated for determining any association of statistical importance between gender bias and other related variables. (P value of <0.05 will be considered significant)

## RESULTS

The socio demographic attributes, vital information on mothers are presented in Table 1 under heading of background characteristics. A total of 110 tribal mothers gave consent for participation in the study. The youngest subject was only 15 years indicative of prevailing teenage marriage and pregnancy with a mean age of 28.18 +/- 6.014 years whereas the age of first pregnancy was reported 12 years. The average age of marriage was 18.19 years with a span of 10.07 years of marital life. There were 5 members in each family on average. The

monthly family income seemed to better, i.e. Rs.10451.81. Tribals had child as young as one year. There was neither predominance of nuclear nor joint family type. Majority of mothers were in mid reproductive period (54.0%), had low education (90%) and did household work (2/3<sup>rd</sup>). Two child norms were practiced by most of the families (91). Out of 110 respondents, 32 reported abortion. The rate of spontaneous and induced type was same (16, 16). The major reason for induction was self - desire (9), followed by medical ground (6). One mother was forced by her family, too. Presently, one third of the participants practiced any form of contraception with slightly preponderance of temporary method (20.7% vs. 11.7%).

On analysing the perception of mothers on different gender based issues, it was noted that, more than four among five mothers had the correct notion of ideal gender composition. Ideal gender composition of one girl and one boy was the voice of only 9 mothers, whereas one son was ideal for eleven (11) mothers. Thirty two (32) mothers expressed desire for future pregnancy and the preference for boy child was more than double in relation to girl child (50.0 % vs. 21.9%) clearly indicating gender bias, inequality and discrimination. This was also reflected through their perception regarding the early marriage of each sex of similar age. The proportion of respondents in favour of early marriage of girl child outnumbered the boy child by several times (67.3% vs. 11.8%). The responses on some other gender related issues also indicate the same like the giving playtime, mixing with others, sharing household work, providing pocket money and allowing night job. Forty mothers chose boy child in comparison with twenty two (22) mothers who chose girl child as preferred one at present. Pre natal sex determination was still preferred by one third mothers. In the context of response regarding completion of treatment during illness, no preference was noticed. An astonishing fact came out after analysis that, till today son was considered as heir of family property leaving daughter way behind. In spite of all inequalities, it was also seen that women were consulted in major family matters in in 84.7% cases that was clearly a breather (Table 2).

There was an attempt to find out the factors associated with the presence of current gender bias towards any sex. The proportion of gender bias towards any sex was recorded more among age group > 36 years (92.8), educated mothers (58.4), among respondents married more than 10 years (60.0), living in joint family(58.3), working mothers (77.0). The prevalence was less in mothers who did not have abortion (59.0), not in favour of pre natal sex determination (64.0) and consulted before taking major decision in families (55.3). After applying statistical tests, age group, occupation and past history of abortion were the factors which were associated with the present gender

**Table 1: Background characteristics of respondents (N=110)**

Variables	Frequency (%)
Age group (years)	
15-25	36 (32.4)
26-36	60 (54.0)
>36	14 (12.6)
Education	
Illiterate	21 (19.1)
Primary and secondary	78 (70.9)
Higher secondary and above	11 (10.0)
Occupation	
Homemaker	84 (75.7)
Skilled worker/business	7 (6.3)
Unskilled worker	19 (17.2)
No. of children	
1-2	91 (82.7)
>2	19 (17.2)
History of abortion	
Yes	32 (29.1)
No	78 (70.9)
Wish for permanent contraception in future	
Yes	18 (24.2)
No/no response	76 (75.8)

**Table 2: Perception of mothers on pertinent gender issues**

Gender issues	Frequency (%)
Ideal number of children	
1-2	96 (87.2)
>2	14 (12.7)
Ideal gender preference	
Male	29 (26.4)
Female	17 (15.5)
Healthy child	64 (58.2)
Providing playtime	
More for son	32 (29.1)
More for daughter	9 (8.2)
Mixing with others in the community	
Only girls	5 (4.5)
Only boys	52 (47.3)
Sharing of household work	
More work by girl child	80 (72.5)
More work by BOY child	5 (4.5)
Allowing to do night job	
Only boys	87 (79.1)
Only girls	5 (4.5)
Property sharing by children	
Son	41 (37.3)
Daughter	1 (0.9)

preference to either sex and this association was statistically significant ( $P < .05$ ). (Table 3)

## DISCUSSION

The area of research in the field of gender inequality has become very important in our country. The utility of such study goes back in years in a developing nation like ours. The major areas where the inequality is seen mostly

**Table 3: Associated factors of present gender bias towards any sex (N=110)**

Variables	Gender bias		Statistics
	Yes	No	
Age group (years)			
15-25	22	14	$\chi^2=11.06$ , $df=2$ , $P=0.003$
26 – 36	27	33	
>36	13	1	
Marital life (years)			
<10	32	28	$\chi^2=0.26$ , $df=1$ $P=0.610$ , $CI=0.89-1.23$ , $OR=0.76$
>10	30	20	
Education			
Illiterate	10	11	$\chi^2=0.43$ , $df=1$ $P=0.513$ , $CI=0.82-1.32$ , $OR=0.65$
Literate	52	37	
Occupation			
Homemaker	43	41	$\chi^2=4.37$ , $df=1$ $P=0.036$ , $CI=0.67-0.90$ , $OR=0.31$
Others	20	6	
History of abortion			
Yes	6	16	$\chi^2=5.70$ , $df=1$ $P=0.016$ , $CI=0.46-0.94$ , $OR=0.26$
No	46	32	
Use of contraceptives			
Yes	21	15	$\chi^2=0.55$ , $df=1$ $P=0.45$ , $CI=1.20-1.75$ , $OR=1.49$
No	31	33	

are field of education, outside work, nutrition, health sector and many more. The impact is not only on current generation but also in the future generation mostly on daughters who will be the major workforce of the family. In reality, a child spends maximum time with his mother during their childhood, adolescence. Therefore the impact of mother is tremendous in every aspect of his or her life like in the field of character formation, physical and mental development, education, behavioural development and also attitude towards society and opposite sex. The current research was done to explore the perception of mothers on different gender based issues and also to assess some of the linkages between sociocultural factors, economic forces and the current gender preference.

Our study had a total population of one hundred and ten women (110), out of which majority were in the age group between 26 - 36 years. It was observed that thirty six respondents were young adult. In a study conducted in a tribal community of Tapi district of Gujrat showed similar findings, where 80 out of 150 subjects were in 18 – 30 years age group. They conducted the study in a community irrespective of either sex. The Gujrat study

had observed that 35 subjects (23.3%) passed class X, 32 (21.3%) passed higher secondary and 36 (24.0%) were educated up to graduate level. The result is a bit poor in our study, where the rate of illiteracy was 19.1%, the number of mothers had either middle or secondary education was 27, eight (8) passed higher secondary (7.2%) and only 2.7% were graduate.<sup>8</sup>

A Tripura based study on gender development and the status of tribal women described the role of women in their families was substantial and crucial. This study was based on analysis of secondary data revealed that there was some homogeneity in marriage rules, property rights, food and drinking habits, dress patterns, housing patterns among different tribes. Tribals are also followers of patriarchy but they have given a considerable socio-economic importance to their women. Many studies from north-east India on tribal women exposed this truth. Women empowerment is strongly associated with status improvement. It synergies with higher literacy, autonomy, better health care, equal sharing of property, increased involvement in economic sectors and also self-esteem. Tribal women being disadvantaged, marginalized and vulnerable were better placed and did not suffer segregation or lower status. This was also reflected in the present study by the number of respondents consulted in the family prior to any important decision taken in the family. Ninety four (94) mothers were consulted indicative of social importance.<sup>9</sup> In a research of Arup Maharatna on gender bias from Indian perspective established that gender relations were historically more balanced and egalitarian among tribes of India, but an unfortunate trend of gender discrimination was observed that had conformed with anti-female pattern.<sup>10</sup>

Prof. Amartya Sen, Nobel Laureate in 2001, described seven types of gender inequalities in India namely mortality, natality, empowerment, ownership, special opportunity, household and basic facility inequality. The major reasons were identified as the need of a male heir for propagation of family, huge dowry, poverty, regular physical and financial support and the caste system. A study of gender inequality in India tried to explore the factors responsible for gender inequality. It had been observed that social, cultural, economic, political and legal factors were behind it. The wage between both sexes was not same in India. There were huge disparities in terms of access to banking services, work in military services. The Hindu Succession Act of 2005 of provision of equal inheritance rights was weakly enforced. Women were deprived of their proper inheritance culturally and religiously as well. There were also workplace inequalities. Men usually were placed in the higher position in comparison to women. Education, health, patriarchal society, dowry, gender based violence came out as the responsible social factors. The dowry

system in India was a major contributor by influencing the perception that girls were a burden. Among the cultural factors, old age support from sons emerged as a vital factor for the preference of boy child. Son was considered as a social security. The role of sons in religious rituals also played a role. Moreover, the belief of losing daughters after marriage discouraged mothers to give birth of a girl child.<sup>11</sup>

The previously mentioned Gujrat study showed that the preferences of the participants for gender of their first child, 121 (80.7%) had no preference, 17(11.3%) respondents preferred daughter. The most common reason was propagation (61.3%). Similar observation was evoked in the present study when the respondents were enquired about their preference of sex in case future pregnancy. Seventy seven (78.4%) mothers wanted healthy child irrespective of sex while nearly 15% were in favour of son. However in the response to the existing gender preference the reply was not alike. There was gender bias towards son (36.0%), daughter (19.8%) wherever no preference was the reply of 48 mothers. In their study, it was observed.

That, only 4 (2.7%) participant had undergone abortion and 142 did not undergo pre natal sex determination. Good number of women was aware of the fact that the repeated prenatal sex abortions are detrimental to both physical and mental health (137). The analysed data from our study had revealed that 32.4% of tribal mothers were in favour of prenatal sex determination while 68 mothers were against it. There was abortion history in 32 participants inclusive of spontaneous and induced. One welcoming fact of the reference study was that 92.7% did not differentiate in offering the treatment facilities to either of child, be it male or female. The current research also observed similar finding but a number of studies had unwelcome observation in form of unequal access to health care attributed as the most important factor of high female mortality.<sup>12-14</sup>

The couple of the some other studies on their response on hypothetical imagination of gender composition, the overwhelming response were for two sons and one daughter if they wanted three children. Some were in favour of at least one son if there were two children. Even if they said that, if both children were girls, they would opt for the third one in the hope that it would be a boy and if not, they would go for selective abortion.<sup>15, 16</sup> It was seen that even in 20017, sex selective abortions were still in practice in spite of enactment laws by showing thumb to the face of administration.<sup>17</sup> A study conducted among the Khasi tribes of Meghalaya had revealed that discrimination against women was an unfortunate reality among the Khasi tribes of Meghalaya.<sup>18</sup>

The present study showed that majority of the respondents were in favour of healthy child in their future pregnancy and also there was no discrimination in relation to offer or complete treatment of their children. However, there were large disparities in the perception regarding the areas of early marriage of each sex of similar age, giving playtime, mixing with others, sharing household work, providing pocket money and allowing night job, inheritance of property. Inadequate planning and monitoring in enactment of laws as well as cultural resistance work as driving force of still prevalent gender inequalities. Acculturation, strong government initiative, involvement of non-governmental organization and different patterns of women's labour force ought to be implicated.

#### What this study adds?

This present study highlighted an area that was rarely touched in any of the previous studies. The mother's perception on the gender issues were also focused earlier, but an in-depth analysis was attempted in this research. The multifaceted approach enlighten us on the present attitude of tribal mothers on ideal gender composition, gender preference in future pregnancy, sharing of food, property inheritance, sex selective abortion and many more. Overall, the analysis depicted a trend of preference towards male child till date.

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**Author's contribution:**

**GB** – Concept and design of the study, manuscript preparation, statistical analysis, copy editing and critical revision; **SB** – Data collection, review of literature, helped in preparation of first draft of manuscript.

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