

CONCLUSION: GENDER RELATIONS IN INDIA

The study explains the gender relations, specially the status of women of India contextualized in a village, Dewan, in the historically specific tea garden setting in the state of Assam in the North Eastern region. The gender relations refer to the consideration of all mutual duties, obligations, rights, freedoms and decision making powers between the sexes and the safeguards provided for the protection of each sex against the bondedness of the other. The phenomenon, therefore, implies a comparative perspective of understanding. The status of women involves the considerations in relation to or in comparison of men. The considerations constitute the bases indicating the women's freedom of choice and movement in social matters, type of taboos, legal and political rights and economic condition. As most of the work in tea plantation being centered on plucking of tealeaves does not need many skilled labourers, a large number of women are employed in the tea gardens. In spite of their working outside home for

earning, they do not neglect their traditional domestic responsibilities like cooking, washing, cleaning, managing household, etc. The class of these women who are the social and economic contributors to their families but have no role in decision-making in their families and suffer from illiteracy, overburden of work, child marriage, ill health, etc. are focused for the inquiries in this research study.

The women's studies of various theoretical orientations (neo-classical, institutional, feminist, Marxist, Radical and liberal) have mainly attempted to thoroughly examine historical, cultural and contextual determinants of social, economic and political status of women, on the one hand, and to highlight the voice of women expressed in literature, arts and history, on the other. But the phenomenon of the women's status shows variations from society to society, culture to culture and region to region. Therefore, the study has been conducted in a systemic perspective of gender relations in Dewan Tea Garden village. The variables of caste, tribe, class, power, occupation, region, nativity, community and religion are used to examine gender relations cutting across the diversities of population in the system. The primary data are extensively used in the study. To find out the socio-cultural and economic patterns of life the basic data were collected from all 925 households in Diwan whereas a sample of 50 households (around 5%) was drawn from the population by applying a mix of stratified random sampling method and purposive method for drawing a representative cross-section of the household heterogeneities of the multiple socio-economic and cultural level to intensively understand the patterns of the gender relations. To probe the patterns of gender relations and status of women a structured interview schedule on the inter-personal and intra-group relations of the sexes in the aspect of health, reproduction, marriage, family, kinship, property, inheritance, succession, political awareness and participation, education, personal belongings and so on was administered to the respondents.

The following are the major findings of the study.

I

The structural units like family, marriage, caste, tribe, community, region, language and religion generally typify the gender relations and status of the women. Family is an elementary group. A type of family by its composition and residence generally affects the status of a gender in a society and any disintegration of a joint family into nuclear or neo-local families results into less control of the authority of patriarchy/matriarchy over its members.

(1) By their residence, over two thirds (69%) of the respondents live in a given type of family by the will of their husbands and parents-in-law; less than one fifth (16%) by their own and husbands' will and 6% only by their own will. Only one tenth of the respondents whose parents-in-law are not alive; sisters are married and brothers have got separated after marriage live in the nuclear family.

Therefore, after their marriage the family of residence of the more than two thirds of the respondents is determined by the will of their husbands and in-law parents. Whether the joint or nuclear families the women subordinated to their husbands have never terminated their kinship relations. Their affinal and cognatic links maintained by the formal or informal visits forms an important feature of their life, which is largely determined by the factors like economic condition, regional and extra-regional dispersal of kins, relationship between bride-giver and bride-taker on dowry and other matters, inter-caste/inter-community marriage and absence/presence of parents or siblings (brothers or sisters).

(2) Under the control of parents-in-law, it is almost impossible for a woman to visit her natal home without the permission of her husband and / or parents-in-law. On their visits some male accompanies them. Only those women who are old in age or married in Dewan itself can visit their natal homes alone. Three fifths (60%) of the respondents visit their natal homes accompanied by husbands and over one fifth (22%) either by husbands or by fathers or brothers whereas 12% respondents, including 2% old women and 10% Dewan's native women, visit their

natal homes alone. Over two thirds (68%) of the Bengali, about three fifths (59%) of the Hindustani and the Oriya (60%) and all the Santal respondents visit their natal homes with husbands.

Thus, the women have a little say in the family and kinship relations maintained through a male line.

(3) Generally, the women's marriage at young age adversely affects their status in the family and society. The age- at -marriage of the respondents ranges between 12 and 23 years whereas for their husbands between 15 and 29 years. This shows a quite low age of marriage for the males and females and for the females it is still lower.

(4) The selection of spouse indicates the hold of patriarchy restricting the scope of decision-making among the youth, especially the women. Most (88%) of the respondents had no choice but to accept their parent's decision about the spouse for them whereas 12% respondents chose their spouse through love affairs. Of the respondents, most of the Bengali (90%), four fifths (80%) of the Hindustani and all of the Oriyan and the Santal were married by their parents' choice. On the other hand, the husbands of two third respondents, constituting over two thirds (69.23%) of the Bengali and the Hindustani (70%) and three fifths of the Oriya community had a great role in selecting their spouse.

Therefore, the women's role for selecting their husbands is not recognized and/or is neglected in the family and society.

(5) The practice of dowry also indicates the low status of women in a society. About three fourths (72%) of the respondents were given dowry in marriage. But all the Muslim respondents received dower in marriage. It shows how the custom of dowry and dower play a significant role in a woman's marriage.

(6) The practice of prohibition of widow re-marriage among the respondents, on the one hand, and that of permission of widower re-marriage, on the other, clearly indicate the

discrimination against the women in the family and society. A few cases of polygyny also indicate the insecurity of the women in married life. In all the cases the second marriage of a male has been a culmination of his post-marital love affair. In the cases of polygyny the caste panchayats recognized the marriages by imposing some penalty and they delivered nothing to the justice-seeker, i. e., the first wife.

Briefly, the patriarchal practices of patriliney, caste endogamy, polygyny, early and negotiated marriage and practice of dowry have contributed to the women's dependency and low status as compared to men in family and society in the tea garden village.

II

(7) The nature of women's work and its returns indicate the economic status of women in society. On the basis of the occupational activities, the women divided into the household work (36%) and the outside wage labour (68%), mainly supplement their family incomes. The wage work activities of the respondents consist of (i) the casual or permanent garden labour for plucking, polypacking, manuring, cleaning, etc. and the domestic service labour for cleaning houses, washing clothes and utensils, fetching water, etc.

(8) In the garden occupations the women are greater in the casual labour while the men in the permanent works. Besides, the women are far less than the men employed in the wage labour and over one third of the women are occupied only with the domestic works in their houses and get nothing in return of it. The domestic work is even not properly recognized as the contribution to their family earnings.

(9) The tea industry does not discriminate in wages on the basis of gender. But in the domestic labour /services (unorganized sector), the women are discriminated in the matter of wages. Generally, the men receive the wages of Rs. 50/- to 60/- per day for the works like digging, cultivation, etc. whereas the women received Rs. 20/- to 25/- per day. They are also

discriminated in terms of the **work hours** as they generally give to the work 4-5 hours more than the males.

(10) Though more than half of the respondents earn from various sources, most of those have no control over their incomes. Of the workingwomen, around half (45.45%) have no control over their incomes; over two fifths (42.42%) along with their husbands have control over their incomes and only over one tenth (12.12%) have their own control. The property of landholding, house building, household goods and cash gives the status and recognition to its owner. Around two thirds (64%) of the respondents' families are landless and over one third (36%) have 1 to 6 bighas of landholding. But only their husbands and / or sons own the family property in the form of landholding, house building, animals and household goods. The landholding and other forms of property are not transferred to the women for the title of ownership. Rather, on their retirement from the garden it is considered their duty to transfer the provident fund or other receipts in the name of their sons or husbands.

(11) The workingwomen of all the communities and castes cannot escape their household duties. Even in the emergency situations of illness, pregnancy, etc. the females from their in-law relatives and / or grown up daughters extend a helping hand to over a two-third of the respondents' household works whereas among the males who helped them were their husbands and grown-up sons. This shows how their traditional work has been stereotyped whereas they, to, have to take on the activities to supplement family incomes.

Briefly, the women lacked the control over their own income and family property, and a respite with regards to their domestic responsibilities that indicate their low status in the society.

III

The political status of women is indicated by gender participation in decision making in various matters. The head of all the households of the respondents irrespective of caste, community and religion are males whereas the women became head of their families only during their widow hood or divorce in absence of any grown-up male child.

(12) The decision making for buying land, marriage or education of children, etc. in the family is mostly vested in husbands, sons, male in-laws or mother-in-law. Only two fifths of the respondents decide their family matters jointly with their husbands. The situation prevails across almost all communities and castes.

(13) None of the respondents, OBCs, SCs and STs, is a member of any of their caste / community panchayat. The women are not allowed to sit with the men to decide matters in a panchayat meeting and are made to accept the decisions given by a panchayat. The Bagan panchayat of the permanent labourers in the garden excludes even the permanent female labourers from its activities by presuming that the females are illiterate and ignorant about industrial-administrative activities. None of the respondents is the member of the present Bagan panchayat.

(14) In the village the trade unions (INTUC, CITU and BMS) and the political parties (Congress, BJP and CPM) have the women as their supporters only. Only one women of the Hindustani community is a formal member of the Congress Party. In 1994, the Assam Government re-introduced the three-tier Panchayati Raj system with one third of the total seats reserved for women. Therefore, in the last Gaon panchayat elections four women have contested for their two seats but they have done this only after the consent of their husbands.

(15) The voting behaviour of the respondents is also largely motivated by the male folk. Over two fifths (42%) of the respondents cast their votes according to the decision of their husbands; over one third (36%) were persuaded by the political workers through their husbands

or sons and 6% by their sons, and only 16% respondents cast their votes according to their own choice. Therefore, about four fifths of the respondents cast their votes according to the will of their husbands directly or indirectly.

Briefly, the traditional and modern power structures of the village exclude the women from its activities and the women accept the decision in the state of affairs of their life.

IV

The literacy rate, dropout rate, enrolment for higher education among males and females indicate the gender relations, specially the educational status of women in a society.

(16) The illiteracy rate is quite high among the villagers. When the illiteracy of the respondents is compared with that of their male counterparts, four fifths of the respondents and less than three fifths (56%) of their male counter parts are illiterate. The respondents' education is limited up to the high school (Xth) level whereas their husbands' education extends up to the graduate level. Thus, the rate and level of education are both low among the respondents.

(17) By the inter-generational literacy, over half (51.85%) of the female and over two thirds (67.79%) of the male children of the respondents are literate. Of the Bengali 65.85% male and 44.44% female, of the Hindustani 65.85% male and 44.44% female, of the Oriya 50% male and 60% female and of the Santal all male and 50% female children of the respondents are literate. This shows that the daughters are educationally better equipped than their mothers but the sex-based discrimination in education is carried along.

(18) Of the literate respondents, about one third (30%) of these dropped out of school after completing the Higher Secondary Leaving Certificate due to poverty and marriage, on fifth due to poor performance at examination or the rest for looking after their younger siblings.

Briefly, the gender discrimination against women exists in terms of rate and level of education and drop out rate. Even the improvement perceived in intergenerational rate and level of female's education carries along the gender bias.

V

The food, nutrition, diseases, treatment, maternity and family planning conditions reflect the health status of women in a society.

(19) In the normal conditions of life phenomenon of the left-outs for women is not a practice among the respondents as the male and female children are both given food equally. But in the crisis of shortage of any kind of food the axe always falls on the females' share.

(20) The diseases and type of treatment do indicate differences. Of the respondent, over four fifths (84%) have suffered from various diseases. Of these, two fifths (40.47%) went for modern treatment; over one tenth (11.90%) took herbal medicine and the rest, about half (47.61%), took no medicine at all.

On the other hand, two thirds of their male counterparts have suffered from various diseases. Of these Over half (54.54%) of these went for modern treatment; 15.15% for herbal treatment and one-third for no treatment at all.

Thus, more women have suffered from diseases than the man and their less number has the access to various types to treatment.

(21) Maternity and health care also indicate the health status of the women. By the mean age at their first child's delivery, over one fifth (22%) of the respondents are in the age group of 13-16 years; over two fifths (42%) in the age group of 17-18 years and about one third (32%) in the age group of 19-24 years.

(22) Over two thirds (68.75%) of the respondents are not given any kind of special food and treatment during the pregnancy; over one fourth (27.08%) are given green vegetables and

4.16% are given fruits and milk. This means that less than one third of the women are given some kind of special food during their pregnancies. The feature is common across all the communities and castes.

(28) Almost all (97.91%) respondents deliver babies at home and go to a hospital only if some major complication arises. They are provided the services of a midwife in the village.

(29) The villagers consider the family planning against the will of god and they do not have any major consideration for it. Over four fifths (83.33%) of the respondents do not adopt family planning in view of their in-laws and husbands not allowing whereas 8.33% each of the respondents adopted the modern family planning method and the herbal medicines but they did so only with consent of their husbands.

Briefly, the poor economic condition, traditional mindset, unhygienic working conditions and lack of awareness contribute to the poor health condition of the women.

VI

The patterns of communication with the outside world, nature of message and mass media uses indicate the communication status of women in a society.

(30) Of the respondents, over one third (36%) communicate by personal visits to their relatives and neighbours; less than one third (28%) use messengers; over one fifth (22%) use both personal visits and messengers; 8% use ordinary post; and 6% use ordinary posts and personal visits. The respondents maintain the interpersonal relations within village by personal contacts and those outside the village by ordinary post, messengers or personal visits. They use the traditional means of communication more than the modern ones in their interpersonal communication.

On the other hand, more male counterparts than the respondents depend on the personal visits and messengers but more respondents than their counterparts depend on the ordinary posts.

The respondents adopt the post conducive to their restricted mobility and being tagged around the domestic environs.

(31) For maintaining inter-personal relationship majority of the males and the females use the traditional media of communicative system like personal visits and messengers. Around one third of the males and the females use the modern media such as posts whereas only a small fraction of the males use the modern electronic media (telephone) in order to maintain their inter-personal relationships. The slightly greater number of the females using the posts indicates that this modern medium of communication has greater function in their life whereas the use of the electronic medium like telephone has come up among the men.

(32) The data show that over one fourth (26%) of the male counterparts are reading newspapers and none of the respondents. In view of the existing literacy rate, economy, social structure and culture the low rate of the newspaper readers is quite natural.

(33) Less than three fourths (72%) whereas over four fifths (84%) of the respondents of their counterparts use the electronic (radio and television) media. The electronic media have a great access to the female users, though it is less than that to the male users. These media overcome both the cultural/traditional and the literacy barriers among the females of the backward social structures.

(34) Over three fourths (77.77%) of the respondents watch television and over one fifth (22.22%) listen to radio. The fact that over three fourths of the respondents have access to television is very significant. It is free from various cultural, literal and physical limitations of the females, on the one hand, and it is the most effective to communicate message among the females, on the other. It is also clear that TV has a great edge over radio as a channel of message.

(35) Over a half of the respondent females and around two thirds of their male counterparts use the TV regularly whereas over three fifths of the respondents and slightly less than three fourths of the counterparts use radio regularly. TV is the more popular than radio but

radio has more regularity of use among the respondents and their male counterparts. The difference of the size of the female and the male users clearly indicate that the gender disparity of media use is prevailing over all the media. But the striking feature of the comparison is that the disparity is far less in the case of the electronic media than in the case of the print media.

(36) Of the radio listener respondents one half listen to informative, entertaining and educational programme for tea garden labourers. On the other hand, the listener male counterparts are far less. This indicates that the males are either withdrawing from the radio use or preferring the TV. Besides, none of the females listen to the News, which means that the women like only entertainment and occupation related information in their given socio-domestic environment.

(37) The data display that one third of the (female) respondents and one fifth of the male counterparts among the TV viewers view only films while over two fifths of the respondents and around half of the male counterparts view serials and films on TV. None of the females view general news and sports news or live telecast whereas about one seventh of the males view cricket and football matches on the TV. Therefore, the females like only entertainment on the TV and their level of general awareness is nil as compared to the males. They lag far behind in terms of their size in the TV viewers as well as the number of the TV programmes they viewed. Despite the availability of the TV set they are unable to spare the time enough for TV viewing in the given socio-political conditions.

VII

Briefly, the women who earn equally along with men depend upon the male folk in every sphere of life: Establishment of family, family matters, marriage, selection of spouse, age at marriage, dowry demand and polygyny. The women earn for family consumption, but have no control over their own incomes and family property and have no respite in their household

duties. In the traditional and modern power structures they have no recognition and role at all except the recently introduced reservation of seats in the Gaon panchayat. The women lag behind the men in the rate and level of education whereas they lead the males in the matter of dropout rate. The discrimination is being carried along through the intergenerational improvement in the rate of literacy. Health discrimination in respect of nutrition and food is not perceivable. But in the maternity and childbirth matters they followed the traditional methods at the risk of mothers' health. They suffer from various diseases more than their counterpart males but they lag behind them in all kinds of the treatment of the diseases. Therefore, this shows that the women's health remains uncared of in view of the male priority as well as the general ideology and the socialization of the women. In the matter of inter- and intra-personal communication, the means of messengers, personal visits and ordinary post cards dominate the scene. After marriage visit to natal home is rare among the women mainly due to economic reasons. Therefore, the social, economic, political, health, educational and communicational status of the women is quite low. The discrimination against these the poor labour class women becomes obvious in the probing into their socialization, ideology, division of work, decision-making, resource enhancement and so on.

The findings indicate that the low status prevails across the community, religion, caste, family, marriage and conjugality wherein the women lacked the basic resources of development; viz., prestige, power, property, education, health and communication. Even their occupational employment outside the house and earning of cash incomes could not change the economic status or otherwise in relation to men in the situation. In spite of the economic base they have, their dependence on men continues in the economic matters as well, apart from other aspects. They are not able to maintain their right to property and ownership of the returns from their employment. They have cash incomes and occupational status and their contribution to their families is no doubt significant, but even this all has not empowered them economically or

otherwise. By their contribution the status of their families improves but the discrimination against the women or the status gap of women with the men remains as usual.

VIII

This situation refutes the second and third hypotheses formulated for investigation in the study. The second hypothesis states: **Access to one or more factors lead to empowerment of women and equality in gender relations.** The third hypothesis reads: **Right to property is the most fundamental factor for gender equalization in a society.** Thus, the economic factor alone or combined with one or two more is not capable to uplift the women in family and society.

But the study proves the third hypothesis: **The historical, cultural and contextual (wealth, power, esteem, etc.) factors dynamically shape the patterns of gender relations, especially the status of women.** Their social status is also determined by the contextual factors like literacy, health, social security, prestige, power and communication besides those of esteem, occupation and income as well as by the factors like historical precedents of social movements, campaigns and other strivings and cultural consciousness of feminist identity in beliefs, customs and ideology. In absence of support from the educational, communicational and / or political contexts the occupational factor alone falls too short of to undo their status gap with the men. Historically, no collective, deliberate and organized action has ever emerged from within or without their social situation to raise their self-consciousness. On the other hand, the historical patriarchic ideology perpetuated through socialization sustains their identities merged with the men and families.

The occupation is not effective enough to generate any surplus from their incomes so as to achieve the support structure of other factors of empowerment. Hence, without the support of other contextual and historical support and ideological awareness the incipient economic factor

ends up at the minimum survival level. Practically, for the empowerment of the women the occupational status has to be boosted along with the awareness through their education or with enhanced political participation at grassroots level. The educational achievement of the new generation females, effect of the electronic media and reservation of the seats in the panchayat points to the fact that a co-coordinated administration of these measures along with other ones will make a dent in the nitty problem of the gender inequality. This support has to be extended by the state or/and Non-Governmental Organizations till these people come out of the state of under-development.

In sum, the vexed and archaic problem of the women's inequality embedded into a host of the factors has to be attempted with a multi-pronged strategy by involving both the sexes so that the identity consciousness may emerge among the women, on the one hand, and by making a gradual transformation of the society, culture and personality at a wider level, on the other. Women have to deliberately be made to share and participate in all aspects and activities of life on the equal footing. That is, the women's uplift has to be a specific programme but it must permeate all the aspects of life simultaneously. Then only the women as a whole can emerge out of the historically underdog position.