

## **Changing Indian Family and the Patterns in Domestic Violence: A Geographical Perspective with Special Reference to the Tribal Areas**

### *An Extended Abstract*

Debendra Kumar Nayak, Ph. D.  
Professor of Social Geography,  
Department of Geography, North-Eastern Hill University,  
Shillong-793022, India  
Email: [dknak@rediffmail.com](mailto:dknak@rediffmail.com)

Globally, violence within the home is universal across culture, religion, class, and ethnicity. Despite this widespread prevalence, however, such violence is not customarily acknowledged and has remained invisible- a problem thought unworthy of legal or political attention. The social construction of the divide between public and private underlies the hidden nature of domestic violence against women. Legal jurisprudence has historically considered the domain of the house to be within the control and unquestionable authority of the male head of household. Thus, acts of violence against members of the household, whether wife or child, were perceived as discipline and essential for maintaining the rule of authority within the family. Available statistics from around the globe indicate that one out of every three women has experienced violence in an intimate relationship at some point in her life. This is only an average based on available national surveys across industrialized and developing countries (World Health Organization 1997).

Statistical evidence on the actual prevalence of domestic violence in India is scant however. This is not surprising considering the fact that it is only in the year 1995 that the Government of India officially recognized domestic violence, particularly violence against women as a critical issue in the country report for the Fourth World Conference on women in Beijing. For many decades, the magnitude of the problem has been hidden behind a cultural emphasis on the privacy and sanctity of the family and on self sacrificing womanhood, as well as generally conservative and insensitive judiciary. Nevertheless, the few studies available on the subject of domestic violence in India indicate that physical abuse of Indian women is quite high, ranging from 22 percent to 60 percent of women surveyed. It may be noted that many of these studies are of qualitative in nature using very small sample size.

Domestic violence is perpetrated by the men and therefore any studies on the pattern of this type of violence involve an understanding of men's role in the family and home. India is a vast country and subsumes within itself a variety of ethnic groups, cultures, values, traditions and ways of living. Interestingly there is a great variation in these attributes of the population across different regions of the country lending itself to a geographical interpretation in the pattern of domestic violence against women which is the main research focus. As is well known, the perceived status and value of women varies greatly across different ecological regions of the country. Many authors have observed a north-south difference in the perceived value of women based on cropping pattern that requires substantive female involvement in agriculture in the latter and their marginal involvement in the former. Likewise, the tribal women have always enjoyed a better status due largely to their egalitarian family structure that rarely distinguishes

between men and women. The depressed class/caste women have always played an important role in the sustenance of their family under difficult conditions. The hold of patriarchal values that are so crucial in the perpetration of domestic violence too is not uniform across geographical regions. All these variations in ecology and culture have defined the sexual division of labour, the place and importance of women in the family and the role of men. The extent of domestic violence against women is thus related to these dimensions.

However, the Indian society is passing through a difficult phase in history. While modern development is paving the way for the general acceptance of the new values which insist on gender equality and free competition between the sexes in the fields of economy, education, administration and arts, traditional secular and egalitarian values are being sidetracked by a heightened concern for the past which has acquired the character of a “revivalist” movement. The two forces are mutually contradictory and antithetical. Modernization, if properly articulated, will ensure a better deal for women. Cultural revivalism will commit them to their traditional roles hastening the process of female subordination. The revivalist tendencies are greatly responsible in changing the role of men in the family and are in a way responsible for an increased violence against women both at home and outside. It is in this context that the present research assumes nuances of meanings.

Fortunately, the National Family and Health Survey has collected very valuable data on the extent and nature of domestic violence against women for all the major states of India for the year 1998-99 that lends itself to a geographical interpretation as the states in India to a very great extent represent the ecological and cultural variation in the country. The data also provides significant information about the violence classified by age, marital status, residence, religion, caste/tribe, household composition and standard of living index. The present paper intends to map the geographical patterning in the extent and type of domestic violence in different regions of India in relation to such explanatory variables as ecology, ethnic composition and agrarian structure etc. The mapping itself reveals the changing family types across different eco-regions and the changing attitudes of men towards women. A special emphasis is laid on the tribal areas of the country where traditional family structure makes little distinction between men and women and the patriarchal norms are less explicit. Domestic violence against women in these areas is unthinkable in the traditional set up. However, these areas have been exposed to exogenetic forces in the recent years through urbanization, industrialization and migration of people of non-tribal origin carrying with them values that are alien to tribal ways of living. This has had a tremendous impact on the traditional values regarding the role of men in the tribal families. The impact of electronic media on changing the attitude of men towards women in the tribal society as well as in others is also an important question that has been addressed in the paper. The study in the final section includes the changing attitude of men towards women and the extent of violence against them in Meghalaya-a state of India in the North-East which contains a large proportion of tribal population and perhaps the only state in India that practices a unique matrilineal social system.