

Introduction:

Conventional wisdom in demography states that women's autonomy is highly correlated with several demographic outcomes. Available literature shows that gender-power relations, as dictated by the existing cultural norms in the North Indian patriarchal kinship system leave women with little or almost no autonomy and provide the central explanatory factor for the very high levels of fertility, and infant, child and maternal mortality in the northern Indian states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. On the other hand, under the South Indian kinship system, women enjoy higher autonomy and status in society resulting in much lower fertility, and lower infant, child and maternal mortality.

However, data from the 1998-99 National Family Health Survey of India (NFHS) shows that the state of Meghalaya, which is the homeland of three matrilineal tribes namely the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo, constituting 86% of the total population of the state, had the **highest fertility (TFR=4.57) in India**. The same survey also shows that the total fertility rate of the state increased by 23% over the eight-year period 1992-1999 although there is a strong possibility that this increase was partially due to other factors such as sampling (urban vs. rural) or better reporting in 1999. This apparent increase and the high level of fertility were in spite of the fact that tribal women in the state of Meghalaya, especially the Khasi women would appear to enjoy a very higher level of autonomy under their traditional matrilineal kinship system than women in other communities under the patriarchal kinship system. Questions then arise: why do Khasi women have the highest fertility in the country in spite of a high level of autonomy? Is women's autonomy necessarily associated with low fertility? Or as cited by Mason (2001), is it dangerous to justify women's autonomy on the basis of demographic outcomes like fertility? This crucial question calls for the need to explore the concept of women's autonomy and the validity of its conventional relationship with demographic outcome in transitional societies.

Theoretical focus:

The overall theoretical framework used in this -study was derived from Freedman's (1963) concept that normative values have a key role in explaining differentials in fertility between groups. The framework portrays the hypothetical relationship between fertility and other variables that influence fertility outcome. There cannot be any argument with the claim that every society has a legitimate interest in its demographic future. From a distance, fertility change that

accompanies social and economic changes shows many similarities across different population groups in different parts of the world, a fact that may have encouraged a uniform or very similar population policy design in widely different countries. At closer range the course of fertility transition is influenced by the institutional endowments each society has inherited through its particular historical experience, and by the continuing process of institutionalisation of individual behaviour as it adjusts to realities, hopes and expectations (McNicoll, 1994). Three major groupings of factors dictate the norms in a society. These can be categorised as ethnic, religious and economic (contextual factors). As described by Freedman (1963), fertility levels in society or fertility differentials between two populations, are mainly the outcomes of existing social norms. But these norms do not directly influence or determine the fertility level in a society and indeed they may not be intended to influence the level of fertility (Bongaarts 1982). It is the influence of the proximate or intermediate variables, which ultimately determines the fertility level in a society. This study integrates this perspective in an overall theoretical framework, which portrays the hypothetical relationship between fertility and different variables influencing it, conceptualised by first making a distinction between **proximate** and **contextual factors** determining fertility. The contextual factors are assumed to affect fertility only through modifying the proximate factors. The theoretical framework focuses on the dependent variable fertility outcome. Fertility outcome pertains to cumulative fertility (children ever born), and total marital fertility.

Data and Research Methods:

This study is predominantly based on primary data collected through the fieldwork survey in Khasi community. Data (both quantitative and qualitative) were collected during January – June 2000. A total of around 400 ever-married women were interviewed. Although the survey was largely conducted through interviews with structured questionnaires, the focus group discussions and the in-depth interviews were integral parts of the survey, and needed a considerable amount of time and effort in successfully organising them to achieve the objectives of the survey. The sample of Khasi women was drawn from two villages in East Khasi Hill districts of Meghalaya. This field-research employed a purposive or judgmental sampling instead of any controlled probability sampling. Almost every household in the villages where at least one eligible woman (ever-married woman in 14-49 age group) was a member of that household, was included for this field research. The selection of the villages was also purposive and the villages were identified based on the basis of higher concentration of population of the particular community.

Findings:

This study establishes that under the matrilineal kinship system, Khasi women are traditionally empowered in one part i.e. control over physical resources, but lack empowerment in intrinsic capability to accept changing traditional ideology. Their self-confidence is low to overcome the external barriers to accept any changes needed to make themselves better off. This study has found that though the inheritance of property and descent comes from the mother's side, a Khasi woman is not necessarily bathed in the splendour of power. Far from enjoying the privilege which Khasi matriliney confers upon her, the Khasi woman is a much-burdened individual. By dint of the matrilineal principle of descent and residence, heavy responsibilities are placed upon the woman to ensure the welfare of the family. Moreover, the weak marital tie and the absence of any measure to ensure that men take up their responsibilities towards their wife and children provide ample excuses for many men to leave their wife and children to fend for themselves. This attitude is especially common among the poorer sections of society where incidentally the rates of separation and divorce are also high. The first and foremost criticism of the matrilineal system that can be made in the context of this study is that the system undermines the spirit of oneness between husband and wife. The bond of marriage among the Khasis is not very strong because the husband and the wife maintain their own separate clans. The feeling of closeness to other members of the same clan is still strong among the Khasis however distant their relation may be. There is a growing feeling of negligence among the Khasi men under the present matrilineal system. This feeling starts at household level and expands outside to the people and society. Another major drawback of the Khasi matrilineal system is that traditionally Khasi women can not directly participate in politics and administration. Women in Khasi society enjoy social and economic freedom but politics and administration are considered a man's domain. Women are not allowed to attend *Dorbar*, the local judiciary; the village administration is headed by men. At the same time Khasi women have been under tremendous cultural pressure to adhere to traditional values and norms prevailing in their society. There has been a growing perceived fear among the Khasis of losing their cultural identity and also their land to the outsiders. This fear has resulted in a strong feeling for cultural revival, especially among traditional Khasis. They want to reinforce their cultural values by strictly adhering to their traditional norms. The Khasis, traditionally being a strong pro-natalist society, do not want to use contraception and abortion. Preventing births through contraception and abortion is considered to be committing sins in Khasi traditional beliefs. In the wake of cultural revival that has been predominantly promoted by male members in Khasi society through their greater access to political power, these beliefs have become more important as cultural securities and women are under tremendous pressure to follow the pro-

natalist cultural norms. The concept of competitive breeding – number power to remain majority was observed as another dimension that has contributed to some extent to high fertility among the Khasis. These have led to a very low acceptance of contraception and induced abortion resulting in a situation conducive to very high fertility (Total Marital Fertility Rate = 8.9 as found in this study). This paper concludes that while the traditional indicators of women's autonomy are useful as first approximations, they are often not sufficiently sensitive to capture the nuances of gender power relations and the ways in which they govern women's reproductive behaviour. Moreover, one has to look not only at how elements of the environment encourage or inhibit women's empowerment, but at how the empowerment of women (in general and as members of particular classes, castes, ethnic or religious groups, age groups and so on) can transform institutional structures and ideologies.

References:

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