

Culture and the Fragmentation of Women's Agency: Evidence from Tribal and Non-Tribal Communities in Tripura

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Abstract—India's tribes have stood out by virtue of according distinctly higher status and agency to women, manifested in greater personal freedom, mobility, and lack of division of labor along gender lines. However, several scholars have pointed out an ongoing process of socio-cultural adaptation among tribes. A specific dimension of these changes has been the adoption of cultural practices of the dominant non-tribal Hindu community, described by what has been called 'Sanskritization'/'Hinduisation' of tribes in literature. This has arguably caused diminution of women's agency in both the productive and reproductive domains. In this context, drawing on a sample of women from tribal (Reang) and non-tribal (Bengali-speaking) communities inhabiting Tripura, this paper attempts to answer two questions (a) If and to what extent is sociocultural assimilation a reality among the studied tribe? (b) How strongly does sociocultural group belongingness, in fact, impact women's decision-making autonomy in the productive and reproductive spheres? In the absence of longitudinal data, the answer to the aforesaid questions has been sought through comparative study of the Reangs and Bengalis. Results from bivariate and multivariate analyses reveal clear signs of cultural assimilation among Reangs. Culture as embodied in group belongingness, has a significant role in shaping women's agency in both the productive and reproductive dimensions. While Reang women have more agency vis-à-vis their nontribal counterparts in the nonreproductive sphere, the same cannot be said for reproductive agency. One of the interesting findings of the paper is the dissociation between the reproductive and non-reproductive agency dimensions, which inter alia calls into question existing notions of high agency among tribal women in India. One of the main policy implications that follows is that, given the importance of sociocultural groups in determining women's agency, policy interventions targeting specific agency domains seem inevitable to further women's economic and social standing.

Keywords— Culture; Gender; Reproductive Agency; Women's Agency

I. INTRODUCTION

Culture is a term that is generally used to describe the beliefs, customs and social behavior that people express by virtue of belonging to a particular group. Seen from this perspective, tribal communities in India have stood out prominently in terms of according a distinctly higher status to women, as arguably manifest in greater personal freedom, mobility, and lack of division of labor along gender lines. However, researchers working on India's tribes have remarked on an ongoing socio-cultural metamorphosis among tribal societies today. It could largely be a result of comprehensive changes in the economic and socio-political organization of these communities. A specific dimension of these changes has been the adoption of non-tribal cultural beliefs and practices of the dominant Hindu community, described by what has been called 'Sanskritization' or 'Hinduisation' of tribes in literature. A repercussion of such conversions has arguably been a diminution of the status and agency of women with implications for reproductive freedom.

Research on the determinants of reproductive behaviour is immense and growing (see for instance, Bongaarts and Potter, 1983; Caldwell, 2004; Cleland and Wilson, 1987; De Bruijn,

2005 and the literature cited therein). Extant literature reveals economic/demand theories and diffusion theories as the dominant explanations of fertility transitions. While the former stresses the role of economic/socio-economic factors in triggering the onset of smaller family sizes, the latter emphasizes the role of diffusion of the idea of small families largely through social learning and social influence. [A detailed review of the theories together with their variants and implications is contained in Sinha (2015 b)]. Interestingly and perhaps inevitably, the recognition of the role of culture in ideational diffusion has led to a burgeoning interest in understanding culture and its role in fertility transition.

However, the relation between culture and fertility has proved to be an area of immense challenge for demographers. More often than not the conceptualization of culture as an 'identifier' (see for instance Hammel, 1990) has led to severe restrictions in the way it has been incorporated in demographic inquiries, (mostly as a summary or dummy variable capturing language, region, social group, and the like), and as a result, these studies could not illuminate the way cultural factors affect the process of fertility transition. Much more promising avenues for exploring these relationships arrived with the incorporation of specific aspects of culture, viz., age at

marriage, kinship patterns and post-marriage residence, cultural norms governing lactation and post-partum abstinence, and female autonomy or agency, which largely reflected existing gender relations in any social group. These developments brought into sharp focus the importance of women's autonomy and related factors in fertility transition, and in the analysis of demographic processes overall. However, it is rather remarkable that even though gender had entered demographic discourse, few studies actually adopted, what might be called, an essentially gender perspective on the subject. This is because of the use of proxies such as education and employment for the measurement of women's autonomy. In a nutshell, crucial aspects of gender viz., its contextualization remained largely ignored.

A significant development in this field was the recognition of the multidimensional aspect of women's agency and the incorporation of more direct measures of agency such as household decision-making power and freedom of movement (see, for instance, Collins et al. 1993; Mason 1986). Still, one could point out that even these measures require further refinement in the sense that they assume cultural homogeneity when assessing women's agency. To give a simple example freedom of movement may be culturally sanctioned norm for women in some societies, whereas it may not be in others. Xaxa (2004) points out that the inference of relatively higher agency of tribal women vis-à-vis non-tribes is based on values of the dominant social group. For instance, on the issue of liberty of movement, among non-tribes/dominant social groups in India, women from so-called upper castes traditionally have had less mobility (see, for instance, Joshi, Kochhar and Rao, 2017). Thus, women among them who by virtue of their merit (or circumstance or both) could gain such mobility are looked upon as possessing greater agency, and expected to act with more sovereignty in other dimensions of their lives too. However, determining if mobility among tribal women, where there is less cultural control over female movement (see, for example, Maharatna, 2005), has comparable correlations with agency necessitates a closer inspection of the environment in which such mobility occurred. The growing evidence of the dissonance of the non-reproductive and reproductive dimensions of women's agency, backed by evidence of higher fertility among tribes, against popular theory, calls for a closer look into the subject.

While gender and culture are now widely recognized as central to understanding reproductive behaviour, existing studies rarely examine whether women's agency operates uniformly across different domains of life. In particular, the distinction between reproductive and non-reproductive dimensions of agency remains underexplored, especially in the context of tribal societies where conventional indicators often suggest relatively higher autonomy. This limitation is critical because such measures fail to explain observed demographic patterns, including relatively high fertility and low contraceptive use among tribal populations. This paper addresses this gap by examining how sociocultural group belongingness shapes women's agency differently across reproductive and non-reproductive spheres, using a comparative analysis of tribal (Reang) and non-tribal (Bengali) women within a similar socio-economic setting.

To address this gap, the aim of the present paper is two-fold, viz., (a) to assess the nature and degree of sociocultural assimilation occurring among the Reangs and (b) to understand and analyze the extent to which sociocultural

group belongingness impacts women's decision-making agency in the productive and reproductive spheres. The following are the questions that this paper seeks to answer:

- 1. To what extent does women's agency differ between tribal (Reang) and non-tribal (Bengali) communities across multiple domains?
- 2. Is women's agency domain-specific, particularly between reproductive and non-reproductive spheres?
- 3. What sociocultural and institutional factors (e.g., dowry, occupation, mobility) determine reproductive decision-making agency?

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Detailed information has been collected from 200 individuals (100 Reang women and 100 Bengali women) from a village council called Khilpara in Matarbari block, using semi structured interview schedule (that included both open-ended and pre-coded responses). It should be noted here that the sample of 100 rural Bengali women has been selected randomly from a village council called Khilpara in the Matarbari block of Gomati district. One hundred Reang women from the same block have been chosen for comparison. This has been done to ensure that broad development indicators remain the same for the two populations and the resulting differences can be attributed largely to individual characteristics and embodied cultural behaviour.

The interviews were conducted the assistance of an interpreter, who speaks both the Reang dialect (Kau-Bru) and Bengali, even though many Reang respondents have a basic knowledge of the local Bengali vernacular. Information on particular aspects of reproductive decision, particularly reasons for non-use of temporary contraceptive methods and related health issues has been gathered from key local informants, viz., Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA).

The women's schedules have been specifically designed for the purpose of analyzing the role of gender systems in determining reproductive autonomy and thus, similar to other large-scale sample survey schedules (e.g., the DHS). However, in addition to it data was also collected on gender ideology as reflected in attitudinal questions guided by current research in the field, such as, primary of male breadwinner role as data on gender division of domestic chores. Alongside the women's schedule included questions on son preference as measured by predilection towards sons over daughters in the desired family composition and her perceptions about her husband's desire in the same matter. A modified version of the scale employed by Upadhyay et al. (2014), to measure reproductive autonomy, has been used, which uses a scale of 10 items. It includes three sub-scales measuring decision-making autonomy, freedom from coercion and spousal communication (see Appendix I for a list of items included in the scale). Also, should be mentioned that factor analysis has been used in the construction of the indices by the method of principal components.

III. SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF REANGS AND BENGALIS

Let us begin with a basic description of the Bengali-speaking (Bengali from now on) women of our sample in a comparative perspective with the Reang women. Table 1 presents the percentage distribution of Reang and Bengali

women on various indices of agency. Explanation of the indices shown in the table is contained in the appendix. It will be recalled that the items included in the various scales are presented in Appendices I and II and hence we refrain from reiterating the items. As will be seen from the table, a significantly larger proportion of Reang women score high on

the index of participation in household decision-making as compared to Bengali women. In fact, we find that a large majority of Reang women participate in decision-making along with their husbands (around 65 percent). But, as can be seen from the table, just around 29 percent of Bengali women score high on household decision-making

TABLE I. CONTINGENCY TABLE OF REANG AND BENGALI WOMEN ON VARIOUS INDICES OF AGENCY

Indices	Agency	Reang	Bengali	Chi-square value
Household Decision-making	Low	34.7%	71.2%	23.556***
	High	65.3%	28.8%	
	Total %	100	100	
Mobility	Low	64.3%	63.8%	0.005
	High	35.7%	36.2%	
	Total %	100	100	
Gender Division of Domestic chores	Low	34.7%	82.5%	40.889***
	High	65.3%	17.5%	
	Total %	100	100	
Male Breadwinner Norm Adherence	Low	4.1%	87.0%	62.604***
	High	95.9%	13.0%	
	Total %	100	100	
Non-traditional Gender Role	Low	22.4%	84.8%	55.257***
	High	72.6%	15.2%	
	Total %	100	100	
Reproductive Decision-making	Low	36.7%	21.2%	5.051**
	High	63.3%	78.8%	
	Total %	100	100	
Spousal Communication	Low	20.4%	62.5%	32.705***
	High	79.6%	37.5%	
	Total %	100	100	

Note: *** significant at 1% level ** significant at 5% level * significant at 10% level

index. However, there is no significant difference between the two communities in terms of women’s freedom of movement (Table 1).

That the Reang community is still largely gender egalitarian in both absolute and relative terms finds expression in the egalitarian gender division of domestic chores as well as gender role ideology. As can be seen from the Table, almost 65 per cent of Reang women score high on the index of gender division of domestic chores, which basically conveys that for a majority of Reang women; husbands sharing domestic chores with them are a regular affair. However, this seems to be true for only a minority of the Bengali women, and just around 17 percent scored high on this index. Likewise, while almost all Reang women revealed that they did not endorse the male breadwinner norm and believed that women should earn and contribute to family expenses as well, the vast majority of Bengali women were found not to adhere to this gender egalitarian ideology. Also, as will be observed from the table, similar differences are found to exist between Reang and Bengali women in performing non-traditional gender roles (of course, apart from being involved in directly productive activities) in terms of taking responsibility for education and health of children by guiding them with

homework, taking them to school and visits to doctors (Table 1).

Finally, we look at the indices of reproductive decision-making. Here, we would like to mention that the items on coercion scale have been dropped because we could not obtain reliable data on these items from the Bengali sample. Thus, we present results for two sub-indices viz., reproductive decision-making agency and spousal communication. Of course, the items included in the sub-indices remain unchanged. Among the sub-indices, we find that a much greater proportion of Reang women evince higher scores on spousal communication regarding fertility matters as compared to Bengali women. However, the scenario is just the opposite if we consider reproductive decision-making agency (i.e. whether and what type of contraception to use). As compared to the Reangs, a significantly higher proportion of Bengali women elicits high agency in this dimension of agency.

IV. ROLE OF CULTURAL FACTORS IN DETERMINING CONTRACEPTIVE USE AND REPRODUCTIVE AGENCY

In this section, we look squarely at the role of cultural factors in contraceptive use and reproductive decision-making for the pooled sample consisting of 200 Reang and Bengali women respondents.

TABLE II. DETERMINANTS OF REPRODUCTIVE DECISION-MAKING AGENCY IN COMBINED SAMPLE: RESULTS FROM BINARY LOGISTIC REGRESSION ANALYSES

Variables	Model I Exp (β)	Model II Exp (β)	Model III Exp (β)	Model IV Exp (β)	Model V Exp (β)
Non-Tribe (Reference: Tribe)	2.152**	2.280**	4.264***	2.035	4.138*
Woman's education		0.970	0.945	0.967	0.957
Age			0.956	0.974	0.978
Age at Marriage			0.992	0.704	0.965
No. of Sons			1.141	1.111	1.141
Occupation of Woman: Not working					
Cultivator			1.818	1.576	1.599
Agricultural Labourer			1.451	0.585	0.600
Salaried			0.298	0.652	0.703
Household Decision-Making agency: High (Ref: Low)			-	0.980	0.999
Freedom of Movement: High (Ref: Low)			-	0.291	0.305
Household Structure (Ref: Nuclear)			-	0.707	0.749
Dowry payment: Paid (Ref: Not Paid)			-	3.538**	7.850***
Mobility Occupation Interaction (Reference: High mobility and cultivator)					
High mobility and agricultural worker				3.316	2.906
High mobility and salaried				7.154*	7.331*
Dowry social group interaction Bengali (Reference: paid dowry and tribe)				-	0.227
Nagelkerke R square	0.040	0.044	0.141	23.1	24.5

Note: *** significant at 1% level; ** significant at 5% level; * significant at 10% level

Table 2 presents the results of binary logistic analyses for the determinants of reproductive decision-making for the combined sample of Reangs and Bengalis. Five logistic regressions have been carried out to explore the strength and significance of sociocultural groups in determining reproductive decision-making. As will be seen from Model I, sociocultural group belongingness is associated with reproductive decision-making and the association is statistically significant. Women belonging to the non-tribal community viz., Bengalis are nearly two times more likely to evince higher agency in the reproductive decision-making vis-à-vis the Reangs. Models II and III present the results of determinants of reproductive decision-making with women's educational attainment, age, age at marriage, number of sons and occupation as additional explanatory variables. As will be seen from the table above, inclusion of education as an additional factor in Model II leaves the model fit (Nagelkerke R square) practically unchanged and needless to say, the education variable is statistically insignificant. Among other competing explanations, it could be mentioned here that a possible explanation for this finding could be that unless formal education reaches a certain threshold, it is unlikely to influence agency in reproductive decision-making process as pointed out by Jejeebhoy (1991) and in such cases family planning education could be combined with adult education to overcome this hurdle (Gallo et al. 2019).

From the results of Model III it will be observed that sociocultural group not only retains its significance after the inclusion of the aforementioned factors, but in fact, the size of

the coefficient of the sociocultural variable increases and it turns even more significant at less than 1 per cent level. As will be seen, none of the variables except sociocultural group are significant, though the model as a whole has better explanatory power as compared to the previous ones. Among the various factors examined in Model III the beta coefficients of age, age at marriage and number of sons are close to one, signifying that they contribute practically nothing to the explanation of variation in reproductive decision-making in the sample. However, higher number of births has been found to be associated with greater agency in this sphere, though the association is not statistically significant (which could be partly attributable to the small sample size, n= 200). Also, the change in the size and significance of the sociocultural variable in this model suggests that the other variables included here, especially number of sons and occupation, are confounders and have a relation with both sociocultural group and reproductive decision-making variables.

In Model IV we further add women's household decision-making and freedom of movement as also dowry payments and an interaction term for type of occupation and freedom of movement as independent variables. Here, we come across several interesting findings. The first is that after inclusion of these additional variables, the sociocultural factor turns insignificant though there is no reversal of the direction of association i.e. belonging to the Bengali community is still associated with higher odds of reproductive decision-making agency. Specifically, the sociocultural variable turns insignificant when dowry is factored in (however, there seems to be an interaction between dowry payments and sociocultural group and that is taken care of in the final model). Also, the women's non-reproductive agency variables

are not significant determinants of the level of women's decision-making agency in reproductive matters. Neither household decision-making nor freedom of movement is found to be statistically significant. This lends support to the argument that the reproductive and non-reproductive domains of agency are essentially distinct and the former may or may not be related to the latter depending on the specific context of the study. Dowry payments have a positive and significant association with agency in reproductive decision-making and in fact have the strongest association among all independent variables in the model.

The findings from Model IV also highlight that freedom of movement associated with different types of work has different implications for agency in the reproductive domain. In this case, women who have high mobility and are engaged as cultivators on family farms have been chosen as the reference category. Women employed as agricultural workers do not evince significantly higher reproductive decision-making agency compared to the reference category. However, those engaged in the 'services' sector and report high freedom of movement are nearly 7 times as likely to possess higher agency in decisions in the reproductive sphere as compared to those with high mobility but engaged in their own farms. Indeed, the quality of work has been found to be associated with degree of mobility in research, i.e. whether it allows women mobility into places/spaces culturally 'sanctioned' or reserved for men (see for instance, Menon 2021). In this particular case, it is notable that a majority of women who report employment in the services sector in the rural areas are directly linked to the health sector as accredited social health activists (ASHA) or Anganwadi workers (of course, there are a few school teachers and doctors but the percentage in the sample is negligible) and that could be driving the association strongly in this particular case.

In the final model, Model V, we include an additional interaction term of dowry payments and sociocultural group since it is clear that dowry payments have a different connotation in cultures where it has been the historical norm (i.e. Bengalis) as against one where bride-price has been the norm historically. Sociocultural group belongingness turns significant again. Also significant are the associations of reproductive decision-making agency with dowry payments and the interaction of freedom of movement and type of work. Interesting, the latter interaction term is not significant but the value of the coefficient indicates that dowry payment lowers agency in reproductive matters among the Bengalis as compared to the Reangs. And, the fact that there is an association of dowry with both sociocultural group and with reproductive decision-making agency is borne out by the results. Again, a very important finding is that the impact of dowry is context-specific to a large extent and can have different effects on women's agency depending on the cultural context. While it can be an economic 'resource' to further women's agency in more egalitarian context of tribes, it can be associated with lower agency in more gender stratified societies such as the Bengalis.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

That the Reang community is still largely gender egalitarian in both absolute and relative terms finds expression in the egalitarian gender division of domestic chores as well as gender role ideology. However, even though the effect of holding gender egalitarian beliefs is reflected in greater

household decision-making agency, the scenario is very different if we consider reproductive decision-making agency (i.e. whether and what type of contraception to use). As indicated in the introduction to this paper, there seems to be a divide between women's agency in the reproductive and non-reproductive spheres. While tribal women could have had an edge over non-tribal women in the past in the non-reproductive domain, the same does not seem plausible in the reproductive domain.

Sociocultural group belongingness is associated with reproductive decision-making and the association is statistically significant. Women belonging to the non-tribal community viz., Bengalis are nearly two times more likely to evince higher agency in the reproductive decision-making vis-à-vis the Reangs. Neither household decision-making nor freedom of movement is found to be a statistically significant determinant of reproductive agency. Dowry payments have a positive and significant association with agency in reproductive decision-making and in fact have the strongest association among all independent variables in the model. An imperative policy implication that follows is that given the importance of sociocultural groups in determining women's agency, taking groups into confidence through various interventions seems inevitable to further women's economic and social standing.

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APPENDIX 1: Items used to construct Agency Scales

REPRODUCTIVE DECISION-MAKING		ME AND HUSBAND = 1	MY HUSBAND=0
1.	Who has the most say about whether you use a method to prevent pregnancy?	1	0
2.	Who has the most say about which method you would use to prevent pregnancy?	1	0
FREEDOM FROM COERCION		AGREE = 0	DISAGREE = 1
1.	My husband has stopped me from using a method when I wanted to	0	1
2.	My husband has made it difficult for me to use a FP method	0	1
3.	My partner has repeatedly asked me to have a baby	0	1
SPOUSAL COMMUNICATION		AGREE = 1	DISAGREE = 0
1.	I can easily discuss family planning with my husband	1	0
2.	If I don't want to have a baby now, I can tell my husband	1	0
3.	I can discuss the number of children to have with my husband	1	0

Appendix 2: Components of Household Decision-Making, Mobility and Gender Role Attitude Scales

Who usually makes decisions about the following?		Mainly Respondent= 2	Jointly With Husband = 1	Only Husband= 0
HOUSEHOLD DECISION-MAKING SCALE				
1.	Major household purchases (HH1)	2	1	0
2.	Purchases for daily needs (HH2)	2	1	0
3.	Visit to family and friends (HH3)	2	1	0
4.	Own health care (HH4)	2	1	0
5.	How to spend family's total income (HH5)	2	1	0
MOBILITY SCALE				
Are you usually allowed to go to the following places alone, only with someone else, or not at all?		Alone = 2	With Someone = 1	Not At All = 0
1.	To the market? (MOB1)	2	1	0
2.	To the health facility? (MOB2)	2	1	0
3.	To places outside this (village/community)? (MOB3)	2	1	0
GENDER ROLE ATTITUDE SCALE				
Regarding the relation between you and your wife, who do you think should:		Husband Only = 0	Wife Only = 0	Both = 1
1.	Be the breadwinner	0		1
2.	Buy provisions	0		1
3.	Cook meals		0	1
4.	Wash clothes		0	1
5.	Feed children		0	1
6.	Bathe children		0	1
7.	Take children to school	0		1
8.	Help children with homework	0		1
9.	Take children to doctor	0		1

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Ethical Considerations: Participant consent was obtained during field survey