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Mapping Disparity: Rajbanshi Women and Literacy

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Abstract - Education is considered a key variable not only for widening intellectual horizon of the individual but it also helps a person to make use of coherent and scientific approaches to different problems. But eventually there are marked differences in the literacy rate among the sexes in our country. The differential literacy rate among men and women indicates the existence of discriminatory practices against women. In terms of literacy rate viz. age, sex and rural/urban background, it is evident that a female child is neglected and denied the basic civic amenities. Regarding educational status, empirical researches point out that the level of literacy among women in general and Scheduled Caste women in particular are significantly low. The reasons are varied. The socio- economic factors like lack of awareness on the relevance of education, gender disparity, lack of incentive and low paid laborious occupations etc., causes poverty and illiteracy which in effect also results in gender gap in literacy.

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Mapping Disparity: Rajbanshi Women and Literacy

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Abstract - Education is considered a key variable not only for widening intellectual horizon of the individual but it also helps a person to make use of coherent and scientific approaches to different problems. But eventually there are marked differences in the literacy rate among the sexes in our country. The differential literacy rate among men and women indicates the existence of discriminatory practices against women. In terms of literacy rate viz. age, sex and rural/urban background, it is evident that a female child is neglected and denied the basic civic amenities. Regarding educational status, empirical researches point out that the level of literacy among women in general and Scheduled Caste women in particular are significantly low. The reasons are varied. The socio- economic factors like lack of awareness on the relevance of education, gender disparity, lack of incentive and low paid laborious occupations etc., causes poverty and illiteracy which in effect also results in gender gap in literacy. In this paper I will focus on some serious statistics related to gender gap in literacy of the Rajbanshi women (Under the Scheduled Caste [SC] category of the Indian Constitution) at various levels of education, generated from the field study of the two mouzas, namely Chauhaddi mouza of Dhupguri Block and Gartali Jalpesh mouza of Maynaguri Block. These areas are situated in the District of Jalpaiguri in the State of West Bengal, India.

"Not all women are poor, and not all poor people are women, but all women suffer from discrimination"
(Kabeer, 1996:20)

The Cairo conference in 1994 organized by UN on Population and Development called attention to women's empowerment as a central focus and UNDP developed the Gender Empowerment measure (GEM) which focused on the three variables that reflect women's participation in society – political power or decision-making, education and health.

Most of the social and economic development is correlated of with education. Status of education is related to nature of employment and income. Educational status is an important determinant of the nature of employment and earning of even those who are employed as casual or regular employee in the unorganized sector. The table below shows the percentage distribution of rural women workers by poverty and their education status.¹

Table 1 : The Percentage Distribution of Rural Women Workers by Poverty and their Education Status.

Education status	Extremely Poor	Poor	Marginal	Vulnerable	Middle income	Higher Income	All
Illiterate	81.2	77.5	71.7	62.9	47.5	24.8	64.5
Primary and below	13.7	15.6	17.7	21.5	23.3	22.6	19.7
Middle level	3.9	4.8	7.6	9.9	14.0	16.6	9.2
Secondary & above but below graduate	1.2	1.9	2.7	5.2	12.8	23.5	5.7
Graduate and above	0.0	0.1	0.2	0.5	2.4	12.5	0.9
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

It is obvious from the table that the level of education of the workers has strong association with

their income and even middle level of education makes a big difference. The same article also argues that "One of the major attributes of women engaged in agriculture is their low level of educational attainment. With the ongoing commercialization of agriculture, crop diversification, introduction of new technologies and the imperative for better information processing, education has to be reckoned as a key input in any attempt at overall development and modernization of agriculture. However, the grim picture is that about 86% of female

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¹ Srivastava, Nisha & Ravi Srivastava. 2010 : 'Women, Work, and Employment Outcomes in Rural India'. *Economic and Political Weekly*. July.

agricultural labourers and 74% of female farmers are either illiterate or have education below the primary level. Shocking as it may seem, the average education of a female agricultural labourer was less than one year in 2004-05.²

Apart from employment and income, the level of education is one important determinant of maintaining good health and avoiding undesirable burden of disease in general and burden of bearing children by the women, which have very important consequences in well being of the individual and the family. People with lower level of education, which is also associated with poverty, fails to access services available or to take precautionary measures due to lack of awareness. National Family Health Survey (NFHS) brought out those features to highlight educational attainment in improving public health. For example, as per NFHS 3 conducted during 2005-06, total fertility rate was 3.07 for illiterate women; 2.43 for those with education below 5 years, 1.92 for women with schooling between 5 to 9 years and only 1.36 for those women who had at least 10 years of schooling. Mean number of children ever born to women aged 40-49 years were 4.4 (2.13); 3.6 (1.73); 2.9 (1.58) and 1.6 (1.22) for the said education categories respectively. The figure in the bracket shows the desired number of children in that category and it is clear that women with lower level of education had to bear higher burden of children as well as higher share of undesired pregnancies. Many of them had to bear child in their teen age. Percentage of girls in the age group 15-19 years who were found to have begun child bearing were 44.1% for those with no education; 29.3% for those with education below 5 years; 23.4% for those with education between 5 to 9 years and only 6.1% for those having at least 10 years of schooling. Thus, level of education has great bearing on population control as well as burden of women in bearing child.³ Access to various health services such as antenatal check up, immunization etc also has strong relationship with the status of education. Therefore, all round development of a society, and

bearing healthy and less number of children may result in educating our women folk. Thus, if we focus on the contribution of women's education to development it is well established fact that educated women contribute towards demographic improvement by reducing fertility, by influencing the age of marriage, by helping to achieve desired family size, by improvement in infant mortality rate, improvement in child health care and nutrition; improving pre- school abilities of children and improvement in the economic status of the family by participating in income earning activities and thereby increasing household earnings. Despite all this, it is unfortunate that female education is still regarded as consumption, if not a burden.⁴

Gender discrimination has been an ongoing feature of economic and social processes in West Bengal. Women here like in many other states in India are the most subjugated and deprived section, grounded in both poverty and ignorance of the patriarchal, caste, class, gender ridden society. Patriarchy confines women's ownership and control over property and other economic resources including the products of their own labor. Women's mobility is constrained and their access to education and information delayed. The clearest examples of gender inequality are the various forms of dispossession and violence thoroughly meted out against women. They are virtually barred from decision making.⁵

Human Development Report in West Bengal presents a sundry picture, and this picture is further intricate by the variations across districts in the state. Table 1 presents the calculations for the Human Development Index for the different districts, as well as for the state as a whole. The table refers to undivided Dinajpur, because of the nature of the data available for consumption, poverty and life expectancy. There are very substantial differences across districts, such that the HDI ranges from a high of 0.78 for Kolkata, to a low of 0.44 for Malda.

Table 2 : Human Development Indices by District.

	Health Index	Income Index	Education Index	HDI	HDI Rank
Darjeeling	0.73	0.49	0.72	0.65	4
Jalpaiguri	0.61	0.38	0.6	0.53	10
Cooch Behar	0.5	0.41	0.65	0.52	11
Dinajpur	0.62	0.39	0.53	0.51	13
Malda	0.49	0.36	0.48	0.44	17

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴Yasmin, Effat. 2011: 'Empowering Women Through Education: Insights from Jammu and Kashmir.' Journal of Women's Studies. pp. 49- 73.

⁵ Mukhopadhyay, Pallav. 2001. 'Problem of Gender Inequality and Expansion of Education of Women in West Bengal.' Deptt. of Journalism & Mass Comm. University of Calcutta.

Murshidabad	0.57	0.29	0.52	0.46	15
Birbhum	0.53	0.27	0.61	0.47	14
Bardhaman	0.74	0.47	0.71	0.64	5
Nadia	0.65	0.41	0.66	0.57	9
N 24 Parganas	0.72	0.49	0.76	0.66	3
Hoogli	0.77	0.46	0.67	0.63	6
Bankura	0.67	0.26	0.62	0.52	11
Purulia	0.61	0.18	0.55	0.45	16
Medinipur	0.68	0.45	0.74	0.62	7
Haoworah	0.77	0.53	0.75	0.68	2
Kolkata	0.82	0.73	0.8	0.78	1
S 24 Parganas	0.71	0.4	0.68	0.6	8
West Bengal	0.7	0.43	0.69	0.61	

Source : West Bengal Human Development Report, 2004.
http://wbplan.gov.in/docs/Executive_Summary_WBHDR2004.doc. 2001. pp.1- 5.

Gender discrimination has been an essential trait of economic and social processes in West Bengal, and while it has declined in some aspects in the recent past, it remains worth mentioning. It is evident in

economic variables and in literacy which indicate improving health position of women relative to men. This is clear in the calculations of the Gender Development Index which are portrayed in Table 3.

Table 3 : Gender Development Indices by District.

	Health Index	Income Index	Education Index	GDI	GDI Rank
Darjeeling	0.731	0.356	0.714	0.600	2
Jalpaiguri	0.614	0.281	0.581	0.492	11
Cooch Behar	0.497	0.287	0.628	0.471	13
Dinajpur	0.616	0.291	0.527	0.478	12
Malda	0.491	0.291	0.465	0.416	17
Murshidabad	0.566	0.176	0.527	0.423	16
Birbhum	0.533	0.178	0.595	0.435	14
Bardhaman	0.740	0.270	0.669	0.560	7
Nadia	0.649	0.215	0.653	0.506	9
N 24 Parganas	0.721	0.219	0.752	0.564	6
Hoogli	0.764	0.259	0.720	0.581	3
Bankura	0.662	0.215	0.605	0.494	10
Purulia	0.606	0.161	0.506	0.424	15
Medinipur	0.683	0.323	0.728	0.578	4

Hawora	0.773	0.194	0.742	0.570	5
Kolkata	0.824	0.320	0.783	0.642	1
S 24 Parganas	0.705	0.192	0.666	0.521	8
West Bengal	0.697	0.270	0.681	0.549	
<i>Source : West Bengal Human Development Report, 2004.</i> http://wbplan.gov.in/docs/Executive_Summary_WBHDR2004.doc, pp.1- 5.					

It is worth noting that the rankings of the GDI largely follow the same pattern as the HDI rankings. In the districts with low HDI also tend to have low GDI. However, some districts such as Haowrah, North 24 Parganas, Bardhaman and Koch Behar tend to have worse ranking in GDI than HDI, suggesting especially acute gender discrimination. The very low "Income index" module of the GDI basically reflects the low workforce participation of women in West Bengal. This in turn suggests a combination of greater restrictions on women's economic agency as well as social lack of recognition of women's unpaid work. Both of these West Bengal Human Development Reports suggest a major trace of gender discrimination in our society⁶.

I. LITERATURE REVIEW

Regardless of slow but steady economic growth since Independence in India, gender gaps in literacy and enrollment have closed little if at all (King and Hill 1993:6). The most obvious hint for a progress impact on lower gender differentials in schooling is the fact that gender gaps in education is likely to be biggest among the poorest countries (Hill and King 1993, World Bank 2001). Using a multi-dimensional indicator of gender inequality that included educational differences, Forsythe, Korzeniewicz and Durrant found that only among rich countries development reduced gender inequalities. Sundaram (2000), by using 1981 Indian district data, found that districts with low levels of agricultural development, as measured by crop value per agricultural worker, had more gender inequality in rural literacy rates. Thus, there is also some evidence within developing countries that the poorest areas have larger gender disparities in education. Some studies reveal that increases in household income add to the probability that girls will be enrolled in school more than the probability that boys will be enrolled in school (World Bank 2001). Sipahimalani (1999) found that a 1 percent increase in household income in India, increases the probability of girls being enrolled by 9 to 13 percent, while the probability of boys being enrolled in school increases by 7 percent. Sundaram's study of 1981

Indian districts (2000) also found that the greater the availability of education as measured by teachers per child, the smaller the gender gap in literacy among children aged 10 to 14.

Horne (2000) in one of his studies revealed that educational performance at school has been found to vary according to the students' sex. Gender disparity in schooling is also observed among the younger population, where female school enrolment in basic and secondary education is less compared to the male children (Tansel, 2002; Erturk and Daylo' Lu, 2004). Mostly, girls drop out before completing four years of primary school (Women: Looking beyond 2000, 1995). Gender difference is reflected in access to educational, empowerment to political power and allocation of resources within the household sector as well (Dutta and Bandopadhyay, 2004). Ramchandran (2003), in an empirical study revealed that if regularity in school could be ensured in case of girls, they performed as well, if not better than boys in school. It is observed that gender gap in enrolment persists at all levels for all the considered years. In a study by Gupta (2004) it has been observed that boys get opportunity to continue their education in spite of their disadvantaged social family background because they are considered as assets of family for economic and social reasons. This is a reflection of social attitude, which definitely indicates bias in favour of boys. Moss and Brown (1979) concluded that sex differences occur in academic achievement partially due to biases and stereotypes.

The review of relevant literature shows that various studies have been conducted considering different social parameters which may have bearing with educational achievement of the students but the comparative studies on SCs and specially Rajbanshi (women) are hardly any, especially in West Bengal, considering gender issues.

⁶ Ibid.

II. FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY AREAS

West Bengal is a state where general, SCs, STs, minorities, OBCs etc, population reside in the same geographical parameter. Given below is a list of sixteen major SCs of the state.

Table 4 : Population and Proportion of Sixteen Major Scheduled Castes in West Bengal, Census 2001.

SL.	Name of the Scheduled Castes	Total Population	Proportion to the Total Scheduled Caste Population
1.	All Scheduled Castes	18,452,555	100%
2.	Rajbanshi	3,386,617	18.4
3.	Namasudra	3,212,393	17.4
4.	Bagdi	2,740,385	14.9
5.	Pod	2,216,513	12.0
6.	Bauri	1,091,022	5.9
7.	Chamar	995,756	5.4
8.	Jalia Kaibartta	409,303	2.2
9.	Hari	390,619	2.1
10.	Dhoba	369,808	2.0
11.	Sunri (excluding Saha)	317,543	1.7
12.	Dom	316,337	1.7
13.	Jhalo Malo	293,714	1.6
14.	Lohar	279,582	1.5
15.	Mal	273,641	1.5
16.	Kaora	263,731	1.4
17.	Tiyar	195,340	1.1
<i>Source: Census. 2001. Office of the Registrar General, India.</i>			

According to Table- 4, the Rajbanshi and Namasudra having more than 32 lakhs population each constitute 35.8 per cent of the total SC population of the state. Bagdi, Pod, Bauri and Chamar each have more than 10 lakhs population. They along with Rajbanshi and Namasudra together constitute 73.9 per cent of the total SCs. The Jalia Kaibartta, Hari, Dhoba, Sunri (excluding Saha), Dom, Lohar, Mal, Kaora, and Tiyar have sizeable population (Statement-1). The rest of the SCs have a comparatively smaller population.

Table 5: Literacy Rate among Sixteen Major Scheduled Castes in West Bengal, Census 2001.

SL.	Name of the Scheduled Castes	Literacy Rate (above 7+ years)		
		Total	Male	Female
1.	All Scheduled Castes	59.0	70.5	46.9
2.	Rajbanshi	60.01	72.3	47.3
3.	Namasudra	71.9	80.6	62.8
4.	Bagdi	47.7	60.4	34.8
5.	Pod	72.1	83.5	59.9
6.	Bauri	37.5	51.8	22.7
7.	Chamar	47.0	58.6	34.1
8.	Jalia Kaibartta	64.9	74.4	54.8
9.	Hari	49.5	61.6	36.8
10.	Dhoba	73.9	83.5	63.6
11.	Sunri (excluding Saha)	82.5	92.7	71.4
12.	Dom	46.0	58.9	32.6
13.	Jhalo Malo	60.3	68.4	51.7
14.	Lohar	46.5	61.1	31.3
15.	Mal	39.6	51.9	26.8
16.	Kaora	53.0	64.9	40.6
17.	Tiyar	62.1	73.5	50.1
<i>Source: Census. 2001 Office of the Registrar General, India.</i>				

According to Table- 5, among all SCs, 59 percent of the population is literate, which is higher than the aggregated national average for SCs (54.7 percent). The gender gap in literacy among SCs is quite conspicuous with male and female literacy rates of 70.5 per cent and 46.9 per cent per cent respectively. The Sunri (excluding Saha) with 82.5 per cent literacy is on top of the list. Other SCs who have recorded literacy rate higher than the state average for SCs are Dhoba (73.9

percent), Pod (72.1 percent), Namasudra (71.9 percent), Jalia Kaibartta (64.9 percent), Tiyar (62.1 per cent), and Rajbangshi (60.1 percent). Bauri have the lowest literacy rate (37.5 percent).

The gender gap in literacy has been noted among the major SCs,. It is high (29 percentage points) among Lohar and Bauri. In case of the Rajbanshis the gender gap in literacy it is 25 percent. It is comparatively small (16 percent) among Namasudra and Jhalo Malo.

Table 6 : Literacy Rate of the Total (7 years and above) Population and SC Population of Jalpaiguri District, 2006.

Jalpaiguri	Population Literate	Percent	Male Literate	Percent	Female Literate	Percent
Total Population	1810083	62.85	1082575	59.81	727508	40.19
Total SC Population	648956	35.85	396936	61.16	252020	38.83
<i>Source : Jalpaiguri District Statistical Handbook, Bureau of Applied Economics and Statistics. Govt of West Bengal. 2006.</i>						

In the district of Jalpaiguri, according to 2006, District Statistical Handbook, 62.85 percent (above- 6 years population) of the total population is literate, among which 59.81 percent is male and 40.19 percent female. The gender gap in literacy is 19.62 percent points.

Among 35.85 percent SC literate population 61.16 percent are male and 38.83 percent are female literates. The gender gap in literacy is 22.23 percent points. Hence, it is found that the gender gap in literacy is higher in case of SC females than the total female population of the district.

Table 7 : Total number of SC Literate in Dhupguri and Maynaguri Blocks, 2001.

Total literate	Total SC Population	Percent	Male Population	Percent	Female Population	Percent
Dhupguri	92732	52.98	57451	61.95	35281	38.05
Maynaguri	105631	52.94	64960	61.50	40671	38.50
<i>Source: Primary Census Abstract Vol. II. Directorate of Census Operations. West Bengal. 2001.</i>						
Table- A- 8.						

The picture is same in case of the two blocks under Jalpaiguri District, namely Dhupguri and Maynaguri.

Literacy Rate and Various Literacy Levels of the Total Population and Rajbanshi Population of the Chauhaddi Mouza and Gartali Jalpesh Mouza.

Table 8 : Literacy Rate of the Total Population of Chauhaddi Mouza and Gartali Jalpesh Mouza, 2009- 2010.

Chauhaddi	Total	Percent	Male	Percent	Female	Percent
Total Literate Population	1044	48.45	602	57.66	442	42.34
Rajbanshi Literate Population	582	46.08	319	54.81	263	45.19

Gartali Jalpesh	Total	Percent	Male	Percent	Female	Percent
Total Literate Population	1350	77.36	734	54.37	616	45.63
Rajbanshi Literate Population	910	72.39	523	57.47	387	42.53

According to Table- 8, among the total population of Chauhaddi mouza, 48.45 percent is literate among which 57.66 percent is male and 42.34 percent is female. The gender gap in literacy is 15.32 percent points. In case of the Rajbanshis the gender gap in literacy is 9.62 percent points. It is visible that the gender gap in literacy among the Rajbanshis is less than the total population.

Again in case of Gartali Jalpesh mouza is 77.36 percent population is literate among which 54.37 percent is male and 45.63 percent is female. Here the gender gap in literacy is 8.74 percent points. In case of the Rajbanshis this gap is 14.94 percent points.

Therefore, the Rajbanshi women are much backward in literacy than the total female population.

The difference in the gender gap in literacy among the Rajbanshi women of both the mouzas vary. This is because due to abundance of minority population in Chauhaddi mouza. The Muslims are minorities over here. Educationally and socio-economically they are very backward. As a major part of the total population constitute of these muslim people the gender gap in literacy is high among the total population than the Rajbanshi population in Chauhaddi mouza.

Table 9 : Percentage Distribution of Total Rajbanshi Literates in Various Levels of Education by Sex of Chauhaddi Mouza and Gartali Jalpesh Mouza, 2009- 2010.

Education Group	Rajbanshi Population Chauhaddi Mouza						Rajbanshi Population Gartali Jalpesh Mouza					
	Total		Male		Female		Total		Male		Female	
	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent
Can Sign	51	8.76	28	54.90	23	45.10	187	20.55	89	47.59	98	52.41
Primary	202	34.71	115	56.93	87	43.07	254	27.91	134	52.76	120	47.24
Middle	204	35.05	112	54.90	92	45.10	248	27.25	158	63.71	90	36.29
Secondary	94	16.15	47	50.00	47	50.00	143	15.71	91	63.64	52	36.36
Higher Secondary	26	4.47	14	53.85	12	46.15	47	5.16	32	68.09	15	31.91
Graduate	4	0.69	3	75.00	1	25.00	28	3.08	15	53.57	13	46.43
Masters	1	0.17	1	100.00	0	0.00	3	0.33	3	100.00	0	0
Total	582	100	319	54.81	263	45.19	910	100	522	57.36	388	42.63

Primary Level- Class I- IV; Middle Level- Class V- VIII; Secondary Level Class IX- X; Higher Secondary Level Class- XI- XII; Graduate Level 3 years degree course; Masters Level 2 years degree course.

The above Table- 9 portrays the educational statistics of the Rajbanshi population of Chauhaddi mouza and Gartali Jalpesh mouza at various levels by sex. The table also portrays the wide gender gap in literacy among the Rajbanshi women.

In Chauhaddi mouza, the proportionate of Rajbanshi literates without having any literacy level is 8.76 percent among which, 54.90 percent is male and 45.10 percent female. 34.71 percent population is literate up to primary level among which, 56.93 percent

is male and 43.07 percent female. At the middle level 35.05 percent population is literate among which 54.90 percent is male and 45.10 percent female. At the secondary level 16.15 percent is literate among which, 50 percent male and 50 percent female. At the higher secondary level, 4.47 percent population is literate among which, 53.85 percent male and 46.15 percent female. At the graduate level, 0.69 percent population is literate among which, 75 percent male and 25 percent female. At the master degree level, 0.17 percent male population and no female literates are found at this level.

The gender gap in literacy is high at the primary level which is 13.86 percent points. At the secondary level the gap is bridged. At the graduate level the gap is highest 50 percent points.

In Gartali Jalpesh mouza, the proportionate of Rajbanshi literates without having any literacy level is 20.55 percent among which, 47.59 percent is male and 52.41 percent female. 27.91 percent population is literate up to primary level among which, 52.76 percent is male and 47.24 percent female. At the middle level 27.25 percent population is literate among which 63.71 percent is male and 36.29 percent female. At the secondary level 15.71 percent is literate among which, 63.64 percent male and 36.36 percent female. At the higher secondary level, 5.16 percent population is literate among which, 68.09 percent male and 31.91 percent female. At the graduate level, 3.08 percent population is literate among which, 53.57 percent male and 46.43 percent female. At the masters level, 0.33 percent male population is literate, without any female literate. The gender gap in literacy is high at the middle, secondary and higher secondary level which are respectively 27.42 percent, 27.28 percent and 36.18 percent points.

III. REASONS BEHIND LOW LITERACY RATES OF RAJBANSHI FEMALES

An eminent feminist critic, Susan Moller Okin in 'Justice, Gender, and the Family', a significant piece of work of her, portrays some of her concerns about gender issues at the familial and societal sphere. By 'gender' Okin means "the deeply entrenched institutionalization of sexual difference"⁷ She argues that gender is "largely socially produced."⁸ "[E]quality

of opportunity, not only for women but for children of both sexes, is seriously undermined by the current gender injustices of our society."⁹ Okin maintains that the gender structure within the family is a major obstacle to equal opportunity.¹⁰ According to Okin the family "is the place where we become our gendered selves;" and, "the division of labor within the gendered-structure family raises both practical and psychological barriers against women in all other spheres of life."¹¹

A number of feminist scholars (Okin 1989, Bubeck 1995, Fraser 1996) has been regarded the so-called conventional gendered division of labor - prescribing a specialization in paid productive work for men and unpaid "reproductive" work for women, as the primary cause of women's social and economic inequality. Urged by much exposed ethics of femininity and masculinity, and enforced by many social and legal norms, the gendered division of labor gets to mold actual people's lives and thought process. And this is so even today, when so many women have entered the labor market, for the recommendation still holds that these women may choose to have a job, but familial responsibilities are still all theirs, a "second shift" for them to perform (Hochschild 1989). In The Second Shift, sociologist Arlie Hochschild demonstrates how so many working women today have two work shifts: their paid job outside and their unpaid job at home doing housework and child care. She calculates that, because of these two shifts, "women worked roughly fifteen hours longer each week than men. Over a year, they worked an extra month of twenty-four-hour days a year."¹² She concludes¹³:

Most women without children spend much more time than men on housework; with children, they devote more time to both housework and child care. Just as there is a wage gap between men and women in the workplace, there is a "leisure gap" between them at home. Most women work one shift at the office or factory and a "second shift" at home.

So be it as full time homemakers or double shifters, household and care work is still overwhelmingly women's work, which in turn is not without consequence as to the modalities of women's labor market participation, women being more likely to work part-time and to withdraw temporarily from the work force to accommodate family responsibilities, leading to a less stable and profitable working life. The fact that women effectively bear exclusive (or main) responsibility for socially useful yet unpaid and undervalued household and caring work has several adverse consequences for women. The most immediate and apparent is deprivation of a (sufficient and reliable) independent income, which leads to domination while living with a (male) partner, and grave risk of poverty after a breakup or death of partner, especially when children are involved.¹⁴

In 1970, Ester Boserup published *Women's Role in Economic Development*, a critical and significant

⁷ Okin, Susan Moller. 1989: *Justice, Gender and the Family*. New York: Basic Books. p. 6

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. p. 14.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 16.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 111.

¹² Hochschild, Arlie. 1989: *The Second Shift*. New York: Avon Books. p. 3.

¹³ Ibid. p. 4.

¹⁴ Cited from Bhattacharyya, Ghosh. Moumita. 2001: 'Gender and Discrimination: The Case of the Rajbanshi women', published in the journal Voice of Dalit. Vol. 4(2). I have discussed elaborately.

work of her. Here, she argued that in changing industrial societies, women faced further marginalization rather than increased freedom. The introduction of new agricultural technologies in developing countries leads to greater yields, shifting agriculture from the subsistence level to market production. Labor specialization became inevitable in order to maximize efficiency of production. If specialization is decided upon comparative advantage, those who have greater decision making power, autonomy and higher levels of education will assume authority over market activities. In most societies around the world, culture and tradition dictate that these individuals are men. Thus, Boserup writes, "The process of increasing specialization of labor is accompanied by an increasing hierarchization of the labor force and a gradual adaptation of the sex distribution of work".¹⁵

Comparative advantage assumes that both parties are capitalizing on their economic strengths in order to reap economic gains. Women's labor in the home, however, is often unpaid. In the public- private dichotomy then, males earn wages while women do not, creating the dependency of women on men (Okin, 1989, 1994). Dependency constraints one's freedom to live one's life in the manner she sees fit. Further more, gains made from economic activity are not only associated with material worth, but also individual and societal worthiness. Those with more material resources enjoy greater power and authority over those with less. Thus, women are not only subordinate in the home to their wage- earning husbands, but also subordinate in society as a group for their lack of independent economic resources.¹⁶

The public- private dichotomy carries deleterious consequences for women's agency and well- being. When a women's place in society is tied only to her reproductive capacity, there exist few incentives to justify equal allocation of resources between sons and

daughters . A daughter is a "lost investment."¹⁷ The deprivation of resources to girls is most acutely witnessed among the poor. The public- private dichotomy thus explains in part why girls are educated at rates far less than boys, why women's literacy falls behind men's, and why sex ratios in certain areas fall drastically below the norm of 1.022 women to men.¹⁸

According to Sen, in family behavior, inequalities between women and men (and between girls and boys), are often accepted as natural or appropriate. Sometimes the operational decisions relating to these inequalities (e. g. providing more health care or nutritional attention to boys vis- a vis girls) are undertaken and executed through the agency of women themselves. The perceived justness of such inequalities and the absence of any contrary sense of deep injustice play a major part in the operation and survival of these arrangements. This is not the only field in which the survival of extra ordinary inequality is based on making 'allies' out of those who have most to lose of such arrangements. It is, therefore, important to scrutinize the under-lying concepts of justice and injustice, and to seek a confrontation between theory and practice.¹⁹

A closer look at the family reveals that in many parts of the world, girls are fed less well than boys, less frequently taken to the doctor when ill, less well educated, less well protected from violence, all this if they are permitted to survive infancy in the first place. To reveal these facts, new methods needed to be devised.²⁰

The status of women in a society is measured in terms of educational level, income level, employment as well as the various roles played by them in the family, society and the community. Indian women's status, role and their problems are linked to the history and traditional social system of the country. Women constitute half of the population, yet they are not treated on par with men in many aspects of life. Though so many years have passed since we have achieved independence, women are yet in the grip of conventional roles. In our country, women usually have been linked to home and hearth. This has traditionally resulted in their economic dependence, social neglect and political ignorance which in their turn have prevented women to attain their due place in the society.²¹

In family behavior, inequalities between men and women (and between boys and girls), are often accepted as 'natural' or 'appropriate' (even though typically not explicitly discussed). Sometimes the operational decisions relating to these inequalities (e.g. providing more health care or nutritional attention to boys vis- a- vis girls) are undertaken and executed through the agency of women themselves.²² Although, in Rajbanshi society, the above mentioned situation was different before 1934- 1935 A. D, before the Kshatriya movement, under the leadership of Thakur Panchanan

¹⁵ Boserup, Ester. 1970: *Women's Role in Economic Development*. New York: St. Martin's Press. p. 9.

¹⁶ Chiang, May. K. 2005: 'Women's Empowerment Vs Women in Power – Gender Inequality and Political Representation in Asia'. Public Policy Program: Stanford University. p. 9.

¹⁷ Sen, Amartya. 1999: *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 106.

¹⁸ Cited from Chiang, May. K. 2005: Women's Empowerment Vs Women in Power – Gender Inequality and Political Representation in Asia'. Public Policy Program: Stanford University.

¹⁹ Sen, Amartya. 1995: 'Gender Inequality and Theories of Justice' in *Women, Culture and Development*, Martha Nussbaum and Jeff Glover (eds.). Oxford: Clarendon Press. p. 206.

²⁰ Nussbaum, Martha. 1979: 'Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defence of Reform in Liberal Education' in *Women's Studies*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. p.188.

²¹ Bhattacharyya, Ghosh. Moumita. 2001: 'Gender and Discrimination: The Case of the Rajbanshi women', published in the journal *Voice of Dalit*. Vol. 4(2). I have discussed elaborately.

²² Sen, Amartya.1995: 'Gender Inequality and Theories of Justice' in *Women, Culture and Development*, Martha Nussbaum and Jeff Glover (eds), Oxford: Clarendon Press. p.260.

Burman took off. Female autonomy was observed at its best. My conversation with Dr. Deepak Kumar Roy²³ and consultation of various literatures has revealed that the Rajbanshi society observed various traits of matrilineal society. Firstly, in this society folk deities are predominant. Female gods are worshiped from ancient times; where as the number of male gods are very few. One of their major deities is 'ma monosha' or locally termed as 'Bishohori'. Secondly, in this society, widow remarriage was there from primeval time (which is also a prominent trait of tribal society). Thirdly, during marriage 'bride price' was taken and the groom used to come and stay with the bride's family. And finally, customs and rituals regarding a Rajbanshi marriage used to be controlled and observed by a female member of the society called 'dhani buri' or 'adhani buri'. Thus from a very primitive age, female members of the society used to administer various important issues inside and outside the households equally and aptly. Therefore, female dominance was there in this society from olden ages. As because, female members enjoyed a great deal of authority in the socio- economic and socio-cultural sphere, the need for education was not considered an important criteria, which can enhance their power or authority.

Whether, gender discrimination was prevalent in this society before the advent of the Kshatriya movement is not very clear. With the advent of the Kshatriya movement under the leadership of Thakur Panchanan Burman, the traits of a matrilineal society gradually started to fade away and patriarchal norms slow but steadily came into existence following the foot steps of the caste Hindu society. Under the patriarchal influence the Rajbanshi society easily fell prey to those issues as gender disparity, female exploitation (at various levels), dowry, etc. Therefore, the marriage rituals which used to be performed under the authorization of a female member of the community called 'dhani buri' or 'adhani buri' was replaced by the priest called 'odhikari'.²⁴ Widow remarriage was no more performed. The male members started to put on 'sacred threads' following the Hindu Brahmins and claimed themselves to be Kshatriyas by performing 'thread wearing ceremony'. Female authority gradually started to fade away and they began to be confined within the households, following the 'bhadramahilas' of the caste Hindu gentry.

Ester Boserup, in her book 'Women's Role in Economic Development' (1970) has argued that in changing industrial societies, women faced further marginalization than increased freedom. The introduction of new agricultural technologies in developing countries leads to greater yields, shifting agriculture from the subsistence level to market production. Specialization in market production became mandatory in order to maximize efficiency of production. When specialization is decided upon comparative advantage, those who have greater decision making power, autonomy and higher degree of education, will assume authority over market activities. In almost all societies around the world, culture and tradition dictate that these individuals are men. Thus, gender is inherent in participation of tasks for who will perform what kind of work.

In Rajbanshi society, women enjoy rights to make decisions regarding child education, and societal norms like attending any ceremonial activities, selecting gifts, participating in any political activities, taking part in Self Help Group etc. There are good numbers of female artisans in Chauhaddi mouza, like, biri binders. Though these women exercise some rights at the familial or societal level, they are mostly deprived from their parental heritage. In majority of the cases, they do not enjoy rights to spend household earnings. In case of their own earnings, they enjoy some freedom.²⁵

The categories of occupation undertaken by the Rajbanshi women are: cultivators; agricultural laborers; mining, quarrying, livestock, fishing, plantation etc; household industry; manufacturing other than household industry; construction, etc. However, most of their occupations depend upon the availability of employment opportunity at a particular point of time. Moreover, most of them are unskilled. Rajbanshi women have to work more hours than their male counter parts and most of the time their labor goes unpaid. The gender division of labour tends to be seen as natural and indisputable, in fact, these ideas and practices are socially constructed. Gender divisions of labour are not necessarily rigidly defined in terms of men's and women's roles, as is sometimes assumed. Often, the accepted norm regarding gender divisions varies from the actual practice. However, roles typically designated as female are almost invariably less valued than those designated as male. Women are generally expected to full fill the reproductive role of bearing and raising children, caring for other family members, and household management tasks, as well as home based production. Men tend to be more associated with productive roles, particularly paid work, and market production. In the labour market, although women's overall participation rates are rising, they tend to be confined to a relatively narrow range of occupations or concentrated in lower grades than men, usually earning less. Historically, women's productive roles have been ignored or under- valued, particularly in the informal sector and subsistence agriculture.

²³ Dr. Deepak Kumar Roy teaches at the Department of Bengali in North Bengal University and an eminent researcher. His area of interests is folk culture and linguistics.

²⁴ My conversation with Dr. Deepak Kumar Roy availed me with the related information. I have dealt with the matter extensively in Bhattacharyya, Ghosh, Moumita. 2001: 'Gender and Discrimination: The Case of the Rajbanshi women', published in the journal *Voice of Dalit*. Vol. 4(2).

²⁵ In my piece Bhattacharyya Ghosh, Moumita, 'Gender and Discrimination: The Case of the Rajbanshi women', published in the journal *Voice of Dalit*. Vol. 4(2). 2001, I have discussed elaborately.

IV. CONCLUSION

Though attainments in terms of health, education and earnings are crucial for a dignified life, the ability to take charge of one's own destiny requires something more than that. Emphasizing the significance of agency, Sen has argued: 'Persons must enter the moral counting by others not only as people whose well-being demands concern, but also as people whose responsible agency must be recognized'.²⁶ While the women's movement has moved ahead from the initial 'welfarist' concerns about women's well-being to the question of women's agency. In such a framework, women are no longer seen as passive recipients of welfare-enhancing assistance, but are seen as active agents of change.²⁷ Gender relations in Rajbanshi community, within and outside the households, are generally perceived to be more equitable than in many other parts of the country.²⁸ In societies facing the challenges of modernization and possible integration into other dominant cultures (in this case caste Hindu Bengali culture), there is generally a strong emphasis on preserving a real or imagined 'pure', 'indigenous' culture. In such sharply polarized discourses on identity and culture women's rights and concerns are often relegated to the background. Disintegration of traditional family systems of the SCs in general and Rajbanshi community in particular, formalization of indigenous cultural and religious practices, migrations from different parts of the country, education, mass entertainment, media exposure and external cultural influences have been influencing gender relations in the areas under study.

So far as gender gap in literacy is concerned, it is only in the recent past that the learned persons of the Rajbanshi society has realized the importance, necessity and relevance of girls' education in particular and over all progress of education in general. It is education and only education which can develop a person's personality, make him/her socially adjustable, financially sound, and useful for the society- an all round

development. A major portion of the Rajbanshi women are active members in Self Help Groups (SHGs)²⁹, which is a project under government sponsored Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY)³⁰. This has encouraged women to take decisions inside out the households, handle micro credits, work in groups and enhance their self esteem. Unless an until our women folk are aware of their rights and duties and encourage other women to get involved in these empowerment activities, get themselves educated and able to demand for equality in a male dominated society, the overall progress of a nation will not be possible. A literate mother will always try and make sure that her children, especially the girl child gets educated. It is only through education that ignorance can be destroyed. Though there are various socio- economic factors which are responsible for low female literacy rate, but it is also on the part of women themselves, who should try hard to bridge the gap.

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²⁷ Sen, A. 1995: 'Agency and well-being: the development agenda'. In N. Heyzar, S. Kapoor & J. Sadler (Eds), *A Commitment to the World's Women*. Washington, DC: Unifem.

²⁸ Although, recent scholarship has cast doubts on such generalizations (Xaxa, 2004).

²⁹ SHG: It is a voluntary association of 10- 15 members predominantly from the same socio- economic background. Initially each member has to contribute an amount to their respective group corpus regularly. After at least six months from the formation of the group, each SHG has to appear in a gradation test. After passing the test, the group becomes eligible for the revolving fund.

³⁰ SGSY: It is a government- sponsored micro- finance programme, is perhaps the largest of its kind in the world. The scheme aims at the formation of a large number of microenterprises in rural areas through the intervention of Gram Panchayats by establishing a large number of Self help groups (SHGs).

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ABBREVIATIONS

GDI	Gender Development Indices
GEM	Gender Empowerment measure
HDI	Human Development Indices
NFHS	National Family Health Survey
NSS	National Sample Survey
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
OBCs	Other Backward classes
SCs	Scheduled Castes
STs	Scheduled Tribes
SGSY	Swarnjayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojana
SRS	Sample Registration Survey (SRS)
NFHS	National Family Health Survey
SHGs	Self Help Groups