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Fertility, mortality and gender bias among tribal population: an Indian perspective[☆]

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Abstract

The present paper critically reviews the existing literature on fertility, mortality and its gender bias among India's tribal population in the post-Independence period. Despite difficulties and limitations of available literature on tribal demography — most of which has been produced by anthropologists — our review extracts several interesting and important points. First, although fertility and mortality levels for some tribes and for some regions are either lower or higher or even the same as those for nontribal groups, India's aggregate tribal population evinces both *lower* fertility and mortality than the levels for their closest comparable nontribal group, namely low caste people. Several sociocultural and lifestyle features of tribals are historically favourable to maintaining a relatively low fertility and mortality. Despite baseline aggregative patterns of demographic differential being favourable to tribes, there is rather strong indication that of late and in the near future Indian tribals might be lagging behind the nontribal population in demographic transition (e.g. in terms of slower pace of tribal fertility and mortality declines). Also, while gender relations among Indian tribes have historically been more balanced and egalitarian, an unfortunate trend of tribal gender bias conforming to the mainstream anti-female pattern (along with acculturation, assimilation and similar 'modernizing' processes) is increasingly discernable under current circumstances. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Introduction and background

Over the recent past several demographic concerns have come to occupy a central place in the development discourse¹. Issues like rapid population growth across the Third World, continuing high fertility in various parts, high infant and child mortality, low status of women and their reproductive health, sex-dis-

crimination and sex differential in mortality appear to be the overriding items on the global agenda for immediate attention and research. In this relatively fast

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¹ Even a browsing of World Development Reports and Human Development Reports for last several years, and also a hurried reading of the deliberations during the recently held Population Conferences at Cairo and Delhi and Social Development Summit in Copenhagen all testify to a heightened global concerns about the demography of the Third World. See for example Dréze and Sen (1995) for having a feel of how much importance is currently being accorded to demographic issues (e.g. fertility, women's status, infant and child mortality and its sex differentials, role of literacy) in discussions on development experiences of less developed countries; and see also Sen, 1989, 1994.

growing literature the role of culture (including kinship and inheritance patterns) has figured as an important explanatory candidate in understanding variation in demographic behaviour across regions of South Asia (e.g. Miller, 1981; Dyson and Moore, 1983; Das Gupta, 1987; Basu, 1989a,b, 1991, 1992; Kishor, 1993, 1995; Malhotra et al., 1995; Morgan and Niraula, 1995 among others). It is well recognized now that

² It is notable, however, that although women's status and autonomy may partly be culturally determined, they (i.e. 'women's agency') can be enhanced through noncultural routes, namely spread of female work opportunities and work participation, and increased female literacy and education (on this see particularly Dréze and Sen, 1995, pp. 140–178; Murthi et al., 1995 and the literature cited).

³ The voluminous anthropological literature amply testifies to ambiguities, confusions and controversies that surround the notion of tribe. In fact this definitional debate and puzzles have sometimes been viewed as a reflection of 'the poverty of anthropological scholarship' (Pathy, 1992, and also literature cited therein; see also Unnithan-Kumar, 1991).

⁴ It is well-known that tribal groups both in India and outside are far from homogeneous. Despite sociocultural diversity among tribal population, what can still be found somewhat common is their typical isolation and distinctiveness - on various counts including sociocultural and life style patterns - from the mainstream population and society. Historically speaking, reasons for such tribal isolation and distinctiveness are complex and not very easy to resolve. For example, Furer-Haimendorf attributes the 'phenomenon of cultural and ethnic heterogeneity' in South Asia largely to an 'attitude basic to Indian ideology which accepted the variety of cultural forms as natural and immutable, and did not consider their assimilation to one single pattern in any way desirable' (Von Furer-Haimendorf, 1985, p. 1). However, it is also very widely held view that in course of this historical process tribes have been marginalized and increasingly 'pushed' into 'the periphery' — the areas which are usually relatively adverse, harsh and less habitable (see e.g. Misra, 1977, and also Von Furer-Haimendorf, 1985).

⁵ See past census reports for population sizes of different classified tribes of India during the British period, and see Mamoria, 1958, pp. 28–30 for percentage distribution of various tribes and their geographical distribution up to 1951 and also Raza and Ahmad (1990) for more recent periods.

⁶ There is considerable body of literature on this process of sociocultural assimilation of India's tribal people with the nontribal majority and on its multi-faceted dimensions.

⁷ For instance, one micro-level anthropological study in 1959 on the relationship between Santals — one major tribe of eastern India — and the mainstream Hindu population in adjoining areas of Birbhum district (West Bengal) concludes that in spite of their intermingling in economic sphere and very close proximity and regular contact, '[Santals] have *not* been absorbed in the vertical hierarchical order of the Hindu caste organization', and '[t]he Santals still adhere to their traditional culture at least in the major cultural traits' (Mukherjee, 1960, p. 305; italics added).

sociocultural traits of a society play quite an important role in shaping demographic outcomes (e.g. fertility, mortality and its gender bias) — albeit often indirectly via their crucial influences *inter alia* with female status and autonomy².

In this context it is worthwhile to explore this broad connection between sociocultural features and demographic outcomes from the standpoint of tribals in India who, with their distinct sociocultural features, can be hypothesized to exhibit different demographic behaviour as compared to that of the nontribal population. With this as a broad background, the present paper reviews the existing literature on India's tribal demography, with the chief aim of identifying the state of the art in this important academic field. The understanding of tribal people and their development problems would remain far from complete without an adequate grasp of their demographic behaviour and its determinants.

It is important to note at the outset that the term, 'tribe' is very *comprehensive*, and it has not always been used as a well-defined notion in the literature largely because of the enormous diversity of tribal population in India and elsewhere³. The very usage of the term 'tribe' has been seriously questioned by several contemporary scholars, and alternate terms like 'ethnic minority' have sometimes been considered more appropriate in the Indian context (e.g. Pathy, 1992). While such definitional intricacies are beyond the scope of this paper, there are often real sociocultural ingredients to distinguishing a tribal group from the mainstream population⁴. Although tribals are dispersed across the entire Indian-subcontinent, the largest tribal belts are — and historically have been — located in central and eastern India, followed by western, southern and northern India (in that order). Among numerous Indian tribes, in terms of anthropologists' meticulous classification, the most dominant ones are the Bhil and the Gond of central and western India, and the Santal and the Oraon of eastern and central India⁵. The tribal existence within larger Indian society is often quite distinctive on various counts, namely, the ecological and environmental circumstances of their habitation (e.g. mountainous and forest tracts), lifestyle and culture, social organization, kinship and inheritance patterns, religious beliefs and practices. Descriptions of such tribal features abound in the voluminous Indian anthropological literature. However, there is a continuous process — albeit slower in certain places and periods than in others — of distorting such sociocultural distinctiveness of tribals along with their increasing assimilation and integration with the mainstream society. Although this may be a potential source of difficulties for deriving *pure* tribal patterns⁶, tribal groups in most places in India are still socioculturally much more isolated and distinctly different from mainstream patterns⁷.

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