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-

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∗ 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 Drèze 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 Niraual, 1995 among others). It is well recognized now that 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 autonomy.

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 elsewhere. 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 population.

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 India. 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 patterns, tribal groups in most places in India are still socioculturally much more isolated and distinctly different from mainstream patterns.
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