



The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development

CHILDREN OF A LESSER GOD: DIFFERENCES IN THE TREATMENT AND PERCEPTION OF CHILDREN 0B6 YEARS OF AGE BY GENDER IN INDIA

Coordinators' Notebook No. 20, 1997

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This study was carried out in four different locations in India: two rural and two urban. The two rural villages for this study were chosen from the State of Madhya Pradesh (M.P.), the largest and central state of India. M.P. has a population of approximately 72 million people, accounting for 8% of the country's total population. It covers 13% of the country's geographical area.¹ According to most inter-state comparisons, it is one of the poorest and most backward states of the country. The two urban locations were in New Delhi.

Bahragaon and Badwani are two rural villages of the Timarni Block in District Hoshangabad. According to the State Human Development Report (1995), Hoshangabad district has an illiterate female population of 78%, compared to 81% for M.P. as a whole. The corresponding figure for male illiteracy in the district is 52% compared with 60% for the state.

Bahragaon is a village of the plains, and Badwani is a forest village. The latter was chosen to see if gender issues would be different in a village in the interior with a forest-based economy and a 100% tribal population. The research team we used in these two villages belonged to an NGO, *Bharat Jan Vigyan Jatha*, which has been active in the district for over 20 years and was familiar with both villages.

Bahragaon Village, Madhya Pradesh

Bahragaon is located 89 kms from Timarni. The total village population is 515 people—271 males and 244 females. People from different castes inhabit the village, including Gujars, Rajputs, Brahmins, Sotar, Nai, Kahar, Scheduled Castes (S.C.) and Scheduled Tribes (S.T.)

This village could be said to be fairly average in its indicators and composition. The approach road to Bahragaon is *pucca (tarmac)*, but the road leading into the habitations is *kuccha (dirt)*, which is a major problem during the monsoons. Drinking water comes from wells and handpumps located throughout the village. Although there is electric power in the village, some of the houses belonging to the S.T. and S.C. populations do not have electric service. There is no medical facility in the village, so people must go up to Sodalpur (2 kms away) for any kind of medical attention needed (private or government). The nearest post office, bus stop, and market are at Sodalpur.

The village has one primary school (up to class V) for boys and girls. The school building consists of one big classroom with a veranda on either side, each of which serves as a classroom. There is no boundary wall to the school compound. Because space is so limited, different classes must sit together. There are only two teachers, one male and one female, to teach all five classes. Both these teachers commute daily to the village from Sodalpur and Harda respectively. According to some of the villagers, this is a drawback, as teacher absenteeism is high.

Working in the Village

We began our first morning by taking a "round" of this village. This helped us get to know the surroundings and let the villagers know about our presence. As we moved around the village, men kept joining us, but women were never part of this. It was interesting to watch groups casually drop out of our party and new people join in as we passed through various parts of town. Many children joined in, too.

This tour of the village was very illuminating. It gave us a general idea of the inter-group relationships in the village, and made it obvious that we would have to talk to representatives of different communities if we wanted our data to be representative of the town as a whole. The village seemed to be largely divided between two of its major communities, the Scheduled Castes and the Other Backward Classes (represented by the Gujar community). In the afternoon, we worked with a group of youth to create a community map.

Most of our information was gathered through single-sex focus group discussions. Since the village is fairly large and has many different communities, we set up focus groups within the various communities, always keeping the men and women separate. Group size was kept at eight to ten people to encourage discussion and the participation of each person. Although we did not want large groups, at times more people gathered than those asked to participate. While one person from the research team facilitated and moderated the discussion, another member took notes.

Badwani Village, Madhya Pradesh

Badwani is a small tribal village, 10 kms from Rahatgaon in the Harda forest of Madhya Pradesh. The nearest town is Timarni, which is 24 kms away. The total village population of 440 comprises 236 (53%) males and 204 (46%) females. Nearly 100% of the population belongs to the Korkoo Tribe, a Scheduled Tribe. As such, this village is atypical, even for Madhya Pradesh.

The total literacy level of Badwani is 5% with the male literacy level being 4% and the female literacy at 1%. These figures are very surprising considering the fact that the village has had a primary school since 1942.

The approach road to Badwani is *kuccha*, which becomes a problem during the monsoons. In addition, the river that has to be crossed to reach Badwani overflows during the monsoons making it extremely difficult for people to cross over, and the village remains virtually cut off.

The village is supplied with electricity and it has a medical dispensary. However, the person posted at the dispensary rarely stays within the village, despite accommodation being provided. Drinking water is available from a well and hand pump. The river is used for bathing and washing clothes and utensils.

Working with the Village

To approach this village we first contacted the forest rangers' office at Rahatgaon. The range officer sent one of his colleagues to accompany us to the village and introduce us to the villagers. We learned from him that this village has been visited by a large number of officials studying forest management, from within the country and abroad.

We first stopped in at the primary school, which was at the entrance of the village. The whole village had a deserted look, though we could hear the voices of children. We discovered later that most of the villagers went out to their fields during the day. Because of this, most of the group discussions took place at night or late in the evening.

Our first task was to work with the children to draw a map of the village. It was surprising to learn how precise even the small children could be, identifying exact locations and points of interest. The map record of demographics was filled in with the help of the schoolteachers. Details left out were filled in by the research team after making visits to individual houses the next day.

As evening approached we could see the villagers returning from the fields. They did not seem too curious about us and moved on after a brief nod. This was quite different from our experience in the other village and seemed strange. We realised we would need to make an effort to develop a rapport with the people. We split up and visited a number of houses, talking to the women and children as they prepared breakfast. During the next three to four days we were able to set up many effective small group discussions. There was some difficulty with dialects—they spoke a somewhat different one from the research team, but with some effort we managed to communicate!

Khanpur Colony, New Delhi

The community, Khanpur *Jhuggi Jhopri cluster*, is a resettlement colony in south Delhi. It started out as an unrecognised urban slum, inhabited by migrants from other parts of the country. The Delhi Municipal Corporation recognised them in 1975, and has allocated land and housing to each family since then.

When Khanpur was established in 1975, during the Emergency, the colony was on the outskirts of the city, and was considered poor and remote. Over the years, the original recipients of the free land and housing have sold off their plots to others, and today the community is much better off; it has moved into the lower middle income group. The families that live in Khanpur now have TVs, refrigerators, gas stoves, stereos, motorcycles and cars. They are in the process of upgrading their houses with expensive tiles, fixtures and furnishings.

Today, each family settled in Khanpur occupies an allocated 25 sq. metres of land. All the houses are constructed according to a well-planned standard design, and are arranged in rows. With the increasing wealth of some of the families, many homes have been expanded to two or three storeys, often bringing in rental income. The colony has adequate provision of electricity, water, and community toilets, and is well connected by roads and public transport. There is also a medical dispensary, community hall, library, post office, and primary school (up to Class V).

The colony is divided into four blocks: A, B, C, and D, with each block housing approximately 260 households (with roughly 1,000 households in all of Khanpur). Each block has an open space/park. There is a well-established market catering to the needs of the community. There are houses of worship for Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, an indication of a heterogeneous community.

It was beyond the scope of this study to cover the whole of Khanpur. Block C was chosen for the study, because the Mobile Creches, (an effective day care programme that provides continuity for parents whose work moves from site to site), already had a creche program in Block C and a good and long-standing rapport with the families in the area.

Working in the Community

The research in Khanpur was undertaken by a team with ten members. It took almost thirty hours spread over eight days to collect the data. Approximately thirty women from thirty households participated in the group discussions through which the data were collected.

The Protocol was first translated into Hindi, and two days of training were given to the researchers on PLA methods. The group familiarised themselves with the objectives of the study.

Mapping the community took three days. For the focus groups, the women could spare at most two hours in a day, so it took three sittings to complete the discussions. Deciding the venue of the meetings was somewhat difficult. Some of the women refused to go to meetings in streets inhabited by people of a different caste.

To learn what children do during the day and who is responsible for them, the researchers conducted interviews with small groups of children age 5—6.

V.P. Singh Camp, New Delhi

V.P. Singh Camp, once known as the Pant Nagar Jhuggies, is an urban slum situated in the heart of New Delhi. No one could tell us exactly when it formed, but many inhabitants said that they have been there since before the Emergency (1975). The Jhuggies lie along the banks of the Pant Nagar Nallah (an open sewer), close to the Lala Lajpat Rai Marg and a residential colony, Jangpura extension.

V.P. Singh Camp has an estimated sixty-three households and a population of about 350.² It was chosen for this study because it is small, centrally located, and has a diverse group of inhabitants. It also has a substantial number of Muslim households, and the Muslim community was totally absent from our earlier samples.

The slum is home to people from different castes and regional backgrounds, including Muslims, Christians, Scheduled Castes, and Other Backward Classes. The slum is recognised by the Delhi Municipal Corporation, but the government does not supply all basic services. For example, although all the houses here have electricity, it is taken illegally. Water taps are provided by the government, and there is a private hand pump. Nearly all houses are *kuccha*, with walls made of mud and bricks, and roofs of bamboo sticks with plastic stretched across wooden planks or asbestos sheets. Some of the houses have cement floors. There are no toilet facilities, so the *nallah* (open sewer) is used as such. Most all the Jhuggies (shacks) are owned by those who live in them, but a few are rented for Rs 300—500 per month. A ration card facility (for food rations) has been provided to people living in this slum.

Most children from this area go to the government-run Municipal Corporation Primary School in the adjoining Jangpura Colony. The school has two shifts: the morning shift for girls and the afternoon shift for boys. A few families are able to send their children to a nearby private school in Jangpura Colony. Under the "Education for All" programme of the Ministry of Human

Resources Development, a group of volunteers conduct literacy classes for adults as well as children. However, according to the slum dwellers, the classes are not conducted regularly.

People in this slum have various occupations. The men are rickshaw pullers, daily wage labourers, *mistri* (masons), car mechanics, factory workers, *chowkidar* (guards), bus conductors, *kabadi wala* (recyclable garbage collectors), vegetable sellers, white washmen, sweepers, and repairmen of such things as seats and sofas. The women are domestic servants in nearby middle-class colonies and *safai karamchari* (sweepers) in offices.

Health facilities are available at the nearby government dispensary in Bhogal. For any major treatment the slum dwellers must go to Safdarjung Hospital, 4—5 kilometers away. Many people also consult private doctors.

Working in the Community

Unlike in the villages, our day here would start late, around 10 a.m. and finish early, around 5—5:30 p.m.

In our first visit we talked to a few women and got some basic information about the slum, its name, and the composition of its population. It was during our second visit that we started asking more specific questions. After taking a quick tour of the slum, accompanied by two women, we were invited to sit in an open clearing where a number of people gathered around us.

With the help of a young boy, the only primary school graduate around, we managed to draw the map of the slum on the roller black board. The whole day was then spent filling in the details of the map record.

Single-sex group discussions were held with men and women of different communities.

As we moved around for the next few days in the slum, children would always gather around us, giving us important bits of information.

Summary of Findings

Although this study uses a small sample, some general observations can be made about gender bias, and these observations tend to confirm the findings of other research.

Economics of Gender Bias in Rural and Urban Settings

The first and most important observation is that poor families—both rural and urban—are locked in a pattern of gender bias that perpetuates gender stereotyping. This behaviour is rooted in social norms that have existed for centuries. The families studied did not perceive their actions as discrimination against girls, because their goal was not to deprive girls of certain rights but to prepare them for their future undisputed role in society.

The girl child is expected to grow into a demure, accommodating, and respectful homemaker. Generally, a "good" six-year-old girl should listen to and respect adults, help her mother in household chores, and stay at home and play. On the other hand, "good" boys are expected to be naughty. They generally do not stay around the home. They have many friends to play with, and they usually do not listen to their parents.

Girls are trained to be good homemakers because, on marrying, they will go to a different family and will represent their parents' family. It is very important that they have good manners, respect elders, and do not use bad language because they will uphold their family's honour in another family. The boy, on the other hand, has no such obligations. He is expected to remain in the very house he is born in. If he is a little naughty and playful, it is readily accepted by the family.

If a girl is treated the same way as a boy, then she will be a misfit in society and will suffer later in life. It is for her own good, many parents believe, that she be deprived of an education and not be allowed to express her mind, demand privileges, laugh too much, and be disobedient. She must learn, above all, to serve others.

The families that consciously discriminate against girls most are the better-off rural families. These families restrict their daughters' choices even though they have the means to be more egalitarian. For example, in the Gujar community of Baharagaon, most often when a male child is born he is given dried dates ground into a paste for about a week. When asked why female babies are not given the dates, the families said, "girls do not need extra energy for growing." This is just one of many ways that the better-off rural families are contemptuous toward female children.

This is in keeping with the findings of other empirical work (notably Dreze and Sen, 1995) which states that the effect of increased income on mortality and fertility can be quite slow and weak and that personal and social characteristics of the population, such as female literacy, often have a more powerful influence on demographic outcomes. The work of Dreze and Sen also suggests that gender bias may be lower among poorer households and that literacy may reduce gender bias at any given level of poverty. Similarly, improved employment opportunities for adult women may tend to raise the relative survival chances of girls.

Better-off urban families, especially the ones with an Early Childhood Development facility nearby, hold more equitable perceptions about their daughters' lives, but they do not appear to treat their daughters much differently from the rural and urban poor. Largely influenced by the media and the intervention of the ECD facility, these families have a better sense of their responsibility regarding their daughters' food, education, and marriage, but we did not find a difference in these families' behaviour. Because urban dwellers have better access to relevant information, it is quite possible that urbanisation may influence demographic outcomes independently of other variables, such as family income.

It has been suggested in other studies that increasing numbers of women in the labour force may increase the importance attached to the survival of a female child, but it also may impair the women's ability to ensure the good health of their children by reducing their time available for child care, especially since men typically show great reluctance to share domestic chores. Also, as

women pursue gainful employment, the effectiveness of women's agencies, including those connected with child care, is increased.

To what extent these different factors have a bearing on the girl child vis-à-vis the boy, and the net result of these different factors is a matter of further empirical investigation. This study merely confirms that income and urbanisation affect demographic outcomes of girls and boys.

Tribal Families

Among those in our sample, rural tribal families are the most free of gender stereotyping, just as they are free of class and caste barriers. For example, in these communities boys, as well as girls, collect water, whereas in other communities only girls perform this task. Research by Dreze and Sen (1995) supports this finding: They found that populations with a higher proportion of Scheduled Tribes had reduced levels of anti-female bias in child survival rates, and that this effect is unchanged by the number of women in the population who work.

Birth Order

In the families we observed, subsequent girls born to the same mother were treated worse than the first. For example, the mother-in-law of one girl restricted feeding of the mother and child upon the birth of the second girl. Conversely, subsequent boys are even more pampered than the first.

Generally, the eldest child, male or female, bears the heaviest load of household responsibilities. He or she is expected to run errands, look after siblings, and so on. In addition, if the only child happens to be a boy, he is expected to share in household tasks in a somewhat similar fashion to a girl, although he is never expected to cook.

Marriage

The primary concern regarding a girl's future is her marriage, and this concern dominates the way parents perceive and treat their daughters. Girls in these settings do not have any say in their marriage. Marriage is related to a family's honour, and the better-off rural families, who are most concerned about their honour, restrict the behaviour and choices of girls most. Because girls must uphold their family's honour in another family, they are groomed for that role until they marry.

Urbanisation seems to have a positive influence on marriage. Girls in the better-off urban families tend to be married off when they are about 17 years old, whereas the rural and urban poor marry their daughters at a much younger age, sometimes as young as 10. In many cases, however, although a marriage ceremony has been performed for convenience, cultural, or financial reasons at an early age, the bride does not physically move to her husband's home until she is older.

Whether poor or well-off, urban or rural, there seems to be no restriction on boys in regards to age of marriage, although even boys are expected to marry by the time they are 22-24 years old.

Education

The close relationship between education and demographic change has clearly emerged in recent empirical studies. Among other factors, such as income, that have a strong influence on fertility and mortality, basic education—especially the education of women—is now widely considered one of the most powerful. The relationship between household income and basic education for girls is more complex, and our study was not able to establish a clear overall link between the two, although some connections were noted in selected communities. For example, in the well-off urban community of Khanpur, the tendency to send children to "good" schools is evident, as is the rise in literacy levels of the community over the generations with increased prosperity in the area.

Within the rural communities, education was perceived differently. The better-off Gujar community did not express an overwhelming desire to send their girls to school. They believe it is more important for a girl to be a good homemaker.

Lower caste families said it was difficult to find husbands for educated girls. The upper caste families thought that by educating their daughters they could find better husbands for them.

References

Dreze, J. and A. Sen. (1995). *India: Economic development and social opportunity*. London: Oxford University Press.

Endnotes

¹ The Madhya Pradesh Human Development Report 1995.

² According to the National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER), the average household population in urban slums is 5.2.

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