

# **Socialisation and gender bias at the household level among school-attending girls in a tribal community of the Kalahandi district of Eastern India**

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## **Abstract**

This study reports on gender bias as a result of the socialisation process among school-attending girls of Sabara, a tribal community living in the Kalahandi district of the eastern Indian state, Orissa. The study is based on both qualitative and quantitative data collected from 60 parents and girls aged 8–14 years, who have brothers in the same age range. These data were collected on gender bias in the home, which is a key part of the on-going socialisation process. Gender stereotyping is found to be deeply rooted in the families' social structure. This study reports the parents' attitude and various restrictions are imposed on girls with regard to mobility and social relations, which are not found for their male counterparts. During menstruation, seclusion and other restrictions must be observed by girls. They are socialised at an early age towards household chores, including taking care of young siblings. The socialisation process installs in the minds of the girls that they are inferior and subordinate. Thus, the whole socialisation process results in the deprivation of various opportunities for girls in this community.

**KEYWORDS:** children, gender, Orissa, socialisation, tribe, Sabara

## **Introduction**

Socialisation is a rational process and its objective is to build gender identity (Crespi 2003). Gender socialisation is a more focused form of socialisation; it is how children of different sexes are socialised into their gender roles (Giddens 1993) and taught what it means to be male and female (Morris 1988). Though the Indian constitution grants equal rights to women and men, strong patriarchal traditions persist and manifest themselves in different ways. In most Indian families, a daughter is viewed as a liability, and she is conditioned to believe that she is inferior and subordinate to men. Sons are idolised and celebrated (Coonrod 1998). Children are always referred as “builders of the nation”, but many children are deprived in various ways accessing various opportunities of life. This is especially true in case of the tribal girls, who constitute a considerable part of the total population. The socialisation process of society perpetuates the self-sacrificing, self-pitying and submissive images of girls. This is because they are socialised in such a way, and the over-protective nature of parents and society sometimes adversely affect the girl. The subordination of girls is responsible for the socialisation process that emphasises the pre-ordained role that she will assume as an adult. The implications of such unequal treatment result in limiting the opportunities and choices that girls may have, both in the present and in the future (Kotwal & Gupta 2006). Though there is no dearth of literature on gender bias in India, only a few studies have exclusively dealt with this problem, particularly among tribal societies. This paper is concerned with understanding of different dimensions of gender socialisation, and analyses how the gender socialisation process leads with the different parameters of the relationship between the society and the child, which results in gender discrimination in various prospects of the lives of girls. This gender-based study deals with the life of school-attending girls of the Sabara tribe inhabiting the Kalahandi region of Orissa, one of the underdeveloped regions of India.

## **Methodology**

The present study was conducted in five villages of the Gourdchhendia area in the Kalahandi district, which lies in the western part of Orissa, an eastern Indian state. The total area of the district is 8,197 square kilometres and its administrative headquarters is Bhawanipatna. This study is done in Gounchhendia *grampanchayat*, which is approximately sixty kilometres from the district headquarters. Grampanchayat, the lowest administrative unit, consists of a cluster of villages and hamlets. Gourdchhendia grampanchayat consists of five villages/hamlets (Khursliguda, Belguda, Chikli, Kandulbandh and Goundchhendia), which are predominantly inhabited by the Sabara tribal community. The Sabara tribe is called by various other names, including Saur, Sora and Saura, etc. They have a racial affinity to the Proto-Australoid type and their physical features resemble those of the aborigines of central and southern India. Sabara constitute 6.26% of the total tribal population of Orissa and rank third in size among the 62 tribes of Orissa (Census of India 1981).

The sampling was done by selecting Sabara families. Four schools exist in the study area, two of which are upper primary schools, and two are middle English schools. The criteria of inclusion of families were: having at least two children in the family, one

boy and a girl, and both should be in the age group of 8–14 years. Another criterion is that both children must be attending school or one of them may be a dropout. Thus, 60 families were included in the study, with their prior consent. The girls and the parents of the child were taken as respondents. The data pertained to various issues of socialisation in the family related to the sample respondents (girls) and brothers of sample respondents were collected from the girls by interviewing them alone. Interviews were also conducted with the parents of these children. The first author has spent considerable time in the community, and observations were made on several related issues. Standard methodology is adopted during collection of these data (Pelto & Pelto 1978). All the ethical guidelines and suggestions were followed while undertaking the interviews with children (Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health 2000).

## Results

The opinion of parents on the equal treatment of boy and girls in the family was obtained (Table 1). Of the 60 parents, only 18 (30%) opined that girls should get equal treatment in the family, while 70% of parents justified the discrimination against girls.

Girls' age	Opinion of parents on whether or not they treat daughters equally with sons	
	Yes	No
7–9 years	8 (30.77%)	18 (69.23%)
10–12 years	7 (31.82%)	15 (68.18%)
13–14 years	3 (25.00%)	9 (75.00%)
Total	18 (30.00%)	42 (70.00%)

*Table 1: Distribution of sample girls in terms of their age group and parent's opinion regarding providing equal treatment in the family*

Table 2 illustrates the responses of girls in terms of restrictions imposed on them and their brothers. Around 62% of girls reported that their parents imposed restrictions on

	Age	Restriction imposed		
		Strict	Neutral	Liberal
Sampled girls	7–9 years	18 (69.23%)	6 (23.08%)	2 (07.69%)
	10–12 years	10 (45.46%)	8 (36.36%)	4 (18.18%)
	13–14 years	9 (75.00%)	3 (25.00%)	0 (0.00%)
	Total	37 (61.67%)	17 (28.33%)	6 (10.00%)
Brothers of sampled girls	7–9 years	10 (52.63%)	7 (36.84%)	2 (10.53%)
	10–12 years	3 (12.50%)	8 (33.33%)	13 (54.17%)
	13–14 years	0 (0.00%)	3 (17.65%)	14 (82.35%)
	Total	13 (21.67%)	18 (30.00%)	29 (48.33%)

*Table 2: Distribution of sample girls and their brothers in terms of their age group and restriction imposed on them*

them against 22% of responses for the restrictions on respective brothers of the respondents. These restrictions are more among the higher age groups of girls. The situation is just opposite in case of boys. The degree of restrictions decreases as the age of boys increases. The qualitative data also revealed that the parents of a girl are always vigilant regarding her clothes, social relations, behaviour, habits, etc., and that they restrict girls in each and every sphere. However, these restrictions are not imposed upon their brothers. Behaviour that is acceptable for boys is considered inappropriate for girls.

Girls' sitting, standing, talking, interacting gestures are also considered important. Girls should not talk loudly; they should not stand with their hands on their hip. Generally, their standing gestures/postures should not look odd, or others will comment that they stand like a male. Girls are often rebuked for rushing to a place, jumping or running, etc.

It was observed that a girl should be docile in manner and perform household duties very promptly and graciously. She should not laugh loudly. Such a girl in this community is called a *Lakshmbanti* (the girl who possesses wealth like Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth). If she stands or runs like a boy or has similar gestures, she is called *andirachandi* (like a man). In contrast, if the boy possesses a loud voice, has a long stride and stands straight, then he is termed "strong and bold".

It is also observed that the restrictions are imposed on girls who attained puberty. Menstruation is taken as a period where various restrictions are imposed, as people think that this period is impure. When the girl begins to menstruate, she should not show her face to the male members of the family for three days, and she will be secluded. On the first day of menstruation, the girl has to take bath and wash her hair. She should sleep on the floor in a corner of the house where nobody touches her. During these three days, she is restricted from touching water and other utensils and also prohibited from going to places where their deities are placed. The girls who have attained puberty are considered impure; thus, they cannot help in religious activities. They cannot hold up *kalasa* (an earthen pot which carry water to bath the deities or sprinkle water on the deity).

The question of time of maturity in case of a male child does not arise. Girls are considered as mature after their first menstruation, which occurs between the ages of 10 to 12 years. So, the girls are mature at a very tender age. However, boys are considered mature when they obtain work and earn money, which usually happens after the age of 20 years. It is thus, pertinent to emphasise that these types of practices treat the girls as impure and inferior, which results in the low self-perception of the girls.

After puberty, girls are restricted from playing with boys. Moreover, the parents usually do not allow girls to play games in which activities like jumping and running are involved. There are also some constraints in space and time, e.g. they should not stay outside home after evening, they should not go alone around the fields in the lean season time when there is no agricultural activity, they should not go alone to the weekly markets, etc. The restrictions that are defined by time and space result in the girls remaining inside the four walls of their house and helping their elders in household chores. The adolescent girl has to inform her parents about her movements outside the house. If she comes late her parents question her.

The parents perceived that this period is the most crucial period for the girls; if

anything goes wrong, there will be a problem arranging her marriage. However, such types of restrictions are not imposed upon boys. Girls are dressed according to their age and their parents' choices. Small girls in the pre-pubertal stage can wear any clothing their parents buy for them; however, after puberty the girls are restricted to wearing dresses or skirts that fall below the knees. After the age of 13 years, the majority of girls wear saris, covering the whole body. In their local term, a *Dangiritukel* (a grown-up girl) should wear a sari. Boys wear whatever they choose, buying whatever clothes they want at the market.

From the childhood, girls are encouraged to do the household chores, such as washing dishes, cleaning the house, cooking food, collecting water from the nearby ponds or tube wells, collecting firewood, taking care of the younger siblings, taking care of cattle, etc.; they should know about agricultural activities. Boys are encouraged to look after fields, cutting firewood, and to do work outside home, such as marketing, metal working, repairing agricultural tools, etc. After puberty, many parents withdraw their girls from school, with a view that they have sufficiently matured and they should take care of the house. In this area, not all villages have schools and parents do not allow their girls to go out of their village for schooling.

The attitude of parents on the inheritance of property in this community is not favourable to girls (Table 3). Parents of only four of the 60 girls (6.67%) opined that parental property should equally be shared to sons and daughters. The remaining parents are of the opinion that daughters should not have rights to parental property.

Girls' age	Attitude regarding the inheritance of parental property to daughters		
	Yes	No	Undecided
7–9 years	2 (7.69%)	23 (88.47%)	1 (3.84%)
10–12 years	1 (4.55%)	19 (86.36%)	2 (9.09%)
13–14 years	1 (8.33%)	11 (91.67%)	0 (0.00%)
Total	4 (6.66%)	53 (88.34%)	3 (5.00%)

*Table 3: Distribution of sample girls in terms of their age group and parents attitude regarding the inheritance of parental property*

## Discussion

This study shows that boys are considered to be necessary, both socially and religiously, because having a son is considered to be old age security and only he has the right to perform last rites of his parents. It reveals the importance of age-old tradition with regard to son preference, which is common in Indian society (Khan & Prasad 1983). Deogaonkar and Deogaonkar (1991) stated that in some tribes a girl does not get a share from her father's property, and it is hypothesised that the traditional Hindu method of succession was adopted by the tribal communities. A study showed that the taboo on women touching and using the plough in tribal societies has been seen as a way of denying women a control over the means of production i.e. land (Kishwar 1987a; b; c; Nathan 1997). In most Indian families, women do not own any property in their own names, and do not get

a share of parental property (Sen & Shiva Kumar 2001). This study also provides similar results about boys' importance in inheriting parental property. Many scholars pointed out that in several countries parental preferences for sons over daughters is found (Freedman & Coombs 1974; Vlassoff 1976; Cleland, Verrall & Vaessen 1983).

There are some traditional boundaries for girls in this tribe. They are subjected to various rules and regulations both inside and outside home. This community is patriarchal and hence the females are subjected to control by the males. This socialisation process forces girls to remain suppressed and to feel themselves to be inferior and subservient under male power.

Human beings are not normally solitary individuals. The whole process of social conditioning demonstrates that the personality, from its simple beginning to its entire complex manifestations in adult behaviour, is the product of the influence of group pressures and social customs upon the individual (Malhotra & Sharma 2001). Ramana and Rao (1999) stated that parents feel that they are training their daughters to be effective homemakers and it is considered that the normally accepted gender stereotype for a girl is to take upon domestic responsibilities.

Boys are looked on as inferior if they remain within the four walls of the house; in contrast, it is expected that the girls should take all the traditional female roles within the home perfectly. Thus, the socialisation process installs orthodoxy and stereotypes in the minds of children. Families are responsible for preparing the girls to play the typically feminine roles of a daughter, wife and mother. Hence, they are suppressed and made to forget their own identities. The domestic activities of the girls are viewed as women's work, i.e. done by women only. This segregation of tasks by gender leads children to think that some tasks are for more males and some are more females (Witt 1997). Therefore, at a very tender age, girls have to do the household activities.

The parents think that it will help the child in the future and that boys will want girls who can do more work, i.e. the girls who are most desirable are those who can do a lot of work both outside and inside home. In domestic chores, parents sometimes expect children of different genders to perform different kind of tasks (Basow 1997). Parents are the primary influence on gender role development in the early years of one's life (Kaplan 1991; Miller 1987; Santrock 1994). This view is supported by Saraceno (1988), who stated that the family is the social and symbolic place in which difference, in particular sexual difference, is believed to be fundamental and at the same time constructed. Thus, gender-based prejudices and economic hardship both operate on girls, depriving them of enjoying their childhood.

Using land size as an indicator of household welfare for rural families, Bhalotra and Heady find that girls' farm labour actually increases with household welfare in Pakistan and Ghana. A similar effect is not found for boys (Bhalotra & Heady 2003).

From childhood, a girl sees her mother's contribution to the family. She finds that her mother perform the household duties alone, after giving food to everyone she takes the food at last as have occupied lower position as compared to the male members of the family. She always keeps her head down in the family's decision-making process. Girls observe the modesty and submissiveness of their mothers in the family environment.

Thus, she understands the socialisation process and trains herself accordingly. This view is supported by Marinova (2003), who stated that the first lessons children receive from their mothers are usually heavily influenced by the same stereotypical thinking.

An infant enters the world without knowledge of rules or relationships among people. Between infancy and adolescence, society's basic expectations and limitations are imparted to the child in a complex series of processes generally referred to as socialisation (Malhotra & Sharma 2001). Socialisation practices lead to gender discrimination; females are taken less seriously by their counterparts even in the areas in which they outdo men (Malhotra 1974). Girls are socialised early into household chores and to look after younger siblings. In the absence of her mother, all household burdens are imposed on her. She finds very little time for her personal affairs. The household works are considered to be "women's work". Gender stereotypes are related to cognitive processes, because we have different expectations for male and female behaviour (Crespi 2003). In the study families, most of the females are working in agricultural fields on daily wage basis. In the absence of their mothers, the girls have to look after all the family household works; they have no option for rest, even if they are ill. It is well-established that working long hours in economic activities or household chores can adversely affect children's health and education (International Labour Organisation 2004).

Puberty and attaining menarche lead to many taboos on the movement of girls. Many parents withdraw their daughters from schools just after attaining the puberty and restrictions are imposed on their movements. From this study, it is clear that although girls do not constitute a minority group in the family, they are forced to adhere to the features of minority group, i.e. inequality and being denied the right to live on par with boys. They are accorded lower status and denied equal autonomy with boys. They are considered inferior to the boys, and are never permitted to live according to their wishes.

## **Conclusions**

Gender stereotypes are pervasive in contemporary Indian society (Hetherington & Parks 1999). The socialisation process gives much priority to her future than to the present. A girl is trained to be a good wife at a very young age and parents are expected to get them married as early as possible. The widespread prevalence of gender bias in all spheres of life is a reflection of the deep-rooted gender inequalities that persist throughout India. This is due to male patriarchy, a system of male dominance legitimised by the family and the society through superior rights, privileges, authority and power. Parents justify the household level discrimination against girls. The desire for a male child to continue the family lineage, the expectation of old age security for parents and the inheritance of property in favour of boys, etc. are responsible for discrimination against girls, which is the major hindrance for their overall development. Girls are restricted at every moment of their life and deprived of opportunities like education; they are even deprived of a chance to enjoy their childhood. Socio-religious practices and the entire socialisation process condition girls to believe that they are inferior and subordinate to men. Tribal women in general, and in comparison with caste women, enjoy more freedom in various walks of life. However, the present findings reveal the truth that girls are even more disadvantaged than boys, even in the tribal context.

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## **POVZETEK**

Študija obravnava spolno pristranskost kot rezultat socializacijskega procesa med šolo obveznimi dekleti plemenske skupnosti Sabara, ki živi v okrožju Kalahandi vzhodnoindijske države Orissa. Študija temelji na kvalitativnih in kvantitativnih podatkih, zbranih med 60 starši deklet, starih med 8 in 14 let, ki imajo brate podobne starosti. Zbrani so podatki o spolni pristranskosti kot ključnim delom dolgotrajnega socializacijskega procesa. Spolna stereotipizacija je globoko ukoreninjena v družbeni strukturi družin, študija pa kaže na odnos staršev in različna omejevanja mobilnosti in družbenih odnosov, katerim so dekleta podvržena, njihovi bratje pa ne. Med menstruacijo se morajo dekleta osamiti in se podvreči tudi drugim omejitvam in že v rani mladosti so socializirane v gospodinjska opravila in skrb za mlajše brate in sestre. Socializacija deklicam vcepi občutek manjvrednosti in podvrženosti, zaradi česa je mogoče socializacijo v tem primeru razumeti kot prikrajšanje deklet za različne priložnosti v tej skupnosti.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** otroci, spol, Orissa, socializacija, pleme, Sabara

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