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Rajbanshi Women and Empowerment: Through the Lens of Gender and Development Rubric

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Abstract - "Empowerment is the process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. It includes both control over resources (physical, human, intellectual, financial) and over ideology (believes values and attitudes)..."¹

The status of women in a society is measured in terms of educational level, income level, employment, health status, decision making right/ autonomy 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. In our country (and world wide), women usually have been linked to home and hearth. This has usually resulted in their economic dependence, social neglect and political ignorance which in their turn have prevented women from empowering themselves.

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Rajbanshi Women and Empowerment: Through the Lens of Gender and Development Rubric

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The status of women in a society is measured in terms of educational level, income level, employment, health status, decision making right/ autonomy 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. In our country (and world wide), women usually have been linked to home and hearth. This has usually resulted in their economic dependence, social neglect and political ignorance which in their turn have prevented women from empowering themselves.

This paper is based on an empirical study of the 776 female heads of the respective households of two selected mouzas under two respective blocks of Jalpaiguri district namely Gartali Jalpesh mouza under Maynaguri block and Chauhaddi mouza under Dhupguri block. The study was undertaken to measure the access towards the rights and empowerment issues of Rajbanshi women at various societal dimensions leading to the development processes (if any).

The U.N. General Assembly declared 1975 as the International Women's Year and 1975-1985 as the International Decade for Women, which led to a mounting awareness of women's issues and an acceptance of their demands as genuine issues for policy making, both at the national and international levels. The major themes of the International Women's Year and Conference were- Equality, Development and Peace. However, Equality, had been a dominant issue for the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women and it came chiefly from the feminist movement of the Western industrialized nations. Peace was gradually more considered to be a women's issue by the countries of the Eastern block. Development, on the other hand, was a recent issue put further mainly by the newly independent "Third World" nations as a key to civilizing

women's lives.² The women's conferences held during the Decade also underlined the importance of changing the sexual division of labour and the need to properly value women's unpaid labour.³ By highlighting women's participation in production, researchers have provided a timely challenge both to the definition of 'work' (and 'active labour') and to the methods of data collection used for generating official statistics.⁴ An important component of this endeavor has been the attempt to deal with the much-talked about category of 'family labour' — which is rendered culturally invisible by falling under the category of 'housework'. At the household level the gendered division of labor traditionally defines women's role primarily as family maintenance. This work is unpaid, taken for granted and indiscernible in economic terms, but has significant impact on the quality of women's lives and well-being. For example, when women assume paid work, they also assume the "double work day," paid and unpaid. The invisibility of women's unpaid work remains a critical issue in national and international macro policy.⁵

The Rajbanshi women⁶ has to work more than their men folk. They not only manage household chores, but also assist their men in fields regarding transplanting irrigational crops or reaping it. They collect dry woods for cooking and sell agricultural products in the nearby markets. Thus the contributions of the women in the Rajbanshi families are significant and results in encouragement of the men folk to tie the knot with more than one wife.⁷ Bellow are the statistics of the work pattern of the Rajbanshi men and women of the study areas.

² SIGNS. 1980: *1975 Report of the World Conference of the U.N. Decade for Women – Equality, Development and Peace*. Copenhagen: U.N. Publication, A/CONF. 94/35.

³ Young, K. 1993: *Planning Development with Women: Making a World of Difference*. London: Macmillan. p. 131.

⁴ Beneria, L. 1981: 'Conceptualizing the labour force: The underestimation of women's economic activities', in N. Nelson (ed.), *African Women in the Development Process*. London: Frank Cass.

⁵ Dixon-Mueller, R.B. 1985: *Women's Work in Third World Agriculture: Concepts and Indicators*, Women, Work and Development Series No.9. Geneva: International Labour Office; Sharma, U. 1980: *Women, Work and Poverty in North-West India*. London: Tavistock.

⁶ Rajbanshis are the indigenous population of north Bengal in the state of West Bengal. They are considered as one of the major Scheduled Caste community by the state government.

⁷ Sunder, D. H. E. 1995: p. 48; J. Roy. 1954: 'Economic and Social Customs of the Rajbanshis', *Modern Review*. August. p. 122. Cited from S. Basu. 2003

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¹ Harriet B. Presser and Gita Sen (ed.). 2000: *Women's Empowerment and Demographic Processes: Moving Beyond Cairo*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 24.

Table 1 : Occupational pattern of the Rajbanshi Men and Women at Chauhaddi Mouza at the Primary Level.

Primary Occupation of Rajbanshi Population in Chauhaddi Mouza	Male	Percent	Female	Percent	Total	Percent
Agriculture	12	1.82	0	0.00	12	0.95
agricultural labour	152	23.10	30	4.96	182	14.41
Day labourer	147	22.34	36	5.95	183	14.49
Forest	2	0.30	0	0.00	2	0.16
Business	49	7.45	0	0.00	49	3.88
Housework	8	1.22	235	38.84	243	19.24
Sevice	4	0.61	4	0.66	8	0.63
Student	232	35.26	234	38.68	466	36.90
Maid	0	0.00	7	1.16	7	0.55
Other	49	7.45	2	0.33	51	4.04
Pension	3	0.46	1	0.17	4	0.32
Biri binding	0	0.00	56	9.26	56	4.43
Total	658		605		1263	

Source: Field Survey, 2009- 2010.

Here primary occupation signifies the full time engagement of the person at the primary level (it may not be income generating).

According to the above Table, major portion of the Rajbanshi male population at Chauhaddi Mouza is agricultural laborer, which is 23.10 percent and 4.96 percent is female agricultural laborer. 22.34 percent male population is day laborer, in case of female it is 5.95 percent. 1.82 percent Rajbanshi male are involved in agriculture. 7.45 percent male population is involved in business as primary occupation. 0.61 percent male population and 0.66 percent female population is service holder. 9.26 percent female population is bidi binders. 1.16 percent female population is maid servants. Very few percentage of male and female population is pension holders. Most of the female members' primary occupation is housework. 38.84 percent female population's primary occupation is housework and also they have to work outside the home occasionally when work is available. Also those who have to work outside the home to earn wage as primary occupation (day labourer or agricultural labourer) they too have to do all the household chores as secondary occupation.

Table 2 : Occupational pattern of the Rajbanshi Men and Women at Gartali Jalpesh Mouza at the Primary Level.

Primary Occupation	Male	Percent	Female	Percent	Total	Percent
of Rajbanshi Population in Gartali Jalpesh Mouza						
Agriculture	10	1.50	0	0.00	10	0.80
agricultural labor	29	4.35	0	0.00	29	2.31
day laborer	106	15.89	14	2.37	120	9.55
Business	92	13.79	2	0.34	94	7.48
Housework	5	0.75	331	56.10	336	26.73
Service	128	19.19	25	4.24	153	12.17
Students	270	40.48	213	36.10	483	38.42
Maid	0	0.00	5	0.85	5	0.40
Other	24	3.60	0	0.00	24	1.91
Pension	3	0.45	0	0.00	3	0.24
Total	667		590		1257	

Source: Field Survey, 2009- 2010.

Here primary occupation signifies the full time engagement of the person at the primary level (it may not be income generating).

According to the above Table, major portion of the Rajbanshi male population at Gartali Jalpesh Mouza is service holder, which is 19.19 percent and in case of female population it is 4.24 percent. 1.50 percent male are involved in agriculture. 4.35 percent male population is agricultural laborer. 15.89 percent male population and 2.37 percent female population is day laborer. 0.85 percent female population is maid servants. 13.79 percent male population and 0.34 percent female population is involved in business as primary occupation. Very few percentage of male and female population is pension holders. Most of the female members' primary occupation is housework. Here in this mouza 56.10 percent female's primary occupation is housework and rest of the female population do it as secondary work. From both the tables it is significant that the percentage of women involved in housework at the primary level is high at Gartali Jalpesh mouza. Because the socio- economic position of the mouza is much better than Chauhaddi mouza and most of the women need not work outside the house. Whereas in Chauhaddi mouza the economic situation is very grim and the women of the mouza has to work as agricultural labourer or day labourer at the primary level to earn a living for their family. Before leaving house for the days

work they have to finish cooking food for the rest of the family and at the evening after returning home from work, they again have to cook night's meal and finish the rest of the household chores. Thus housework which is generally females part of work does not even gets acknowledged as labour and goes unnoticed.

A number of feminist scholars(Okin 1989, Bubeck 1995, Fraser 1996) has 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. 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."⁸ 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."⁹ She concludes¹⁰:

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.

Therefore, 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.¹¹

Ester Boserup's (1970) ground breaking work on the negative impact of colonial and ensuing post-colonial industrial development strategies on women threw open avenues of research consciousness and action associated to, and appropriate for, women in the Third World. Till the mid-sixties, modernization theories were used to understand post-colonial societies. Through an evolutionary process of change that would transform traditional society, through various stages to a state of modernity. It involved a total transformation of traditional societies, their institutions, cultures and behaviour. On the whole, modernization theories argued that capitalism played a progressive role in the development of traditional and underdeveloped societies.

According to Boserup, unlike African countries where female farming and shifting agriculture is

predominant and plough is not used, in Asian countries like India, the agricultural work through plough cultivation is distributed between the two sexes in a very different way. The main farming instrument in this region, the plough, is used by men helped by draught animals, and only the hand operations- or some of them are left for women to perform.

⁸ Ibid. p. 111.

⁹ Hochschild, Arlie. 1989: *The Second Shift*. New York: Avon Books. p. 3.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 4.

¹¹ Ibid.

Country (where sample villages are located)	Percentage of men in family labour force in agriculture	Average hours worked per week on own farm			Percentage of work in farm performed by			
		by active female family members	by active male family members	female hours as percent of male hours	by active female family members	by active male family members	hired labour of both sexes	
Western India	{A				17	50	33	
	{B	32	16	33	48	14	57	29
	{C	39	19	35	54	20	56	24
Central India	{A	21	15	27	64	6	21	73
	{B	27	20	29	52	7	20	74
Southern India		40	20	30	67	25	37	38
Delhi territory			31					
Malaya	{A		7	17	45			
	{B		9	14	68			
Philippines		21	30	43	70	13	69	18
Chinab, average					50	13	72	15
Northern China					41	9	75	16
Southern China					58	16	69	15
Of which: sub-region with multi-cropping of paddy		42		76		30	62	9

a The A sample refers to a village with one annual crop of paddy; the B sample refers to three villages with multi-cropping of paddy. The farm families were smallholders and both men and women had much wage labour in addition to their work in own farm.

b The figures refer to the period 1929- 33.

* *Western India*: Sample A, Dandekar, 82- 9, sample of 2,379 households in the old Bombay Deccan, 1949- 50. Sample B and C, Farm Survey Bombay, 14, 87, 117, 344-50, sample of 158 farms in Ahmednagar and Nasik districts (1956- 57). *Central India*: Sample A and B, Farm Survey Madhya Pradesh, 126- 7, 143-4, 149, 152, sample of 160 farms in Akola and Amraoti districts, 1956- 7. *Southern India*: Farm survey Madras 16- 7, 39- 43, sample of 199 farms in Salem and Coimbatore districts, 1956- 7. *Delhi territory*: Chaudhuri 647, sample of twenty- seven families in village close to Delhi. *Malaya*: Sample A and B, Wharton, 5- 6, sample of fifty families in Province Wellesley in 1962- 3. *Philippines*: Survey of Households, 25, arepresentative sample of 5, 123 households, October 1960. *China*: Buck, 290 3, sample of 15,316 farms, 1929 33.

The above Table shows the regions of India where plough cultivation is predominant. The samples from regions of plough cultivation in India show a predominantly male family labour force, because a large proportion of women in cultivator families are completely exempted from work in the fields. The land is prepared for sowing by men using draught animals, and this thorough land preparation leaves need for weeding the crop, which is usually the women's task. Therefore, women contribute mainly to harvest work and to the care of domestic animals and household chores. Women's labour goes unpaid and unnoticed. 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".¹³

¹² Ibid., Table. 2. pp. 25

Gradually there was a growing disillusionment with modernization theories by the late 1960s and early 1970s. Its inability to explain the failure of capitalist development in different parts of the world, particularly Latin America, led to the rise of an alternative theory, namely underdevelopment theory or dependency theory. The theorists Andre Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein have contributed immensely to the development and popularization of Dependency Theory.

Most dependency theorists regard international capitalism as the motive force behind dependency relationships. Andre Gunder Frank, is quite clear on this point:

...historical research demonstrates that contemporary underdevelopment is in large part the historical product of past and continuing economic and other relations between the satellite underdeveloped and the now developed metropolitan countries. Furthermore, these relations are an essential part of the capitalist system on a world scale as a whole.¹³

Like Frank, for Wallerstein too, unequal exchange between the core and the periphery led to the development of the former and underdevelopment of the latter

The underdevelopment Theories/ Dependency Theories, have been completely blind to the question of gender and the contribution of women to economic development. It was at this time that the contribution of Ester Boserup in her book "Women's Role in Economic Development" (1970) was recognized and widely quoted. Scholars like Ester Boserup, Elise Boulding and others, have noted that time and again, economic development in the underdeveloped countries leads to structural changes that dislocate women from income generating occupations. This, on the other hand imposes a greater load on women who continue with subsistence agriculture, while men move into mechanized agriculture, grow cash crops or migrate to the cities. By the mid- 1970s an increasing number of women and men concerned with global equity had become aware that both planned and unplanned development of the world has had inimical effect on women (Tinker and Bramson, 1976). Simultaneously, the Indian women's movement developed along lines quite autonomous of the Western paradigm and the participation of a cross- section of women lent it a depth and perspective that worked in turn to implant insight in the rising Indian academic contribution to Women's

studies. Thus the field of Women and Development emerged.¹⁵

I. CHRONOLOGICALLY HOW THE APPROACHES EVOLVED

The truth that women had not benefited from the new creative opportunities, new technology and market forces, resulted in doubts over the alleged objectivity of the development agencies. This led to the emergence of the WID (Women In Development) approach. The term "women in development" was coined in the early 1970s by a Washington-based network of female development professionals.¹⁶ The WID approach was adopted focusing on the fact that women's contribution for development is not recognized by the policy makers. Women are treated as 'beneficiaries' of development, not as active agents of development.¹⁷ However, the WID scholars, retained the fundamental premise of the liberal world view. The problem was how to integrate women into development process (Mcfarland, 1988). The WID position legitimized research focusing specifically on women's experiences and perceptions (Rathgeber, 1990). WID was characterized by the Welfare approach. The critiques of WID argued that women would never get their equal share of development benefits unless patriarchy and global inequality are addressed. At this early stage, the emphasis was on equal rights for women rather than on economic development.

Then came into existence WAD (Women and Development) Approach. This approach argued that women are already integrated into the development process in an exploitative way. Under the WAD rubric, poor men in the third world faced as much of disadvantage as women as a result of the exploitative nature of international capitalism (Rathgeber, 1990). Therefore the WAD view does not satisfy the gender relations within caste/ class structure of society. Nor does it focus extensively on class and gender linkage and structures of patriarchy.

The female sphere theorists argue that the demand for equality of work for a just and egalitarian society may be disadvantageous for women. In a society where women enjoyed autonomy in the private sphere, for the sake of family however, they are withdrawn from the visible public labour force and are made economically dependent. However, many women have chosen to retain their economic independence.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ray, Bharati. 1994: *Detecting Disadvantages- A Pilot Study of Scheduled Caste Women in Two Districts of West Bengal*. University of Calcutta: Women's Studies Department.

¹⁶ Tinker, I. (ed.) 1990: *Persistent Inequalities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 30.

¹⁷ Available at the site www.egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/36007/1/Unit%206.pdf. 6.7.2 The Indian Context ... 6.9 Gender and Development (GAD) Approach ... Commission on the Status of Women and it came primarily from the feminist ...

¹³ Boserup, Ester. 1970: *Women's Role in Economic Development*. New York: St. Martin's Press. p. 9.

¹⁴ Frank, Andre Gunder. 1972: 'The Development of Underdevelopment', in James D. Cockcroft, Andre Gunder Frank, and Dale Johnson, eds., *Dependence and Underdevelopment*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1972, p. 3.

Some radical female sphere theorists noticed that class revolutions and class struggles do not ensure the end of discrimination (Parpart, 1989). For them women's subordination is rooted upon 'male control of women's sexuality, procreative capacity and ideology'. Thus the only chances of redistribution of resources lie in the recognition of a 'female sphere' where women are agents in, and of themselves. This perspective, however, detracts from an analysis of economic structures and class/ caste differences and is often ahistorical in its neglect of social reality.¹⁹ This has led to a rethinking of the WID approach and resulted in the emergence of the Gender and Development approach or GAD.

Under the Gender and Development approach or GAD, both gender and caste/ class are considered in explaining women's development problems (Sen and Grown).²⁰ The GAD approach focuses on the socially constructed basis of differences between men and women and emphasizes the need to challenge existing gender roles and relations. GAD points to the importance of understanding the relationship between women and men and how society influences their respective roles. The GAD approach uses gender, rather than women, as an analytical category to understand how economic, political, social and cultural systems affect women and men differently. Gender is understood as the social roles, expectations and responsibilities assigned to women and men because of their biological differences. It is an ideological and cultural construct that shapes women's and men's realities.²¹ Finally, under GAD approach women are seen as agents of change rather than passive recipients of development (McGreevy, 1983).

II. WOMEN AND EMPOWERMENT

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*.

Empowerment is the process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. It includes both control over resources (physical, human, intellectual, financial) and over ideology (believes values and attitudes)...²²

Mayoux's (2000) definition of empowerment is related directly with power, as "a multidimensional and interlinked process of change in power relations". It consists of:

(1) 'Power within' which enables women to articulate their own aspirations and strategies for change; (2) 'Power to', which enables women to develop the necessary skills and access the necessary resources to achieve their aspirations; (3) 'Power with', which enables women to examine and articulate their collective interests, to organize, to achieve them and to link with other women and men's organizations for change; and (4) 'Power over', to change the underlying inequalities in power and resources that constrain women's aspirations and their ability to achieve them. These power relations operate in different spheres of life like economic, social, political spheres and at different levels such as individual, household, community, market, institutional, etc.²³

The notion of empowerment is inescapably bound up with the condition of disempowerment and it refers to the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such ability. There is a logical association between poverty and disempowerment because an insufficiency of the means for meeting one's basic needs often rules out the ability to exercise meaningful choice. The ability to exercise choice can be thought of in terms of three inter-related dimensions: Resources, Agency and Achievements. Resources define pre-conditions; which include not only material resources but also human and social resources which serve to enhance the ability to exercise choice. The second dimension of power relates to Agency- the ability to define one's goals and act upon them. Resources and agency together constitute what Sen refers to as capabilities: the potential that people have for living the lives they want, of achieving valued ways of 'being and doing' which are valued by people in a given context.²⁴ The third is Achievements: The well-being outcomes that women experience as a result of access to resources and agency.

Gender division in access to resources such as land, technology and education, or discrimination in wages paid to women and men, have an effect on women's capabilities. Policy makers should think about both the actuality of women's lives and the manner in

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ray, Bharati. 1994: *Detecting Disadvantages- A Pilot Study of Scheduled Caste Women in Two Districts of West Bengal*. University of Calcutta: Women's Studies Department.

²⁰ Sen, G and C. Grown. 1988: *Development, Crises and Alternative Visions*. London: Earthscan Publications.

²¹ Beneria, Lourdes and Roldan, Martha. 1987: *The Crossroads of Class and Gender*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. p.7.

²² Harriet B. Presser and Gita Sen (ed.). 2000: *Women's Empowerment and Demographic Processes: Moving Beyond Cairo*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 24.

²³ Mayoux, L. 2000. Microfinance and the empowerment of women: A review of the key issues. *Social Finance Unit Working Paper*, 23, ILO, Geneva. (www.unrisd.org/engindex/publ/list/opb/opb3/opb3.htm)

which institutions and ideas (social, political, cultural, economic, and religious) locate them. Gender-transformative policies can grant women the resources which will allow them to take better control of their lives, to determine what kinds of gender relations they want to live with, and to devise strategies and alliances to help them get there²⁵. An examination of women's roles, division of labour based on gender, decision-making and control over resources may help in avoiding slip-ups which may eventually cause a sabotage of the aims of the program.

The overall lower socio-economic position of the scheduled castes in general and Rajbanshis²⁶ in particular, made the framers of the Constitution, to realize that special attention is urgently required for their development. As a result, some specific provisions have been incorporated in the Constitution to provide social justice to the members of these castes through the policy of protective discrimination. The basic purpose of incorporating these developmental provisions was to change the traditional social structure of our society, which is based upon socio-economic and political inequalities. These special provisions have played an important role in improving the socio-economic conditions and achieving a respectful position to the members of the scheduled caste communities in the society. Rural development has been given top priority during the successive five year plans by the government of India. Various rural development programmes have been initiated from time to time for the upliftment of the rural poor. These programmes benefited the rural people and bring qualitative change in their lives, but not as desired or expected by the planners. This may be because of poor implementation of the various schemes, corruption and inadequate people's participation specifically of the beneficiaries in the process of development. The socio-economic development of the scheduled castes is a continuous process and the government is constantly making efforts to improve the lot of poor people. Distribution of surplus land to the members of the scheduled caste categories is one of the important steps towards their economic empowerment. The government has also initiated many programmes to improve the quality of life of the rural poor specially the scheduled castes by making special provisions for them.

One of the important programmes is the 'Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana' which was launched to safeguard the interest of the weaker sections and women by providing them wage employment. Under this scheme around 22.5 per cent of the annual allocations (first stream) have been earmarked for individual beneficiary schemes of SCs/STs. Similarly, a minimum of 50 per cent of the allocation has been earmarked to the village panchayat for creation of need based village infrastructure in SC/ST habitations under the second stream of SGRY. The Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana, another rural development scheme also aims at bringing poor families above the poverty line by providing them income generating assets through a mix of credit and subsidy. The SGSY has also made an explicit provision that 50 per cent of the swarozgaris assisted should be from SCs/STs. Under the SGSY scheme, around 1.10 lakh SHGs have been formed and a total of 4.56 lakh swarozgaris have been assisted during the year 2008-09 (up to August). Among the total swarozgaris assisted, 2.11 lakh were from SC/ST category and 2.78 lakh women swarozgaris, which constitute 46.29 and 60.96 per cent, respectively of the total swarozgaris (Gol, 2008-09)²⁷. The government of India recently enacted the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in February 2006. This act for the first time guaranteed 100 days of manual labour to each poor rural household. Under this scheme in Gartali Jalpesh mouza 388 families were issued job cards, each card for a family. Henceforth, it is the only operational wage employment programme in the country and all other public wage programmes including Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY) have been merged with it. It provides huge possibilities of making difference to the lives of 45 million rural households of the country over the period of two years of its existence.

In Rajbanshi society, women enjoy rights to make decisions regarding household foods and cooking materials, 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.²⁸ In case

²⁴ Bhattacharyya, Joysankar and Sarmila Banerjee. 2012: Women Empowerment as Multidimensional Capability Enhancement: An Application of Structural – Equation- Modelling. Occasional Paper 36. Kolkata: IDSK. pp. 2- 3.

²⁵ Kabeer, N. 1998. 'Can't buy me love? Re-evaluating gender, credit and empowerment in rural Bangladesh'. *IDS Discussion Paper* No. 363. Institute of Development Studies, Sussex.

²⁶ Rajbanshis are considered as Scheduled Castes under the Indian Constitution.

²⁷ Singh, Darshan. 2009: Development of Scheduled Castes in India- A Review. *Journal of Rural Development*, Vol. 28, No. 4, October - December. pp- 529- 542.

of wages, females are less paid than male laborer. Regarding discrimination in wage labour, my observation is slightly different. For instance, during the season of jute growing and processing, female laborer are hired at the rate of 100- 120 Rupees per day. For the same cause male laborers are paid 140- 150 Rupees per day. Thus, apparently it seems that the female agricultural laborers are paid less than their male counterparts. But my intensive field visits and observations reveal that the female laborers are unable to bear the heavy loaded bundles of jute from cultivation field to the place where they are supposed to be carried out and stored, where male co- operation becomes obvious and also on various other occasions when needed during the process. The situation is different when a male laborer is hired for the same work. They can carry out the whole thing without any help from others. Therefore, heavy goods bearing from field to other decided area is part of the same job which a female laborer cannot perform and male labor becomes mandatory. Thus, it has become obvious, that female laborers are paid less than their male counter parts (though these are some particular cases).

Through the light of education, gradually these Rajbanshi women like many other backward class women, having gained self confidence to a certain level, begun to realize their own rights at familial and societal levels.²⁹ They have become capable of giving required arguments (in family matters, at the party level regarding politics, etc).³⁰ Most of the female members of one of the study area, namely, Chauhaddi mouza, are active participants of Mahila Samity and are also involved with Self Help Groups. They are also active party workers and most of them have read till the middle school or secondary level.

In Gartali Jalpesh mouza, the female members are more educated and conscious about their rights. Here the economy is much better and educational attainment is also high. They actively participate in Self Help Groups and at the panchayat levels (local political bodies) they carry out party works very efficiently. They conduct meetings, take required decisions and give fruitful efforts to bring forward expected results. The mouza has good communication, the location of the primary, secondary and higher secondary schools are apt which has high attendance rate of students, and the village economy is far better than the Chauhaddi mouza. This results in better socio- economic conditions of the village people. Through Self Help Groups, the women of this mouzas have gained some sort of economic

independence and mental stamina. I have met women who have learned to read and write only to become active members in SHG and panchayat activities. Thus, the implication of educational attainment is understandable, considering the family and social background they belong to. It is education and literacy which can turn life of individuals for betterment, regarding familial and social adjustment and management.

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'.³¹ Though 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.³² Although termed as 'decision making' in the social science literature, 'agency is about more than observable action; it also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, their sense of agency, or 'the power within'.³³

III. CONCLUSION

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.³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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

²⁹ Bhattacharyya, Moumita G. 2012: Mapping Disparity: Rajbanshi Women and Literacy' in *Global Journals of Human Social Sciences- E Linguistics and education*, USA. CAMBIDIDGE: Massachusetts. Vol. 12 (9) June.

³⁰ In one of the study areas, namely, Chauhaddi mouza, I met with the 'Pradhan' (female) of Jharaltagram gram panchayat. She has read up to the higher secondary level. She has a one year old boy child. She has to manage her party activities and familial duties with equal efficiency. It is on her part to balance both duties by paying equal attention.

³¹ Sen, A. 1985: 'Well- being, agency and freedom'. *Journal of Philosophy*. Vol. 82 (4). p.204.

²⁸ I have discussed on this topic elaborately in Bhattacharyya, Moumita G. 2012: Mapping Disparity: Rajbanshi Women and Literacy' in *Global Journals of Human Social Sciences- E Linguistics and Education*, Vol. 12 (9) June.

entertainment, media exposure and external cultural influences have been influencing gender relations in the areas under study.³⁶

As far as gender differences in intra- family decision making is concerned, it is important to note that within the Rajbanshi community where women enjoy some control over decision making in the households, this participation is almost always enjoyed within well- defined and differentiated spheres of action and socially sanctioned parameters. Second, there has been a clear tendency towards imitation of the 'other' cultures, particularly among the better- off and educated groups (caste Hindu Bengalis) living in urban areas, in terms of moving closer to the male centered, patriarchal nuclear family system. Autonomy, which is viewed as the decision making power of a woman within the family, has been looked upon as one of the important factors which can influence the life of the woman herself as well as others (Safilios- Rothschild, 1983). Decision making in a family/ society is by and large affected by various factors to mention a few among others, the level of education, husband's education, occupation, the habitat, age, etc. As well as social setting, a woman's life cycle plays an important role in the dynamics of decision making and it is right that when a woman becomes older, she has more power and control over situations than when she was young (Cain et al. 1979; Das Gupta 1996). Jejbhoy (1995) argues that the degree of gender stratification in the society acts to condition the impact of other factors. In extreme patriarchal setting, where the seclusion of women or their withdrawal from outside activities is considered as high prestige, even better educated women may experience less decision making autonomy than uneducated women of less stratified setting. Dyson and Moore's (1983) observation also corroborates that in the less gender stratified society of south Indian women enjoy more autonomy than their counterparts of the north. There is a strong relationship between the benefits for education to women and the goals of empowerment. Education and empowerment can be linked through the psychological and behavioural changes and each component is expected to affect: increased sense of control, confidence, competence,

changed behaviours, increased access to resources, and an ability to get around in modern society. They are also linked through larger societal effects on women's status and roles. Most often in developing countries, women are oppressed because they are illiterate and do not have access to knowledge capability. Attainment of knowledge competence plays an important role to promote the process of empowerment through a proper understanding of both the structures of power within families as well as citizens of a civil society.³⁷

Women are hardly allowed to play any role in traditional institutions either, although in recent years, there have been some attempts to provide some space for them. However, after the introduction of the three- tier Panchayati Raj system along with 33 percent reservations for women. The level of participation of women at the Gram Parisad level, Anchal Samimti level and district or Zilla Parisad levels has risen.

The emergence of grassroots- level women's leadership may play a catalytic role in gradually eliminating gender bias in sharing of political power. However, even today at the grassroots level, the traditional village chief and the village councils play a crucial role in conflict resolution and administration of justice. In this transitional phase, as the 'traditional' community institutions and the formal institutions of grassroots democracy coexist and share an ambiguous common space of governance with vague and approximate boundaries, women's issues do not necessarily get adequate attention, even though their representation has been ensured through legislation.³⁸

Feminist critique of development, starting from Boserup (1970, [2007]), have argued that the outcomes of economic development, far from being gender neutral, are embedded in existing and emerging gender relations. The initial misconception that women's subordination is primarily the result of their 'lack of participation in productive work' has gradually been replaced by a more contextual and nuanced understanding of the conditions under which women participate in, or are incorporated into, the economy (Beneria and Sen, 1981; Kabeer, 1994 [1998]; Rai, 2002)³⁹. The nature of the development process, particularly in terms of its distributional outcomes, not only influences emerging gender relations but is also itself influenced by the nature and extent of gender inequality in the society. It is important to note that 'economic processes sometimes modify and sometimes reinforce pre- existing gender norms and unequal gender relations' (Beneria, Floro, Grown and

³² 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. p. 193.

³³ Kabeer, N. 1999: Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of Women's Empowerment. *Development and Change*. Vol. 30 (3). p. 348.

³⁴ Although, recent scholarship has cast doubts on such generalizations (Xaxa, 2004).

³⁵ Conversation with Dr. Deepak Kumar Roy availed me with the related informations.

³⁶ In my published paper Bhattacharyya, G. Moumita. 2011: 'Gender and Discrimination: The Case of the Rajbanshi Women'. *Voice of Dalit*. Vol. 4 (2). I have deliberately dealt with the issue.

³⁷ Bhattacharya, Joysankar and Sarmila Banerjee. 2012: *Women Empowerment as Multidimensional Capability Enhancement: An Application of Structural- Equation- Modelling*. Kolkata: Institute of Development Studies. pp. 6- 8.

McDonald, 2000)⁴⁰. The rapid transformation of the agricultural economy to cash crop economy poses serious challenges before women, particularly because, on the one hand, there is an increasing attack on the 'traditional' egalitarian values and practices,⁴¹ and on the other hand, economic transformation itself has generated gendered processes of exclusion and impoverishment.

The various dimensions of gender equality are not only interconnected, but impediments to any of them impede other dimensions as well (Nussbaum, 2000)⁴². While spread of education and exposure to mass media has helped women to expand their capabilities, unequal opportunities and subtle discriminations tend to limit the scope for gender equality. The predominance of the politics of ethnicity and identity over a period of time has generated a political discourse where questions of gender equality are generally seen as undermining the legitimacy of community institutions, collective solidarity and identity. As the interest of the local Rajbanshi elites is significantly anchored in the politics of identity, questions regarding intra- community distribution of assets, income and opportunities have been pushed to the back. In this transition to capitalism, the 'traditional/old/indigenous' institutions are not simply being replaced by 'modern/ new/ alien' institutions; institutional diversity, adaptability and hybridity provide the broader context in which traditional identities are being reworked, adapted and selectively appropriated in response to the emerging challenges and opportunities.⁴³ As Harriss- White et al. (2009)⁴⁴ have argued, this has also provided the context for the emergence of an ethnicized discourse of development and governance.

Education is considered a significant medium for human resource development; therefore the need for qualitative education starting with elementary education up to higher level can serve as sound base for up gradation and empowerment of these people in general and women in particular. 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)⁴⁵, which is a project under government sponsored Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY)⁴⁶. This has encouraged women to take decisions inside out the households, handle micro credits, work in groups and enhance their self esteem. A literate mother will always try and make sure that her children, especially the girl child gets educated. Though there are various socio- economic factors influencing simultaneously, it is only through education that ignorance can be destroyed and sincere awareness may be obtained. Finally, the probability of a literate woman to have more autonomy than an illiterate woman, is a convincing fact irrespective of any social setting.

³⁸ Mishra, D., Upadhyay, Vandana. 2012: The Difficult Transition: Economic Development and Gender Relations in Arunachal Pradesh. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*. Vol 19 (1). pp. 93- 126.

³⁹ Beneria, L., & Sen, G. 1981: 'Accumulation, reproduction and women's role in economic development: Boserup revisited.' *Signs*. Vol. 7 (2), pp. 279- 298. Kabeer, N. 1994[1998]. *Reversed realities: Gendered hierarchies in development thought*. London and New Delhi: Verso and Kali for Women. Rai, S. M. 2002: *Gender and the Political Economy of Development*. Cambridge: Polity press.

⁴⁰ Beneria, L., Floro, M., Grown, C., & MacDonald, M. 2000: 'Globalization and Gender' in *Feminist Economics*. Vol 6(3), pp. 7- 18.

⁴¹ To what extent traditional values, institutions and practices are egalitarian or gender neutral is itself a contested question (Elwin, 1957[1999]); Furer- Haimendorf, 1939, p. 101).

⁴² Mishra, D., Upadhyay, Vandana. 2012: The Difficult Transition: Economic Development and Gender Relations in Arunachal Pradesh. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*. Vol 19 (1). pp. 93- 126.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Harriss- White, B., Mishra, D. K., & Upadhyaya, V. 2009: 'Institutional diversity and capitalist transition: The political economy of agrarian change in Arunachal Pradesh, India'. *Journal of Agrarian Change*. Vol 9(4). pp. 512- 547.

⁴⁵ 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.

⁴⁶ 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).

Table 4 : Decision Making Right of the Female Population of Chauhaddi Mouza and Gartali Jalpesh Mouza.

Decision making right of Female		
	Chauhaddi Mouza	Gartali Jalpesh Mouza
*Yes	60	70
*No	36	4
*Partial	350	254
Total	446	328

Source: Field Survey, 2009- 2010.
 Total number of female heads interviewed during the study
 Chauhaddi Mouza- 446
 Gartali Jalpesh Mouza- 328
 *Yes- Regarding quantity and quality of cooking, clothing, children's education and educational requirements, etc.
 *No- Property, business, commodities, etc.
 *Partial- Children's marriage, food, household income spending, own earning spending (if any), etc.

Table 5 : Rights to Buy and Sell Property of the Female Population of Chauhaddi Mouza and Gartali Jalpesh Mouza.

Rights to Buy and Sell Property of Female		
	Chauhaddi Mouza	Gartali Jalpesh Mouza
Yes	22	10
No	421	318
Partial	3	0
Total	446	328

Source: Field Survey, 2009- 2010.
 Total number of female heads interviewed during the study
 Chauhaddi Mouza- 446
 Gartali Jalpesh Mouza- 328

Table 6 : Rights to Family Heritance of the Female Heads of Chauhaddi Mouza and Gartali Jalpesh Mouza.

Family Heritance		
	Chauhaddi Mouza	Gartali Jalpesh Mouza
Yes	4	8
No	440	320
Partial	2	0
Total	446	328

Source: Field Survey, 2009- 2010.
 Total number of female heads interviewed during the study
 Chauhaddi Mouza- 446
 Gartali Jalpesh Mouza- 328



Table 7: Rights to Spend Household Income of the Female Heads of Chauhaddi Mouza and Gartali Jalpesh Mouza.

HH income spend		
	Chauhaddi Mouza	Gartali Jalpesh Mouza
Yes	84	100
No	359	228
Partial	3	0
Total	446	328
Source: Field Survey, 2009- 2010. Total number of female heads interviewed during the study Chauhaddi Mouza- 446 Gartali Jalpesh Mouza- 328		

Table 8: Rights to Spend Own Earning of the Female Heads of Chauhaddi Mouza and Gartali Jalpesh Mouza.

Own earning spend		
	Chauhaddi Mouza	Gartali Jalpesh Mouza
Full independence	133	100
No	11	20
Total Population who earns	144	120
Total Female Heads	446	328
Source: Field Survey, 2009- 2010. Total number of female heads interviewed during the study Chauhaddi Mouza- 446 Gartali Jalpesh Mouza- 328		

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ABBREVIATIONS

NGOs	Non- governmental organizations, also known as voluntary Organizations
GAD	Gender and Development approach
GEM	Gender Empowerment Measure
IAY	Indira Awaas Yojana
NREGA	National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
SGSY	Swarnjayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojana
SGRY	Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana
SHGs	Self Help Groups
SC	Scheduled Caste
ST	Scheduled Tribe
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WID	Women In Development
WAD	Women and Development