

Development, Status of Women and Fertility : Case Study of a Tribal Group

THERE is a considerable body of scientific literature suggesting that development, status of women and fertility are closely interlinked. Of the three, problem of status of women is the most recent in gaining attention of the world. It has, therefore, no technological support corresponding to that of either development or fertility. It remains as yet largely in the realm of conceptual exploration. However, its unique significance lies in that it is one of the goals of human welfare in contrast to the means-dominated development and the means-oriented fertility control activities.

These three concepts have tended to remain somewhat independent and unrelated identities in our thoughts and action programmes. It is only since 1974 that the basic unity and interrelationship between these three sets of variables has begun to attract attention. Some credit for this goes to the declaration of United Nations of 1974 and 1975 as International Years of Population and of Women respectively, during the Second Development Decade. This somewhat accidental coincidence of the Second Development Decade and the International Population and Women's Years led to the focussing and evaluating of development performance in relation to its impact on fertility and women's status. Development is now increasingly looked upon as a process which must be consistent with goals of social justice and human welfare equally for the male and the female population. According to Ester Boserup (1975) "Development is a dual

process. It greatly expands new economic and social activities, and at the same time traditional activities are transformed and their relative importance reduced, so that labour is released for the new activities. The main purpose of all development planning is, or should be, to guide this process of transformation in such a way that efficient use is made of all human resources so that the largest possible number of families obtain an improvement of their level of living". The process of development is enlarging its ideological base, from exclusive concern with increasing the aggregate material product, to include behavioural considerations of different groups and classes in the society. The International Women Year enlarged the development concept by highlighting the bias of economic development in favour of men at the cost of women, and pleading for women's right to fully contribute and equally share the growing economic cake.

This new orientation of development ideology took researchers and social scientists rather by surprise. Even today, the data and information base for translating the new development ideology into action is meagre. This paper is a modest attempt to fill this gap in respect of a small tribal group. Under the present national priorities, tribal areas are receiving heavy doses of investment. The resulting process of growth need to be informed by the newer ideology of development, marked by its concern for people, commitment to furthering of social justice and to improving quality of life of both the male and female population. The paper broadly describes the processes of development, fertility and status of women at two points of time—before and after the initiation of modern economic progress. It indirectly illustrates some of the more common generalizations about the relationship between these three processes. In doing so it supports the idea that the new development ideology can be implemented only to the extent that adequate recognition is given to specific context of the people under change. New development programmes will have to vary along with the variations of human groups and their socio-economic and culture values and life contexts. The situation calls for tempering and modifying broad generalisations according to the results of situation specific micro-analysis and studies.

The Tribal Group Under Study

This illustration is drawn from our field study of the tribal people of Lahul and Spiti. We first describe the situation as it existed before this land-locked and completely isolated tribal area was exposed to modern processes of development, highlighting the responses and adjustments of the people to the problems of economic resource scarcity, population control, and quality of social organis-

ation in terms of relationship between men and women. Next, we take up the major economic development processes the people experienced in order to see how these forces are influencing variables related to population trends and status of women. The responses, in general, have been unique and do not neatly fit into any readymade hypothetical model. The lesson to be drawn is that action consistent with new concept of development would continue to be deficient and faulty unless context specific micro studies of different human groups are undertaken on a large scale to strengthen the information and data base for refining generalisations based on macro studies of economic development and demography.

The Land and Its People

The District of Lahul and Spiti was created as one of the districts of Himachal Pradesh in June, 1960. Before this it was an isolated part of the Kangra District of Punjab. On its eastern border lies Tibet. Its area is 12,210 sq. km. Its general topography is extremely rugged with high peaks, deep gorges and cliffs exposed to snow and severe winter cold for a major part of the year. It is therefore quite inhospitable for human settlement. It is only at selected spots of the district that the sturdy hill tribes have made settlements, struggling against all sorts of natural odds. The newly constructed road through Rohtang Pass acts as the gate-way to this district and connects it with rest of the country. The district has the highest concentration of tribal population in the State of Himachal Pradesh. Out of its total population of 23,538, a little over 76 per cent belong to scheduled tribes (1971). The total population is distributed into 204 census villages. The district has two dominant religions—Buddhism (61 per cent) and Hinduism (37.5 per cent). Lahuli is the main language of the people.

The Initial State of Economy

The district accounts for about 21 per cent of the total area of the State of Himachal Pradesh. In most of the district, the terrain and the climate are quite unsuited to growth of vegetation. Only about 2,770 hectares i.e. 25 per cent of the total area, permits cultivation. With a total population of 23,538 the cultivable land per head comes to around 0.11 hectare. There is no forest of any significance in the district. The main occupation of the people is agriculture in valleys which are extremely narrow with steep mountains and rivers running through deep gorges. This agriculture is extremely labour intensive.

As the area was totally cut off with the rest of the country, people had to be completely self-sufficient. The whole economy was based on family productions through labour intensive agriculture for subsistence and survival. There was no trade, commerce or industry with the main land. Development as a process of expansion of economic activities to raise the levels of living was unknown to the people of the area. Every family produced the minimum essentials for its survival. The struggle was for existence and for progress.

It is interesting to note that it was only in the year 1930 that the first cash crop of KUTH was cultivated and marketed outside the district. This appears to be the first time when agriculture production for market rather than subsistence entered into the economy. This also introduced money into the life, economy and attitude of the people. However, this was on a modest scale. Money and market being the two prerequisites of economic development, it can be safely assumed that the period before 1931 was marked by complete lack of economic development and progress, in the sense in which these terms are now understood and accepted. As the District Gazetteer notes, the cultivation of KUTH not only raised the standard of living of the people, but also changed their outlook and values by creating a desire for better social and economic life on the model of people from outside.

Past Demographic Situation

Taking the year 1931 as marking the initiation of changes in social values, attitudes and economy of the area, demographic situation of the past may be described with reference to the period preceding that year. The table below uses the information of District Gazetteer to present population trends in the district from 1868 to 1931.

There was during this period very little increase in population. The increase appears to be very gradual except for 1881-1901. The period began with a decreasing trend and there was a decrease in population also in 1911-21. The gradual increase may be taken to indicate that during this period there was no epidemic or famine. It suggests that these people even in those days could maintain a balance between their static and limited economic resources and the number of people. How they could do this, in the absence of modern contraceptive technology, becomes clear when we look to the status of some of the population related variables.

POPULATION TRENDS FOR THE PERIOD 1868-1931

<i>Years</i>	<i>Persons</i>	<i>Decade Variation</i>	<i>Decennial</i>		
			<i>Growth Rate %</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>
1868	8,994	—	—	—	—
1881	8,622	-372	-4.4	—	—
1891	9,530	+908	+10.53	—	—
1901	10,444	+914	+9.59	5,198	5,246
1911	10,903	+459	+4.39	5,427	5,476
1921	10,660	-243	-2.23	5,290	5,370
1931	11,481	+821	+7.70	5,724	5,757

SOURCE : Himachal District Gazetteer : Lahul and Spiti, 1975,

Number of Reproducing Women and Age at Marriage

Historical accounts mention of the system of polyandry in tribes living in the Himalayan region. According to the District Gazetteer, in the past, polyandry was practised widely in this tribe. In this system the eldest brother marries and the younger, if any, share his wife. As a result large number of girls remained outside the wedlock and contributed greatly in keeping the population growth in-check. Anthropologists explain practice of polyandry by scarcity of female population in relation to male. However, this does not seem to be the reason in so far as this area is concerned. The above table clearly indicates an excess of female over the male population throughout in the past. Was it then not practised to keep in check the population? Can we not credit these backward people with the wisdom of some of western societies where a very significant proportion of women remain unmarried and contribute substantially to keeping population increase at a low level? These questions will remain open for want of any definite information. The important fact, in any case, is its impact in regulating population increase consistent with the very limited and scarce economic resources of the area. Child marriages are unknown to the people of the area. The present age at marriage of the girls is higher than the national average. It is even higher than what is prescribed in the most recent legislation on this subject. The Gazetteer indicates that the present practice is the continuation of the

past. The reasons for the effective practice of these population depressing practices in the past seem to lie more in the severe socio-economic context and less in the demographic wisdom of the people. As already explained the hostile nature and climate and extremely limited small patches of cultivable land required everybody to struggle hard for living. The whole family had to work and marriages at higher age, remaining unmarried or the practice of polyandry were all effective mechanisms to meet the demands of labour intensive agriculture, and keeping the small fields consolidated, through the practice of polyandry, under joint families.

Family Organisation and Status of Women

Polyandrous families in which one wife among several brothers acted as a force to keep the brothers together did perpetuate the joint family system, which in turn prevented endless sub-division of very small fields. Under polyandry, the married woman has an important position, as the entire control over the household affairs rests with her. She decides the paternity of children and wields authority in the house. Besides, like other traditional societies depending upon family based subsistence agriculture, women took a heavy share of agricultural work and also enjoyed benefits of her productive work in terms of survival. There was least difference between the position of men and that of women. Men as well as women had dual functions; family roles were integrated with economic roles. Concrete evidence of this is provided by such social facts as these : women were more in number than men; marriage age was high; there was no bar to widow remarriage; dowry system did not exist; divorce was not difficult; widow was not looked down upon; there did not exist any son preference; and the women who could not give birth to children were not discriminated against.

The Period of Change

This land-locked and isolated area started experiencing changes after 1931. The changes so initiated at the societal level are still continuing. With passage of time, the process of development is gathering strength and its full impact is still to be realised.

The three most important elements of this process of development are described below. In the past, the district was a venue for explorers, mountaineers and traders who used its narrow paths precariously built on mountain sides, frequently looking into deep gorges. There was no vehicular traffic leading into the

district from the main land. Within the district sheeps, goats, yaks and sturdy ponys were used as beast of burden in addition to human beings.

This is no more so. The communication situation both within the district and with outside world has changed greatly and is still changing. The change, which had started immediately after freedom, got accelerated after the Chinese invasion of the country. A great deal has already been achieved and more lines of communication are coming up speedily to open up the interior of the district. The traditional Simla—Leh trade route is the main artery of Lahul. A National Highway, passing through Manali, crosses the Lahul sub-division to reach its destination Leh. This and the new district road permit plying of heavy vehicles and buses to a nodal point called Keylong and from there to important villages in the district. There is a 'Kacha' road connecting Keylong with Spiti. Another National Highway connects the Spiti region with Kinnaur. This almost phenomenal growth of communications after independence is a major change which is influencing its subsistence economy and injecting significant changes in the pre-existing equilibrium between the economic resources and the population on the one hand and social institutions and values on the other. The second important change is of administrative nature. This area was raised to the district status in the year 1960. The district status made available large government funds and facilities for the allround development of the area. Several development schemes in agriculture, education, health and tribal welfare have since been initiated. This led to some influx of educated and qualified government officials from outside into the district. The development programmes got a boost after the Chinese aggression on account of its being a border district. The military personnel and instalations and movements of military personnel have increased substantially since then. In addition, the district is getting special preference for its development due to predominance of tribal population thanks to the committment of the Centre and the State Governments for improving the lot of the weaker sections. In brief, the attainment of district status is responsible for introducing several programmes of developing the area, which influence the traditional way of life of the people in several ways.

The third major change practically touching all the families in the area, belongs to economic domain, this in substance, is a change from subsistence agriculture to diversified market oriented crop-pattern and economy. Some 20 years back, cultivation of potato as a cash crop was unknown to the area. The credit for introducing it goes to enterprising collector of Kangra district, who

started it on an experimental or exploratory basis. It turned out to be a mini-revolution in agricultural economy of the district. The district is now one of the main source of supply of quality seed potatoes fetching attractive prices from the main land. The potato marketing is done on a cooperative basis, involving all farmers in the district. The cooperative finances and promotes introduction of modern agricultural practices. The resulting diversification of agriculture has brought in a lot of money into the district, provided market orientation to the people, been responsible for modernizing cultivation, increased geographical and occupational mobility and given rise to substantial trucking operations.

Expanding Economic Opportunities

The impact of these changes is leading to enlargement of economic activities. Agriculture is no more for subsistence or survival alone; it is increasingly getting diversified and market oriented. Development of communication plays a very important role in the process. People, who previously produced only for home consumption, are now producing for market with the assistance provided by Government departments and cooperatives in terms of additional inputs of technology, seeds, fertilisers, credit and other resources. This has changed the quality as well as quantity of the agricultural operations.

Further, the development projects, like road and public buildings, construction of irrigation and power facilities, promotion of cottage industries and the associated increase in Government departments and jobs for their activities as well as substantial recruitment of the local people in the military etc., have for the first time introduced so many altogether new economic activities and roles. In the private sector, trade and commerce, which is gradually increasing, is also contributing to new economic opportunities. The improvements in communications have also made it possible for the people to share in the expanding agricultural and industrial development of adjoining areas. As a matter of fact, significant number of people in Lahul have purchased land in adjoining Kulu for apple orchards and improved agriculture, as there is no possibility of increasing cultivable land in the district itself. This enables the people of Lahul to increase their land holdings and also enables them to take advantage of two crop seasons.

In brief, money and market have started playing significant role in the economic life of the people. While subsistence agriculture has continued, a new

money based sector of economic activities is being introduced gradually. Practically all these opportunities have been created away from home and its immediate vicinity.

Impact of Changes on the Roles and Status of Women

The biggest impact of new development processes is felt on the structure and organization of family. In the past, prevalence of polyandry and joint family system was a response to a very difficult subsistence agriculture, based upon limited cultivable land in small fields requiring intensive labour of the total family. The new economic opportunities had started providing alternative and increased means for survival and motivating people to form their independent families. As a result, there has been a fast change over from polyandry to monogamy, as seen from census records. The 1961 census for example enumerated the number of married males to be 5110 as against 3481 married women, indicating a decline in the universality of polyandry.

In the present study, a set of 3 questions about the attitude of informants on the two forms of marriage was asked to each respondent. Their responses are summarised below.

ATTITUDE TOWARDS MONOGAMY AND POLYANDRY

<i>Items</i>	<i>Percentage response favouring monogamous family</i>	<i>Percentage response favouring polyandrous family</i>
(a) Which of the two marriage systems— monogamy or polyandry, provide for more enjoyment and happiness in family life ?	100.00	Nil
(b) If you get a chance to remarry, what type of marriage would you prefer— monogamous or polyandrous ?	93.00	7.00
(c) What type of marriage you would like your daughters to have—monogamous or polyandrous ?	93.00	7.00

The table suggests from now onwards, practically every girl of reproductive age will be for forming her own independent family. Easy availability of alter-

native ways of earning has also reduced the need for the institution of joint families. In the past, with the exception of those women who married, a large number of them had only the role of agricultural work. Under the changing situation practically every woman will have to play the three roles of wife, mother and agricultural worker. In this sense they are likely to have a fuller and socially more rewarding life as compared to the past situation. Under the new situation, the nature of agricultural operations is changing. Previously she was responsible for about 80 per cent of agricultural work and the role of men was limited to really very difficult operations. With the introduction of new technology of agriculture, the responsibilities of men have increased as he is to procure and use improved seed and fertilisers. Production for market involves men in marketing activities. Agricultural activities have thus so changed as to render the participation of both men and women more balanced.

This case do not fit in well with the widely held view that, as the traditional societies move from subsistence agriculture to modern farming, the women suffer both in terms of economic participation and social status. Here, we find that with the improvement in economic base of the society, women have now better opportunities for full and socially rewarding life and their participation in agricultural activities become more balanced and cooperative in nature.

This, however, is the immediate impact. There may be a possibility that as the pace of development increases in future, a situation consistent with the above broad generalisation may arise. Signs of the possibility are apparent in the fact that, even under the much expanded economic opportunities, the role of women still remains limited to agriculture and their participation in the new opportunities is minimal. Even within agriculture, some women have started feeling the pressure of work because of their three roles. However, they seem happy to put up with this situation in view of their enriched social life within the new family. Also, growth in the non-agricultural activity is not unlikely, with the passage of time, to reduce the relative importance of agriculture and thereby, to lower the status of the only economic role women are playing today.

Impact of Change on Demographic Variables

Since social, economic and demographic factors are closely interrelated, a change in one or more invariably involves all of them.

The first demographic variable to be influenced most is the number of repro-

during couples. The shift towards monogamy is leading to an increase in the number of such couples and greater increase in the number of births. This shift which started after 1931 has started showing results. According to census records, there was a slow and gradual growth in population till 1951. The next twenty years starting from 1951 indicate a high spurt in population growth; the average yearly growth rate being about 4 per cent which is almost the double of the national growth rate. The popular administrative explanation for this growth is given in terms of in-migration into the district of officials after the area achieved district status in 1960. This however, do not account adequately for the high spurt in the growth rate; the 1961-71 annual growth rate of scheduled tribe population in the district, for example, was of the order of about 3 per cent, which is indicative of rapid population growth inside the district itself.

The development is apparently also motivating each couple to have large families so that they can avail of more and more of the increased economic opportunities. This survey enquired from the respondents about the number of living children, how many more children each respondent desired and what they believe to be the norm prevailing in the group. This information is presented below :

Average number of living children	—	3.65
Average number of living children of parents who do not desire any more	—	4.21
Average number of living children of parents who desire additional number of children.	—	1.75
Average number of additional children desired.	—	2.18
Perceived norm about number of children	—	3.79

The average number of living children of our respondents is around 4. Such respondents who did not desire any additional children had also on an average 4 living children. Desire for additional children was expressed by those who had less than four living children. The average number of living children of such respondents in the study was around 2. When such respondents were further probed as to how many additional children they desired, it is noted that on an average they wanted two more additional children so as to reach the

number of four living children. Four living children seem to be goal for the respondents in general.

The respondents were also requested to give the ideal number of children in a family. This too is around four children. There is an interesting similarity between the normative family size and the actual number of children after which parents cease to desire any more.

Normally demographic studies show that with increased development there is increase in aspirations of parents for children leading to smaller families. In the present case, however, development and preference for large families seem to co-exist. This can be partly explained by relatively high increase in economic opportunities which are available to additional children. Several parents reported "more children more cash", "more sons more alternative sources of income", "more sons more chances to become rich and more possibility to purchase land". In the present situation development is thus not acting as the best contraceptive.

There are several indications that as a result of the type of development that is taking place, a trend for son preference is emerging. First of all, there are the statements of our respondents to suggest this. Changes in the sex composition of the population is another indication. According to census till 1931 there was always a surplus of women over men. After 1931 this started changing and in each following census there are more males than females. In 1961 there were 814 female per 1000 male. Lastly, 65 per cent of our respondents preferred more sons than daughters. On discussion with the respondents, it was found that the respondents perceived that new opportunities were more appropriate for male population which is more mobile. They considered women to be home-based for agricultural and household work, The same reason explains why people preferred females to males in the past. This change further promotes larger families and increase in population.

The significance of age at marriage of women for completed family size a women is likely to have, has been widely documented and accepted. In this area, the almost exclusive dependence on female for agriculture, not only promoted polyandry but also encouraged higher age at marriage of girls because of vested interest of parents in the labours of their daughters. In the past, according to the District Gazetteer, age was not an important consideration in polyandrous marriages and the girls were generally older than the boys. While

this trend has persisted, a slight change is revealed by our data. The difference between the ages of wives and husbands in this study is on an average one year. This is quite different from the findings of most of Indian demographic studies showing a general pattern of about five years difference between the ages of husbands and wives. There seems to be a tendency to squeeze out this difference as much as possible by raising the age at marriage of girls. As per data collected for this study, the average age of girls at marriage comes to be a little more than 19 years which is certainly higher than the national average of 17.20 years. Higher age at marriage has an impact in raising age of wife at first birth, which according to our data is around 21.8 years. As the importance of female labour in agriculture still prevails, there is every possibility of a continuity of this high age of marriage for girls. If so, this factor may be counted upon in having some negative influence on future population increase in the district.

Another important correlate of fertility is education. There has been a great increase in the number of educational institutions in the district since independence from nine in 1947 to 95 in 1972 (District Gazetteer, 1975). The maximum distance to be covered by a student to reach his primary school is not more than about 3 kms. However, this boost in number of educational institutions gives a false impression about literacy status of the people. This needs to be corrected by the existing teacher-student ratio which is one to eighteen at the primary level and one to nine at the middle and high school levels indicating less than full use of the educational facilities. According to the census, the literacy in the district was about 17 per cent in 1961. It rose to 27 in 1971. This is not much below the State (31%) and National (29%) literacy rates. While this aggregate level of literacy is satisfactory, with regard to the crucially relevant female literacy the picture is far from encouraging. According to 1971 census, the female literacy rate is only 10 per cent as against 42 per cent literacy of the males. The educational benefits are very disproportionately shared by the two sexes.

Lastly, there has been a phenomenal increase in the provision of health services. Here too, the main beneficiaries seem to be men, although it is women and children who are in the greatest need of these services, particularly of its MCH component. In one of the health centres studied by us, it was found that among every 10 cases attended by it there were five males, three females and only two children. One of the main reasons for this was absence of lady doctors in the area and scarcity of lady paramedical workers,

In conclusion, we do find a close relationship between development, status of women and fertility. These relationships tend to be specific to the context of the society under change. This fact highlights the need and usefulness of micro-studies for evolving appropriate development strategies consistent with the new concept of development which displays concerns for status of women and fertility.