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Socio-cultural factors influencing women empowerment: A cross-sectional study among an ex-criminal tribe in West Bengal, India

Sila Jana¹, Dipak Kumar Midya¹

¹ Vidyasagar University

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Abstract

A society cannot develop without women's equal participation in the decision-making process within the family as well as in the society. Unquestionably, a woman can do this only when she becomes empowered at least to some extent to have control over resources. Women empowerment is a concept that enables women to enhance their status in their family as well as in society and helps to take active participation in every sphere of social aspects. Based on a cross-sectional study among 110 ever-married women of the Lodha tribe, an ex-criminal tribe, in an Indian village, we have tried to find out whether some socio-cultural factors like education, family type, and earning opportunity influence women's decision-making capacity, and thereby, their empowerment or not. The decision-making capacity was assessed with reference to eight specific socio-cultural dimensions, viz, education, marriage, family planning, children's schooling, incurring expenditure, shopping, going outside, and going to hospital. The data of the earner women were compared with those of a control group who were not involved in any kind of earning pursuit. The study reveals that the level of participation of women in the decision-making process from various household perspectives was hardly satisfactory. Majority of the study participants could not get chance to put their decisions on the family matters selected for the study. The findings further show that women's participation in Self Help Group activities and/or involvement as wage labourers play an effective mechanism to enhance women's decision-making capacity within family. It is also found that age, education, family type, and earning opportunity are significantly associated with the level of participation in the decision-making process.

Keywords: Empowerment, decision-making, Lodha, ex-criminal Tribe.

Introduction

Status of women in a society is perhaps the most valuable indicator of the level of social justice/injustice in that society. Empowerment of women has, therefore, been one of the major development goals across the world, especially in

developing countries (Cherayi & Jose, 2016). This certainly requires the redistribution of resources and social power in favour of women to enable them to become decision-makers (Mayoux, 1998, 1999; Gupta & Kumari, 2017). As empowerment and economic development goes hand in hand, empowering women is considered an indispensable means for advancing development and reducing poverty among them (Kabir and Jahan, 2013). An empowered woman can have effective contributions toward productivity as well as health care of the whole family, in particular, and thereby the entire community, in general.

Empowering women has been one of the crucial issues, particularly in South-East Asia. In India, women empowerment has been given prime importance since the Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2002) and the Union Government had shown their commitment toward that end by observing the year 2001 as the 'year for women empowerment' (Leoni & Indhumathi, 2018). But the initiative has not brought about the expected outcome, since different socio-cultural factors are seen to act as barriers to women's achievement with regard to their decision-making capability, particularly in developing countries and, more specifically, among the tribal and other marginalized communities across the world. Women's decision-making capability is seen to be negatively affected by the fact that they are often deprived of access to education, economy, health, power and authority and, thereby, to the development process in society as reflected in some scholarly studies (Sultana, 2011; Rathirane, 2013; Bushra and Wajaha, 2015; Asaolu et al., 2018; Midemaet et al., 2018; Folyanet et al., 2020).

Some socio-cultural factors, in addition to age, seem to influence women's decision making capacity in relation to the decision making process in household matters. Aging is a normal biological process that cannot be controlled, but it may influence the act of participation of women in decision making process. The socio-cultural factors like educational achievement, involvement in some form of earning pursuits, and family type may have a decisive role in enhancing decision-making capacity of the women and, thereby, leading towards their empowerment. In the present study, we have tried to find out whether the said socio-cultural factors influence the decision-making process in the Lodha society with specific reference to women's participation or not. And, if yes, how far such influence has been examined with reference to decision-making in eight distinct household matters, viz., education, marriage, family planning, children's schooling, incurring expenditure, shopping, going outside, and going to hospital. For studying women's participation in economic activity, the women who are involved in any regular income generating activity including involvement in SHGs and working as wage labourers were considered in comparison to the others who were not engaged in any earning activity.

A few scholars, however, understand that women's participation in micro-financing activities through self-help groups (SHGs) in India enhances their decision-making capability and, thereby, their empowerment (e.g., Anand, 2002; Galab and Rao, 2003; Karunakar and Saravanam, 2008; Chakraborty, 2012, 2013; Naik and Rodrigues, 2017; Nandhini *et al.*, 2017). But these studies have serious limitations. The data of these studies have not been compared with the appropriate control group to ascertain whether the observed change in the women's decision-making capability is solely due to their participation in decision-making process in connection with economic activities or otherwise. The present study aims at overcoming this shortcoming by including a control group who were not connected to any micro-financing or other earning activities. This study further seeks to examine whether the association of similar sociocultural variables may affect the outcome across different ethnic groups including the most marginalized ones or not. To fulfil the second objective, this

study was conducted among an ex-criminal tribe (viz., the Lodha), who are now categorized as a particularly vulnerable tribal group (PVTG) in West Bengal. Study on the ex-criminal tribe in this domain is very rare, except only a few studies (on the Irula, Gujjar and Shariya) demonstrating that women among such communities are less powerful in decision-making process and are discriminated and subjugated in every sphere of life (Dwarakanath, 2002; Awias et al., 2009; Chitagubb et al., 2011; Menon, 2019; Hamid et al., 2021; Rajpoot, 2021). However, the women among the Garo and Khasi tribes of north-east India enjoy relatively higher positions due to their matrilineal system (Mitra, 2007; RoyBurman, 2012). But among the other tribal communities, particularly among the PVTGs, the empowerment status of the women is largely vulnerable.

The Lodha is one of the 'denotified' tribes who were declared a Criminal Tribe by the British Government under the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871. Though they were de-criminalized with the revocation of the Criminal Tribes Act in 1952 in independent India, the stigma of criminality still haunts them and they remain trapped within the most marginalized section of India's 104m tribal population. They comprise about 2 percent of the total tribal population in West Bengal, with a population of 84,966 as per the 2001 Census report (Census of India, 2001). They are distributed over the erstwhile Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia districts of the State. They are mostly landless marginal workers and depend on the forest produces (Sabud et al., 2020; Setua and Islam, 2021). Their literacy rate is alarmingly as low as 34.8 per cent (Setua and Islam, 2021).

Methodology

Theoretical approach: This is a cross-sectional study among Lodha women of several age groups. Before conducting fieldwork, the purpose of this study was explained to the villagers and their written consent was obtained. To examine the socio-cultural factors that influence the empowerment status of women, the ethnographic approach was the basic theoretical perspective. The approach enabled us to capture the belief, social interactions and behaviours of the respondents over a period of time (Reeves *et al.*, 2008; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

Conceptual dimensions: For the present purpose, empowerment is seen as a process by which women can take decisions that lead to the enhancement of their ability to access resources and to improve their socio-economic position (Yadav et al., 2011). There may have different dimensions, but we have purposively selected the decision-making process of these tribal women with regard to eight specific socio-cultural dimensions, viz, education, marriage, family planning, children's schooling, incurring expenditure, shopping, going outside, and going to hospital.

Study group: The study was carried out among the Lodha women of Phulpahari village under Midnapore Sadar block in Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal, India. There were 110 ever-married Lodha women in the village. All the ever-married Lodha women comprised the study group. There are three Self-Help Groups (SHG) in the village, each having ten members. Therefore, a total of 30 women were SHG members who were involved in micro-financing activities centering around the SHG functioning and could take decisions relating to the required activities. The remaining 80 Lodha women in the village were not involved in SHG or other financial activity under an institutional setup, excepting only 13

women who were engaged as occasional wage labourers.

Methods and techniques adopted: The study was a descriptive type of cross-sectional study. Data were collected through fieldwork during the period from April 2022 to August 2022. Multistage sampling was used to select the study area. Considering the time and accessibility, only one block was chosen randomly. Purposive sampling was done for selecting the village that was located very close to our university. Observation, interview and case study methods were employed for obtaining the data. For conducting this study, we prepared a structured schedule comprising two parts: the first part involved questions on the socioeconomic status of the study group; and the second part was on the questions related to empowerment or decision-making ability on the selected dimensions mentioned above. Each question regarding decision-making around specific household activities had four response options: respondent alone, respondent and husband, the husband alone, and others. A binary variable was created for each type of decision-making by grouping the first two responses in which women participated in decision making, coded as 1 ('yes'), and the remaining two responses together coded as 0 ('no'). In the first stage, when we approached the participants, they were a little bit hesitant to offer response and suspicious about the motive of the research. But after establishing a good rapport, the wife of the *panchayat* member (i.e., village-level leader in the local self-government institution) shared various information. After observing the wife of the *panchayat* member share her experience, the other women of the village came forward to give their responses spontaneously. Case studies on different issues were recorded to substantiate the general observation. However, the names of the respondents in the case studies were changed for the sake of protecting their privacy. All data were analysed by the SPSS (version 16.0). A Chi-square test was performed to find out the association between sociocultural factors and decision-making status of the women involved in earning activities, in addition to those in connection with some specific household activities. The data were again compared with those of the women who were not involved in any such economic activities that required decision-making. P value <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results

Socio-economic condition of study group

The socio-economic profile of the study group was reflected in table 1. The study group was divided into three categories on the basis of age group: 15-25, 26-36, and ≥ 37 years. Out of the total 110 women, 38.20 percent of women were in the age group of 15-25 years, while 37.30 percent and 24.50 percent of women in the age groups of 26-36 and ≥ 37 years respectively. Regarding educational status, the findings depicted that nearly half of the respondents (48.20 per cent) got no formal education. Only 17.30 percent of women attained primary education, whereas 18.10 percent and 16.40 per cent of women got upper primary and secondary education respectively. This study was conducted among the ever-married women of the Lodha tribal group, with only 4.50 percent of them as widows. Most of the respondents were housewives (61 percent), while only 39 percent of women were working as SHG members and/or occasional wage labourers. More than half of the participants lived in a joint family (56.40 per cent), whereas 43.60 percent of the study participants lived in a nuclear family.

The findings further showed that more than half of the study respondents' monthly family income was less than Rs. 5000 and 48.20 percent of study respondents' monthly family income ranged between Rs.5000-9000. 57.30 percent of study participants have 4-5 family members and 33.70 percent of participants have 6-7 family members. It was also found that 87.30 per cent of the study respondents were married before attaining their legal age, i.e., 18 years and only 12.70 percent of them were married at the age of 18 or above.

Table 1. Socio-economic profile of study group

Age Groups (yr.)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
15-25	42	38.20
26-36	41	37.30
≥37	27	24.50
Education		
Non-literate	53	48.20
Primary	19	17.30
Upper Primary	20	18.10
Secondary	18	16.40
Marital Status		
Married	105	95.50
Widow	05	04.50
Occupation		
Housewife	67	61.00
SHG member/wage labourer	43	39.00
Family Type		
Nuclear	48	43.60
Joint	62	56.40
Monthly Family Income (Rs.)		
>5000	53	48.20
5000-9000	57	51.80
No. of Family Members		
≤ 3	5	4.50
4-5	63	57.30
6-7	37	33.70
≥8	5	4.50
Age at Marriage		
<18	96	87.30
≥18	14	12.70
Members of SHG		
Yes	30	27.30
No	80	72.70
Total	110	100.00

Source: Fieldwork data, 2022

Women's participation in the decision-making process

The level of women's participation in decision making in different household matters was presented in Fig.1. The findings

drew a clear sketch that the role of Lodha women in taking decisions was restricted to minor domestic issues such as shopping, going outside or to the hospital. Most of the women took decisions in such minor household matters through discussion with their husbands. But, in case of serious matters like marriage, their opinion was not sought by their husband. In the words of Protima Kotal, aged 35 years [free translation]:

When I was only 15 years my father fixed my marriage. My mother remained silent and didn't try to argue with my father. Now, when my husband decided to marry off our daughter, he did not even think of discussing it with me. How do others decide our fate without taking into consideration our own opinion and choices? They did consider us as puppets.

The study respondents also reported that in most cases their husband or other elder members had the right to take decisions in connection with major household matters. Women were rarely asked to give an opinion, and their voices were suppressed. Majority of the women argued that they had no right to take decisions about continuing their education (90.90 percent) and also for their marriage (76.36 percent). Elder members of the families took such decisions. It also showed that 87.30 percent of women were getting married before attaining the appropriate age of marriage. A case study can substantiate the findings. Jamuna Mallick, aged 17 years, expressed her experience in the following way:

I was then in class 10 and it was just 6 months to complete my secondary examination. I was in hope that I would do higher studies and get a job and help my family. But my father, grandfather and grandmother fixed my marriage all of a sudden. I told them that after 6 months my board exam would be started, how I could marry now. But they didn't listen to my words. I was very sad but I thought that my husband might understand me and I could convince him. But after marriage, my husband said that he didn't want me to continue my studies and told me to look after his parents and do household works for which she was brought into his house.

Nearly 63.63 percent of women experienced that despite having children they were rarely asked to give any opinion regarding the future of their children. 36.37 percent of respondents revealed that they took decisions regarding the schooling of their children through discussions with their husbands. Sita Bhakta, aged 35 years, shared her experience in the following way:

When our daughter passed the primary level, I just wanted she would continue her studies because I wanted to do higher education but I couldn't get the scope to study further after completing the primary level. But my husband and other family members decided not to educate her further and ordered me to teach her household works which was essential to prepare her for marriage. I was very much upset because I couldn't do anything for my child. What could be a more unfortunate thing than this for a mother?

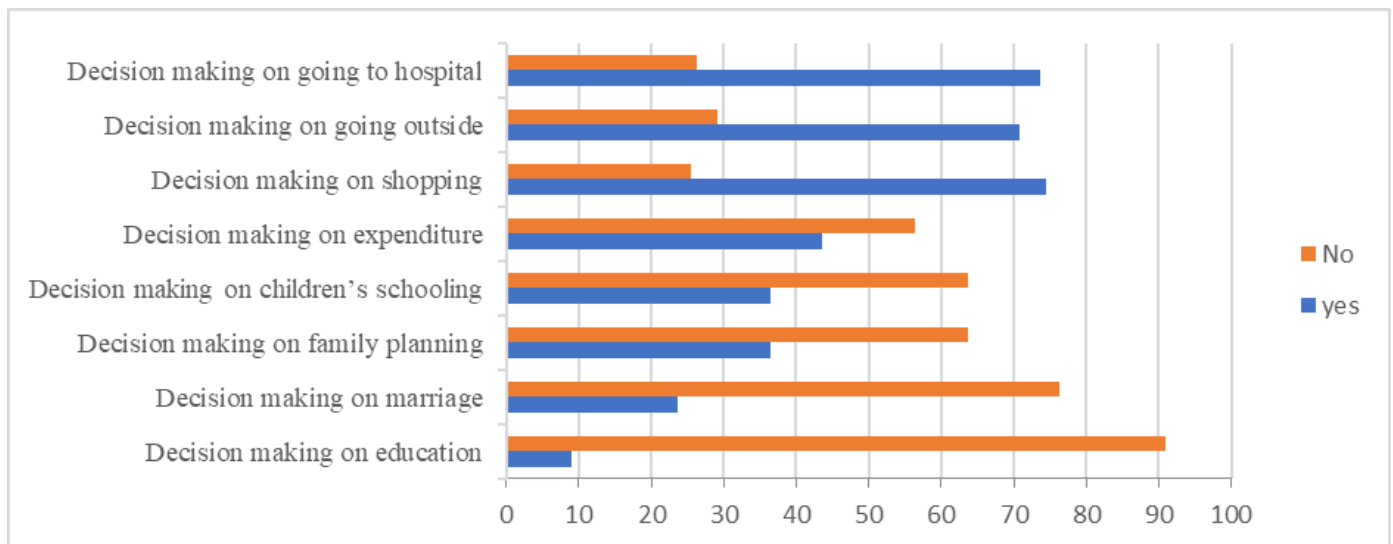


Figure 1. Level of women's participation in decision-making in different household matters

Source: Fieldwork data, 2022

Age had a positive association with the level of involvement in the decision-making process in various household affairs (table 2). Generally, older women had a greater say in decision-making relating to expenditure (77.77 percent), shopping (96.29 percent), going outside (100 percent) and going to the hospital (92.59 percent) than their younger counterparts. They informed that because of their maturity and experience in running the family, they were in a better position to put their views in these household affairs. The findings also drew attention that the majority of young women, who were educated, were in a position to give their opinion regarding their education, marriage, family planning and children's schooling in their in-laws' houses. Their family members were likely to accept their opinion since they thought that their daughters-in-law were more educated than them and they could take better decisions in these matters. Pearson chi-square test reveals a significant association between age group and decision-making on education ($p < 0.01$), marriage ($p < 0.01$), child's schooling ($p < 0.05$), expenditure ($p < 0.001$), shopping ($p < 0.001$), going outside ($p < 0.001$) and going to the hospital ($p < 0.001$).

Sharmila Mallick, aged 60 years, shared her experience in the following words:

After my marriage, when I came to my in-law's house, I was not given any chance to speak up on family matters. Instead, my husband and my father-in-law used to take major decisions, and my mother-in-law ran the household and sometimes took the decision regarding various household matters. But now I took the position of my mother-in-law and my husband and son often used to discuss with me and ask my opinion before finalizing any decision.

Table 2. Age group and level of participation in decision making

Decision Making	Age category (yr.)			χ^2 value
	15-25 (n=42) (%)	26-36 (n=41) (%)	≥37 (n=27) (%)	
Decision making on education	09 (21.42)	01 (02.43)	00 (00)	12.631**
Decision making on marriage	17 (40.47)	09 (21.95)	00 (00)	15.020**
Decision making on family planning	18 (42.85)	14 (34.14)	08 (29.62)	2.926
Decision making on children's schooling	16 (38.09)	15 (36.58)	09 (33.33)	12.653*
Decision making on expenditure	06 (14.28)	17 (41.46)	21 (77.77)	41.970***
Decision making on shopping	23 (54.76)	33 (80.48)	26 (96.29)	27.09***
Decision making on going outside	17 (40.47)	34 (82.92)	27 (100.00)	40.724***
Decision making ongoing to hospital	22 (52.38)	34 (82.92)	25 (92.59)	29.236***

Level of significance * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Source: Fieldwork data, 2022

Table 3. Family type and level of participation in decision making

Decision Making	Family Type		χ^2 value
	Nuclear (n=48) (%)	Joint (n=62) (%)	
Decision making on education	04 (08.33)	06 (09.67)	0.059
Decision making on marriage	08 (16.67)	18 (29.03)	2.292
Decision making on family planning	17 (35.41)	23 (37.09)	11.067*
Decision making on children's schooling	18 (37.50)	22 (35.48)	3.196
Decision making on expenditure	24 (50.00)	24 (38.70)	44.647***
Decision making on shopping	43 (89.58)	39 (62.90)	10.246*
Decision making on going outside	42 (87.50)	36 (58.06)	14.448**
Decision making ongoing to hospital	40 (83.34)	41 (66.12)	6.083

Level of significance * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Source: Fieldwork data, 2022

It is also found that the majority of the women from nuclear families were able to take decisions regarding shopping for their children (37.50 percent), household expenditure (50 percent), going to hospital (83.34 percent) and going outside (87.50 percent) than the women who were from joint family (table 3). The respondents also stated that in the joint family, most of the decisions were taken by the elder members of the family, i.e., father-in-law, mother-in-law and/or husband. Women from joint families were hardly involved in family matters. Even many respondents from joint families revealed that even their mobility was restricted by the elder members. They could not go anywhere at any time. The chi-square test

reveals that family type has a significant association with decision making on family planning ($p < 0.05$), household expenditure ($p < 0.001$), shopping ($p < 0.05$), and going outside ($p < 0.01$). Ganga Kotal, aged 28 years, explained the role of family type in the decision-making process regarding various household matters. In her words:

I was married off to a joint family. After my marriage, I noticed that I could not able to talk about family matters. In fact, on the first day of my marriage, my mother-in-law told me that I have no right to involve in the family decisions. But after the separation from my in-law's house, we started to live in another house. Now I look after my family and my husband used to discuss with me before taking any decision.

Susama Kotal, aged 24 years, argued:

I went to the local market with my neighbour for shopping and I didn't take permission from my mother-in-law, because she was sleeping. When I came back, I was questioned by everyone that why I didn't take permission before going outside. I wanted to answer their all questions but I had no right to talk in front of the elder members. I felt helpless and cried that day.

Table 4. Occupation and level of participation in decision making

Decision Making	Occupation		χ^2 value
	Housewives (n=67) (%)	Working women ¹ (n=43) (%)	
Decision making on education	08 (11.94)	02 (04.65)	1.684
Decision making on marriage	17 (25.37)	09 (20.93)	0.286
Decision making on family planning	15 (22.38)	24 (55.81)	14.430**
Decision making on children's schooling	14 (20.89)	26 (60.46)	20.922***
Decision making on expenditure	08 (11.94)	39 (90.69)	66.473***
Decision making on shopping	41 (61.19)	41 (95.34)	48.296***
Decision making on going outside	36 (53.73)	42 (97.67)	45.845***
Decision making on going to hospital	41 (61.19)	40 (93.02)	48.992***

Level of significance ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

¹ include SHG members and/or occasional wage labourers

Source: Fieldwork data, 2022

Occupation had also a positive impact on women's involvement in decision-making in different household affairs (table 4). In the present study, there were a total of 43 women who were categorised as working women among whom 17 were

engaged as both SHG members and wage labourers, 13 women as only wage labourers and 13 women were only SHG members. It was observed that women who were working were asked to put their viewpoint on various perspectives regarding decision-making on family planning (55.81 percent), children's schooling (60.46 percent), incurring expenditure (90.69 percent), shopping (95.34 percent), going outside (97.67 percent) and going to hospital (93.02 percent). The study participants deliberated that women who used to contribute to their families by providing money had somehow acquired the right to involve in their family matters. Pearson chi-square test demonstrated that there is a significant association between the occupation of the study respondents and decision-making on family planning ($p < 0.01$), children's schooling ($p < 0.001$), household expenditure ($p < 0.001$), shopping ($p < 0.001$), going outside ($p < 0.001$) and going to hospital ($p < 0.01$).

The role of employment status in the involvement in decision making in different household matters was reflected in the words of Bulu Mallick, a wage labour, and Sonali Nayek, a housewife. Bulu Mallick, aged 31 years, illustrated the phenomenon in the following words:

I am working as wage labour and earn an average of Rs.2000/- per month. My husband also earns the same amount. I contribute all the money for running our family. My husband has passed on all the family responsibilities to me. I can take all the decisions independently and my husband never interferes in the family matter. But I often discuss it with him when I take any major decision.

Sonali Nayek, another Lodha woman aged 27 years, elaborated on her experience in the following way:

I never spoke up on my family matters. My husband always took decisions and my duty was to cook and serve him and look after the children. Even I didn't get any respect from him as I didn't earn money. If I wanted some money for shopping for my children, I had to inform him about the purpose I would like to fulfil.

Table 5. Self-Help Groups and participation in decision-making in various household affairs

Decision Making	Member of SHG		χ^2
	Yes n=30 (%)	No n=80 (%)	
Decision making on education	02 (23.33)	8 (10.00)	0.293
Decision making on marriage	07 (23.33)	19 (23.75)	0.002
Decision making on family planning	22 (73.33%)	18 (22.50)	26.276*
Decision making on children's schooling	22 (73.33)	18 (22.50)	25.504*
Decision making on expenditure	29 (96.67)	19 (23.75)	57.391*
Decision making on shopping	28 (93.33)	54 (67.50)	25.018*
Decision making on going outside	30 (100.00)	48 (60.00)	27.403*
Decision making ongoing to hospital	29 (96.67)	52 (65.00)	34.513*

Level of significance * $p < 0.05$

Source: Fieldwork data, 2022

Self Help Groups were found to contribute greatly to improve the status of women in their families. The findings of the present study drew a clear sketch about the relation between involvement in self-help groups and the level of participation in decision-making in various household matters (table 5). In the present study, we further divided the study women into two groups: one, the women who were members of self-help groups and, second, the women who were not a member of SHGs or engaged in any micro financing activities. We treated the group who were not engaged in any micro financing activity as control group and tried to find out how far the SHGs of the village helped to empower the women in decision-making process on the selected dimensions. Most of the women stated that the SHGs boosted their confidence to speak up on their family matters and they eventually earned good respect from their family members. It also enhanced their decision-making power in various family matters including continuing education (23.33 percent), marriage (23.33 percent), family planning (73.33 percent), children's schooling (73.33 percent), incurring expenditure (96.67 percent), shopping (93.33 percent), going outside (100 percent) and going to hospital (96.67 percent). It is found that SHG membership has a significant association with decision making on family planning ($p < 0.05$), children's schooling ($p < 0.05$), household expenditure ($p < 0.05$), shopping ($p < 0.05$), going outside ($p < 0.05$), going to hospital ($p < 0.05$)(table5). The role of SHGs was reflected through the eyes of Laxmi Bhakta, aged 27 years, as a case reference:

I am a housewife in a joint family. I don't have permission to talk about family matters. Even though I don't have permission to decide today's menu, it is my mother-in-law's prerogative. I just work silently. I don't even have permission for shopping anything and if I want to go anywhere, I also have to take permission from my family. One day my neighbour came and suggested me to join an SHG. I told my husband about the SHG. I can remember the day when everyone in my family scolded me and ordered me not to join SHG. But that day I decided to join an SHG and ultimately I joined the Maa Durga Sasahayak Dal without informing anyone. After six months of my joining, my family faced a sudden danger when my father-in-law became seriously ill and was hospitalized. My husband had no money for the treatment of my father-in-law. That time I gave Rs.10,000/- to my husband, and my husband and my mother-in-law were surprised and asked me about the source of the money. Only then I told them about the SHG and they appreciated it. After that incidence, they didn't restrict me to go anywhere and they used to seek my opinion every time when they took any decision.

According to Tapati Nayek, aged 42 years, SHG helped her to speak up against her husband when her husband was spoiling her child's future. She revealed:

When my son passed class eight, I was very happy and I wanted to see him highly educated. But my husband told me that he didn't want to continue our son's education and he wanted that our son would help him in cultivation. That day a fight started between my husband and me. He told me that he couldn't afford his education. But, I

decided to educate our son. Being a member of Maa Sitala Sasahayak Dal, I applied for a loan from the bank and I easily got it. Now my son is reading in a college and I am very happy to see him continuing his study.

When SHG appeared to improve the status of women in their family, some respondents informed that due to lack of education, they have to depend on their husbands. They were not able to do their work efficiently. They thought that they still could not raise their voice due to lack of proper education. Rekha Mallick, aged 43 years, narrated in the following words:

I joined Maa Durga Sasahayak Dal about one year ago. I can write only my name and I don't understand anything. My husband does every work regarding the SHG activities and he instructs me to sign in the papers and I follow. I am fully dependent on him. I wish should I have a chance to educate myself, I need not to depend on my husband in every step.

Table 6. Educational status and level of participation in decision making

Decision Making	Educational Status			χ^2 value
	Non-literate (n=53) (%)	Up to Upper primary (n=39) (%)	Class IX - X (n=18) (%)	
Decision making on education	00 (0.00)	05 (12.82)	05 (27.78)	13.562***
Decision making on marriage	02 (03.77)	15 (38.46)	09 (50.00)	23.265***
Decision making on family planning	11 (20.75)	19 (48.71)	10 (55.56)	12.633*
Decision making on children's schooling	12 (22.64)	17 (43.59)	11 (61.11)	11.368
Decision making on expenditure	27 (50.94)	16 (41.02)	05 (27.78)	11.935
Decision making on shopping	45 (84.90)	27 (69.23)	10 (55.56)	9.402
Decision making on going outside	46 (86.79)	25 (64.10)	07 (38.89)	22.768***
Decision making ongoing to hospital	46 (86.79)	25 (65.10)	10 (55.56)	18.451**

Level of significance * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Source: Fieldwork data, 2022

Education enables a woman to build up a positive self-image and develops the ability of critical thinking (Midya et al., 2021). It is found to be an effective mechanism to empower women so that they can take control of their lives and choices to improve their lives as well as their families. The findings of the present study also suggest that education has a significant association with decision making on education ($p < 0.001$), marriage ($p < 0.001$), family planning ($p < 0.05$), going

outside ($p < 0.001$), going to hospital ($p < 0.01$) (table 6). Thus, education has a positive influence on decision-making power of women. It is also found that most of the women who are educated could decide about their marriage (50 percent), family planning (55.56 percent) and schooling of children (61.11 percent).

Conclusion

From the findings, it can be concluded that the empowerment status of the Lodha women is hardly satisfactory. Patriarchal practices in different household matters appear to force women towards a marginalized state within their own family as well as in society. Male members are seen to be the principal decision makers. Women are seldom found to be allowed to take part in the system of decision making in connection with family matters and, for the most part, they remain silent spectators. The present study demonstrates that the status of the Lodha women is in general very gloomy. The findings of the present study also suggest that women who are engaged in some economic activity including wage labourers and members of SHGs are getting more importance from their family members as they earn and contribute to their respective families compared to the others, and they are more likely to participate in decision making in family matters compared to the women who are not connected with any earning activity. Self-help group found to be effective mechanism for enhancing women's confidence to speak up and raised their status in their families. Unfortunately, there are only three self-help groups in the study area. Therefore, it is a crucial time for the government to take effective measures to involve each and every woman with SHG in a marginal areas, especially among the ex-criminal tribe like the Lodha, so that the women can come out of the traditional thinking of patriarchy. Several socio-economic factors like education, family type, and earning status are found to be significantly associated with women's participation in decision making process in various household issues. Lack of educational attainment was found to be a major barrier to the improvement in the status of women. So, the government should take necessary steps so that no one is left behind the education. Awareness programmes should be organized about the necessity of women's education so that tribal parents may be interested to let their children continue their education.

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